

## CARA'S BRAVERY.

BY ESTHER BERLE KENNETH.

"For whom did you want the house young lady?"

"For myself, sir."

Dr. Lee Leighton stood amazed. The girl before him was so young—not more than eighteen, and so pretty—golden-haired and blue-eyed as an angel. He had never dreamed that she was making the application to rent Thistle Cottage herself. But Miss Caroline Clarke took no notice of his surprise.

"The house is in good order, sir."

"It requires a few repairs, only," said the young physician, rather stiffly.

He had begun to think he was throwing his time away.

"And those you will make?"

"If I let the cottage—yes."

The young lady mused a moment.

"I think I will like it," she said then.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Clarke?"

"Yes."

"Do you quite understand the situation?"

"I think I do. The house is thought to be haunted, and the rent is merely nominal to anyone who will live there."

"Yes. But—How are you situated in regard to family, my dear young lady?"

"I have the care of two younger brothers—twelve and fourteen years old. I have only a limited income, which I eke out by embroidery. I am anxious to get my brothers out of the city and there is a good academy here. I am not afraid of ghosts," with a faint smile. "We shall come."

Her words and manner were not at variance with her delicate beauty—all was so petite and yet so self-possessed and dignified. Dr. Leighton's experience in girls did not seem to serve him at all in this emergency. He recollected that his sisters, Maud and Bess, always regarded the outer walls of Thistle Cottage with an apprehensive gaze, and could not be persuaded to pass it alone after dark, and here was this girl, no older than they, proposing to live there, with two children!

"You have no parents?"

"No."

"Relatives?"

"None to rely upon. I depend on myself entirely. Dr. Leighton; I am used to it. Would you like to let me have Thistle Cottage?" with a steady glance into the young man's countenance.

"I hesitate only on your account," he hastened to say. "It is no fable that a man was killed there. He was murdered by a son of ungodly mind, after a quarrel about money. The estate was owned by my father. It is now mine. It long ago fell into ill-repute on account of the murder, but it is a very pretty place and has been kept in repair. I will walk over it with you again and make any changes you may find desirable," thus tacitly consenting to the young lady's proposal.

What her words failed to do, her clear blue eyes had succeeded in accomplishing. They had won the confidence of the owner of the cottage.

"She can but try since she wishes," he said to himself. "I am close by at our house. If she gets frightened out she can come to us."

When they had gone over the house again, the girl asked, quite coolly:

"What became of the murderer?"

"He fled from justice—is probably dead. He has never been heard from, and his ghost is said to haunt this spot. If you can prove that it does not, I will give you five years rent here free."

The young girl made no reply, only smiled brightly.

"What a brave little creature!" thought Dr. Leighton.

A week later Caroline Clarke and her brothers were settled at the Thistle Cottage.

Dr. Leighton did not fancy the boys. He told his mother that they were "whelps that wanted licking into shape." But when he saw the gentleness and tact used by their sister in managing them, when he saw her patience, her charming smile in encouragement of their simplest well-doing, he was ashamed of his intolerance.

"My father," she hesitated, "did not set his boys a very good example. They were much away from home before he died. They will do much better here away from harmful associations," she said.

"That's a good girl—a rare good girl, Lee," said old Mrs. Leighton. "I only wish Maud and Bess had half as much character."

But Cara, as the boys called her, did not trouble her neighbors. She was an exquisite housekeeper; she had a piano—an old one but of mellow tone; she did much work with creels and flosses. In the evening she assisted her brothers with their studies. They were fond of her under their roughness and selfishness. They shoveled snow, when it came, took care of the poultry—she encouraged them in their ambition for prize chickens—and kept in wood and water. There was not a brighter little home in the village. Cara had finished the rooms herself with pretty artistic touches. On the pale buff paper of the sitting room she had painted, here and there, a bunch of red Bergundy roses. She had gilded the cornices and hung before a doorway a crimson curtain. As for guests—when people queried her, she simply answered: "No, I have not seen any."

But perhaps the air of the mountain village did not agree with Cara Clarke, for she grew pale. She was always sweet, but sometimes she had a little wearied air. Dr. Leighton asked her if she did not work too hard. "It is not that," she answered. He wondered sometimes, with a secret

disquiet, if she had not somewhere a sweetheart who did not write to her. But Cara kept her own counsel.

The fall and winter wore away without any revelation to him of what troubled her. Jack and Willie, the boys, were jubilant over the prospect of a vegetable garden with peas, potatoes and squashes of their own raising. But their sister looked so ill that the young physician felt called upon to expostulate.

"Cara," he said, "I want to speak to you. You must have a change or you will die."

"O, no, I shall not," she replied, incredulously.

"Your countenance gives token of unmistakable exhaustion. You are doing too much labor or you have some trouble. Cara, why do you not confide in me? Do you not believe I am your friend?"

"Oh, yes. It is nothing, only I do not sleep very well."

"Why?"

"She made no reply, and seeing that his insistence distressed her, he ceased to urge her confidence at that time, though more certain than ever that she had a painful secret. He was satisfied that she had no organic disease; and her mind seemed to have no morbid tendency. But the colorless cheek, the hollow temples, the air of languor, betrayed that something daily and hourly sapped the young girl's strength.

One morning, Willie, the younger boy, rapped at his office door.

"Something's the matter with my sister," he said. "We can't wake her up. Won't you come over?"

