



Sorrel's Story

*A story of bitterness, grief, and
forgiveness*

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TO MY BRILLIANT FAMILY

THE VERY BEGINNING

The carriage jolted at every rut, and the woman inside struggled to keep hold of a tiny, red-faced baby.

The baby's eyes were corkscrewed shut, and her tiny mouth was emitting the most piercing and heart-wrenching sound the woman had ever heard.

The woman winced and thumped the baby's back roughly, unsure of what to do. The baby flailed her arms and screamed louder.

"Quiet now," the woman scolded. The carriage lurched, and the woman was knocked violently against its frame. The baby's screams subsided into whimpers. Then she stopped.

Her tiny brown eyes darted every which way. The woman clutched her tighter, afraid to drop the tiny creature. The baby's eyes focused on the middle-aged woman.

A tiny fist reached out for something to grasp. The woman quickly jerked back. The tiny fist closed in thin air. The baby had found nothing to hold on to.

She began to whimper. Her eyes roved the carriage wildly. Her head jerked this way and that. Then she was still.

The woman closed her eyes and sighed, leaning her head back to rest.

The baby closed her eyes, and fell into fitful slumber. The rest of the journey was silent. The woman brooded, the baby slept, and the coachman drove.

The carriage lurched to a stop. The coachman jumped down from the driver's seat in order to assist the woman down.

The woman handed off the bundled baby to the man and stepped down on her own. The man held the baby gently and peered at the tiny pink face.

The baby was sleeping, but she jerked in her sleep. The man's face softened.

"I used to have me a grandbaby like this one," he told the woman. The woman didn't answer. The baby cried out in her sleep.

"What's to happen to this little one?" the man asked tentatively.

"Her parents are dead. Her grandmother is to raise her," she said indifferently.

"Oh," the man whispered. "Really, that's a shame." The woman took the baby back quickly and smoothed the folds of her blanket.

"Now I must go and deliver her to her guardian," she said brusquely.

The man turned slowly and climbed back onto the driver's seat. He watched idly as the woman made her way to the front door. He called out suddenly.

“Pray tell. What is the girl’s name?” His worn face listened intently. The woman turned, exasperated.

“They call her Sorrel,” she called back irritably. Before the man could reply, the woman quickly knocked on the door.

The man watched as a maid in a frilled white cap opened it and admitted them inside. “God help Sorrel,” the man whispered under his breath.

CHAPTER ONE

“You poor, poor girl. You are all alone in this world. You have no one but me to look after you.” An old, wrinkled lady sat on a delicate sofa, crocheting.

“Does that make me poor?” a small, sweet voice asked the lady.

“Oh, yes. You are the most unfortunate little girl in the world,” the grandmother soothed her, “and I feel so very sorry for you.”

The little girl cocked her blond head to one side and studied her grandmother. “But don’t I have you?” she asked finally.

“Oh, but dear, I am not nearly as good as a mother or father. Yes, I feel very sorry for you. Poor, poor dear.” The lady continued to crochet, caught up in her sympathy.

She didn't notice the little face before her thinking intently. She didn't notice the little chin jet up defiantly. She didn't notice a little mind thinking fiercely, "I do not need parents."

The lady and child sat in silence until the maid came to take the child away for her lessons.

The girl looked back at her grandmother, as the maid gently guided her to the door. "You will always take care of me, won't you, Grandmother?" she asked, her childish voice worried. The lady looked up, dropping a stitch.

"Oh, yes, dear," the lady assured her, quickly. The child nodded, her smile returning, and went willingly to the nursery.

She did not see the lady's forehead wrinkle, or her hands shakily stop crocheting. "I have years yet," the lady assured herself.

But she sat there for a long time, knowing this wasn't true. Then she rang her servant's bell. A maid shortly appeared, curtsying crisply.

"Go find Joel and send him to me immediately," the lady ordered, deep in thought. She waited until the coachman appeared in the doorway.

"How may I serve you, madame?" the man asked in his deep voice. He stood tall in the doorway, his hat in his hands.

"I want you to send for my lawyer," the lady told him. "It's high time I made my will." The man studied her, taken aback.

"Are you feeling alright, madam?" he asked, watching her in concern.

"Perfectly. I'm just being practical," she told him.

So he put his hat on his head, went out by the servant's door, and set out.

But the lady was far from alright. She sat there, shaking, until she spilled her tea on the dark skirt she was wearing.

She closed her eyes in an effort to sleep, but opened them a second later. “What is to happen to the girl when I die?” she wondered to herself. “I shall give her money, but who is to care for her?”

She was deeply disturbed, and pondered this restlessly the remaining time of the afternoon.

That evening, the lawyer arrived, with Joel following him in. The lady wasted no time. “I want a will drawn up so my grand-daughter will be taken care of when I die,” she told her lawyer.

The man scratched his head, unused to this side of the lady. “Yes, ma’am,” he said finally, and he sat down heavily, the chair creaking under him.

“I want my grand-daughter to be taken care of until she is married. I think six or seven-hundred dollars a year should pay for the girl to be fed and clothed well. Once she is off

and married, I want her to have five-hundred dollars a year to help support her family.”

The woman leaned back, her eyes closed. She obviously expected this to be a short ordeal.

The man watched her for a moment before taking her pen and ink from the desk. He began writing what the lady had said.

The lady dictated, the man wrote. The little girl in the upstairs nursery knew nothing of what was going on below. That was how the lady wanted it.

Years after the will was finished and locked away, the lady still did not tell her granddaughter of the money she was to inherit upon her death.

In fact, she did not speak of the will at all. Neither did she did she speak of death. She did nothing to prepare the girl for what was inevitable. Nothing at all.

Perhaps this was why the girl did what she did.

CHAPTER TWO

“But she is not dead,” the girl insisted to the maid at the door. The maid stood there, her eyes wide with fear and her lip trembling.

“She cannot be, for she promised me that she would always take care of me. No, she can’t be,” the girl said again.

But already her eyes were brimming, and her face splotched. “No, she is not!” the girl said fiercely. The maid took the girl’s arm.

“Yes, Miss, she is,” the maid said quietly. A tear slipped down the girl’s face.

“She promised me!” the girl sobbed. “She promised!” The girl’s mind was whirling.

“What will happen to me? Who will care for me? Who will care about me? But she is dead. She is dead. She is gone forever and ever.”

The girl moaned and dropped to the floor, as white as a ghost. The maid shrieked and called for someone to bring smelling salts.

Another maid appeared, and, quickly assessing the situation, set about reviving the distraught girl.

The girl came to, but more agitated than before. She lay on the ground, screaming.

“Come back, Grandmother! Don’t leave me here! Take me with you!” She screamed while the minutes ticked by.

Then her eyes darted around the room, and her hand reached out for something to hold and comfort her. She found nothing.

Gradually, her screaming subsided into small, exhausted gasps. She curled herself into a ball. Then she was still.

The girl lay on the floor until dusk, refusing to eat, refusing to go to bed.

Her feverish cheek caressed the matted and tear stained rug on which she sprawled. The light outside the nursery window was gone, and stars had begun to peek out from the indigo sky.

She lay there, whispering to herself. “You are all alone in the world,” she repeated. Words she had heard often.

“All alone,” she said again. A tear streaked down the quivering nose and dripped to the floor.

She shivered, wrapping her arms around herself in the darkness, protecting her haggard body from the world. The world she was all alone in.

Suddenly, the girl sat up. “I will not stay here. There is nothing for me now. No one wants me. No one cares. I shall go away forever and ever. Then they’ll be sorry for

me. Then they'll see that Grandmother shouldn't have died."

It is debatable whether the grieving girl's reasoning was sound. Either way, she allowed herself to be put to bed with such a docile manner that she thoroughly confused the poor maids.

They soon discovered why, when the girl's bed was found empty in the morning.

"Miss Sorrel is missing," one maid hissed into another's ear, somewhat guiltily. "They say she's run away."

"I just hope it doesn't get pinned on us," the other said unfeelingly.

The first maid nodded, "If it does, I shall feel awful. But where do you think a young thing like Sorrel - Miss Sorrel - would run off to? Do you think they'll find her?"

"No one wants to take care of her, it seems. No one appears to be searching very hard. Seems to me they're glad she's gone."

With that, the maid walked off to go about her business. The other, first maid, stood there, feeling remorseful.

“I should’ve kept more watch of the girl. Who knew she would fly away like a fluttering little bird when the madame passed on? I suppose I should’ve. If I were a young girl of fourteen or so, I s’pose I would feel just the same. Poor, poor girl.” And the maid went to find someone else to talk to.

