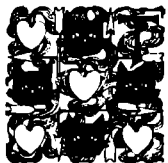


The Transformation of Mrs. Dwight's Son-in-law.

BY LOUISE S. TODD.



THE window was open a little at the bottom and the warm spring breeze blew fitfully in upon the occupant of the low rocking chair.

It was one of those late April days when the buds show in tiny green spots on the blackened tree branches, when the grass begins to look fresh despite the brown patches which occur at intervals as though to prove that the brightness is only premature after all, and that summer is still far away.

One of those days when the warm air steals into one's veins and stirs all the youthfulness there, even that left in decrepit old age, filling one with something of former fervor and a desire to accomplish seemingly impossible ends; when the middle-aged fancy themselves young once more and start forward gaily to do battle with the world, with a reflection of youth's vigor, only to discover that middle age, after all, holds them in chains and refuses to release them from bondage.

Something of these feelings without the inevitable conclusion of despair — for as yet she had not put her youthful powers to the test — vibrated through Mrs. Dwight as she swayed to and fro in the low chair by the open window. Her lap was occupied by a pile of men's socks, one of which she held in her hand while her eyes busied themselves in watching the precision with which her fingers wove the thread through and through until the hole was filled with a beautiful, intact piece of embroidery. But her thoughts, impelled by the stirring of youth within her, had strayed to the past, not the far-off past — she never thought of that — but to the past which was the reason of her sitting there darning leisurely at a pile of men's socks.

Directly opposite Mrs. Dwight, on a low table, and where, if she raised her eyes for a moment, she could surely see it, stood a

large photograph in a silver frame with doors. The doors stood open. The portrait was one reason; the other was the owner of the socks.

The picture was that of a girl perhaps seventeen, with a purely oval face, framed in fair, wavy hair; with great dark eyes which looked at the gazer with a certain wistfulness almost pathetic, were it not contradicted by a sweet, tender mouth which seemed about to smile and which suggested a dimple in hiding at the corner. A very fair reason, this one; and she had been Mrs. Dwight's daughter.

It had all happened ten years before, and the bright, beautiful story had ended as suddenly as it began. Ah, that beginning! — with lovely, enchanting, spell-weaving Venice for a setting, Venice in spring — how soon to be shadowed by gloomy, cold, dark New York — New York submerged in a rainy winter. And that was all, but the exquisite happiness of a young life lay between.

Mrs. Dwight and her daughter had been traveling for nearly five years, finding that their scanty income was more satisfactorily utilized that way than in trying to live at home. There, in that Venetian spring, Mrs. Dwight had encountered a man from home, a man she had met many years before during her husband's lifetime, who remembered her, and with our usual American affinity became her cavalier forthwith. She had liked him; if she had not, she would quickly have snubbed him in her quiet, ladylike way. As it was, she permitted him to come and see them frequently and make a third to their party on their little jaunts. She never thought of him in any light save that of a kind compatriot, a man of her own age, who had been successful in his business and was using some of the results of that success to see the world. The awakening came when he asked her to give him her daughter — her Virginia.

"I do not ask you to give her up," he had said in his pleasant way, when he saw the quick pallor in her face. "I only ask you to take me in, to let me be your son-in-law." And then he had smiled a little at the absurdity of it—he, who had traveled life's path a year farther than she, asking to be regarded as her son-in-law.

She had accepted him as such when she found that Virginia had

given her heart to him with all the intense fervor of a child whose circle of loved ones has been limited. Virginia's mother sometimes wondered even yet if it had been more than a child's affection, if it was what the man demanded.

Then came a blissful two months of travel, when Mrs. Dwight found how pleasant it is to have some one to look after you and take charge of everything, for Mr. Winthrop had accompanied them and insisted upon being their courier. In the fall they had come home, and Mr. Winthrop had urged an early marriage, to which the mother could find no reasonable objection.

"My house is lonely," he had said to her. "I want my wife very much"; and then he had smiled so wistfully at her that she was forced to give way, inasmuch as she was to benefit by the change, too, and have a home once more; so the wedding was fixed for January.

But in December, hardly a month before the wedding, Virginia Dwight died. Oh, the bitterness of it all! They had been obliged to take her away from the apartment where they had secured rooms; in spite of Mr. Winthrop's urgency, Mrs. Dwight would not take Virginia to his house, and there had remained only the hospital.

