Smoking Flax

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TO MY MOTHER AND THE SOUTH

INTRODUCTION.

"Smoking Flax" is a story of the South written by a young Kentucky woman. Undoubtedly in the South its advent will be saluted with enthusiastic bravos. What will be the nature of its reception in the North it is hazardous to predict. One thing, however, can be confidently prophesied for it everywhere—consideration. This the subject and manner of its treatment assures.

The methods of Judge Lynch viewed from most standpoints are, without extenuation, evil; from a few aspects they may appear to be perhaps not wholly without justification. Miss Rives, through the medium of romance, presents the question as seen from many sides, and then leaves to the reader the responsibility of determining "what is truth," though where her own sympathies lie she does not leave much in doubt.

The authoress comes of an old Virginia stock to whom the gift of narrative and literary expression seem to be a birthright. Since revolutionary days literature has been more or less enriched by contributions from successive members of the family—the well known contemporary novelist and the youthful author of this book sharing at the present time the responsibility of upholding the hereditary traditions. It seems, therefore, happily appropriate that Miss Rives should have taken upon herself the task of placing before the world southern views of the problem of lynching, which, be it understood, are far from unanimous. The subject is handled

with admirable tact, the author steering clear alike from prudish affectations of modesty and shocking details of inartistic realism: and throughout is maintained a judicial impartiality infrequent in the treatment of such burning questions.

Miss Rives will achieve distinction in the South and at least notability elsewhere.

H. F. G.

ROCHESTER, N. Y.
September 22nd, 97.

CHAPTER I.

The house faced the college campus and was the only one in the block. This, in Georgetown, implies a lawn of no small dimensions; the place had neither gardener's house nor porter's lodge—nothing but that old home half hidden by ancient elms. For many a year it had stood with closed doors in the very heart of that prosperous Kentucky town, presenting a gloomy aspect and exercising for many a singular attraction. Near the deep veranda a great tree, whose boughs were no longer held in check by trimming, had thrust one of its branches through the frontmost window. Dampness had attacked everything. The upper balcony was loosened, the roof warped, and lizards sunned themselves on the wall.

As for the garden, long ago it had lapsed into a chaotic state. The thistle and the pale poppy grew in fragrant tangle with the wild ivy and Virginia creeper, and wilful weeds thrust their way across the gravel walks.

Sadly old residents saw the place approaching the last stages of decay—saw this house, once the pride of the town, in its decrepitude and loneliness the plaything of the elements.

"A noble wreck! It must have a history of some kind," strangers would remark.

"Ah, that it has, and a sombre one it is!" any man or woman living near would have answered, as they recalled the history of Richard Harding's home. For the fate of Richard Harding was

a sad memory to them. They remembered how he had been the representative of a fine old family and that much of his fortune had been spent in beautifying this place, to make it a fitting home for Catharine Field, his bride.

She too had been of gentle birth and held an important place in their memory as one who brought with her to this rural community the wider experience usual to a young woman educated in Boston, who, after a few seasons of social success in an ultra fashionable set, has crowned her many achievements by a brilliant marriage.

Her husband adored her and showed his devotion by humoring her extravagant tastes and prodigal fancies. He detested gayeties, yet complied with her slightest wish for social pleasures.

Although it was generally agreed that this young couple got on well together, at the end of two years the husband had to admit to himself that his efforts to render his wife happy had not been entirely successful. He saw that she fretted for her northern life, was bored by everything about her. She cherished a bitter resentment for the slaveholders, vowing that it was barbarous and inhuman to own human beings as her husband and neighbors did. Though expressing pity for the poor, simple, dependent creatures, she did little to make their tasks more healthful and reasonable ones, or to render them more capable and contented.

Her baby's nurse was the one servant of her household who met with gracious treatment at her hands. This old slave came to her endowed with the womanly virtues of honor, self-

respect and humility. But in marveling at her on these accounts, Mrs. Harding forgot that it was the former mistress—her husband's mother—that had made her what she was.

At length the truth became clearly apparent that she was an obstinate, intensely prejudiced and very unreasonable woman, who, having lived for a time at a centre of fashionable intelligence in a city of culture, supposed herself to be quite beyond the reach of and entirely superior to ordinary country folk. Eventually, her morbid dissatisfaction became so extreme that her husband yielded to her importunities, closed the house, and with her and their baby boy, went to live in Boston.

This sacrifice he made quietly and uncomplainingly, his closest friends not then knowing how it wrenched his heart. A year passed, then another, and at the end of the third, the papers announced the death of Richard Harding.

