

Angelina Grimke, Goldie

Goldie

By Angelina Grimke

HE HAD NEVER thought for the night before as so sharply black and white: but then he had never walked before three long miles, after midnight, over a country road. A short distance only, after leaving the railroad station the road plunged into the woods and stayed there most of the way. Even in the day, he remembered, although he had not traveled over it for five years, it had not been the easiest to journey over. Now, in the almost palpable darkness, the going was hard, indeed; and he was compelled to proceed, it almost seemed to him, one careful step after another careful step.

Singular fancies may come to one, at such times; and, as he plodded forward, one came, quite unceremoniously, quite unsolicited, to him and fastened its tentacles upon him. Perhaps it was born of the darkness and the ultra windlessness with the resulting great stillness; perhaps—but who knows from what fancies spring? At any rate, it seemed to him, the woods, on either side of him, were really not woods at all but an ocean that had flowed down in a great rolling black wave of flood to the very lips of the road itself and paused there as though suddenly arrested and held poised in some strange and sinister spell. Of course, all of this came, he told himself over and over, from having such a cursed imagination; but whether he would or not, the fancy persisted and the growing feeling with it, that he, Victor Forrest, went in actual danger, for at any second the spell might snap and with that snapping, this boundless, deep Upon deep of horrible, waiting sea, would move, rush, hurl itself heavily and swiftly together from the two sides, thus engulfing, grinding, crushing, blotting out all in its path, not excluding what he now knew to be that most insignificant of insignificant pigmies, Victor Forrest.

But there were bright spots, here and there in the going—he found, himself calling them white islands of safety. These occurred when the woods receded at some little distance from the road.

"It's as though," he thought aloud, "they drew back here in order to get a good deep breath before plunging forward again. Well, all I hope is, the spell holds O.K. beyond."

He always paused, a moment or so, on one of these islands to drive out expulsively the dark, black oppressiveness of the air he had been breathing and to fill his lungs anew with God's night air, that, here, at least, was sweet and untroubled. Here too, his eyes were free again and he could see the dimmed white blur of road for a space each way; and above, the stars, millions upon millions of them, each one hardly brilliant stabbing its way whitely through the black heavens. And if the island were large enough there was a glimpse scarcely more of a very pallid, slightly crumpled moon sliding furtively down the west—Yes, sharply black and sharply white, that was it, but mostly it was black.

AND as he went, his mind busy enough with many thoughts, many memories, subconsciously always the aforementioned fancy persisted, clung to him; and he was never entirely able to throw off the feeling of his very probable and imminent danger in the midst of this arrested wood-ocean.

--Of course, he thought, it was downright foolishness, his expecting Goldie, or rather Cy, to meet him. He hadn't written or telegraphed.--Instinct he guessed, must have warned him that wouldn't be safe; but confound it all! this was the devil of a road.--Gosh! What a lot of noise a man's feet could make--couldn't they?--All alone like this?--Well, Goldie and Cy would feel a lot worse over the whole business than he did.--After all it was only once in a lifetime, wasn't it?--Hoofing it was good for him, anyway.--No doubt about his having grown soft.--He'd be as lame as the dickens tomorrow.--Well, Goldie would enjoy that--liked nothing better than fussing over a fellow.--If (but he very resolutely turned away from that if).

--In one way, it didn't seem like five years and yet, in another, it seemed longer--since he'd been over this road last. It had been the sunshiniest and the saddest May morning he ever remembered.--He'd been going in the opposite direction then; and that little sister of his, Goldie, had been sitting very straight beside him, the two lines held rigidly in her two little gold paws and her little gold face stiff with repressed emotion. He felt a twinge,

yet, as he remembered her face and the way the great tears would well up and run down her cheeks at intervals.-- Proud little thing!--She had disdained even to notice them and treated them as a matter with which she had no concern.--No, she hadn't wanted him to go.--Good, little Goldie!--Well, she never knew, how close, how very close he had been to putting his hand out and telling her to turn back--he'd changed his mind and wasn't going after all.

He drew a sharp breath.--He hadn't put out his hand.

--And at the station, her face there below him, as he looked down at her through the open window of the train.-- The unwavering way her eyes had held his--and the look in them, he hadn't understood then, or didn't now, for that matter.

"Don't," he baid said. "Don't, Goldie!"

"I must, Vic, I must.--I don't know--Don't you understand I may never see you again?"