Meanwhile, the girl causing all of the fuss was getting off a streetcar with luggage in hand. Chicago bustled around her, and she sidestepped to avoid a pile of horse droppings.

Her matted blond hair fell around her face and hid her red, hardened eyes. Resolutely, she crossed the busy street.

People yelled for her to get out of the way. Her dress became quite soiled, but she pushed on. She looked up at the towering buildings, searching for sky.

She had to crane her neck to see it. She spotted a carved wooden sign and saw that the store closest to her was a bakery.

She pushed her way through the people to the door and from the door to the counter.

“Do you need a hired girl here?” she asked the man at the counter. The man observed her dirty dress and tangled hair.

“Go home,” the man told her, “We don’t need a girl like you.” The girl’s eyes flashed, and her jaw tightened.

“And what kind of girl am I?” she asked hotly. “Go home,” the man repeated.

The girl turned on her heel and marched out to the street. She scanned the storefronts, marching onward.

The butcher was next. The girl strode inside and looked the butcher in the eye.

The man was wearing a smock covered in blood and looked quite menacing. The girl kept her gaze.

“I’m looking for work. Do you need a hired girl?” she asked him clearly.

“No,” the man growled. The girl left, but not before giving him a look that would’ve curdled milk.

Outside, the girl sat down on her luggage and bit her lip, thinking. Then she slowly combed her hair with her fingers and smoothed her dress.

She opened her carpet bag and pulled out a rumpled hat and hair pins. She put these in, after calming herself with a few deep breaths.

The air was cool for April weather, and the sky was a grayish blue, as if it couldn’t decide between rain or shine.

It was overall a lovely morning, around seven o’clock, but to the blond girl sitting all alone on the curb, it seemed black as night.

The girl stood up slowly and hauled the carpet bag with her. She didn’t know where she was going, but she hoped she could find work somewhere.

An old wooden building sat on the corner of South Avenue, and the girl found herself walking toward it.

Hopeless and lost, she decided to give it a try. She hid her bag behind a bush, smoothed the bun she had just put in, and shook the wrinkles out of her skirt.

She forced herself to look pleasant and respectable, and climbed the creaking steps. Her arm was up to knock on the smooth wooden door, when it flung open, and someone fairly flew out.

The girl turned to see a lanky boy speeding down the sidewalk, his brown hair in his eyes, and his head turned her way.

“Excuse me!” he called apologetically. “I’m late.” With that, he was gone.

The girl smoothed her dress again, her feathers ruffled, and knocked on the door.

She stood there, heart pounding, for what seemed a lifetime.

Finally, a plump, middle aged woman with a ruddy face answered it. The girl cleared her throat.

“Do you run this -”

“Boarding house,” the woman smiled.

“Do you need a hired girl to clean?” the girl asked quickly. She began to turn away, already guessing the answer.

“Well, it depends. I can’t pay more than about seven dollars a week,” the woman said. “But, dear me, this old place could use it. Why? You applying for a job?” The woman laughed delightedly.

“It’s been a long time since we had somebody who wanted to work here,” she chuckled. “Well, if you can clean, you’ve got the job.”

The woman beckoned for the girl to follow her inside.

“Oh, I forgot. I’m Mrs. O’Keily. And what’s your name?”

The girl’s fingers tightened on her skirt.

“Sorrel. Sorrel -” she paused and her eyes rested on the doorknob the woman was holding. “Lock,” she finished.

The woman, Mrs. O'Keily, nodded, and they both went inside.

The front door led into a dark hall, with closet on the left and a wide and worn staircase on the right.

Mrs. O'Keily led to the rambling kitchen, at the back of the building. "This is where I spend my time," she told Sorrel. "It's likely I'll die here," she laughed.

Sorrel winced. Mrs. O'Keily didn't notice. "Now, here's where all the dusters, brooms, and the like are kept," she told Sorrel, showing her yet another dusty closet. "And if you can clean this place up nicely, we'll see what we can do about hiring you. How's that sound?"

"Good, thank you," Sorrel managed. So she set to work. She had never in her life held a duster, except to play with.

Sweeping was a foreign concept. But she needed the money. So she wiped down everything in sight, and

awkwardly swept up the dirt, leaves, and crumbs that managed to wedge themselves in every corner.

When she was finished, it was far past lunch, and she was intensely hungry. Mrs. O'Keily came to look over her work.

“Have you had a job like this before?” she asked, a twinkle in her eyes.

“No, but I learn quickly,” Sorrel said determinedly.

Mrs. O'Keily didn't say anything more about it except, “I'll teach you a few things, and the job's yours.” Sorrel smiled for the first time that day.

“Thank you. I'll do well. Just wait and see,” she promised. And so began her life at the little old boarding house on South Avenue.

CHAPTER THREE

Sorrel followed Mrs. O'Keily up the creaking steps to the second floor and shadowed her until they reached the door numbered five.

Mrs. O'Keily pulled out a key and unlocked the door. Handing the brass object to Sorrel, she said, "Here is your room, and here is your key. I hope you will be happy here."

With that, the lady whisked off to some other task. Sorrel slipped the key in her dress pocket and gently turned the doorknob.

If this were a fairy tale, she would have found a lovely, homey little room, snug and cozy. If she were the imagining type, she may have found even this to be a comfortable place to be.

Having neither, she let out a small cry of dismay at what she saw. The cramped room was dark and stuffy, with a

faded quilt spread over a large bumpy bed in the corner, and an empty fireplace.

A chair sat wedged in the corner, and a slightly chipped pitcher and basin made their appearance near the door.

“It’s the smallest room I’ve ever seen,” Sorrel lamented. And she sat down, a bitter expression on her face.

The girl’s dotting grandmother had all but spoiled the young thing, but Sorrel didn’t know it.

She fancied herself to be a wonderful young lady in unbearable circumstances, and the world around her to be spiteful and cold.

She sat for quite a while, pitying herself in this strange place, before realizing the time. Shutting the door, she hurried to the window and opened the heavy drapes. Light poured in, illuminating the dusty air.

She coughed and hastily threw open a window, hurrying to wash her tear-stained face in the basin.

It was almost five o'clock, when all the boarders would come down for supper.

Sorrel was expected to meet each and every one.

There was no mirror, but Sorrel knew she needed to change her dirty appearance, and looked around for a tool.

She then remembered her luggage, hidden in a bush, and quietly opened the door. She heard voices, and shut it abruptly.

Eyes darting, she looked for some way to get her carpet bag. The open window allowed a breeze to flutter past her, and she ran to it and stuck her head out.

A brick building was about three yards away, and below that, dry grass and dirt peeped up her. She considered it.

She was on the second floor, but a good climber. She heard people in the hall, and knew it was very close to supper time.

She threw her leg over the sill, and judged that she could do very well. She swung her body out of the window, and hastily found herself in a predicament.

She could no longer get back inside, and found that she was hanging there, a good ways above the ground.

She struggled for something to hold, and found that she was losing grip. Panic seized her, and embarrassment.

She hoped Mrs. O'Keily would not come out and see her this way. But she also hoped that she would not fall and crack her head.

While she was pondering these things, she heard a boyish whistle, and craned her neck to see a lanky youth striding up the front walk. He caught sight of her, and his eyes opened wide.

“Need help?” he called, running toward her. Her face colored. Not a boy! Here she was, almost fifteen years old, hanging from a window sill because she was scared of meeting people in the hall.

Not only that, but the only one to witness her predicament and help her was a boy.

She bit her lip as she felt her hands slipping. “Yes,” she said shortly. “I do. It’s farther down than I calculated.”

With that, he laughed and said, “Sorry, but you’ll have to jump. I’ll catch you.”

Sorrel sighed inwardly, but felt her grasp loosen. All at once, she was sitting on the ground, where the boy had put her once he caught her.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “Good way to meet. S’pose I should ask you why you were hanging from a window on the second floor?”

Sorrel didn’t answer. He laughed. “Oh, if that’s how it has to be. Well, nice meeting you.”

And with that, he walked away. Sorrel sat in the grass a minute, mortified, until she realized that she was late for supper.

She sprung up and darted toward the bushes to find her carpet bag. But when she had given every bush a thorough search, she couldn't find even a trace of it.

After a few angry words, the girl tramped up to the porch, and slipped inside. Everyone was at the long dining table in the kitchen.

Everyone looked up at the dirty "girl with the sad brown eyes," as they called her from then on.