After Virginia's death, Mr. Winthrop had come to her again, and she was too weak then to combat his arguments; so when he said he was as lonely as she, and that together they must learn to bear their sorrow, she agreed to come and take charge of his house. If she had not been so overcome by her grief she might have stopped to ask what the world would think, but she did not care about it then, and to her surprise, had she been capable of any such feeling, this was one time when the world said nothing. It seemed the natural thing to do; she had assumed in their eyes the position of Mr. Winthrop's mother. But on her arrival in Mr. Winthrop's house she covered her soft, dark hair with a little lace cap.

She was thinking over some of this past while the warm spring air blew in upon her, and her busy fingers continued to weave the threads into the hole in the work in her hands, when from the hallway came the sound of approaching footsteps and the rustle of silken garments. She put her work into the basket and the

basket under the table near her; then she stood up to greet her visitor. The rustle came through the door and filled the room as a tall woman swept gracefully forward, clad in all the attractive beauty of a new spring costume.

"How do you, Mrs. Dwight?" she said in the sweetly penetrating tones cultivated by a society woman. "I knew you wouldn't mind my coming right up."

"I am very well, thank you," replied the other, quietly ignoring the last remark. "How pretty you are looking," she added after a moment, but she spoke as though it were an admission she would rather not feel justified in making.

The younger woman, who was perhaps twenty-five or six, flushed a little and looked over her shoulder towards the door.

"Thank you," she said.

Mrs. Dwight knew her better than any other woman in New York, perhaps, for Marion Maybrook had made a point of calling on her very soon after Mr. Winthrop had taken up society again. Even now he did not go out so much as before Virginia had come into his life, yet he was in great demand, for he was still in his prime. A man is never more eligible than when he is in his early forties and has made a tolerable fortune; besides, Mr. Winthrop had such pleasant, deferential ways with women that they all liked him. Virginia's mother did not "go out," but she had returned Miss Maybrook's call, and Marion had taken that for an evidence of her liking, and come frequently ever since. Mrs. Dwight could not have told whether she liked Marion or not; she rather fancied not, since she had heard the rumor that "Marion Maybrook had the inside track with Clarence Winthrop." She had credited this feeling of resentment to a natural protest against any one's taking Virginia's place, and if the younger woman ever noticed any coolness in her manner, she never showed it, but came as often and was just as agreeable.

This afternoon she rattled on in her usual go-aheaditive way, talking of everything that was going on in the outside world, giving little bits of gossip, but through it all hovering around herself as a topic of conversation, as though there were something pleasant to be told concerning her. Marion had a bright way of telling things, which seemed to suit the key she used to talk in, and Mrs.

Dwight, listening with a quiet, interested smile, found her very entertaining, and wondered if others did, too, if men did. There was a restlessness apparent in Marion's manner which was puzzling, and several times she saw her eyes wander to the picture of Virginia, with what she fancied was a pitying curiosity.

Finally she spoke of the house, of its old-fashioned beauty, of the harmony of its decorations, the exquisiteness of the wood carving, and as she talked her eyes were fixed with something like pity on the older woman, whose cheeks flushed — the call seemed to drag endlessly. Marion stayed only an hour, but it seemed three or four before she stood up nervously and said with a quick, indrawn breath : —

“ Won't you call me Marion just once, and kiss me as my own mother might ? ” She had put her hands on Mrs. Dwight's shoulders — she was a little the taller of the two — and she looked down at her with the same pitying look ; then she stooped suddenly and kissed her cheek with a passionate eagerness. Her own mother was dead, and she lived alone with her father. When she stood up again there were bright tears in her eyes, but her mouth was stern.

“ Hasn't Clarence Winthrop told you of the intended change in his life ? ” she asked ; then seeing the bewildered look in her companion's face, she stooped again as though to kiss her. Mrs. Dwight drew back coldly.

“ Mr. Winthrop tells me whatever it is necessary for me to know,” she said icily. “ You are going now ? Good afternoon, Miss Maybrook.”

“ Yes, I must go ; I have an engagement,” Marion said hurriedly, a faint flush creeping up her cheek. “ Good-by, Mrs. Dwight,” and with another look at Virginia's picture she left the room.

