A New Romance of the Storm Country

CHAPTER I.

"Tony"—For Short.

Another winter had lifted its icy fingers from the Storm Country and Lake Cayuga, and an early spring had brought from the South the red-breasted robins and thousands of other birds to build their homes in the Forest city, as Ithaca, N. Y., is well called, for to the south, the east, the west, and even to the north where the lake cut sharply around a corner, broad forests stretched their lengths and heights of leaf and bough on miniature mountains.

One evening on the western side of the railroad tracks, a girl stood before a small building over which, like ropes of green, draped the branches of a weeping willow tree. This building was different from any of the other habitations near it in that it was well painted, and the door stood open all day.

'Twas a strange little girl that gazed up with searching eagerness at the two lighted signs that had arrested her attention. In her arms she held a diminutive guinea pig, and the way she hugged it close demonstrated her love for it.

"THE SALVATION ARMY," she spelled out and thoughtfully considered it.

"Everybody is welcome here," she read slowly. That meant that anyone could enter if he wanted to, she decided, and as Tonnibel Devon did want to go in, she softly tiptoed up the steps and peeped into the room. As there was nobody in sight, she sidled in and looked about.

"Welcome" was curved in letters of red above a table, and the silent young stranger sighed. She couldn't understand how a girl could be really welcome anywhere. Of course her mother liked her and missed her when she was away, but Tony knew of no other place where she was really wanted but the canal boat, called Mary and Dirty Mary for short, which had been her home ever since she could remember.

"Glory be to God in the highest," swung in letters of gold across the right wall, and to the left, "Stand Still and See the Salvation of the Lord," kept her attention a little longer. She didn't know what they meant, but the varied colors shining brilliant in the bright light calmed her turbulent spirit and made her happy. She hugged the pig closer, bent her head and kissed the top of its ear.

"I guess we're in a church, Gussie," she said aloud, "and you mustn't grunt or squeal like you do on the Dirty Mary. It's awful nice and quiet, ain't it, honey?"

"Were you speaking to me?" said a voice from near the door.

Tonnibel Devon struggled to her feet, turned around and saw a young man looking at her. A flame of red rushed over the tanned skin, but because he was smiling and kindly, she smiled back, a dimple coming to life at each corner of her mouth.

"Nope," she flung out in confusion. "I was talkin' to Gussie-Piglet here. Mebbe her and me hadn't ought to be here. You can kick us out if you want to."

Philip MacCauley, the captain of the Salvation army in Ithaca, bowed, and then he laughed.

"Every one is welcome here," he quoted, coming forward. "Where'd you come from? I've never seen you before."

"I'm staying up Hoghole way," replied Tony. "I ain't been around Ithaca long. This is an awful nice room, ain't it, huh?"

"Yes, very. We like it," replied the young man. "Sit down; don't be in a hurry. I want to talk to you."

Tonnibel did sit down but not very comfortably. She was embarrassed in the presence of this handsome young stranger, abashed in the glamor of his uniform, and all the beauty of him.

With boyish admiration he was contemplating the sparkle of her gray eyes, shaded by long lashes as ebony black as her hair which hung in ringlets to her waist. He decided that she was very pretty, and that he liked to have her in the Salvation army quarters.

"Can't you stay for meeting this evening?" he asked presently. "We have singing here."

Tony's eyes deepened almost to lustrous black.

"Oh, I'd love that!" Then she shook her head. "Nope," she went on, "I got to go home to mummy. She's all alone! Mebbe when my daddy gets back, I'll come some time and sit clean through the night."

For an instant the smile stayed about the boy's lips, then gravity settled once more over his earnest young face.

"What's done in this place?" he questioned after a while.

"[illegible]" cried the boy. "We do [illegible] misery in the world."

"That's as true's you're born," came back promptly from the parted red lips. "I know that because my mother is sick every day, and she cries too. That's misery, ain't it?"

Captain MacCauley was used to tales of woe, but he knew a panacea for them. "Yes, it is so," he said. "Perhaps you could get her to come here some evening! Do you think you could?"

