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Grandmother Elsie

Martha Finley

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GRANDMOTHER ELSIE

CHAPTER I.

"Every state,
Allotted to the race of man below,
Is in proportion, doom'd to taste some sorrow."
— *Rowe*.

The Ion family were at home again after their summer on the New Jersey coast.

It was a delightful morning early in October: the dew-drops on the still green grass of the neatly kept lawn sparkled in the rays of the newly risen sun; the bright waters of the lakelet also, as, ruffled by the breeze, they broke gently about the prow of the pretty row-boat moored to the little wharf; the gardens were gay with bright-hued flowers, the trees gorgeous in their autumnal dress.

But though doors and windows were open, the gardener and his assistants at work in the grounds, there seemed a strange quiet about the place: when the men spoke to each other it was in subdued tones; there was no sound—as in other days—of little feet running hither and thither, nor of childish prattle or laughter.

Two horses stood ready saddled and bridled before the principal entrance to the mansion, and Mr. Horace Dinsmore was pacing the veranda to and fro with slow, meditative step, while Bruno, crouching beside the door, followed his movements with wistful, questioning eyes, doubtless wondering what had become of his accustomed merry, romping play-mates.

A light step came down the hall, and a lady in riding hat and habit stepped from the open doorway, stooped for an instant to touch the dog's head caressingly with a "Poor Bruno! do you miss your playfellows?" then glided quickly toward Mr. Dinsmore, who received her with open arms and tenderest caress.

Then holding her off and scrutinizing the sweet, fair face with keen, searching eye, "You are looking better and brighter than I dared to hope, my darling," he said. "Did you get some sleep?"

"Yes, papa, thank you, several hours. And you? did you rest well?"

"Yes, daughter. How are the children?"

"No worse, Arthur says; perhaps a trifle better. He, Elsie and Mammy are with them now, and 'Mamma' can be spared for a short ride with her father," she said, smiling lovingly into the eyes that were gazing with the tenderest fatherly affection upon her.

"That is right; you need the air and exercise sorely; a few more days of such close confinement and assiduous nursing would, I very much fear, tell seriously upon your health."

He led her to the side of her steed and assisted her into the saddle as he spoke, then vaulted into his own with the agility of youth.

"But where are Vi and her brothers?" Elsie asked, sending an inquiring glance from side to side.

"I sent them on in advance. I wanted you quite to myself this once," he answered, as they turned and rode at a brisk canter down the avenue.

"And I shall enjoy having my dear father all to myself for once," she rejoined, with a touch of old-time gayety in look and tone. "Ah! papa, never a day passes, I think I might almost say never an hour, in which I do not thank God for sparing you to me; you who have loved and cherished me so long and so tenderly."

"My own dear child!" he said in reply, "you and your love are among the greatest blessings of my life."

As they rode on side by side they talked of the youngest two of her children—Rose and Walter—both quite ill with measles; of her sister's family, where also there was sickness among the little ones, and whither Mrs. Dinsmore had gone to assist in the nursing of her grandchildren; of the recent death of Enna at Magnolia Hall, the home of her daughter Molly; and of the anxiety of the younger Elsie because of a much longer silence than usual on the part of her absent betrothed.

She greatly feared that some evil had befallen him, and had not been able to hide her distress from these two—the mother and grandfather who loved her so—though making most earnest, un-

selfish efforts to conceal it from all, especially her mother, whose tender heart was ever ready to bleed for another's woe, and who had already griefs and anxieties enough of her own.

They spoke of her with tenderest compassion, and affectionate pride in her loveliness of person and character, and her brave endurance of her trial.

Enna's death could hardly be felt as a personal loss by either, but they sympathized deeply in the grief of her old father, with whom her faults seemed to be buried in her grave, while he cherished a lively remembrance of all that had ever given him pleasure in her looks, words, or ways.

He was growing old and feeble, and felt this, the death of his youngest child, a very heavy blow.

"My poor old father! I fear we shall not have him with us much longer," Mr. Dinsmore remarked with emotion.

Elsie's eyes glistened with unshed tears. "Dear old grandpa!" she murmured. "But, dear papa, be comforted! he may live for years yet, and should it please God to take him, we know that our loss will be his infinite gain."

"Yes; would that we had the same assurance in regard to all his children and grandchildren."

Silence fell between them for some minutes.

Elsie knew that her father, when making that last remark, was thinking more particularly of his half sister, Mrs. Conly, and her daughter Virginia.

The two had gone to a fashionable watering-place to spend the last fortnight of their summer's sojourn at the North, and ere it expired Virginia had contracted a hasty marriage with a man of reputed wealth, whom she met there for the first time.

