

VI. Old Man Shaw's Girl

"Day after to-morrow--day after to-morrow," said Old Man Shaw, rubbing his long slender hands together gleefully. "I have to keep saying it over and over, so as to really believe it. It seems far too good to be true that I'm to have Blossom again. And everything is ready. Yes, I think everything is ready, except a bit of cooking. And won't this orchard be a surprise to her! I'm just going to bring her out here as soon as I can, never saying a word. I'll fetch her through the spruce lane, and when we come to the end of the path I'll step back casual-like, and let her go out from under the trees alone, never suspecting. It'll be worth ten times the trouble to see her big, brown eyes open wide and hear her say, 'Oh, daddy! Why, daddy!'"

He rubbed his hands again and laughed softly to himself. He was a tall, bent old man, whose hair was snow white, but whose face was fresh and rosy. His eyes were a boy's eyes, large, blue and merry, and his mouth had never got over a youthful trick of smiling at any provocation--and, oft-times, at no provocation at all.

To be sure, White Sands people would not have given you the most favourable opinion in the world of Old Man Shaw. First and foremost, they would have told you that he was "shiftless," and had let his bit of a farm run out while he potted with flowers and bugs, or rambled aimlessly about in the woods, or read books along the shore. Perhaps it

was true; but the old farm yielded him a living, and further than that Old Man Shaw had no ambition. He was as blithe as a pilgrim on a pathway climbing to the west. He had learned the rare secret that you must take happiness when you find it--that there is no use in marking the place and coming back to it at a more convenient season, because it will not be there then. And it is very easy to be happy if you know, as Old Man Shaw most thoroughly knew, how to find pleasure in little things. He enjoyed life, he had always enjoyed life and helped others to enjoy it; consequently his life was a success, whatever White Sands people might think of it. What if he had not "improved" his farm? There are some people to whom life will never be anything more than a kitchen garden; and there are others to whom it will always be a royal palace with domes and minarets of rainbow fancy.

The orchard of which he was so proud was as yet little more than the substance of things hoped for--a flourishing plantation of young trees which would amount to something later on. Old Man Shaw's house was on the crest of a bare, sunny hill, with a few staunch old firs and spruces behind it--the only trees that could resist the full sweep of the winds that blew bitterly up from the sea at times. Fruit trees would never grow near it, and this had been a great grief to Sara.

"Oh, daddy, if we could just have an orchard!" she had been wont to say wistfully, when other farmhouses in White Sands were smothered whitely in apple bloom. And when she had gone away, and her father had nothing to look forward to save her return, he was determined she should find an

orchard when she came back.

Over the southward hill, warmly sheltered by spruce woods and sloping to the sunshine, was a little field, so fertile that all the slack management of a life-time had not availed to exhaust it. Here Old Man Shaw set out his orchard and saw it flourish, watching and tending it until he came to know each tree as a child and loved it. His neighbours laughed at him, and said that the fruit of an orchard so far away from the house would all be stolen. But as yet there was no fruit, and when the time came for bearing there would be enough and to spare.

"Blossom and me'll get all we want, and the boys can have the rest, if they want 'em worse'n they want a good conscience," said that unworldly, unbusinesslike Old Man Shaw.

On his way back home from his darling orchard he found a rare fern in the woods and dug it up for Sara--she had loved ferns. He planted it at the shady, sheltered side of the house and then sat down on the old bench by the garden gate to read her last letter--the letter that was only a note, because she was coming home soon. He knew every word of it by heart, but that did not spoil the pleasure of re-reading it every half-hour.

Old Man Shaw had not married until late in life, and had, so White Sands people said, selected a wife with his usual judgment--which, being interpreted, meant no judgment at all; otherwise, he would never have

married Sara Glover, a mere slip of a girl, with big brown eyes like a frightened wood creature's, and the delicate, fleeting bloom of a spring Mayflower.

"The last woman in the world for a farmer's wife--no strength or get-up about her."

Neither could White Sands folk understand what on earth Sara Glover had married him for.

