

A PRODIGAL FATHER.

She turned nervously before the high, thin mirror, a tall, heavy woman, with sleek gray hair. Her gown was of black alpaca made in bygone vogue when narrow pipings held sway and a lingering fondness for crimolines lurked in full skirt breadths.

As she wheeled in critical half circles, the girl at her side pulled and patted the alpaca folds straight, the old woman observing this process of adjustment with a look of helpless anxiety, her elbows lifted.

'I don't know a thing to say,' she argued. 'Oh, mother! don't go to worrying again. You won't have anything to say. He'll do the talking. You just sit up and listen. Here's your hemstitched handkerchief with the initial. I'd hold it like this.' She drew the stiff linen into shape, holding it at the centre with an assumption of carelessness.

A candle on the bureau with its restless brush of flame pained in the oval glass a sketchy picture of the room, the ceiling of which lifted like a tent. A spot of rich blue deepened in the homespun bed cover. Yawning darkly under the low side wall was a little hide-bound trunk, the dimensions of which were exactly reproduced in the creases of the alpaca skirt.

'You look mighty nice,' said the girl, stepping away, her hand judiciously poised on her hips. She was young, with a peachy face in round cheeks of which certain little dimples were furtively tucked. Her hair of the faint brown which is shot with silvery reflections, was coiled awkwardly, as if it had only lately been coiled at all, and still yearned to lie in the hanging braids of childhood.

'I hope my collar is even,' reflected the other woman.

'It isn't that I care for myself, Lizzie. I ain't cared to dress since—your father went away. I wouldn't think it looked just right. But William's maw is real dressy. I saw her once at church. And so I want to appear just as I know how. Only I do hope I'll never hev to go through any such doin's again! I do so.'

The girl slipped out a low gurgle of laughter.

'I don't reckon you will,' she said, 'seeing I'm the only daughter you got. I don't look to be asked for more than once. Hush! Oh, mother, there's him knocking right now!'

'You better go to the door. Give me the candle. I'll light you down.'

The old woman, seeming to gather resolution of despair, stepped heavily on the first step of the narrow stair. Lizzie held the flaring taper aloft with a shaking hand. Suddenly she caught her mother's sleeve.

'Don't say much about father, Will knows he ain't here.' She hung breathlessly in the shadow of the staircase, listening to the little bustle of entrance just below. A young man's voice stammered out a greeting.

'Right cold night,' he said. 'Reckon we're going to have real Christmas weather by next week.'

Lizzie hanging against the deal casing, heard the sitting-room door shut. From within a low murmur of talk came. The girl, wild-eyed and flushing, crept down the steep stairs, slipping into the room across the bit of entry.

A young fellow whose boyish face reduplicated in a less delicate tone her own pink and white tints glanced up from a book.

'Keep calm, Lizzie,' he said teasingly. 'You look excited, I reckon mother will say yes. You told her to say yes. didn't you? I expect she'll be easy on him—a nice young man like Will Raley. Only thing is she may forget what you told her—he drew up, warned by the tremor of his sister's lip that this heart stirring moment was not a time for jest.'

It occurred to him for the first time how little she must be to him in the future, this pretty sister of his, whose ways were appointing in the room across the hall.

'I hate to see you marry, Liz!' he exclaimed. And mother—it'll be awful hard for her. She's only got us two. And she's had a fearful lot to put up with. Father—'

'She wouldn't like to have you breathe a word against him, Ed.' She started as she spoke. Her mother was pushing at the door. She came in grumping a little.

'Go, Lizzie,' she said in a labored voice. 'I'll give you to him. He—he's got 'nuf fond o' you. He'll make you a good man.'

And as the girl flung toward her impulsively, she made out to smile. Don't mind me, daughter. He's waitin' on you—go on.' Shutting the door upon the girl, she sat down heavily.

'Don't feel so bad mammy!' cried the young man. 'There's no nicer fellow anywhere, than Will. Well fixed and all. He could have had his pick. He's never had eyes for any one else but Lizzie since he settled here a year back. She's as sweet as a pink, but, mother, we've got nothing. And then folks remember—well, you know father oftentimes—'

The woman at the hearth listens with a quivering chin.

