

Two Hearts.

A TALE OF THE GREAT MIRAMICHI FIRE.

rapidly behind me. I poured out my heart in gratitude to God for our deliverance. When I ventured to look up not only the rapid but the fire also was behind us, and a few strokes of the paddle carried us into the Miramichi river. Neither Mary nor I were hurt, and what was more remarkable, all the livestock had escaped. The horse was behind the skiff, swimming gallantly, and looking up at me with his great, honest eyes. The cattle had passed us in the rapid, and were swimming in front. All were now bound to the same goal of safety, a little grassy island which lies in the centre of the Miramichi river, with nothing of larger growth upon it than an alder bush. Here we landed, and looked back on the wasted land we had left behind.

Had I the pen of a Homer I could not adequately describe the terrors of that scene. All that my mind had ever imagined or my eye witnessed of destruction by fire fell far short of this dreadful reality, and every moment added to its horrors. The wind, which until then had been light, now grew to a violent hurricane, and the fire raged on almost with the speed of a race-horse; huge burning brands bore on the wings of the storm fell on every side of us and threatened us with destruction. The river was lashed into fury by the forest and rose in high waves, and through the black pall of smoke which hung over all the sheets of flame seemed to pierce the very sky.

As I sat and gazed on this awful scene my courage, which had sustained me while struggling for life, now seemed to fail me, and I burst into tears. I had saved myself and little Mary, but where were the rest? There was that fond mother and her two brave sons! There, above all, was Grace, my love, my life! I looked toward the blazing forest for an answer, but I saw written there nothing but death. And when little Mary laid her head on my shoulder and weeping said: "Joe, dear Joe, where is ma?" I could only reply by tears.

The long weary night passed, but the morning sun brought no cheer. Our little group of cattle were still with us, and hiding among them was a huge mouse, who, having been the cause of our haunts and sought refuge with his enemy, man. Poor wretch who would have the heart to do harm to him? He was not a fellow sufferer with us all. He remained unharmed and was still on the island when we left it.

My first care was to take little Mary to a place of safety, but where should I go? Every human habitation was destroyed, and for all I could see, the whole region was swept of living men. My sister's house in Chatham was the only place of shelter I could think of for Mary, but even Chatham might have been destroyed. If so our case was bad indeed.

We set out on our melancholy voyage down the river, both parties of which had been completely swept by the fire. Until we reached Newcastle we did not see a human face. But that place no longer existed; the fire had swept it all away and its deserted inhabitants were wandering in silence about the ruins of their homes. They looked upon me as one risen from the dead, for they had thought that all the inhabitants up the river had been destroyed. Douglastown and all the villages north of the Miramichi were burnt, they told me, but Chatham had escaped; thank God for that—I still had a home!

It was late in the day when I reached Chatham, and my sister was almost beside herself with joy when she saw me. She had been told that I was dead, and to her kind, womanly heart, and I may say here, for the next fourteen years that noble woman and loving child never were parted for a single day. My sister's husband, her mother, but it is seldom that the loss of a mother is so generously replaced.

That very night returned to Newcastle to obtain assistance to search for the Prentiss family. I felt that they could not have escaped, but I could not endure the thought of their remains being exposed to the chances of the wilderness. Accompanied by two stout lumbermen I started off on my melancholy mission. I would gladly omit or forget this part of my story, the thought of which even now fills me with unspeakable sorrow. My fears were only too sadly realized; all had perished and we found the four in a group together near the edge of the barren where they had fallen in their attempt to escape. Burnt beyond recognition, my sister and daughter could only be distinguished by some remains of their clothes. That lovely face had smiled on me so tenderly a few hours before, was now a blackened mass in which not a feature could be discerned. And this was all that was left of my darling Grace, my wife that was to be! It was many a long year before I got over the shock of that discovery.

We buried the Prentiss family together in the churchyard at Chatham, and a handsome stone tells the sad story of their death. When this last duty was accomplished I felt that I could no longer live in a place where I had endured such misery. Nor did my sister attempt to detain me, for she felt that change of scene and active employment were the only medicines that would be of any benefit to me. So I kissed Mary and my sister farewell and went to sea.

Before my departure, however, I placed the few hundred dollars I possessed in a bank in Mary's name and told my sister to use them for the child's maintenance and education. To this sum was added the price received for the horses and cattle rescued from the fire and also the money realized from the sale of the farm, of which Mary was sole heir. This fund my sister never would touch, but constantly added to it, so at the end of the fourteen years I had broken off, it had become a considerable sum and Mary was quite an heiress in a small way. And she was endowed also with a richer inheritance than money could buy—a pure and honest heart.

I need not linger long over my career at sea; I was very successful, and by due time to be mate and then master of a fine vessel. I saved money and bought a share in the vessel I sailed, and took such care of my savings and profits that my money accumulated rapidly. I had, in fact, no temptation to be otherwise than temperate and saving; the Miramichi fire had burnt all the youth and hope out of me. Although I did my work as well as any man, I lived wholly in the past, and at night as I stood on my vessel's deck and peered into the darkness, or lay wakefully in my cabin, the sweet face of my lost Grace was always before me, and she ever wore the same kind smile with which she had once farewell that last sad day when we were parted forever.

Little Mary went to school and the very first letter she wrote was sent to me. From the day she could use a pen no month passed that she did not write to me, and at the end of many a long voyage I have had enough of Mary's letters to make quite a little volume. How much they interested me! They were for many years almost the only solace I knew in my lonely life. I have them all now; the notes made up of printed letters when she was five or six years old, then the big childish hand, and so through all gradations to the perfection which she at last attained. I was not so good a correspondent as Mary, yet I did not neglect her. I wrote from every port at which I touched and took care to keep her well supplied with clothes and jewelry as

well as money, which, dear soul, she never spent. But all this time I had never returned to Chatham; I had never seen Mary's face, and when I thought of her it was as a child.

