

Lost
By
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Freeditorial 

LOST

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The 25th of May, 1866, was no doubt to many a quite indifferent date, but to two persons it was the saddest day of their lives. Charles Randall that day left Bonn, Germany, to catch the steamer home to America, and Ida Werner was left with a mountain of grief on her gentle bosom, which must be melted away drop by drop, in tears, before she could breathe freely again.

A year before, Randall, hunting for apartments, his last term at the university just begun, had seen the announcement, "Zimmer zu vermieten," in the hall below the flat where the Werners lived. Ida answered his ring, for her father was still at his government office, and her mother had gone out to the market to buy the supper. She would much rather her mother had been at home to show the gentleman the rooms; but, knowing that they could not afford to lose a chance to rent them, she plucked up courage, and, candle in hand, showed him through the suite. When he came next day with his baggage, he learned for the first time what manner of apartments he had engaged; for although he

had protracted the investigation the previous evening to the furthest corner, and had been most exacting as to explanations, he had really rented the rooms entirely on account of a certain light in which a set of Madonna features, in auburn hair, had shown at the first opening of the door.

A year had passed since this, and a week ago a letter from home had stated that his father, indignant at his unexplained stay six months beyond the end of his course, had sent him one last remittance, barely sufficient for a steamer ticket, with the intimation that if he did not return on a set day, he must thenceforth attend to his own exchequer. The 25th was the last day on which he could leave Bonn to catch the requisite steamer. Had it been in November, nature at least would have sympathized; it was cruel that their autumn time of separation should fall in the spring, when the sky is full of bounteous promise and the earth of blissful trust.

Love is so improvident that a parting a year away is no more feared than death, and a month's end seems dim and distant. But a week,—a week only,—that even to love is short, and the beginning of the end. The chilling mist that rose from the gulf of separation so near before them overshadowed all the brief remnant of their path. They were constantly together. But a silence had come upon them. Never had words seemed idler, they had so much to say. They could say nothing that did not mock the weight on their hearts, and seem trivial and impertinent because it was exclusive of more important matter. The utmost they could do was to lay their hearts open toward each other to receive every least impression of voice, and look, and manner, to be remembered afterward. At evening they went into the minster church, and, sitting in the shadows, listened to the sweet, shrill choir of boys whose music distilled the honey of sorrow; and as the deep bass organ chords gripped their hearts with the tones that underlie all weal and woe, they looked in each other's eyes, and did for a space feel so near that all the separation that could come after seemed but a trifling thing.

It was all arranged between them. He was to earn money, or get a position in business, and return in a year or two at most and bring her to America.

"Oh," she said once, "if I could but sleep till thou comest again to wake me, how blessed I should be; but, alas, I must wake all through the desolate time!"

Although for the most part she comforted him rather than he her, yet at times she gave way, and once suddenly turned to him and hid her face on his breast, and said, trembling with tearless sobs:—

"I know I shall never see thee more, Karl. Thou wilt forget me in thy great, far land and wilt love another. My heart tells me so."

And then she raised her head, and her streaming eyes blazed with anger.

"I will hover about thee, and if thou lovest another, I will kill her as she sleeps

by thy side."

And the woman must have loved him much who, after seeing that look of hers, would have married him. But a moment after she was listening with abject ear to his promises.

The day came at last. He was to leave at three o'clock. After the noontide meal, Ida's mother sat with them and they talked a little about America, Frau Werner exerting herself to give a cheerful tone to the conversation, and Randall answering her questions absently and without taking his eyes off Ida, who felt herself beginning to be seized with a nervous trembling. At last Frau Werner rose and silently left the room, looking back at them as she closed the door with eyes full of tears. Then, as if by a common impulse, they rose and put their arms about each other's necks, and their lips met in a long, shuddering kiss. The breath came quicker and quicker; sobs broke the kisses; tears poured down and made them salt and bitter, as parting kisses should be in which sweetness is mockery. Hitherto they had controlled their feelings, or rather she had controlled him; but it was no use any longer, for the time had come, and they abandoned themselves to the terrible voluptuousness of unrestrained grief, in which there is a strange, meaningless suggestion of power, as though it might possibly be a force that could affect or remove its own cause if but wild and strong enough.

