

ONE OF THE NORTH MEN

KATHARINE MELICK.
(For The Courier.)

VII

It was when the grasshoppers came "Father Matthiason," as the Reverend James had come to be known along the lower Platte country, was preaching in a sod school house, when the air darkened with the plague shadow. It is told, to this day, how he lifted his hands to cry out against the iniquities of which the visible punishment was falling, and how he held every soul of the anxious congregation for an hour, listening to the tale of their sins, while the grasshoppers ate up their grain.

Then he strode ten miles to his next appointment, with the whirring swarms rising up before him and dropping back to their work behind with a sound like myriads of imp reapers, sawing the stalks with infinitesimal scythes. Sometimes pitchy smoke rolled over a field, from fires set to fight back the invaders. Long trenches had been dug along many green acres, but though frequently these were filled with squirming masses, there seemed no thinning of the invading hosts ahead. Amid the smells of pitchy smoke, burning rags, and stranger odors from the smeared trenches, the old man walked, with the spirit of contest rising in his veins.

"It is the voice of the Lord God unto your Pharaoh, which is Mammon,—'Let my people go!'" was the burden of his preaching that night in a 'lean to' which rustled with the devouring wave reaching its thatch of morning glory vines.

"To you all in this broad inheritance, the green and gold of harvest have been but the gold and green of eagles and bank notes. This is God's scourge upon Mammon. 'Let my people go!' All must suffer as all have been blessed. And all must repent before it is everlastingly too late. Even as the myriad mouths eat up the fruit of your hands, so the myriad seconds of earthly life are consuming your probation here. And if this destruction pains you, reflect upon the pains of that eternal devouring of the worm which dieth not. 'Listen, then,' and in the pause the vine stalks fell from the eaves, listen, before your day of consuming vengeance come, and you gather up your feet in death, hear the voice that cries unto Mammon, 'Let my people go!'"

In the days of gathering want that followed, while whiter faces and gloomier eyes turned upon the Jeremiahs of the veteran 'preacher,' there was no softening of the "message." James Matthiason as little thought of sparing the hearts of his flock as of sparing the flesh of his children, and not one small Matthiason but hushed laughter when his travel-worn figure darkened his own door. Men have conquered empires with no more of fixed purpose, and he was supreme in his own.

There were twelve Matthiasons when the plague came, and John and James, on borrowed horses, galloped up and down the little wheat field they had planted, dragging a long rope over the heads of grain. A cloud of swarming green and brown rose before the dragging rope, and fell again behind it, with livelier gusto upon the milky grains.

"There goes schoolin', down them crunchin' jaws," John muttered, sullenly, flinging off from his wet horse and turning his eyes away from the little field. But everywhere the wriggling plain seemed to quiver into nauseous life, until the boy threw his head upward, and took one long look at the unspotted light of the summer sky.

Then he walked home to his mother, scarcely conscious that James—"tricky Jim,"—had hastily, stampeded both horses, and was off for a half day of rare "fun" with a livelier comrade. It was a vanishing glimpse of books and

college walls that dissolved before him into the picture of a strangely old baby face, blue-lipped, with a forehead lined by pain.

"How is the baby, mother?" he whispered to Eliza, at the door, and Eliza shook her crown of close drawn braids, threaded now with grey.

"When Adah can get her term's wages, and we have a cow," she began, but the boy's face stopped her, and they looked together at the quivering field of wheat.

There would be nothing, now, to keep a cow. The "little twin" might go on setting copies with her slim fingers, but her sacrifice would not avail.

With some glimpse of his mother's long vigil of years, waiting for what might come, burdened with little ones' needs, John touched very gently the mute, strong fingers that had dropped helpless.

"Mother, I can't help you, here. There's no work,—nothing but to eat your bread. I'm going away, back to Canada. I'm going to study, and be something for you. One less will be some help to a preacher's family." Then they both looked inward at the little crib.

"No. I didn't mean that. But—you know."

Yet John waited, until the little life that flickered more and more faint at last went out with the first snows of the famine year. Then help came from the skies. With the October frost, upon the ravaged fields had fallen benediction from unknown hands. It was the Reverend John Matthiason himself who dispensed with impartial hands the garments and food that railroads carried free from the east, that had not forgotten. Old homesteads by the Delaware, the Ohio and the Illinois, opened their granaries and cedar chests. Fingers that trembled with age stowed red apples among the strong folds of winter coats and in the generous palms of furry mittens. Fingers that trembled with want opened the stores, and divided them with earnest care.

On the edge of the shivering crowd that assembled in the sod school house where the boxes "from the east" were opened, John waited. "See if the rest need it more," his mother had charged him, and he waited, with his eyes on his father's hand. "Seems like mother needs every one of 'em," he thought, hungrily, as canned fruit, dried corn, cheeses and jelly went to the sad-faced young fathers of sick little ones. Then a pair of blankets, the great prize, was divided, but Father Matthiason refused a suggestion that the 'preacher's wife' needed one of these. He steadily dealt the precious gifts until his helpers declared that every sufferer had received some good thing. Then John, half in shame, pushed to the emptied cases. His father determinedly looked away, while the boy took a little muslin folded thing from the last box. A woman standing near to help, nodded.

"That aint what you'd ought to have but if your mother can use it, take it along. How's the baby?"

"Dead," John whispered, and hurried home to Eliza.

"You aint got to cut any more of your clothes, mother. Here's what father saved."

So they buried the twelfth and last of the children of Eliza, in the little gown fashioned by stranger fingers.

"If ten men should ask you to marry them, what would it be?"

"What would it be?"

"A tender."

"And if one should ask you, what would that be?"

"I don't know; what?"

"A wonder."—From Life.

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COUNTER-THOUGHTS.

"What is the baby thinking about? Very wonderful things, no doubt."

What are the old folks thinking about? Very wonderful things, no doubt. A thought like this filled the baby's head (A wonderful baby, and very well read.)

He gazed at grandpa, and grandma, too, And mirrored the pair in his eyes of blue. As side by side they sat there, rocking— He with his pipe, and she with her stocking

And the baby wondered, as well he might, Why the old folks always were happy and bright; And he said in his heart with a blithe little start That showed how gladly he'd act his part:

"I'll find some baby, as soon as I can, To stay with me till I'm grown an old man. And, side by side, we'll sit there, rocking— I with my pipe, and she with her stocking."

—Mary Mapes Dodge, in September St. Nicholas.

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