

The Broken Heart

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

Angela's father had returned home. He had come upon her birthday; she was twelve years old. She had almost forgotten her father, it was so long since she had seen him. Not since she had left India herself, seven years ago. And Angela's mother, she had not come. It was long before Angela clearly understood why, and why there came no more the beautiful letters she so loved, from that mother, who was named Angela too.

It was when Angela's father came home that her irresponsible, short life changed to her. The first night of his arrival, she had awakened to find him gazing down upon her with a look she could not understand, so eager, so hungry, so despairing it was. He then sank upon his knees by her cot, putting his arms about her, saying, as though speaking to a woman, "Comfort me, my daughter; comfort me." She put her little hands about his neck, and, with the instinctive gesture of a mother hushing her babe, pressed his face upon her tiny breast.

"Poor father!" she said; "I will sing you to sleep."

She started a lullaby in a high, childish treble, which, after a few spasmodic efforts to continue, wavered off into silence.

When she woke it was morning; she dressed with speed and impatience. A new responsibility had dawned upon her. No doll had ever been added to her over-numerous family that had given her thoughts so deep as these. There had been a last letter from that dear dream-mother, and in it she had written, "I shall be always with you, though you will not see me." "Always with her," Angela thought; she who had been so far away: she who had been invisible for years—nearer, though invisible still. Then in the letter she had also read, "Comfort your father; be good to him: his is a deep and terrible trouble."

Yes! that was the sentence that thrilled her. Here was responsibility! All the motherhood that lies in the breast of the woman-child was awakened. All the care that had gone to the large family of wax images was withdrawn. Not without a struggle; not without a tear; not without a last comforting mother-touch to the dresses and a more easy placing of stuffed limbs when the babies were laid reverently away in their box. Not without a lingering, backward look at Alexander's wide, blue eyes, and Angel's bald though much-respected head.

Yes, she would comfort Father, though what was his great hidden trouble she could not imagine. He never spoke to her of trouble. He was quiet and grave. He seldom smiled, but he never cried. Most big people were quiet—not so quiet as Father, perhaps—but then, big people were so hard to understand. Why, they laughed when Angel was run over, and her beautiful china legs, with the blue boots on, cut right off. And yet it seemed as though her own little heart must break when she saw the dreadful accident. She remembered, too, how when little Charlie from next door had come screaming into their hall, saying his father was lying on the floor and would not waken; that he was dead—she remembered how the old nurse, who had taken care of her since she came from India, had rushed to the next house at the child's cries, to be met by a smiling man-servant, who whispered something to her, and she had gone back clicking her tongue against her palate, as she did when Angela was naughty. Angela remembered how she and the little boy, being told to run away and play, sat beneath a bush watching the house afraid to move till the mystery was cleared up. How she imagined the man-servant must have killed the boy's father; how the boy paled when she told him so, yet showed the glimmer of an excitement

at the possession of a tragedy. How cruel they thought those grown-up people, whose world was so much calmer than their own. How amazed they were, and even disappointed, to see, after a couple of hours, the boy's father walk out of the house—a little unsteady, perhaps—with a flushed face and a dim eye. Not till she was grown up did she know that there was a tragedy, after all.

When she had dressed and breakfasted, she ran to her father. She found him in his study, walking up and down, up and down, as if he could not tire. She slipped in and bid by the door, and, as he passed, jumped out upon him. He did not start or laugh, as she had meant him to, but the lines about his forehead deepened. He took her into his arms, and, seating himself with her upon his lap, gazed into her little face.

"Not a feature of hers, not a look!" he said. "O my God!" He put her down and forgot her, walking up and down the room without pause. The child, hurt and frightened, commenced to cry. At the sound he stopped and gathered her to him.

"Poor little one!" he soothed her; "do not cry. Tears are not for the young; and the old," he added pitifully, "are denied them." Putting the child down, he took her by the hand. "Have you nothing pretty to show me?" he said.

The child skipped beside him like a young lamb.

"There's a nest," she cried, "in Donald's Field. But it is a long way, a very long way, maybe a mile."

