

CHAPTER XI

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

A woman was sitting in a low room, engaged in knitting. Her feet were stretched out toward a small fire that smouldered in an open hearth. She wore a simple calico gown, neat and well-fitting, and her face bore traces of much beauty that time and care had been unable wholly to efface.

Suddenly she paused in her work, her head turned slightly to one side to listen.

"Come in, sir," she called in a soft but distinct voice; "come in, miss."

So Kenneth and Beth entered at the half-open porch door and advanced into the room.

"Is this Mrs. Rogers?" asked Beth, looking at the woman curiously. The woman's eyes were closed, but the lashes fell in graceful dark curves over her withered cheeks. The girl wondered how she had been able to know her visitors' sex so accurately.

"Yes, I am Mrs. Rogers," said the sweet, sad voice. "And I think you are

one of the young ladies from Elmhurst--perhaps the one Will talked to."

"You are right, Mrs. Rogers. I am Elizabeth DeGraf."

"And your companion--is it Mr. Forbes?" the woman asked.

"Yes, madam," replied Kenneth, astonished to find Will's wife speaking with so much refinement and gracious ease.

"You are very welcome. Will you please find seats? My affliction renders me helpless, as you may see."

"We are very comfortable, I assure you, Mrs. Rogers," said Beth. "We have come to ask if you have heard anything of your daughter."

"Not a word as yet, Miss DeGraf, Will is out with the horse and buggy doing his best to get information. But Lucy has been gone so long now that I realize it will be difficult to find her, if, indeed, the poor girl has not--is not--"

Her voice broke.

"Oh, you don't fear that, do you, Mrs. Rogers?" asked Beth, quickly.

"I fear anything--everything!" wailed the poor creature, the tears streaming from between her closed lids. "My darling was frantic with

grief, and she couldn't bear the humiliation and disgrace of her position. Will told you, didn't he?"

"Yes, of course. But it wasn't so bad, Mrs. Rogers; it wasn't a desperate condition, by any means."

"With poor Tom in prison for years--and just for trying to help her."

"Tom isn't in prison, you know, any more," said Beth quietly. "He has been released."

"Released! When?"

"Last evening. His fault has been forgiven, and he is now free."

The woman sat silent for a time. Then she asked:

"You have done this, Mr. Forbes?"

"Why, Miss DeGraf and I assisted, perhaps. The young man is not really bad, and--"

"Tom's a fine boy!" she cried, with eagerness. "He's honest and true, Mr. Forbes--he is, indeed!"

"I think so," said Kenneth.

"If he wasn't my Lucy would never have loved him. He had a bright future before him, sir, and that's why my child went mad when he ruined his life for her sake."

"Was she mad, do you think?" asked Beth, softly.

"She must have been," said the mother, sadly. "Lucy was a sensible girl, and until this thing happened she was as bright and cheerful as the day is long. But she is very sensitive--she inherited that from me, I think--and Tom's action drove her distracted. At first she raved and rambled incoherently, and Will and I feared brain fever would set in. Then she disappeared in the night, without leaving a word or message for us, which was unlike her--and we've never heard a word of her since. The--the river has a strange fascination for people in that condition. At times in my life it has almost drawn me into its depths--and I am not mad. I have never been mad."

"Let us hope for the best, Mrs. Rogers," said Beth. "Somehow, I have an idea this trouble will all turn out well in the end."

"Have you?" asked the woman, earnestly.

"Yes. It all came about through such a little thing--merely an unjust accusation."

"The little things are the ones that ruin lives," she said. "Will you let me tell you something of myself? You have been so kind to us, my dear, that I feel you ought to know."

"I shall be glad to know whatever you care to tell me," said Beth, simply.

"I am the wife of a poor farmer," began the woman, speaking softly and with some hesitation, but gaining strength as she proceeded. "As a girl I was considered attractive, and my father was a man of great wealth and social standing. We lived in Baltimore. Then I fell in love with a young man who, after obtaining my promise to marry him, found some one he loved better and carelessly discarded me. As I have said, I have a sensitive nature. In my girlhood I was especially susceptible to any slight, and this young man's heartless action made it impossible for me to remain at home and face the humiliation he had thrust upon me. My father was a hard man, and demanded that I marry the man he had himself chosen; but I resented this command and ran away. My mother had passed on long before, and there was nothing to keep me at home. I came west and secured a position to teach school in this county, and for a time I was quite contented and succeeded in living down my disappointment. I heard but once from my father. He had married again and disinherited me. He forbade me to ever communicate with him again.

