

***LOUISE
FORSSLUND***



***OLD LADY
NUMBER 31***

Louise Forsslund

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I

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THE TEA-TABLE

Angeline's slender, wiry form and small, glossy gray head bent over the squat brown tea-pot as she shook out the last bit of leaf from the canister. The canister was no longer hers, neither the tea-pot, nor even the battered old pewter spoon with which she tapped the bottom of the tin to dislodge the last flicker of tea-leaf dust. The three had been sold at auction that day in response to the auctioneer's inquiry, "What am I bid for the lot?"

Nothing in the familiar old kitchen was hers, Angeline reflected, except Abraham, her aged husband, who was taking his last gentle ride in the old rocking-chair—the old arm-chair with painted roses blooming as brilliantly across its back as they had bloomed when the chair was first purchased forty years ago. Those roses had come to be a source of perpetual wonder to the old wife, an ever present example.

Neither time nor stress could wilt them in a single leaf. When Abe took the first mortgage on the house in order to invest in an indefinitely located Mexican gold-mine, the melodeon dropped one of its keys, but the roses nodded on with the same old sunny hope; when Abe had to take the

second mortgage and Tenafly Gold became a forbidden topic of conversation, the minute-hand fell off the parlor clock, but the flowers on the back of the old chair blossomed on none the less serenely.

The soil grew more and more barren as the years went by; but still the roses had kept fresh and young, so why, argued Angy, should not she? If old age and the pinch of poverty had failed to conquer their valiant spirit, why should she listen to the croaking tale? If they bloomed on with the same crimson flaunt of color, though the rockers beneath them had grown warped and the body of the chair creaked and groaned every time one ventured to sit in it, why should she not ignore the stiffness which the years seemed to bring to her joints, the complaints which her body threatened every now and again to utter, and fare on herself, a hardy perennial bravely facing life's winter-time?

Even this dreaded day had not taken one fraction of a shade from the glory of the roses, as Angeline could see in the bud at one side of Abraham's head and the full-blown flower below his right ear; so why should she droop because the sale of her household goods had been somewhat disappointing? *Somewhat?* When the childless old couple, still sailing under the banner of a charity-forbidding pride, became practically reduced to their last copper, just as Abe's joints were "loosenin' up" after a five years' siege of rheumatism, and decided to sell all their worldly possessions, apart from their patched and threadbare wardrobes and a few meager keepsakes, they had depended upon raising at least two hundred dollars, one half of which was to secure Abe a berth in the Old Men's

Home at Indian Village, and the other half to make Angeline comfortable for life, if a little lonely, in the Old Ladies' Home in their own native hamlet of Shoreville. Both institutions had been generously endowed by the same estate, and were separated by a distance of but five miles.

"Might as waal be five hunderd, with my rheumatiz an' yer weak heart," Abraham had growled when Angy first proposed the plan as the only dignified solution to their problem of living.

"But," the little wife had rejoined, "it'll be a mite o' comfort a-knowin' a body's so near, even ef yer can't git tew 'em."

Now, another solution must be found to the problem; for the auction was over, and instead of two hundred dollars they had succeeded in raising but one hundred dollars and two cents.

"That air tew cents was fer the flour-sifter," inwardly mourned Angy, "an' it was wuth double an' tribble, fer it's been a good friend ter me fer nigh on ter eight year."

"Tew cents on the second hunderd," said Abe for the tenth time. "I've counted it over an' over. One hunderd dollars an' tew pesky pennies. An' I never hear a man tell so many lies in my life as that air auctioneer. Yew'd 'a' thought he was sellin' out the Empery o' Rooshy. Hy-guy, it sounded splendid. Fust off I thought he'd raise us more 'n we expected. An' mebbe he would have tew, Angy," a bit ruefully, "ef yew'd 'a' let me advertise a leetle sooner. I don't s'pose half Shoreville knows yit that we was gwine ter have a auction sale." He watched the color rising in her cheeks with a curious mixture of pride in her pride and

regret at its consequences. "It's no use a-talkin', Mother, Pride an' Poverty makes oneasy bed-fellers."

He leaned back in the old chair, creaking out a dismal echo to the auctioneer's, "Going, going, gone!" while the flush deepened in Angy's cheek. Again she fastened her gaze upon the indomitable red rose which hung a pendant ear-ring on the right side of Abraham's head.