"Well, the fool crop was the only one that never failed."

Old Man Shaw--he was Old Man Shaw even then, although he was only forty--and his girl bride had troubled themselves not at all about White Sands opinions. They had one year of perfect happiness, which is always worth living for, even if the rest of life be a dreary pilgrimage, and then Old Man Shaw found himself alone again, except for little Blossom. She was christened Sara, after her dead mother, but she was always Blossom to her father--the precious little blossom whose plucking had cost the mother her life.

Sara Glover's people, especially a wealthy aunt in Montreal, had wanted to take the child, but Old Man Shaw grew almost fierce over the suggestion. He would give his baby to no one. A woman was hired to look after the house, but it was the father who cared for the baby in the main. He was as tender and faithful and deft as a woman. Sara never

missed a mother's care, and she grew up into a creature of life and light and beauty, a constant delight to all who knew her. She had a way of embroidering life with stars. She was dowered with all the charming characteristics of both parents, with a resilient vitality and activity which had pertained to neither of them. When she was ten years old she had packed all hirelings off, and kept house for her father for six delightful years--years in which they were father and daughter, brother and sister, and "chums." Sara never went to school, but her father saw to her education after a fashion of his own. When their work was done they lived in the woods and fields, in the little garden they had made on the sheltered side of the house, or on the shore, where sunshine and storm were to them equally lovely and beloved. Never was comradeship more perfect or more wholly satisfactory.

"Just wrapped up in each other," said White Sands folk, half-jealously, half-disapprovingly.

When Sara was sixteen Mrs. Adair, the wealthy aunt aforesaid, pounced down on White Sands in a glamour of fashion and culture and outer worldliness. She bombarded Old Man Shaw with such arguments that he had to succumb. It was a shame that a girl like Sara should grow up in a place like White Sands, "with no advantages and no education," said Mrs. Adair scornfully, not understanding that wisdom and knowledge are two entirely different things.

"At least let me give my dear sister's child what I would have given my own daughter if I had had one," she pleaded tearfully. "Let me take her with me and send her to a good school for a few years. Then, if she wishes, she may come back to you, of course."

Privately, Mrs. Adair did not for a moment believe that Sara would want to come back to White Sands, and her queer old father, after three years of the life she would give her.

Old Man Shaw yielded, influenced thereto not at all by Mrs. Adair's readily flowing tears, but greatly by his conviction that justice to Sara demanded it. Sara herself did not want to go; she protested and pleaded; but her father, having become convinced that it was best for her to go, was inexorable. Everything, even her own feelings, must give way to that. But she was to come back to him without let or hindrance when her "schooling" was done. It was only on having this most clearly understood that Sara would consent to go at all. Her last words, called back to her father through her tears as she and her aunt drove down the lane, were,

"I'll be back, daddy. In three years I'll be back. Don't cry, but just look forward to that."

He had looked forward to it through the three long, lonely years that followed, in all of which he never saw his darling. Half a continent was between them and Mrs. Adair had vetoed vacation visits, under some

specious pretense. But every week brought its letter from Sara. Old Man Shaw had every one of them, tied up with one of her old blue hair ribbons, and kept in her mother's little rose-wood work-box in the parlour. He spent every Sunday afternoon re-reading them, with her photograph before him. He lived alone, refusing to be pestered with kind help, but he kept the house in beautiful order.

"A better housekeeper than farmer," said White Sands people. He would have nothing altered. When Sara came back she was not to be hurt by changes. It never occurred to him that she might be changed herself.

And now those three interminable years were gone, and Sara was coming home. She wrote him nothing of her aunt's pleadings and reproaches and ready, futile tears; she wrote only that she would graduate in June and start for home a week later. Thenceforth Old Man Shaw went about in a state of beatitude, making ready for her homecoming. As he sat on the bench in the sunshine, with the blue sea sparkling and crinkling down at the foot of the green slope, he reflected with satisfaction that all was in perfect order. There was nothing left to do save count the hours until that beautiful, longed-for day after to-morrow. He gave himself over to a reverie, as sweet as a day-dream in a haunted valley.