Though never again seeing his southern home, where he had planned to live his life in peace and useful happiness, it had held to the end a most sacred place in his memory—a memory which he truly hoped would be transmittted to the heart and mind of his son. It was his last wish that the old homestead should remain as it was—closed to strangers—that no living being, unless of his own blood, should inhabit that abode of love and sorrow, that it be kept from the careless profanation of aliens.

The world prophesied that his widow would soon forget the wishes of the dead, but as witness that she had thus far kept faith, there stood the closed, abandoned home, upon which Nature alone laid a destroying hand.

CHAPTER II.

In process of time, hardly a brick was to be seen in this old house that had not grown purple with age and become cloaked with moss and ivy. Antiquity looked out from covering to foundation stone. Only the flowers were young, and flowers spring from a remote ancestry. This house, inlaid in solitude, was as quiet as some cloister hidden away within some French forest.

One summer afternoon, the quiet was broken by a group of college girls looking for some new flower for their botanical collection. But so full of youthful spirits were they that they hardly saw the valley lilies with stems so short that they could scarcely bear up their innocent, sweet eyes, distressed, and stare like children in a crowd.

Among these girls was one whom the most casual observer would have singled out from her companions for a beauty rare even in that land of beautiful women. She had wandered off alone and found a sleepy little primrose. As she freed the blossom from its stem and held it in her hand, a tide of thought surged up from her memory and deepened the color of her face. Quietly she dropped down upon the grass and began turning the leaves of her floral diary until she came to a similar flower pressed between its pages.

In a corner was written: “Gathered in the mountains on the 18th of August.”

“How strange,” she thought, “to note how late it was found there, while it blooms so early here.”

Commonplace as that discovery seemed to be, the face so radiant a moment before, became thoughtfully drawn.

She looked at the name “E. Harding” written below the dry, dead blossom, and thought of the time when it had been written, thence back to her first meeting with its owner—one of those happy chances of travel, which have all the charm of the unexpected—as fresh in her memory as though it had been but yesterday. That summer had been one of those idyllic periods which are lived so unconsciously that their beauty is only realized in memories. To become conscious of such charm at the time would be to break the spell which lies in the very ignorance of its existence.

She, this ardent novice in learning, fresh from graduating honors, and full of unmanageable, new emotions did not comprehend that the same youthful impetuosity which had made the two fast friends in so brief a time, had also made it possible for a few heedless words even more quickly to separate them. An older or more experienced woman would have missed the sudden bloom and escaped the no less sudden storm.

“Primroses are his favorite flowers,” she said half aloud, and a dainty little smile lifted ever so slightly the corners of her mouth as if there were pleasure in the thought. Then she took up her pencil and studiously began to jot down the botanical notes concerning the primrose. “Primrose, a biennial herb,

from three to six inches tall. The flower is regular, symmetrical and four parted."

A twig snapped. The girl looked up quickly. "Welcome to my flowers," said a voice beside her, and a young man smiled frankly, as he bowed and raised his white straw hat.

"Mr. Harding!" she exclaimed, opening her eyes in wonder and staring at him with the prettiest face of astonishment. Alarm had brought color to her cheeks, while the level rays of the sun, which forced her to screen her eyes with one hand, clothed her figure in a broad belt of gold. "How did you happen to be here?"

"I did not happen. Man comes not to his place by accident."

His answer, though given with a laugh, had a touch of truth.

Through the bright excitement of her eyes, a sudden gleam of archness flashed.

"Have you come to write us up, or rather down?" she asked.

"I have come to help those who won't help themselves, but first let us make peace, if such a thing be necessary between us. Here is my offering," and smilingly he laid two fresh white roses in her hand.

She answered his smile with one of her own as she thrust the long generous stems through her waist belt; but she did not thank him with words, and he was glad that she did not. Just as he would have spoken again, a number of girlish voices called in chorus:

"Come, Dorothy, we are going now."

CHAPTER III.

In the same year that Elliott Harding was graduated from Princeton, he came into possession of his estate, which he at once began to share with his mother. Her love of good living and luxury, her craving for such elegancies as sumptuous furniture, expensive bric-à-brac, and stylish equipages had well nigh exhausted her means, and she was now almost entirely dependent upon a half-interest in the small estate in Kentucky. Considering that Elliott had a leaning towards the learned professions and political and social pursuits, added to a constitutional abhorrence of a business career, his financial condition was not altogether uncomfortable. He longed to own a superb library, a collection of books, great both in number and quality, and, furthermore, he wanted to complete his education by travel abroad, followed by a year or two of serious research in the South. He realized how ill these aspirations mated with the pleasure loving habits of his mother and how impossible it would be for him to realize his dreams, so long as his purse remained the joint source of supply.

