SATURDAY NIGHT: A STORY: BY ALICE BROWN

ERRY NORTON stopped for a moment swinging his axe and crashing it into the grain of the tree, and took off his cap to cool his wet forehead. He looked very strong, standing there, equipped with great shoulders, a back as straight as the tree its might was smashing, and the vigor bespoken by red-brown eyes, a sanguine skin and thick bright hair. He seemed to be regarding the pine trunks against the snow of the hill beyond, and again the tiny tracks nearer by, where a winter animal had flurried; but really all the beauties of the woods were sealed to him.

He was going back five days to his quarrel with Stella Joyce, and scowling as he thought how hateful she had been in her injustice. It was all about the ten-foot strip of land the city man had claimed from Jerry’s new building lot through a newly found flaw in the title. Jerry, Stella mourned, had relinquished the land without question.

“I’d have hung on to it an’ fought him through every court in the country,” she had declared, in a passion of reproach.

“You’re so numb, Jerry! You just go pokin’ along from day to day, lettin’ folks walk over you—an’ never a word!”

Jerry had been unable, out of his numbness, to explain that he gave up the land because the other man’s title to it, he had seen at once, was a valid one, nor could she, on her side, tell him how her wounded feeling was intensified because old aunt Bray, come from the west for a visit, had settled down upon him and his mother, in all likelihood to remain and go into the new house when it was built. But there was no time for either of them to reach pacific reasons when every swift word of hers begot a sullen look from him, and before they knew it they had parted.

Now, while he was retracing the path of their disagreement, lighted by the flaming lamps of her upbraiding, he heard a movement, light enough for a furry creature on its way to covert, and Stella stood before him. She did not look either obstinate or likely to continue any quarrel, however well begun. She was a round little person, very complete in her miniature beauties, and now her blue eyes sought him with an extremity of emotion very honest and also timid. She had wrapped herself in a little red shawl, and her hands, holding it tight about her, gave a fantastic impression of being clasped in mute appeal. Jerry looked at her in wonder. For an instant they both stood as still as two wood creatures surprisingly met and, so far, undetermined upon the degree of hostility it would be wise to show.
SATURDAY NIGHT

Stella broke the silence. She retreated a little, in doing it, as if words would bring her nearer and she repudiated that degree of intimacy.

"I just want a favor," she said humbly.

Jerry advanced a step as she withdrew, and the interval between them stayed unchanged. Now the trouble in her face had its effect on him, and he forgot for a moment how he hated her.

"Ain't anything the matter, is there?" he asked, in quick concern.

Stella shook her head, but her eyes brimmed over. That evidently annoyed her, and she released the little shawl to lift a hand and brush the tears away.

"Aunt Hill has come," she said.

He had an impulse to tell her, as a piece of news that would once have concerned them both, that his own aunt was making her plans to go west again, and that she had furnished the money for him to buy back the precious strip of land. The city man, seeing how much he prized it, had sold it to him. But while he reflected that now Stella cared nothing about his intimate concerns, she was rushing on.

"An' mother's sick," she ended.

"Sho!" said Jerry, in a sympathizing blur. "Real sick?"

"No, nothin' but her rheumatism. But it's in her back this time. She can't move hand or foot."

"Why, yes," said Jerry, leaning his axe against the trunk of the wounded tree, "Course! you want I should go over 'n' help lift her."

Stella shook her head in definite finality.

"No, I don't either. Aunt Hill 'n' I can manage well enough. I guess mother'd be provoked 'most to death if I run round callin' the men folks in."

"Well, what is it then?" asked Jerry, in palpable disappointment.

"What is 't you want me to do?"

He thought he had never seen her cheeks so red. They made him think of the partridge berries under the snow. She began her tale, looking indifferently at him as she proceeded, as if to convince them both that there was nothing peculiar in it all.

"Aunt Hill's an awful trial to mother."

Jerry took up his axe in one hand, and began absently chopping off a circle of bark about the tree. Stella was near saying, "Don't you cut your foot!" but she closed her lips upon the friendly caution and continued.

"There's nothin' she don't get her nose into, an' it just wears mother out."
SATURDAY NIGHT

“She’s a great talker, seems if I remembered,” said Jerry absently, wishing Stella would keep her hands under the shawl and not get them frozen to death. He was about to add that most women did talk too much, but somehow that seemed an unfortunate implication from one as unpopular as he, and he caught himself up in time. Stella was dashing on now, in the course of her obnoxious task.

