

The Oxford Democrat.

VOLUME 42.

PARIS, MAINE, TUESDAY, JUNE 15, 1875.

NUMBER 22.

Oxford Democrat

Published Every Tuesday Morning, by
GEO. H. WATKINS,
Editor and Proprietor.

Published by H. WATKINS, Editor.

Terms.

Subscription in Advance.

Rates of Advertising.

One square (10 lines) for one week, \$1.00

For each additional week, .25

For each additional month, .75

For each additional year, \$7.00

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Selected Story.

For the Oxford Democrat.

A Story That's Not a Love Story.

By M. E. C.

LENA'S BIRTH-DAY PRESENT.

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There came a reverse in fortune, and the two brothers sustained heavy losses. The accumulations of years were swept away in one day. Yet they had enough left for the necessities and many of the luxuries of life; but Ernest Fletcher set a very high value on this world's goods, and as the consequence, his mind and heart were very much embittered by his loss, and he heaped unmerited reproaches on his brother, which stung him deeply.

When they divided the remnant of their property, Ernest Fletcher said to his brother: "William, you ought not to have any of this; for it is chiefly owing to your carelessness and want of foresight that we have met with this loss." William felt that this was very unjust, and told his brother so; but at length he reluctantly gave up his claim to Ernest.

Fortunately, William's wife possessed a small farm. This was sold for fifteen hundred dollars, and Mr. Fletcher being a man of industrious habits, and master of a good trade, they were enabled to live very comfortably and happily.

The two brothers never visited each other now, which was a source of great grief to their families. The little girls did manage to obtain stolen interviews occasionally, but this fact was one day revealed to Ernest Fletcher, and he sternly rebuked his daughter to speak to Lena on any occasion; and so these two families who had been so much to each other, were both made very unhappy.

About three years before Mr. Fletcher's death, he went to his brother Ernest, requesting the loan of five hundred dollars. Ernest peremptorily refused to advance the desired sum, and as his brother remonstrated with him he became very angry and told him never to enter his house, or speak to him again. This effectively closed all communication between them, and when William Fletcher died, his brother's family were not present at the funeral.

We can now easily imagine Mr. Fletcher's surprise on beholding her brother-in-law at the door. "Madam," said he, "don't you see me surprised at seeing me here?"

"Well, I have come because I want my just due," said the astonished lady.

"What do you mean? Pray explain yourself," said the astonished lady.

"Madam," replied he in a chilling tone, "I mean just this: Your husband was owing me quite a large sum of money, and I want it."

"How much is it?" asked Mrs. Fletcher.

"Five thousand dollars."

"I wasn't aware that William was owing you anything," she said in trembling tones.

"That matters not; the question is—Can you pay me to-night?"

The lady knew very well that her story was false; but she was powerless to do anything against her cruel oppressor.

"No, Mr. Fletcher; I am unable to pay you," she faltered.

"Well, I must have it, and since you can't pay me, I'll just take the house."

The lady pleaded long and earnestly with the hard-hearted man to spare her, but he was inexorable. He said she must leave that house before a week. At length he told her that she might keep all her furniture; but this was the extent of his compassion.

As her uncle turned to leave the room little Rilla, who was now five years old, fixing her reproachful eyes on him, said: "Y-a naughty, wicked man, you go 'way and not come here to make poor mamma cry."

"Hush, darling," said her mother, and then gathering the child to her breast, she wept bitterly. The tears coursed rapidly down her pale cheeks, and fell on the precious head folded to her bosom. They were tears of deep, bitter anguish, such as she had never known before.

Lena was now thirteen years old, and like a brave little girl as she was, she endeavored to comfort her mother.

"Darling mamma," said she, "God will provide for us. Does he not tell us that he will care for the widow and the fatherless?"

"Yes," said the weeping mother; "God will provide for us." And she took the Bible and read a few of the Father's precious promises; then kneeling down she commended herself and children to his kind care and protection. She passed a sleepless night, but she had a noble soul, and it was roused to action. In the solemn midnight, she sent her vow upward, upward to the God who gave her being: "So help me Heaven, and faith in my own awakened strength, and my own ambition and powers of mind and soul, I will be strong and faithful, and do thoroughly the part I have chosen and marked out for myself, though it be humble; then I will not be said that life to me was a fruitless gift, but a well-filled allotment, bearing my Master's impress and seal, and rendered acceptable by his chastening power. God helping me, I will be henceforth cheerful, trusting, and content."