"Rot!" he had said. "Am I not going to send for you?"

--And then she had tried to smile and that had been worse than her eyes.

"You think so, now, Vic,--but will you?"

"Of course."

"Vic!"

"Yes."

"Remember, whatever it is--it's all right. *It's all right* .-I mean it.--See! I couldn't smile--could I?--if I didn't?"

AND then, when it had, seemed as if he couldn't stand any more--had leaned over, even to pick up his bag to get off, give it all up--the train had started and it was too late. The last he had seen of her, she had been standing there, very straight, her arms at her sides. and her little gold paws two little tight fists.--And her eyes!--And her twisted smile! God! that was about enough of that.--He was going to her, now, wasn't he?

--Had he been wrong to go?--Had he?--Somehow, now, it seemed that way.--And yet, at the time, he had felt he was right--He still did for that matter.--His chance, that's what it had meant--Oughtn't he to have had it?-- Certainly a colored man couldn't do the things that counted in the South. --To live here, just to live here, he had to swallow his self-respect. --Well, he had tried, honestly, too, for Goldie's sake, to swallow his.--The trouble was he couldn't keep it swallowed --it nauseated him--The thing for him to have done, he saw that now, was to have risked everything and taken Goldie With him--He shouldn't have waited, as he had from year to year, to send for her.--it would have meant hard sledding, but they could have managed somehow.--Of course, it wouldn't have been the home she had had here with her Uncle Ray and her Aunt Millie, still--Well, there wasn't any use in crying over split milk.--One thing was certain, never mind how much you might wish to, you couldn't recall the past.

--TWO YEARS AGO--Gosh! but time flew--when her letter had come telling him she had married Cy Harper.-- Queer thing, this life!--Darned queer thing!--Why he had been in the very midst of debating whether or not he could afford to send for her--had almost decided he could--Well, sisters, even the very best of them it turned out weren't above marrying and going off and leaving you high and dry--just like this--Oh! of course, Cy was a good enough fellow, clean, steadygoing, true, and all the rest of it;--no one could deny that--still, confound it all how could Goldie prefer a fathead like Cy to him.--Hm!--peevd yet, it seemed!--Well, he'd acknowledged it--he was peeved all right.

Involuntarily he began to slow up.

--Good! since he was acknowledging things--why not get along and acknowledge the rest.--Might just as well have this out with himself here and now.--Peeved first, then, what?

HE CAME to an abrupt stop in the midst of the black silence of the arrested wood ocean.

--There Was one thing, it appeared, a dark road could do for you--it could make it possible for you to see yourself quite plainly--almost too plainly.--Peeved first, then what? --No blinking now, the truth--He'd evaded himself very, cleverly--hadn't he?--up until tonight?--No use any more.--Well, what was he waiting for? Out with it.--Peeved first; go ahead, now--Louder!--Relief!--Honest, at last.--Relief! Think of it, he had felt relief. When he had learned he wasn't to be bothered, after all, With--little, loyal, big hearted Goldie. --Bothered!--And he had prided himself upon being rather a decent, upright, respectable fellow.--Why, if he had heard this about anybody else, he wouldn't have been able to find language strong enough to describe him--A rotter, that's what he was, and a cad.

"And Goldie would have sacrificed herself for you any time and gladly, and you know it."

T O HIS SURPRISE he found himself speaking aloud. Why once when the kid had been only eight years old and he had been taken with a cramp while in swimming, she had jumped in too!--Goldie, who couldn't swim a single stroke!--Her screams had done it and they were saved. He could see his mother's face yet, quizzical, a little puzzled, a little Worried.

"But what on earth Goldie, possessed yon to jump in too?" she had asked. "Didn't you know you couldn't save him?"

"Yes, I knew it."

"Then, why?"

"I don't know. It just seemed that if Vic had to drown, why I had to drown with him.--I just couldn't live *afterwards*, Momsey, if I lived *then* and he drowned."

"Goldie, Goldie!--If Vic fell out of a tree, would you have to fall out too?"

"Proberbly." Goldie had never been able to master "probably," but it fascinated her.

"Well, for heavens' sake, Vic, do be careful of yourself hereafter. You see how it is," his mother had said.

And Goldie had answered--how serious, how quaint, how true her little face had been--:

"Yes, that's how it is, isn't it?" Another trick of hers, ending, so often, what she had to say with a question.--And he hadn't wished to be bothered with her!--

He groaned and started on again.