Sorrel stood there, her face red, her stockings ripped, as she was introduced by Mrs. O'Keily to each of them.

Sorrel winced as she saw the boy sitting there placidly by his mother. So. He lived here.

Inwardly, Sorrel groaned. Surely her folly would be the gossip of the boarding house by tomorrow. She sat down, firing a daring look at the boy, as if to say, "Don't dare tell what happened."

He just smiled, a twinkle in his eye, as he subtly nodded his head.

Sorrel ate little that night, as she felt that she was being watched. And she was. But she thought everyone was gossiping about her.

What were they truly thinking? Well, Mrs. O'Keily was thinking what a good little cleaner she would make, and how strange it was that she did not talk of her family. Out loud she said, "Sorrel, you haven't met Mrs. Wakefield yet. She eats in her room."

Hank Campson, a tall, well-built man, was thinking about Miss March.

Miss March, a quiet mill-girl, was thinking how pretty Sorrel's eyes were, and wishing she had pretty eyes so Hank might notice her.

The boy, Willie Oliver, was thinking of the funny escapade that afternoon, and how strange it was for a girl to hang out of a window and not be afraid.

Margaret Oliver had also noticed Sorrel's deep brown eyes, but she had a faraway look in her eyes, and was dreaming of a man she had loved.

He used to have the same deep brown eyes, and had died only two years before, leaving her widowed, and with a boy to raise.

Sorrel was thinking of her grandmother, and her parents, and her misfortune. She was feeling alone, and depressed, and angry at Willie, who suppressed a smile every time their eyes met.

“Why did that aggravating boy have to come along?” she thought miserably. “Why did he have to see me hanging from a window?”

Sorrel envisioned how she had appeared to Willie, hanging limply from the window sill, high off the ground, feet dangling. She wanted to laugh. In fact, she began to.

Then she remembered that she was alone, penniless, and that her loved ones were dead.

The next time she caught Willie's eye, she scowled. He cocked his head, confused, but said nothing.

Shrugging his shoulders, he joined in the conversation at the other end of the table, leaving Sorrel to eat in seclusion.

That is what she wanted. At least, she thought she did. But she felt ignored and abandoned as soon as Willie turned his head.

She pushed her plate away and ran out of the room. All conversation stopped as the boarders peered after her. But she didn't hear the silence.

She was already bolting her door and stomping to the window, shutting it with a bang.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mrs. O'Keily knelt on the smooth plank floor, where she was painfully bent to retrieve a fallen potato.

Hearing footsteps, she looked up. Sorrel stood there in the morning light, an earnest look on her face.

“I brought a carpet bag when I came, but someone stole it. I haven't anything to wear except this,” she began, fingering her wrinkled skirt.

Mrs. O'Keily studied her a moment before saying, “I believe you, Sorrel.”

The girl looked relieved. Mrs. O'Keily continued. “I suppose you will have to go home to retrieve more. I can spare you for a few days.”

Sorrel's jaw tightened, and she shook her head. “I haven't a family. They're all dead.” Mrs. O'Keily's face softened.

“I will pay you early so you can buy the things you need.”

She stood up slowly, and looked Sorrel squarely in the eyes.

Clearly and simply she finished, “I am taking a risk in paying you early because I trust you, Sorrel Lock. Please do not disappoint me.”

She waddled away to her room, leaving a glowing Sorrel. She had never been trusted before. Always before, she had had maids and governesses chasing after her, not willing to believe she was responsible.

Mrs. O’Keily returned with a few dollar bills in her hand. “Here,” she told Sorrel. “Seven dollars. I’ll pay you the fifty cents at the end of the week.”

Sorrel thanked her and hurried out of the room. Mrs. O’Keily stood watching her.

“She’ll come back,” she whispered. “She wouldn’t take the money and run.”

That night at supper, Sorrel appeared right on time. Her hair was brushed smooth and pulled into a knot at the nape of her neck.

She was wearing a brand new mossy green smock and her dusty shoes had been wiped off.

The boarders tried not to stare, but their curiosity was piqued. Where did the raggedy girl from yesterday go off to?

Sorrel gave a discouraging glare to anyone who stared too long, and sat down prettily.

Willie coughed, trying to disguise a laugh at her strange manners, and Mrs. O'Keily nodded approvingly.

“You look nice, Sorrel,” she stated. A few of the boarders agreed politely. Sorrel was quite flushed with triumph - she had never taken pains to look nice before, and now she felt quite pretty.

She smiled as she ate, almost forgetting that her parents were dead, her grandmother gone, and her belongings stolen. Almost, but not quite.

After dinner was over, she was back to her morose old self.

Willie caught up with her after dinner. “I saw you looking in the bushes last evening. What were you looking for?” he asked, a teasing smile on his face.

“A place to hide from you,” she retorted as she continued to walk. He followed her.

“You’re quick. It’s a time in itself keeping up with you.” Sorrel turned to stare at him. “Well I’m glad I provide such ample entertainment for you,” she said, her voice spiteful.

Willie turned to study her face, his head cocked as if to get a more explaining angle. She stopped walking and turned to face him, her face flushed.

“Do you always pry into stranger’s business?” she demanded. He took a step back, his smile gone.

Then he forced a smile back onto his face, though he didn’t find it funny. “No, I suppose I’m just like that,” he said, his voice low. “I want to know about other people’s lives, ever since Dad died. It makes me feel less lonely, somehow. But I’ll stop. Please forgive the intrusion.”

He made a quick nod in her direction before hurrying off, a tense whistle on his lips. Sorrel watched him go.

“I always scare everyone off,” she said, a menacing look someone might call repentance on her face. “At least now I can have some peace,” she added, but she sounded unconvinced, and looked regretfully back at the direction Willie had left.

She bit her lip, her jaw tense, as she mounted the large wooden stairs. “Why does everyone have to be sensitive?” she muttered.

Willie had walked back to the kitchen, but when he was sure Sorrel was gone, he returned to his mother's apartment.

He took the worn stairs two by two with his long stride, and quickly ducked inside room number three.

His mother was staring into a small fire, looking into the distance. Willie walked quietly to her and bent down to kiss her cheek.

She looked up, but didn't say anything. She reached out to him. Stroking his hair, she whispered, "It's been such a long time. Why does the pain still hurt?"

He didn't answer, but smiled a sad smile. His mother saw it, as a tear formed in the corner of her eye.

She looked at his deep brown eyes, and his dark, wavy hair, now blackened by flickering shadows.

She studied his strong jaw and thick eyebrows, and watched the firelight dance on his face.

“You look just like your father,” she whispered. Willie smiled halfheartedly.

“Do you want to remember him, Mother? Or would it be better to forget?” he asked, his eyes searching hers.

Her eyes softened, and she answered quietly, “I will remember him always, whether I want to or not.” Willie nodded and put his arms around his mother.

“Then let’s want to,” he replied. A silence hung in the air, but not a tense one. For grief, when shared, becomes a bittersweet thing.

It brings people closer together, though the pain is harrowing, and the grief unwanted.

His tired mother let a few tears fall silently, hidden from view. Willie held her in his arms, hiding his pain manfully. The two sat in darkness for a long time, remembering.

In a dark room down the hall, a bitter girl was remembering, too. She was remembering her grandmother, and the parents she never knew. She was thinking with

hatred of every person she knew who had someone to love.

She meditated on the impudence of Willie, laughing and teasing while her family was dead.

She tried to hate him. She tried to think of everything he had done against her. But as she did so, Willie's words flashed through her mind, "Ever since Dad died..." and she shuddered.

The room was drafty and cold, but the girl's heart was much colder. Huddled in a quilt, she clenched her jaw and muttered, "I don't need anyone. I'll show them. I can do everything on my own."

Oh, the heartache this poor girl felt. But she refused to be comforted. She insisted on doing things alone. She insisted upon being miserable.

CHAPTER FIVE

In this chapter, the reader would hope that something pleasant happens to Sorrel, and that her misery and grief are forgotten, at least for the moment.

As the author, I am left with the sad duty of informing you that an angry girl who refuses to see any good in the world does not allow anything pleasant to happen to her.

The reader may argue, “What about Mrs. O’Keily, who feeds and rooms her even though Sorrel doesn’t know how to clean? What about Willie, who tries to understand and befriend her, even though she’s heartless and proud? Aren’t these things pleasant? Don’t they count?”

Indeed they do count, and they are the very things that should be pleasant to Sorrel. And the reader might wonder, “Then why did you say that Sorrel will have nothing pleasant happen to her?”