“If anything’s queer, she just goes at mother hard as she can pelt an’ keeps at her till she finds it out. An’ mother hates it enough when she’s well, but when she’s sick it’s just awful. An’ now she’s flat on her back.”

“Course,” said Jerry, in a comprehending sympathy. “Want I should carry your aunt Hill off to the Junction?”

“Why, you can’t! She wouldn’t go. You couldn’t pry her out with a crowbar. She’s made up her mind to stay till a week from to-morrow, an’ till a week from to-morrow she’ll stay.”

Jerry looked gloomily into the distance. He was feeling his own limitations as a seer.

“Well,” he said, venturing a remark likely to involve him in no way, “I s’pose she will.”

“Now, see here,” said Stella. She spoke with a defiant hardness, the measure of her hatred for what she had to do. “There’s one way you could help us out. She asked about you right away, an’ of course she thought we were—goin’ together, same’s we had been.”

Here her voice failed her, and he knew the swift color on her cheek was the miserable sign of her shame in such remembrance. It became his task to hearten her. “Course,” said he. “Anybody would.”

“Well, I can’t tell her. I ain’t even told mother yet, an’ I don’t want to till she’s on her feet again. An’ if aunt Hill gets the leastest wind of it she’ll hound mother every minute, an’ mother’ll give up, an’—well, I just can’t do it, that’s all.”

Jerry was advancing eagerly now, his lips parted for speech; but her task once begun was easier, and she continued.

“Now, don’t you see? I should think you could.”

“Yes,” said Jerry, in great hopefulness. “Course I do.”

“No, you don’t either. It’s only, she’s goin’ to be here not quite a week, an’ it’s only one Saturday night.”

“Yes,” said Jerry, “that’s tomorrer night.”

“Well, don’t you see? If you don’t come over, she’ll wonder why, an’ mother’ll wonder why, an’ mother’ll ask me, an’, oh, dear! dear!”

Jerry thought she really was going to cry, this time, and it seemed to him that these domestic whirlwinds furnished ample reason for it.
SATURDAY NIGHT

"Course!" he said, in whole-hearted misery for her. "It's a bad place. A man wouldn't think anything of it, but women folks are different. They'd mind it terribly. Anybody could see they would."

Stella looked at him as if personal chastisement would be too light for him.

"Don't you see?" she insisted in a tone of enforced patience. "If you'd only dress up an' come over."

Light broke in on him.

"Course I will, Stella," he called, so loudly that she looked over her shoulder to see if perhaps some neighbor, crossing the wood lot, might have heard. "You just bet I will!"

Then, to his wonderment, she had vanished as softly as she came. Jerry was disappointed. He had thought they were going on talking about the domestic frenzies wrought by aunt Hill, but it seemed that further sociability was to be denied him until tomorrow night. He took up his axe, and went on paying into the heart of the tree. But he whistled now, and omitted to think how much he hated Stella. He was debating whether her scarlet shawl was redder than her cheeks. But Jerry never voiced such wonders. They seemed to him like a pain, or satisfaction over one's dinner, an ultimate part of individual experience.

The next night, early after supper, he took his way "down along" to the Joyce homestead lying darkly under leafless elms. There was a light in the parlor, as there had been every night since he began to go with Stella, and his heart beat in recognition, knowing it was for him. He tried the front door to walk in, neighbor fashion, but it resisted him, and then he let the knocker fall. Immediately a window opened above and Stella's voice came down to him.

"Oh, Jerry, mother's back is worse, an' I feel as if I'd ought to be rubbin' her. You come over another time."

Jerry stood staring up at her, a choking in his throat, and something burning hotly into his eyes. But he found his voice just as the window was sliding down.

"Don't you want I should do somethin'? I should think she'd have to be lifted."

"No," said Stella, quite blithely, "I can do all there is to do. Good night."

The window closed and he went away. Stella ran down stairs to the bedroom where aunt Hill sat beside her mother, fanning the invalid with a palm-leaf fan. Mrs. Joyce hated to be fanned in wintry weather, but aunt Hill acted upon the theory that sick folks needed air.
Aunt Hill was very large, and she creaked as she breathed, because, when she was visiting, even in the country, she put on her black silk of an afternoon. She had thick black hair, smooth under a fictitious gloss and done in a way to be seen now only in daguerreotypes of long ago, and her dull black eyes were masterful. Mrs. Joyce, gazing miserably up at her daughter, was a shred of a thing in contrast, and Stella at once felt a passionate pity for her.

