

VI. THE BROTHER WHO FAILED

The Monroe family were holding a Christmas reunion at the old Prince Edward Island homestead at White Sands. It was the first time they had all been together under one roof since the death of their mother, thirty years before. The idea of this Christmas reunion had originated with Edith Monroe the preceding spring, during her tedious convalescence from a bad attack of pneumonia among strangers in an American city, where she had not been able to fill her concert engagements, and had more spare time in which to feel the tug of old ties and the homesick longing for her own people than she had had for years. As a result, when she recovered, she wrote to her second brother, James Monroe, who lived on the homestead; and the consequence was this gathering of the Monroes under the old roof-tree. Ralph Monroe for once laid aside the cares of his railroads, and the deceitfulness of his millions, in Toronto and took the long-promised, long-deferred trip to the homeland. Malcolm Monroe journeyed from the far western university of which he was president. Edith came, flushed with the triumph of her latest and most successful concert tour. Mrs. Woodburn, who had been Margaret Monroe, came from the Nova Scotia town where she lived a busy, happy life as the wife of a rising young lawyer. James, prosperous and hearty, greeted them warmly at the old homestead whose fertile acres had well repaid his skillful management.

They were a merry party, casting aside their cares and years, and harking back to joyous boyhood and girlhood once more. James had a family of rosy lads and lasses; Margaret brought her two blue-eyed little girls; Ralph's dark, clever-looking son accompanied him, and Malcolm brought his, a young man with a resolute face, in which there was less of boyishness than in his father's, and the eyes of a keen, perhaps a hard bargainer. The two cousins were the same age to a day, and it was a family joke among the Monroes that the stork must have mixed the babies, since Ralph's son was like Malcolm in face and brain, while Malcolm's boy was a second edition of his uncle Ralph.

To crown all, Aunt Isabel came, too--a talkative, clever, shrewd old lady, as young at eighty-five as she had been at thirty, thinking the Monroe stock the best in the world, and beamingly proud of her nephews and nieces, who had gone out from this humble, little farm to destinies of such brilliance and influence in the world beyond.

I have forgotten Robert. Robert Monroe was apt to be forgotten. Although he was the oldest of the family, White Sands people, in naming over the various members of the Monroe family, would add, "and Robert," in a tone of surprise over the remembrance of his existence.

He lived on a poor, sandy little farm down by the shore, but he

had come up to James' place on the evening when the guests arrived; they had all greeted him warmly and joyously, and then did not think about him again in their laughter and conversation. Robert sat back in a corner and listened with a smile, but he never spoke. Afterwards he had slipped noiselessly away and gone home, and nobody noticed his going. They were all gayly busy recalling what had happened in the old times and telling what had happened in the new.

Edith recounted the successes of her concert tours; Malcolm expatiated proudly on his plans for developing his beloved college; Ralph described the country through which his new railroad ran, and the difficulties he had had to overcome in connection with it. James, aside, discussed his orchard and his crops with Margaret, who had not been long enough away from the farm to lose touch with its interests. Aunt Isabel knitted and smiled complacently on all, talking now with one, now with the other, secretly quite proud of herself that she, an old woman of eighty-five, who had seldom been out of White Sands in her life, could discuss high finance with Ralph, and higher education with Malcolm, and hold her own with James in an argument on drainage.

The White Sands school teacher, an arch-eyed, red-mouthed bit a girl--a Bell from Avonlea--who boarded with the James Monroes, amused herself with the boys. All were enjoying themselves hugely, so it is not to be wondered at that they did not miss

Robert, who had gone home early because his old housekeeper was nervous if left alone at night.

He came again the next afternoon. From James, in the barnyard, he learned that Malcolm and Ralph had driven to the harbor, that Margaret and Mrs. James had gone to call on friends in Avonlea, and that Edith was walking somewhere in the woods on the hill. There was nobody in the house except Aunt Isabel and the teacher.

"You'd better wait and stay the evening," said James, indifferently. "They'll all be back soon."

Robert went across the yard and sat down on the rustic bench in the angle of the front porch. It was a fine December evening, as mild as autumn; there had been no snow, and the long fields, sloping down from the homestead, were brown and mellow. A weird, dreamy stillness had fallen upon the purple earth, the windless woods, the rain of the valleys, the sere meadows. Nature seemed to have folded satisfied hands to rest, knowing that her long, wintry slumber was coming upon her. Out to sea, a dull, red sunset faded out into somber clouds, and the ceaseless voice of many waters came up from the tawny shore.