The match was made with the full consent and approval of her mother—who, on rejoining the Dinsmores and Travillas, boasted much of "Virginia's brilliant position and prospects"—but without the knowledge of any other relative. No opportunity of making inquiries about the character or real circumstances of the stranger to

whom she committed the happiness of her life, was afforded by Virginia to grandfather, uncle or brothers.

Of late Mrs. Conly had ceased to boast of the match—scarcely mentioned Virginia's name; and Mr. Dinsmore had learned from Calhoun and Arthur that Virginia's letters were no longer shown to any one, and seemed to irritate and depress their mother so unmistakably that they feared more and more there was something very much amiss with their sister; yet the mother steadily evaded all inquiries on the subject.

Mr. Dinsmore presently told all this to his daughter, adding that he very much feared Virginia had made an utter wreck of her earthly happiness.

"Poor Virgie!" sighed Elsie. "Ah! if only she had been blest with such a father as mine!" turning upon him a look of grateful love.

"Or such a mother as my granddaughters have," added Mr. Dinsmore, smiling into the soft, sweet eyes.

"What blessings my darlings are! how good and lovable in spite of my failures in right training and example," she said in sincere humility.

"Those failures and mistakes have been very few, I think," was his reply; "you have tried very earnestly and prayerfully to train them up in the way they should go. And God is faithful to his promises—your children do not depart from the right way; they do arise and call you blessed."

"Papa," she said, in moved tones, after a moment's silence, "we must not forget how much is due to the training, the example, and the prayers of their father."

"No, daughter; and we can always plead in their behalf the precious promises to the seed of the righteous. 'I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring.' 'A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children.'"

"Yes, father, how often have those promises been my comfort and support as the inheritance of both my children and myself; inherited by me from both you and my sainted mother and her pious ancestors."

"And from mine; for my mother was a devoted Christian and came of a long line of God-fearing men and women. But I see nothing yet of Edward and his party; they must have taken another road."

"Yes, sir; and shall we not turn now? I ought not to be long away from my poor sick darlings."

"I think it would be well to return by the other road; we shall reach it in a moment, and our ride will be lengthened by but a half mile or so."

She acquiesced in his decision, as was her custom.

On the homeward way, as they neared the cross-road leading to the city, they saw a boy on horseback coming at a hard gallop down it in their direction.

On catching sight of them he held aloft what looked like a letter, waving it about his head in evident desire to attract their attention; then as he reached their road he halted and waited for them to come up.

"Mr. Dinsmore, from the Oaks or Ion, isn't it?" he queried, lifting his cap and bowing to the lady and her escort as they reined in their steeds close at hand.

"Yes."

"A telegram for you, sir."

Mr. Dinsmore took the missive, tore it open and glanced at the contents, then, handing it to Elsie, paid the boy and dismissed him.

"Oh, my poor darling!" she exclaimed, her tears dropping upon the paper. "Father, what shall we do? tell her at once? Perhaps that would be best."

"Yes; I think it is her right. But of course it must be done as gently as possible. Dear daughter, do not grieve too sorely for her; try to trust her as well as yourself in your heavenly Father's hands."

"I will, papa, I will! but oh my heart bleeds for her!"

"Will you break the news to her? or shall I?"

"My kindest of fathers! you would if possible spare me every trial, bear all my burdens. But perhaps the dear child may suffer less in hearing the sad news from her mother's lips, as, in her place, I could bear it better from yours than from any other."

"Unselfish as ever, my darling," he said, "but I believe you are right—that the blow will be somewhat softened to Elsie coming to her through the medium of her tender and dearly loved mother."

"I think, papa," Mrs. Travilla said, checking her horse to a walk as they entered the avenue at Ion, "I shall reserve my communication until my poor child has had her breakfast."

He expressed approval of her decision, adding interrogatively, "You will breakfast with the family this morning?"

"Yes, sir; if I find all going well in the sick-room."

A servant was in waiting to lead the horses away to the stable. Violet, Edward, Harold and Herbert, just returned from their ride, were on the veranda.

Edward hastened to assist his mother to alight, and all gathered about her and their grandfather with morning greetings spoken in cheerful but subdued tones; no one forgetting for a moment the illness of the little pet brother and sister, but all inquiring anxiously how they and "Mamma" had passed the night, and what was cousin Arthur's report of their condition this morning.

"No worse, my dears; and we will hope that they may soon be decidedly better," the mother answered, returning their greetings with affectionate warmth and smiling sweetly upon them. "But you must let me go at once to the sick-room, and if all is well I shall be down presently to breakfast with grandpa and you."

That announcement was heard with the greater pleasure because her loved face had seldom been seen at the table for some days past.

The face was bright and hopeful as she spoke, but an unwonted expression of sadness and anxiety came over it as she turned quickly away and went swiftly through the spacious entrance hall and up the broad stairway.