“There, aunt Hill,” she said daringly, “I wouldn’t fan mother any more if I’s you. Let me see if I can get at you, mother. I’m goin’ to rub your back.”

Aunt Hill, with a quiver of professional pride wounded to the quick, did lay down the fan on a stand at her elbow. She was listening.

“Where’s Jerry?” she demanded. “I don’t hear nobody in the foreroom.”

Stella was manipulating her mother with a brisk yet tender touch.

“Oh,” she said, “I told him he’d have to poke along back tonight. I wanted to rub mother ’fore she got sleepy.”

“Now you needn’t ha’ done that,” said Mrs. Joyce from a deep seclusion, her face turned downward into the pillow. “He must be awful disappointed, dressin’ himself up an’ all, an’ ’pearin’ out for nothin’.”

“Well,” said Stella, “there’s more Saturday nights comin’.”

“I wanted to see Jerry,” complained aunt Hill. “I could ha’ set with your mother. Well, I’ll go in an’ put out the foreroom lamp.”

Stella was always being irritated by aunt Hill’s officious services in the domestic field, but now she was glad to watch her portly back diminishing through the doorway.

“You needn’t ha’ done that,” her mother was murmuring again. “I feel real tried over it.”

“Jerry wanted to know how you were,” said Stella speciously. He’s awful sorry you’re laid up.”

“Well, I knew he’d be,” said Mrs. Joyce. “Jerry’s a good boy.”

The week went by and her back was better, but when Saturday night came, aunt Hill had not gone home. She had, instead, slipped on a round stick in the shed while she was picking up chips nobody wanted, and sprained her ankle slightly. And now she sat by the kitchen fire in a state of deepest gloom, the foot on a chair, and her active mind careering about the house, seeking out conditions to be bettered. She wore her black silk no more, lest in her sedentary durance she should “set it out,” and her delaine wrapper with palm leaves seemed to Stella like the archipelagoes they used to define at
SATURDAY NIGHT

school, and inspired her to nervous laughter. It was the early evening and Mrs. Joyce, not entirely free from her muscular fetters, went back and forth from table to sink, doing the dishes, while Stella moulded bread.

There was a step on the icy walk. Stella stopped an instant, her hands on the cushion of dough, the red creeping into her face. Then she dusted her palms together and went ever so softly but quickly to the front entry, closing the door behind her. Aunt Hill, pricking up her ears, heard the outer door open and the note of a man’s voice.

“You see ‘f you can tell who that is,” she counseled Mrs. Joyce, who presently approached the door and laid a hand on the latch. But it stuck, she thought with wonder. Stella was holding it from the other side.

Jerry, in his Sunday clothes, stood out there on the step, and Stella was facing him. There was a note of concern in her voice when she spoke, of mirth, too, left there by aunt Hill’s archipelagoes.

“Oh, Jerry,” she said, “I’m awful sorry. You needn’t ha’ come over tonight.”

“She ain’t gone, has she?” inquired Jerry, in a voice of perilous distinctness.

“Don’t speak so loud. She’s got ears like a fox. No, but I could ha’ put her off somehow. I never thought of your comin’ over tonight.”

“Well, I thought of it,” said Jerry. “I ain’t seen your mother for quite a spell.”

“Oh, she’s all right now. There! I feel awfully not to ask you in, but aunt Hill’s ankle an’ all—goodnight.”

He turned away after a look at the bright knocker that, jumping out at him from the dusk, almost made it seem as if the door had been shut in his face. But he went crunching down the path, and Stella returned, to wash her hands at the sink and resume her moulding.

“Law!” said aunt Hill, “Your cheeks are’s red as fire. Who was it out there?”

“Jerry Norton.” Stella’s voice sank in spite of her. That unswerving gaze on her cheeks made her feel out in the world, in a strong light, for curiosity to jeer at.