"Herr Randall, the carriage waits and you will lose the train," said Frau Werner from the door, in a husky voice.

"I will not go, by God!" he swore, as he felt her clasp convulsively strengthen at the summons. The lesser must yield to the greater, and no loss or gain on earth was worth the grief upon her face. His father might disinherit him, America might sink, but she must smile again. And she did,—brave, true girl and lover. The devotion his resolute words proved was like a strong nervine to restore her self-control. She smiled as well as her trembling lips would let her, and said, as she loosed him from her arms:—

"No, thou must go, Karl. But thou wilt return, nicht wahr?"

I would not venture to say how many times he rushed to the door, and, glancing back at her as she stood there desolate, followed his glance once more to her side. Finally, Frau Werner led him as one dazed to the carriage, and the impatient driver drove off at full speed.

It is seven years later, and Randall is pacing the deck of an ocean steamer, outward bound from New York. It is the evening of the first day out. Here and there passengers are leaning over the bulwarks, pensively regarding the sinking sun as it sets for the first time between them and their native land, or maybe taking in with awed faces the wonder of the deep, which has haunted their imaginations from childhood. Others are already busily striking up

acquaintances with fellow-passengers, and a bridal pair over yonder sit thrilling with the sense of isolation from the world that so emphasizes their mutual dependence and all-importance to each other. And other groups are talking business, and referring to money and markets in New York, London, and Frankfort as glibly as if they were on land, much to the secret shock of certain raw tourists, who marvel at the in-sensitiveness of men who, thus speeding between two worlds, and freshly in the presence of the most august and awful form of nature, can keep their minds so steadily fixed upon cash-books and ledgers.

But Randall, as, with the habit of an old voyager, he already falls to pacing the deck, is too much engrossed with his own thoughts to pay much heed to these things. Only, as he passes a group of Germans, and the familiar accents of the sweet, homely tongue fall on his ear, he pauses, and lingers near.

The darkness gathers, the breeze freshens, the waves come tumbling out of the east, and the motion of the ship increases as she rears upward to meet them. The groups on deck are thinning out fast, as the passengers go below to enjoy the fearsome novelty of the first night at sea, and to compose themselves to sleep as it were in the hollow of God's hand. But long into the night Randall's cigar still marks his pacing up and down as he ponders, with alternations of tender, hopeful glow and sad foreboding, the chances of his quest. Will he find her?

It is necessary to go back a little. When Randall reached America on his return from Germany, he immediately began to sow his wild oats, and gave his whole mind to it. Answering Ida's letters got to be a bore, and he gradually ceased doing it. Then came a few sad reproaches from her, and their correspondence ceased. Meanwhile, having had his youthful fling, he settled down as a steady young man of business. One day he was surprised to observe that he had of late insensibly fallen into the habit of thinking a good deal in a pensive sort of way about Ida and those German days. The notion occurred to him that he would hunt up her picture, which he had not thought of in five years. With misty eyes and crowding memories he pored over it, and a wave of regretful, yearning tenderness filled his breast.

Late one night, after long search, he found among his papers a bundle of her old letters, already growing yellow. Being exceedingly rusty in his German, he had to study them out word by word. That night, till the sky grew gray in the east, he sat there turning the pages of the dictionary with wet eyes and glowing face, and selecting definitions by the test of the heart. He found that some of these letters he had never before taken the pains to read through. In the bitterness of his indignation, he cursed the fool who had thrown away a love so loyal and priceless.

All this time he had been thinking of Ida as if dead, so far off in another world

did those days seem. It was with extraordinary effect that the idea finally flashed upon him that she was probably alive, and now in the prime of her beauty. After a period of feverish and impassioned excitement, he wrote a letter full of wild regret and beseeching, and an ineffable tenderness. Then he waited. After a long time it came back from the German dead-letter office. There was no person of the name at the address. She had left Bonn, then. Hastily setting his affairs in order, he sailed for Germany on the next steamer.

