

Title

"Losing Her Hold." *Zion's Herald*, 13 Feb. 1889.

[1] The schoolmaster and his wife, after morning meeting was over, took their way as usual down Prout's Lane, and across the hill homeward. The path was narrow; the dominie[2] walked first. He [made] a remark at long intervals to his wife behind him, but without looking back.

"Squire wasn't out. Reckon his lumbago's worse?"

"S likely."

"The doctor had his little grandchild with him, I suppose his daughter has come for the summer."

"I reckon she has."

There was a long silence after that, broken only by the buzz of the bees in the red clover and the ch'k-k of the grasshoppers through the hot grass. The old man stopped, as he always did on Sunday, to see how much the corn in the lower field had grown during the week, and to give meditatively at the pigs in their pen. But Mrs. Holmes had no thoughts today for the pigs or corn. She walked with her head bent on her breast, almost forgetting to hold up her skirt of her Sunday merino[3] out of the grass. There had been a strange preacher that day—an old man with a quick, sharp tone like the call of a horn to wandering sheep—very different from Father Langley's prolonged drowsy hum. One or two of his sentences rang in Ann Holmes' ears.

"While you live, live! You wrap yourselves in selfishness and fat content as in grave-clothes before you are dead. The world is full of your brothers, starving, cold, ignorant. Go to them! You owe them service to the last breath of your life."

Mrs. Holmes had asked the doctor's wife anxiously what she thought of the sermon as they came out of the churchyard.

Mrs. Perry shook her head contemptuously.

“He's one of these half-cricket, sensation preachers. What has Amity township to do with the starving poor? We keep up our almshouse well. Let the big towns see to their own paupers!”

Ann was comforted for the moment, but she remained uneasy. That hint about the grave-clothes seemed a personal hit at herself. Could the man know—?

She hurried past the schoolmaster when they reached their own gate, going up the spotless board walk with beds of geraniums and roses on either side, to the side door. She could not resist a complacent glance at those beds. Not a weed; the brown earth sifted fine and smooth! There was no such garden in the village; no kitchen was so exquisitely neat, no parlor so speckles and prim. Surely, her conscience told her, she was a good Christian woman, fulfilling her duty, and had no cause for the wrench and misery of soul which she felt just now.

She went up the stairs to her own chamber, laid off her bonnet carefully, and then unlocked a drawer in the press.[4] She did not need to lift the white towels. She knew perfectly well what was pinned up in them. The underclothing of snowy linen, the worked flannels, the fine woolen shroud. She had put every stitch in them. Could the man have known?

Every matron in Amity had her “funeral suit” provided. It was a matter of pride to them, just as Mrs. B. in Boston would delight in her old Satsuma or her Corot.[5] The Amity people gloried in their new cemetery. The Holmes had their lot like the rest; a narrow one, for there were only two

to be buried in it. Ann had her choicest roses set out there. She had directed in her will every detail of the trimming of her coffin.

She thrust her hand under the shroud now and pulled out a little bag of gold coin. They were the savings of years; pennies scrimped out of clothes, milk, meat. They were to pay for the handsome granite monument, “Erected to the Memory of Daniel Holmes and Ann his wife.”

“While you live—live!”

She dropped the bag as if some one spoke at her back, locked the drawer and went back down stairs.

The “piece” was spread as usual on Sunday noons; flaky bread, clover-scented honey, delicious pies. Ann, as she cut the pie, was comforted by a sense of spiritual well-being. No woman made such crust in Amity. No woman was more faithful at meeting, at Sunday-school, at missionary society. In what had she come short? her starved soul demanded of its Maker. Every duty, great and small, had been well finished.

Mrs. Holmes was fifty-five years of age, but she was used to speak of herself as near her grave. She twisted up her hair in a wisp, and wore the scuttle bonnets proper to old age. The work of life, she held, was finished for her and Daniel. They had paid for the farm, so that when one died the other was sure of a maintenance; the farm and house were in perfect order, the cemetery lot was bought. The money for the monument was a kind of frilling embroidery on this perfected life, the handsome flourish to the signature which closed the deed.

As she sat pouring out the tea, thinking these things over, her husband “reckoned” again that the squire’s lumbago was bad, and that the doctor’s daughter was at home. Then he yawned drearily, and fell asleep in his chair in the sun.

