

Rev. Mr. Sweet prayed, and so was brought to an end the most exciting meeting ever held in Brampton town hall.

But Miss Lucretia did not like being called "a famous lady."

CHAPTER XVI

MISS LUCRETIA QUOTES GENESIS

WHILE Miss Lucretia was standing, unwillingly enough, listening to the speeches that were poured into her ear by various members of the audience, receiving the incense and myrrh to which so great a celebrity was entitled, the old soldier hobbled away to his little house as fast as his three legs would carry him. Only one event in his life had eclipsed this in happiness — the interview in front of the White House. He rapped on the window with his stick, thereby frightening Cynthia half out of her wits as she sat musing sorrowfully by the fire.

"Cousin Ephraim," she said, taking off his corded hat, "what in the world's the matter with you?"

"You're a schoolmarm again, Cynthy."

"Do you mean to say —?"

"Miss Lucretia Penniman done it."

"Miss Lucretia Penniman!" Cynthia began to think his rheumatism was driving him out of his mind.

"You bet. 'Long toward the openin' of the engagement there wahn't scarcely anybody thar but me, and they was a-goin'. But they come fast enough when they l'arned she was in town, and she blew 'em up higher'n the Petersburg crater. Great Tecumseh, there's a woman! Next to General Grant, I'd sooner shake her hand than anybody's livin'."

"Do you mean to say that Miss Lucretia is in Brampton and spoke at the mass meeting?"

"Spoke!" exclaimed Ephraim, "callate she did — some. Tore 'em all up. They'd a hung Isaac D. Worthington or Levi Dodd if they'd a had 'em thar."

Cynthia, striving to be calm herself, got him into a chair and took his stick and straightened out his leg, and then Ephraim told her the story, and it lost no dramatic effect in his telling. He would have talked all night. But at length the sound of wheels was heard in the street, Cynthia flew to the door, and a familiar voice came out of the darkness.

"You need not wait, Gamaliel. No, thank you, I think I will stay at the hotel."

Gamaliel was still protesting when Miss Lucretia came in and seized Cynthia in her arms, and the door was closed behind her.

"Oh, Miss Lucretia, why did you come?" said Cynthia, "if I had known you would do such a thing, I should never have written that letter. I have been sorry to-day that I did write it, and now I'm sorrier than ever."

"Aren't you glad to see me?" demanded Miss Lucretia. "Miss Lucretia!"

"What are friends for?" asked Miss Lucretia, patting her hand. "If you had known how I wished to see you, Cynthia, and I thought a little trip would be good for such a provincial Bostonian as I am. Dear, dear, I remember this house. It used to belong to Gabriel Post in my time, and right across from it was the Social Library, where I have spent so many pleasant hours with your mother. And this is Ephraim Prescott. I thought it was, when I saw him sitting in the front row, and I think he must have been very lonesome there at one time."

"Yes, ma'am," said Ephraim, giving her his gnarled fingers; "I was just sayin' to Cynthy that I'd rather shake your hand than anybody's livin' exceptin' General Grant."

"And I'd rather shake yours than the General's," said Miss Lucretia, for the *Woman's Hour* had taken the opposition side in a certain recent public question concerning women.

"If you'd a fit with him, you wouldn't say that, Miss Lucretia."

"I haven't a word to say against his fighting qualities," she replied.

"Guess the General might say the same of you," said

Ephraim. "If you'd a b'en a man, I callate you'd a come out of the war with two stars on your shoulder. Godfrey, Miss Lucretia, you'd ought to've b'en a man."

"A man!" cried Miss Lucretia, "and 'stars on my shoulder'! I think this kind of talk has gone far enough, Ephraim Prescott."

"Cousin Eph," said Cynthia, laughing, "you're no match for Miss Lucretia, and it's long past your bedtime."

"A man!" repeated Miss Lucretia, after he had retired, and after Cynthia had tried to express her gratitude and had been silenced. They sat side by side in front of the chimney. "I suppose he meant that as a compliment. I never yet saw the man I couldn't back down, and I haven't any patience with a woman who gives in to them." Miss Lucretia poked vigorously a log which had fallen down, as though that were a man, too, and she was putting him back in his proper place.

Cynthia, strange to say, did not reply to this remark.

"Cynthia," said Miss Lucretia, abruptly, "you don't mean to say that you are in love!"

Cynthia drew a long breath, and grew as red as the embers.

"Miss Lucretia!" she exclaimed, in astonishment and dismay.