He smiled down upon her. "I think I can manage it."

She got her hat, and they started together; her joy was high, and she chatted to her father incessantly, only receiving incoherent answers from him in return. She felt she was doing her duty nobly. After a time she got weary, and stumbled often as she went. She asked her father frequently, "Was he tired?" and looked doubtful when he answered, "No." The more exhausted she got the more she imagined he must be also. She wished she could offer to carry him; her heart was full of tenderness towards him. When they arrived at the field she ran forward. She climbed the stile to reach to him her hand. He must have smiled had he noticed her solicitude. She thought he must be getting blind, he was so heedless as he walked; he would have stumbled over tufts of grass and straying brambles, had she not been there to guide him. She thought he could not see well, his gaze was so distant. The truth was he saw more than the present. His eyes were dulled by the pressure of lost dreams against them. His ears filled with the notes of a lost voice. He went half blind and half deaf.

She reached the bush where the nest was. She let go his hand, and, springing forward, drew the branches asunder; but her face fell as she looked. The nest was broken, and the young birds destroyed or stolen.

"Oh!" she cried, "they are gone!"

He stooped beside her.

"Alas! the pretty home."

"And my little birds, where are they, my father?"

"God knows," he answered bitterly. "The birds are gone and the nest broken; the destroyer has been here too. It is always so."

"Does he come to all the nests?" she said. And he answered, following his own bitter thoughts,—

"Always."

The child was silent. They returned home. She clung to her father's hand, too weary to speak. She was afraid to say how tired she was, for fear he should offer to carry her. He strode on, with

long, quick steps that she found it difficult to keep up to. Her lips were quivering, and the tears would keep rolling down her cheeks. She turned away her head from him so that he could not know, for fear of troubling him. She was full of weariness and grief. Had he not said all the nests were broken in the world and the little birds within them dead? She ran by his side, choking down her tears, for the young are very strong in their nobleness.

When she at last reached home, and away from her father's eyes, she ran into her nurse's arms and let her tears fall.

The good woman hushed her and understood.

"He forgets you in his own trouble," she muttered. "It is not right." She smoothed the child's hair and looked into her face. "What a pity you are not like your mother, darling; it would have drawn him to you. But, being like himself, he shuts you too away from happiness along with his own heart."

The child dried her tears to listen to her nurse. Was she saying something against her father?

"I will ask him to let you go to your aunt's," the woman continued. "It's not right for a child to be in this sad house."

The child flung herself away. What! leave her father! Never! She was going to live with him always—always—to mind him and comfort him.

The woman was aghast at her rage.

"But your pretty cousins. Think of the games you can have with them."

"I won't go!" the child cried. "I will stay with Father."

She ran downstairs and opened the door of his room. He was sitting at the fire with a long tress of hair upon his hand. He was smoothing it upon his fingers and curling it around them. She thought she heard him sob. She ran to him and put her arms around his neck. He drew himself away and hastily put the lock of hair into his pocket-book.

With the strange wisdom of a child, she knew she was not to ask what he had been doing. She saw that his eyes were dry, and laughed. What made her think he was crying? Grown-up people never cry. She laughed again.

"I am not going away—never," she said. "I shall not go to my aunt's, but will stay with you."

"What you like, dearest," he answered.

"When I am grown up," she continued, "we will have a little cottage all covered with roses, and I will do all the work for you; but it will be long, long years before I am grown up.

She felt him sigh, "Oh! the years, the lonely years."

"But I will be with you," she said; "you won't be lonely then." He stroked her hair.

"I love you," she whispered, nestling closer to him.

"And I you," he answered. He kissed her, and then her nurse came to take her away.

She half hoped he would tell her not to go, but he did not. Before she was at the door he had his head upon his hands, gazing into the fire. Twice she called to him "Good-night" before he heard, and turned to her with a start to answer,—

"Good-night, my darling."

While she was with him he never bid her go or stay, it seemed indifferent to him which she did. "She is nothing to him," the nurse said to her fellow-servant. And the child heard and sobbed herself to sleep. When the morning came she went to him.