“Jerry Norton?” Aunt Hill was repeating in a loud voice. “Well, I’ll be whipped if it ain’t Saturday night an’ you’ve turned him away agin. What’s got into you, Stella? I never thought you was one to blow hot an’ blow cold when it come to a fellow like Jerry Norton. Good as gold, your mother says he is, good to his mother an’ good to his sister, an’ now he’s took his aunt home to live with ’em.”
SATURDAY NIGHT

"I can't 'tend to callers when there's sickness in the house," Stella plucked up spirit to say, and her mother returned wonderingly—
"Why, it ain't sickness exactly, aunt Hill's ankle ain't. I wish I could ha' got out there. I'd have asked him in."

Before the next Saturday aunt Hill's ankle had knit itself up and she was gone. When Stella and her mother sat down to supper in their wonted seclusion, Stella began her deferred task. She was inwardly excited over it, and even a little breathless. It seemed incredible to her still, that Jerry and she had parted, and it would, she knew, seem so to her mother when she should be told. She sat eating cup-cake delicately, but with an ostentatious relish, to prove the robustness of her state.

"Mother," she began.
"Little more tea?" asked Mrs. Joyce, holding the tea-pot poised.
"No. I want to tell you somethin',"
"I guess I'll have me a drop more," said Mrs. Joyce. "Nobody need to tell me it keeps me awake. I lay awake anyway."
Stella took another cup-cake in bravado.
"Mother," she said, "Jerry'n' I've concluded to give it up."
"Give what up?" asked Mrs. Joyce, finding she had the brew too sweet and pouring herself a drop more.
"Oh, everything! We've changed our minds."
Mrs. Joyce set down her cup. "You ain't broke off with Jerry Norton?"
"Yes. We broke it off together."
"You needn't tell me 'twas Jerry Norton's fault." Mrs. Joyce pushed her cup from her and winked rapidly. "He's as good a boy as ever stepped, an' he sets by you as he does his life."

Stella was regarding her in wonder, a gentle little creature who omitted to say her soul was her own on ordinary days, but rousing herself, with ruffled feathers, to defend, not her young, but the alien outside the nest.

"If he had give you the mitten, I shouldn't blame him a mite, turnin' him away from the door as you have two Saturday nights runnin'. But he ain't done it. I know Jerry too well for that. His word's as good's his bond, an' you'll go through the woods an' get a crooked stick at last." Then she looked across at Stella, as if in amazement over her own fury; but Stella, liking her for it and thrilled by its fervor, laughed out because that was the way emotion took her.

"You can laugh," said her mother, nodding her head, as she rose
SATURDAY NIGHT

and began to set away the dishes. "But 'fore you git through with this you'll laugh out o' t'other side o' your mouth, an' so I tell ye."

Upon her words there was a step at the door, and Stella knew the step was Jerry's. Her mother, with the prescience born of ire, knew it too.

"There he is," she said. "Now you go to cuttin' up any didos, things gone as fur as they have, an' you'll repent this night's work the longest day you live. You be a good girl an' go 'n' let him in!" She had returned to her placidity, a quiet domestic fowl whose feathers were only to be ruffled when some terrifying shadow flitted overhead.

Stella flew to the door and opened it on her lover, standing still and calm, like a figure set there by destiny to conquer her.

"Jerry," she burst forth out of the nervous thrill her mother had awakened in her, "you're botherin' me 'most to death. It's awful not to ask you in when you come to the door, an' you a neighbor so. But I can't. You know I can't. It ain't as if you'd come in the day time. But Saturday night—it's just as if—why, you know what Saturday night is. It's just as if we were goin' together!"

Jerry stood there immovable, looking at her. He had shaved and he wore the red tie she had given him. Perhaps it was not so much that she saw him clearly through the early dusk as that she knew from memory how kind his eyes were and what a healthy color flushed his face. It seemed to her at this moment as if Jerry was the nicest person in the world, if only he wouldn't plague her so. But he was speaking out of his persistent quiet.

"I might as well tell you, Stella, an' you might as well make up your mind to it. It ain't tonight only. I'm comin' here every Saturday night.

She was near crying with the vexation of it.

"But you can't, Jerry," she said. "I don't want you to."

"You used to want me to," said he, composedly.

"Well, that was when we were——"

"When we were goin' together." He nodded in acceptance of the quibble. "Well, if you wanted me once, a girl like you, you'll want me ag'in. An' anyways, I'm comin'."

Stella felt a curious thrill of pride in him.

"Why, Jerry," she faltered, "I didn't know you took things that way."

He was answering quite simply, as if he had hardly known it either.