"Daddy wouldn't let her," was the reply, and she lifted unfathomable saddened gray eyes to his. "You see when a man owns a woman, and she don't do the things he tells her to, he beats her, huh?"

There was mute pleading in her expression as she drew back on the bench a little farther away from him. Ah! He might have known that she had been swept along by the relentless tide of brutality. He sighed a little. He had seen enough of ignorant men with their supreme egotism, to know she told the truth.

"Your father is—is—cruel to your mother, then?" he faltered.

She remained in deep thought for the space of a few seconds.

"A swat or two, mebbe more, ain't a killin' thing to women folks," was the response she made confusedly at length.

So unusual had been her answer that Philip MacCauley gazed at her in amazement.

"Have you ever heard of—of God?" he asked finally, his own confusion apparent in the stumble of his tongue.

Tonnibel laughed.

"I hear God d—n more'n a hundred times a day," she replied. "Is that what you mean?"

"Not quite," answered Philip, startled. "No! Not that."

"Then what?" demanded Tony. "What kind of a God do you mean?"

"One that is good," explained Philip. "There isn't any God but the one who helps—"

"My mummy?" breathed the girl, misty tears shadowing her eyes.

"Yes."

"Where is he, then?" The words shot forth with such insistence that something within Philip MacCauley rose to its demand.

"Some one's got to be good to my mother," the girl ran on before he could speak. "She's sick—and lonely. Oh, I've got to do something for her. Where's your helpin' God, mister?"

"Right here in this place," said Philip, a strange emotion sweeping over him. "In fact there isn't any place where God is not."

"He wouldn't come in a dirty canal boat, would He?" demanded Tony, breathlessly.

Astonished at such crudeness, Captain MacCauley shifted himself about so he faced her squarely. Was it pretended ignorance or innocence in the searching gray eyes? Then he decided that truth was stamped on every line of the upturned face.

"Of course, everywhere," he exclaimed brokenly. "Why, dear child—"

Tony Devon interrupted him swiftly. "Tell me how to manage it," she pleaded. "How can I wheedle your God to the Dirty Mary?"

"To the what?" was the question the boy asked in shocked swiftness.

"The Dirty Mary," repeated Tony. "My mummy and me live on a canal boat. Once she were just called 'Mary.' But she's so d—d nasty, Ede calls her the Dirty Mary. She's a nice boat just the same as long as my mummy's there. But I can't see how a clean God could come on 'er. . . . I guess you're foolin' me, mister."

Philip swallowed hard. Then slowly and gently he talked to her, trying to make her understand as best he could what he meant by God, Spirit.

"And you can help your mother, little—what's your name?"

"Tony, just Tonnibel," she mumbled. Then her voice rose and she uttered sharply, "Now tell me how to help my mother."

Philip went to the altar and sorted out a small card.

"This," he said, coming back to her, "has happy, loving thoughts written on it. If you think these things all the time—oh, how they will help both you and your mother."

Wonderingly she took it in her fingers. The first thing that met her eyes was a beautiful uplifted face of a man and in his arms was a little lamb. Underneath the picture was printed, "Feed my sheep," and directly under that were the words, "Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord." Once more her eyes sought the face above, a face wherein lay all the pity and love in the world.

Tony Devon caught a glimpse of the lesson he was trying to teach, and when she went out of the Salvation army hall she held within the depths of her a wonderfully new and utterly strange emotion.

She was panting for breath when she ran up the gangplank of the canal boat.

A woman was busy brewing tea when the girl slipped down the steps of the cabin.

"You been gone a long time, Tony," mumbled Mrs. Devon. "Did you see anything of your daddy?"

"Nope, and I squinted in every beer hole in Ithaca," Tony replied, "but—but—but I found out something for you. Listen! There's somebody on this boat besides me, and you—and Gussie.'"

"Who?" came sharply from the woman.

She shivered, fearing that the law lay in wait for her absent husband.

"Who, brat?" she repeated imploringly.

Tonnibel bent over and looked straight into the sad, wan face.

"God, just a plain lovin' God!" she replied, her countenance expressing unusual exaltation. "Sit a minute while the tea's makin' good, and I'll tell you."