"You do love me," she said; and he answered that he did. "And you could not possibly do without me." He answered as she wished; and from that day she was with him every minute she could be. She felt she was indispensable to him, and that without her he would be wretched. From being childish and backward for her age, she became precocious and clever. From being

full of dreams and fond of playing, she became practical and busy. She brought him his slippers, and knitted and sewed for him hideous things that he never wore. She waited upon him like a slave, and he took it all without notice. With all her efforts the child could not break through the doors of knowledge and years, and so reach and understand him. This in a vague way she was conscious of.

Often she played her silent games at his feet, hoping he would not resist their pleasure and join her, but he never did. She played her little tunes upon the piano, a performance the mistress in the school was so proud of, and paused often for his approval; but it never came. Only when she drew his head upon her shoulder, or was directly speaking to him, did he seem to really know she was with him, and wake from his dreaming. Yet she was full of her quaint conceit that he could not do without her.

Every morning she arose, she counted another day off her years—"I will be a woman soon." She plied herself to her tasks, and worked until she grew pale and tired. She won prizes at school, and praise.

One night as she sat with her father in the garden, he spoke as he had never done before in her presence. Perhaps it was the great sad beauty of Nature in the night that beat upon his heart, till it broke with a cry.

"Where are you?" he cried, in a voice of agony. "Come to me."

The child was gathering roses in the dusk, some way from him. She was startled by his passion, and kept still.

"I cannot live without you," he continued. "O God, the loneliness! the loneliness!"

The child rose and threw herself into his outstretched arms. "I am here," she sobbed. "I will not leave you again."

The man pulled himself together. "It is you, poor child! poor child!"

She never forgot that night in the following days. Not an hour was she from him, that she could help. Even in the night she would often awake, and fancying she heard that cry, "Come to me," would creep to his door to listen.

It was on one of these wanderings that a great fear came to her. As she crouched listening by the door, she heard her father's voice speak in a tone of deep agony.

"O destroyer of the beautiful!" he cried, "why have you pursued me, to rob me of my heart's treasure, and leave my home to me desolate?"

He paused, and the child could hear him walking restlessly up and down the room. Her heart beat in great blows. Who was with her father? Who was this terrible destroyer who killed the young birds, and was now inside with her father? Who was he who had robbed that dear father of his heart's treasure. Would he open the door, and fall upon her, a little girl, to devour her? She clutched the handle to prevent it from turning. Her father, hearing the rattle, cried out, "Come," and she pushed the door and sprang to his side. She hid in his arms, and only after a moment's comforting did she spy from his safe keeping to look about the room. There was no one there. She sat up in her father's arms.

"Why are you here?" he said. "What has frightened you?"

She did not answer. The warmth and light, the comfort of his presence dispelled her alarm. She did not remember that she had been so afraid.

The man looked into her little face, so flushed with sleep and excitement. His gaze dwelt upon the smooth brow that bore no wrinkle of heavy thought, on the clear, innocent eyes that had not recognised sin, on the round cheeks glowing with childhood, on the parted mouth that was still bowed in its baby outline, with never a trace upon it yet to show an evil hour.

“Little soft face,” he whispered, “so precious with youth, must you one day change like mine—so old, so hard, so sorrowful? Will you, too, shun the sunlight, and only cry in the shadow for the great destroyer to come and give you oblivion?”

The child pressed closer, and gazed about the room.

“Do not let him have me!” she cried in terror. “Hold me tight!”

The man at her movement awoke from his thoughts. “Poor little one! he is not here,” he said; “he will not get you. I will keep you from him.” He smiled bitterly. “I will keep you from him.”

He bore the child up to her room, and stayed beside her till she slept.

After this he became the one thought of her days, and his love and dependence upon her, as she imagined it, became alike her joy and alarm. Nearly a year passed since his return, and she became old for her short years. Already she had mapped out her future interwoven with his. She had studied with one intent. Her reading was beyond her, but she persevered. She frequented his room in his absence to read some of the books he read, which she did without in the least understanding them. She saw him grow more grey and weary, and thought he leant more heavily upon her.