Robert rested his chin on his hand and looked across the vales and hills, where the feathery gray of leafless hardwoods was mingled with the sturdy, unfailing green of the conebearers. He

was a tall, bent man, with thin, gray hair, a lined face, and deeply-set, gentle brown eyes--the eyes of one who, looking through pain, sees rapture beyond.

He felt very happy. He loved his family clannishly, and he was rejoiced that they were all again near to him. He was proud of their success and fame. He was glad that James had prospered so well of late years. There was no canker of envy or discontent in his soul.

He heard absently indistinct voices at the open hall window above the porch, where Aunt Isabel was talking to Kathleen Bell.

Presently Aunt Isabel moved nearer to the window, and her words came down to Robert with startling clearness.

"Yes, I can assure you, Miss Bell, that I'm real proud of my nephews and nieces. They're a smart family. They've almost all done well, and they hadn't any of them much to begin with. Ralph had absolutely nothing and to-day he is a millionaire. Their father met with so many losses, what with his ill-health and the bank failing, that he couldn't help them any. But they've all succeeded, except poor Robert--and I must admit that he's a total failure."

"Oh, no, no," said the little teacher deprecatingly.

"A total failure!" Aunt Isabel repeated her words emphatically. She was not going to be contradicted by anybody, least of all a Bell from Avonlea. "He has been a failure since the time he was born. He is the first Monroe to disgrace the old stock that way. I'm sure his brothers and sisters must be dreadfully ashamed of him. He has lived sixty years and he hasn't done a thing worth while. He can't even make his farm pay. If he's kept out of debt it's as much as he's ever managed to do."

"Some men can't even do that," murmured the little school teacher. She was really so much in awe of this imperious, clever old Aunt Isabel that it was positive heroism on her part to venture even this faint protest.

"More is expected of a Monroe," said Aunt Isabel majestically.

"Robert Monroe is a failure, and that is the only name for him."

Robert Monroe stood up below the window in a dizzy, uncertain fashion. Aunt Isabel had been speaking of him! He, Robert, was a failure, a disgrace to his blood, of whom his nearest and dearest were ashamed! Yes, it was true; he had never realized it before; he had known that he could never win power or accumulate riches, but he had not thought that mattered much. Now, through Aunt Isabel's scornful eyes, he saw himself as the world saw him--as his brothers and sisters must see him. THERE lay the sting. What the world thought of him did not matter; but that

his own should think him a failure and disgrace was agony. He moaned as he started to walk across the yard, only anxious to hide his pain and shame away from all human sight, and in his eyes was the look of a gentle animal which had been stricken by a cruel and unexpected blow.

Edith Monroe, who, unaware of Robert's proximity, had been standing on the other side of the porch, saw that look, as he hurried past her, unseeing. A moment before her dark eyes had been flashing with anger at Aunt Isabel's words; now the anger was drowned in a sudden rush of tears.

She took a quick step after Robert, but checked the impulse. Not then--and not by her alone--could that deadly hurt be healed. Nay, more, Robert must never suspect that she knew of any hurt. She stood and watched him through her tears as he went away across the low-lying shore fields to hide his broken heart under his own humble roof. She yearned to hurry after him and comfort him, but she knew that comfort was not what Robert needed now. Justice, and justice only, could pluck out the sting, which otherwise must rankle to the death.

Ralph and Malcolm were driving into the yard. Edith went over to them.

"Boys," she said resolutely, "I want to have a talk with you."

The Christmas dinner at the old homestead was a merry one. Mrs. James spread a feast that was fit for the halls of Lucullus. Laughter, jest, and repartee flew from lip to lip. Nobody appeared to notice that Robert ate little, said nothing, and sat with his form shrinking in his shabby "best" suit, his gray head bent even lower than usual, as if desirous of avoiding all observation. When the others spoke to him he answered deprecatingly, and shrank still further into himself.

Finally all had eaten all they could, and the remainder of the plum pudding was carried out. Robert gave a low sigh of relief. It was almost over. Soon he would be able to escape and hide himself and his shame away from the mirthful eyes of these men and women who had earned the right to laugh at the world in which their success gave them power and influence. He--he--only--was a failure.

He wondered impatiently why Mrs. James did not rise. Mrs. James merely leaned comfortably back in her chair, with the righteous expression of one who has done her duty by her fellow creatures' palates, and looked at Malcolm.

