

TIMOTHY'S QUEST

*A STORY FOR ANYBODY, YOUNG OR OLD, WHO CARES TO
READ IT*

BY

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To

NORA

DEAREST SISTER, STERNEST CRITIC,

BEST FRIEND.

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TIMOTHY'S QUEST.

SCENE I.

Number Three, Minerva Court. First floor front.

FLOSSY MORRISON LEARNS THE SECRET OF
DEATH WITHOUT EVER HAVING LEARNED
THE SECRET OF LIFE.

Minerva Court! Veil thy face, O Goddess of Wisdom, for never, surely, was thy fair name so ill bestowed as when it was applied to this most dreary place!

It was a little less than street, a little more than alley, and its only possible claim to decency came from comparison with the busier thoroughfare out of which it opened. This was so much fouler, with its dirt and noise, its stands of refuse fruit and vegetables, its dingy shops and all the miserable traffic that the place engendered, its rickety doorways blocked with lounging men, its [Pg 8] Blowsabel-las leaning on the window-sills, that the Court seemed by contrast a most desirable and retired place of residence.

But it was a dismal spot, nevertheless, with not even an air of faded gentility to recommend it. It seemed to have no better days behind it, nor to hold within itself the possibility of any future improvement. It was narrow, and extended only the length of a city block, yet it was by no means wanting in many of those luxuries which mark this era of modern civilization. There were groceries, with commodious sample-rooms attached, at each corner, and a small saloon, called "The Dearest Spot" (which it undoubtedly was in more senses than one), in the basement of a house at the farther end. It was necessary, however, for the bibulous native who dwelt in the middle of the block to waste some valuable minutes in dragging himself to one of these fountains of bliss at either end; but at the time my story opens a wide-awake philanthropist was fitting up a neat and attractive little bar-room, called "The Oasis," at a point equally distant between the other two springs of human joy.

This benefactor of humanity had a vaulting ambition. He desired to slake the thirst [Pg 9] of every man in Christendom; but this being impossible from the very nature of things, he determined to settle in some arid spot like Minerva Court, and irrigate it so sweetly and copiously that all men's noses would blossom as the roses. To supply his brothers' wants, and create new ones at the same time, was his purpose in establishing this Oasis in the Desert of Minerva Court; and it might as well be stated here that he was prospered in his undertaking, as any man is sure to be who cherishes lofty ideals and attends to his business industriously.

The Minerva Courtier thus had good reason to hope that the supply of liquid refreshment would bear some relation to the demand; and that the march of modern progress would continue to diminish the distance between his own mouth and that of the bottle, which, as he took it, was the be-all and end-all of existence.

At present, however, as the Oasis was not open to the public, children carrying pitchers of beer were often to be seen hurrying to and fro on their miserable errands. But there were very few children in Minerva Court, thank God!—they were not popular there. There were frowzy, sleepy- [Pg 10] looking women hanging out of their windows, gossiping with their equally unkempt and haggard neighbors; apathetic men sitting on the doorsteps, in their shirt-sleeves, smoking; a dull, dirty baby or two sporting itself in the gutter; while the sound of a melancholy accordion (the chosen instrument of poverty and misery) floated from an upper chamber, and added its discordant mite to the general desolation.

The sidewalks had apparently never known the touch of a broom, and the middle of the street looked more like an elongated junk-heap than anything else. Every smell known to the nostrils of man was abroad in the air, and several were floating about waiting modestly to be classified, after which they intended to come to the front and outdo the others if they could.

That was Minerva Court! A little piece of your world, my world, God's world (and the Devil's), lying peacefully fallow, awaiting the services of some inspired Home Missionary Society.

In a front room of Number Three, a dilapidated house next the corner, there lay a still, white shape, with two women watching by it. [Pg 11]

A sheet covered it. Candles burned at the head, striving to throw a gleam of light on a dead face that for many a year had never been illuminated from within by the brightness of self-forgetting love or kindly sympathy. If you had raised the sheet, you would have seen no happy smile as of a half-remembered, innocent childhood; the smile—is it of peaceful memory or serene anticipation?—that sometimes shines on the faces of the dead.

Such life-secrets as were exposed by Death, and written on that still countenance in characters that all might read, were painful ones. Flossy Morrison was dead. The name "Flossy" was a relic of what she termed her better days (Heaven save the mark!), for she had been called Mrs. Morrison of late years,— "Mrs. F. Morrison," who took "children to board, and no questions asked"—nor answered. She had lived forty-five years, as men reckon summers and winters; but she had never learned, in all that time, to know her Mother, Nature, her Father, God, nor her brothers and sisters, the children of the world. She had lived friendless and unfriendly, keeping none of the ten commandments, nor yet the [Pg 12] eleventh, which is the greatest of all; and now there was no human being to slip a flower into the still hand, to kiss the clay-cold lips at the remembrance of some sweet word that had fallen from them, or drop a tear and say, "I loved her!"

