

Eloise

By Caroline Conrad

“Miss Eloise, please, Madame requests to see you in her sitting room.”

A little girl, with black ringletted hair clustering about a fair open face, rather sad but sweet in expression, rose at once from her place in the class, at Madame Renier’s boarding school, and followed the servant from the room.

Madame met her at the door, saying, in a voice of strange compassion:

“My poor darling!”

Eloise’s dark eyes flashed pained inquiry in Madame’s solemn face.

“You have news,” she cried, in a stricken voice—“you have news of mamma! Oh, Madame, tell me!”

“Poor baby! poor little one! how can I tell thee?” Madame murmured.

“Don’t tell me that!” she cried; “don’t tell me I shall never see mamma any more—my poor, suffering, abused mamma!”

“I wish I had it not to tell thee,” Madame said sadly.

“Is she dead?” the child asked.

“Yes, dear.”

Madame bent presently to look on the little girl’s face.

“Don’t, child—don’t look like that!” Madame pleaded, shuddering. “Cry, Eloise—cry here on my bosom; it will do thee good.”

Eloise lifted her great solemn eyes to Madame’s.

“*He* has done it, I know; I know he has,” she said, in strange, unchildlike tones. “Mamma said I should not be sent away from her; she would teach me herself. She said it would kill her to take me from her, and it has.”

“Hush, dear; you are crazed now with grief.”

“Madame, I am not. Madame, I will tell every one I see that it was that bad man who killed her.”

“Child, you must not speak so. Eloise, try to bear it—try to be calmer. He is here; he has come to take you home with him.”

“He! the man who married my beautiful mamma only to torture the life out of her? I had rather die than go with him.”

“Child, he may come in at any moment.”

“Madame, I am not a child. I am only fourteen, but I am old enough to remember—”

“And obey,” said a deep voice beside her, and without looking up, Eloise knew it was her stepfather who had stolen noiselessly into the room, and heard she knew not how much of her passionate talk.

The child trembled like a leaf, and shrank into Madame’s compassionate arms with a low cry.

“She has fainted.”

Sidney Herbert took her out of Madame’s arms, and laid her upon a sofa.

“She will be better soon,” he said in a cold voice; “and pray prepare her at once for the journey.”

“Tonight?” Madame asked, aghast. “She is not fit to travel so soon.”

“I will attend to that,” Mr. Herbert said, in unanswerable tones, and Madame with a smothered sigh returned to her task of restoring the child.

Poor Eloise had to be carried out to the carriage, where she shrank away into one corner, and pressed her face against the lining, for fear of meeting the cold, icy looks of the man who sat opposite and watched her with merciless eyes.

By the time they reached home she was in a high fever, and moaning with delirium.

Her stepfather carried her into the house himself, and himself tended her through the long illness that followed.

When the child grew better he thus addressed her:

“You assured Madame Reiner that you were not a child. I expect you therefore to exercise something of the discretion which belongs to more years than yours, and to let me hear no more such wild talk as that to which you treated Madame. I desire to be to you indulgent guardian; but whether I am so or not, will entirely depend upon yourself.”

Eloise made no reply. She only looked at him gravely, with a pair of dark intent eyes that her stepfather felt vaguely uneasy under, but made no effort to avoid while he pressed her to promise to do as he wished.

But Eloise would promise nothing. He might as well have talked to the doorpost, for all eliciting any response.

That night Barbara, who had been Eloise's nurse in brighter days, crept stealthily to the child's bedside.

"You musn't brave him, little dear," she whispered the child; "it won't do no good, and he'll make you suffer for it. You won't get out of this room till you promise, if you hold on till you're gray."

"But I can't promise not to talk about *her*. Somebody must tell me about it. I couldn't keep such a promise, if I made it."

"I'll tell you, darling, all there is to tell; only you agree to anything he bids you. It's best; take Nurse Barby's word for that."

Eloise rather astonished her stepfather by suddenly asking, when he came back to the room.

"May I go out in the garden tomorrow, Mr. Herbert, if I will promise what you wished me to?"

"Yes."

"Then I promise."

Mr. Herbert kept his word. Eloise was permitted to go to the garden, but not with Barbara; and the poor longing child looked in vain for nurse to come and keep her promise about mamma.

It was so the next day, and the next; and then, at the turning of a walk, she came suddenly face to face with Nurse Barby.

Eloise caught hold of her dress breathlessly.

"You must tell me, nurse, or I can't keep my promise to Mr. Herbert. I shall ask some one else."

"Dear me, Miss, I couldn't now possibly. I'll go tomorrow and get the things, if I can get the time," Barbara said, in a cross voice, and hurrying on; but while Eloise looked in a puzzled fright after her, she glanced back through the bushes and smiled, and shook her forefinger at her warningly. And the next moment Eloise saw her stepfather sauntering slowly up the walk.

He stopped a moment to speak to Barbara, and then turned off toward the house.