'I'm not saying a word against him, mother.'

'Don't you, Eddie!'

'I ain't, mother.'

'Because I—Eddie, he had his faults, but he was real good-hearted when he was himself.' The son set his lips.

'And since he went off I've often studied that maybe I wasn't as patient as I ought to have been. I wake up nights and get to studying over us being comfortable—you with a good place in the store and Lizzie to marry well—when maybe he's 'out a roof to his head!' it has been three years since he left—I reckon he's aged a heap.'

There was a high wind rioting outside, muttering contempt upon the low roots of the village, and commencing in sharper notes with the stripped tree tops. It had an almost human accent, varying from a wild cry to the confused murmuring of a feverish tongue. The sounds of it gave a strange significance to the woman's words. Ed's face took a sadder cast.

His father's figure recurred to him, clothed for the once in some thin shroud of sentiment. Practically reviewed, it was the figure of a man who, in deserting, his family, had conferred on it a deep and lasting good. A tall man, as his son remembered him with a rollicking air in his long, gray moustaches, a disreputable uncertainty in the texture of his slouched hat, and a varying thickness in his voice.

His son recalled the night of the old man's departure. There had been a stormy scene. Unable to wring tribute from his wife's empty purse, the master of the house had strongly expressed a lack of satisfaction in his family ties. He had swung himself over the threshold, declaring an intention of leaving forever a family so unworthy a father's devotion. The family itself believed the calm which followed his going would be as fleeting as the odor of rye which hung upon his menace. But as days lengthened and no stumbling foot sounded after night upon the door step, it began to seem as if the old man's threat had not been merely a tactical device.

The human growths he has tramped on began to lift themselves, daring to freshen in the sunshine. But they never put into overshape the satisfaction which enlivened them.

'Maybe if I'd been different to what I was—more sternlike and pushing—your father wouldn't ever hev give way to drink,' breathed Mrs. Hicks, staring into the fire.

'No one could have been any kinder than you was, mother.'

'I was real short to him the night he went, Ed. You said some things too, that—oh, dear! I ain't resigned to think maybe he's cold and hungry.'

Ed, pocketed his hands with a sudden sense of gloom.

It was not a pleasant fancy. He hated to think even a stranger's dog might be abroad on a night when black skies housed a howling wind and barren trees wrung their empty hands to the stress of it.

In spite of himself he seemed to see a leaning old shape buffeted by that raw sweep. Its gray beard mocked by bleak gusts. The cheer of the rag-carpeted kitchen upon which a series of dark pictures came and went, pictures always of the same aged figure, bent with a burden of shameful years. It stretched out feeble hands, begging bread of a hard-faced farer in a city. It crouched for shelter in some noisome door. It looked from prison bars, it slept in hedges, always with the peculiar pathos upon it of sins long past and bitterly atoned.

Lizzie's soft laugh rang out in the hall. There was a whispering. She was bidding her lover good night.

Ed sat with his head in his hands. His mother stared into the fire with a gray face.

'Will's going to eat Christmas dinner with us!' cried Lizzie, bursting into the room. 'Why—why, what's the matter with you two?'

'We just happened to get talking about father. I wish I knew where he is,' explained Ed., striking away the somber panorama from disliking eyes.

But somehow the voiceless actor in these dramas of woe had a peculiar instance. He was not to be banished.

Measuring musins in the store next day Ed. Hicks was constantly sensible of a miserable presence, which went through the piteous enactment of the night before.

'Perhaps he's dead!' surmised the young man. 'Dead—huddled under the clouds of a pauper's grave.' The idea, carrying a weight of compunction, ringed a new glory round old Hick's brow. 'I wish to the Lord I hadn't spoke to him like I did the night he left,' mused his son.

On Christmas eve Lizzie had gone to some neighborhood festival with her lover. Ed. coming in late from the store was hanging his overcoat behind the door. His mother stood shaking a dipperfull of corn over the blaze.

'You set right down and eat this while it is hot, Eddie. I never see corn pop like it does—white as cotton.'

Ed. stretched his hands over the stove, watching the leap of the corn flakes.

Mrs. Hicks bent a glance of inquiry toward the house front.

'That wasn't a step, was it?' she debated.