Apparently, the two watchers did not regard Flossy Morrison even in the light of "the dear remains," as they are sometimes called at country funerals. They were in the best of spirits (there was an abundance of beer), and their gruesome task would be over in a few hours; for it was nearly four o'clock in the morning, and the body was to be taken away at ten.

"I tell you one thing, Ettie, Flossy hasn't left any bother for her friends," remarked Mrs. Nancy Simmons, settling herself back in her rocking-chair. "As she didn't own anything but the clothes on her back, there won't be any quarreling over the property!" and she chuckled at her delicate humor.

"No," answered her companion, who, whatever her sponsors in baptism had christened her, called herself Ethel Montmorency. "I s'pose the furniture, poor as it is, will pay the funeral expenses; and if she's got any debts, why, folks will have to whistle for their money, that's all." [Pg 13]

"The only thing that worries me is the children," said Mrs. Simons.

"You must be hard up for something to worry about, to take those young ones on your mind. They ain't yours nor mine, and what's more, nobody knows who they do belong to, and nobody cares. Soon as breakfast's over we'll pack 'em off to some institution or other, and that'll be the end of it. What did Flossy say about 'em, when you spoke to her yesterday?"

"I asked her what she wanted done with the young ones, and she said, 'Do what you like with 'em, drat 'em,—it don't make no odds to me!' and then she turned over and died. Those was the last words she spoke, dear soul; but, Lor', she wasn't more'n half sober, and hadn't been for a week."

"She was sober enough to keep her own counsel, I can tell you that," said the gentle Ethel. "I don't believe there's a living soul that knows where those children came from;—not that anybody cares, now that there ain't any money in 'em."

"Well, as for that, I only know that when Flossy was seeing better days and lived in the upper part of the city, she used to have money come every month for taking care of [Pg 14] the boy. Where it come from I don't know; but I kind of surmise it was a long distance off. Then she took to drinking, and got lower and lower down until she came here, six months ago. I don't suppose the boy's folks, or whoever it was sent the money, knew the way she was living, though they couldn't have cared much, for they never came to see how things were; and he was in an asylum before Flossy took him, I found that out; but, anyhow, the money stopped coming three months ago. Flossy wrote twice to the folks, whoever they were, but didn't get no answer to her letters; and she told me that she should turn the boy out in a week or two if some cash didn't turn up in that time. She wouldn't have kept him so long as this if he hadn't been so handy taking care of the baby."

"Well, who does the baby belong to?"

"You ask me too much," replied Nancy, taking another deep draught from the pitcher. "Help yourself, Ettie; there's plenty more where that came from. Flossy never liked the boy, and always wanted to get rid of him, but couldn't afford to. He's a dreadful queer, old-fashioned little kid, and so smart that he's gettin' to be a reg'lar [Pg 15] nuisance round the house. But you see he and the baby,—Gabrielle's her name, but they call her Lady Gay, or some such trash, after that actress that comes here so much,—well, they are so in love with one another that wild horses couldn't drag 'em apart; and I think Flossy had a kind of a likin' for Gay, as much as she ever had for anything. I guess she never abused either of 'em; she was too careless for that. And so what was I talkin' about? Oh, yes. Well, I don't know who the baby is, nor who paid for her keep; but she's goin' to be one o' your high-steppers, and no mistake. She might be Queen Victory's daughter by the airs she puts on; I'd like to keep her myself if she was a little older, and I wasn't goin' away from here."

"I s'pose they'll make an awful row at being separated, won't they?" asked the younger woman.

"Oh, like as not; but they'll have to have their row and get over it," said Mrs. Simmons easily. "You can take Timothy to the Orphan Asylum first, and then come back, and I'll carry the baby to the Home of the Ladies' Relief and Protection Society; and if they yell they can yell, and [Pg 16] take it out in yellin'; they won't get the best of Nancy Simmons."

"Don't talk so loud, Nancy, for mercy's sake. If the boy hears you, he'll begin to take on, and we sha'n't get a wink of sleep. Don't let 'em know what you're goin' to do with 'em till the last minute, or you'll have trouble as sure as we sit here."

