

✿ The Story Page. ✿

"The North Room."

BY CLARA J. DENTON.

"It is all right, is it, Harry?"
"Yes, all right. The deed is signed and Mr. Drumno will take it to the county seat to have it recorded to-morrow."

"Then, after to-morrow mother can't back out, if she wants to?"

"Certainly not. But what an idea. Why should she want to back out? She's not that kind of a woman. But where is mother?"

"She went over to Beemer's a few minutes ago. I suppose she wanted to tell them what she has done. Their hired man visits our Jane quite often, you know, and she told me that Beemer's folks had tried to persuade her not to sign the deed over to you. I wonder if they think we could ever abuse mother?"

"It seems they have failed to make her think so; she knows there will be no difference."

"Well, Harry, I mean to drive over to the village to-morrow. I want Mr. Smith to come on Monday and make those alterations in the house that we have so long talked about, you know."

"Have you said anything to mother about them?"

"No, why should I? Isn't this our house, now, and haven't we a right to do as we like?"

"Yes, I suppose it is, and, I dare say, mother wouldn't care to be bothered about them."

"Of course, she wouldn't. Oh, I will be so glad to have these mean little windows taken out and those awfully old-fashioned green blinds. I have been so mortified about them for nearly the last five years."

"Let me see, Carrie, what other changes do you propose?"

"I shall have back stairs put in where the conservatory is."

"But what will mother say to that?"

"Oh, Harry, don't be too absurd; as if she will not like it better to have back stairs. Besides, I really think the care of all those plants is too much for her in the winter, so I want to have the conservatory taken out while the plants are still outdoors. That will not seem so great a change to her as it would to move the plants if they were once returned to their accustomed shelves."

"Oh, I see," said Harry; "very considerate of you, I am sure," and his wife thought she detected a shade of sarcasm in his voice.

"And what else are you planning to have done?" continued the husband.

"I mean to have that little north room fitted up for mother. You know how long I have wanted the back parlor for a library. It will be so cozy with its open fire place."

"Perhaps mother thinks it's cozy, too, and so may object to being routed out."

"Now, Harry, you know very well that she will give it up gladly, if she thinks you want it," said the wife in her most wheedling voice. "Besides, what difference can it make to an old person like her what room she has? She receives all her visitors in the parlor and sits with the family the greater part of the time. I'm sure she'll not be so selfish as to want the very best room in the house just to sleep in."

"Well, I suppose you know best," said the easy-going husband, as he took up his paper, and the wife knew that she was safe from any interference on his part.

Across the wide hall, in the darkness and silence of the coveted back parlor the mother sat an unsuspected listener to this wholesale readjustment of her old home. Her call across the street had been a short one, and she had slipped in at the open front door unobserved and unheard. Although she had passed her sixty-fifth birthday she did not consider herself an "old woman," for she was strong and well, and of an exceedingly bright and cheerful disposition. She would admit now and then that she was "getting along," but at the close of this unintentional eavesdropping she said to herself: "An old woman, to be laid on the shelf and disposed of at the pleasure of others!"

Her thoughts went swiftly back to the day that she came a happy bride to this house that was now to be so ruthlessly overhauled. The green shutters against the white clapboards had seemed to her then the most beautiful things on earth. Was it strange that, with a fresh coat of paint now and then they still retained their charm for her? Various additions had been made to the house as the worldly store of its owners had increased, until it was now the roomiest and most comfortable (albeit, a bit old-fashioned) farm house in the county. She and her husband had often discussed the subject of "back stairs," but as they could only be obtained by sacrificing the conservatory, they had given them up, for the flowers had become to the wife after the death of her three little girls and the later marriage of her only son, the solace and joy of her life.

"The children know this," she said to herself over and over again, as she in the darkness wiped the burning tears from her eyes; "how can they be so cruel?"

As to the "back parlor," it was here that her husband had been cared for during the long months of his last illness, and it was here, too, that she had watched his eyes grow dim under the touch of death. When it had seemed advisable that Harry should leave his own farm, and come to the old homestead they found the mother cozily settled in the back parlor, and "here I mean to die," she often said to herself.

"But the north room," she repeated, "the dreariest room in the whole house, the one that I have always thought fit for nothing but an occasional extra hired man."

Again the tears came hot and fast, but after a few moments of this abandonment she roused herself with a little shake.

"I'll show her," she thought. "She's a master hand at planning, but I'll do a little of that myself, I think."

Soon after, according to her usual custom, she joined her son and his wife for an hour or so, and bade them good-night again with her usual gentleness.

The following morning, when Harry entered the dining-room, he asked at once:

"Where is mother, Carrie?"

"She hasn't appeared yet. I suppose she has overslept."

"Nonsense," he answered, indignantly; "you know she never oversleeps. She must be ill. How could you wait all this time without finding out?"

He left the room with an impatient stride, but in a moment he returned with an anxious look on his face.

"She isn't there," he said.

"Oh, well, that's not strange," replied his wife.

"She is, no doubt, outdoors somewhere, putting about her flowers. She'll come in when she gets ready."

Harry, however, was not satisfied with this, but sent the eldest boy outdoors to hunt up his grandmother.

"Queer thing for mother to forget meal time," said Harry; "she's always so prompt."

They gathered around the table, but had barely seated themselves when there was a resounding ring of the front doorbell. This of itself was an unusual event, but at so early an hour it at once seemed the forerunner of trouble of some kind. They had only time, however, for a mere interchange of frightened glances when Jane rushed into the dining-room the family lawyer, Mr. Drumno.

"Excuse me for breaking in upon you," he said, "but I am in great haste. I want to return to the village in time for the morning train. No, thanks, don't place a chair for me at the table, I've been to breakfast. We had our morning meal about two hours ahead of the usual time."