--Well, he'd try to even up things a little, now.--He'd show her (there was a lump in his throat) if he could.

For the first time Victor Forrest began to understand the possibilities of tragedy that may lie in those three little words, "If I can."

--Perhaps Goldie had understood and married Cy so that he needn't bother any more about having to have her with him. He hoped, as he had never hoped, for anything before that this hadn't been her reason. She was quite equal to marrying, he knew, for such a motive--and so game, too, you'd never dream it was a sacrifice she was making. He'd rather believe even, that it had been just to get the little home all her own.

--When Goldie was only a little thing and you asked her what she wanted most in all the world when she grew up, she had always answered:

"Why, a little home--all my own--a cunning one--and young things in it and about it."

And if you asked her to explain, she had said:

"Don't you *know* ?--not really?"

And, then, if you had suggested children, she had answered:

"Of course, all my own; and kittens and puppies and little fluffy chickens and ducks and little birds in my trees, who will make little nests and little song there because they will know that the trees near the little home all my own are the very nicest ever and ever."

--Once, she must have been around fifteen, then--how well he remembered that once--he had said:

"Look here, Goldie; isn't this an awful lot you're asking God to put over for you?"

Only teasing, he had been--but Goldie's face!

"Oh! Vic, am I?--Do you *really* think that?"

AND THEN, BEFORE he could reply in little eager, humble rushes:

"I hadn't thought of it--that way--before--Maybe you're right--If--if--I gave up something perhaps--the ducks--or the chickens--or the--birds--or the kittens--or the puppies?"

Then very slowly:

"Or--the--children?--Oh!--but I couldn't--I couldn't--Not any of them,--Don't you think perhaps,--just perhaps Vic,--if--if--I'm--good--always--from now on--that--that -maybe--maybe--sometime, Vic, sometime--I--I--might? Oh! don't you?"

He shut his mouth hard.

--Well, she had had the little home all her own. Cy had made a little clearing, she had Written, Just beyond the great live oak. Did he remember it? And did he remember, too, how much Cy loved the trees?

--No, he hadn't forgotten that live oak--not the way he had played in it--and carved his initials all over it; and he hadn't forgotten Cy and the trees, either--Silly way, Cy had had, even after he grew up, of mooning among them.

"Talk to me--they do--sometime--Tell me big, quiet things, nice things."

--Gosh! after his experience, this night among them. *Love* 'em!--Hm!--Damned, waiting greedy things!--Cy could have them and welcome.

--It had been last year Goldie had written about the clearing with the little home all her own in the very "prezact" middle of it--They had had to wait a whole year after they Were married before they could move in--not finished or something--he'd forgotten the reason.--How had the rest of that letter gone?--Goldie's letters were easy to remember--had somehow a sort of burrlik quality about them. He had it now something like this:

She wished she could tell him how cunning the little home all her own was, but there was really no cunning word cunning enough to describe it--Why even the very trees came right down to the very edges of the clearing on all four sides just to look at it--If he could only see how proudly they stood there and nodded their entire approval one to the other!

Four rooms the little home--all her own, had-Four!--And a little porch in the front and a "littler" one in the back and a hall that had really the most absurd way of trying to get out both the front and rear doors at the same time.

Would he believe it they had to keep both the doors shut tight in order to hold that ridiculous hall in? Had he ever, in all his life, heard of such a thing? And just off this little hall at the right of the front door was their bedroom and back of this at the end of this same very silly hall was their dining room and opposite, across the hall again--she hoped he saw how this hall simply refused to be ignored--opposite was the kitchen.--He was, then, to step back into the hall once more, but *this* time he was to pretend very hard not to see it. There was no telling, it's vanity was so great, if you paid too much attention to it, what it might do. Why, the unbearable little thing might rise up, break down the front and back doors and escape; and then where'd they be, she'd like to know, without any little hall at all?--He was to step, then, quite nonchalantly--if he knew what that was, back into the hall and come forwards but this time he was to look at the room at the left of the front door; and *there*, if he pleased, he would see something really to repay him for his trouble, for here he would behold her sitting room and parlor both in one. And if he couldn't believe how perfectly adorable this little room could be and was, why she was right there to tell him all about it.--Every single bit of the little home all her own was built just as she had wished and furnished just as she had hoped. And, well, to sum it all up, it wasn't safe, if you had any kind of heart trouble at all to stand in the road in front of the little home all her own, because it had such a way of calling you that before you knew it, you were running to it and running fast. She could vouch for the absolute truth of this statement.