A rap thundered upon the door panel.

'Some of the boys,' said Ed. 'I half-promised to look in on the candy pulling at Howe's tonight. Reckon they've come to—' he flung the door open wide.

It disclosed a parallelogram of snow-white earth, rippling along its upper part with star-faceted gray sky. A bare sapling at the gate, the glow of a Christmas tree in the window over the way, its branches specked with fire and gaudy with tinsel, the ring and clamor of a sleigh full of young folk of young folk passing in the street—all this made an indefinite settling of the figure on the step.

It was not a bowed, wretched figure with hollow eyes and blowing strands of ashen hair. It was mean enough, in its ragged clothes, a limp hat jammed over its brow, but despite these signs of fallen fortunes it stood upright and rotund, the moist red of its puffy cheeks reaching out and rimming its heavy nose in scarlet.

In the hanging, bubulous moustaches hung the old Bohemian air. The eyes rolled. The unsteady knees had something jaunty in their advance.

The prodigal had come home. He entered the house with a step of amiable assurance, anticipating the fatted calf with a tolerant nostril. He had doffed the willows of exile for holiday green and his manner was that of one who realizes a certain delight in forgiveness.

'Yes, I'm back,' he conceded, making himself at ease in the rocking chair. 'This time of year a fellow feels like he owed something to his family, even if they ain't treated him just straight. I never was a man to cherish ill-feelings. Forgive and forget is my motto. Well, Ed, you're a big boy. Looking fine. What's Lizzie? Cuts little trick, that! Heh? 'gone out.' Well, I'll be here when she comes in. A man's place is with his folks. I'm going to bury bygones.'

His wife, brewing tea, holding up bread

to toast, was moved with anguish that her heart had given no other token of joy and gratitude than might be encompassed in a cold sinking.

The prodigal, unaffected by the silence, the spasmodic remarks, the flushings and palings of the two who plied him with remorseful attentions, rambled cheerfully on. At 12 of the clock he announced himself 'dead on his feet' and ready for bed.

Just on the stroke Lizzie came, calling out some word to young Raley as he shut the gate.

She came in, all the pretty color going swiftly from her cheeks, all the frosty brightness quenched in her eyes at sight of the massy figure greeting her in a jovial tone as daughter.

The three people who were left in the room when the new comer had yawned himself off to bed, stood dumbly looking at and away from each other. Lizzie's face, white as a white rose just unhooded, struggled with tears.

'Will'll be here all day to-morrow,' she breathed. 'He—he's never seen father.' Ed, wheeled round, holding his lips in. Their mother, enfolding them in a look of prophetic love, saw what shame, what possible discomfiture and ruin lay for them in the dark face of the future.

Her lips trembled and the water stood in her eyes.

'It's late,' she said. 'Let us remember all we got to be grateful for. Your father ain't sick, or in want or dead. He's come home.'

But there was no prayer in her heart as she lay at Lizzie's side, listening to the girl's uneven, sighing breath. When she woke in the morning it was with a sense of surprise that she had slept even a little, had been able for an hour or two to bind slumber upon her paining eyes.

It was a full day. Lizzie was already up and gone down stairs.

Across the panes a snow heaped beech-branch contorted itself like a stem of rough coral. Behind it she saw a blank sky which seemed to wear the very look she felt her face assuming, a look that must hide hint of doubt and fear.

She got up with faltering knees. It was Christmas day, when the measure of joy is full, so full that even the wretched of earth may wet their lips at its flowing brim. She went down stairs. They appeared strangely steep, a venturesome descent for one whose eye took a suggestion of unreality from their very slope.

Lizzie was setting the table. Her lashes glistened up a morning glance as her mother unlatched the door. Then she averted them quickly, with a look at her brother.

'Your father ain't up?' said Mrs. Hicks feebly, nearing the stove. 'Make the coffee strong, Lizzie. He likes it strong.'

'Mother,' said Ed. suddenly, 'I—I hate to tell you!—spoiling your Christmas! but—he's gone, father has—'

'Gone?'

'Yes'm.'

'Oh just out som'ers! He'll be in against coffee boils.'

She broke off, shaking, searching his face for contradiction.