And I will remind them that I did not say that nothing pleasant will happen to Sorrel. Rather, I stated the fact that she does not allow something to be pleasant.

Pleasant things *do* happen to people, but it is up to them whether or not they will see the good in it.

The reader may ask, “Will Sorrel ever stop being angry and hurt?” And I would suggest that we continue the story.

For as an author, I am not allowed to disperse this information, known as a “spoiler alert.” I am merely here to tell the story, and let you glean the true meaning from it.

Sorrel woke up as light from the dusty window filtered in to illuminate the empty fireplace and faded chair.

Idly, she fingered the old quilt, tracing hand-stitched patches and worn fabric. She was startled by a loud knock on the door.

Mrs. O’Keily opened the door slowly, and peeked her head in. “Sorrel? Are you alright? You’ve been sleepin’

for quite a while. I could use your help as soon as you get dressed.”

Sorrel nodded her assent as Mrs. O’Keily closed the door hurriedly. She stretched and dragged herself out of bed.

She tossed her nightgown onto the old chair in the corner, not bothering to fold it. Pulling her green smock over her tousled head, she combed her knotted hair and splashed water on her sleep lined face.

Opening the window, she let Chicago in, as the clapping of hooves and the calls of passers-by filled the little room.

She shook loose of sleep’s hold enough to exit her room, and even remembered to lock her door. “Sorrel Lock,” she reminded herself.

She had almost slipped up twice when using the fake last name. Turning, she met Mrs. Oliver coming down the hall, a basket in her arms.

Mrs. Oliver sewed to bring in extra money. She smiled at Sorrel, almost dropping a lovely light blue dress from the

top of the pile. Sorrel didn't smile back, but at least acknowledged Mrs. Oliver with a nod.

She bolted down the stairs in front of her, banging her shin on the banister in the process.

Wincing, she limped to the kitchen, where Mrs. O'Keily stood waiting.

"Breakfast is in ten minutes. Stir the oatmeal while I make eggs, dear," she ordered, not unkindly.

Between stirring, Sorrel set the table with silver and linen napkins. She put a pitcher of water on the table and glass cups at every place.

Boarders began to flock in. First, Hank Campson in work clothes. A button up shirt and a pair of rather soiled pants completed his wardrobe.

He sat down, but stood as soon as Miss March entered the room. Though she only worked in a thread factory, she was as fresh as a daisy in a crisp flowered dress.

Hank cleared his throat and said a gruff, "Good morning."

Mrs. O'Keily smiled knowingly, and Sorrel looked from face to face.

Willie strode in next, his hair combed and his movements rushed. He smiled at Mrs. O'Keily, gave a voluntary grin to Sorrel, and sat down to shovel food into his mouth.

Five minutes later, he pushed back his chair and nodded a goodbye.

He looked to Mrs. O'Keily, but she only said, "I'll send lunch over." He nodded and strode out of the room.

"Where's he going?" Sorrel asked curiously.

"He works at the steel factory," Mrs. O'Keily answered her.

The rest of the boarders slowly left, and the two worked in silence for some time before Sorrel asked suddenly, "When did his father die?"

Mrs. O'Keily turned to study her, surprised at the question. "Four years ago," she said, her voice soft. "I

believe he was your age when it happened. Now he's almost eighteen. A hard worker, too."

Sorrel found herself asking, "How did he die?" Mrs. O'Keily turned back to cleaning up breakfast.

"A factory accident," she answered.

Sorrel shivered, and shakily brought more dirty plates to Mrs. O'Keily. She felt sorry for Willie, even compassionate. But then she asked herself why.

Hadn't she lost all her family? Didn't she have much more to grieve for?

She shook her head to clear it and forced herself to put it out of her thoughts.

Mrs. O'Keily left to check on a boarder, and came back, a worried expression on her kindly face.

"Mrs. Wakefield is ill, Sorrel. I think I'll make some soup. Run down in the cellar and get me a jar of broth. Then I'll send it up with you to her room."

Sorrel paused. She disliked the cellar with every bone in her body. But Mrs. O'Keily was waiting. She hurried outside, down the outside steps, and into the dank cellar, lighting a candle on her way.

In the dampness, she shivered. She snatched up a jar of broth and darted up the stairs, slamming the bulkhead doors on her way.

She deposited the jar in Mrs. O'Keily's waiting hands and plopped down, heart beating. She waited patiently for the soup, then knocked timidly on Mrs. Wakefield's door and advanced into the dark little room.

The old woman in the bed against the wall coughed weakly, then laughed. "I'm a sick old goose," she apologized.

Sorrel set the the soup on a small nightstand and sat down heavily. She hadn't gotten to say goodbye to her grandmother. Is this how she went? Ill and bedridden?

Suddenly, Sorrel felt unwell, too. Her head throbbed, and she shook violently. Why was the world so cruel?

A tear slipped down her cheek unnoticed in the darkness. The woman sat up slowly, and dribbled down the broth feebly.

But she talked as she did so, kind and sweet. “Haven’t seen you before, dear.” Sorrel shook her head and wiped away the tell-tale tear.

“I live here now.” The woman coughed again, and soup spilled onto the bed cover.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you.” Sorrel tried to smile.

It wasn’t nice to meet Mrs. Wakefield. Not like this. But she said, “You, too.”

She took the soup from the lady and brought it back to Mrs. O’Keily, with as tender a farewell as she had said since coming.

In other words, she simply said, “Goodbye.” For the first time, she felt concern for someone besides herself. But she

soon was back to her old self, as she sat in her own dark room, anger welling up inside her.

It wasn't fair that people died! The world was cruel. Cruel and unfair.

Sorrel finished her crying and hurried back to Mrs. O'Keily, who no doubt needed help with lunch.

Instead, Mrs. O'Keily handed Sorrel a bag, with rolls and boiled eggs packed into it.

"This is for Will, at the factory." She handed it to Sorrel with a gleam well hidden in her eyes. "The steel factory is down the street and to the left," she reminded her. Sorrel looked at her, confused.

"Is that why he doesn't come for lunch?" Mrs. O'Keily nodded her head.

"I thought today you could bring it to him today," she replied.

With one last questioning glance, Sorrel took the bag and left for the factory, following the directions as if her life depended on it.

She didn't see the merry look on Mrs. O'Keily's face when she left, or hear her say, "Maybe I'm cut out for match-makin'. I enjoy it plenty enough."

All she heard was the clatter of carriages, dinging of the horse-drawn trolley, and the chatter of people on the sidewalks.

All she saw was the destination. A big, brick building with a black iron fence around it.

She sat in the dirt to wait. After about ten minutes of idly watching the coaches pass, she heard a distant ringing, and turned to watch adults and children alike file out of the building, to take their lunch break.

After a while, she spotted Willie, his face flushed from heat, his hair slightly damp.

She yelled over to him through the fence, causing quite a few people to stare.

Aware that she was being watched, she blushed and stepped back. But Willie recognized her and came toward her rapidly.

“You brought my lunch?” he asked hopefully. Sorrel handed it through the fence.

He plopped onto the dusty grass, opened the bag, and began to eat as if the world would end.

She studied him while he did so, and if he was self-conscious, he didn't show it. Sorrel sat in the grass outside the fence, lost in thought.

So this was the boy whose father had died. You wouldn't think it to look at him. He seemed to be in good spirits, and friendly.

How was it that he could go on living, when God had taken his father? Why wasn't he angry?

Sorrel became agitated, watching him eat with such a carefree air.

“Don’t you care?” she burst out. “How can you be so happy when your father is dead?” she stopped, realizing the fullness of what she had just said.

Willie’s jaw tightened, and he studied her with such a serious gaze that Sorrel squirmed.

“Of course I care,” he said evenly. “But I have to go on living. I’ve got Mom to take care of.” Sorrel’s eyes flashed.

“At least you’ve got somebody,” she shot back. Willie eyes were confused, but evidently Sorrel was angry.

His eyes flashed back, though he was struggling desperately to keep his temper in check.

“What did I do to earn your anger? Ever since I met you, you’ve acted as though I’ve wronged you. Like you hated me. What did I do?” he repeated, his face tense, his eyes sharp.

Sorrel was taken aback, but only for a minute.

“You cruel boy! You have a mother, and until four years ago, a father. Mine have been dead forever, and my only relative, my grandmother, is dead now, too. And no one cares. No one at all. The world is an awful place. Yet you go around laughing and mocking me.” These last words caused him to flush.

“When have I ever mocked you? I’ve been as kind as I knew how, even though you offended me and hurt my pride.” But his eyes clouded with something, and if Sorrel had known that it was compassion, she might have softened.

