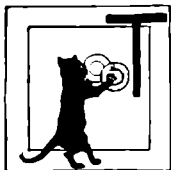


A Witness of War.

BY VIRGINIA WOODWARD CLOUD.



HERE was great excitement at the old Disborough place. Doors and windows that had been forbiddingly barred until well-nigh rusted from their hinges stood open to the summer sunshine. The wind blew through rooms which long had been possessed solely by moth, and rust, and the drear, ghostly atmosphere of departed days. To the fences, fallen and overrun by blackberry vines, were tied teams which represented all the families in the county who could boast of the Disborough connection.

Disburys, with handkerchiefs stuck in their unaccustomed collars, walked about heavily in their Sunday boots, and fanned themselves with their Sunday hats, glancing askance at the Disboro's who came over from Clarkville in a road cart. To all of them alike, without distinction of persons, had been extended the invitation that for a fortnight past had appeared in the form of a placard decorating the town pump, and courthouse wall, and the sycamores at the lane leading to the old Disborough place.

NOTICE.

Whereas the property of the late Nathan Disborough of this county will be sold at auction on June 7, at 3 o'clock, all interested in the disposition of household goods, etc., are hereby notified.

(Signed.)

Francis Disborough,
James Yellott, County Solicitors.

For one member of the Disborough family alone — and she that one who by birth should have been the owner of the estate — the invitation thus extended was null and void.

From the day, thirty years ago, when Nathan Disborough's orphan niece and adopted daughter, Rosetta, had refused to become his heir on condition of living single all her days at the old homestead, and so keeping the property from dwindling into improvident channels,—from that day she had never so much as lifted the latch of her girlhood's home. Some said that when she not only declined his offer, but announced her intention of marrying Giles Drew — almost in the same breath — her uncle drove her from the house. At any rate it was known that he forbade her ever to enter the place again; and the next day she married Giles Drew.

Soon after her marriage the war broke out. Nathan Disborough closed his house, and enlisted, first demanding of the town authorities that his property should remain unmolested until he saw fit to return. Or, in event of his death in the army, the house was to stay closed for thirty years, and then be sold for taxes.

After the Battle of Gettysburg, Nathan Disborough was among the killed. Rosetta Drew left town and returned with the body of her uncle, which she had decently buried at her own expense at the back of his place. His sword and knapsack she handed to Lawyer Disborough, a distant cousin, who, after the funeral, hung them on a nail in the front hall of the old house. Then the place was closed and deserted, and gradually almost forgotten. Even the negroes left it unmolested, the younger generation being reared upon the superstition that it was haunted by old Nathan Disborough, who would bring back any of his possessions which might be purloined.

Meantime Rosetta Drew had become a widow, and earned a somewhat straitened living for herself and child by dressmaking, — a fact in which those of the connection who owed her a grudge as being the cause of all this coil, traced a signal retribution.

Only Miss Eunice Disborough, a familiar visitor at the old place in the days of Rosetta's girlhood, saw something pathetic in the fact that from the attic windows of Mrs. Drew's little frame house the tall chimneys of her old home were distinctly visible.

To-day as Miss Eunice sat in one corner of the musty parlor, and watched Disboroughs to the tenth degree of cousinship finger

the sacred furniture as they might poultry or vegetables, the thought of the banished one weighed heavily.

"I never knew poor Nathan had so many kith and kin," she said plaintively to Mrs. Lias Disborough, who occupied nearly the whole of a massive haircloth sofa. "It does seem too bad for Rosetta not to be here. You know it was her childhood's home, and it went harder to leave it—and him—than any one knew. Nathan was a man of his own way, but he had a good heart."

"Nathan was my third cousin once removed," said Mrs. John Disborough aggressively.

"Rosetta has made her bed, and must lie in it," said Mrs. Lias with oracular emphasis. "She's got no more claim on the property than a stranger,—not as much as we have, seeing she was forbidden the house; though it might have belonged to her if she hadn't been so heady."

"They appear to be talking of the village dressmaker," said Miss Adèle Disboro'—to a loud whisper from her mother. And then both turned their attention to certain antique andirons and candlesticks with an air that disposed of Rosetta as far as any possible connection with the Disborough estate was concerned.

