

HOW IT HAPPENED.

By JAMES WHITCOMB RILEY.

I got to thinkin' of her—both her parents dead and gone—And all her sisters married off, and none but her and John—A-livin' all alone there in that lonesome sort o' way, And him a blame old bachelor, confirmder every day! I'd known 'em all from children, and their daddy fit the time. He set in the neighborhood, and hadn't a cent. Er dollar, when he married, fer to start house-keepin' on—So I got to thinkin' of her—both her parents dead and gone!

I got to thinkin' of her, and a-wundern what she done That all her sisters kep' a gittin' married, one by one, And her without no chances—and the best girl of the pack—An old man with her hands, you might say, tied behind her back! And mother, too, afore she died, she us to jes' take on, When none of 'em was left, you know, but Eva-line and John, And jes' declare to goodness' at the young men must be blime To see what a wife they'd git if they got Eva-line!

I got to thinkin' of her; in my great affliction she Was such a comfort to us, and so kind and neighborly! She'd come and leave her housework, fer to he'p out little Jane, at she'd never see again—Maybe sometimes cry together—though, fer the most part, she Would have the child so reconciled and happy-like at we Felt lonesom'er ever she'd put her bonnet on And say she'd rally haf' to be a-gittin' back to John!

I got to thinkin' of her, as I say—and more and more I'd think of her dependence, and the burdens 'at she bore—Her parents both a-bein' dead, and all her sisters gone—And married off, and her a-livin' there alone with John—You might say jes' a-toolin' and a-slavin' out her life For a man 'at hadn't pride enough to git hisse' a wife—Less some one married Evaline, and packed her off some day!—So I got to thinkin' of her—and it happened that away.

WITHOUT THE SHADOW OF A DOUBT.

When I looked at Elizabeth as she stood there before me, I understood fully, and for the first time, why she refused to marry me just yet, and in my heart I could not blame her.

Picture to yourself a fresh and charming young girl in brave attire—that is, in a silken robe made ridiculously long and looped up ridiculously high, with a defiantly flaring affair of ribbon and lace and feathers towering above a most bewildering arrangement of puffs and frizzles, from which elaborate structure one poor little golden curl had escaped and run away over her shoulders; with silver bangles upon her perfect arms, and jewels in her bits of ears, and a delicate perfume floating like incense about her—and you have Elizabeth as she appeared that summer morning when we discussed the momentous question of our marriage and its possible consequences. She was speaking:

"I mean to say, my dear boy, that we could never live upon what you earn—never! It would barely give us bread. Don't frown, Julian; you know that I would only be a drag upon you. I am such a helpless, ignorant creature. I can dress and dance, and play the piano a little, and I don't believe that I know a girl who can do any more. It is a great mistake, I suppose, letting us crop up into such worthlessness; but there! the mischief is done, and we can't help it, can we? Of course not. Now see, dear, you must remember that father refuses to listen to us, and as I have not a penny of my own—"

"You do not need a penny!" I interrupted, angrily. "Will not my life, with all its years and possibilities, be yours, to reign over for ever?"

"Nonsense!" laughed Elizabeth. "Come now, get to work, like a brave fellow, and paint something grand—something that will make you famous. Can't you?"

I shook my head despondently.

"At least you will try?"

"Yes, and fail once more."

"I lost all patience with you!" exclaimed my companion, her blue eyes flashing, warningly. "You provoke me past endurance. What! Am I not worth trying for? Paint portraits, then, and leave off those fussy old historical things. Why, some men have become famous at portrait-painting—haven't they?"

"Oh, as for portraits, yes," I answered, nonchalantly. "I am quite willing to venture upon that field, for there is Miss Talbot—she has offered me sitting more than once."

I glanced furtively at Elizabeth, and saw that my shot had told. Her eyes fell, a vivid flush stained her cheeks, and that pretty, pouting nether lip quivered piteously. Only for a second, however. Then she looked up fearlessly, and said, without a tremor in her voice:

"You speak of Miss Talbot because you think that I am jealous of her. You are wrong. I do not pretend to deny that I have been jealous—frightfully so, even—but that feeling is dead now, Julian, and you have just killed it. Ah, believe me, I may be very silly in many respects, but I have my own ideas about some things, and especially about lovers, and can tell you, sir, that the man I love is placed as far above other men as heaven is above the earth. He cannot do anything dishonorable; but if you—"

"Well, and if I should, what then?" I asked, mimicking her emphasis.

Elizabeth dismissed the subject with a wave of her little white hand.

"It is three o'clock!" she exclaimed, looking at her watch. "Goodness! Aunt Janet will be frantic. I am going, Julian."

"You will come again to-morrow to see this picture?"

"I think not; I may be busy. Wait, I must leave you these—some fresh, sweet violets; I gathered them expressly for you."

I received the little cluster of flowers indifferently enough. That Elizabeth had worn them on her bosom and blushingly detached them was to me a matter of small import then.

"Tell me good-by, please," she murmured.