"Well," Miss Lucretia said, "I should have thought you could have gotten along, for a while at least, without anything of that kind. My dear," she said leaning toward Cynthia, "who is he?"

Cynthia turned away. She found it very hard to speak of her troubles, even to Miss Lucretia, and she would have kept this secret even from Jethro, had it been possible.

"You must let him know his place," said Miss Lucretia, "and I hope he is in some degree worthy of you."

"I do not intend to marry him," said Cynthia, with her head still turned away.

It was now Miss Lucretia who was silent.

"I came near getting married once," she said presently, with characteristic abruptness.

"You!" cried Cynthia, looking around in amazement.

"You see, I am franker than you, my dear — though I never told any one else. I believe you can keep a secret."

"Of course I can. Who — was it any one in Brampton, Miss Lucretia?" The question was out before Cynthia realized its import. She was turning the tables with a vengeance.

"It was Ezra Graves," said Miss Lucretia.

"Ezra Graves!" And then Cynthia pressed Miss Lucretia's hand in silence, thinking how strange it was that both of them should have been her champions that evening.

Miss Lucretia poked the fire again.

"It was shortly after that, when I went to Boston, that I wrote the 'Hymn to Coniston.' I suppose we must all be fools once or twice, or we should not be human."

"And — weren't you ever — sorry?" asked Cynthia.

Again there was a silence.

"I could not have done the work I have had to do in the world if I had married. But I have often wondered whether that work was worth the while. Such a feeling must come over all workers, occasionally. Yes," said Miss Lucretia, "there have been times when I have been sorry, my dear, though I have never confessed it to another soul. I am telling you this for your own good — not mine. If you have the love of a good man, Cynthia, be careful what you do with it."

The tears had come into Cynthia's eyes.

"I should have told you, Miss Lucretia," she faltered.

"If I could have married him, it would have been easier."

"Why can't you marry him?" demanded Miss Lucretia, sharply — to hide her own emotion.

"His name," said Cynthia, "is Bob Worthington."

"Isaac Worthington's son?"

"Yes."

Another silence, Miss Lucretia being utterly unable to say anything for a space.

"Is he a good man?"

Cynthia was on the point of indignant protest, but she stopped herself in time.

"I will tell you what he has done," she answered, "and then you shall judge for yourself."

And she told Miss Lucretia, simply, all that Bob had done, and all that she herself had done.

"He is like his mother, Sarah Hollingsworth; I knew her well," said Miss Lucretia. "If Isaac Worthington were a man, he would be down on his knees begging you to marry his son. He tried hard enough to marry your own mother."

"My mother!" exclaimed Cynthia, who had never believed that rumor.

"Yes," said Miss Lucretia, "and you may thank your stars he didn't succeed. I mistrusted him when he was a young man, and now I know that he hasn't changed. He is a coward and a hypocrite."

Cynthia could not deny this.

"And yet," she said, after a moment's silence, "I am sure you will say that I have been right. My own conscience tells me that it is wrong to deprive Bob of his inheritance, and to separate him from his father, whatever his father may be."

"We shall see what happens in five years," said Miss Lucretia.

"Five years!" said Cynthia, in spite of herself.

"Jacob served seven for Rachel," answered Miss Lucretia; "that period is scarcely too short to test a man, and you are both young."

"No," said Cynthia, "I cannot marry him, Miss Lucretia. The world would accuse me of design, and I feel that I should not be happy. I am sure that he would never reproach me, even if things went wrong, but — the day might come when — when he would wish that it had been otherwise."

Miss Lucretia kissed her.

"You are very young, my dear," she repeated, "and none of us may say what changes time may bring forth. And now I must go."

Cynthia insisted upon walking with her friend down the street to the hotel — an undertaking that was without

danger in Brampton. And it was only a step, after all. A late moon floated in the sky, throwing in relief the shadow of the Worthington mansion against the white patches of snow. A light was still burning in the library.

The next morning after breakfast Miss Lucretia appeared at the little house, and informed Cynthia that she would walk to school with her.

"But I have not yet been notified by the Committee," said Cynthia. There was a knock at the door, and in walked Judge Ezra Graves. Miss Lucretia may have blushed, but it is certain that Cynthia did. Never had she seen the judge so spick and span, and he wore the broadcloth coat he usually reserved for Sundays. He paused at the threshold, with his hand on his Adam's apple.