To many a young man the outlook would have been deeply discouraging. To him it was a means of developing the endurance and the strength of will which were among his distinguishing characteristics.

Nature had fashioned Elliott Harding when in one of her kindly moods. She had endowed him with many gifts; good birth, sound health of body and mind, industry, resolution and

ambition. Besides possessing these goodly qualifications, he stood six feet in height, and in breadth of shoulder, depth of chest, sturdiness of legs and arms, he had few superiors. There was, too, a nobility of proportion in his forehead that indicated high breeding and broad intellectuality, and his face was full of force and refinement. His steel blue eyes gleamed with a superb self-confidence.

By profession, Elliott Harding was a lawyer; by instinct, a writer. He practiced law for gain. He wrote because it was his ruling passion. He was a man who had been early taught to have faith in his own destiny and to consider himself an agent called by God to do a great work. When he came to his southern home he came with a purpose—a purpose which he determined to carry out quietly but with mighty earnestness. When he first arrived in the town he was content to rest unheralded, and his presence was not understood by the villagers. Nearly every morning now, he could be seen from the opposite window of the college to enter the old abandoned house and sit for hours near the door, his head bowed, his fingers busy with note-book and pencil.

For some weeks this proceeding had continued with little variation. People noted it with diverse conjectures. Old men and women feared lest this man, whoever he might be,—a real estate agent perhaps—would bring about the restoration and sale of the old Harding home. These old-time friends, who had known and loved the father, Richard Harding, through youth and manhood, now rebelled against the possible disregard of his last request, which had become a heritage of the locality. With anxiety they watched the maneuvers of this mysterious

individual and drearily wondered what would result from his stay.

To young Harding the anxiety he had caused was unknown. Absorbed in his own affairs, he was too much occupied to think of the impression he was creating. His whole thought was given to gleaning the knowledge he required for the writing of the book by which he hoped to permanently mould southern opinion in conformity with his own against what he believed to be the shame of his native land.

It was an evening in the third month of his residence in Georgetown. Elliott Harding paused in his walk along the street not quite decided which way to go.

“She writes me she has drawn a ten-day draft for twenty-two hundred dollars,” he said to himself. “How on earth can I meet it? What shall I do about it? Let me think it out.” And checking his steps, which had begun to tend towards the college, where a reception to which he had been invited was being held, he took a turn or two in the already darkening street, and then started back to his rooms. In his mind, step by step, he traced out the possible consequences of action in the matter, but long consideration only confirmed his first impression that it was too late now to change the course of affairs so long existing.

“But how am I to meet this last demand?” he questioned. “There is but one way open to me,” he finally thought. “The old home must go.”

He nervously walked on, repeating to himself, “Mother! mother! I could never do this for anyone but you.”

With the memory of his beloved father so strong within him, it was difficult to bring himself to face the inevitable with composure. The turbulent working of his heart contended against the resignation of his brain, and, when for a moment he felt resigned, then the memory of his dead father's wish would rise up and protest, and the battle would have to be fought over again.

But what he considered to be duty to the living triumphed over what he held as loyalty to the dead, so the next time he went to the old homestead, "For Sale" glared coldly and, he even imagined, reproachfully at him. It was then that Elliott realized the immensity of his sacrifice and bowed his head in silent sorrow.

CHAPTER IV.

After that one time, Elliott Harding determined to face the inevitable and passed into the house without seeming to see the placard.

One day while sitting in his accustomed writing place, which was the parlor, now furnished with a table and office chair, a man walked up the front steps. Elliott had just finished writing the words "The glimpses of light I have gained make the darkness more apparent," when the man entered the doorway.

The stranger was a tall, lean individual with iron gray beard curving out from under the chin. Eyes dark, keen and deep set; cheekbones as high as an Indian's; hair iron gray and thick around the base of the skull, but thin and tangled over the top of the head, formed a combination striking and not unattractive. Though apparently far past his prime, he appeared to be as hearty and hale as if half the years of his life were yet to come. After gazing a moment at Elliott, he opened the conversation by saying:

"Good morning! I suppose you are the agent for this property?"

"I am, sir," answered Elliott, courteously. "Come in and have a seat," offering him his chair as he stood up and leaned against the writing table.

"I have come to make a bid for this place. I would like to buy it, if it is to be had at a reasonable figure. It is not for the land value alone that I want it," he went on, "it is the old home of my