

A storm swep' through me like a cyclone. It wuz all Bill's fault; that warrior name had done it all—the cyclopeedy with its lies had pized Bill's mind to put this trouble on me an' mine!

No, no, a thousand time no! These wuz coward feelin's an' they misbecome me; they ache here in this heart uv and mine had no business there. The better part uv me called to me an' said: "Pull yourself together, Reuben Ketcham, and be a man!"

"Well, after he we went away leetle Lizzie wuz more to us 'n ever before; wuz at our house all the time; called Lizzie 'mother;' wuz contented, in her woman's way, willin' to do her part, waitin' an' watchin' an' prayin' for him to come back. They sent him boxes of good things every fortnight, mother and leetle Lizzie did; there wuzn't a minute of the day that they wuzn't talkin' or thinkin' uv him.

Well—ye see—I must tell it my own way—he got killed. In the very first battle Cyrus got killed. The rest uv the soldiers turned to retreat, because there wuz too many fer 'em on the other side. But Cyrus stood right up; he wuz the warrior Bill allowed he wuz goin' to be; our boy wuzn't the kind to run. They tell me there wuz bullet holes here an' here, an' here—all over his breast. We always knew our boy wuz a hero!

Ye can thank God ye wuzn't at the 'jinin' farms when the news came that he'd got killed. The neighbors they were there, of course, to kir' uv hold us up an' comfort us. Bill an' I sot all day in the woodshed, holdin' hands and lookin' away from each other, so; never said a word; jest sot there sympathizin' an' holdin' hands. If we'd been women, Bill an' I would uv cried an' beat our foreheads an' hung round each other's neck like the womenfolks done. Bein' we wuz men, we just sit there in the woodshed, away from all the rest, holding hands and sympathizin'.

From that time on leetle Lizzie wuz our daughter—our very daughter, all that was left to us uv our boy. She never shed a tear; crep' like a shadder 'round the house an' up the front walk an' through the garden. Her heart wuz broke. You could see it in the leetle lambkin's eyes an' hear it her voice. Wanted to tell her sometimes when she kissed me an' called me "father"—wanted to tell her: "Little Lizzie, let me help yer bear yer load. Speak out the sorrier that's in yer broken heart; speak it out, leetle one, an' let me help yer bear yer load."

But it isn't for a man to have them feelin's—leastwise it isn't for him to tell uv 'em. So I held my peace an' made no sign.

She jest drooped an' pined an' died.

One mornin' in the spring she was standin' in the garden, an' all at oncet she threw her arms up, so, an' fell upon ner face, an' when they got t' her all that wuz left to us uv leetle Lizzie wuz her lifeless leetle body. I can't tell uv what happened next—uv the funeral an' all that. I said this wuz in the spring, an' so it was all around us; but it wuz cold and winter here.

One day mother sez to me: "Reuben," sez she, softlike, "Marthy an' I is goin' to the buryin' ground for a spell. Don't you reckon it would be a good time fer you to go over an' see Bill while we're gone?"

"Mebbe so, mother," sez I.

It wuz a pretty day. Cutting across lots, I thought to myself what I'd say to Bill to kind uv comfort him. I made it up that I'd spea' about the time when we wuz boys together; uv how we used to slide down the meeting house hill, an' go huckleberryin'; uv how I jumped into the pond one day an' saved him from bein' drowned; uv the spellin' school, the huskin' bees, the choir meetin's, the sparkin' times; of the swimmin' hole, the crow's nest in the pine tree, the woodchuck's hole in the old pasture lot; uv the sunny summer days an' sung winter nights when we wuz boys, an' happy! An' then—

No, no! I couldn't go on like that! I'd break down. A man can't be a man more'n jist so far!

Why did mother send me over to see Bill? I'd better stayed at home! I felt myself chokin' up; if I hadn't took a chew uv tobacco I'd 'ave been crying in a minute.

The nearer I got to Bill's the worse I hated to go in. Standin' on the stoop, I could hear the tall clock tickin' solemnly inside—"tick-tock, tick tock," just as plain as if I wuz sitting aside uv it. The door wuz shet, yet I knowed jest what Bill wuz doin'; he wuz sittin' in the old red easy chair, lookin' down at the floor—like this. Strange, ain't it, how sometimes when you love folks you know jest what they are doin' without knowin' anything about it!

There warn't no use knockin', but I knocked three times, so; didn't say a word, only jest knocked three times, that a-way. Didn't hear no answer—nuthin' but the ticking of the tall clock, an' yet I knew that Bill heard me an' that down in his heart he was sayin' to me to come in. He never said a word, yet I knowed all the time that Bill was sayin' for me to come in.

I opened the door, keeful like, an' slipped in. Didn't say nothin'; jest opened the door softly like an' slipped in. There set Bill jest as I knowed he wuz settin'; lonesome like; sad like; his head hanging down; he never looked up at me; never said a word—knowed I wuz there all the time, but never said a word an' never made a sign.

How changed Bill wuz—oh, Bill how changed ye wuz! There wuz furrers in yer face, an' yer hair wuz white—as white—as white as mine! Looked small about the body, thin an' hump shouldered.

Jest two ol' men, that's what we wuz; an' we had been boys together!

Well, I stood there a spell, kind uv hesitatin' like, neither uv us sayin' anything, until bimeby Bill he sort uv made a sign for me to set down. Didn't speak, didn't lift his eyes from the floor; only made a sign, like this, in a weak, tremblin' way—that wuz all. An' I set down, an' there we both set, neither uv us sayin' a word, but both settin' there, lovin' each other an' sympathizin' as hard as we could, for that is the way with men.

Bimeby, like we'd kind uv made it up aforehand, we hitched over closer, for when folks is in sorrier an' trouble they like to be closte together. But not a word all the time, an' hitchin' closer an' closer together, why, byemby, we set side by side. So we set a spell longer lovin' an' sympathizin', as menfolks do; thinkin' uv the happiness uv the past an' uv all the hopes them two children had brought us. The tall clock ticked, an' that wuz all the sound there wuz, excep' when Bill gin a sigh an' I gin a sigh, too—to lighten the load, ye know.

Not a word come from either uv us; 'twas all we could do to set there, lovin' each other an' sympathizin'.

All at oncet—for we couldn't stand it no longer—all at oncet, we turned an' groped with our hands, this a-way, faces t'other way an' reached out, so, an' groped with our hands, this a-way, till we found and held each other fast in a clasp of tender meanin'.

Then—God forgive me if I done a wrong—'hen I wisht I wuz a woman! For, bein' a women, I could have riz up, an' standin' so, I could have cried. "Come, Bill! come let me hold you in these arms; come, let us weep together, an' let this broken heart uv mine speak through these tremblin' lips to that broken heart of yourn, Bill, tellin' ye how much I love ye an' sympathize with ye!"

But—no! I wuz not a woman! I wuz a man! An', bein' a man, I must let my heart break; I must hold my peace, an' I must make no sign.

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