Mrs. Dwight stood quite still until she heard the door close behind Marion in the lower hall, then she threw open all the windows, letting in the fresh spring air. It had grown a little cooler and the air had lost its tinge of warmth. She took up Virginia's picture, and leaning close to the open window looked into the dear eyes long and lovingly. The air blew coolingly on the pictured face as well as the living one. The loving scru-

tiny had lasted several minutes, when she put the photograph back on the table and shut the doors with a quick, passionate gesture.

There was a mirror above the fireplace, and she walked over to it, looking at herself with a frown.

"I am not old," she said to herself at last. "I feel too young; I will not be old."

The white lace caught the light and gleamed snowily. It was the work of an instant to take it off and pull the soft, wavy hair underneath into something like order.

"I am younger now," she whispered half aloud. "It was not merely the spring atmosphere; it was really there all the time, inside me, and this hideous cap made me forget it. Virginia," she added, "I know you will forgive me that your mother must reassert her age here in this house where she came as your husband's mother; but there is another woman now, and I am going to be alone again." Perhaps there was also a thought to which she did not give utterance, but which flushed her cheeks and made her turn away from the mirror; at least she was standing between two of the windows a few moments later when a man came in, and the draught was fanning the loosened hair against her heated cheeks, while the late rays of the afternoon sun shone caressingly on her head.

"Marion has been here, she tells me," the man said, yawning lazily as he came towards her. He was good-looking, though his hair was beginning to turn gray on the temples, and his moustache and beard were tinged in the same way. He was one of the many who make true the affirmation that New York is noted for its fine-looking middle-aged men.

The flush still remained on Mrs. Dwight's cheek, and she felt it burn deeper at this confirmation of her thought concerning Marion's engagement.

"Yes, Marion has been here," she said. Something in her tone made him look at her more sharply, and he saw her flushed cheeks, her tossed hair, and her little cap crushed in her hand.

"What has Marion been saying to you?" he asked, half smiling.

Mrs. Dwight steadied her voice with difficulty. "She tells me you intend making some change in your method of living."

Mr. Winthrop frowned angrily and muttered something under his breath before he answered.

"I do expect to," he said.

"Pray do not hesitate about telling me, Clarence," she returned, trying to control herself. "I still have something to live on, you know, and can leave you at any time when you find your — other arrangements. I can go in a moment, you know."

"But I don't see why it is necessary for you to leave me at all. Everything can go on just as it does now with, of course, this difference —"

"Certainly not," Mrs. Dwight interrupted. "I should not stay to be an encumbrance."

"I don't mean you to stay. I want to ask you to go —"

"I have said I would go, have I not?" she interrupted again.

Mr. Winthrop looked at her in amazement. She who was usually so calm and serene, who waited until he had said what he had to say and then discussed it with him quietly, she now interrupted him, speaking quickly and with evident excitement.

In his astonishment he looked around the room curiously, as though to discover the cause of the change. He saw the windows were wide open, he noted the work-basket, upset, as she hurried through the room to open the windows, the balls of cotton and a white china egg or two tumbling unheeded on the floor. Then his gaze came back to the figure before him. The serenity had depended on the little lace cap, perhaps, and she had thrown them both aside together. He wondered vaguely if she had thrown the former away forever, or if she had crushed it for the time as she had the flimsy bit of lace in her hand.

"Did Marion tell you what the change actually was?" he asked at last, watching her intently. She shook her head. "Then I must tell you myself," he continued. "We have been having trouble with our Chicago agent, and it has become necessary for one of the firm to go out there and look after affairs in person. As I am the least tied down here, the lot has fallen to me. That is what I am going to do."

Mrs. Dwight drew a sigh of relief. Until now she had not realized what it meant to her had he told her what she expected. He heard the sigh.

"What did you think Marion meant?" he asked.

She did not answer, but she drooped her head until her eyes were fastened on the carpet.

"Won't you tell me what you thought, — Gertrude?" He tried to call her "m'Aimée," Virginia's pet name for her and one which he had always used; but that seemed not to belong to the woman who stood before him now. It seemed to have been cast away with her serenity and her cap.

Mrs. Dwight tried to raise her head, tried to look at him, and speak with her old placid calm, but his gentle "Gertrude" disarmed her, and she only could murmur almost incoherently: —

"I thought — she meant — you were going — to be — married." Her voice trailed off in an inaudible whisper.

