

The Silence of Sorrowful Hours

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From
“The Blue and the Gray”
by
Francis Miles Finch

BY the flow of the inland river,
Whence the fleets of iron have fled,
Where the blades of the grave-grass quiver,
Asleep are the ranks of the dead.

• • •

From the silence of sorrowful hours
The desolate mourners go,
Lovingly laden with flowers
Alike for the friend and the foe.

• • •

So, when the summer calleth,
On forest and field of grain,
With an equal murmur falleth
The cooling drip of the rain.

In September, the wilting heat was more oppressive and the sound of sluggish flies bzzzz-ing in ever-widening circles was more monotonous. The smells of ripe apples, horse droppings, and lime from the garbage dump were dragged on the wind. But in September, as well, a soft morning breeze could carry the scent of wheat chaff as it floated across her face. All of it conspired to remind her of years of Septembers. Osborne had gone to war in September. She pushed up the loose strands of damp hair that had fallen out of the combs holding her hair in place.

Ethan knew it was the farm. The smaller Engle house on the Hanover Pike and the Hoffman farmhouse thirty yards beyond it were situated in the same positions. But what had been fields of ripened wheat, oats and soybeans was turned over to grassy pastures for mares and tawny spring-born foals almost as big as their mothers. The dirt path – dust in the summer, mud in the spring – was a graveled lane lined with elms. Judging by their size, they must have been planted soon after he left.

As he approached the house he could see it truly was the one he had lived in, but the door and trim were painted dark green like the oval sign on the road that announced the “Hoffmann Horse Farm”. Green-painted stables large enough to hold two dozen horses surrounded the old, red bank barn. As the buggy drew closer, Ethan saw a tall woman with straight back and square shoulders rise from a peacock blue rocking chair.

Chapter 1

When Ethan stepped down from the carriage on that September day in 1900, Angelise Lindstrom's first thought was, He's an old man. She caught herself and smiled; she was almost as old as he.

Rising from her rocker, she pushed a wisp of her mostly white hair behind her ear. "Ethan McElhannon, I would know you anywhere! Come up here." She held out her arms as he reached the porch stairs. "I'll get Annie to bring us some tea with chipped ice."

Ethan was still tall and thin, but his shoulders were rounded and his step was slower. His hairline had receded and his wooly hair was as white as snow. He wore a sober black suit and shiny black boots. Angelise called through the screen door for the tea.

"Miss Angelise, it's been a long time," Ethan said, using the handrail to steady himself up the steps. "And I'm Ethan Freeman now."

"Freeman. I like that. It's much better than McElhannon. But don't call me 'Miss Angelise'. I didn't like it then and I still don't," she scolded.

"Sorry," he laughed. "I should have known that would get you riled."

She laughed along with him as she thought back to the first time he called her "Miss Angelise." It was more than forty years since they had first met at her cabin by the creek. Another hot September day. Three years before the Confederacy fired on Fort Sumter. Five years before Gettysburg.

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Osborne introduced Ethan to Angelise in the cabin he had rebuilt for her by Plum Run along the eastern edge of their farm. The runaway slave with nettles in his matted hair and thorny scratches on his face and hands had been on the road for five days. He was tired, hungry, scared and dirty and a pungent odor emanated from his unwashed clothes. When Angelise tried to embrace him, he pulled back. Looking at the floor, trying to diminish his size by slumping, he stammered, "Pleased... pleased to... to... to meet you, ma... ma'am."

"My name is Angelise," she answered, smiling.

He shook his head and looked at her with contrition like a reprimanded child. "Mi... Mi... Miss Angelise," he said.

"Angelise." She stepped back from him but kept smiling, focusing her arctic blue eyes on his frightened ones, black as coals.

The long limbed woman pushed a wisp of her curly hair behind her ear. She was almost as tall as he but slim as a boy. Her skin was tanned and freckled, and her hair was streaked buttery by the sun. Ethan figured she was about sixteen; he wondered how she got so tall.

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While they talked distractedly about Ethan's train journey, Ruth Anne brought the tea and some butter cookies on a large, black Toleware tray. The screen door slammed behind her.

“Scuse me,” said the girl with sparkling blue eyes.

“I wish you could find a way to not do that, Annie.”

“Sorry, Mémé.” Ruth Anne performed a small, but playful curtsy.

“Ruth Anne, this is Mr. Mac... Mr. Freeman,” Angelise said. “He lived here a long time ago.” Ruth Anne’s eyes widened, but she did what was expected, she curtsied and smiled as she nodded her head at the old Negro man with a barely perceptible scar across his eye. “Ethan, Ruth Anne is Mariabella’s granddaughter.”

“Oh, my lord. Mari’s child.”

“Grandchild,” Angelise corrected.

“How time does pass us by,” said Ethan, a bit embarrassed. “I can hardly believe I’m seein’ Mariabella’s grandchild.” Looking at the girl, he said, “You put me in mind of the man who used to own this farm, Miss Ruth Anne. Your hair,” he said, patting the side of his own head. Ruth Anne’s long, wavy hair had a rich, mink brown color. “Your smile.”

“I hate my teeth,” Ruth Anne said. She thought they were too big, showed too much gum when she smiled.