Side by side they sat together on the bunk while with lowered reverent

Side by Side They Sat Together on the Bunk.

voice the girl told the story of the Shepherd who had said long ago with infinite pity, "Feed my sheep."

"And mummy," the girl continued, leaning her head against her mother's arm, "Darling mummy, that beautiful man said, 'Love'd make crooked things straight,' and—and it's so."

A look of unbelief came over Edith Devon's face.

"Fiddle," she said in a disgusted voice. "Tony, you ain't a brain in your bean."

"I don't need any brains as long as I got this, Edie," the girl replied, lifting the card she held. "Come on, let's say these things over. Here's one that'll keep—well, it'll help keep daddy from beatin' you."

Mrs. Devon grasped the girl's arm in sudden frenzy.

"You told some one Uriah beats me?" she demanded sharply.

"Mebbe I did, and mebbe I didn't," answered Tony, slyly, "but these here words about standin' still and watching Salvation slam good all about will keep pappy's fists up his sleeves. Say it, Edie," she ended.

"I won't," said Edith, getting up swiftly. "If there's anything in it, Tony, you can show me by gettin' your daddy back home. Mebbe he's in jail."

"Even if he was," retorted the girl, with a wise shake of her head, "lovin' hard could make the coop-doors fly wide open, and daddy'd flop out like a dogfish flops into the lake. I'm goin' to find out more some of these days, and then I'll tell you all about it. Huh, mummy?"

"Yes," muttered Edith, "but I'm getting a guess out of the days I spent on this boat that God, or whoever you're talkin' about, ain't botherin' his head over the Dirty Mary, nor us uther."

CHAPTER II.

The Master of the Dirty Mary.

A week before this story opens, Uriah Devon had steamed the length of the lake, anchoring his boat as near Ithaca as he dared. Even to his wife, Edith, he had not confided why he had brought her to a town where yawning prison doors gaped for her every passing hour.

"I won't go, Riah," Mrs. Devon had cried when her husband had made the statement that he intended to visit Ithaca. "You couldn't get me near that place with a rope around my neck."

But the very fact that she now sat on a small bench against the boat rail, gazing moodily at the water, proved that Uriah Devon had contrived to have his way.

Occasionally Mrs. Devon lifted her head to listen and turned her eyes to the west where a narrow path zigzagged its length up the hill to the boulevard. Into her tortured soul had come a belief since the night before, that Tony's "Gloriest God," would send her man home.

Suddenly the sound of heavy footsteps in the forest path brought her sharply around. At last he was coming, this man she loved, perhaps drunk, perhaps to beat her; but nevertheless he was coming, and that was all she cared about.

Uriah Devon slowly walked up the gangplank in silence.

"Where you been?" the woman forced herself to say. But instead of replying, he demanded:

"Where's Tonnibel?"

"I dunno," was the answer. "A minute ago she was over there not ten of your long jumps from here. . . . Where you been all this week?"

[illegible] a terrible spree, she thought [illegible] as if he had been drunk [illegible] That he had some thing unusual on his mind, she knew, and she knew, too, it was about Tonnibel, for hadn't he asked for the kid the moment he'd returned?

"It's about time we was doing things, Ede," he said, turning grimly. "I've waited as long as I dared. Rege says 'Paul Pendlehaven hasn't an inch leeway before he's in his coffin.'"

Mrs. Devon's face grew deathly pale.

"What do you mean, honey?" she faltered.

"We live like rats in a hole," took up the man, after a pause, "while if Tony was made to do her part, we'd be on easy street. That's what I mean. We've got to have money and lots of it. Reggie's willing to marry the kid if you mind your business afterward. His marryin' her ain't sayin' he'll stick to her. But we got to have boodle, and we can't get it only through her."

"He shan't have 'er," the woman said, with hard tones and flashing eyes. "How many times 've I got to say it over to you? If that's the why you've come to Ithaca, you might as well turn the old scow north and go back again. He's a bum," she went on. "A dude and a fool and everything else that's bad. He's a thief, too."

Devon laughed.