"There's a heap of good china, real India most of it, that belonged to Cousin Nathan's mother," went on Mrs. Lias. "It's a wonder the place hasn't been robbed time and again."

"It's because the negroes believe it's haunted," said Miss Eunice. "Rosetta Drew's old Cassy, who lived here, declares that if anything is taken from this place it will come back, and seems to me I know how she feels. Things do get sort of human, you know, just belongin' to one place for so long. I don't believe I could imagine that old blue jar in another fireplace 'cept Cousin Nathan's. Why, Rosetta and I filled that jar with rose leaves the very summer"—Miss Eunice paused, and gazed at the jar with a vision of the past in her eyes. Mrs. Lias fanned contemptuously. Cousin Eunice was so unpractical: that very jar would make an excellent umbrella stand!

"And Rosetta cared a heap for all these things. She talks of 'em yet to me," went on Miss Eunice.

"Then she was a fool to take Giles Drew instead, that's all," said Mrs. Lias.

"I don't know, Susan; s'pose she'd just lived 'long here, not marrying nor anybody to keep her company; maybe she'd grown hard and close-fisted. Whereas she's been tried in the fire of adversity, and she's softened in spirit, and she's got Rosy, too. It's a great thing to have somebody to love, Susan —"

"Mercy, Cousin Eunice!" said Mrs. Lias, in a tone arguing that there is no use talking business to sentimental people. "Here they come," as the auctioneer entered with Lawyer Disborough and a man carrying a pine table. "Lias! Where's Lias? Be sure and bid first on the mahogany table. It does seem as though the nearest of kin ought to get things almost for nothing."

The spirit of competition is contagious, and creates its own excited atmosphere. As piece by piece was denoted and sold at abnormally small prices (some of it impervious to time, some in varied stages of decay) the crowd pressed closer to the windows and doors. By and by the blue jar stood austere beside Mrs. Lias; the clock on the landing was knocked down to Mrs. Augustus, because it looked antique; and old settles, pictures, chairs, and looking-glasses went for a song, a song on a low key. Mr. John and Mrs. Lias bid against each other more than once, but in the midst of the excitement little Miss Eunice bid nothing at all.

"I can't imagine what she came for," said Mrs. Lias in a whisper, "she's as poor as a church mouse!"

"Wasn't Cousin Nathan a beau of hers once?" asked somebody else.

"Dear knows!" said Mrs. Lias, shaking her head at her husband, who had so far forgotten himself as to bid on a family Bible.

Soon there was but little of value left. A mass of undesired articles stood in the hall awaiting transportation to the junk shop, and there rested on the table beside the auctioneer only a portrait of Nathan Disborough as a young man, and the sword and knapsack which had been hung in the hall the day he was buried.

"Everything of value has been disposed of," said the auctioneer; "I suppose these can go with the things to the shop."

"Mercy! I'd like to know who wants 'em!" said Mrs. Lias.

Little Miss Eunice sat upright and gazed at the picture. There was a stir outside, and a man put his head in the window. "Mrs. Drew bids one dollar on the picture."

"Rosetta!" breathed Miss Eunice.

"Well, the idea of her coming here and bidding a dollar on that old thing, as poor as she is!" said Mrs. Lias.

"This portrait, ladies and gentlemen, one dollar — one dollar — one dollar! Going! Going! Going at one dollar! GONE!"

"I'll take the sword and knapsack, please," said Miss Eunice's voice faintly. And while Mrs. Lias sniffed audibly, and Mrs. Augustus raised her lorgnette, the sword and knapsack were knocked down to Miss Eunice for a trifle, and she took them reverently and sat with them in her lap.

"I been thinkin' since I sat here," she said apologetically to Mrs. Lias, "I been thinkin' nobody really cares for anything that was his 'cept Rosetta, and — and — he wore these in battle, and there's no telling how sorry he might have been before he died. 'Cause he'd a good heart under his gruffness, Nathan had."

And then there was a sudden raising of voices which had been subdued, and the odor of roses sweeping in carried out the scent of age and mold. The past lost its ghostliness in the contact of dollars and cents. Mrs. John ordered a looking-glass with a ship painted over it to be packed in the front of the wagon, and Mrs. Lias, with her head out the window, superintended the transportation of the mahogany table, leaf by leaf. When she drew her head in the window, she said: —

"Rosetta's standing out there with her old Cassy, waiting for that picture. Somebody might as well hand it out to her! Mercy, Cousin Eunice! What's the matter?"