So the years began to roll past. The child became a girl, and the girl a maiden. All these different periods were devoted to the same ideal—to be her father’s prop and comfort. In very truth she was the foundation of his home. Her young shoulders took the responsibility of life upon them early. With the little money he allowed her, she set the domestic wheels in motion, and they never creaked. He stinted and saved, keeping the house from every luxury, grudging himself, and therefore her, everything save the barest necessities. And why? Because he was laying by a fortune in her name.

He was her ideal; she worshipped him as only those who are young enough to keep an ideal can. She would sit in the room watching him work, never knowing his work was one that would leave him free, when finished, to go from her for ever. Yet that was the day he longed and prayed for over his papers. She thought him completely happy, in his quiet way. And when a friend once said in her presence, “Since he came from India he has been a broken man,” it came upon her with a shock. Was there any side of him she did not know—something a stranger would notice and not herself, she who had lived beside him for years? She watched him closely, but could discover no difference from what he had been since she had known him.

Just in this way do many go through life beside one constant companion, in whose heart they dream themselves the sole beloved tenant, whose every thought they fancy they can read. And all the time the soul beside them, even while they stand cheek to cheek and lip to lip, is shrieking, broken, bleeding, alone, so terribly alone, going down, down, down to its destined end.

One day the man raised his head, and closed his books with a sigh of gladness.

“It is done,” he said, “at last.”

He became aware of eyes watching him, and turned to see a young man. He was struck with the face, so fair was it with youth. It flashed upon him that such was the boy in the poem, who started up the Alpine heights with his banner—Excelsior! Hope! Onward! Life! All mottoes written upon the bright brow, in the clear eyes, on the smiling, nervous mouth. Under his gaze the youth flushed and stammered,—

“I want your help.”

The man was surprised.

“What is it?” he questioned.

“Your daughter,” the youth faltered; “I love her; she will not marry me—will you help me?”

“My daughter! She is a little child,” the father replied, smiling.

“She is old enough to know love,” the young man answered, smiling too.

“But who are you?”

“My father was Gerald Donaldson.”

“A good fellow, a dear fellow—and he is dead?”

“He died a month after you left India—five years ago.

“Only five years, and they so long, so long!”

“I am not badly off,” the young man pursued. “I have two thousand a year”—he smiled—“and expectations. I have plenty of friends who can tell you all you wish to know about me personally.”

Angela’s father looked upon him. “You have a good face. It is worth all the credentials in the world. I could trust you. Where have I seen you before?”

“I have been introduced to you four times,” the young man said, laughing. “But you always forgot me the moment I was out of sight.”

The man apologized.

“I will forget the slight,” the young man said, smiling, “if you will induce your daughter not to follow your example. But, oh, sir,” he added seriously, “I love her dearly, and I beg you to speak to her in my favour.”

“Angela will have money whether she marries or not,” the father said, as though thinking aloud. “Only a little, but enough to keep her in comfort. It took me five long years to make it, but at last I have done it, thank God!”

The youth said eagerly: “I do not care for that. I have plenty for both. Only tell her to be kind to me.

The older man looked at him. “She is but a little girl,” he said, “not old enough.”

“She is seventeen,” the young man argued, “and we can wait a couple of years, if you wish.”

“Seventeen!” The father looked into the garden, where his daughter walked. “Angela, come here,” he called.

She came through the open window to his side. He looked at her little slender figure. What was this? It had developed from childish angles into soft curves and dimples. He looked into her face, and beheld there upon her cheek the flush of womanhood. Her eyes no longer gazed upon the world as though they were still new to it, but were deep with soft emotions coming from within. Her lips had lost the baby roundness, and had been modelled into sweet lines, that told of smiles, and power, and gentleness. He felt shy of her, as though he did not know her.

“You are a stranger,” he said, dropping her hands.