The incidents of the voyage were a blank in his mind. On reaching Bonn, he went straight from the station to the old house in ———strasse. As he turned into it from the scarcely less familiar streets leading thither, and noted each accustomed landmark, he seemed to have just returned to tea from an afternoon lecture at the university. In every feature of the street some memory lurked, and, as he passed, threw out delaying tendrils, clutching at his heart. Rudely he broke away, hastening on to that house near the end of the street, in each of whose quaint windows fancy framed the longed-for face. She was not there, he knew, but for a while he stood on the other side of the street, unmindful of the stares and jostling of the passers-by, gazing at the house-front, and letting himself imagine from moment to moment that her figure might flit across some window, or issue from the door, basket in hand, for the evening marketing, on which journey he had so often accompanied her. At length, crossing the street, he inquired for the Werner family. The present tenants had never heard the name. Perhaps the tenants from whom they had received the house might be better informed. Where were they? They had moved to Cologne. He next went to the Bonn police-office, and from the records kept there, in which pretty much everything about every citizen is set down, ascertained that several years previous Herr Werner had died of apoplexy, and that no one of the name was now resident in the city. Next day he went to Cologne, hunted up the former tenants of the house, and found that they remembered quite distinctly the Werner family, and the death of the father and only breadwinner. It had left the mother and daughter quite without resources, as Randall had known must probably have been the case. His informants had heard that they had gone to Dusseldorf.

His search had become a fever. After waiting seven years, a delay of ten minutes was unendurable. The trains seemed to creep. And yet, on reaching Diisseldorf, he did not at once go about his search, but said to himself:—

"Let me not risk the killing of my last hope till I have warmed myself with it one more night, for to-morrow there may be no more warmth in it."

He went to a hotel, ordered a room and a bottle of wine, and sat over it all night, indulging the belief that he would find her the next day. He denied his imagination nothing, but conjured up before his mind's eye the lovely vision of her fairest hour, complete even to the turn of the neck, the ribbon in the hair,

and the light in the blue eyes. So he would turn into the street. Yes, here was the number. Then he rings the bell. She comes to the door. She regards him a moment indifferently. Then amazed recognition, love, happiness, transfigure her face. "Ida!" "Karl!" and he clasps her sobbing to his bosom, from which she shall never be sundered again.

The result of his search next day was the discovery that mother and daughter had been at Diisseldorf until about four years previous, where the mother had died of consumption, and the daughter had removed, leaving no address. The lodgings occupied by them were of a wretched character, showing that their circumstances must have been very much reduced.

There was now no further clue to guide his search. It was destined that the last he was to know of her should be that she was thrown on the tender mercies of the world,—her last friend gone, her last penny expended. She was buried out of his sight, not in the peaceful grave, with its tender associations, but buried alive in the living world; hopelessly hid in the huge, writhing confusion of humanity. He lingered in the folly of despair about those sordid lodgings in Diisseldorf, as one might circle vainly about the spot in the ocean where some pearl of great price had fallen overboard.

After a while he roused again, and began putting advertisements for Ida into the principal newspapers of Germany, and making random visits to towns all about to consult directories and police records. A singular sort of misanthropy possessed him. He cursed the multitude of towns and villages that reduced the chances in his favor to so small a thing. He cursed the teeming throngs of men, women, and children, in whose mass she was lost, as a jewel in a mountain of rubbish. Had he possessed the power, he would in those days, without an instant's hesitation, have swept the bewildering, obstructing millions of Germany out of existence, as the miner washes away the earth to bring to light the grain of gold in his pan. He must have scanned a million women's faces in that weary search, and the bitterness of that million-fold disappointment left its trace in a feeling of aversion for the feminine countenance and figure that he was long in overcoming.

Knowing that only by some desperate chance he could hope to meet her in his random wanderings, it seemed to him that he was more likely to be successful by resigning as far as possible all volition, and leaving the guidance of the search to chance; as if Fortune were best disposed toward those who most entirely abdicated intelligence and trusted themselves to her. He sacredly followed every impulse, never making up his mind an hour before at what station he should leave the cars, and turning to the right or left in his wanderings through the streets of cities, as much as possible without intellectual choice. Sometimes, waking suddenly in the middle of the night, he would rise, dress with eager haste, and sally out to wander through the dark

streets, thinking he might be led of Providence to meet her. And, once out, nothing but utter exhaustion could drive him back; for how could he tell but in the moment after he had gone, she might pass? He had recourse to every superstition of sortilege, clairvoyance, presentiment, and dreams. And all the time his desperation was singularly akin to hope. He dared revile no seeming failure, not knowing but just that was the necessary link in the chain of accidents destined to bring him face to face with her. The darkest hour might usher in the sunburst. The possibility that this was at last the blessed chance lit up his eyes ten thousand times as they fell on some new face.