"So am I, Ede," said he. "So 're you' for that matter. If Reggie knew that Tony was Paul Pendlehaven's kid, we wouldn't get one d——n cent of her money. He snitches from the Pendlehavens and his mother because he don't get cash enough other ways. A feller's got to have spendin' money."

"Pretty small pickin's," sneered Edith Devon. "Stealin' from folks almost in the grave ain't my style. Reggie's some second-story man, that young duffer is."

"You sneaked Paul's kid," taunted Devon. "He wouldn't be almost in his grave now if you'd kept your hands off'n Tony."

The woman turned on him savagely, paying no heed to his words.

"Get your blasted Reggie to steal enough for us all from the Pendlehavens," she said. "God knows they've got it and to spare. It's better'n handin' Tony over to 'im. He lives at Pendlehaven's, don't he?"

"He won't do it," cut in Devon. "Reggie ain't got the nerve to burn his fingers too deep. Paul Pendelhaven'd send him up for that, if he caught him. My plan is to get Tony married to Rege, and before the lid's screwed down on Pendlehaven's face, shove the girl in between John Pendlehaven and his precious cousin, Reggie's mother, and then Rege and me gets Tony's money, see?"

Edith shivered.

"I hear what you say," she muttered, "and I 'spose I'll do it if you promise not to let that pup hurt Tony when he gets her. . . . Best let's wait another year before talkin' marriage to her, though."

"Nothin' doin'," rasped the man. "Tony's almost a woman, and she's eatin' her head off. After she's married—"

"You two men'll rag the kid to death or do something worse to her," gritted the woman. "Well, you won't! Rather'n have that I'll tell her she ain't ours. I'll go right bold to Paul Pendlehaven and blurt him the truth. I'll do it today if you keep naggin at me."

Devon studied her face, his own distorted with rage.

"You'll do no such a thing, mad woman," he returned, running his tongue over his dry, cracked lips. "If you get me in a temper you'd better look out. Reggie knows Tonnibel's got rich folks, but he don't know who they are. You spill the beans, by G—d, and the lake for yours."

The woman's gaze sought the sheet of blue water.

"She'll grow a beard a mile long before I tell 'er," she said finally, bringing her eyes back to his face. "Tell 'er yourself, and see how you like it!"

There was a ring of revolt in her tones that brought an expression of surprise to the man's face, leaving it angrily, frowningly red. But the sound of a girl's voice on the hill brought him suddenly to his feet.

"There she is, by G—d," he cried abruptly. "Now if you want any more lovin's from me—more'n that, if you want to stay where I live, you got to do my will."

"Uriah, honey, darlin'," cried Edith, "don't say that. I've always stuck by you."

"Then keep a stickin'," growled Devon. "For God's sake, if the brat ain't lugged that pig clean up that pine tree!"

Above them a giant pine tree lifted its head far above its fellows. Among its branches the man and woman could plainly see the upper half of a girl's figure settled in the crotch of an outspreading limb, and clasped in two slender arms was the small guinea pig. She bobbed her head gravely, held up the animal and shook it at them.

Tony, herself, little knew why in times of strife she sought refuge among these forest giants and came always to happiness. They were animated beings in her mean little world and because she had showered idolatrous love on them they, from their primeval grandeur, sent an answering spark of life to her starved little soul. The sight of Tony further enraged Uriah. He waved her in.

"Now tell her outright, and get it over, Ede," he said, sitting down again.

Reaching the canal boat, Tony stood looking at her parents.

"Set down," growled Devon.

Shifting the pig a little, she dropped down on the deck. She always [illegible] these talks with her father and mother. It usually meant [illegible] or reclaims that a [illegible] was coming. Today [illegible] her long lashes [illegible] first Devon with his frowning brow, then at length let her gaze settle on the woman.

"I s'pose I been doin' something hellish," she ventured presently in a low tone. "Have I, Edie?"

"Nope, not this time, Tony," thrust in Devon. "But we've got to tell you something. You're gettin' to be a woman, Tonnibel, and you got to do something for your mother and me."

"I'm always wantin' to do something nice for you, Edie, darling," she said, looking at her mother. "Yap it out quick, sweet, and I'll jump to do it!"