The red roses were out in bloom. Sara had always loved those red roses--they were as vivid as herself, with all her own fullness of life and joy of living. And, besides these, a miracle had happened in Old Man Shaw's garden. In one corner was a rose-bush which had never bloomed,

despite all the coaxing they had given it--"the sulky rose-bush," Sara had been wont to call it. Lo! this summer had flung the hoarded sweetness of years into plentiful white blossoms, like shallow ivory cups with a haunting, spicy fragrance. It was in honour of Sara's home-coming--so Old Man Shaw liked to fancy. All things, even the sulky rose-bush, knew she was coming back, and were making glad because of it.

He was gloating over Sara's letter when Mrs. Peter Blewett came. She told him she had run up to see how he was getting on, and if he wanted anything seen to before Sara came.

"No'm, thank you, ma'am. Everything is attended to. I couldn't let anyone else prepare for Blossom. Only to think, ma'am, she'll be home the day after to-morrow. I'm just filled clear through, body, soul, and spirit, with joy to think of having my little Blossom at home again."

Mrs. Blewett smiled sourly. When Mrs. Blewett smiled it foretokened trouble, and wise people had learned to have sudden business elsewhere before the smile could be translated into words. But Old Man Shaw had never learned to be wise where Mrs. Blewett was concerned, although she had been his nearest neighbour for years, and had pestered his life out with advice and "neighbourly turns."

Mrs. Blewett was one with whom life had gone awry. The effect on her was to render happiness to other people a personal insult. She resented Old Man Shaw's beaming delight in his daughter's return, and she "considered

it her duty" to rub the bloom off straightway.

"Do you think Sary'll be contented in White Sands now?" she asked.

Old Man Shaw looked slightly bewildered.

"Of course she'll be contented," he said slowly. "Isn't it her home? And ain't I here?"

Mrs. Blewett smiled again, with double distilled contempt for such simplicity.

"Well, it's a good thing you're so sure of it, I suppose. If 'twas my daughter that was coming back to White Sands, after three years of fashionable life among rich, stylish folks, and at a swell school, I wouldn't have a minute's peace of mind. I'd know perfectly well that she'd look down on everything here, and be discontented and miserable."

"YOUR daughter might," said Old Man Shaw, with more sarcasm than he had supposed he had possessed, "but Blossom won't."

Mrs. Blewett shrugged her sharp shoulders.

"Maybe not. It's to be hoped not, for both your sakes, I'm sure. But I'd be worried if 'twas me. Sary's been living among fine folks, and having

a gay, exciting time, and it stands to reason she'll think White Sands fearful lonesome and dull. Look at Laretta Bradley. She was up in Boston for just a month last winter and she's never been able to endure White Sands since."

"Laretta Bradley and Sara Shaw are two different people," said Sara's father, trying to smile.

"And your house, too," pursued Mrs. Blewett ruthlessly. "It's such a queer, little, old place. What'll she think of it after her aunt's? I've heard tell Mrs. Adair lives in a perfect palace. I'll just warn you kindly that Sary'll probably look down on you, and you might as well be prepared for it. Of course, I suppose she kind of thinks she has to come back, seeing she promised you so solemn she would. But I'm certain she doesn't want to, and I don't blame her either."

Even Mrs. Blewett had to stop for breath, and Old Man Shaw found his opportunity. He had listened, dazed and shrinking, as if she were dealing him physical blows, but now a swift change swept over him. His blue eyes flashed ominously, straight into Mrs. Blewett's straggling, ferrety gray orbs.

"If you're said your say, Martha Blewett, you can go," he said passionately. "I'm not going to listen to another such word. Take yourself out of my sight, and your malicious tongue out of my hearing!"

