

The Storyteller

THE SPIRIT OF HARRIET

The day drowsed in the July sun. Heat waves were palpitating visibly upon the brick pavement, along the dusty street and against the low white house. Tiger lilies reared their passionate blooms upon every side, crowding their way to the edge of the walk or thrusting themselves brazenly above the pickets. The green shutters of the old house were closed, as was the front door beneath its fan transom. The rusty crepe that had swung disconsolately from the handle of the bell, giving to the quaint shabbiness of the old house a touch of the dignity of death, had been removed, and it had sunken back into its dreary dreaming.

A frail little woman covered in the side doorway, resting her chin in her palm. Her dark eyes gazed unseeing as her mind pondered wearily upon the past or crept hopelessly toward the future. On the step at her feet lay Beelzebub, the cat, big, black and sullen, blinking wickedly at doves that cooed on the roof.

The afternoon had slipped away into the past. The sun was sinking its crimson disc in a bank of orange clouds at the very head of High street, for the city fathers had laid out Philamelaque directly with the points of the compass; there were no winding lanes, no delightfully crooked byways to lure your willing feet in all the old town's length and breadth, but at the western end of High, the street dipped down a gentle hill, and behind it each night through the long summer, as back of a screen, old Sol got himself decently to bed. Over in the South-West a bank of violet clouds tinged with dingy green at the summit was silently spreading itself across the sky, broken now and then by a quivering flash that jagged it from top to bottom as if to let the glory through.

Lois, her face showing wanly above the blackness of her gown, still sat in the doorway as the twilight deepened. Beelzebub, yawning with ennui, had long since taken himself off to the barn. The evening silence was broken only by the mad whirring of the crickets among the lilies, and now and then by the low muttering of distant thunder.

So intent was Lois upon her own sad thoughts that she did not hear the click of the gate nor the quick step upon the walk, but turned with a start when a cheery voice broke in upon her.

'You poor, dear girl, all alone in the twilight, it's enough to give a body the rumpumples, with this storm a-brewin'.'

'Oh, Marthy, how good of you to come!' cried Lois, as the newcomer, a little butter-ball of a woman, her stiff-starched calico rattling with every movement, placed upon the step a tray covered with a napkin. 'The house seemed so awful I didn't have the heart to go in, but I didn't think of anybody comin'.'

'Just wait a minute,' went on Mrs. Read, entering the dark sitting-room. 'I'm goin' to get a candle. I know just where it is, so sit still. Then I'm goin' to light the gasoline and get you a good cup of tea. I'd have been here an hour ago, but Dan's sister and the children come up to the funeral and I had to get supper. By the time I'd got them off and the dishes washed and the baby asleep, seemed as if I could scream, for I just knew you were sitting here all alone. Seems as if Mrs. Keel might have run in, but she's that took up with her asthma I expect she never thought of it. Granny Simmers went over to Oldtown to see that poor little Mattie Miller, and won't be back till to-morrow.'

'I—I didn't expect it,' faltered Lois. 'Folks ain't come here much since Ma died. Harriet wasn't no hand for company, and I suppose they got out of the way.'

'Then they've got to get in the way again. Now, I'm goin' to draw up that twisted-legged, and set the tray here. That tea'll be made in a jiffy as quick as the kettle boils. You might just as well make up your mind, Lois, I'm goin' to take you in hand.'

'I'm sure I'll be grateful, though you ain't much older than me, Marthy. I'll be thirty-six next month, and I ain't really lived one of those years. That's what I've been thinkin' all the afternoon, that I'd like to live a day before I die.'

'Poor girl! there never was a speck of reason why you shouldn't have had a real good time. You was made for fun if ever a girl was. I just love that twinkle in your eyes when it gets ahead of the sadness, you're such a pretty woman, Lois.'

'Oh, no,' protested Lois, a flood of soft color mounting from chin to forehead. 'Harriet was handsome; she was so big and strong, always up and comin'. She used to say I wasn't nothin' but a washed-out baby doll.'

'Humph! Well, some folks think differ'n't. There, I hear that kettle boilin'. Come on,' continued Mrs. Read, as she returned with the little brown teapot, a banner of steam issuing from its chipped spout. 'Come on and eat a bite. I'm goin' to try this rocker, for I feel as if my feet wouldn't carry me.'