Miss Eunice stood alone in the middle of the room looking white. The sword lay on a chair, the knapsack hung from one hand, and in the other was a piece of yellow paper, found between the lining and outside of the knapsack, and which she now held out mutely to Lawyer Disborough.

As the attorney glanced hurriedly over the paper, those nearest him detected a shade of excitement cross his face. Then he rapped on the table.

"Wait, if you please!" Every one stood still, and those near the door said "Sh" to those whose boots creaked outside.

Then Mr. Yellott was summoned, and the two men bent over the paper together. There was no sound except for the kicking

of a horse outside, and the humming of a bee that flew in one window and out the other.

Finally the lawyer straightened up, and spoke impressively: —

“An exceedingly important discovery has been made. Is Rosetta Drew present?”

“She won’t come in, Rosetta won’t,” said Miss Eunice; “she hasn’t been in since she was forbidden.”

“Then I will go to her.” Lawyer Disborough left the room and a wondering silence behind him. When he entered again there followed slowly, reluctantly, a woman, pale, worn, and gray haired, who stopped upon the sill, and stood with her eyes fixed longingly upon the interior.

“Rosetta!” said Miss Eunice. Lawyer Disborough rapped on the table. “The letter which has just been found,” he said aloud, “was written by the late Nathan Disborough to his niece, Mrs. Drew, on the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg. She requests me to read it aloud.

“June 30, 1863.

“My Dear Niece Rosetta: If I get back alive there is no use of this letter, because I can tell you. But lest I don’t, I will give a copy to William Yellott to-morrow. Seeing death so often has brought a heap of things home to me. I was hasty in sending you away, and you were right to marry the man you loved, and I suppose I was wrong trying to hinder it —”

There was a stifled sob from Miss Eunice, who sank in a chair and covered her face.

“I want you to know I am not as hard as I seemed —”

“He wasn’t! He wasn’t!” sobbed Miss Eunice.

“I want to do right by you, and if I don’t get back I want you to have the house and land together with fifteen thousand dollars in gold now in the Bank of Deposit. And this must hold good in any court of law. I was wrong in letting you think me a poor man, and I hope you will forgive me.

“Your affectionate uncle, NATHAN DISBOROUGH.”

Following were the signature of three witnesses.

“What became of William Yellott, of this place?” said Lawyer Disborough, in the silence following.

“My brother died at Gettysburg on July first, the same day with Nathan Disborough,” spoke Solicitor Yellott.

“I suppose you all know that this is a perfectly legal bequest,” said Lawyer Disborough, addressing the astonished assembly,

“although it was found in so remarkable a way. In the letter is a draft on the Bank of Deposit, to be paid to the order of Mrs. Drew. Yesterday I was informed by the bank officers of a sum of money deposited by Nathan Disborough, still lying idle, to remain until he ordered its withdrawal. Therefore Mrs. Drew is quite an heiress. Cousin Rosetta, let me congratulate you.”

The woman in the doorway caught Miss Eunice's arm. “He's asked me to come home,” she said softly. “It's what I've prayed for.” And the light of ineffable joy irradiated her face.

Of course the sale was pronounced null, and while husbands and brothers were despatched to return the household gods to their shrines and to receive the money given for their purchase, the wives and sisters crowded around Rosetta with cousinly congratulations. To them all, however, she listened with the slightly dazed, abstracted air of one not wholly awakened from a dream.

When finally the last piece of furniture was borne back to the house, and the last vehicle had vanished in a cloud of dust, Rosetta Drew and Miss Eunice, still lingering in the doorway, looked at each other with eyes that ignored the incongruous collection heaped all about them.

“We'll live here together, Cousin Eunice, you and Rosy and I, and we'll keep the picture in the hall, because he's welcomed us back,” said Rosetta softly.

“And if you don't mind, Rosetta,” said Miss Eunice, beaming with happiness, and holding up the sword, “I'll just keep this for myself, because it was the last thing that belonged to him.”

But old Cassy waved her cane triumphantly towards the articles piled in the hall. “Whut I tell you, honey?” she said. “Dey's all come back, dey shorely has all come back!”

