

Woodbine Cottage

Sarah Josepha Hale

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"Love, and love only, is the loan for love." Young.

"PRAY, can you tell me who owns yonder pretty cottage? I am sure it must have a history," said Mrs. Conant to her landlady.

"Ah, yes is it not a love of a place, with its pillars and porticoes all around?" said Mrs. Bell, advancing towards the window. "It is called a cottage orne, you know, and belongs to Mr. "

"No, no! I don't mean that flaunting pagoda, which is just such a vulgar, expensive-looking thing as any body who has money may buy or build," said Mrs. Conant. "I mean that dear little cot on the hill-side there, nestled in among the green vines and shrubbery and peeping forth from among the leaves and flowers like a timid bride from beneath her veil. Who lives there?"

"O! that is Woodbine Cottage, you know," replied Mrs. Bell; "and the Waltons live there, you know."

"Yes, I know it now you have told me," said Mrs. Conant, smiling at the repetition of you know, which better educated people than Mrs. Bell are sometimes in the habit of using.

"It is a charming place!" exclaimed Emily Conant; "and good old Izaak himself, with his refined taste for the beauties of nature, never described a more delightful spot. I hope Mr. Walton loves fishing."

"Mrs. Walton is a widow," said Mrs. Bell; and she added, compassionately, "her son, poor fellow, could not be persuaded to hurt a fly, much less to pull a struggling fish out of the water."

"Why, he must be romantic, indeed," said Emily,* Conant. "What is he a poet?"

The landlady shook her head. "You have never heard then of Mrs. Walton's idiot son?"

Mrs. Conant assured her she had not.

"Well, then" said Mrs. Bell, in her rambling way "Clara Walton is very beautiful and very bright, and that makes it more strange poor Henry should be so ill-shapen and dull. But then he is a kind, loving, harmless creature, and his mother and sister think all the world of him, you know. Some say it was a judgment on Mrs. Walton for her pride, when she was so rich in her first husband's day; but that is over now, and she is poor enough, you know. But I must say, that she has borne all sorrows like a Christian, as she is, you know."

"Indeed, I know nothing of Mrs. Walton or her affairs, except what you have now communicated," replied Mrs. Conant. "I feel an interest in her from these circumstances; a widow, poor, with an idiot son clinging to her for the protection which, from such a relation, it would seem natural he should give, makes a touching appeal to my feelings."

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"And she has a lovely daughter," said Emily Conant. "I wish, mother, we could make their acquaintance."

"That would be easy enough if you were sick or in distress," said the landlady. "Mrs. Walton is famous for her broths and possets; and as for Clara, why, she thinks nothing of going miles to carry something nice to the sick, or to watch with the poor, while she would not spare an afternoon from her work or her books to visit a neighbor socially!"

"O, what a eulogy!" exclaimed Mrs. Conant, turning to her daughter. "How glad I am to find that the moral beauty of the dwellers in that lovely cottage is in unison with the charms of nature around them! What a Paradise we might make of this earth if all were good and kind!"

"Clara and her mother are good and kind," chimed in the landlady; "that every body allows; but people say they are over proud, though certainly, as Mrs. Walton is not able to go out much she has the asthma terribly at times except to church, it is not strange that Clara stays at home with her, and to take care of poor Henry. But then, she never seems to care about going, and that is strange; and now, as she has managed to catch the richest match in the state of Vermont, I suppose she will hold her head higher than ever."

"Then I presume Miss Walton is soon to be married," remarked Emily Conant.

"I hope so," replied Mrs. Bell; "for they say her mother is urging on the match. But indeed, poor lady, who can blame her? when Mr. Palmer is so rich and they have nothing."

"But the cottage " said Mrs. Conant.

"O! that is not their own; they live there on sufferance," replied the other. "The place is owned by the Rev. Mr. Forester."

"What, Charles Forester?" inquired Emily Conant.

"Yes, I believe his name is Charles at any rate he is a southern gentleman, and came here with his invalid mother, who had been ordered to try our bracing climate," said the loquacious Mrs. Bell. "He fitted up the cottage, which he bought, and ornamented the grounds, and lived there two years or more, and became very intimate with the Waltons. I told you they always visited the sick; so Mrs. Forester had Clara with her nearly half the time, and Mr. Forester gave her lessons she was a mere child when they came, not more than fifteen, you know so he gave her lessons in music and drawing, and all sorts of languages; some say he taught her Hebrew; and when they went away, they put the Waltons into the cottage to take care of it."

"The Foresters have been absent near three years, I believe," observed Mrs. Conant.

"Thereabouts," said Mrs. Bell. "But news has just come that the old lady is dead, and Mr. Forester is coming back soon. So I suppose Mrs. Walton will hurry Clara's marriage; otherwise they would have to go into cheap lodgings, which would terribly mortify her, after living so long in such a lovely place so people say."

