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Chapter 15 - Waiting

'My wife, I have bad news for thee,' said Professor Bhaer, coming in one day early in January.

'Please tell it at once. I can't bear to wait, Fritz,' cried Mrs Jo, dropping her work and standing up as if to take the shot bravely.

'But we must wait and hope, heart's-dearest. Come and let us bear it together. Emil's ship is lost, and as yet no news of him.'

It was well Mr Bhaer had taken his wife into his strong arms, for she looked ready to drop, but bore up after a moment, and sitting by her good man, heard all that there was to tell. Tidings had been sent to the shipowners at Hamburg by some of the survivors, and telegraphed at once by Franz to his uncle. As one boat-load was safe, there was hope that others might also escape, though the gale had sent two to the bottom. A swift-sailing steamer had brought these scanty news, and happier ones might come at any hour; but kind Franz had not added that the sailors reported the captain's boat as undoubtedly wrecked by the falling mast, since the smoke hid its escape, and the gale soon drove all far asunder. But this sad rumour reached Plumfield in time; and deep was the mourning for the happyhearted Commodore, never to come singing home again. Mrs Jo refused to believe it, stoutly insisting that Emil would outlive any storm and yet turn up safe and gay. It was well she clung to this hopeful view, for poor Mr Bhaer was much afflicted by the loss of his boy, because his sister's sons had been his so long he scarcely knew a different love for his very own. Now was a chance for Mrs Juno to keep her word; and she did, speaking cheerily of Emil, even when hope waxed faint and her heart was heavy. If anything could comfort the Bhaers for the loss of one boy, it would have been the affection and sorrow shown by all the rest. Franz kept the cable busy with his varying messages, Nat sent loving letters from Leipzig, and Tom harassed the shipping agents for news. Even busy Jack wrote them with unusual warmth; Dolly and George came often, bearing the loveliest flowers and the daintiest bon-bons to cheer Mrs Bhaer and sweeten Josie's grief; while good-hearted Ned travelled all the way from Chicago to press their hands and say, with a tear in his eye: 'I was so anxious to hear all about the dear old boy, I couldn't keep away.'

'That's right comfortable, and shows me that if I didn't teach my boys anything else, I did give them the brotherly love that will make them stand by one another all their lives,' said Mrs Jo, when he had gone.

Rob answered reams of sympathizing letters, which showed how many friends they had; and the kindly praises of the lost man would have made Emil a hero and a saint, had they all been true. The elders bore it quietly, having learned submission in life's hard school; but the younger people rebelled; some hoped against hope and kept up, others despaired at once, and little Josie, Emil's pet cousin and playmate, was so broken-hearted nothing could comfort her. Nan dosed in vain, Daisy's cheerful words went by like the wind, and Bess's devices to amuse her all failed utterly. To cry in mother's arms and talk about the wreck, which haunted her even in her sleep, was all she cared to do; and Mrs Meg was getting anxious when Miss Cameron sent Josie a kind note bidding her learn bravely her first lesson in real tragedy, and be like the self-sacrificing heroines she loved to act. That did the little girl good, and she made an effort in which Teddy and Octoo helped her much; for the boy was deeply impressed by this sudden eclipse of the firefly whose light and life all missed when they were gone, and lured her out every day for long drives behind the black mare, who shook her silvery bells till they made such merry music Josie could not help listening to it, and whisked her over the snowy roads at a pace which set the blood dancing in her veins, and sent her home strengthened and comforted by sunshine, fresh air, and congenial society - three aids young sufferers seldom can resist.

As Emil was helping nurse Captain Hardy, safe and well, aboard the ship, all this sorrow would seem wasted; but it was not, for it drew many hearts more closely together by a common grief, taught some patience, some sympathy, some regret for faults that lie heavy on the conscience when the one sinned against is gone, and all of them the solemn lesson to be ready when the summons comes. A hush lay over Plumfield for weeks, and the studious faces on the hill reflected the sadness of those in the valley. Sacred music sounded from Parnassus to comfort all who heard; the brown cottage was besieged with gifts for the little mourner, and Emil's flag hung at half-mast on the roof where he last sat with Mrs Jo.

