

Erastus Dawkins' New Year's Eve.

LOUISE J. BROOKS.

'Twas the last eve of the old year, and Erastus Dawkins, broker and speculator, sat in his counting-room in the Queen's Buildings, examining the returns of the day.

"A prosperous week," he commented, running his hand through his iron-gray locks, a large white hand ornamented with a great seal ring, a genuine antique that matched well the dead gold buttons on the wristbands of snowy linen. "Yes, a very prosperous week. Well, Maps," impatiently addressing a figure who had just that moment entered the room with a halting footstep and a look of almost painful embarrassment on his thin, closely-shaven face, "what can I do for you to-night?"

"Mr. Dawkins, sir," began the newcomer in a quavering voice, lifting the thin bent form, "it is high upon twenty years since I first entered your service."

"Well, and what of that?" returned the other stooping to lift a stray wisp of paper from the floor. "What of that, Maps?"

A look of disappointment crossed the anxious countenance of the one addressed as Maps, and he gave vent to a succession of little dry coughs before he could muster up courage to proceed.

"And Mr. Dawkins, sir, I have tried to serve you faithfully and well, and have never once during that time asked of you a single favor."

The figure in the leather-cushioned chair drew itself erect, and the voice that answered the more timid one, plainly proclaimed the cold, calculating man of the world.

"You know that I do not approve of favors, Maps. They are things I never ask and seldom grant. I told you last month when I raised your wages ten pounds a year, that it was all you could expect from me under the circumstances."

"It was not the subject of wages alone that brought me here to-night," said the old man, dejectedly, a dark flush rising to his brown cheeks, "the sum that I receive is sufficient for the bare wants of my little family, but—but I wished for a loan of thirty pounds."

If the earth had opened at his feet that moment, his employer could not have been more astounded.

"Maps," he said, rising majestically, "if you were not an old man and a steady one, I should wonder less at your words. Knowing you as I do, there can be but one reason for such a departure from your ordinary way."

The flush deepened on the worn cheek beside him, and the long thin fingers worked nervously as Maps made his slow reply.

"You are right sir; it is—Milly."

"I thought so," returned the other, contemptuously, "smiling back into the depths of his cushioned chair. "And why do you trouble yourself in regard to her? Is she close her own path, and left the roof that sheltered her for the company of the miserable vagabond who claims her as wife. She took her own deliberate choice; why should you suffer for her fault?"

"But she was my girl, my little one," said the old man, in his quavering voice, "and I mind her, the blue-eyed, fair-haired tiny dot that she was, dancing about after the sunbeams like a bird on the wing. And she grew up such a sweet, shy maiden that I thought in all the world there was nothing half good enough for my Milly."

"And she scorned your counsels," the harsher voice continued, "darkened your home, and nearly broke your old heart, Maps. Why should you consider her after that?"

There was a tender light in the old clerk's dim eyes; a far away dreamy look that brightened the wrinkled face wonderfully.

"She was my girl, my little one," he repeated, softly, "and every year that passed she became more and more the image of her dead mother. I loved her well, and when she took her own way, it broke me down and made me the old, old man that I am. But you would not know my once winsome Milly. She is thin, and hollow-eyed, and all the music has gone out of her voice. Her husband lies in prison for debt, and she swears that if he is once released he will lead an honest life, and in another country build up his ruined character. He is young, and there must be good in him yet, or my girl would never love and cling to him as she does. She has come back to my lonely home, and the motherless children who so sadly need her care, but her heart will break if he is denied the chance he pleads for so desperately. If I had but the thirty pounds."

"It is useless, Maps," answered Mr. Dawkins, in his most decided tone. "Let the fellow remain in the strait to which his transgression has condemned him, and the girl suffer to the utmost the sorrow brought on by her own folly."