"Good morning, ladies," he said, and looked shyly at Miss Lucretia and cleared his throat, and spoke with the elaborate decorum he used on occasions, "Miss Penniman, I wish to thank you again for your noble action of last evening."

"Don't 'Miss Penniman' me, Ezra Graves," retorted Miss Lucretia; "the only noble action I know of was poor Jonathan Hill's — unless it was paying for the gas."

This was the way in which Miss Lucretia treated her lover after thirty years! Cynthia thought of what the lady had said to her a few hours since, by this very fire, and began to believe she must have dreamed it. Fires look very differently at night — and sometimes burn brighter then. The judge parted his coat tails, and seated himself on the wooden edge of a cane-bottomed chair.

"Lucretia," he said, "you haven't changed."

"You have, Ezra," she replied, looking at the Adam's apple.

"I'm an old man," said Ezra Graves.

Cynthia could not help thinking that he was a very different man, in Miss Lucretia's presence, than when at the head of the prudential committee.

"Ezra," said Miss Lucretia, "for a man you do very well."

The judge smiled.

"Thank you, Lucretia," said he. He seemed to appreciate the full extent of the compliment.

"Judge Graves," said Cynthia, "I can tell you how good you are, at least, and thank you for your great kindness to me, which I shall never forget."

She took his withered hands from his knees and pressed them. He returned the pressure, and then searched his coat tails, found a handkerchief, and blew his nose violently.

"I merely did my duty, Miss Wetherell," he said. "I would not wilfully submit to a wrong."

"You called me 'Cynthia' yesterday."

"So I did," he answered, "so I did." Then he looked at Miss Lucretia.

"Ezra," said that lady, smiling a little, "I don't believe you have changed, after all."

What she meant by that nobody knows.

"I had thought, Cynthia," said the judge, "that it might be more comfortable for you to have me go to the school with you. That is the reason for my early call."

"Judge Graves, I do appreciate your kindness," said Cynthia; "I hope you won't think I'm rude if I say I'd rather go alone."

"On the contrary, my dear," replied the judge, "I think I can understand and esteem your feeling in the matter, and it shall be as you wish."

"Then I think I had better be going," said Cynthia. The judge rose in alarm at the words, but she put her hand on his shoulder. "Won't you sit down and stay," she begged, "you haven't seen Miss Lucretia for how many years, — thirty, isn't it?"

Again he glanced at Miss Lucretia, uncertainly. "Sit down, Ezra," she commanded, "and for goodness' sake don't be afraid of the cane bottom. You won't go through it. I should like to talk to you, and most of the gossips of our day are dead. I shall stay in Brampton to-day, Cynthia, and eat supper with you here this evening."

Cynthia, as she went out of the door, wondered what they would talk about. Then she turned toward the school. It was not the March wind that burned her cheeks;

as she thought of the mass meeting the night before, which was all about her, she wished she might go to school that morning through the woods and pasture lots rather than down Brampton Street. What — what would Bob say when he heard of the meeting? Would he come again to Brampton? If he did, she would run away to Boston with Miss Lucretia. Every day it had been a trial to pass the Worthington house, but she could not cross the wide street to avoid it. She hurried a little, unconsciously, when she came to it, for there was Mr. Worthington on the steps talking to Mr. Flint. How he must hate her now, Cynthia reflected! He did not so much as look up when she passed.

The other citizens whom she met made up for Mr. Worthington's coldness, and gave her a hearty greeting, and some stopped to offer their congratulations. Cynthia did not pause to philosophize: she was learning to accept the world as it was, and hurried swiftly on to the little schoolhouse. The children saw her coming, and ran to meet her and escorted her triumphantly in at the door. Of their welcome she could be sure. Thus she became again teacher of the lower school.

How the judge and Miss Lucretia got along that morning, Cynthia never knew. Miss Lucretia spent the day in her old home, submitting to hero-worship, and attended an evening party in her honor at Mr. Gamaliel Ives's house — a mansion not so large as the first citizen's, though it had two bay-windows and was not altogether unimposing. The first citizen, needless to say, was not there, but the rest of the élite attended. Mr. Ives will tell you all about the entertainment if you go to Brampton, but the real reason Miss Lucretia consented to go was to please Lucy Baird, who was Gamaliel's wife, and to chat with certain old friends whom she had not seen. The next morning she called at the school to bid Cynthia good-by, and to whisper something in her ear which made her very red before all the scholars. She shook her head when Miss Lucretia said it, for it had to do with an incident in the 29th chapter of Genesis.



"To chat with certain old friends."