

MY SISTER-IN-LAW'S BABY.



DEAR Brother Orpheus: I write to let you know that my wife, finding it necessary to go to New York on business, will start from Pokeville Thursday afternoon at half-past 5, and will arrive in your city about 2 the next day. "She is a very timid, dear girl, and unfortunately, owing to the crops, I cannot travel with her. I have, therefore, proposed that she should stay with you for a few days, instead of going to a hotel. Maria Briggs will be with her. Her business is with the dentist. Your loving brother,

JOSHUA SMITH.

This letter, which the postman brought early one afternoon, alarmed me considerably.

I lived in a neat two-story brick house that had been my father's, smoked where I chose, and kept one deaf old servant, who seldom said and never heard anything.

But having made up my mind that my sister-in-law must come, I began to wonder how, since Hepsiba could not read, the fact might be communicated to her, in order that due preparations might be made.

I rang the bell, Hepsiba saw it shake and came. She stood and looked at me. I pointed to the letter; she nodded. I pointed out of the window at a lady going past; she nodded again. Then I drew another armchair opposite mine and put two plates upon the table, and marked off three days upon the almanac.

Hepsiba gazed with astonishment; looked at me again, shook her head, and putting her apron to her eyes rushed out of the room. I followed her. I found her crying in the kitchen and had matters thus explained to me:

"I'd best take warning. I've kept house for you fifteen years, and a missus will on-settle me. I thought you'd gin up marrying years ago."

I left her. I hoped she did know, but I wasn't sure.

Friday Hepsiba came down in her best gown, and I retired to my study to wonder what I should do with my sister-in-law.

I heard the bell ring after awhile. Then several kittens began to mew in the hall, or I fancied so.

Kitten! no—something more; for in a minute more my study was invaded by Hepsiba, who marched in, holding in her arms a baby, in a dress long enough for a six-footer.

"She's sent the baby on ahead," said Hepsiba, solemnly. "Hadrn't you no confidence in an old critter like me? I shouldn't have objected to your gettin' married, but to keep it from me 't least a couple o' years is kinder hard."

The truth flashed upon me. Some wretched impostor had brought an infant to my door and deserted it. My sister-in-law might arrive before I could rid myself of the horrible little creature.

To find a policeman and get the child off my hands was my only hope. I rushed to my study window and fortunately saw the sturdy form of our particular guardian just turning the corner. I beckoned to him.

And away we drove to the station house, where, having been cruelly cross-questioned, I was informed that the little waif and stray would be sent to the foundling hospital, and that I "might go."

I went. At least my sister-in-law would never know of this absurd affair. My heart was lighter. I grew even cheerful.

But at the door of my own house I halted in terror. Screams of the most fearful description were being uttered within. I burst open the door and rushed in.

In the front parlor a young lady lay upon the floor shrieking and tearing

her hair. A servant girl, whom I remember to have seen at my brother's house, sat rocking to and fro in ecstasies of grief.

"Here's your wife, I reckon," said Hepsiba, "and her sister. They come in and asked me suthin'—didn't exactly hear what it was. Then they began to tear up and down the house like mad. Now she's got fits."

Then Augusta sprang to her feet, rushing toward me, clutching my arm with both her hands, and screamed:

"Oh, where is he? Where is he? Where is my son?"

"I—I don't know. I'm not acquainted with him," I stammered. "I—I—what do you mean, Augusta?"

"My dearest angel! My baby!" cried Augusta.

"Baby!" I cried. "Eh, your baby?" and sat down, faint with horror.

"Me and Mis' Smith we kem up from Pokeville," said Mary Briggs, "this mornin' and we fetched the baby along with us, and me and Mis' Smith come to the door in a cab, and he charged us most an awful price, and drove off with the travelin' bags, with the baby's most particular and needful things in 'em, and so says I, 'Let's run after him,' so says she, 'Yes.' And we rings the bell, and I says to the old lady, 'This is Mr. Smith's?' Says she, 'Yes.' Says I, 'Take in the baby and we'll be back turectly.' And off we puts and caught the man. But we got lost somehow, and we've been half an hour' inquirin' our way back, and can't find the baby."

"There's been a little mistake, and I'm sorry, but I will rectify it. Come along."

We arrived at the station house.

"Well, sir, what do you want?" inquired the sergeant.

"The baby!" I gasped. "You remember the baby. I made a slight mistake. I want him back."

"You are the fellow who gave us so much bother an hour ago, are you?" asked the gentleman, fiercely. "The unfortunate child has been sent to the foundling asylum. The matter is out of our hands."

"Where is the foundling asylum?" I asked.

The direction was hurled at me, so to speak, and we departed. The dreadful journey, with Augusta Jane in spasms of grief, and the other two women crying I cannot describe.

At last we reached the spot were admitted, ushered into a parlor, and there at last interviewed by a stout lady in black, who called herself the matron.

"The last baby was brought in," she said. "Dear me, it's so hard to tell. Twelve was fetched at once. Was it a dark child in a ragged blanket, or—"

"It had a white dress, and a white cloak lined with blue, and a white hood and his name was Ellsworth Lincoln Grant Smith," said Anna Maria.

"And his nice white cloak was lined with blue. The Irish lady said he was quite perfectly beautiful. Oh, he has been adopted already, ma'am."

"Adopted! My baby adopted!" cried Augusta.

"By an Irish lady, just starting for Liverpool," said the matron. "Oh, dear! if it is a mistake, you'll have to hurry, or you won't catch the vessel. She starts at 4, and it's 3:30—the Arizona, and the lady is Mrs. Murphy."

We reached the proper pier at last. The crowd was just dispersing.

"The Arizona!" I cried.

"She's off these fifteen minutes," said a man. "That's the smoke of her yonder."

Then Augusta fainted away. But just as she did so a carriage jostled ours.

"Too late!" cried a voice.

"Oh, Murphy, dear, I knew it!" said another. And a child began to cry.

"Maria Briggs, that's him!" cried Augusta, coming to herself in a minute.

"It's him!" cried Ann Maria, and the two, regardless of danger, were out of our carriage, and in that of our neighbor's in an instant, and I saw them seize upon something in a blue-lined cloak and devour it with kisses.

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"It's my baby," cried Augusta.

"It's mine, madam!" cried the Irish lady.

I stood dumb. The Irish gentleman offered to fight it out with me. Maria Briggs it was who explained.

"Me and Mis' Smith we came from Pokeville to-day, and the man went off with our bags; and the deaf critter there thought the baby was a foundling, and gave it to the police, and we've been ravin' distracted ever since," was her version.

"No apologies at all," said the Irish gentleman. "Shake hands, sir. Sure we can adopt another just the same."

Augusta had Ellsworth Lincoln Grant, and was crying softly over him. She returned with the child and Anna Maria to Pokeville by that night's boat. No power could induce her to sleep in my house, and she has never forgiven me.

As for Hepsiba, I have never been able to explain the thing to her, and she still alludes occasionally to "the day your wife came."

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