That evening, as Eloise sat in an easy-chair upon the verandah, Barbara came and laid some late roses on her lap; but as she did do, she pressed a bit of paper into the thin hand that hung over the arm of the chair.

Mechanically the child's fingers closed upon it, and when she was sure no one was looking, she read it. It said, "Be patient, and you shall not be sorry. Destroy this." Surely Barbara could not write like that. The heart of the sad child thrilled almost painfully, as she remembered *who* used to make just such delicate clear letters as those, and she turned her face to the wall, with a whispered cry of "Oh, mamma!"

A week went on. One day Mr. Herbert was summoned suddenly city-ward, and in the course of the forenoon, the woman who usually attended upon Eloise, a stranger hired for that purpose, having partaken some fine fruit Nurse Barby had brought her, was taken so ill that she was compelled to go to her chamber.

Then Nurse Barby came to Eloise, and while she pretended to dress her pretty curls, asked her if she could bear to hear a bit of good news. The tears came into Eloise's eyes.

"How can any news be good to me now, nurse?" she asked reproachfully.

"But if—if the news was that somebody whom you love was not—not—Lie back in your chair, and be still as death, or I will never tell you, Miss. It's as much as my life is worth to do what I'm doing."

"I will be still if you speak quick. But I suffer so, Barby," she pouted, clasping her little hands on her bosom.

"Well, then, Miss, your mamma is not—"

"Not dead? Oh, Barby, oh, dear Barby, is it true?" And the child looked for a moment so like a flower that a sudden burst of sunshine has stricken down, that Barby's heart misgave her.

"You wouldn't tell me a story, Barby—I know you wouldn't. Kiss me, Barby, if it's true." And Barby kissed her. Then she said:

"You must hurry and get well now, dear, for mamma is in great trouble, and there is no one to help her but you and me, and I'm only old Barby, you know. No one would believe *me*."

"When can I see her, Barby?" the child asked.

"There's no telling that, no knowing it," she said doubtfully. "You must get well, and then we must watch our chance."

"What made him tell me that she was—"

"He wants your mamma to make a will and leave him all the money away from you, deary; and now he's made everybody believe she's dead, he can keep her shut up till she does it, he thinks."

"Where is she, nurse?"

“Not so far—but you musn’t ask any more questions now; and don’t look too happy, there’s a darling, or the master will suspect us.”

The weeks moved by slowly to this anxious little heart.

“He’s a fox, that he is,” said Barbara to herself, “and we’ll never match him, if we don’t look wild.”

Her welcome face dawned on Eloise once more at dead of night. As she hurriedly dressed her, she whispered:

“I put something in the master’s wine to make him sleep sound, but I didn’t dare make it strong, for fear he should suspect; and the t’other one has got a beau.”

The “t’other one” was her poor mother’s paid keeper, as Eloise learned in time. Now, without explanation, she was whirled away by Barby, noiselessly though, as a waft of thistle-down, down this passage, up that, of the great rambling old house, till they came to a portion which had long fallen into disuse, partly because of decay, and partly because of some ancient superstition such as often lingers about such old houses.

In an inner room of this wing, Eloise found the wan shadow of the mother her poor little heart had ached for so long. To describe the mingled ecstasy and pain of that necessarily brief meeting would be impossible here. Confined to her bed by an illness that was lingering and painful, but not likely to terminate fatally for years perhaps, Mrs. Herbert, whom her unprincipled husband had given out as dead, was completely in his power, so far as her personal liberty was concerned; but she had up to this time remained firm in her opposition to his wishes concerning a will, and perhaps if she had yielded it would have only shortened her days; for a man who would do what Sidney Herbert had already done, would not be likely to stop at worse, if it served his purpose.

How to help the poor lady, that was the question; and it was decided that Eloise should try to obtain permission to visit some friends at a little distance, and should take advantage of the opportunity to tell her mother’s story to a lawyer whom she knew in the same town, and ask his advice.

To the afflicted lady and her two simple adherents it looked like a very difficult matter to circumvent so bad a man as Sidney Herbert.

As it chanced, Mr. Herbert had at this time a new scheme for moulding his wife to his wishes, and he was quite willing, therefore, to have Eloise out of the way for a little while; so she was sent off to make her visit.

Mr. Macy, the lawyer, listened to her story incredulously at first. He thought without doubt that the child was crazy; but she succeeded finally in so far impressing him, that he caused what was supposed to be Mrs. Herbert’s grave to be secretly examined. When he found a coffin filled with stones and other rubbish, his blood began to tingle, and he was not long in making a raid upon Sidney Herbert’s premises, armed with due process of law.

Herbert was taken completely by surprise, or he might perhaps have spirited his unfortunate wife to some other quarters.

As it was, the poor lady was freed from her cruel imprisonment, and in due time set at liberty from him by one of those laws which he had so daringly outraged.

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