

The Clearest Voice

by Margaret Sherwood, 1864-1955

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THE little business frown which John Wareham usually wore only at his office, and put off as he put on his hat in starting for home, lingered that evening, persisting through the long street-car ride, the walk past rows of suburban houses, and even to the brook at the foot of the hill below his home. Here it vanished, for the brook marked the spot where the world stopped, and Alice began. He watched with a meditative happy smile the rough stone fence which bordered this bit of meadow land, with the trailing woodbine and clematis that made it a thing of beauty; and, as he climbed the hill, the deepening color in the sunset clouds, and the notes of a wood thrush from the forest edge not far away, became part of a deep sense of harmony, breaking a mood of anxiety and fear.

Then came the comforting glimpse of the red brick house through the encompassing green, with its white daintiness of porch, fan-window, and window-facings. It all looked like her; in its serene and simple distinction it seemed to embody her; her creative touch was everywhere. The bay window, about which they had disagreed when the house was planned, had, surprisingly, turned out to the liking of both. As he fumbled at the latch of the gate, and pinched his finger as

he always did, a vexed sense of triumph came to him, for it surely would have worked better if he had insisted on having his own way! Everywhere were traces of little worries and little triumphs, the latter predominating. It was the very soul of home, from the threshold to the branches of the tall elm which touched the roof protectingly; it was wholly desirable,—and it might have to go.

As he followed the brick walk, in bitterness he closed his eyes that he might not see, and so ran into a porch pillar, the one on which Alice's red roses were blossoming; the queer little groan that he gave in some strange way took on the sound of 'Railroads!' and again 'Railroads!' as he beat his head against the pillar once or twice purposely; and his voice had a note of contempt. He had not felt that way about railroads when he had invested his savings, partly in the stock of a new railroad in the West, partly in the stock of an old railroad in the East that was doing wild things in the way of improvements. Then there had been nothing too good for him to say about the earning power of railroads, the wise management of railroads, the net profits of railroads. Now, both railroads were in trouble; dividends were cut, and the stock which he had hoped to sell at a profit had dropped almost to zero; the mortgage loan on his house was due in a month; and he, a man earning only a moderate salary in a real-estate office, had nothing in the world wherewith to meet the emergency. Even the savings-bank deposit had gone into railroad stock, in order that the mortgage might be paid off more quickly.

But his face lighted up with a smile both sad and bright which made quite a different face of it as he crossed the threshold, that threshold on which Alice had stopped to kiss him the day he had married her and brought her home. There was something here that shut out all the trouble in the universe: about the doorway his wife's laughter seemed to be always floating—that laughter, merry, touched with tenderness, made up of mirth and sorrow, as all wise laughter is. Just then came little Jack to meet him, speeding madly down the baluster; and John, as he picked up his boy, kissed him, and reproved him for coming downstairs that way, had nothing to answer, when his son averred that it was lots better than a railroad, save 'That might well be.'

'There's ice-cream for dinner,' the boy exploded; and the father, roughly smoothing Jack's tousled hair, started as he caught a sound of chatter from the living-room, and stood still in dismay. That to-day of all days should be the time of the family gathering which brought two uncles, two aunts, and three cousins to the house! How completely he had forgotten! He hung up his hat and grasped little Jack's hand; he would tell them nothing about his troubles, nothing; he would be the ideal host, concealing his personal vexations under a cordial smile.

But hardly had he opened the door, with his office bag still held absent-mindedly in his hand, when they were upon him. The cordial smile did not deceive them for a minute. Aunt Janet, who was sitting by the fireplace, looked the most troubled of all, though she said nothing. It was 'Why, John, what's the matter?' from Aunt Mary, and 'Well, John, how goes it?' from Uncle Philip, who looked as if he knew that it went very badly indeed; and 'What makes you look so worried?' With a home like this, no man ought to look worried,' from his Cousin Austin, who had recently become engaged and was thinking about homes. He nodded approvingly at the room, which was simply furnished, soft in coloring, with

English chintzes, a few pictures of trees and of water—all out-of-door things—and a fireplace that showed signs of constant use.

John's face brightened as he caught this look of admiration; not all the confusion of greeting and inquiries in regard to health, not all the business worries in the world could check the sense of peace that always came to him in entering this room, which, more perfectly than any other spot, expressed the personality of Alice. He managed to make his way through the little crowd of sympathetic wrinkled faces, and wondering smooth faces. There were, it was discovered, comfortable chairs enough for all, and John found himself, as host, the centre of a little group bent on probing his affairs, in friendly fashion, to the bottom.

It was his sister Emily who finally started the flood of questioning that led to the betrayal of the secret he had meant to keep for the present. She came bustling in through the door leading to the dining-room, looking anxious as soon as she glanced at her brother; and from the brass bowl of yellow roses held unsteadily in her hand, a few drops spattered to the floor.

