

"Bill"

Mrs. Hobbs and her husband were on their way to the Mohr school house to attend prayer-meeting. Mrs. Hobbs strode along a few steps ahead, her black hood pushed back from her wide forehead, the crisp snow crunching under her overshoes. The moon shone full upon her large, firm face, which wore a worried expression. She looked up at the little flying clouds and at the clear space in the sky, from which the moon looked calmly down—but she was not thinking about the moon. Suddenly she pressed her lips tightly together and waited for her husband to catch up. Then, taking his arm in hers, she stooped till her face was on a level with his and said in a beseeching, troubled voice:

"Bill, I've been a prayin' fer ye agin'. I just wish this time you'd try it when the preacher asks the sinners to come forwards! There ain't no use o' my tellin' you you're goin' the downward road to ruin. You know that as well as I do! But it ain't too late to repent. You know, Bill, how Mis Marvin feels about her man a-dyin' unsaved. The doctor says it's just that worryin' that's a killin' her, fer her fever's gone now. Bill, ye don't want me to go to heaven without you, do ye?"

"Now, don't, Sairy!" begged Bill. "You're good enough fer two, an' I guess the Lord'll let me in on your ticket."

"Don't you scorf, William! The Bible speaks dretful hard agin' scoffers! Ain't you never goin' to make a start?"

"What 'ud be the use, Sairy? You said I'd have to throw away my plug o' horse-shoe, didn't ye?"

"Of course! The Bible says that no unclean thing shall enter into the city of God!"

"Well, Sairy, if I'd sling it away I'd get so darn sick I'd have to find it agin or buy me another plug. Mebby you wouldn't b'live it now, Sairy, but I've tried it more times 'n once. It's jes like som'pun wuz gone all the time, an' I feel so lonesome an' weak, an' then I jes git so blame sick—all hot an' cold an' thirsty—I've jest got to have a chew! An' seems to me, Sairy, if they can't have terbacker in Heaven, I might jest as well go 'tother place."

Mrs. Hobbs sighed audibly and opened the school house door. She walked straight to her place in front, while Bill, his head bent and his eyes on the floor, slunk into a back seat.

The little school-room, lit up with kerosene lamps and lanterns, was almost full. The people seemed waiting for something. The preacher now arose and asked if some one would start a hymn. All glanced expectantly at Mrs. Hobbs, who cleared her throat and began in a strong voice:

"I know I love Thee better, Lord,
Than any earthly joy."

When the singing ended the preacher said:

"We will now have a season of prayer. Will Brother Brown, Sister Hobbs, and Brother Sparks lead?"

When the strong, earnest voice of Sister Hobbs said "Amen," Brother Sparks began. Mrs. Hobbs, after a few fervent "Lord grant it's," turned to the woman who knelt next to her.

"Is Mis Marvin any worse?" she whispered.

"Dyin'," the doctor said when I stopped," answered the woman. "Who do you suppose is going to take the baby?"

"Why, Hannah ought to," Mrs. Hobbs said decidedly. "She's related to Mis Marvin."

"Only her second cousin, an' with seven children and her man always havin' rheumatiz, I don't see how she can. Such a pert little feller, too. Wist I could take him myself."

There Brother Sparks said "Amen," and they arose.

After the benediction, groups of women gathered and discussed the news of Mrs. Marvin's death, which had come during the meeting. It was the general opinion that the baby would be sent to the orphans' home in the city.

As they started home Bill tried his best to keep up with his wife, and twice cleared his throat as if to speak. Finally he began:

"Say—Sairy—couldn't we take that little feller? He'd soon be a mighty help to you 'round the house and in the garden, and that 'sylum ain't no home fer a baby!"

"Now, William Simpkins Hobbs! Haint I told you I ain't no hand fer children? I couldn't take care o' that youngun if I was to try—which I ain't a goin' to do!"

"Well, see Sairy, they's a light! Who do you s'pose is watchin'? We might jest stop an' see if they need any extry help."

Remarking that she had intended doing so, Mrs. Hobbs turned in at the Marvin place.

"Is there somethin' I can do tonight, Mis Brown?" asked Mrs. Hobbs of the woman at the door.

"Oh, I guess not, thankin' you. There's three of us. Would you like to see her?"

As Mrs. Hobbs gazed at the worn, white face on the pillow, the neighbor woman touched her arm.

"I didn't think when you asked," she said, "but if you was a mind to take the baby tonight 'twould be a great help. We don't know yet what's to be done with him, and it don't seem quite right to keep him here."

"Why—I—I ain't no hand with children—does he cry much?"

"Oh, no! He's wonderful good! Just give him his bottle and he goes right to sleep."

"Well—mebby I could keep him tonight," and she gingerly took the little bundle in her hands. "Here, Bill! You carry it!"

Bill flinched. "Say, Sairy—I believe you'd better, I might drop it. I'll carry your hymn book."

She grimly shut her mouth and walked out. He followed her down the snowy path to the road. Then she turned and said:

"William Simpkins Hobbs! You take this baby! I ain't one bit more used to totin' babies than you be, an' 'twas you said to stop here!"

She placed the baby in his arms and strode on. He stood still a minute—bewildered. A few flakes of snow lit on the shawl, which he pulled at clumsily, to more completely cover the little face. Then he spat his quid of tobacco out into the snow and glanced quickly around. But his wife was far ahead and he hurried on after her.

When they reached home Mrs. Hobbs placed a chair near the stove for her husband, telling him to take off the shawl and rock the baby while she fixed a bed for it. Then she left the room.

The child awoke during the performance and cried a little. He tossed it up and down gently, making queer cluckings, with his face drawn into comical contortions. The baby laughed and threw out its little hand. He let the small, soft fingers clutch his cheek, and he held the baby close.

He felt oddly embarrassed when his wife came back. The baby was asleep with its little fist against his neck. He was almost afraid to breathe lest it should waken. He looked so patient she had to laugh.

"Tendin' babies seems right in your line! You'd be all right with a little practice."

Bill glanced up quickly. Their eyes met and there was a moment of awkward silence.

"I'll put him to bed now," she added in a softened voice.

As she picked it up the baby opened its blue eyes and smiled.

"The little feller!" she exclaimed, and as she closed the bed-room door behind her, she pressed the soft little face to her lips.

Bill stepped out on the porch. The snow was flying fast now. His eyes were misty and he seemed to still feel the tiny fingers grasping his cheek. His hands trembled and his face was hot. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his tobacco—then he stopped. He seemed to see the baby's fair, pure little face, and he muttered:

"Danged if I will!" and threw the brown square far out into the flying snow.

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