'No, mammy. He won't be back. He's—well, he's taken my overcoat—and several little things of mine—of course he's welcome to 'em—but he's gone for good.' His voice rang with a stifled joy.

Lizzie's eyes beamed under their covert lashes. In her mother's countenance struggled a feeling that broke at the lips in a short sob.

There was a moment's silence, a moment in which Mrs. Hicks let her eyes shine with the wild brightness which like some minister of grace, the prodigal had left in his train.

His wife looked at her children. Something in her glance seemed to beg them to disbelieve the rapture she could not banish from her face.

'We'll have to comfort each other,' she said.

FACTS FULL OF SUNSHINE.

FOR RHEUMATIC SUFFERERS.

Shakespeare says that "the miserable have no other medicine but only hope," but for those who are made miserable by Rheumatism, even hope has fled in a great majority of cases.

Twenty years is a long time to be the victim of a disease, and yet that is the time Thos. Stevenson, of 122 John St. South, Hamilton, makes oath that he was afflicted with Rheumatism. Twenty years' affliction is enough to banish any hope of cure, and yet Ryckman's Kootenay Cure, after everything else failed, restored Mr. Stevenson to health.

Seven years one would think too long to suffer indescribable torture, and yet Mr. C. B. Hamilton, of 131 Sydenham Street, London, Ont., endured the agonies of Rheumatism for that length of time. At times he could not use his limbs. Kootenay Cure has cured him, and he's truly thankful for it. Hundreds of others, besides these, have sworn to being cured by Ryckman's Kootenay Cure.

There is no mistaking its wonderful power. Thousands of Rheumatic Sufferers have had the sunshine of hope and health come back through its use. If you are afflicted with Rheumatism, Sciatica, Neuralgia, or any Blood Disease, it will pay you to investigate. Particulars sent free on addressing the Ryckman Medicine Co., Hamilton, Ont.

One bottle lasts over a month.

A Miracle Gun.

One of the most remarkable of war inventions is attributed to the ingenuity of a Frenchman, Paul Giffard. His 'miracle gun' is a repeating rifle which employs no gunpowder. Liquefied air, obtained as a pressure hundreds of degrees below zero, and thus representing an enormous expansive power, is the projecting force. This rifle is described as being much lighter than an ordinary rifle. The steel cartridges nine inches long, and as thick as one's thumb, contain three hundred bullets which may be discharged as quickly or slowly as desired. There is no smoke and no flash, only a sharp and low report. As soon as one cartridge is empty another can be screwed on instantly, three hundred shots costing but 2½ cents.



THE SOOTY PETREL.

A Fish Eating Bird That is Deemed a Delicacy in Australia.

Tastes differ in different latitudes, even among English speaking people. Imagine Caucasians dining on salted petrels, and with a relish, too, as though that fish eating sea bird were a luxury. Of all the fowls that haunt the barren islands on the California coast none is considered quite so worthless as the sooty petrel. Even the sea gull has his usefulness as a scavenger on the bays along the coast, but the petrel is truly a despised bird in these waters. Sea gulls' eggs bring a price in the market that makes it worth while to gather them at a considerable expense, but no one thinks it worth while to rob the petrels' nests on the rookeries at the Farallone islands.

It is different in Australia. Is it the cold winds that blow up from the antarctic regions or the hot air that sweeps down from the equator? No matter what the cause, the fact is that the appetites of our Australian cousins are radically different. The sooty petrel is there an edible fowl, with a decided market value, and a number of men and small craft are employed each year in catching, salting, packing and carrying it in great quantities from the rookeries on Trefoil island and other adjoining islands on the north coast of Tasmania to Stanley and Melbourne.

Mutton bird is the general name given the petrel there, and the men and ships engaged in the business are known as mutton birders. To Americans this is quite a novel industry, and the fact that such common sea-birds as the petrel are packed and salted down like so much pork is always a matter of wonderment to strangers who go there. But the test of the pudding is in the eating of it, and those who have dined off mutton-birds instead of land mutton pronounce the one every bit as good as the other.