But at last he found himself back in Bonn, with the feverish infatuation of the gambler, which had succeeded hope in his mind, succeeded in turn by utter despair! His sole occupation now was revisiting the spots which he had frequented with her in that happy year. As one who has lost a princely fortune sits down at length to enumerate the little items of property that happen to be attached to his person, disregarded before but now his all, so Randall counted up like a miser the little store of memories that were thenceforth to be his all. Wonderfully, the smallest details of those days came back to him. The very seats they sat in at public places, the shops they entered together, their promenades and the pausing-places on them, revived in memory under a concentrated inward gaze like invisible paintings brought over heat.

One afternoon, after wandering about the city for some hours, he turned into a park to rest. As he approached his usual bench, sacred to him because Ida and he in the old days had often sat there, he was annoyed to see it already occupied by a pleasant-faced, matronly looking German woman, who was complacently listening to the chatter of a couple of small children. Randall threw himself upon the unoccupied end of the bench, rather hoping that his gloomy and preoccupied air might cause them to depart and leave him to his melancholy reverie. And, indeed, it was not long before the children stopped their play and gathered timidly about their mother, and soon after the bench tilted slightly as she relieved it of her substantial charms, saying in a cheery, pleasant voice:—

"Come, little ones, the father will be at home before us."

It was a secluded part of the garden, and the plentiful color left her cheeks as the odd gentleman at the other end of the bench turned with a great start at the sound of her voice, and transfixed her with a questioning look. But in a moment he said:—

"Pardon me, madame, a thousand times. The sound of your voice so reminded me of a friend I have lost that I looked up involuntarily."

The woman responded with good-natured assurances that he had not at all alarmed her. Meanwhile Randall had an opportunity to notice that, in spite of

the thick-waisted and generally matronly figure, there were, now he came to look closely, several rather marked resemblances to Ida. The eyes were of the same blue tint, though about half as large, the cheeks being twice as full. In spite of the ugly style of dressing it, he saw also that the hair was like Ida's; and as for the nose, that feature which changes least, it might have been taken out of Ida's own face. As may be supposed, he was thoroughly disgusted to be reminded of that sweet girlish vision by this broadly moulded, comfortable-looking matron. His romantic mood was scattered for that evening at least, and he knew he should not get the prosaic suggestions of the unfortunate resemblance out of his mind for a week at least. It would torment him as a humorous association spoils a sacred hymn.

He bowed with rather an ill grace, and was about to retire, when a certain peculiar turn of the neck, as the lady acknowledged his salute, caught his eye and turned him to stone. Good God! this woman was Ida!

He stood there in a condition of mental paralysis. The whole fabric of his thinking and feeling for months of intense emotional experience had instantly been annihilated, and he was left in the midst of a great void in his consciousness out of touching-reach of anything. There was no sharp pang, but just a bewildered numbness. A few filaments only of the romantic feeling for Ida that filled his mind a moment before still lingered, floating about it, unattached to anything, like vague neuralgic feelings in an amputated stump, as if to remind him of what had been there.

All this was as instantaneous as a galvanic shock the moment he had recognized—let us not say Ida, but this evidence that she was no more. It occurred to him that the woman, who stood staring, was in common politeness entitled to some explanation. He was in just that state of mind when, the only serious interest having suddenly dropped out of the life, the minor conventionalities loom up as peculiarly important and obligatory.

"You were Fraiilein Ida Werner, and lived at No.———strasse in 1866, nicht wahr?"

He spoke in a cold, dead tone, as if making a necessary but distasteful explanation to a stranger.

"Yes, truly," replied the woman curiously; "but my name is now Frau Stein," glancing at the children, who had been staring open-mouthed at the queer man.

"Do you remember Karl Randall? I am he."

The most formal of old acquaintances could hardly have recalled himself in a more indifferent manner.

"Herr Gott im Himmel!" exclaimed the woman, with the liveliest surprise and interest "Karl! Is it possible? Yes, now I recognize you. Surely! surely!"