“I’m sorry that your parents are dead,” he told her, his voice beginning to level out.

“You should be. Everything has been taken from me.” At this, he started up again.

“That’s not true! You have Mrs. O’Keily, who pays you even though she’s days away from the poor house. But you’re too caught up in self-pity to notice!”

Sorrel stood up, practically shouting. “If this had happened to you, you might understand! But unfeeling as you are, you have no idea!”

With that, she shot him a venomous look and fled down the street, aiming for the boardinghouse.

Willie stared after her, his brown eyes flashing with anger. That girl needed help. But she wouldn’t let anyone help her.

He sat down again with a thump. Then he shrugged, sighed, and got up again to pace.

What could he do? What in the world could he do? Finally, he sat back down.

“God, help her. Help her somehow.” And he finished his lunch as the bell began to ring.

CHAPTER SIX

Sorrel felt her way blindly through the street, tears streaming down her face and a look of pure hatred written in every line on her face.

People got out of her way and she continued on, toward wherever she had come from.

Her face was pale and blotchy. Her slender body stumbled as she seethed with anger.

She had to live this way. What other choice did she have? She was alone. Didn't that mean she had to be miserable?

Willie didn't seem miserable. Why couldn't she be more like him? Why did he have to be so happy?

These thoughts pulsed through Sorrel's mind as she threw herself onto her bed back at the boardinghouse.

She drifted off to sleep in her troubled state only to find troubled dreams. She awoke with a start from a terrifying nightmare.

She was all alone in the world, she told herself. But then she stopped. Was she? Was she alone? She began to doubt it.

She did have Mrs. O'Keily, didn't she? Suddenly, she was embarrassed.

Humiliated. Willie and the boarders had all been kind, hadn't they? And she had treated them as enemies.

Worse than that, she had thought they *were* her enemies. But they weren't. They were her friends.

Even though she hated them and gave them rude answers and nasty looks. They were her friends.

She felt ashamed. Utterly ashamed. She never again wanted to see the faces of those who had tried to befriend her.

She felt as if she were the worst person in the world. She felt such remorse, that her heart seemed ready to burst with agony.

Never again would they love her. She had treated them like dirt, and now they would treat her that way.

She was sorry. Sorrier than she had ever been in her entire life. She had wasted her whole life grieving.

Not for her dead parents. Not even for her grandmother. She had spent her whole life grieving for herself.

Feeling pity for herself. Being a victim. She had wasted fourteen years in misery.

She sat down now, stricken with despair. What could she do? Who would love such an awful girl?

She was filled with longing. Longing to be far, far away from this place. This place that proved her selfishness.

Once more, she swung herself over the windowsill. This time, she found herself wishing fervently that Willie might

come to catch her. That she could start over. That she could start fresh.

But Willie didn't appear, though she strained her eyes for him and hoped against hope.

Despondent, she dropped to the ground. She sat there for a minute in pain, but quickly recovered and picked herself up.

Hurrying behind the old building, she slipped into the shadows. Into the shadows and away.

Her heart beating and her eyes as dry as the dusty road, she traveled. Deep into the night, when stars began peeking from the indigo clouds.

All the while she murmured. Murmured a dusty prayer.

“I'm sorry. So sorry. I can't take words back. Sorry.

Maybe someday they'll... forgive me. Help me, God. I'm sorry.”

Her smock was ashen with dust, and her face was drawn and pale. In the lonely night, a wagon rattled by.

The girl kept walking. The man driving the wagon stopped. The moonlight shone on his silvery hair.

“Do you need a ride somewhere, young lady?” he called. She stopped, looking wistfully down the road.

“Yes,” she said softly.

“Where to?” the old man asked her.

“Where is far away from here?” she asked. The man laughed, but then saw that she was serious. He sobered, but the curious twinkle was still in his gray eyes.

“Many places are far away. My farm is down the road a ways. Why don’t I bring you to my wife, and you can talk it out woman to woman?”

Sorrel sighed a lost sigh and nodded. “Yes, please,” she replied. She clambered up onto the seat next to him.

“What’s your name, young lady?” the friendly man asked her.

“Sorrel,” the girl told him absently, brushing off her dress. The old man was taken aback.

“Sorrel,” he repeated. He shook his head as if to clear it.

“Funny thing. I drove a baby named Sorrel, a long, long time ago. Not a very common name. That’s why I remember it.”

Sorrel looked at him openly. He tried not to pry, but asked her, “You’re about how old?”

Sorrel decided to trust him. “Fourteen,” she replied. The man cocked his head and scratched at his silvery beard.

“Hmm,” was all he said.

He pulled up into the yard of a friendly looking home, and the candle in the window testified to his statement of a wife.

She bustled to the door and took in Sorrel at once. “You brought me a companion,” she teased. To Sorrel she said,

“Hello, dear. Come on in. I’m Mrs. Hansom. I’ll fix some tea.”

Sorrel allowed herself to be seated, and watched the woman bustle about the cluttered kitchen.

She watched the man pull off his shoes and shuffle into some house slippers.

The woman was stacking calendars and moving houseplants to make room for the tea.

The home was just the right kind of cluttered - the cozy, relaxed sort. She liked this old couple. She could feel it in her bones.

The woman poured the boiling water over tea leaves and looked up, the steam wafting through the air.

“Now, dear. What’s your name, where are you coming from, and where are you going?” the woman asked, a great deal of sparkle in her old eyes and spring in her old step.

She plunked the tea cup on the table in front of Sorrel, and sat down, hands folded. “I’m Sorrel Fuller,” Sorrel said at

once, using her true last name. “I came from a boarding-house, where I worked as a cleaning girl. I don’t know where I’m going.”

Sorrel took a sip of the steaming tea and found that she rather liked it.

The woman, Mrs. Hansom, said, “Well, dear. What had you coming away so quick?”

Her expert eyes took in the humble appearance of the girl, and ascertained the situation as well as any mother could.

“I was irascible to the people there, and now I am ashamed to stay there.”

This came out with more frankness than Sorrel had ever used. It felt good. Clean and simple, somehow. The woman nodded.

“And what about the boarders? Won’t they miss their friend?” Sorrel shook her head.

“I wasn’t a friend. At least, I don’t deserve to be called that.”

The woman looked around the cluttered kitchen, with the red-checked curtains and the disarray of furniture.

“Well, I’m glad you happened by, dear. I do apologize about the clutter. I just can’t keep on top of things. I could certainly use an extra pair of hands. This rambling place keeps me on my toes.”

Sorrel sat taller, seeing what the woman was aiming at.

“And I certainly could use someone to clean up after Mr. Hansom and myself,” the kind lady continued.

“Do you mean to say that you would like to hire a cleaning girl?” Sorrel asked, hopeful.

“Precisely, dear. Now, would you like the job? I could only pay you a couple of dollars a week,” with this, she looked over at her husband, who nodded, “But there would be food and board included in the offer.”

“And,” the old man offered, “This place is far away.” The twinkle in his eye was merrier than any Sorrel had seen, and she smiled in spite of herself.

“Thank you. Thank you so very much,” she said, standing up to give a grateful little curtsy.

She put her teacup in the sink, and turned to the woman.

“When may I start?” she asked earnestly.

Perhaps she saw it as a way to start over. Or a way to begin a new life. Or maybe she was just drawn to the sweet old couple who seemed to have so much life still in them.

“Oh, right now would be nice,” the woman said. And she showed Sorrel to the guest room.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sorrel woke up in the morning, not quite sure where she was. Then she remembered the night before and the Hansoms.

The soft bed sheets felt luxurious to her bare feet, and she sat up and stretched lazily.

Soft light filtered through the windows, and the filmy curtains blew in a light breeze.

A bumble bee buzzed into the room, sending Sorrel to her feet.

She watched as the bee buzzed around until he found the window again and took leave.

She heard creaking outside her door, and knew that Mrs. Hansom must be coming up the wooden steps.

Hurriedly, she pulled off the nightgown Mrs. Hansom had given her to wear and dressed.

She hadn't brought a single thing with her, but she felt no regret. She had run away to start over. She could purchase new things.

Mrs. Hansom knocked softly and waited for Sorrel to reply. Sorrel opened the door.

“Good morning, Sorrel. How would you like it if I showed you around?” Mrs. Hansom asked, her friendly eyes crinkling at the edges.

Sorrel nodded, and she followed Mrs. Hansom down the creaking steps.

Funny how similar the steps were to the stairs at the boarding house, Sorrel thought. She suddenly felt a twinge of hope that the boarder's might miss her just a tiny bit.