AND SHE HAD a puppy, yellow all over, all but his little heart--she dared him even to suggest such a little thing! --with a funny wrinkled forehead and a most impudent grin. And he insisted upon eating up all the uneatable things they possessed, including Cy's best straw hat and her own Sunday --go--to--meeting slippers. And she had a kitten, a grey one; and the busiest things he did were to eat and sleep. Sometimes he condescended to play with his tail and to keep the puppy in his place. He had a way of looking at you out of blue, very young, very innocent eyes that you knew perfectly well were not a bit young nor yet a bit innocent. And she had the darlinest, downiest, little chickens and ducks and a canary bird, that Emma Elizabeth lent her sometimes when she went away to work, and the canary had been made of two golden songs. And outside of the little home all her own--in the closest trees, the birds were, lots of them, and they had nested there.--If, of a morning, he could only hear them singing!--As if they knew--and did it on purpose--just as she had wished.

How happy it had all sounded--and yet--and yet--once or twice--he had had the feeling something wasn't quite right. He hoped it didn't mean she wasn't caring for Cy.--He would rather believe it was because there hadn't been children.--The latter could be remedied--from little hints he had been gathering lately, he rather thought it was already being remedied; but if she didn't *care* for Cy, there wasn't much to be done about that.--Well, he was going to her, at last.--She couldn't fool him--couldn't Goldie;--and if that fathead, Cyc, couldn't take care of her, he was here, now. Just let somebody start something.

--That break ahead there, in the darkness, ought to be just about where the settlement was.--No one need ever tell *him* again it was only three miles from the station--he guessed he

knew better.--More like ten or twenty.--The settlement, all right--Thought he hadn't been mistaken.--So far, then, so good.

The road, here, became the main street of the little colored settlement. Three or four smaller ones cut it at right angles and, then ran off into the darkness. The houses, for the most part, sat back, not very far apart; and, as the shamed moon had entirely disappeared, all he could make out of them was their silent, black little masses. His quick eyes and his ears were busy. No sound broke the stillness. He drew a deep breath of relief.

HE DID NOT pause until he was about midway of the settlement. Here he set his bag down, sat on it and looked at the illuminated hands of his watch. It was half past two. In the woods he had found it almost cold, but, in this spot, the air was warm and close. He pulled out his handkerchief, took off his hat, mopped his face, head and neck, finally the sweatband of his hat.

Queer!--but he wouldn't have believed that the mere sight of all this, after five years, could make him feel this way. There was something to this home idea, after all.--Didn't feel, hardly, as though he had ever been away.

Suddenly he wondered if old man Tom Jackson had fixed that gate of his yet. Curiosity got the better of him. He arose went over and looked. Sure enough the gate swung outward on a broken hinge. Forrest grinned.

"Don't believe over much here, in change, do they?--That gate was that way ever since I can remember.--Bet every window is shut tight too. 'Turrible' the night air always used to be.--Wonder if my people will ever get over these things."

He came back and sat down again. He was facing a house that his eyes had turned to more than any other.

"Looks just the same.--Wonder who lives there, now.--Suppose some one does.--Looks like it--Mother sure had courage--more than I would have had--to give up a good job in the North, teaching school to come down here and marry a poor doctor in a colored settlement. I give it to her.--Game! Goldie's just like her--she'd have done it too."

--How long had it been since his father had died?--Nine --ten--why, it was ten years and eight since his mother.- They'd both been born there--he and Goldie.--What was that story his mother used to tell about him when he had first been brought in to see her?--He had been six at the time.

"Mother," he had asked, "is her gold?"

"What, Son?"

"I say, is her gold?"

"Oh! I see," his mother had said and smiled, he Was sure, that very nice understanding smile of hers. "Why, she *is* gold, isn't she?"

"Yes, all of her. What's her name?"

"She hasn't any, yet, Son."

"(Her aint got no name?--Too bad! I dive her one. Hers name's Goldie. 'Cause."

"A11! right, Son, Goldie it shall be." And Goldie it had always been.

--No, you couldn't call Goldie pretty exactly.--Something about her, though, mighty attractive,--Different looking--that was it.-Like herself.--She, had never lost that beautiful even gold color of hers,--Even her hair was goldeny and her long eye-lashes.--Nice eyes, Goldie had, big and brown with flecks of gold in them--set in a little wistful, pointed face.