'How pretty it does look, Marthy!' said Lois, as she sat down. 'Too pretty for just me. My! I've laid awake nights plannin' fixin's for the house, and clothes, and a garden with sweet-smellin' things in it, and all the tigers left out. I've just loved pretty things all my life. I expect Harriet would have thought me crazy.'

'Harriet!' began Mrs. Read, vehemently. 'Well, it ain't right to speak ill of the dead, and I suppose she lived accordin' to her lights, but she wasn't comfortable. Now, I want you to have clothes and things like other folks.'

Lois paused, with her cup half-way to her lips, and opened her eyes wide in surprise.

'Now! Oh, it's too late now! There ain't anybody to care how I look. I ain't got a friend except you and Dan and Granny Simmers—that blessed old soul loves everybody—and perhaps Lawyer Neely.'

'Oh, honey, it ain't you. Everybody will be your friend now. It was Harriet; her queer, fierce ways, Beelzebub and the tiger lilies, and—and—her hardness to you. Why, I'd liked to come often if she hadn't always made me feel my room was better than my company.'

'Sister Harriet was a wonderful woman, said Lois, her voice trembling. 'Ma always said she could do more work in a day than most women, and she knew most as much about business as Lawyer Neely. My likin' to read and dream, and my poky ways made her nervous. And once—Lois' eyes fell and the color flamed in her pale cheeks, as she went on in a low voice—'once I deceived her, and she said she would never forgive or trust me again, and she didn't. She was dreadful determined when she set her head to a thing.'

A vivid flash followed by a terrific crash broke in upon them, then the sudden downpour plashed upon the pavement outside.

'My sakes!' gasped Mrs. Read, as both women sprang to their feet. 'What an awful clap that was, and just listen to that rain! There comes Dan after me,' she continued, as the gate-latch clicked sharply and the heavy footfalls of a man came around the house. 'I knew he'd be a huntin' me up.'

'Hello, Lois! got anything there that belongs to me?' called Dan Read, in his rumbling bass, as he came in sight of the open door. 'Just wait till I get this umbrella down. I've got something for you. Here, Marthy, come get Snicklefritz. I brought her along to take care of Lois to-night, and I've got her nightie tucked under my arm.'

'Mercy on us!' exclaimed Mrs. Read, taking the sleeping child from her husband's shoulder. 'Whatever made you think of Amy? A baby of three won't be much company.'

'She will that,' replied her husband. 'She's just what Lois needs to-night. You get Snicklefritz out of her little duds and cuddle down with her, Lois, and you'll sleep the sweetest you ever did in your life.'

'Do you really want her, honey?' asked Mrs. Read anxiously, as she laid her chubby burden down on Lois' bed. 'Now, if you don't, Dan will pack her right back.'

'I'd love to, if you ain't afraid to trust her,' whispered Lois, as she bent over the sleeping child. 'It was just like Dan to think of it.'

So after a last good-night Mr. and Mrs. Read trudged off in the wet and dark, and when the echo of their footsteps died away Lois stood in the doorway looking after them wistfully through the slanting rain.

Behind her in the house she could feel the awful stillness settle, that loud silence that presses against the heart and quickens its beating; that dreadful sense of emptiness that awaits us when a soul has taken its departure.

All through the afternoon Lois had tried to adjust herself to live alone. Harriet's fierce hold had been so strong upon her gentleness that her jostled soul, set free, shuddered and shrank from mere weakness; and yet what frightened her most and wrung her affectionate heart with remorse was a haunting sense of relief beneath her grief. She was free! Never again would those black eyes flash contempt upon her stolen happy dreams, and burn like vitriol into her inner consciousness. No longer would her life's one innocent secret be made a crime. No longer would there be days of pitiful weeping in her little room over cruel words. And yet—

'Oh, Harriet, Harriet, though you ruined my life,' she moaned, 'through it all I loved you. If you had cared for me ever so little, it would make it all so much easier. Forgive me that I am glad of peace. Please, God, make her understand and help me to forget.'