She imagined them looking for her and hoping she'd come back. Then she shook her head. She had been imagining.

That in itself was a miracle. But she knew that the way she had acted warranted no remorse on the boarder's side when they found her gone.

But she still wished they might feel the tiniest bit sad.

She resolved to treat everyone with the utmost respect.

Unfortunately, old habits die hard, and she still had a lot to learn.

Oh, with the Hansoms she was alright. They reminded her of her grandmother, and she had always had a fearful sort of respect for her grandmother.

But for some reason, she wasn't the least bit afraid of the Hansoms, though she had just met them and they were strangers to her.

For some reason, her lonely heart wanted to trust them badly. She needed something to hold on to. Something to grasp.

Sorrel shook her head to clear her musings. Mrs. Hansom was leading her outside, to the garden.

“Now, dear, unless you have something against gardening, I could certainly make that part of your job.”

The dirt patch where potatoes were said to grow was infested with springy plants that were obviously unwanted. Sorrel nodded.

“Alright,” she said, though her voice gave a hint of wariness.

“I’ll teach you, and you’ll learn to like it,” Mrs. Hansom promised.

Next, Sorrel was brought to the chicken coop, where she would be asked to gather eggs, scatter feed for the chickens, and fill their water trough.

Mrs. Hansom showed Sorrel to the barn, where she was introduced to three cows.

“Mr. Hansom milks them, dear. Don’t worry,” was the answer to the overwhelmed look on Sorrel’s face.

There were also two horses that were “Mr. Hansom’s.”

“He used to be a coachman for whoever needed to go somewhere. You know, not for one particular family. But he’s taken to farming now.”

Mrs. Hansom laughed. Sorrel eyed the barn for more animals, but there were no more. She sighed with relief.

Mrs. Hansom took it that she was hungry. “Dear me! I got a little over eager. I didn’t even give you breakfast.”

With that, Mrs. Hansom whisked Sorrel into the house to get a bowl of oatmeal. Sorrel didn’t complain, but ate it quickly.

The long walk the night before had left her hungry, and she had had no supper.

Suddenly, she regretted leaving without a goodbye. For one thing, Mrs. O’Keily didn’t deserve to be worried, and who would clean for her? For another, it seemed ungrateful to leave without at least a note.

Sorrel hung her head. It was too late now, she lamented. Too late. What awful, awful words.

Sorrel put her bowl in the sink and hurried upstairs to make her bed and comb her hair, meditating on how

horrible she was, and how sad it was that she had wasted her life up till now.

She tried to shake free of such despondent thoughts, but they hung over her all day long. In fact, they hung over her for a long, long time.

Part of Sorrel's growing up would be to come to grips with things she couldn't change: death, bad decisions, and fate.

Part of Sorrel's growing up would be to let go of the things she couldn't change. To move on.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sorrel sat up, her face rigid, her eyes full of fear, and her breath coming in short gasps.

She was tangled in damp sheets, and her tangled hair clung limply to her flushed face. “It was just a dream,” she murmured, but immediately she got up and lit a candle.

She trembled. It had been so real. So *lifelike*.

Mrs. Wakefield had gasped for breath, with Sorrel at her bedside.

“Don’t die!” she had cried. “Please, don’t!” She had sobbed into her hands.

Mrs. Wakefield had taken her last, choking breath. Willie had walked in, but he stood there, watching Sorrel weep.

“Willie!” Sorrel had sobbed. “I’m sorry. So, so sorry.”

She reached out to him, but Willie turned his back on her and left, locking the door behind him.

Sorrel shuddered again at the nightmare. The vivid emotions even found their way into her dreams. But was it a dream? Was Mrs. Wakefield going to get better?

Sorrel dreaded the answer. Of course she would, Sorrel assured herself.

“But what if she doesn’t?”

Sorrel wanted Mrs. Wakefield to live. She wanted it badly.

“God, let her live,” she breathed. “Please.”

She quivered, and turned back to go to bed. But light was already beginning to dawn.

Then she had an idea. The first unselfish idea she had had in a long while.

She blew out her candle, immediately in darkness. She scuttled to smooth her bedsheets and pulled on her wrinkled green dress.

Tying her hair up, she opened the door to her room, ever so softly. It creaked as if it were being wakened from a deep sleep.

She eased it open, and tiptoed into the hall. All was silent.

A thick, calm darkness surrounded her, and she heard nothing from the direction of the Hansom's room.

So she crept down the protesting stairs, and into the dark, cluttered kitchen.

Carefully, so as not to bang the pots and pans, she got out a large pot, and set it on the cooking range.

She began to start a fire, and blew it to life. Quietly, she got out the oats and poured water into the pot.

She was making breakfast, and doing it all by herself.

She stood over the hot stove and stirred until her arm was liable to fall off. Then she put the tiniest bit of brown sugar in the pot, and took a taste.

It wasn't bad at all. In fact, she found it rather appetizing. She smiled in the dawning light, and set the littered table.

Mrs. Hansom came into the room with surprise etched on her lined face. "Now, dear, what have you gone and made breakfast for?" she asked, a smile on her face.

"For you," Sorrel answered, and she hurried out to gather eggs. Mrs. Hansom stared after her, shaking her head in disbelief.

"That girl is a puzzle. A wonderful, perplexing sort of puzzle."

She sat down to eat the breakfast she hadn't needed to cook.

Mr. Hansom came down to find his Mrs. with a smile on her old face.

"Morning, dear. Sorrel fixed us some breakfast."

Now they were both smiling. The girl who had given this blessing was completely oblivious. She was out filling a

basket with warm eggs, and conversing with the chickens,
her head thrown back to enjoy the warm July dawn.

CHAPTER NINE

It was a humid, muggy day, towards the end of August. Sorrel was sitting in the garden, weeding among the potatoes. She paused to slap at a mosquito.

“Ouch!” she said, exasperated.

She leaned back over, pulling the tough plants up by the roots.

The sun beat down on her neck and arms, and her back was aching and hot. She sat up and stretched.

“That should be enough for today,” she said to herself.

The potato vines were brown around the edges because of the heat. Sorrel felt rather brown around the edges herself.

She got up and dusted herself off. Mrs. Hansom stood in the kitchen, watching Sorrel.

“My, is she growing!” Mrs. Hansom muttered to herself. She had given Sorrel one of her own dresses, but Sorrel was certainly going to need more.

Her green smock was growing tight, and getting shorter by the day.

Sorrel looked up, and gave Mrs. Hansom a little wave. She stretched again, and headed inside to mop the kitchen.

“Mud everywhere,” she breathed to herself as she swept. Down on her hands and knees, her dress looked even smaller.

Mrs. Hansom made a mental note to take her to buy more.

“Dear, what if we went and got you some new dresses later this afternoon?” she ventured.

They had gone to town many times since Sorrel came, but the girl always seemed hesitant. Sorrel thought for a moment.

“Alright. I’ve got money saved up,” she said finally. Mrs. Hansom smiled at the girl’s practical tone. Sorrel was silent, staring at her sorrowfully.

Mrs. Hansom’s smile was the same kind of smile Mrs. O’Keily used to give her. Sort of a fond smile, Sorrel thought.

She gave her a half-hearted smile back. She bent to pick up the bucket of soapy brown water, and lugged it out to the garden, where she hastily emptied it on the potatoes.

Mrs. Hansom set about making lunch, musing about how pretty Sorrel would look in pink ruffles, and calculating how much it might cost to carry out.

Sorrel, on the other hand, was pondering how to go past the boarding house without being seen, and wishing she had never acted the way she had.

She never would have had to leave if she had just behaved. Of course, she wouldn’t have met the Hansoms if she hadn’t run away.

Silently, she thanked God for letting her find them.

Then she thought of Willie and his mother, and her brow furrowed. Oh, how cruel she had been.

Sorrel bent her head to hide a tear. What a complex riddle her life was. She sighed and returned to the house.

At two o'clock, Mr. Hansom had the buggy hitched and waiting. Sorrel and Mrs. Hansom appeared at the door.

They were dressed in clean clothes, Sorrel in a blue smock of Mrs. Hansom's, and Mrs. Hansom in lavender.

"Don't you look nice," Mr. Hansom said, and without further ado, they set off.

Sorrel was wearing a bonnet of Mrs. Hansom's, and she kept her head down as they neared the shops.

Slumping, she eyed the boarding house and yearned to go back. But she wouldn't. She couldn't. Not after everything she had said.