Mrs. Blewett went, too dumfounded by such an unheard-of outburst in mild Old Man Shaw to say a word of defence or attack. When she had gone Old Man Shaw, the fire all faded from his eyes, sank back on his bench. His delight was dead; his heart was full of pain and bitterness. Martha Blewett was a warped and ill-natured woman, but he feared there was altogether too much truth in what she said. Why had he never thought of it before? Of course White Sands would seem dull and lonely to Blossom; of course the little gray house where she was born would seem a poor abode after the splendours of her aunt's home. Old Man Shaw walked through his garden and looked at everything with new eyes. How poor and simple everything was! How sagging and weather-beaten the old house! He went in, and up-stairs to Sara's room. It was neat and clean, just as she had left it three years ago. But it was small and dark; the ceiling was discoloured, the furniture old-fashioned and shabby; she would think it a poor, mean place. Even the orchard over the hill brought him no comfort now. Blossom would not care for orchards. She would be ashamed of her stupid old father and the barren farm. She would hate White Sands, and chafe at the dull existence, and look down on everything that went to make up his uneventful life.

Old Man Shaw was unhappy enough that night to have satisfied even Mrs. Blewett had she known. He saw himself as he thought White Sands folk must see him--a poor, shiftless, foolish old man, who had only one thing in the world worthwhile, his little girl, and had not been of enough account to keep her.

"Oh, Blossom, Blossom!" he said, and when he spoke her name it sounded as if he spoke the name of one dead.

After a little the worst sting passed away. He refused to believe long that Blossom would be ashamed of him; he knew she would not. Three years could not so alter her loyal nature--no, nor ten times three years. But she would be changed--she would have grown away from him in those three busy, brilliant years. His companionship could no longer satisfy her. How simple and childish he had been to expect it! She would be sweet and kind--Blossom could never be anything else. She would not show open discontent or dissatisfaction; she would not be like Laretta Bradley; but it would be there, and he would divine it, and it would break his heart. Mrs. Blewett was right. When he had given Blossom up he should not have made a half-hearted thing of his sacrifice--he should not have bound her to come back to him.

He walked about in his little garden until late at night, under the stars, with the sea crooning and calling to him down the slope. When he finally went to bed he did not sleep, but lay until morning with tear-wet eyes and despair in his heart. All the forenoon he went about his usual daily work absently. Frequently he fell into long reveries, standing motionless wherever he happened to be, and looking dully before him. Only once did he show any animation. When he saw Mrs. Blewett coming up the lane he darted into the house, locked the door, and listened to her knocking in grim silence. After she had gone he went out, and found a plate of fresh doughnuts, covered with a napkin, placed

on the bench at the door. Mrs. Blewett meant to indicate thus that she bore him no malice for her curt dismissal the day before; possibly her conscience gave her some twinges also. But her doughnuts could not minister to the mind she had diseased. Old Man Shaw took them up; carried them to the pig-pen, and fed them to the pigs. It was the first spiteful thing he had done in his life, and he felt a most immoral satisfaction in it.

In mid-afternoon he went out to the garden, finding the new loneliness of the little house unbearable. The old bench was warm in the sunshine. Old Man Shaw sat down with a long sigh, and dropped his white head wearily on his breast. He had decided what he must do. He would tell Blossom that she might go back to her aunt and never mind about him--he would do very well by himself and he did not blame her in the least.

He was still sitting broodingly there when a girl came up the lane. She was tall and straight, and walked with a kind of uplift in her motion, as if it would be rather easier to fly than not. She was dark, with a rich dusky sort of darkness, suggestive of the bloom on purple plums, or the glow of deep red apples among bronze leaves. Her big brown eyes lingered on everything in sight, and little gurgles of sound now and again came through her parted lips, as if inarticulate joy were thus expressing itself.

At the garden gate she saw the bent figure on the old bench, and the next minute she was flying along the rose walk.

"Daddy!" she called, "daddy!"

Old Man Shaw stood up in hasty bewilderment; then a pair of girlish arms were about his neck, and a pair of warm red lips were on his; girlish eyes, full of love, were looking up into his, and a never-forgotten voice, tingling with laughter and tears blended into one delicious chord, was crying,

"Oh, daddy, is it really you? Oh, I can't tell you how good it is to see you again!"