The sun rose next morning bright, calm and cloudless, flinging out its rich beauty and leaving a golden tracery everywhere. Mrs. Fletcher tried to be cheerful; and after breakfast she called Nora, her faithful servant, and told her of the circumstances in which she was placed and that she should not be able to pay her for her services any longer. Nora was deeply grieved, for she loved Mrs. Fletcher truly, and her indignation against Ernest Fletcher knew no bounds; but Mrs.

Fletcher endeavored to hush her bitter imprecations. Nora took the cars that afternoon for New York, the city where her brother resided. Fortunately, Mrs. Fletcher had been brought up to work. Her parents taught her that that life was something more than pleasure, fashion, and show, and now she felt fully competent to undertake the duties of house-keeping.

Having dismissed Nora, her next thought was to find some humble tenement where she might support herself and little girls. Accordingly in the afternoon she went to Mr. Insfield's, the minister whose church she attended. In him she found a sympathizing listener and a ready helper. He at once proffered his services, and together they went that afternoon in search of a small tenement, and at last their efforts were rewarded. In a retired part of the city of L— was a tenement which, though very humble and unpretending, seemed to be the only available one that presented itself, and which it was quite neat and clean.

The next morning the minister called on her, and with him was a gentleman who wished to buy all the furniture she had to sell. He paid her liberally for all that he purchased. The money which she received from the sale was sufficient to enable her to purchase the tenement and still have a little left for a "rainy day."

In three days more, Mrs. Fletcher and her children had become settled in their new home.

It is Saturday night. The children have retired to rest; Mrs. Fletcher goes to the door and looks out. In a cold, damp, starless night; scarcely a person is abroad that breaths of a part of a home and the lights in the windows are expiring one by one, leaving the way more lonely, only as the struggling moon drifts up now and then through the thick masses of storm-clouds that lay like the angry incense of a great battle all along the Eastern sky. While she stood musing on the past, present and future, a man passed by. It was a laborer returning from a hard day's work, but he was singing cheerily and trustfully, and as the words: "Father, take my hand and guide me," reached her, they touched a responsive chord in her heart, and she went into her humble dwelling cheered and strengthened and with renewed faith that her Heavenly Father would lead and support her.

The next day she listened to a soul-stirring sermon from the eloquent Mr. Insfield. His theme was the infinite love of God. This, with a few encouraging words from her pastor, buoyed her up wonderfully, and the next day when she went out in quest of employment, it was with a great deal of hope and courage. She succeeded in engaging needle work enough to last her for two or three weeks; and at the end of that time, she found more awaiting her. She was a very skillful seamstress, and her employers considered themselves very fortunate in being able to secure the services of so efficient a laborer; and so they gave her all the work she wanted, and paid her liberally.

Lena and Rilla attended school for about eight months in the year. Lena possessed a fine intellect. She longed to know, to understand; and so rapid was her progress, that it seemed as if her mind had been gathering almost unnatural strength to grasp rich gems from the tree of knowledge. She was not like a girl of thirteen years, but rather like a woman in capacity and strength of intellect. As the thirty hard drinks of the sweet water for which it panted, so her mind drank in rich draughts of knowledge daily.

And so time's never resting car moved on, until Lena was eighteen years of age. She was not what a casual observer would have called beautiful, but she was very lovely notwithstanding. Tall and finely developed in form, there was always a graceful dignity and perfect self-possession in her manners, united with a genial, affectionate air, which made her very attractive.

It had always been customary in Mrs. F's family to bestow birthday gifts on each other, and so on Lena's eighteenth birthday, Mrs. Fletcher gave her a gold necklace which she had purchased for herself many years before. Lena gave her mother a grateful kiss, and said her present would give her a great deal of pleasure.

"I hope it will, Lena, for you have been a good girl," said Mrs. Fletcher, as she gazed at her with an expression of doating fondness on her face.

Soon after this, Mrs. Fletcher took a violent cold, and though there was nothing left undone that could be done to restore her health, she never recovered. She faded gradually; but she was afflicted with a distressing cough, which enfeebled her, and one morning in the latter part of September, the summons came.