"At that time Will Rogers was one of the most promising and manly of the country lads around here. He was desperately in love with me, and at

this period, when I seemed completely cut off from my old life and the future contained no promise, I thought it best to wear out the remainder of my existence in the seclusion of a farm-house. I put all the past behind me, and told Will Rogers I would marry him and be a faithful wife; but that my heart was dead. He accepted me on that condition, and it was not until after we were married some time that my husband realized how impossible it would ever be to arouse my affection. Then he lost courage, and became careless and reckless. When our child came--our Lucy--Will was devoted to her, and the baby wakened in me all the old passionate capacity to love. Lucy drew Will and me a little closer together, but he never recovered his youthful ambition. He was a disappointed man, and went from bad to worse. I don't say Will hasn't always been tender and true to me, and absolutely devoted to Lucy. But he lost all hope of being loved as he loved me, and the disappointment broke him down. He became an old man early in life, and his lack of energy kept us very poor. I used to take in sewing before the accident to my eyes, and that helped a good deal to pay expenses. But now I am helpless, and my husband devotes all his time to me, although I beg him to work the farm and try to earn some money.

"I wouldn't have minded the poverty; I wouldn't mind being blind, even, if Lucy had been spared to me. I have had to bear so much in my life that I could even bear my child's death. But to have her disappear and not know what has become of her--whether she is living miserably or lying at the bottom of the river--it is this that is driving me distracted."

Kenneth and Beth remained silent for a time after Mrs. Rogers had finished her tragic story, for their hearts were full of sympathy for the poor woman. It was hard to realize that a refined, beautiful and educated girl had made so sad a mistake of her life and suffered so many afflictions as a consequence. That old Will had never been a fitting mate for his wife could readily be understood, and yet the man was still devoted to his helpless, unresponsive spouse. The fault was not his.

The boy and the girl both perceived that there was but one way they could assist Mrs. Rogers, and that was to discover what had become of her child.

"Was Lucy like you, or did she resemble her father?" asked Beth.

"She is--she was very like me when I was young," replied the woman.

"There is a photograph of her on the wall there between the windows; but it was taken five years ago, when she was a child. Now she is--she was eighteen, and a well-developed young woman."

"I've been looking at the picture," said Kenneth.

"And you mustn't think of her as dead, Mrs. Rogers," said Beth, pleadingly. "I'm sure she is alive, and that we shall find her. We're going right to work, and everything possible shall be done to trace your daughter. Don't worry, please. Be as cheerful as you can, and leave the

search to us."

The woman sighed.

"Will believes she is alive, too," she said. "He can't sleep or rest till he finds her, for my husband loves her as well as I do. But sometimes I feel it's wicked to hope she is alive. I know what she suffers, for I suffered, myself; and life isn't worth living when despair and disappointment fills it."

"I cannot see why Lucy shouldn't yet be happy," protested Beth. "Tom Gates is now free, and can begin life anew."

"His trouble will follow him everywhere," said Mrs. Rogers, with conviction. "Who will employ a bookkeeper, or even a clerk who has been guilty of forgery?"

"I think I shall give him employment," replied Kenneth.

"You, Mr. Forbes!"

"Yes. I'm not afraid of a boy who became a criminal to save the girl he loved."

"But all the world knows of his crime!" she exclaimed.

"The world forgets these things sooner than you suppose," he answered. "I need a secretary, and in that position Tom Gates will quickly be able to live down this unfortunate affair. And if he turns out as well as I expect, he will soon be able to marry Lucy and give her a comfortable home. So now nothing remains but to find your girl, and we'll try to do that, I assure you."

Mrs. Rogers was crying softly by this time, but it was from joy and relief. When they left her she promised to be as cheerful as possible and to look on the bright side of life.

"I can't thank you," she said, "so I won't try. You must know how grateful we are to you."

As Beth and Kenneth drove back to Elmhurst they were both rather silent, for they had been strongly affected by the scene at the farm-house.

"It's so good of you, Ken, to take Tom Gates into your employ," said the girl, pressing her cousin's arm. "And I'm sure he'll be true and grateful."

"I really need him, Beth," said the boy. "There is getting to be too much correspondence for Mr. Watson to attend to, and I ought to relieve him of many other details. It's a good arrangement, and I'm glad I thought of it."

They had almost reached Elmhurst when they met the Honorable Erastus Hopkins driving along the road. On the seat beside him was a young girl, and as the vehicles passed each other Beth gave a start and clung to the boy's arm.

"Oh, Ken!" she cried, "did you see? Did you see that?"

"Yes; it's my respected adversary."

"But the girl! It's Lucy--I'm sure it's Lucy! She's the living image of Mrs. Rogers! Stop--stop--and let's go back!"

"Nonsense, Beth," said the boy. "It can't be."

"But it is. I'm sure it is!"

"I saw the girl," he said. "She was laughing gaily and talking with the Honorable Erastus. Is that your idea of the mad, broken-hearted Lucy Rogers?"

"N-no. She was laughing, Ken, I noticed it."

"And she wasn't unhappy a bit. You mustn't think that every pretty girl with dark eyes you meet is Lucy Rogers, you know. And there's another thing."

"What, Ken?"

"Any companion of Mr. Hopkins can be easily traced."

"That's true," answered the girl, thoughtfully. "I must have been mistaken," she added, with a sigh.