He came to his feet suddenly and picked up his bag. He moved swiftly, now, but not so swiftly as not to notice things still as he went.

"Why, hello " he exclaimed and paused a second or so before going on again. "What's happened to Uncle Ray's house?--Something's not the same.--Seems larger, somehow. --Wonder what it is?---Maybe a porch.--So they do change here a little.--That there ought to be Aunt Phoebe's house-But she must be dead--though I don't remember Goldie's saying so.--Why, she'd be way over ninety.--Used to be afraid of the dark or something and never slept without a dim light. --Gosh! if there isn't the light--just the same as ever!--And way over ninety.--Whew!--Wonder how it feels to be that old.--Bet I wouldn't like it.--Gee! what's that?"

VICTOR FORREST STOPPED short and listened. The sound was muffled but continuous, it seemed to come from the closed faintly lighted pane of Aunt Phoebe's room. It Was a sound, it struck him, remarkably like the keening he had heard in an Irish play. It died out slowly and though he waited it did not begin again.

"Probably dreaming or something and woke herself up," and he started on once more.

He soon left the settlement behind and, continuing along the same road found himself (he hoped for the last time) in the midst of the arrested wood-ocean.

But the sound of that keening, although he had explained it quite satisfactorily to himself had left him disturbed. Thoughts, conjectures, fears that he had refused, until now, quite resolutely to entertain no longer would be denied. They were rooted in Goldie's two last letters, the cause of his hurried trip South.

"Of course, there's no *real* danger.--I'm foolish, even, to entertain such a thought--Women get like that sometimes-nervous and overwrought--And if it is with her as I suspect and hope--why the whole matter's explained.--The letter didn't seem like Goldie, though, not a bit like her.--Why it had really sounded *frightened!* -and parts of it were--hm! --almost incoherent.--The whole thing's too ridiculous however, to believe.--Well, when she sees me we'll have a good big laugh over it all--Just, the same, I'm glad I came.--Rather funny--somehow--thinking of Goldie--with a kid--in her arms.--Nice, though."

--Lafe Coleman!--Lafe Coleman!--He seemed to remember dimly a stringy, long white man with stringy colorless hair quite disagreeably underclean; eyes a pale grey and fishlike.--He associated a sort of toothless grin, with that face.--No, that wasn't it, either.--Ah! that Was it!--He, had it clearly, now.--The grin was all right but it displayed the dark and rotting remains of tooth stumps.

He made a grimace of strong disquiet and loathing.

--And--this--this-*thing* had been annoying Goldie, had been in fact, for years. She hadn't told anybody, it seems, because she had been able to take care of herself--But since she had married and been living away, from the settlement--it had been easier for him, and much more difficult for her. He wasn't to worry, though, for the man was stupid and so far she'd always been able to outwit him --What she feared was Cy. It was true Cy was amiability itself--but--well--she had seen him angry once.--Ought she to tell him? She didn't believe Cy would kill the creature --not outright--but it would be pretty close to it. The feeling between the races was running higher than it used to.--There had been a very terrible lynching in the next county only last year.--She hadn't spoken of it before--for there didn't seem any use going into it--As he had never mentioned it, she supposed it had never gotten into the papers. Nothing, of course, had been done about it, nothing ever was. Everybody knew who were in the mob.--Even he would be surprised at some of the names.--The brother of the lynched man, quite naturally, had tried to bring some of the leaders to justice; and he, too, had paid with his life. Then the mob, not satisfied, had threatened, terrorized, cowed all the colored people in the locality.--He was to remember that when you were under the heel it wasn't the most difficult of matters to be terrorized and cowed. There was absolutely no law, as he knew, to protect a colored man. That was one of the reasons she had hesitated to tell Cy, for not only Cy and she might be made to pay for what Cy might do, but the little settlement as well. Now, keeping all this in mind, ought she to tell Cy?

AND THE LETTER had ended:

"I'm a little nervous, Vic, and frightened and not quite sure of my judgment. Whatever you advise me to do, I am sure will be right."

On the very heels of this had come the "Special" mailed by Goldie in another town.--She hadn't dared, it seemed, to post it in Hopewood.--It had contained just twelve words, but they had brought him South on the next train.

"Cy knows," it had said, "and O! Vic, if you love me, come, come, come!"

(To be concluded.)