'Are you ill, John,' she asked, 'or have you lost—'

Among all the many voices of inquiry, comment, question whereby she was interrupted, the voice of Alice was the clearest, making the others, no matter how near the speakers stood, seem to come from far away. Little Jack came and climbed upon his father's knee, a curious reproduction of the family look of worry appearing on his chubby face. John the elder leaned his head back in the chintz-covered chair, shutting his eyes for a minute with a sense of warmth and satisfaction, and the nearness of the cuddling body of his son.

'Everything's the matter,' he said wearily, 'everything'; and he had a momentary twinge of conscience, realizing that he was not being the ideal host.

They all watched him anxiously, sympathetically, in silence; and Aunt Mary, near the window, went on drawing her needle in and out with exquisite precision, her gray head bent over a centrepiece which she intended to present to the house.

'Oh no, I'm not ill,' said John Wareham, suddenly sitting upright; 'but the Long Gorge Railroad has gone into a receiver's hands, and three days ago the New York and Nineveh cut its dividend. I'm done for.'

Emily gave a little gasp, and said nothing. 'You will pull through all right,' asserted Uncle Philip, stirring up the fire in order to hide his face. And Cousin Austin slapped John's shoulder, saying facetiously, 'Take courage, Jeremiah. The worst is yet to come.'

John laughed in spite of himself, and struck his fist upon the knee not occupied by Jack.

'Every dollar I had in the world I had drawn out and put into those two cursed things. Now I've nothing, no capital, no credit. The place has got to go.'

'No, no!' cried the women-folk.

'The place has got to go,' repeated John Wareham, his face in little Jack's hair. 'And I feel as if I could rob a bank or a jewelry store to prevent that.'

Jack burst into a delighted giggle, through which John heard, 'You wouldn't do any such thing, and you mustn't talk that way before Jack.' It was Alice who spoke, with a little catch in her voice that sometimes came, half way between a laugh and a sob; and it was echoed by the two aunts.

'Railroads!' growled John, with supreme contempt. 'It would have been a great deal better if railroads had never been invented. Jack, we shall have to get a prairie schooner, and trek to the West.'

Jack's eyes shone like stars, but he got no chance to say anything, for, with that outburst, the springs of speech were loosened. There was the clamor, the chorus clamor, of relatives, indignant, inquisitive, sympathetic relatives, all eager to help, and all uneasily conscious that their own small measure of prosperity would hardly stand the strain. He shook his head sadly in answer to the inquiry as to whether he could not borrow: he had no security. Aunt Mary did not fail to remind him that she had warned him at the time; Aunt Janet, in a thin but affectionate voice, admitted that she had suffered in the same way heavily. And then the clock ticked through a brief silence.

'Why don't you read your letters?' asked Emily suddenly. She stood, absent-mindedly arranging the flowers with one finger, busy already with plans for the future.

There was a small pile of letters on the centre table, quite within John's reach; he began tearing open the envelopes in mechanical fashion, throwing them untidily upon the floor. As each one fell, Jack slid down and picked it up, climbing back to his father's knee. One was a wedding announcement; one was a plumber's bill; at the third, John paused, read, looked up bewildered, and read again.

'Why, Emily!' he exploded, boyishly. 'This can't be. Read that, will you, and tell me if I have lost my mind.'

Emily put down the roses, and read the letter slowly, wonderingly, smiling even as her brother had smiled.

'Not Uncle John! And we were always so afraid of him!'

'Twenty thousand dollars!' murmured John.

Open-mouthed silence waited upon them, until Cousin Austin broke the spell with—

'I say, would you mind if I looked over your shoulder?'

And John flung him the letter with a little whoop of joy.

'Is this plain living, or is this a fairy story?' he demanded quizzically. 'I never thought of myself as a dark-eyed hero with a fortune dropping into my hands just in the nick of time! A title ought to go with it.'

The vibrant energy of the man was back again; the dry humor which, in sunny seasons, quivered about his mouth, was once more there; the mocking incredulity of his words belied the growing look of peace and security in his face. The years seemed slipping from him, bringing him a mellow boyhood.

'Twenty thousand dollars isn't exactly a fortune, John.'

'It will buy the place twice over,' exulted the man, 'and we shan't have to start for the West in a prairie schooner right away!'

'Shan't we, papa?' asked little Jack, in hungry disappointment.

But the child's shrill voice had little chance where everybody was speaking at once. Aunt Mary's 'Well, I hope you hang on to this, and not be foolish again,' and Cousin Austin's 'You deserve it, John,' and Uncle Howard's 'Well, I am glad. Shake!' and several other congratulatory remarks all came at once.

'The poor old fellow; the poor old fellow,' said John to himself softly, rubbing his hands. 'I suppose he died out in Oklahoma all alone. How he happened to will this to me, I give up; he didn't like me very well.'

The very atmosphere of the room had changed; once more a feeling of quiet pleasure pervaded it. The full sense of home, peace, security came back, with a suggestion of a kettle singing on the hearth, though there was no kettle nearer than the kitchen.