Malcolm rose in his place. Silence fell on the company; everybody looked suddenly alert and expectant, except Robert. He

still sat with bowed head, wrapped in his own bitterness.

"I have been told that I must lead off," said Malcolm, "because I am supposed to possess the gift of gab. But, if I do, I am not going to use it for any rhetorical effect to-day. Simple, earnest words must express the deepest feelings of the heart in doing justice to its own. Brothers and sisters, we meet to-day under our own roof-tree, surrounded by the benedictions of the past years. Perhaps invisible guests are here--the spirits of those who founded this home and whose work on earth has long been finished. It is not amiss to hope that this is so and our family circle made indeed complete. To each one of us who are here in visible bodily presence some measure of success has fallen; but only one of us has been supremely successful in the only things that really count--the things that count for eternity as well as time--sympathy and unselfishness and self-sacrifice.

"I shall tell you my own story for the benefit of those who have not heard it. When I was a lad of sixteen I started to work out my own education. Some of you will remember that old Mr. Blair of Avonlea offered me a place in his store for the summer, at wages which would go far towards paying my expenses at the country academy the next winter. I went to work, eager and hopeful. All summer I tried to do my faithful best for my employer. In September the blow fell. A sum of money was missing from Mr. Blair's till. I was suspected and discharged in

disgrace. All my neighbors believed me guilty; even some of my own family looked upon me with suspicion--nor could I blame them, for the circumstantial evidence was strongly against me."

Ralph and James looked ashamed; Edith and Margaret, who had not been born at the time referred to, lifted their faces innocently.

Robert did not move or glance up. He hardly seemed to be listening.

"I was crushed in an agony of shame and despair," continued Malcolm. "I believed my career was ruined. I was bent on casting all my ambitions behind me, and going west to some place where nobody knew me or my disgrace. But there was one person who believed in my innocence, who said to me, 'You shall not give up--you shall not behave as if you were guilty. You are innocent, and in time your innocence will be proved. Meanwhile show yourself a man. You have nearly enough to pay your way next winter at the Academy. I have a little I can give to help you out. Don't give in--never give in when you have done no wrong.'

"I listened and took his advice. I went to the Academy. My story was there as soon as I was, and I found myself sneered at and shunned. Many a time I would have given up in despair, had it not been for the encouragement of my counselor. He furnished the backbone for me. I was determined that his belief in me should be justified. I studied hard and came out at the head of

my class. Then there seemed to be no chance of my earning any more money that summer. But a farmer at Newbridge, who cared nothing about the character of his help, if he could get the work out of them, offered to hire me. The prospect was distasteful but, urged by the man who believed in me, I took the place and endured the hardships. Another winter of lonely work passed at the Academy. I won the Farrell Scholarship the last year it was offered, and that meant an Arts course for me. I went to Redmond College. My story was not openly known there, but something of it got abroad, enough to taint my life there also with its suspicion. But the year I graduated, Mr. Blair's nephew, who, as you know, was the real culprit, confessed his guilt, and I was cleared before the world. Since then my career has been what is called a brilliant one. But"--Malcolm turned and laid his hand on Robert's thin shoulder--"all of my success I owe to my brother Robert. It is his success--not mine--and here to-day, since we have agreed to say what is too often left to be said over a coffin lid, I thank him for all he did for me, and tell him that there is nothing I am more proud of and thankful for than such a brother."

Robert had looked up at last, amazed, bewildered, incredulous. His face crimsoned as Malcolm sat down. But now Ralph was getting up.

"I am no orator as Malcolm is," he quoted gayly, "but I've got a

story to tell, too, which only one of you knows. Forty years ago, when I started in life as a business man, money wasn't so plentiful with me as it may be to-day. And I needed it badly. A chance came my way to make a pile of it. It wasn't a clean chance. It was a dirty chance. It looked square on the surface; but, underneath, it meant trickery and roguery. I hadn't enough perception to see that, though--I was fool enough to think it was all right. I told Robert what I meant to do. And Robert saw clear through the outward sham to the real, hideous thing underneath. He showed me what it meant and he gave me a preachment about a few Monroe Traditions of truth and honor. I saw what I had been about to do as he saw it--as all good men and true must see it. And I vowed then and there that I'd never go into anything that I wasn't sure was fair and square and clean through and through. I've kept that vow. I am a rich man, and not a dollar of my money is 'tainted' money. But I didn't make it. Robert really made every cent of my money. If it hadn't been for him I'd have been a poor man to-day, or behind prison bars, as are the other men who went into that deal when I backed out. I've got a son here. I hope he'll be as clever as his Uncle Malcolm; but I hope, still more earnestly, that he'll be as good and honorable a man as his Uncle Robert."