If you leave San Francisco in August, sailing westward and southward, you will pass many great flocks of birds that will be pointed out to you as sooty petrels—or they will pass you, for they are traveling about three times faster than you are. And when you reach Melbourne and have become acclimated enough to venture a trip across to Tasmania, you may dine off the young of those very birds that passed you on the California coast, only now they will be served to you as mutton birds.

These fowls leave the Farallones every few months, and once every year they visit Australia. Trefoil island is their chief roosting place in the southern hemisphere, so far as it is known. Here they scratch and dig in the barren soil until they have burrowed a hole perhaps two feet deep. Into these holes each hen in the immense flock deposits her one egg. The mutton birder inserts his arm full stretch for his game. He does not take the egg, but waits a week or ten days after the egg has been hatched. Then he finds the young bird almost as big as the parent, but much more tender and fat. On land the petrel is quite unable to escape from the catchers. It cannot mount into the air from off the land, though its wings are enormously long in proportion to its black body, and it rises quite gracefully from the water. On shore, however, the strange bird must hop along at a slow pace and can only fly from the top of a ledge. Certain points of Trefoil island are littered with thousands of these nests, and it is no difficult task to gather the yearly harvest of young mutton birds. The mutton birding season on Trefoil island lasts from a month to six weeks, and this includes the catching, salting, packing and shipping. They are packed in casks, and these are

loaded on coasting schooners that come after them from Tasmania and Melbourne.

By the time the fresh crop of mutton birds is being eaten at Melbourne the adult parents, with perhaps a certain percentage of the young ones that have escaped the catchers, are returning to their old haunts, occupying the old and scratching new nests on the Farallone islands. Here the birds are practically unmolested, and it may thus be said, with some basis in reason, that the California coast is supplying the Australian coasters with their edible sea fowl.

It is true, of course, that the petrel finds other quiet nesting places besides the islands off the California coast, but it is also true that Catalina, the Santa Barbara channel islands and the Farallones are their chief rookeries on this coast, and that at certain seasons these islands are entirely deserted by them, while the islands off Tasmania and the southern coast of Australia then swarm with them.—San Francisco Chronicle.

Piles Cured in 3 to 6 Nights—Itching, Burning Skin Diseases Relieved in One Day.

Dr. Agnew's Ointment will cure all cases of itching piles in from three to six nights. One application brings comfort. For blind and bleeding piles it is peerless. Also cures tetter, salt rheum, eczema, barber's itch and all eruptions of the skin. Relieves in a day. 35 cents.

OUTWITTED BY HORSE THIEVES.

Detective Found Captives Shrewder than He Supposed.

'What was the case that made the deepest impression upon me?' was a well-known detective's response to the query of a Star reporter. 'Well, if I should tell it it would ruin my reputation, but I will give it to you upon the understanding that my name is not to be used.'

'A gang of horse thieves were working Southern Indiana, and I was employed to ferret them out. Taking two assistants, I started on the trail, and finally succeeded in locating them in Brown County, which is, I believe, the only one in the State without a railroad.'

'We knew that the thieves had their headquarters somewhere between Columbus and Nashville, the latter being the county seat of Brown County, and with my men I scoured until nightfall, when we took refuge in a cabin, the family being absent, and we expected to explain our presence when the occupants returned.'

'In about an hour four men rode up, evidently much excited, the leader accosting me with: 'We are from Columbus and understand you are looking for stolen horses. Three were taken from us last night, and we want to give you descriptions of them and join our party.' At first I was somewhat suspicious and gave them no direct reply, inquiring instead:

'Do you know whose cabin this is?'

'Oh, yes; it is old man Stewart's. They are in Columbus and will not be home to-night, but we are friends of his and know any man is welcome, especially on the mission we are. He has had four horses stolen.'

'They entered the cabin and I soon lost all suspicion of them, taking descriptions of the horses they had lost and agreeing that they could remain with us the next day.'

'I awoke early in the morning, having occupied the lower room with my men, while the strangers had retired in the loft. I went to the log stable to see after our three horses and they were gone. Then I returned to the house and no trace could be found for some time of the strangers. Finally a rudely written note was discovered pinned to the door, saying that we were welcome to remain in the house until the following day, when a stage would take us to Columbus; that they had moved and would not use the cabin any longer. That was the last trace I ever got of the thieves or the horses.'—Washington Star.