No earthly eye saw that look, but the traces of tears on her mother's cheeks had not escaped Vi's keen observation.

"Grandpa," she said in low, tremulous tones, following him into the library, whither he went to await the summons to breakfast, "what has been distressing mamma so? is it that she is so anxious about Elsie and Walter? May I not know?"

Mr. Dinsmore paused a moment before he replied. "You shall know all about it, my dear child, before very long. Be satisfied for the present with the assurance that your mother's distress is for another's woe. You know what a tender, sympathetic heart she has. I cannot deny that our little ones are seriously ill, but their case is very far from hopeless."

CHAPTER II.

"Within her heart was his image,
Cloth'd in the beauty of love and youth, as last she beheld him,
Only more beautiful made by his deathlike silence and absence."
—*Longfellow*.

The sick ones were sleeping quietly when the mother entered; the doctor had already breakfasted, and would assist Aunt Chloe and Dinah in watching beside them for the next hour, so the two Elsie—mother and daughter—went down together to the breakfast parlor.

They were a more silent party than usual at meal-time, for no one could forget the two absent members of the family, or that they were suffering upon beds of sickness; yet there was no gloom in any face or voice: their few words were spoken in cheerful tones, and each seemed unselfishly intent upon promoting the comfort and happiness of all the others; on the part of the children, especially of their grandfather and mother; each young heart was evidently full to overflowing of tenderest sympathy and love for her.

She had been closely confined to the sick-room for several days, so that it was a treat to have her with them at breakfast and at family worship, which followed directly upon the conclusion of the meal.

It surprised them a little that when the short service came to an end, she did not even then return at once to her sick little ones, but

putting on a garden hat invited her eldest daughter to do likewise and come with her for a short stroll in the grounds.

"It will do us both good," she said as they stepped from the veranda upon the broad, gravelled walk, "the air is so sweet and pure at this early hour; and you have not been out in it at all, have you?"

"No, mamma; and what a treat it is to take it in your dear company," Elsie responded, gathering a lovely, sweet-scented flower and placing it in the bosom of her mother's dress.

"Thank you, love," Mrs. Travilla said; then went on to speak feelingly of the beauty and fragrance that surrounded them, and the unnumbered blessings of their lot in life.

"Mamma, you seem to have a heart always filled with love and gratitude to God, and never to be troubled with the least rebellious feeling, or any doubts or fears for the future," remarked Elsie, sighing slightly as she spoke.

"Have we any right or reason to indulge repining, doubts, or fears, when we know that all is ordered for us by One who loves us with an everlasting and infinite love, and who is all-wise and all-powerful? O my darling, no! Well may we say with the Psalmist, 'I will fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.' Oh what a blessed assurance! goodness and mercy while here in this world of trial—all things working together for our good, that so we may be brought at last safely to our desired haven—and then to be forever with the Lord!"

"Mamma, I have been so anxious and troubled about my little brother and sister, and about Lester, I needed the lesson you have just given me, and hope I shall profit by it."

"My dearest child, have faith in God; try to believe with all your heart that he will never send you or any of his children one unneeded pang. I am sure you could never think I—your tender mother—would give you the slightest pain except for your certain good; and what is my love for you compared to that of your Saviour? who died that you might live!"

"Mamma," cried the young girl, pausing in her walk, laying her hand on her mother's arm and looking searchingly into the sweet, compassionate face, while her own grew deathly pale, "what is it you are trying to prepare me for? O mamma!"

A rustic seat stood close at hand.

"Let us sit down here for a moment, dear daughter," Mrs. Travilla said, drawing Elsie to it with an arm about her waist. "You are right, my child—I have news for you. Oh, not the worst, dearest!" as Elsie seemed to gasp for breath. "Lester lives, but is very ill with typhoid fever."

"Mamma!" cried Elsie, starting to her feet, "I must go to him! go at once. O dearest mother, do not hinder me!" and she clasped her hands in piteous entreaty, the big tears rapidly chasing each other down her pale cheeks.

"If I could go with you," faltered the mother, "or your grandfather; but I can neither leave nor take my little ones, and he would never consent to leave me, or his poor old father, who seems just tottering on the verge of the grave."

"I know! I see! but, O mother, mother! how can I let him die all alone in a stranger land? Think if it had been you and my father!"

"What is your entreaty, daughter?" Mr. Dinsmore asked, coming up and laying his hand affectionately upon his grandchild's shoulder.

"To go to him—to Lester, grandpa. Oh, how can I stay away and leave him to die alone? to die for lack of the good nursing I could give him, perhaps to the saving of his life!"

"My poor child! my poor dear child!" he said, caressing her; "we will see what can be done in the way of finding a suitable escort, and if that can be obtained your mother will not, I think, withhold her consent."