"Oh, they are sound asleep," responded Mrs. Simmons, with an uneasy look at the half-open door. "I went in and dragged a pillow out from under Timothy's head, and he never budged. He was sleepin' like a log, and so was Gay. Now, shut up, Et, and let me get three winks myself. You take the lounge, and I'll stretch out in two chairs. Wake me up at eight o'clock, if I don't wake myself; for I'm

clean tired out with all this fussin' and plannin', and I feel stupid enough to sleep till kingdom come." [Pg 17]

SCENE II.

Number Three, Minerva Court, First floor back.

LITTLE TIMOTHY JESSUP ASSUMES PARENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES.

When the snores of the two watchers fell on the stillness of the death-chamber, with that cheerful regularity that betokens the sleep of the truly good, a little figure crept out of the bed in the adjoining room and closed the door noiselessly, but with trembling fingers; stealing then to the window to look out at the dirty street and the gray sky over which the first faint streaks of dawn were beginning to creep.

It was little Timothy Jessup (God alone knows whether he had any right to that special patronymic), but not the very same Tim Jessup who had kissed the baby Gay in her little crib, and gone to sleep on his own hard bed in that room, a few hours before. As he stood shivering at the window, [Pg 18] one thin hand hard pressed upon his heart to still its beating, there was a light of sudden resolve in his eyes, a new-born look of anxiety on his unchildlike face.

"I will not have Gay protectioned and relieved, and I will not be taken away from her and sent to a 'sylum, where I can never find her again!" and with these defiant words trembling, half spoken, on his lips, he glanced from the unconscious form in the crib to the terrible door, which might open at any moment and divide him from his heart's delight, his darling, his treasure, his only joy, his own, own baby Gay.

But what should he do? Run away: that was the only solution of the matter, and no very difficult one either. The cruel women were asleep; the awful Thing that had been Flossy would never speak again; and no one else in Minerva Court cared enough for them to pursue them very far or very long.

"And so," thought Timothy swiftly, "I will get things ready, take Gay, and steal softly out of the back door, and run away to the

'truly' country, where none of these bad people ever can find us, and where I can get a mother for Gay; somebody to [Pg 19] 'dopt her and love her till I grow up a man and take her to live with me."

The moment this thought darted into Timothy's mind, it began to shape itself in definite action.

Gabrielle, or Lady Gay, as Flossy called her, in honor of her favorite stage heroine, had been tumbled into her crib half dressed the night before. The only vehicle kept for her use in the family stables was a clothes-basket, mounted on four wooden wheels and cushioned with a dingy shawl. A yard of clothes-line was tied on to one end, and in this humble conveyance the Princess would have to be transported from the Ogre's castle; for she was scarcely old enough to accompany the Prince on foot, even if he had dared to risk detection by waking her: so the clothes-basket must be her chariot, and Timothy her charioteer, as on many a less fateful expedition.

After he had changed his ragged night-gown for a shabby suit of clothes, he took Gay's one clean apron out of a rickety bureau drawer ("for I can never find a mother for her if she's too dirty," he thought), her Sunday hat from the same receptacle, and last of all a comb, and a [Pg 20] faded Japanese parasol that stood in a corner. These he deposited under the old shawl that decorated the floor of the chariot. He next groped his way in the dim light toward a mantelshelf, and took down a savings-bank,—a florid little structure with "Bank of England" stamped over the miniature door, into which the jovial gentleman who frequented the house often slipped pieces of silver for the children, and into which Flossy dipped only when she was in a state of temporary financial embarrassment. Timothy did not dare to jingle it; he could only hope that as Flossy had not been in her usual health of late (though in more than her usual "spirits"), she had not felt obliged to break the bank.

Now for provisions. There were plenty of "funeral baked meats" in the kitchen; and he hastily gathered a dozen cookies into a towel, and stowed them in the coach with the other sinews of war.

So far, well and good; but the worst was to come. With his heart beating in his bosom like a trip-hammer, and his eyes dilated with fear, he stepped to the door between the two rooms, and opened it softly. Two thundering snores, pitched in such dif [Pg 21] ferent

keys that they must have proceeded from two separate sets of nasal organs, reassured the boy. He looked out into the alley. "Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse." The Minerva Courtiers couldn't be owls and hawks too, and there was not even the ghost of a sound to be heard. Satisfied that all was well, Timothy went back to the bedroom, and lifted the battered clothes-basket, trucks and all, in his slender arms, carried it up the alley and down the street a little distance, and deposited it on the pavement beside a vacant lot. This done, he sped back to the house. "How beautifully they snore!" he thought, as he stood again on the threshold. "Shall I leave 'em a letter?... P'raps I better ... and then they won't follow us and bring us back." So he scribbled a line on a bit of torn paper bag, and pinned it on the enemies' door.