"Shall it be good-by or farewell?"

She did not answer, so I kissed the tempting lips that were raised to mine, said something—I don't remember what—something cold and cruel, no doubt, and presently stood alone upon the threshold of my studio, listening to the rustle of a silken robe, the tinkling of bangles, and

the clinking of little bottles as she sped swiftly down the stairway. Then I returned to my work, grimly resolute.

"That chapter in my life is ended," I said, to myself. "It was very sweet, but very silly. To-morrow I will write to the poor child and release her from all her promises. Little simpleton! She has her ideas of what a lover should be, has she? By Jove! she was sensible in refusing to marry me. And I not only imagined that I was in love, but fancied that she—bah! I am an idiot! A girl like that, and so mercenary—and, by heavens! not ashamed to tell it, either! Well, I suppose she will marry some rich fool. I hope so."

I have said that I went to work; it was not—I could not work. Somehow the sunlight seemed no longer to freshen and brighten up the room. It was a gloomy place at the best, but now it seemed horribly lonely and cheerless.

Then, too, thoughts of Elizabeth and of my miserable position were half-crazing me, for, despite my pretended indifference, I was madly in love, and knew it.

"By all the gods of pagan Rome she shall be my wife, if she cares enough about it to wait for me!" I mentally exclaimed, for, like an inspiration, a plan of action had suddenly suggested itself, and I resolved to lose no time in putting it into execution.

I had a friend—an old college chum—Fred Denbigh, a royal good fellow—free-hearted, open-handed, and as loyal as a Scot. Putting aside my brushes, I sought Denbigh; then we dined together, and soon afterward I returned to my room alone.

Late that evening, when I went out again, I could have met my principal creditor and safely defied the danger of recognition. I had sacrificed my beard—that profusely flowing beard which, if somewhat untidy, was also of that picturesqueness most kindly affected by artists. I had sacrificed it without a pang, and by so doing had completely destroyed my own identity.

In point of fact, I was now a tall, well-built, and clean-shaven young fellow, not altogether bad-looking, and certainly attired with the most scrupulous regard to neatness and refinement.

Nor was I Julian Vancourt—I was plain John Warner, and I was to start at midnight for the West, commissioned by Denbigh to look after certain claims in which he had an interest.

Two weeks later I read in a New York paper a long account of the mysterious disappearance and supposed suicide of Julian Vancourt, an artist of recognized ability, who, after years of honorable endeavor, had attained an envied position in his profession, and bade fair to become one of the greatest historical painters of the age.

I laid aside the paper with a curious sort of shiver; I felt like a man might feel who had just seen his own tombstone. But, then, I was dead, you know—legally so, at least. A letter from Denbigh followed close upon the paper. Here is an extract:

"The pictures went off like wildfire. Each brought a fabulous price. Everything is sold, and Colonel Shinstone bought your 'Jephtha's Daughter' because it resembles his daughter, I suppose. At any rate, he has it. He was at the sale, looking grimmer and sterner than ever. I have heard that — is ill. No one seems to see much of her, and her friends say the same spiteful things about her and the dead man, poor girl!"

I was a wretch; but there, it was too late now to undo what had been done, so I went about my work with a will, and in that way sought to lessen any regret that might arise at the loss of so close a friend as that poor beggar of a painter. Maybe, after all, there was a deeper regret for someone else, but if there was, I never acknowledged it, even to myself. Yet, as the months wore on, and the anniversary of the day upon which I had last seen Elizabeth drew nigh, I became restless and unhappy, and finally I did a very silly thing. I took from their hiding place a little cluster of dried violets, about which a faint perfume still lingered, and I am not ashamed to say that at first I could not see them very clearly for the tears that rushed to my eyes. One of these I detached, and holding it carefully in a disguised hand to the woman who was dearest to me than the life of my heart.

And so at once I went that way I had so often dreamed of going. It was almost night, and the gray ghosts of houses loomed up like spectral shapes in the long white streets.

Looking back at it all now, it seems like a dream, just as it seemed then when at last I stood in Colonel Shinstone's drawing-room, and some one was coming toward me with a wondering look in her beautiful eyes.

Not a pale, unhappy, simply attired creature. That I detected at the first keen glance. Not a nun, a recluse, a sweet, sad saint, but a girl in all the flush and glory of early womanhood, whose rich attire seemed but the fitting frame for such radiant beauty. My heart gave a great bound, but I took courage to call to her:

"Katherine!"

She sprang to me with a glad little cry.

"Ah, yes, my beloved was in my arms. I felt her warm breath upon my cheek, and her eager hands were clasped about my neck, whilst away behind us—far, far behind us—fell all the ugly shadows of our lives.

"I have come for you," I said.

"And I have waited for you," she answered.

"My violets came back to me with the tenderest words of hope and comfort.

"Julian. Ah, my dear, my own, own dear!

I do not know what you have been doing all this while, away from me, but I am sure that it is something great and noble?"

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