They would never forgive her, Sorrel decided. So she would never go back.

Mrs. Hansom noticed Sorrel gazing at the old building, and decided that it must be the boarding house she talked of.

She watched as Sorrel sat a little straighter once they passed, and looked straight ahead.

Soon, they found themselves dropped off on a bustling sidewalk, and they went inside a promising looking fabric shop.

Mrs. Hansom discreetly bought four yards of rosy pink taffeta while Sorrel shopped.

Sorrel bought cotton, perhaps because she was planning on gardening in it. It was yellow, with a flowered print. She purchased it with her own money, and followed her employer out the door.

Mr. Hansom picked them up with a pleased look on his gentle face. “You were fast,” he said cheerfully. He drove them home in silence.

During the next week, Mrs. Hansom and Sorrel poured over patterns and began their work.

Sorrel was charmed with the pink dress Mrs. Hansom was sewing, though she thought Mrs. Hansom was sewing it for herself.

Sorrel’s yellow dress took more time, because Sorrel had never in her life sewn anything, except a few samplers.

Mrs. Hansom was patient, and spent many an hour bent over Sorrel’s work, helping to rip out or add in stitches.

It was the beginning of September now, and the lovely warm winds that caressed the world put Sorrel in a restless state.

She put the demanding dress aside on a lovely afternoon, and went out into the yard.

She had to figure something out. She had to piece her life back together somehow.

So she did the only logical thing she could think of. She set off at a fast pace down the road, and started at the beginning.

CHAPTER TEN

The very beginning, she thought. How far back that seemed!

Her parents. Her parents had died in a fire. She had been taken to live with her widowed grandmother, who had loved her.

Surely, she had loved her. As best as an old, selfish woman could. Sorrel thought of her grandmother with grief.

“Oh! She is dead. How I wish she wasn’t dead.”

Sorrel continued to think. After her grandmother had died, she, alone and afraid, had run away. But had she been alone?

Sorrel stopped walking. Afraid, yes. But alone? There were maids and servants who would have cared for her.

Maybe she would have gone to live with one of them. Or they might have sent her to live in an orphanage.

Sorrel shook her head. Maybe they wouldn't have cared for her. Either way, she had run away before she could find out.

Sorrel began to walk again, fast and hard.

“Funny, that every time something bad happens, I go away,” she mused out loud.

But the more she thought about it, the more it was true. As a baby, she had left her home because her parents were dead. Then she had left her grandmother's house, because she was angry and hurt that she had not kept her promise.

She had even left the boarding house, angry with Willie. Angry with the world.

It seemed that she had run away a lot. Run away from her problems.

“Isn't that what you have to do?” Sorrel asked no one in particular. But she got the strange sense that it wasn't.

Bewildered, she turned around and hurried home, eager to ask Mrs. Hansom.

She found her sitting in the backyard, dozing. Sorrel didn't want to wake her, but her eyes opened as Sorrel's shadow fell over her.

“Yes, dear?” the woman murmured.

“Is running from your problems a bad thing?” Sorrel asked in a rush.

Mrs. Hansom sat up, and rubbed the sleep from her eyes.

“Well, dear, it's generally thought to be a bad thing. Why?” She motioned to Sorrel to sit in a chair beside her, and Sorrel obeyed quickly.

“Because I was mean to someone who didn't deserve it, but I thought they did, and so I got angry. Then, I felt sorry and ran away.”

This simple speech made Mrs. Hansom smile a sad smile.

“Avoiding your problems is a good way to let them hang over you for a long time,” the wise woman said.

“And they have been!” Sorrel exclaimed earnestly, “I don’t think they’ll forgive me. What should I do?”

Mrs. Hansom hesitated, but came out with the truth. “You should ask them to. Even if they don’t, you’ll know you did what’s right.” Sorrel shook her head.

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

She looked at Mrs. Hansom warily. “Because I’m scared.”

Mrs. Hansom took her hand. “I’m not going to tell you what to do, Sorrel. I know you’ll do what’s right,” she said, giving the hand a gentle squeeze.

Sorrel looked at her closely. “You think I should go back,” she accused.

“I do.” Sorrel sat in silence for a minute.

“I don’t want to,” she persisted. But she knew she needed to face her problems, because they weren’t going away.

“Isn’t it time for supper yet?” Sorrel asked. Perhaps she was hungry, but it was most likely a change of subject.

“So it is,” Mrs. Hansom said. She stood up slowly, her knees cracking. Sorrel followed, her face troubled.

Sorrel said goodnight to the Hansoms and went upstairs to go to bed.

Softly, she opened the door to the guest room, and thoughtfully, she slipped inside.

On the bed was the lovely pink dress she had been admiring. It was for her.

She stood there for a minute, trying to remember the last time someone had given her a gift.

She felt almost giddy. But she had her suspicions. She knew why the dress was there.

“Mrs. Hansom wants me to go back,” she said skeptically.

But she slipped into it anyway. The silky fabric felt cool on her skin. She twirled, feeling very pretty.

With a sigh, she took it off and laid it thoughtfully aside.

She pulled on the old nightdress and crept under the covers without bothering to wash her face.

But sleep wouldn't come. She had been away from the boarding house for months, and she felt guilty.

Guilty that she had run away. Guilty that she was too scared to go back.

She got up and paced the room, the floorboards creaking, the moonlight streaming in.

She was unsettled in her heart, and she felt weary of the feeling.

Her eyelids became leaden, but still she paced, restless and upset.

Finally, she forced herself to sleep. She woke at such an early hour that the sun had yet to assert herself.

She rose resolutely. She had to. Otherwise, there would be time for fear and doubts to change her mind.

She slid into the beautiful pink dress, and did her hair up quickly. Then she crept downstairs, once more in darkness.

She felt about until she found a pencil stub. Lighting the kerosene lamp, she hastily scribbled on the edge of a worn newspaper.

Dear Hansoms, I haven't run away.

I've only gone to make things right.

Thank you for everything you did for

me. ~ Sorrel

She ripped the note free and put it where it could be seen, setting the pencil on it to keep it down. Then she turned off the lamp and pattered lightly to the door.

She opened it gently. With one last glance behind her, she shut the door softly.

“Goodbye,” she whispered. Then she took a deep breath and stole away. Away, to where she should have gone long, long ago.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

First she walked. She walked for almost an hour, along the dusty road. She watched the sunrise to her right, and nodded to people passing.

She wished someone would give her a ride. She was hot and tired, and wanted to see Mrs. O'Keily before all of the boarders came down. But she was too proud to ask, and no one offered. So she walked on, her head held high.

Her dress became dusty, and her face drawn. But she walked on. On until the boarding house came into view.

Then Sorrel's mouth went dry, and her eyes shut tight. She forced them opened and pressed herself to keep walking.

Down the sidewalk. Past the bushes. Up the old stairs. She put her arm up to knock on the front door, wishing that Willie would burst out, and they could all start over.

He didn't. Instead, she tried the knob. It was unlocked.

Heart thudding, she opened the door and stepped inside. It still looked the same as when she left.

It was still dark. It was still old. But somehow, she had the feeling that she had missed it.

She walked hesitantly down the hall and into the big kitchen. Mrs. O'Keily was wiping down the counters to prepare breakfast.

She heard a noise, and turned. Her face went pale, her hand flew to her heart, and she gasped. All was silent. Silent and still. Until Sorrel could no longer take it.

She burst out. "I'm sorry! I was uncivil. And I shouldn't have left without telling you. That was thoughtless. I was running, see. From my problems. Because I was angry. I'm sorry. Please, if you can some day, forgive me."

This little speech brought tears to the woman's eyes, and tears were already streaming down poor Sorrel's exhausted face. Mrs. O'Keily held out her arms, and Sorrel ran into them. They stood there for a long while.

“All is well, child.” Mrs. O’Keily answered in a low voice.

“I am thankful you are back. Safe.”

Sorrel felt so much relief wash over her that she was dizzy.

“You are?” she asked. Mrs. O’Keily laughed.

“Of course. I’m right fond of you, Sorrel, and I was anxious when you never came back.” Sorrel hung her head.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

“I’m glad you’re back,” Mrs. O’Keily repeated.

“And, Mrs. O’Keily?” Sorrel asked timidly. “Is Mrs. Wakefield... alright?” Mrs. O’Keily’s eyebrows went up.

“Why, of course. Why wouldn’t she be?” she answered, surprised. Sorrel sighed with relief.

“I just thought...,” she trailed off, shaking her head.