"Yew wouldn't 'a' had folks a-comin' here ter bid jest out o' charity, would yew?" she demanded. "An' anyhow," in a more gentle tone,—the gently positive tone which she had acquired through forty years of living with Abraham,—"we hain't so bad off with one hunderd dollars an' tew cents, an'—beholden ter nobody! It's tew cents more 'n yew need ter git yew inter the Old Men's, an' them extry tew cents'll pervide fer me jest bewtiful." Abraham stopped rocking to stare hard at his resourceful wife, an involuntary twinkle of amusement in his blue eyes. With increased firmness, she repeated, "Jest bewtiful!" whereupon Abe, scenting self-sacrifice on his wife's part, sat up straight and snapped, "Haow so, haow so, Mother?"

"It'll buy a postage-stamp, won't it?"—she was fairly aggressive now,—"an' thar's a envelop what wa'n't put up ter auction in the cupboard an' a paper-bag I kin iron out,—ketch me a-gwine ter the neighbors an' a-beggin' fer writin'-paper—an' I'll jest set daown an' write a line ter Mis' Halsey. Her house hain't a stun's throw from the Old Men's; an' I'll offer ter come an' take keer o' them air young 'uns o' her'n fer my board an' keep an'—ten cents a week. I was a-gwine ter say a quarter, but I don't want ter impose on nobody. Seein' that they hain't over well-ter-do, I would go fer

nothin', but I got ter have somethin' ter keep up appearances on, so yew won't have no call ter feel ashamed of me when I come a-visitin' ter the hum." Involuntarily, as she spoke, Angy lifted her knotted old hand and smoothed back the hair from her brow; for through all the struggling years she had kept a certain, not unpleasing, girlish pride in her personal appearance.

Abraham had risen with creaks of his rheumatic joints, and was now walking up and down the room, his feet lifted slowly and painfully with every step, yet still his blue eyes flashing with the fire of indignant protest.

"Me a-bunkin' comfortable in the Old Men's, an' yew a-takin' keer o' them Halsey young 'uns fer ten cents a week! I wouldn't take keer o' 'em fer ten cents a short breath. Thar be young 'uns an' young 'uns," he elucidated, "but they be tartars! Yew'd be in yer grave afore the fust frost; an' who's a-gwine ter bury yer—the taown?" His tone became gentle and broken: "No, no, Angy. Yew be a good gal, an' dew jest as we calc'lated on. Yew jine the Old Ladies'; yew've got friends over thar, yew'll git erlong splendid. An' I'll git erlong tew. Yer know"—throwing his shoulders back, he assumed the light, bantering tone so familiar to his wife—"the poorhouse doors is always open. I'd jest admire ter go thar. Thar's a rocking-chair in every room, and they say the grub is A No. 1." He winked at her, smiling his broadest smile in his attempt to deceive.

Both wink and smile, however, were lost upon Angy, who was busy dividing the apple-sauce in such a way that Abe would have the larger share without suspecting it, hoping the while that he would not notice the absence of butter at

this last home meal. She herself had never believed in buttering bread when there was "sass" to eat with it; but Abe's extravagant tastes had always carried him to the point of desiring both butter and sauce as a relish to his loaf.

"Naow, fur 's I'm concerned," pursued Abe, "I hain't got nothin' agin the poorhouse fer neither man ner woman. I'd as lief let yew go thar 'stid o' me; fer I know very well that's what yew're a-layin' out fer ter do. Yes, yes, Mother, yew can't fool me. But think what folks would say! Think what they would say! They 'd crow, 'Thar's Abe a-takin' his comfort in the Old Men's Hum, an' Angeline, she's a-eatin' her heart out in the poorhouse!'"

Angeline had, indeed, determined to be the one to go to the poorhouse; but all her life long she had cared, perhaps to a faulty degree, for "what folks would say." Above all, she cared now for what they had said and what they still might say about her husband and this final ending to his down-hill road. She rested her two hands on the table and looked hard at the apple-sauce until it danced before her eyes. She could not think with any degree of clearness. Vaguely she wondered if their supper would dance out of sight before they could sit down to eat it. So many of the good things of life had vanished ere she and Abe could touch their lips to them. Then she felt his shaking hand upon her shoulder and heard him mutter with husky tenderness:

"My dear, this is the fust chance since we've been married that I've had to take the wust of it. Don't say a word agin it naow, Mother, don't yer. I've brought yer ter this pass. Lemme bear the brunt o' it."