The woman began to cry softly.

"Go on, Edie," said Uriah. "Why in h—l are you blubberin' over a thing you can't help?"

"But I can help it," cried Edith. "And what's more I will. Run away, baby, and I'll have it out with your pop while you're gone."

Devon reached forward and laid a strong detaining hand on the girl's arm.

"It's this," he got out between his teeth. "You got to get married. You been livin' on me long enough."

The girl stared at him blankly.

"Get married," she repeated dully. "Who'd marry a brat like me? I'm nothin' but a kid yet, and I'm goin' to stay right here with my mother. See? I don't have to—do I, mummy darlin'?"

"Your ma's word ain't law on this boat," answered Uriah in an ugly tone. "Mine is, though. Fire ahead, Edie, and tell the kid my will."

Mrs. Devon coughed spasmodically and toyed with the fabric of her skirt. A slender brown hand went up and closed over her twitching fingers.

"I wouldn't marry any of the mutts you know, daddy," the girl burst out in desperation. "So get that notion clean out of your mind."

Her face settled sullenly into little lines that pursed up the lovely young mouth, and Uriah Devon moved his feet nervously. Perhaps his task wasn't going to be so easy after all.

"Kid," he said huskily, "if you don't do what you're told, I'll make you. You ain't too old to gad yet. And you'll be missin' one of the best lickin's you ever got if you mind what I tell you."

The girl eyed him curiously, making a sidewise gesture with her head.

"Who's the duffer you've chose out for me?" she asked at length. "You might as well tell me."

"My friend, Reggie," said Devon, bending over and staring at her.

Tonnibel's mouth widened until two rows of teeth gleamed through the red of her lips. She made a wry face. "Nothin' like that for me—eh, Edie?"

Edith Devon was coming to a resolution that meant trouble for herself and for Tonnibel.

"I ain't fought it all out with your daddy, kid," she sniffled weakly. "You get to the cabin and mend them old clothes."

Uriah Devon laid his pipe beside him and uttered an oath.

"You'll stay right here, brat," he gritted, "and pay heed to me."

"Uriah," screamed the woman, "if you go on with this, I'll tell 'er all I know. I swear I will. Tony, honey, Tony, baby, I—I ain't—"

With a roar the man sprang forward and in his effort to reach his wife knocked the girl flat on the deck. When Tonnibel rolled over and sat up, her mother was stretched along the boat rail, and Devon was standing over her. She lay so dreadfully still and limp that the girl scrambled to her feet.

It wasn't the same Tony who had come fearfully to them but a short period before with the little pig in her arms; nor the same girl who had swung in the treetops making play fellows of the squirrels and answering the shrill calls of the forest birds. She seemed suddenly to have grown taller, and as she flung herself on Devon, the very strength of her little body sent him sprawling against the side of the cabin. "Now you killed her, d—n you," she screamed. "If you kick 'er—I'll—I'll—" She dropped at the side of her mother, her threat broken in two by the awful pallor on the woman's face. "Oh, God, mummy darlin', mummy darlin'," she ended in a bitter cry.

Growling in rage, Devon turned on her.

"Mebbe I have killed 'er," said he. "If so, I'll make a good job of it and finish you too."

The girl rose before him, her eyes

"Go On and Finish Me."

blazing into his, her little fists clenched together.

"Folks that murder other people, Pappy Devon," she shot back, "get strapped in a chair, and they get electrified up through you. Go on and [illegible] Go on and finish me! I'd rather have you end me than make me marry that old Reggie."

As if his name had brought him out of the forest, Reginald Brown walked down the Hoghole path.

CHAPTER III.

The Picture of a Baby.

Tonnibel's heart jumped almost into her throat, then seemed to cease beating. There stood her father growling, enraged and drunk, and as if she were dead and no longer able to help her child, her mother lay almost within touching distance. If Uriah carried out his plans, then the horrid fellow there would soon claim her as his woman. That thought frightened her so that she stepped back as the newcomer came upon the deck.

"What's the matter, Ry?" he asked quite casually.