He had been telling the news to the others, and Edward had followed him, anxious to express the sympathy for his sister with which his heart was full.

"An escort, grandpa?" he said. "Would mine be sufficient? Mamma, if you will permit me, I shall gladly go to Lester, either with or without Elsie."

"My dear boy!" was all his mother said, her tones tremulous with emotion, while his grandfather turned and regarded him with doubtful scrutiny.

"Oh, thank you, brother!" cried Elsie. "Mamma, surely you can trust me to him! Who loves me better? except yourself – and who would take such tender care of me?"

"Mamma, I would guard her with my life!" exclaimed Edward earnestly.

"My dear son, I do not doubt it," Mrs. Travilla answered, turning upon her father a half-inquiring, half-entreating look.

"If no older or more experienced person can be found."

He paused, and Elsie burst out: "O grandpa, dear grandpa, don't say that! There is no time to lose! no time to look for other escort!"

"That is true, my child; and we will not waste any time. Make your preparations as rapidly as you can, and if nothing better offers in the mean while, and your mother consents to Edward's proposition, you shall go with him – and Ben who travelled all over Europe with your father and myself – as your protectors."

She thanked him fervently through her tears, while her mother said, "Ah yes, that is a good thought, papa! Ben shall go with them."

"Better go now and at once select whatever you wish to take with you, and set some one to packing your trunks," he said. "Edward, do you do likewise, and I will examine the morning papers for information in regard to trains and the sailing of the next steamer. Daughter dear," to Mrs. Travilla, "you need give yourself no concern about any of these matters."

"No, I shall trust everything to you, my best of fathers, and go back at once to my sick darlings," she said, giving him a look of grateful love.

Then passing her arm affectionately about her daughter's waist, she drew her on toward the house, her father and son accompanying them.

She parted with Elsie at the door of the sick-room, embracing her tenderly and bidding her "Be strong and of a good courage," my darling, for 'the eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.'"

"Dearest mamma, what sweet words!" said the weeping girl. "Oh, how glad I am that God reigns! and that I know he will send to each of his children just what is best."

She turned away as the door closed upon her mother, and found Violet close at her side.

There was a silent affectionate embrace, and with their arms about each other they sought Elsie's dressing-room.

"Grandpa and Edward have told me," Violet said, "and you will let me help you, my poor dear sister? help in thinking and selecting what you will want to carry with you."

"Gladly, thankfully, for oh, I seem scarcely able to collect my thoughts! How can I leave mamma and all of you? and the darling little brother and sister so ill! and yet how can I stay away from Lester when he is sick and alone in a strange land, with not a friend to speak a cheering word, smooth his pillow, give his medicine, or see that he has proper food? O Vi, can I help going to him, even at the sacrifice of leaving all other near and dear ones?"

"I think our mother would have done it for papa," Violet answered, kissing Elsie's cheek.

Mr. Dinsmore having first seen Ben, and found him more than willing to go with the children of the master he had loved as his own soul, went to the library, looked over the papers, and had just found the information he sought, when the sound of horses' hoofs on the avenue drew his attention, and glancing from the window he saw the Roselands carriage drive up with his sister, Mrs. Conly, inside.

He hastened out to assist her to alight.

"Good-morning, Horace," she said. "Is my son Arthur here?"

"Yes, Louise, he has spent the last hour or more in attendance upon our sick little ones. Ah, here he is to speak for himself!" as the young doctor stepped from the open doorway. "But won't you come in?"

She demurred. "Is there any danger, Arthur?"

"Danger of what, mother?"

"You certainly understood me," she said half angrily; "danger of contagion, of course."

"None for you, surely, mother, and none you could carry home unless you came in personal contact with the sick children."

"I shall sit here for a moment, then," she said, stepping from the carriage and taking a chair upon the veranda. "How are they to-day?"

"The sick little ones? The disease has not yet reached its crisis."

"I hope they'll get safely over it: it's a good thing to have over. How soon can you be spared from here, Arthur?"

"Now, mother, if I am needed elsewhere, I shall not be needed here—at least am not likely to be—for some hours."

"Then I wish you'd come home directly to see what you can do for your grandfather. He doesn't seem at all well to-day."

"My father ill?" Mr. Dinsmore exclaimed in a tone of alarm and concern.

"It hardly amounts to that, I presume," Mrs. Conly answered coldly; "but he is not well; didn't eat a mouthful of breakfast."

"Grandpa, did you find what you wanted in the morning paper?" queried Edward, joining them at this moment. "Ah, Aunt Louise, how d'ye do?"

She nodded indifferently, listening with some curiosity for her brother's reply.

"Yes," he said; "and I think you should leave to-night; for by so doing you will reach New York in time to take the next steamer, if you meet with no great detention on the way. Do you think you can both be ready?"