Ah, the greatest good of all had not vanished, and that was the love they bore one to the other. The sunshine came flooding back into Mother's heart. She lifted her face, beautiful, rosy, eternally young. This was the man for whom she had gladly risked want and poverty, the displeasure of her own people, almost half a century ago. Now at last she could point him out to all her little world and say, "See, he gives me the red side of the apple!" She lifted her eyes, two bright sapphires swimming with the diamond dew of unshed, happy tears.

"I'm a-thinkin', Father," she twittered, "that naow me an' yew be a-gwine so fur apart, we be a-gittin' closer tergether in sperit than we 've ever been afore."

Abe bent down stiffly to brush her cheek with his rough beard, and then, awkward, as when a boy of sixteen he had first kissed her, shy, ashamed at this approach to a return of the old-time love-making, he seated himself at the small, bare table.

This warped, hill-and-dale table of the drop-leaves, which had been brought from the attic only to-day after resting there for ten years, had served as their first dining-table when the honeymoon was young. Abe thoughtfully drummed his hand on the board, and as Angy brought the tea-pot and sat down opposite him, he recalled:

"We had bread an' tea an' apple-sass the day we set up housekeeping dew yew remember, Angy?"

"An' I burned the apple-sass," she supplemented, whereupon Abe chuckled, and Angy went on with a thrill of genuine gladness over the fact that he remembered the

details of that long-ago honeymoon as well as she: "Yew don't mind havin' no butter to-night, dew yer, Father?"

He recalled how he had said to her at that first simple home meal: "Yew don't mind bein' poor with me, dew yer, Angy?" Now, with a silent shake of his head, he stared at her, wondering how it would seem to eat at table when her face no longer looked at him across the board, to sleep at night when her faithful hand no longer lay within reach of his own. She lifted her teacup, he lifted his, the two gazing at each other over the brims, both half-distressed, half-comforted by the fact that Love still remained their toast-master after the passing of all the years. Of a sudden Angy exclaimed, "We fergot ter say grace." Shocked and contrite, they covered their eyes with their trembling old hands and murmured together, "Dear Lord, we thank Thee this day for our daily bread."

Angy opened her eyes to find the red roses cheerfully facing her from the back of the rocking-chair. A robin had hopped upon the window-sill just outside the patched and rusty screen and was joyfully caroling to her his views of life. Through the window vines in which the bird was almost meshed the sunlight sifted softly into the stripped, bare, and lonely room. Angy felt strangely encouraged and comforted. The roses became symbolical to her of the "lilies of the field which toil not, neither do they spin"; the robin was one of the "two sparrows sold for a farthing, and one of them shall not fall to the ground without your Father"; while the sunlight seemed to call out to the little old lady who hoped and believed and loved much: "Fear ye not therefor. Ye are of more value than many sparrows!"

II

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"GOOD-BY"

When the last look of parting had been given to the old kitchen and the couple passed out-of-doors, hushed and trembling, they presented an incongruously brave, gala-day appearance. Both were dressed in their best. To be sure, Abraham's Sunday suit had long since become his only, every-day suit as well, but he wore his Sabbath-day hat, a beaver of ancient design, with an air that cast its reflection over all his apparel. Angeline had on a black silk gown as shiny as the freshly polished stove she was leaving in her kitchen—a gown which testified from its voluminous hem to the soft yellow net at the throat that Angeline was as neat a mender and darter as could be found in Suffolk county.

A black silk bonnet snuggled close to her head, from under its brim peeping a single pink rose. Every spring for ten years Angeline had renewed the youth of this rose by treating its petals with the tender red dye of a budding oak.

Under the pink rose, a soft pink flush bloomed on either of the old lady's cheeks. Her eyes flashed with unconquerable pride, and her square, firm chin she held very high; for now, indeed, she was filled with terror of what "folks would say" to this home-leaving, and it was a bright June afternoon, too clear for an umbrella with which to hide one's face from prying neighbors, too late in the day for a sunshade.