She clapped one hand to her bosom, and dropped on the bench to recover herself. Fleishy people, overcome by agitation, are rather disagreeable objects. Randall stood looking at her with a singular expression of aversion on his listless face. But, after panting a few times, the woman recovered her vivacity and began to ply him vigorously with exclamations and questions, beaming the while with delighted interest. He answered her like a schoolboy, too destitute of presence of mind to do otherwise than to yield passively to her impulse. But he made no inquiries whatever of her, and did not distantly allude to the reason of his presence in Germany. As he stood there looking at her, the real facts about that matter struck him as so absurd and incredible that he could not believe them himself.

Pretty soon he observed that she was becoming a little conscious in her air, and giving a slightly sentimental turn to the conversation. It was not for some time that he saw her drift, so utterly without connection in his mind were Ida and this comfortable matron before him; and when he did, a smile at the exquisite absurdity of the thing barely twitched the corners of his mouth, and ended in a sad, puzzled stare that rather put the other out of countenance.

But the children had now for some time been whimpering for supper and home, and at length Frau Stein rose, and, with an urgent request that Randall should call on her and see her husband, bade him a cordial adieu. He stood there watching her out of sight, with an unconscious smile of the most refined and subtle cynicism. Then he sat down and stared vacantly at the close-cropped grass on the opposite side of the path. By what handle should he lay hold of his thoughts?

That woman could not retroact and touch the memory of Ida. That dear vision remained intact. He drew forth his locket, and opening it gazed passionately at the fair girlish face, now so hopelessly passed away. By that blessed picture he could hold her and defy the woman. Remembering that fat, jolly, comfortable matron, he should not at least ever again have to reproach himself with his cruel treatment of Ida. And yet why not? What had the woman to do with her? She had suffered as much as if the woman had not forgotten it all. His reckoning was with Ida,—was with her. Where should he find her? In what limbo could he imagine her? Ah, that was the wildering cruelty of it. She was not this woman, nor was she dead in any conceivable natural way so that her girlish spirit might have remained eternally fixed. She was nothing. She was nowhere. She existed only in this locket, and her only soul was in his heart, far more surely than in this woman who had forgotten her.

Death was a hopeful, cheerful state compared to that nameless nothingness that was her portion. For had she been dead, he could still have loved her soul; but now she had none. The soul that once she had, and, if she had then died, might have kept, had been forfeited by living on, and had passed to this

woman, and would from her pass on further till finally fixed and vested in the decrepitude of age by death. So, then, it was death and not life that secured the soul, and his sweet Ida had none because she had not died in time. Ah! had not he heard somewhere that the soul is immortal and never dies? Where, then, was Ida's? She had disappeared utterly out of the universe. She had been transformed, destroyed, swallowed up in this woman, a living sepulchre, more cruel than the grave, for it devoured the soul as well as the body. Pah! this prating about immortality was absurd, convicted of meaninglessness before a tragedy like this; for what was an immortality worth that was given to her last decrepit phase of life, after all its beauty and strength and loveliness had passed soulless away? To be aught but a mockery, immortality must be as manifold as the manifold phases of life. Since life devours so many souls, why suppose death will spare the last one?

But he would contend with destiny. Painters should multiply the face in his locket. He would immortalize her in a poem. He would constantly keep the lamp trimmed and burning before her shrine in his heart. She should live in spite of the woman.

But he could now never make amends to her for the suffering his cruel, neglectful youth had caused her. He had scarcely realized before how much the longing to make good that wrong had influenced his quest of her. Tears of remorse for an unattonable crime gathered in his eyes. He might, indeed, enrich this woman, or educate her children, or pension her husband; but that would be no atonement to Ida.

And then, as if to intensify that remorse by showing still more clearly the impossibility of atonement, it flashed on him that he who loved Ida was not the one to atone for an offense of which he would be incapable, which had been committed by one who despised her love. Justice was a meaningless word, and amends were never possible, nor can men ever make atonement; for, ere the debt is paid, the atonement made, one who is not the sufferer stands to receive it; while, on the other hand, the one who atones is not the offender, but one who comes after him, loathing his offense and himself incapable of it. The dead must bury their dead. And, thus pondering from personal to general thoughts, the turmoil of his feelings gradually calmed, and a restful melancholy, vague and tender, filled the aching void in his heart.

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