“But your smile is pretty and your dimples are so like Osborne’s.” Ethan stopped. He looked at Angelise. “Don’t they remind you of him?” he asked.

Angelise didn’t reply, but instead reprimanded the girl. “Please, Ruth Anne, don’t say ‘hate’.”

“Yes, Mémé,” Ruth Anne said, giving another small curtsy as she turned to go back into the house.

“Don’t let it slam,” Angelise said as the door slammed. “That child!” She frowned at Ethan.

“But you love her.”

“With all my heart.”

“My, my, my,” Ethan said, shaking his head at the old woman sitting next to him. They were on the porch of the farmhouse where treachery and mourning had taken place so many years ago. Angelise looked the same except the color of her hair, and she had a bit more flesh on her bones. Her eyes were still as surprising as the blue winter sky after nothing but gray for days.

The three-story, dormered farmhouse looked the same. Made of stone, mortar and wood, it had withstood generations and the storms of many seasons. There was no sign of disrepair about the old house – no chipped paint, no worn boards, no cracking mortar between the stones. Spic and span, top to bottom.

“What about you, Ethan? Do you have grandchildren?”

“Plenty of grandchildren,” he said, smiling broadly. “Fifteen.”

“Goodness gracious, man, you must be as proud as a rooster on a one-rooster chicken farm.” She paused. Then, in a somber voice, she said, “I’m sorry about your wife.”

“She had a good long life.” He paused for a moment to control the quivering of his chin. “She got to play with most of the little ones. Some not so little now.”

“I wish I had met her.”

“The New Mexico air agreed with her. And she loved that River Grandy.”

“And you? Are you still working?”

“No. Colonel Anthony gave me a nice pension a few years back. And the carriage house – for as long as I live...”

“Do any of the children or grandchildren live with you?”

“Our youngest, Nathaniel, stayed with us ‘til my wife passed.”

“We have so much to catch up on,” Angelise said, pushing a loose curl behind her ear. She stood up; she wanted to put off the harder conversations. “Let me show you to your room. Maybe you’d like to freshen up or take a nap before supper.”

“Don’t mind if I do, Miss Angelise. I’ve been on that train since early this mornin’ – and quite a few more since I left Albuquerque.”

Angelise opened the door and ushered Ethan into the cool dark house whose walls whispered the secrets spoken there.

“I hope you’ll be comfortable here. There’s fresh water in the pitcher and there’s a hand towel here.” She picked up the embroidered flannel folded on the marble topped washstand, then laid it down again, smoothing the corner. “I can bring you anything you need ... I ...”

“This was Nelson’s room,” Ethan said. “This bed looks like one I’ve slept in before.”

“It very likely is, *mon ami*,” she said. “It has new feathers, of course,” she added.

“Thank the good Lord for that,” he said.

Angelise’s head snapped around to face him, but when she saw Ethan’s broad grin, she laughed. “I forgot how mocking you could be.”

“I meant no disrespect,” he said, returning her laughter, easing the awkwardness of their first moments together after thirty-five years.

“None taken, sir.” Angelise moved toward the door. “I’ll leave you now. The water closet’s at the end of the hall and there’s a new bathroom next to it, if you want a bath. Let me know and I’ll start the fire for the water.”

“I’m sure I can light the stove, ma’am.”

Angelise grated at the “ma’am”. It made her feel old and slightly patronized. “The water’s pumped in now and the toilet flushes.”

“Good to know you’re keepin’ up with the times,” he said with a grin.

Angelise smiled with delight, the lovely familiarity of talking with an old friend.

Before she could close the door, Ethan spoke up. “Angelise, I need to know, if you don’t mind, if Mariabella is still alive?”

“No. I’m sorry.” Angelise closed the door behind her.

Ethan’s heart stumbled; he put his hand to it to steady its flow.

“He’s a very old man, Mémé.” Ruth Anne said when Angelise told her they would be napping.

“Not much older than I, Chérie.”

“Well he looks it.”

“He’s had a hard life.”

“Sorry, Mémé.”

“It’s all right. Now, don’t disturb me for at least two hours.”

“Yes, Mémé.”

“Don’t slam the door, if you go out.”

“Yes, Mémé.”

“Set the table and...”

“Mémé...” Ruth Anne whined.

“Set the table.”

“Yes, Mémé.”

After washing up, Ethan removed his boots and braces and hung his new suit jacket over the back of a wooden chair by the window. He placed his new hat on a hook inside the wardrobe. It was a small brimmed black felt he had bought in Harrisburg right before boarding the train.

Angelise had never seen Ethan in a suit and the only hat he wore in those days was an old one Osborne had given him. He almost lost it when he went to Maryland to cut the telegraph wires at a train depot on the Baltimore & Ohio line. That was the last time Ethan tried to get his wife and daughters. It was a secondary reason for their mission, but it was the part he had pinned his hopes on.

He removed his shirt collar and then his new white shirt. Using a hangar from the wardrobe, he hung the shirt on the latch of the open window, hoping it would dry before dinner. He had soaked it through from the heat and his nerves. Sitting in the floral slip-covered chair next to the west-facing window, he pulled off his boots. This simple, familiar act set his mind back to the day he had first arrived at the Hoffmann farm in 1858.