Dr. Leighton found Cara in a stupor and delicious, with every symptom of brain fever. He lost no time in getting assistance. Mrs. Hodgdon, the village nurse, was at Cara's bedside when she awoke.

Dr. Leighton had just left the room and was in the next apartment. He did not go in immediately, though he heard the girl talking.

"Am I so very sick?" she asked.

"No, dear. You was feverish and your mind wandered a little, and I was out of a place and told Dr. Leighton I could stay with you a day or two as well as not for my board. I ain't forgotten the jackets as Willie outgrew that you sent to my Bobbie; and I had feeling for a young girl with no mother's hand in the hour o' need."

"Oh," moaned the young girl. "I'm not sick, I'm worn out! Oh, this dreadful house! I have not slept soundly all winter."

"Why, dearie?"

"Oh, Mrs. Hodgdon, there is somebody in this house beside ourselves. Beside me and the boys, I mean. Somebody creeps about and I am always listening for that step. It is killing me! Oh, don't tell anyone! It did not mean to tell you, but I am so weak. Don't, don't say a word to Dr. Leighton. I must bear it, because it's all the home we have, and the boys never had such a pretty, nice home before, and they are doing so well, and are so good. I was not afraid at first. I am not afraid now, only for them. There may be some evil about, though nothing has ever harmed us. But as soon as I fall asleep I start up and listen."

Cara was begging the old woman not to betray her confidence, when Dr. Leighton came into the room.

"You miss; tell me the whole story, Cara," he said. "You shall not lose anything by it," he added.

But Cara broke out, crying, in her weakness giving way to her emotions, and for a time the tumult would have its way. She was brought to listen to reason at last.

"It was two months after we came here," she said, "that I first heard those creeping, creeping steps. I tried to think it was the trees, or the wind, or the cat, but I heard them when there was no wind at all, and the cat was asleep on the foot of my bed, and the things were moved from their places about the house, and lately I have missed food. That's since I would not allow myself to believe that a spirit haunted the place. I have searched every spot and nook in this house. There is only the space above the scullery in the roof, and there are no stairs."

"Oh, Dr. Leighton!" groaned Mrs. Hodgdon, "then, of course, it's spirits."

"Nonsense."

Dr. Leighton contented himself with prescribing for the sick and overwearing girl, and after a few days of care arranged a drive for her in his new buggy, with her brother Jack as attendant.

"You are to take a nice long drive, and not be back under two hours," he said, smiling.

The kindness and care surrounding Cara was new and very pleasant to her. As the wheels rolled away from the door in the brightness of the spring day, her trouble fell away from her like a nightmare, and the color came back to the pretty cheek.

Fifteen minutes after her departure from Thistle Cottage two men were in the house with Dr. Leighton. They went rapidly through it, beginning with the cellar. Every wall was tried, with the idea of discovering any unknown space or passage. Nothing unknown was developed. At length a short ladder was brought, and the men ascended to the attic.

It was only a hollow space beneath the center of the roof, quite unlighted. But enough light penetrated the place to show an unkempt figure rising from its lair of straw and rags in one corner.

"What's this? Are you after me?" he said, in hollow tones.

The men silently gazed on this object with astonishment, repulsion and pity. It was a man, but so thick the mask of dirt and grim, so ragged the beard and hair, grotesque the costume of tatters from which fell feathers and straw, it seemed some unknown creature instead of a human being.

"Great heavens! it is Simon Leland!" cried Dr. Leighton.

This only added to the consternation of the other men. For Simon Leland was the half-crazed boy who murdered his father at Thistle Cottage five years before. But want and misery had given him the appearance of an old man.

"I don't care what you do with me!" cried the hollow voice. "Only give me something to eat."

"Come with us and you shall have all you want," said Dr. Leighton, not unkindly.

"Where? Down there, where the fire and the light and the girl is?" asked the wretched being, and when they nodded, he caught up a rough ladder of rope, quickly adjusted it and swung himself down before them. But he was so weak he staggered, and they were obliged to help him down the stairs to the kitchen, where Mrs. Hodgdon, shaking with excitement and consternation, placed food upon the table from which he snatched it, without any pretense of eating from a plate, devouring it like a half-famished animal. When he had filled himself, he would have laid down on the floor and gone to sleep, but that the unaccustomed plenty sickened him, and he began to groan and roll about. In a short time, the sheriff, who had been sent for, arrived, and he was taken away. No one believed that the poor, underwitted, half-dying creature was a fit subject for punishment, but the county jail was a clean and comfortable refuge for him in his destitution. Here he remained until consigned to the almshouse. No reliable account of his career could be obtained from him, but it is probable that he had sought refuge at Thistle Cottage in its desertion, and existed miserably there a great while before discovered. He had prowled about at night searching for food, of which he found a scanty supply, stealing from corn bins, pigs and poultry, and robbing hen roosts, eating the flesh of the fowls raw. It was the occasional discovery of his miserable figure which had called into existence the story of the place being haunted by his ghost. But so reduced had he become he would probably have died in his lair but for Dr. Leighton's discovery of him.

Dr. Leighton kindly saved Cara from witnessing so much misery. She never saw Simon Leland. Her nerves had already borne much, and that she had been willing still to suffer in secret for the sake of preserving a good home for her young brothers was a fact which became known and endeared her to many hearts. Her friends multiplied, and when she accepted as a life companion, Dr. Leighton, the oldest friend of all, hearty kindness surrounded her and warm wishes for her happiness danced merrily at the wedding.

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