Fourteen years had elapsed since I left my home in Chatham, and it seemed as if every day was making the prospect of my return to it more remote. For what should I return, had not my heart died and been buried there? No, I thought to myself, I will not go back. It was again the night of the 7th October, but this time I was at sea, in my own stout ship on my return from India, and but two or three days' sail from a port of destination, New York. The sea was calm and the weather fine, so I returned early to my cabin and soon fell asleep. Then, in a vision of the night, the past seemed to come back to me; I again lived through that dreadful tober night, of fourteen years before, and out of the burning forest, the face of my Grace seemed to rise and I thought she beckoned me and called to me, "Come home, my love, my life!" I heard the sailors rushing overhead and the orders of the mates, as they encouraged them in their struggle with the flames. All I thought, was in vain; the fire could not be stayed; it advanced, and the sailors were driven to the quarter deck; horror of horrors! they were leaving the vessel and I, imprisoned in my cabin, could not escape! I struggled to gain my feet, but I seemed to be held down by the heavy weight of my despair. The cabin was barred by the flames; all hope was gone, and I could only die. Again, in the midst of my struggle, the face of Grace seemed to rise, calm and serene; she reached out her arms, and her hand and they disappeared, and again she called to me, "Come home."

I again woke and was conscious that something was wrong. I rushed on deck, and at the head of the cabin stairs met the mate with a pale face. "It is all right, captain," said he, "the fire is out and no harm done."

"What fire?" I asked. "Has the ship been on fire?"

"No," said he, "the boy stupidly upset a lamp in a lot of cottons, and it made a nasty blaze, but it is all out now and no one the worse."

"Thank God!" I exclaimed and without another word I returned to my cabin, but before I went to sleep again that night I had made up my mind that I would do on my arrival in port. It was the first accident of the kind that had ever happened to a ship of mine and I vowed that I would never give fate another such chance.

We reached New York in a couple of days, and the other owners there were very much surprised when I told them that I would go to sea no more. They were sincerely sorry to lose me, for I had made money for them, as well as for myself, and when I expressed my wish to sell out my shares in the vessel, they met me in a liberal spirit, and purchased them on favorable terms. My good ship went to sea again a few weeks later, and when I saw her depart, so staunch and gallant looking, I almost regretted the step I had taken. But I thought better of it as week and month and year passed on without any tidings of her arrival in any friendly port, for from that hour to the present she has never been seen. My living ship, my ship perished by fire, or by the violence of the tempest? Who can tell? But I shall always firmly believe that my good angel sent me the midnight warning which hindered me from sharing her fate.

My business in New York had detained me for some weeks, and Christmas was approaching before I set out for Chatham. I had written to Mary after my arrival, but I gave her no hint that I intended to give up sea life. So when I arrived in Chatham on Christmas morning, no one expected me and no one knew me. How should they, indeed? I had left the place a slim, smooth-faced youth; I returned to it a strong, fur-bearded man, with the marks of a hundred combats with the storm stamped on my face. I put up at the hotel, and although I wrote my name on the register it was in such a tremulous hand, that no one could read it, and if they had, how much wonder would they have been? Who was likely to remember Joe Farwell, when even the great fire was beginning to be rather an old story?

I took my breakfast at the hotel and turned my steps towards my sister's dwelling, and when I reached it, I found it as I found it, a beautiful old house, long heart; as I passed the window I caught a glimpse of a matronly-looking lady, who I knew was my sister, but she did not see me; I reached the door and knocked. In a moment or two it was opened, and then I saw in real life and blood the face and form that had haunted me for so many years—those features which had appeared to me so often in the night watches, and which had risen from the mist of the flame to warn me to come home. I started back and almost fainted.

"Good Heavens, who is this? Grace!" I cried, "is it you?"

I had hardly spoken when Mary, for it was indeed she, with a loud cry fell into my arms, and the whole household came running to see what was the matter. My sister rushed to embrace me, and when my worthy brother-in-law made his appearance on the scene he thought for a moment that the female of his family had lost their senses, when he learned that the lost brother had indeed returned he was much delighted and flurried as the most hysterical woman of them all.

That Christmas was, I think, the happiest day I ever spent. My loss seemed to be alive again and my without heart to be bathed in the fountain of youth. I could hardly take my eyes off my beautiful Mary, who in form, face and expression was the exact counterpart of her sister Grace. Surely, all that I had passed through was but a dream and this was Grace herself. That night when all the others had retired, my sister, Mary and myself gathered round the wide hearth. We talked of many things, but the one which gave me some concern, yet which I feared to approach: Was Mary's heart free or not?

At length I mustered courage enough to say:

"Sister, it is a wonder you have been able to keep Mary so long; I should have thought all the young men would have been dying about her."

"Mary," replied my sister, "will not listen to any lover's words; she tells all the young men who make advances to her that it is no use, for she has been engaged ever since she was four years old, and that she will never marry any one else."

"Is that true?" said I, by Mary, who was blushing deeply; it is, my dear brother, and to say so and this hand is yours for I swear to you that since your dear sister perished I have never spoken of love to any other woman, or felt my heart glow for any other except yourself."

Mary bowed her head, placed her hand in mine and said, in a gentle tone:

"It is true; I will wed none but you, and to be true, my declaration of love is not to be broken, my good sister, I have kept my heart for you, and I have loved you dearly for many years."

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