Old Man Shaw held her tightly in a silence of amazement and joy too deep for wonder. Why, this was his Blossom--the very Blossom who had gone away three years ago! A little taller, a little more womanly, but his own dear Blossom, and no stranger. There was a new heaven and a new earth for him in the realization.

"Oh, Baby Blossom!" he murmured, "Little Baby Blossom!"

Sara rubbed her cheek against the faded coat sleeve.

"Daddy darling, this moment makes up for everything, doesn't it?"

"But--but--where did you come from?" he asked, his senses beginning to struggle out of their bewilderment of surprise. "I didn't expect you

till to-morrow. You didn't have to walk from the station, did you? And your old daddy not there to welcome you!"

Sara laughed, swung herself back by the tips of her fingers and danced around him in the childish fashion of long ago.

"I found I could make an earlier connection with the C.P.A. yesterday and get to the Island last night. I was in such a fever to get home that I jumped at the chance. Of course I walked from the station--it's only two miles and every step was a benediction. My trunks are over there. We'll go after them to-morrow, daddy, but just now I want to go straight to every one of the dear old nooks and spots at once."

"You must get something to eat first," he urged fondly. "And there ain't much in the house, I'm afraid. I was going to bake to-morrow morning. But I guess I can forage you out something, darling."

He was sorely repenting having given Mrs. Blewett's doughnuts to the pigs, but Sara brushed all such considerations aside with a wave of her hand.

"I don't want anything to eat just now. By and by we'll have a snack; just as we used to get up for ourselves whenever we felt hungry. Don't you remember how scandalized White Sands folks used to be at our irregular hours? I'm hungry; but it's soul hunger, for a glimpse of all the dear old rooms and places. Come--there are four hours yet before

sunset, and I want to cram into them all I've missed out of these three years. Let us begin right here with the garden. Oh, daddy, by what witchcraft have you coaxed that sulky rose-bush into bloom?"

"No witchcraft at all--it just bloomed because you were coming home, baby," said her father.

They had a glorious afternoon of it, those two children. They explored the garden and then the house. Sara danced through every room, and then up to her own, holding fast to her father's hand.

"Oh, it's lovely to see my little room again, daddy. I'm sure all my old hopes and dreams are waiting here for me."

She ran to the window and threw it open, leaning out.

"Daddy, there's no view in the world so beautiful as that curve of sea between the headlands. I've looked at magnificent scenery--and then I'd shut my eyes and conjure up that picture. Oh, listen to the wind keening in the trees! How I've longed for that music!"

He took her to the orchard and followed out his crafty plan of surprise perfectly. She rewarded him by doing exactly what he had dreamed of her doing, clapping her hands and crying out:

"Oh, daddy! Why, daddy!"

They finished up with the shore, and then at sunset they came back and sat down on the old garden bench. Before them a sea of splendour, burning like a great jewel, stretched to the gateways of the west. The long headlands on either side were darkly purple, and the sun left behind him a vast, cloudless arc of fiery daffodil and elusive rose. Back over the orchard in a cool, green sky glimmered a crystal planet, and the night poured over them a clear wine of dew from her airy chalice. The spruces were rejoicing in the wind, and even the battered firs were singing of the sea. Old memories trooped into their hearts like shining spirits.

"Baby Blossom," said Old Man Shaw falteringly, "are you quite sure you'll be contented here? Out there"--with a vague sweep of his hand towards horizons that shut out a world far removed from White Sands--"there's pleasure and excitement and all that. Won't you miss it? Won't you get tired of your old father and White Sands?"

Sara patted his hand gently.

"The world out there is a good place," she said thoughtfully, "I've had three splendid years and I hope they'll enrich my whole life. There are wonderful things out there to see and learn, fine, noble people to meet, beautiful deeds to admire; but," she wound her arm about his neck and laid her cheek against his--"there is no daddy!"

And Old Man Shaw looked silently at the sunset--or, rather, through the sunset to still grander and more radiant splendours beyond, of which the things seen were only the pale reflections, not worthy of attention from those who had the gift of further sight.