Lena and her sister were at first nearly paralyzed with grief. Their kind pastor, Mr. Insfield came to them in this deep affliction. He pointed them to the

Father of all, who doeth all things well. A few kind neighbors also came to them and helped to make all necessary arrangements for the funeral, after which the orphans went to Mr. Insfield's, where they remained for nearly three weeks, and then returned to their desolate home. They had devotedly loved their mother, and it was not natural that they should deeply grieve for her, but by faith in their heavenly Father, they learned to be resigned to even this sad Providence. Lena felt that she had no time to spend in useless repinings. The support of her sister and herself would now devolve upon her, and it was a very serious responsibility. It had taken all Mrs. Fletcher's earnings to pay her doctor's bills and funeral charges; but Lena was a brave girl, and was not disheartened, as most girls in her circumstances would have been. She had a good education, and after much trouble, she succeeded in obtaining a situation as teacher in a Grammar school, about half a mile from where she lived. She had not taught many weeks before her little sister was taken sick, and she was obliged to be at home with her. She had a dangerous attack of the Typhoid fever, but Lena watched over her most faithfully, and after a few weeks, the Dr. said she would get well. "But, Miss Lena," added he, "we will never quarrel to decide which shall have the credit of the cure; for I now resign all pretensions to so great an honor. To you alone, it rightfully belongs, and I really think you are entitled to a diploma for skillful practice."

When Rilla was able to sit up, Lena endeavored to find something to do; but her mother's employers had now engaged others to do their work, though they gave her a little sewing; but the price they paid was not very encouraging to poor Lena.

Having carried some sewing home one day she failed to obtain any more, and returned with a heavy heart. That night she could not sleep; she was revolving plans for the future. The doctor must be paid, and there was quite a bill at the provision store which must be settled, and Lena must be taken care of, come what would.

The next day the Dr. sent in his bill, amounting to thirty dollars, and on going to the provision store for a few necessities, the merchant told her she could not let her have anything more until she paid him his dues which were thirty-five dollars. In her distress she thought of applying to Mr. Insfield, her pastor. She accordingly went to his house, and was met by a servant, who told her that he had been called very suddenly, by a telegraphic dispatch, to go to Europe on important business, and that he would not return for six months.

Other way home Lena decided what to do. Their house must be sold, and they must purchase a cheap rent elsewhere.

Rilla detected an unusual sadness in her sister's greeting, and said, "What is the matter, Lena? You look as if you were just ready to cry."

It was a very unpleasant duty for Lena to tell her little sister of the difficulties in which they had been placed, and that they must leave their home; but she told her the whole story as gently as she could. Rilla had great confidence in Lena, and after the first outburst of childish grief, she was quite willing to fall in with any arrangements which Lena might make. Accordingly, after considerable search, Lena succeeded in finding a rent. Mr. Mayhew, who owned a tenement house in a distant part of the city, said he would let her have a room in the third story. Lena soon found a purchaser for the house which she had long been her home, though he would give only half the sum which had been paid by her mother. With the money which she received, Lena paid their debts, and purchased a few things which they needed. After paying all the expenses of moving &c., Lena had but fifteen dollars left, no wonder that she looked forward with dread to the winter that was now fast approaching.

On the next day, after arriving at their home, Lena tried to find employment. She was very successful here, and she did her work so well, that she was supplied with all she could do; for Rilla, naturally delicate, and not having fully recovered her health, was so much fatigued with moving, that she became seriously ill, and a physician was summoned, who said that she required the most watchful care; so Lena had to lay aside her work, and give her attention to her sister; only sometimes when Rilla slept, Lena would take her sewing, and work with all her might.

"You will need my services soon, Miss Fletcher," said the Dr. one day to Lena. You are getting very pale, and thin, you must rest awhile, and get some one to take your place."

"Oh! I can't do that."

"Why not?" said the Dr. "I will find a good trusty woman who will take good care of your sister, for four dollars a week."

"Oh, I can leave her to no one; I must take care of her myself." Lena shrunk from telling the Dr. how poor they were; and there seems to be a reluctance in many refined people to parade their poverty before the world.

Rilla was gradually getting better, while Lena was growing paler and thinner every day.

quent, and on the day in which our story opens, he had thought it would not be necessary for him to come again, unless indeed, Lena should require his services.

That night, after Rilla had dropped into a quiet sleep, her sister sat a long time thinking how she could manage to pay the physician for his services, and how they should get along through the rest of the winter. It was now the twenty-ninth of January.