"Well, I don't know myself how I'm goin' to take things till I've
SATURDAY NIGHT

thought ’em out. That’s the only way. Then, after ye’ve made up your mind, ye can stick to it.”

Stella fancied there was a great deal in this to think over, but she creaked the door insinuatingly.

“Well,” she said, “I’m awful sorry——”

“I won’t keep you stannin’ here in the cold. I’ll be over agin next Saturday night.”

Stella went in and sat down by the hearth and crossed her feet on the head of one of the firedogs. She was frowning, and yet she was laughing too. Her mother, moving back and forth, kept casting inquiring looks at her.

“Well,” she ventured at last, “you made it up betwixt ye?”

Stella put down her feet and rose to help.

“Don’t you ask me another question,” she commanded rather airily. “It’s all over an’ done with, an’ I told you so before. Le’s pop us some corn by’n’by.”

Before the next Saturday something had happened. Stella walked over to the Street to buy some thread, and Matt Pillsbury brought her home in his new sleigh with the glossy red back and the scrolls of gilt at the corners. Matt was a lithe, animated youth who could do many unexpected and serviceable things: a little singing, a little violin playing, and tricks with cards. He was younger than Stella, but he reflected, as he drove with her over the smooth road, nobody would ever know it because he was dark and she was fair, and he resolved to let his moustache grow a little longer and curl it more at the ends. Mrs. Joyce was away when this happened, quilting at Deacon White’s, but all the next day, which was Saturday, she remained perfectly aware that Stella was making plans, and when at seven o’clock the girl came down in her green plaid with her gold beads on, Mrs. Joyce drew the breath of peace.

“Well, there,” she said, “if you behave as well as you look, you’ll do well, an’ if Jerry don’t say so I’ll miss my guess.”

Stella was gazing at her, trembling a little, but defiant also.

“Mother,” she said, “if Jerry comes, you go to the door an’ you tell him—oh, my soul! I believe there he is now.”

But in the next instant it seemed to her just as well. She could tell him herself. She flew to the door in a whirl. But she got no further than his name. Jerry took her with a hand on either side of her waist and set her back into the entry. Then he shut the door behind him and laid his palms upon her shoulders. She could hear his breath, and it occurred to her to wonder if he had been running,
the blood must be pumping so through his heart. He was speaking in a tone she had never heard from any man.

“What’s this about your goin’ to the sociable with Matt Pillsbury?” She stiffened and flung back defiance.

“I’m goin’, that’s all. How’d you know it?”

“I was over to the store an’ Lottie Pillsbury come in an’ I heard her tell Jane Hunt: ‘Brother Matt asked her, an’ she says she’s goin’.’”

“Well, it’s true enough. I expect him along in three-quarters of an hour.”

“Well, he won’t come.” That strange savage thrill in his voice frightened her, and before she could remember they were not going together, she was clinging to his arm.

“Oh, Jerry,” she breathed, “you ain’t done him any mischief?” But his arms were about her and she was locked to his heart.

“No,” he said, “I ain’t—yet.” He laughed a little. “I stood out in the road till I heard him go into the barn to harness. Then he went back into the house to change his clo’es. An’ I walked into the barn an’ unblanketed the horse an’ slung away the bells an’ druv the horse down to the meetin’-house, an’ left him there in the sheds.”

Stella laughed with the delight of it. She felt wild and happy, and it came to her that a man who could behave like this when he had made up his mind, might be allowed a long time in coming to it. But she tried reproving him.

“Oh, Jerry, the horse’ll freeze to death!”

“No, he won’t. He’s all blanketed. Besides, little Jim Pillsbury’s there tendin’ the fire for the sociable, an’ he’ll find him. Now—”’ his voice took on an added depth of that strange new quality she shivered under. “Matt’ll be over here in a minute to tell you he’s lost his horse an’ can’t go. You want me to harness up an’ take him an’ you in the old pung, or you want to stay here with me?” Stella touched his cheek with her finger in a way she had, and he remembered and bent and kissed her. “All right,” he said. “That suits me. We’ll stay here. Only, I don’t want to put ye to no shame before Matt. That’s why I played a trick on him instid o’ breakin’ his bones.”

“Oh, Jerry!” She had not meant to tell him, but it seemed she must. “I wasn’t goin’ with him alone. Lottie was goin’, too. I told him I wouldn’t any other way.”