“Her illness? Heavens, child, she’s ill every time you turn around.” Mrs. O’Keily chuckled and finished wiping the table.

Sorrel whispered a silent “Thank You,” and set about making breakfast.

One by one, boarders appeared. First Miss March, with a sparkling engagement ring on her finger. Then Hank, his face shaven and eyes shining.

They were both a bit startled when they saw Sorrel bustling around as if she had never left.

They recovered, with many welcomes, and told her they were pleased to have her back. Sorrel colored, but felt so relieved she thought her heart might burst.

So she had been wanted. All along she had been wanted. She hummed a little tune to herself, and tingled with happiness. She glowed until her wrongs again sought her out. Then her happiness was shadowed.

She still had Willie to ask, she reminded herself, darkness moving in again. And Willie was the one she had hurt the most.

Her head ached, and her happiness drained. Again she felt despairing.

She desperately hoped Willie would forgive her. But Willie didn't come to breakfast.

After eight o'clock, Sorrel was so tied up in knots that she risked asking Mrs. O'Keily. "Where is Willie?" she ventured. Mrs. O'Keily turned to her.

"About a week after you left, he started working twelve hour days. From five in the morning to five at night." Mrs. O'Keily shook her head. "He's a hard working boy, that one. Going to work himself to death, I'm afraid."

Sorrel felt ill. She would have to wait long hours until the suspense ended.

"Well," she said after a moment, "I suppose I'd better start cleaning." And she marched briskly to the cleaning closet, forcefully holding back tears, her chin high. Mrs. O'Keily smiled at what she thought was enthusiasm.

“I suppose you’d better,” she agreed. The morning had crawled by at a torturously slow rate.

Sorrel felt sick with anxiety. She wanted so badly to be forgiven. “Oh, please, let him forgive me,” she begged God in her mind.

She dusted vigorously, swept vehemently, and mopped forcefully.

Finally, it was almost twelve. She threw the cleaning things in the closet with a clatter, and went to find Mrs. O’Keily.

“I’ll be back in time to help with supper,” she promised, flying out of the room. Mrs. O’Keily watched her go, a look of pain on her face.

“I believe you, Sorrel,” she whispered. Then, to herself, she added, “I have to.”

Sorrel tore down the front walk and bolted past the side shops without a second glance. She crossed the street without looking where she was going.

Blindly, she followed the path as well as she could. She was intent upon one thing. One thing only.

The big brick factory came into view, and Sorrel slowed down involuntarily. It was startlingly huge, with Willie inside.

The same Willie she was looking for. The Willie she wanted to forgive her.

Her heart was in her throat, but she advanced, ever slowly. The bell would ring any minute, and then what? Sorrel began to rehearse what she was going to say.

Then it rang. Loud and long and shrill. As if to seal her fate.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Panic seized her. What would she say? Her eyes darted around and she reached out in vain. Nothing offered comfort.

Then she saw Willie. He was taking the stairs in that long gait of his, his face tired, and somehow older.

Sorrel called to him before she could stop herself. His eyes rested on her.

Her heart leapt. His face had an unreadable expression. He began to run. Not away from her, but toward her.

He reached the fence. She was staring at him blankly. He stood there, a grin on his face.

“You came back. Why did you stay away so long?” he asked her, but his voice wasn’t accusing. She noticed how weary he looked.

Willie stood there, examining her, trying to put a finger on the difference. His eyes rested on her face. It didn't look angry. It looked... wistful.

Sorrel swallowed, licking her lips. She began, and faltered.

His full attention was on her. She tried again. "I'm sorry," she told him in a dry voice. "I was angry at you, and you didn't do anything."

He looked at her, his head cocked in that funny way.

"What?" he asked her, disbelieving.

"I'm sorry," she said again, her voice cracking. "I understand if you don't want to forgive me..." Sorrel turned to go, holding back tears.

"Wait!" he said, and he grabbed her arm through the fence.

"Don't go! Of course I forgive you. I already had before you left." Sorrel stopped and turned to him.

"How?" she said vaguely. Dizzily, she looked at him.

"Are you alright?" he asked her, watching her sway.

“Yes,” she answered faintly. And she sat right down in the dirt.

“You want some of my lunch?” he asked her, uneasy.

“Yes,” she mumbled again, dazed.

He handed her a bread roll and a bruised apple. She ate, unaware that she had taken all of his lunch.

They sat in silence. Willie played with a piece of grass, building his courage.

“Are you coming back to the boarding house?” he asked anxiously.

“If I still can,” Sorrel murmured abstractedly.

“Of course you can,” Willie answered quickly. His answer seemed to wake Sorrel from her reverie.

She shook her head, her daze clearing, and let a smile play at her lips. Rising, her heart felt lighter than it had ever felt before.

She looked at Willie, only to find him regarding her.

Suddenly, she felt her cheeks flame and an uncomfortable feeling in her chest.

It was a sensation she had never felt before, and it was strange and unfamiliar.

Sorrel bit her lip, suddenly longing for something to hold.

Her eyes darted around the factory yard. The littered grass was brown and withered, and the lonely yard had all but emptied of people.

She turned her head away, taking in the busy road, with its many faces and bustling figures. She knew no one.

The scraggly trees that had struggled through the packed ground had turned to colors of the earth. Reds and browns and golds waved restlessly in the sunlight.

Endless throngs had crunched the leaves that had fallen, and the cement was scattered with bits of color.

Tilting her head, she studied the sky, with its wispy gray clouds and pale blue shade. The sun glimpsed out from behind a cloud, as if she, too, was shy.

A soft autumn breeze gently fluttered the ruffles of her dress. Her blond hair danced in the wind. But felt as if her heart had stilled. The wind could not reach her fear.

She had tried so many times to hold on. Oh, how it hurt. To be rejected. To find nothing.

Her searching eyes rested on Willie, still regarding her.

Dear, dear Willie. With his forbearance and his forgiveness and his friendly smile.

A sudden realisation pulsed through her.

She closed her eyes, shaking her head in terror. Her heart, which had been hardened for so long, now felt frozen with fear. No, she couldn't do that. What if she was rejected?

Her mind throbbed with panic, trying to warn her not to get her hopes up. Not to be disappointed again.

Shaking her head, she stepped back, her eyes fixed dumbly on Willie's face.

She bit her lip, her body moving mindlessly back, away from risk. Away from hurt.

As she did so, his face flickered with anxiousness. His eyes searched hers, confused. “Don’t leave,” he implored helplessly.

She took a faltering step forward, back toward uncertainty, back toward risk.

“Don’t go,” Willie entreated again.

Sorrel made up her mind. She would brave the uncertainty. If she was cast aside, then so be it.

Tentatively, she reached out. Her hand reached through the iron fence, past the iron bars.

“If only,” Sorrel’s mind began. “If only -”

Her fingers brushed Willie’s.

She closed her eyes, prepared to accept rejection. Her face was tense with the effort of keeping her hopes pushed down.

In that moment, Willie's hand clasped hers.

All the fear and panic drained out of Sorrel. Her eyes flickered open hesitantly.

They went from her gently held hand to Willie's face, and back again.

A startled sound escaped her lips. And then a smile. A beautiful, beaming smile.

She was accepted.

The factory bell began to ring, its shrill voice barely heard. It rang, unheeded, while they stood there, her small hand entwined in his rough one.

The grasp was strong, and safe, and comforting. And the girl was free.

Free from the guilt that had chained her down. Free from the anger that had bound her heart.

A tear slipped from Sorrel's eye, glittering as the sun burst through the clouds.

The air was illuminated with sunlight. Still, Sorrel smiled. Her heart beat and her blood pulsed with the feeling of the forgiven.

And for the first time in her life, Sorrel held on.

ALL THAT HAPPENED AFTERWARD

Sorrel lived at the boarding house until she was nineteen, cooking and cleaning, and talking to Willie on his lunch breaks.

She visited the Hansoms every week, and the old couple treated her like a daughter.

When she married Willie Oliver, they moved to their own little apartment over the bakery on South Avenue.

They invited Margaret Oliver to live with them, but Margaret preferred to stay on in her little boarding room, sewing and living a quiet life.

Willie continued to work at the factory, and he supported his family honestly. He was drafted in 1917, but came back safely, much to everyone's relief.

Eventually, the Olivers learned of Sorrel's inheritance, and they were able to buy a house with room for their four mischievous children.

Sorrel lived a productive life, with Willie by her side. The two of them grew old together, still in love long after their children were grown and gone.

They lived long lives, battling through the rough times and enjoying the peaceful ones. And they all lived "happily ever after."

THE END