Mr. Winthrop heard, however, and his face grew deadly pale as he walked over to the window and stood looking out. The air which blew in was much colder now, and he shivered a little; perhaps that was the reason of his putting out his hand to steady himself. It touched the silver frame on the table and lingered there, the fingers closing over it. Then he seemed to feel it and look down. He saw the doors were closed.

Virginia's mother had raised her head, but her eyes were still downcast when Mr. Winthrop spoke to her. "I am going to be married," he said, "if the woman I want will have me."

She raised her eyes and looked at him half startled. "I think she will," she said in a low voice.

"I do not know," he said in the same way. "Will you?"

"I!" — Her voice broke. "I thought you cared for Marion; I am sure she does for you."

"No," he said. "I know she cares for you, and I asked her to come here often, as I thought she would entertain you. I find her interesting, don't you? But I don't want Marion, I want you, Gertrude. Will you go out to Chicago with me as my wife?"

"I would, yes," she said frankly, her serene, loving eyes fixed on his; "but for Virginia —"

The man's fingers loosed their hold on the silver frame.

"Virginia belongs to the past, Gertrude, such a sweet, beautiful past. You and I have our future before us, and though the life we have lived here has suited these last ten years and New

York, it will not do for the rest of our lives and Chicago. I cannot live without you, Gertrude, and from now I shall love Virginia as my daughter, since she was yours."

I cannot live without you! That has overcome many arguments, and she had not many to overcome. She was so alone with only the picture of Virginia, and he needed her even as she needed him. But before he came around the table to her, they opened the doors of the silver frame.

The windows were closed when Marion Maybrook came back a half hour later, and Mrs. Dwight was sitting alone in the low rocking chair mending another hole. This mending had been the happiest thing in the past, the one thing she had done exclusively for him, and it belonged to her future, too. The nervousness was still apparent in Marion's manner when she came in, but she forgot it in a little outburst of pleasure.

"How pretty your hair is!" she said. "And you have covered it all these years." Then she knelt down beside the older woman, after a quick glance at the picture on the table, and spoke hurriedly. "I came to tell you something this afternoon, and then my courage gave out. I am engaged to be married. Don't you remember my telling you about Jack Glenshawe? You know it began in Venice, and I hated somehow to tell you because your daughter — Dear Mrs. Dwight, I have no one to be glad with me." Marion's head with its pretty new spring hat was pressed against her companion's shoulder.

The older woman dropped her mending and patted the younger's shoulder tenderly; there were tears in her eyes and in her voice, as well as a great love and pity in her heart for the girl at her side. She did not hesitate about her emotion now.

"My dear," she said very tenderly, "it would only have made you nearer and dearer to me. It would have seemed as though you were taking Virginia's place. Oh, my dear!" Marion had thrown her arms around Mrs. Dwight's neck and was kissing her passionately.

"Every one has been so nice about it," she whispered. "But no one has looked at me as you have done." In a moment or two she stood up and looked again at the picture on the table. "May I?" she said; but without waiting for a reply she had kissed the pic-

tured, smiling lips. "I think I should have loved her," she explained, "but I never dared to speak of her to you."

As she put the picture back on the table, Mr. Winthrop came in.

"Have you told Marion?" he asked. Then as Mrs. Dwight shook her head, flushing a little, he added, "Marion, will you come to a quiet wedding to-morrow noon at St. Mary's? You may not see us again, as we are going south for a few days and then to Chicago. By the way, how did you know I was going out there?"

Marion smiled a little and the color came up into her cheeks. "Jack told me," she said. "He heard it out there."

"Oh! Jack is here, too, isn't he? I forgot I saw you with him a few hours ago. Perhaps you had better bring him with you to-morrow."

Marion kissed Mrs. Dwight very tenderly as she said good-by, adding, "I shall see you some day in Chicago."

But before she left the house she came back and called from the doorway, with happy tears sounding through her ringing tones:—

"I am so glad about you two dear people. I always knew you were intended for each other, and was so afraid you would never find it out."

She saw they were standing in the light from the western window, and that Clarence Winthrop's arm lay across Mrs. Dwight's shoulders; but neither she nor they noticed that the wistfully smiling picture of Virginia had fallen face downwards on the table.