How much of his time he spent in yawning and sleeping! Yet thirty years ago Daniel Holmes was an eager teacher, keeping well abreast with the knowledge and ideas of his time, living in the world of books, newspapers, music and pictures. She, too, had been a live woman then. But they had come out of town into this village, and set themselves to scrape together money to buy this farm. What was this change that had come to them? Had they been really spinning their grave-clothes out of selfishness?

Ann went to afternoon service; but she did not hear a word of Father Langley’s discourse. She was back in town; long-forgotten voices sounded in her ears. There was Dan’s brother Jack, poor fellow! She saw him plainly in the crowd. A gay, affectionate lad who might have turned out well if he had been guided! But he had married a feather-headed girl, and Ann, out of patience, had turned them both adrift.

As they walked home that evening she said to the schoolmaster, “How long is it since we heard from John, Danell?”

He did not respond at first, and when he did it was with a strained, annoyed voice.

“Twenty-six year.”

“I wish I and Abby could have hit it off together. I am ’feared that it was not right to shove them off, with neither money nor religion ‘for a staff.’”

Daniel made no reply, but An[n] understood his silence as a more bitter reproach than words.

The next morning she brought to him a small canvas bag.

“There is some money I had saved for buryin’ expenses, Danell,” she said. “I’d like to take it instead for us to spend a week in Philadelphia.”

“What tomfoolery’s that?”

“There’s no poor folks in Amity, ’n maybe we might see some there as we could give—advice to. And you could look up the libraries and museums.”

“Nonsense!”

But his eyes paused, attentive.

“And maybe we might meet John.”

“Here, put the money away! I’ll bank it,” he growled.

But four days later Amity was shaken to its centre by the news that the schoolmaster and his wife had gone for an outing to Philadelphia.

“There’s a queer customer,” whispered one of the attendants in the old Franklin Library to another a week afterwards. “He comes every day and goes from shelf to shelf breathless, as if he had not touched a book for years. Been buried in the country, I suppose.”

“And why should anybody who could live out of doors and dig, want to smell this musty leather?” grumbled the other lad, who was lean, and stooped, with an ugly cough.

He went up to Daniel, however, and helped him in his explorations.

Our country pilgrims put up at an old-fashioned inn in the lower part of the city. Daniel came back to it at night fairly panting with the triumphs of his researches. He had visited kindergartens, industrial schools and museums, where art and science were taught without charge to the poorest.

“As for the libraries, whole continents of knowledge have been discovered while I was dozing and snoring in Amity,” he exclaimed.

Ann had made her rounds among the asylums, the hospitals for children, the free classes, the *crèches*. Her cold gray eyes were dim and wet.

“Half the world seem to be cold and hungry, and the other half are working to warm and feed them,” she said. “And I could find nothing to do but to make fine my shroud and gravestone! But have you got any trace of John or Abby, Danell?”

“No; I doubt it’s no use, Ann.”

But as Ann woke day by day, and got her hold upon the world again, her search became more energetic. One day she came in at noon red with excitement.

“I’ve found them, Danell! That is to say, John and Abby are dead; but they’ve left three children. The oldest boy supports them, and he is that consumptive lad in the library you took such a fancy to. Come right along! Don’t stop for dinner! Come! Three children! And the Lord never before gave us one!”

Mrs. Ann Holmes’ house is no longer the neatest in Amity. The chubby little girl of fourteen who helps her in the kitchen leaves her work and school books here and there, and the baby who tugs after Ann from morning until night drops her greasy bread and butter even in the sacred parlor, unrebuked.

“What’s a clean floor compared with the flesh coming on to their bones?” she asks triumphantly. “Look at Albert! He’s another boy. He’s a born farmer. That library was killing him.”

“I’ll have no abuse of libraries,” Daniel says. “I’m going up for study twice a year. It doesn’t do to lose your hold on the world. You’ve got to keep step while you live.”

“Y-es,” Ann replies absently. She is looking out a hymn simple enough for Abby to understand, and after that she is going to make some flannel petticoats for baby before the cold weather comes. They are cut out and folded neatly in her basket, and the drawer upstairs which held her fine shroud is empty.

Notes

1. Originally published in the *Congregationalist*. I have been unable to locate a copy of that issue, so I have used its reprint in *Zion's Herald*.
2. Scottish term for a schoolmaster.
3. A fine woolen material similar to cashmere.
4. A clothes press or armoire.
5. Satsuma is pottery exquisitely painted in glazes and gold; Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796-1875), French painter of landscapes and portraiture.

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