"He's killed mummy," burst forth the girl. "And if both you fellers don't want to get pinched, you'd better scoot offen this boat."

Uriah laughed, and Reggie's high-pitched cackle followed.

"Been giving your woman a little discipline, eh, pal?" he demanded, turning on Devon. "Well, they all need it now and then. But she's the liveliest breathing corpse I ever saw. Did you hit 'er, Dev?"

"Yep," growled the other man, "and I'm goin' to beat Tony, too. The impudent brat says she wouldn't marry you if you was the last man livin'. You watch the brat there, Rege, while I duck Ede in the cabin."

Tonnibel, wide-eyed and suffering, saw her father lift her mother up in his brawny arms and carry her downstairs, none too gently. When he had disappeared, a throat sound made her swing her eyes to the other man. He was contemplating her with a smile, an evil smile, such as she hated in men. His white teeth seemed like many gleaming knives, sharp, strong and overhanging, his red lips spreading away from them.

He took a step toward her and stopped.

"Why so much fuss about nothing, my little one?" he said, cooing.

"Daddy said I had to marry you," breathed the girl, brushing back a stray curl from her brow. "But I don't! I'm goin' to stay with my mother on the Dirty Mary. There ain't no law forcing a girl to marry a man she don't like. And I hate you, see? Huh?"

"Who spoke of a law?" smiled Brown. "I didn't! But I do know, my little Tony-girl, that you'll say a very meek 'yes' when I get through with you."

Tonnibel suddenly shuddered and a hopeless, helpless feeling went in waves over her. Oh, to be anywhere in God's clear, clean world! Away from those gleaming lustful eyes! But she saw no opportunity to escape. Reginald Brown was blocking the small space through which she must fly if she were to be saved at all. She knew very well if she could hide for a little while the two men would drink until they slept. Then she could come back and help her mother. Plainly she had heard the woman weeping below in the cabin, and even more plainly to her suffering ears came Devon's blows, and after that—silence.

Her heart thumped like a hammer against her side. Behind her lay the shining lake. And one hasty glance over her shoulder only added to her fear. There was not a sign of a boat anywhere. She was frantic enough to scream if it would have done her any good.

"I think I'll kiss you, my little bird," said Reggie, suddenly, narrowing his eyes. "You're pretty enough for anyone to want to kiss. By Jove, I never realized until today just how much I liked you. If I kissed you, well—perhaps you'd change your mind about—about things."

Tonnibel slid backward to the boat rail. When she touched it, she whirled about and dove headlong into the lake.

When Reginald Brown saw the girl's feet disappear under the water, he uttered an oath and cried out. He hadn't expected such an action on her part. He ran to the cabin steps and screamed to Devon.

"She's in the lake, Ry," he shivered as the other man sprang to the deck.

When Tonnibel felt the water over her, she swept to the lake's bottom with one long stroke. Then deftly she rid herself of her dress skirt and began to swim swiftly under the water.

They were tense minutes that the two men stood waiting, until suddenly beyond them to the south a curly head came above the water's edge. Then they leapt to the shore and raced toward the place she must land. To the panting girl it was a race for life.

Suddenly, like a flashing glimpse from Heaven, the words, "Stand Still and See the Salvation of the Lord," floated before her eyes like a flame of gold. Philip MacCauley's deep voice seemed to speak them in her ringing ears immediately after. "Goddy," she groaned, "Salvation of the Lord, oh, darlin' Salvation."

Just then her feet touched the pebbles on the bottom of the lake. With one wild leap she was on the shore and up the bank, Uriah screaming at her to stop.

She heard the two men crashing after her. That her short, swift leaps could outdistance them for long if she tried for the boulevard, she had no hope. But all about her were giant friends with outstretched arms, offering her shelter. For one instant she paused, then sprang into the air, caught the lower branch of a great pine tree and like a squirrel scurried up it. Almost at the top, spanned over by the blue sky, she crawled out to the end of a big limb and clung to it. Beneath her the men paused and showered curses up at her. Tonnibel cared [illegible] for curses. She'd heard them all her life, used them, too, when she felt like it.