So the weeks went heavily by till suddenly, like a thunderbolt out of a clear sky, came the news, 'All safe, letters on the way.' Then up went the flag, out rang the college bells, bang went Teddy's long-unused cannon, and a chorus of happy voices cried 'Thank God', as people went about, laughing, crying, and embracing one another in a rapture of delight. By and by the longed-for letters came, and all the story of the wreck was told; briefly by Emil, eloquently by Mrs Hardy, gratefully by the captain, while Mary added a few tender words that went straight to their hearts and seemed the sweetest of all. Never were letters so read, passed round, admired, and cried over as these; for Mrs Jo carried them in her pocket when Mr Bhaer did not have them in his, and both took a look at them when they said their prayers at night. Now the Professor was heard humming like a big bee again as he went to his classes, and the lines smoothed out of Mother Bhaer's forehead, while she wrote this real story to anxious friends and let her romances wait. Now messages of congratulation flowed in, and beaming faces showed everywhere. Rob amazed his parents by producing a poem which was remarkably good for one of his years, and Demi set it to music that it might be sung when the sailor boy returned. Teddy stood on his head literally, and tore about the neighbourhood on Octoo, like a second Paul Revere - only his tidings were good. But best of all, little Josie lifted up her head as the snowdrops did, and began to bloom again, growing tall and quiet, with the shadow of past sorrow to tone down her former vivacity and show that she had learned a lesson in trying to act well her part on the real stage, where all have to take their share in the great drama of life.

Now another sort of waiting began; for the travellers were on their way to Hamburg, and would stay there awhile before coming home, as Uncle Hermann owned the Brenda, and the captain must report to him. Emil must remain to Franz's wedding, deferred till now because of the season of mourning, so happily ended. These plans were doubly welcome and pleasant after the troublous times which went before, and no spring ever seemed so beautiful as this one; for, as Teddy put it:

'Now is the winter of our discontent
 Made glorious by these sons of Bhaer!'

Franz and Emil being regarded in the light of elder brothers by the real 'sons of Bhaer'.

There was great scrubbing and dusting among the matrons as they set their houses in order not only for Class Day, but to receive the bride and groom, who were to come to them for the honeymoon trip. Great plans were made, gifts prepared, and much joy felt at the prospect of seeing Franz again; though Emil, who was to accompany them, would be the greater hero. Little did the dear souls dream what a surprise was in store for them, as they innocently laid their plans and wished all the boys could be there to welcome home their eldest and their Casablanca.

While they wait and work so happily, let us see how our other absent boys are faring as they too wait and work and hope for better days. Nat was toiling steadily along the

path he had wisely chosen though it was by no means strewn with flowers - quite thorny was it, in fact, and hard to travel, after the taste of ease and pleasure he had got when nibbling at forbidden fruit. But his crop of wild oats was a light one, and he resolutely reaped what he had sowed, finding some good wheat among the tares. He was taught by day; he fiddled night after night in the dingy little theatre, and he studied so diligently that his master was well pleased, and kept him in mind as one to whom preferment was due, if any chance occurred. Gay friends forgot him; but the old ones stood fast, and cheered him up when Heimweh and weariness made him sad. As spring came on things mended - expenses grew less, work pleasanter, and life more bearable than when wintry storms beat on his thinly clad back, and frost pinched the toes that patiently trudged in old boots. No debts burdened him; the year of absence was nearly over; and if he chose to stay, Herr Bergmann had hopes for him that would bring independence for a time at least. So he walked under the lindens with a lighter heart, and in the May evenings went about the city with a band of strolling students, making music before houses where he used to sit as guest. No one recognized him in the darkness, though old friends often listened to the band; and once Minna threw him money, which he humbly received as part of his penance, being morbid on the subject of his sins.