And thus, under the shelter of that convenient oracle, the sayings of the thoughtless, the idle, or the envious, did Mrs. Bell virtually bear false witness against her neighbor and yet they both knelt at the same altar, and took the symbols of their Saviour's dying love from the same Pastor's hand. Nay, more than this, Mrs. Bell, in her own soul, believed Mrs. Walton to be a pious, humble Christian. Truly, evil-speaking is the sin which, in social life, requires our most constant watchfulness. Let us pray each morning not to be led into this temptation, but that we may have our hearts filled with that clarity which suffereth long and is kind, which believeth no evil, and giveth tongue to no slanderous report.

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At the very time when this conversation between the Conants and Mrs. Bell occurred, a scene was passing at the cottage, which, could they have known, would have read them a lesson never to have been forgotten.

Mrs. Walton was sitting by her work-table, which stood not far from an open window that over-looked the river, called in poetic lore, the "soft-flowing Connecticut;" (but which here, compressed in its channel, was deep and rapid) and the green hills beyond. It was a soft June evening; the sun had disappeared behind the western mountains, but his beams yet rested on the heads of the tall cliffs that bordered the river, and brightened the old evergreens that clothed the broken hills on the eastern shore. The flowers, that surrounded the cottage, were filled with fresh fragrance as the evening drew on; and the birds, that thronged, unmolested, in this sanctuary of peace, were pouring forth their sweetest songs of thankfulness and love.

But all these beauties and perfections of nature were lost on Mrs. Walton. Her thoughts were busy with the past, while her heart yearned towards her daughter. She felt the time had come when the deep lessons, which errors and sufferings had engraved in her own heart, must be told to Clara. The sweet girl was leaning beside the open window. The pale roses that drooped over her head not so white as her cheek. Yet she shed no tear, breathed no sigh; her eyes were, in truth, bright, as though she had nerved her soul for some deep sacrifice of self at the shrine of duty.

She had, that day, received the reiterated and urgent offer of marriage from Mr. Palmer, with a pledge that if she would become his wife, her mother and brother should be amply provided for should have Woodbine Cottage, if it could be obtained, or one equally as good, and a yearly allowance besides of a thousand dollars.

"Clara, my darling child, come here to me; I want to see you smile once more. You have not smiled of late. Come and sit here close beside me," said Mrs. Walton.

Clara obeyed, and seated herself on a cushion at her mother's feet but she did not look up.

Her mother took her hand it was cold and trem-bling. "Clara," said Mrs. Walton, impressively, "you must not accept this offer."

"Mother!

"No, you must not. You do not love Mr. Palmer, and unless you can give him your heart, you must not become his wife."

"But what will you do? What will become of you and poor Henry? You have no longer strength to work nay, hear me, dear mother we must leave this cottage immediately. Mr. Forester will come soon, and I would not for the world he should find me here." She spoke this hurriedly, for there was a rustling among the shrubbery near the window, which opened to the ground, and she thought some one was coming in. They listened. "It is only Henry gathering his evening offering of flowers," said Mrs. Walton, and Clara resumed.

"I have thought of every plan, but I do not find anything I can do will support you in comfort. And then poor Henry he so loves these trees and flowers that he will droop and die if we take him into a close room, as we must do, should we go back to boarding again. But do not fear that I shall deceive Mr. Palmer. I have told him that I do not love him; that if I accepted him, it would be for the sake of my mother and brother. To-morrow I shall tell him "

"That you love another," said Mrs. Walton, in a low sad tone.

"No but that I have loved. I think," continued this heroic girl, "I hope, I have overcome the weakness I ought never to have indulged!"

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"O! it was my fault; I ought never to have permitted you to pass so much time with the Foresters. The excellencies of that young man's character seemed to me, then, a guarantee that he would not abuse my confidence would not seek to win the heart of my child, and then cast it away like a worthless weed!" said Mrs. Walton, in a tone of deep anguish.

"He did not he did not. O! mother, you wrong him," said Clara, weeping for the first time. "He never attempted to win my affections. He never paid me a compliment, or said a word which a good brother might not have said to a young sister, whom he wished to guide in the way of everything pure and holy. I gave him my love unsought, unknown by him un-known even to myself. Till Mr. Palmer addressed me, to whom, except that he is not a religious man, I could have no reasonable objection, I knew not that I had no heart to give. But I must not be thus weak," she added, wiping the tears from her eyes. "My resolution is taken."

"To marry Mr. Palmer?"

"Yes if he continues to desire it after I have told him all." Here the rose-tree by the window was again agitated.