"But you have a daughter," pleaded Maps—"and Master Arthur—"

At the mention of that name Erastus Dawkins' face grew pale with anger, and he cried, in a voice that made the other shrink in dismay:

"My Alice! Why man, I would rather see her robed in a shroud than have to do with such a Arthur Marvin. A mental that I took from the street and raised to position, that he might steal from me my greatest treasure forsooth."

"But he was the son of your boyhood's friend, handsome Henry Marvin, who never had an enemy on the wide earth. And he is good and noble as Master Arthur—a kind true heart, that he might steal from me my greatest treasure forsooth."

"Nevertheless, to-day I sent him about his business," retorted the other, grimly, "and when he has to beg for a livelihood, his nobility will stand him in poor stead. My Alice shall never marry a pauper. If she does, my curse rest on her head. As for him, if he ever crosses my threshold, I will have him thrust forth into the street without pity and without warning."

With even a slower step than he had taken, Maps returned to the outer door, leaving the old man staring after him.

"Poor Arthur!" sighed the old man drearily, "poor fellow! And Miss Alice loves him too, bless her bonny heart. Ah, well-a-day! 'Tis a sad world for the young as well as the old."

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"Where is my daughter—your mistress?" asked his master, impatiently. A look of terror stole over the man's face, and he turned away with a dry rattle in his throat.

"Your mistress, fellow!" demanded his master again, in alarm at his singular behavior. "Where is Alice?"

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With a blind gesture the man staggered forward and looked within. It was empty. Uttering a wild cry, he threw up his hands and fell, laying his face downward on the rich carpet, like one dead, with white, drawn face and wide open eyes that saw nothing on the earth.

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How strange seemed the life and bustle of the busy streets, and the voices of men calling one to another. The hurry and turmoil made his weak brain swim. The passers looked askance at his tall, gaunt figure, and hurried on, making no reply to his mute question. Presently the streets grew more and more deserted. The fog came down heavy and damp, hiding all objects in a dreary mist, and causing his teeth to chatter dismally. Finally a second foot-fall echoed on the cold hard pave, and a figure thinner, gaunter, more wretched, if possible, than his own, loomed behind him in the gloom.

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With a blind gesture the man staggered forward and looked within. It was empty. Uttering a wild cry, he threw up his hands and fell, laying his face downward on the rich carpet, like one dead, with white, drawn face and wide open eyes that saw nothing on the earth.

Months must have fled ere the poor brain recovered consciousness, and when the blind eyes opened again it was in an hospital ward, where the sunbeams crept lightly over the whitewashed walls, and low-voiced attendants fitted about among the lowly cots, soothing away pain with gentle ministrations. All day long the eyes of Erastus Dawkins had gazed vaguely about him. All day long after his awakening in the morning from that dreamless sleep, his memory had been at work. When the shadows of the winter day began to lengthen, a sudden strength seemed to come to his enfeebled frame, and he said to one who bent over him with kind inquiry, "I think that I can go forth," but they bade him rest yet another day, and then put garments on his shrunken frame and gave him his freedom.

How strange seemed the life and bustle of the busy streets, and the voices of men calling one to another. The hurry and turmoil made his weak brain swim. The passers looked askance at his tall, gaunt figure, and hurried on, making no reply to his mute question. Presently the streets grew more and more deserted. The fog came down heavy and damp, hiding all objects in a dreary mist, and causing his teeth to chatter dismally. Finally a second foot-fall echoed on the cold hard pave, and a figure thinner, gaunter, more wretched, if possible, than his own, loomed behind him in the gloom.

Obeying a dumb impulse, he paused till the form had overtaken him, and peering under the tattered, rimless hat, recognized the well-known countenance of—Maps.

"Where is Alice, my daughter?" gasped Erastus Dawkins. "Tell me, for the love of Heaven."

"Why should I tell you?" asked the other, with a grim smile on his pinched features. "You must take the sound of her name. Who took the light from your hearthstone and left you childless? Who robbed you of your hard-earned gold? Who has whitened your hair, and dimmed your