"To-morrow is my birth-day; I wonder what I shall have for a present," Lena said, almost bitterly, then added, "I never need expect any more birth-day gifts;" but presently these thoughts ceased, and a trustful contented feeling took their place. The next morning she woke early, and after kindling the fire, she discovered that they had barely wood enough to last that day. What should she do? "God will provide," I will trust my mother's God," she said. She cheerfully prepared their simple breakfast, and then after helping her sister to dress, they sat down together, and thankfully partook of their frugal meal.

"Did you know this is my birth day?" "No," said Rilla, "I had not thought of it, and how sorry I am that you cannot have a present." Lena's eyes filled with tears, but she said nothing. Going to a trunk, she took from it a gold necklace which had been her mother's gift just one year ago. She looked at it lovingly, lingeringly. How could she part with it? She had been thinking that she must sell it in order to buy fuel; but when she looked at it, it brought her mother and former happier scenes so vividly to her mind, that she put it carefully back in the box from which she had taken it, saying, "I cannot part with it now; I will wait a little longer," and now we must leave these poor orphans for a time.

A festive night in Mr. Fletcher's stately mansion. All that wealth could purchase, or taste devise, to add to the rich magnificence of the scene; for Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher felt that they could not do too much for their daughter's pleasure on her nineteenth birth day. Graceful and beautiful as were the many forms gathered in those splendid rooms, Lena Fletcher shone preeminent. Such a sweet holy light dwelt in her glorious eyes, they seemed to draw their radiance from a never dying fount of love and joy. On a clear gray or hazel, they had the most bewitching curtains of long dark lashes, which, when she was looking downward, seemed to rest caressingly on the fair cheek below; but when she was animated and her eyes were raised, the light seemed actually to flash from them. Anon, a sad and dreamy expression would veil their beams, like emanations from some hidden fountain of love and tears.

Ernest Fletcher had, by industry and shrewd calculation, become very wealthy and he loved his only daughter with all a father's love. Though to others he was cold, and seemingly unfeeling, her lightest wish was a law to him. It happened that Inez and her father were alone in one of the parlors. As he gazed upon her lovely features, he thought that her deep, sad eyes looked more sad than was their wont. "What troubles my darling?" said the fond father, "I want you to look, and to feel very happy to-night."

"I am not happy father and cannot be, though you do so much for my happiness."

"And why not, Inez?" The young girl hesitated a moment, and then gently laying her hand on his shoulder, and looking up into his face, said, "Dear father, don't be angry with me, I can't help thinking of poor Cousin Lena to-night. You know she and I are of the same age, and while I am surrounded with kind friends, and everything to make me happy, she is a poor orphan, and for ought we know, she and Rilla may suffer for the common necessities of life. Oh father, let me do something for them. My heart aches for my poor cousin whom I have always loved."

Mr. Fletcher looked very stern, and was silent. Inez had never known to what extent her father had wronged his brother's family, and so she could not know the gnawing remorse which her words had aroused in her father's heart. Again she earnestly entreated him to do something for the relief of the poor orphans. "I'll think of it, child; go back to your friends now," said Mr. Fletcher, much moved.

Going to his study, he sank into a chair, and gave vent to emotions which would no longer be restrained. His heart, which had grown harder than adamant, had become somewhat softened by his daughter's words. He thought of the past so fraught with blackness to him, and of his brother whom he had so irreparably wronged, and of the orphans against whom he had so long steered his heart. The color came and went in his cheeks as these harrowing thoughts burned into his very soul. Pride, humiliation and remorse had a mighty struggle in his heart. Only the searcher of hearts could know his agony; but at last he seemed to feel new strength, and he wished to make some reparation to his brother's children for the deep wrong he had done them. The man wept, but they were not tears of weakness, they were blessed holy drops gushing up from the healing fountain which the Angel had troubled. Ere long he felt

indeed, strong to battle with, and overcome his pride, and do his duty. "I will go to those poor girls this very night," he said; and going to his desk drawer, he took therefrom a roll of bills, amounting to five hundred dollars, and put them in his pocket book. Then, thinking that he would not make himself known to his nieces that night, he took a large envelope which was lying on the table, and having directed it to Miss Lena Fletcher, he put the bills inside. Then a sudden fancy having seized him, he took his pen, and underneath the name which he had written, he wrote, "A birth-day present."

He descended to the hall, and was just putting on his hat, when Inez entered. "Where are you going, father?" said she.