'But there's Frank—' It must have been Alice who suggested this, and a something disturbing, questioning, crept into the air.

'Frank!' said John Wareham suddenly. 'Why, I'd forgotten all about Frank! We haven't heard of him for more than fifteen years or so, have we?'

'More than that,' answered Emily. 'He was in Mexico, the last we knew.'

'He may be living,' suggested John. 'Mexico is always in such a state—I suppose the mails can't be trusted.'

'We ought to find out,' said Alice.

'Uncle John had cast him off,' suggested Emily tentatively, anxiously.

'But he was Uncle John's own son,' said Alice, earnestly, compellingly; 'and wasn't Uncle John in the wrong?'

'Uncle John was a queer customer,' said John hastily. 'He was cranky, no doubt about it, but he wasn't crazy; and if this lawyer's statement is correct, I've got a good legal right to the twenty thousand, haven't I?'

'Of course you have!' said Aunt Mary.

'But the moral right?' whispered Alice.

'What was the quarrel about, anyway?' asked Austin. 'Frank's marriage, wasn't it? I never heard much about it.'

'That was part of it,' said Aunt Janet. 'Frank, you know, fell in love with a little country girl whom his father did not want him to marry, but he insisted on having his way, and married her.'

'Good for him,' nodded Austin approvingly.

Little Jack, glancing from one to another with wide blue eyes, was silently weaving his philosophy of life, and his interpretation of humanity.

'Religion was mixed up in it in some way,' contributed John. 'Uncle grew to be something of a fanatic, and he wanted them both to believe what he believed, and they wouldn't, or didn't, or couldn't. It was incompatibility of temper all round, I dare say.'

'Frank was a good son,' reminded Alice. 'He was patient with his father, and he all but gave up his life for Uncle John, nursing him through diphtheria.'

More and more the sweet, persistent voice brought trouble and question into the atmosphere from which trouble and question had so suddenly cleared. The new security began to seem unstable; the new-found joy a stolen thing. Even in the pauses, the personality of the woman spoke from curtain and cushion and fireplace of this room of her devising. She dominated the whole, seeming the only presence there; brother and sister and guests shrank in the radiance of her.

'Do you really think I ought to hunt Frank up?' asked the man.

Emily shook her head, but doubtfully.

'You probably couldn't find him, after all these years.'

'I could try,' admitted John.

'Nonsense!' cried Aunt Mary, over her embroidery. 'You stay right where you are, and pay off your mortgage. A man who has worked as hard as you have, and has had as much trouble, ought to take a bit of good luck when it comes.'

'Think how much good you could do with it,' murmured Aunt Janet.

'As the pickpocket said when he put the stolen dime in the collection plate,' said Austin; but fortunately Aunt Janet did not understand.

'Uncle had a right to do what he pleased with his own,' said John defiantly. 'If he chose to cast off his son, for reasons which he considered sufficient, he had the right.'

'But you cannot cast off your son,' persisted Alice. 'John, we have a boy of our own. You know that the obligation is one of all eternity; you cannot get rid of fatherhood.'

'O papa, papa, you hurt me,' squealed little John, suddenly interrupted in his philosophy-weaving.

'Confound it all!' cried John with sudden irritation. 'Isn't this just like life! To hold out the rope, just to grab it away again with a grin—I won't, I say. What is mine is mine.'

'But it isn't yours.'

'Did Frank have any children?' he asked.

'Several, I believe,' admitted Emily reluctantly.

'And he never got on?'

'He never got on.'

'And the twenty thousand might save their pesky little Mexican souls.'

The child's laughter rippled out across the shocked silence of the elders.

'Maybe Uncle John left them something,' suggested Emily. 'For a man who tried such big things this doesn't seem much money.'

Her brother shook his head.

"The entire sum of which he stands possessed," he read from the lawyer's letter.

'You might make a few inquiries through the post. I rather imagine the Mexican mail service isn't very trustworthy,' suggested Aunt Mary, hopefully.

He looked at her, but in abstracted fashion, as if it were not to Aunt Mary that he was listening.

'I'll write to this Oklahoma lawyer, and then I must go to Mexico.'

'Isn't it a little quixotic?'

'It's most likely all kinds of foolishness, like everything else I do,' groaned the man. 'But it's what I'd want done for my little chap if I were dead and he alive, and I had quarreled with him. I suppose I could keep this money and save my skin, but—'

'You couldn't keep it without finding out,' murmured Alice, 'because you are you, and the real you is incapable of doing a mean thing.'

'You must do as you think best,' said Emily at last. 'Maybe, if you find Frank, he won't want it all, but will divide, knowing that his father willed it to you.'

'That may be as it may be,' said the man, leaning back in his chair with the face of one listening. 'But I go to Mexico. It's a queer game we play here, and I'll be dashed if I can understand it, but I'm going to play it as fairly as I know how.'

So the voice of Alice won, of Alice, who had been dead for five long years.