A sudden thought came to Harry's wife.

"There is some flaw in that deed. Oh, I hope we can get it fixed up and hustle him out of the way before mother comes in. There is no telling what she might do."

Aloud she said, with her suavest manner:

"I suppose you are taking that deed to the county seat to record, this morning?"

"Madame," he said gravely, "I regret to say that I have no deed to record."

"What!" she exclaimed in startled tones.

"Harry, what does this mean?"

"Mr. Drumno," he said, sternly, "explain yourself."

"I will," was the answer. "This morning about five o'clock—"

But here he was interrupted by the entrance of the boy who had been sent to look around for his grandmother.

"Grandma isn't anywhere around, he said, with a sob."

"No, my son," said the lawyer, with a funny little smile. "I left your grandma seated at my table, comfortably sipping her morning coffee, and when she found I was coming over here she sent you her love and said she would stay a day or two with your Cousin Julia, and that they would bring her home when she was ready to come."

"But," said Harry in great bewilderment, "do you mean to tell me that my mother walked the two miles to your house this morning and reached there at five o'clock?"

"You have stated the case exactly."

"But what in the world did she come for?" asked Carrie with a half sob, for she knew only too well the forthcoming answer.

"To burn up the deed which she signed yesterday," said the lawyer, tersely.

"But," said Carrie, rising angrily, "how did you dare let her get hold of it? Is that the way you look out for your clients' interests?"

"Carrie," said her husband, sternly, "you forget yourself."

"I am aware," said the lawyer, humbly, "that I was very remiss, but really the old lady was very sharp. She pretended that there was an error in the description of that creek that runs through her back forty, and she asked me merely to read it over to her. In the first place she had complained that her feet were wet from tramping so far in the dew. I

could do no less than build a fire in the kitchen stove, so when she was comfortably ensconced in a rocking chair, with her feet in the oven, she made her business known and said it might make trouble if the deed went on record wrong. I brought the deed out and read it over to her. She showed no desire to get hold of it, and I did not for a moment suspect her of any sinister designs. Finally after repeating the description over many times she said, just as she had said before: 'I don't feel quite satisfied.' Then I assured her that the description was an exact copy of the old deed. 'But that may have been wrong,' she persisted. So taking the deed with me I went to my office and brought the township map to the kitchen table, spreading it out to convince her that the creek was properly located on the deed. I said to myself, if she is so anxious to have this all right for Harry as to walk over here before it was fairly daylight, surely I can work for his interest, too, and see that it really is all right. Well, I became so intent on following the course of that creek that I forgot to keep my hand on the deed, and the first thing I knew she had jerked it from the table, lifted the stove cover, and it was in the flames. She did it so adroitly that I didn't realize what she had done until my wife cried out, 'Tom!' Then I took it in, but when I lifted the stove cover the deed was only a black, shapeless mass."

As the lawyer ceased, Carrie dropped her head upon her hands and gave way to a torrent of tears.

"Did mother give any explanation?"

"No, she simply said that she had changed her mind."

In a few days the mother returned to her home. Nothing was said about the destruction of the deed, no questions were asked, no explanations were volunteered, and life again flowed on in its wonted channels.

One morning, about six months later, Carrie, feeling in an unusual petulant mood, made some unkind remarks about the ancient appearance of the house. This seemed to the mother a decisive moment, and she said kindly, but firmly:

"Carrie, this is my house. I like it as it is; but you do not need to stay here unless you quite prefer to do so. Harry's cousin is ready to take the farm whenever you would like to return to your own more modern and elegant mansion."

This settled the question. The land at the home farm was the best in the county, and as the rent was a merely nominal sum, the daughter-in-law's eyes were too firmly fixed on the "bargain" element to allow her to relinquish her hold lightly.

The mother lived twenty years longer, and when the will was read it was found that everything was left to Harry save a few personal belongings, but following the bequests was a paragraph explaining the cause of the destruction of the deed, closing with these words:

"When you find yourself growing old, hold on to whatever property you may have gained, for human nature is weak, and the temptation to send the 'old folks' to 'north rooms' is more than some people can overcome!"—The Standard.

✿ A Leaf in a Gale. ✿

He crept, full of fear, into the warm waiting-room of the railroad station, and tried to hide behind a big radiator. He was seven years old, but not an inch larger than a five-year-old should be. He was very dirty, very cold, very ragged, and very miserable. He carried a boot-blackening "kit" over his shoulders, and held five crumpled papers under his arm.

The deaconess on duty at the station spied the little fellow.

"What's your name, little boy?" she asked.

"Tomasso," he replied, with trembling lips.

She drew up a rocking-chair, for they have rocking-chairs in that station, and took the little fellow, rags and all, on her motherly lap.

"What's the matter, Tommy?" she asked, pityingly.

"I—I can't sell my papers, an' I hain't got a single shine, an' de boys out dere beat me, awful!" And the sobs burst out unrestrained.

A glance out the window showed "de boys," still in an angry knot, telling each other how "dat impudent kid t'ought he c'd git inter business 'round dese 'ere corners. But we jest sent him howlin'!"

The deaconess remembered a big box of lunch that a chance traveller had put into her hands. She produced it now and watched its contents disappearing. It was a prosaic kind of comfort, but very satisfactory to the half-starved little lad.

"Now, Tommy, tell me how you try to get shines and sell papers. Maybe you don't do it right. Suppose I am your customer. How would you ask me?"

"Have a shine?" said Tommy, but in a hopeless, monotonous tone.

"Oh, that's not the way. You must say, 'Please, sir, have a shine?' You must speak bright, and smile and look right at him. Try it again."