"Clara," said Mrs. Walton, solemnly, "listen to me. I dare not allow you to make this sacrifice on my account, neither would it be for good. All mere worldly prosperity is unstable; even while it lasts, it is hollow and unsatisfying. I married Colonel Meredith, because he was rich and my parents insisted on the connection while I loved only Edward Walton, your father. The consequences were most unhappy. I lived in splendor, it is true, and became so absorbed in the dissipations of fashionable life, into which I plunged to avoid reflection, that I left my dear little Henry, one of the most beautiful children I ever looked upon, when he was only three years old, at home, to the care of hired servants, and made the tour of Europe, not for health, but amusement. When, at the end of two years, I returned, I found him a poor cripple and idiotic. A fall he received, which was neglected, because his mother was not near to watch over him, was the cause of this! My husband knew that I did not love him, and after our return, and he found his hopes in his son thus destroyed, he grew morose and unkind. His affairs, too, were deranged, and the failure of a large banking-house in England, where he had placed most of his money, completed our ruin. He lived but a few weeks after this loss; and thus, in less than seven years from the time I married one of the richest men in New York, I was left a poor widow, with a sickly, deformed child to provide for and, Clara, during these seven years, I was never happy for my heart was not in my duties, and God was not with me."

"But then you married my father, and he was good and kind to you, my dear mother," said Clara, sobbing. "He had always loved you."

"He had always remembered me," replied Mrs. Walton, "and my sorrows revived his affection. But he had lost his health, and was not able to take orders, as he had intended. His lungs were so weak that he could not preach. When we married, his income, gained by his writings and giving lessons in the languages, was only sufficient to furnish us with the mere necessaries of life. But then we loved each other, and had faith in God. I had learned that earth was a broken reed Edward taught me to look to heaven and trust in the Saviour. Our humble home was the temple of prayer and praise; and then we had you to crown our happiness. There was still one bitter drop in my cup poor Henry's state, and the thought that it was my fault. But your father was so kind to him, and Henry always seemed so happy himself, that though I mourned I did not repine. O! Clara I can bear witness from my own experience, that better is a dinner of herbs where love is I mean love to God and to each other than a house full of sacrifices with strife."

"But when my father died " said Clara, hesitatingly.

"O! that was a sorrow which God inflicted, and he alone could comfort," said Mrs. Walton, looking upwards. "I bowed to His will, I trusted that he would sustain me, and He has never forsaken us. We have been poor, but God has raised up friends to help us when we have done what we could. We will trust Him still. Let us only do right,

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and then we shall all have faith to pray for His blessing. But if, from motives of expediency, of selfish, or indeed, of generous feeling, we violate His law, how can we expect to prosper? And the law of God bears witness, in every human heart, that those who marry together should love each other. I dare not allow you, on my account, to violate this law. You must send a decided refusal to Mr. Palmer."

"But will you, mother, leave this place directly?"

"As soon as possible, my love."

"O, let us go to-morrow, dear mother. I so fear Mr. Forester will come while we are here," said Clara.

"I don't think he would turn us out of the cottage," replied Mrs. Walton, half-smiling; "though, to be sure, he has been very negligent about writing."

"O, he has quite forgotten us, mother, and "

"Clara, dear Clara!" said a deep manly voice, but in a tone of the softest tenderness, and Charles Forester stood before them!

"O, Clara!" said Mr. Forester, as he pressed her hand to his bosom, after she had become tranquilized "O Clara, you little know how severe was the trial of my soul, how painful the sacrifice, when I left you without declaring my love, and attempting to secure yours in return. But I was going to attend on my dear, feeble mother, who required all my time and means; I knew not how long this filial duty would be upon me. Young, lovely, and attractive as you are, should I, ought I, to have bound you in a long engagement, which might, as you saw more of the world, be irksome to you, and prevent you from choosing among others, the rich and distinguished, who, I foresaw, would bow before you? I thank God that He strengthened me to do what I felt to be right to leave you free. But, dear Clara, I have prayed night and morning, on my knees, that, if it could be, I might find you thus; and I bless God he has granted my prayer. He has brought your heart to love him supremely, while its tenderest earthly affections have been kept constant and pure. Forget you, Clara! I can truly say

"I've wandered east, I've wandered west,
I've borne a weary lot;
But in my wanderings, far or near,
You never were forgot."

And they were married, Mr. Forester and Clara Walton, united in that true affection and sympathy of heart, soul, and mind, which constitute the holiness of the relation, and make it a fit type of the union between Christ and his Church.

Mrs. Conant and her daughter, who were distant connections of Mr. Forester, remained in Windsor till after the wedding; and Mrs. Bell acknowledged she had wronged Mrs. Walton, and never would again make an evil report of her neighbor on the mere "they say" of the world.