His reward came sooner than he expected, and was greater than he deserved, he thought, though his heart leaped with joy when his master one day informed him that he was chosen, with several other of his most promising pupils, to join the musical society which was to take part in the great festival in London the next July. Here was not only honour for the violinist but happiness for the man, as it brought him nearer home, and would open a chance of further promotion and profit in his chosen profession.

'Make thyself useful to Bachmeister there in London with thy English, and if all goes well with him, he will be glad to take thee to America, whither he goes in the early autumn for winter concerts. Thou hast done well these last months, and I have hopes of thee.'

As the great Bergmann seldom praised his pupils, these words filled Nat's soul with pride and joy, and he worked yet more diligently than before to fulfil his master's prophecy. He thought the trip to England happiness enough, but found room for more when, early in June, Franz and Emil paid him a flying visit, bringing all sorts of good news, kind wishes, and comfortable gifts for the lonely fellow, who could have fallen on their necks and cried like a girl at seeing his old mates again. How glad he was to be found in his little room busy at his proper work, not living like an idle gentleman on borrowed money! How proud he was to tell his plans, assure them that he had no debts, and receive their praises for his improvement in music, their respect for his economy and steadfastness in well-doing! How relieved when, having honestly confessed his shortcomings, they only laughed, and owned that they also had known like experiences, and were the wiser for them. He was to go to the wedding late in June, and join his comrades in London. As best man, he could not refuse the new suit Franz insisted on ordering for him; and a cheque from home about that time made him feel like a millionaire - and a happy one; for this was accompanied by such kind letters full of delight in his success, he felt that he had earned it, and waited for his joyful holiday with the impatience of a boy.

Dan meantime was also counting the weeks till August, when he would be free. But neither marriage-bells nor festival music awaited him; no friends would greet him as he left the prison; no hopeful prospect lay before him; no happy home-going was to be his. Yet his success was far greater than Nat's, though only God and one good man saw it. It was a hard-won battle; but he would never have to fight so terrible a one again; for though enemies would still assail from within and from without, he had found the little guide-book that Christian carried in his bosom, and Love, Penitence, and Prayer, the three sweet sisters, had given him the armour which would keep him safe. He had not learned to wear it yet, and chafed against it, though he felt its value, thanks to the faithful friend who had stood by him all that bitter year.

Soon he was to be free again, worn and scarred in the fray, but out among men in the blessed sun and air. When he thought of it Dan felt as if he could not wait, but must burst that narrow cell and fly away, as the caddis-worms he used to watch by the brookside shed their stony coffins, to climb the ferns and soar into the sky. Night after night he lulled himself to sleep with planning how, when he had seen Mary Mason according to his promise, he would steer straight for his old friends, the Indians, and in the wilderness hide his disgrace and heal his wounds. Working to save the many would atone for the sin of killing one, he thought; and the old free life would keep him safe from the temptations that beset him in cities.

'By and by, when I'm all right again, and have something to tell that I'm not ashamed of, I'll go home,' he said, with a quicker beat of the impetuous heart that longed to be there so intensely, he found it as hard to curb as one of his unbroken horses on the plains. 'Not yet. I must get over this first. They'd see and smell and feel the prison taint on me, if I went now, and I couldn't look them in the face and hide the truth. I can't lose Ted's love, Mother Bhaer's confidence, and the respect of the girls, for they did respect my strength, anyway; but now they wouldn't touch me.' And poor Dan looked with a shudder at the brown fist he clenched involuntarily as he remembered what it had done since a certain little white hand had laid in it confidingly. 'I'll make 'em proud of me yet; and no one shall ever know of this awful year. I can wipe it out, and I will, so help me God!' And the clenched hand was held up as if to take a solemn oath that this lost year should yet be made good, if resolution and repentance could work the miracle.