The girl was wounded. “Father!” she said, and could say no more. She could have told his every movement—every wrinkle that the years had added, every new tress of white that came among his brown hair. She knew his step along the road before she saw him. She could almost tell how he looked at every hour of the day, what his rare smile was like, and what the habitual frown that sorrow had laid upon his forehead.

“Forgive me, dear,” he said, drawing her to him.

The young man smiled nervously upon them. “I shall leave you together,” he said anxiously; “you will do the best you can for me, sir?”

When the door closed after him, the man turned to his daughter.

“So you will not marry him?” he said gently. “Why?”

“I had not thought of marrying,” the girl answered, looking into his eyes with unfaltering gaze.

“Do you not love him?”

“I had not thought of loving,” said the girl, flushing softly.

“Why, what a hard heart!” replied the father, smiling; “and yet he is handsome and honest.”

“It is not hard,” the daughter replied; “but it is already full—I think there is no room for any one there but you.” She wound her arms round his neck, he took her upon his knees, as he used to do when she was a child. He spoke to her of his property. He told her that everything was straight now, and that she would have quite a little fortune.

“For years,” he said, “I was afraid you would lose it; but it is safe at last, little girl.”

She was glad for his sake, but she felt she did not want more than she had. She was quite happy, quite content, as long as he was with her.

“You love me, too?” she said, in a childlike way.

“I love you very much.”

“And you could not do without me?” she questioned playfully.

“I could not indeed, dear little comrade. Now go to bed and sleep well.”

“And you will sleep well, dear father, now your business worry is over?”

“Yes, to-night I shall sleep well—for I am tired, so tired.”

He kissed her upon the face and hair, and smiled upon her as she blew a kiss to him from the door. She had never seen him so gay. She thought what a lover he must have been when he was young, and how handsome. She imagined a bride—her mother—beautiful enough to be his mate; but imagination failed. She marshalled several dream-mothers before her, but none were lovely enough for him.

“Oh, mother,” she said, “if I could only remember your face!”

In truth her mother was not beautiful, but enough to drag a man’s soul through the gates of death with her, and not leave go her hold upon him till he followed.

So Angela lay upon her bed quite happy.

“Father’s comrade,” that was what she would be. She fell asleep to dream of it, and then awoke with a start, as though something had happened. What had she heard? She did not know; only something had awakened her—some noise. She jumped from her bed, cast a wrapper about her. There were confused voices in the nurse’s room—the old nurse and the fellow-servant talking excitedly together. She heard them asking each other, “What did you hear?” So they, too, did not know what had happened. Her first thought was for her father. She must go to him, and see if he was in danger. She ran downstairs upon her little bare feet, and paused at the study door.

There was no sound. But at the hall door came a soft knocking. Could this have been the noise that woke her? She opened it slightly, and asked who was there.

“It is I, Alfred Donaldson,” the young man said, coming into the hall. “Angela, what is the matter? I—I was walking past”—in truth he had been standing beneath her window for an hour—“and I heard a shot.”

“I don’t know; I was asleep,” she said, as she crossed the hall to the door of her father’s room. She opened it softly, and heard her father’s voice, infinitely tender.

“Angela, Angela, come to me, Angela.”

“I am here, father,” she replied, as she sprang into the room.

The light was still burning. She could see her father in the arm-chair before the fire. His head hung upon his breast. There was a strange red upon his cheek. In the hand that lay upon his knees was a pistol, the grey smoke still hovering about it.

The women came clattering down the stairs, excited and afraid. “What was the shot?” “Where had it come from?” They stood at the open door, and saw the tragedy—the dying man, with his great selfish love at peace at last. And there was the little white daughter, standing in the middle of the room, afraid to go nearer. She was nothing to him—nothing at all! She cried in a terrified

voice, "Father! father!" and at the sound he moved his arms towards her with a beautiful smile. "Angela, Angela, after all the years—at last."

The girl clung to him, and the red stain came upon her hair from his cheek.

But even then his head turned away from her in the stillness of death, and she rose and walked blindly into the loving arms that closed around her and held her through her great sorrow.