By this time Robert's head was bent again, and his face buried in his hands.

"My turn next," said James. "I haven't much to say--only this. After mother died I took typhoid fever. Here I was with no one to wait on me. Robert came and nursed me. He was the most faithful, tender, gentle nurse ever a man had. The doctor said Robert saved my life. I don't suppose any of the rest of us here can say we have saved a life."

Edith wiped away her tears and sprang up impulsively.

"Years ago," she said, "there was a poor, ambitious girl who had a voice. She wanted a musical education and her only apparent chance of obtaining it was to get a teacher's certificate and earn money enough to have her voice trained. She studied hard, but her brains, in mathematics at least, weren't as good as her voice, and the time was short. She failed. She was lost in disappointment and despair, for that was the last year in which it was possible to obtain a teacher's certificate without attending Queen's Academy, and she could not afford that. Then her oldest brother came to her and told her he could spare enough money to send her to the conservatory of music in Halifax for a year. He made her take it. She never knew till long afterwards that he had sold the beautiful horse which he loved like a human creature, to get the money. She went to the Halifax conservatory. She won a musical scholarship. She has had a happy life and a successful career. And she owes it all to her brother Robert--"

But Edith could go no further. Her voice failed her and she sat down in tears. Margaret did not try to stand up.

"I was only five when my mother died," she sobbed. "Robert was both father and mother to me. Never had child or girl so wise and loving a guardian as he was to me. I have never forgotten the lessons he taught me. Whatever there is of good in my life or character I owe to him. I was often headstrong and willful, but he never lost patience with me. I owe everything to Robert."

Suddenly the little teacher rose with wet eyes and crimson cheeks.

"I have something to say, too," she said resolutely. "You have spoken for yourselves. I speak for the people of White Sands. There is a man in this settlement whom everybody loves. I shall tell you some of the things he has done."

"Last fall, in an October storm, the harbor lighthouse flew a flag of distress. Only one man was brave enough to face the danger of sailing to the lighthouse to find out what the trouble was. That was Robert Monroe. He found the keeper alone with a broken leg; and he sailed back and made--yes, MADE the unwilling and terrified doctor go with him to the lighthouse. I saw him when he told the doctor he must go; and I tell you that

no man living could have set his will against Robert Monroe's at that moment.

"Four years ago old Sarah Cooper was to be taken to the poorhouse. She was broken-hearted. One man took the poor, bed-ridden, fretful old creature into his home, paid for medical attendance, and waited on her himself, when his housekeeper couldn't endure her tantrums and temper. Sarah Cooper died two years afterwards, and her latest breath was a benediction on Robert Monroe--the best man God ever made.

"Eight years ago Jack Blewitt wanted a place. Nobody would hire him, because his father was in the penitentiary, and some people thought Jack ought to be there, too. Robert Monroe hired him--and helped him, and kept him straight, and got him started right--and Jack Blewitt is a hard-working, respected young man to-day, with every prospect of a useful and honorable life. There is hardly a man, woman, or child in White Sands who doesn't owe something to Robert Monroe!"

As Kathleen Bell sat down, Malcolm sprang up and held out his hands.

"Every one of us stand up and sing Auld Lang Syne," he cried.

Everybody stood up and joined hands, but one did not sing.

Robert Monroe stood erect, with a great radiance on his face and in his eyes. His reproach had been taken away; he was crowned among his kindred with the beauty and blessing of sacred yesterdays.

When the singing ceased Malcolm's stern-faced son reached over and shook Robert's hands.

"Uncle Rob," he said heartily, "I hope that when I'm sixty I'll be as successful a man as you."

"I guess," said Aunt Isabel, aside to the little school teacher, as she wiped the tears from her keen old eyes, "that there's a kind of failure that's the best success."

VII. THE RETURN OF HESTER

Just at dusk, that evening, I had gone upstairs and put on my muslin gown. I had been busy all day attending to the strawberry preserving--for Mary Sloane could not be trusted with that--and I was a little tired, and thought it was hardly worth while to change my dress, especially since there was nobody to see or care, since Hester was gone. Mary Sloane did not count.

But I did it because Hester would have cared if she had been here. She always liked to see me neat and dainty. So, although