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- STORIES -

The Brown Silk Tassel

By Mrs. McKillip, for The Courier.

It was the night before Christmas and I was waiting in the station at Rawlins, a little town about an hour's ride from the city, for the express. I had worked the town very successfully for the dry-goods firm for which I traveled. With my memorandum book full of orders I was in a Christmas frame of mind. My baggage was checked and to while away the time before the five-thirty train came in I read the following letter:

"Dear Ned: Do not fail us Christmas eve, for we are all to meet at your home and have an old-fashioned family gathering. Your father and mother are happy because all their children are to be together again under the parental roof. Your brother will be there from college and your sister Daisy with all of her family. The baby and I will go over in the afternoon and if your train does not arrive on time you are to go directly to your father's house. Your mother told me to write you that she will not have dinner until eight o'clock so as to make more sure of your sitting down to the table with all the rest. Then after dinner the Christmas tree in the back parlor will be lighted up. Grandfather gave baby a quarter to buy you a present and it took the little fellow two days to decide what to buy for "Father." At last he bought a woolly horse. He keeps it in a barn made of a pasteboard box, in a corner of the sitting room, and he leads it by a string halter to water twenty times a day.

"Now, Ned, come home as soon as you can. With love from the baby and his mother. NELLIE."

The letter brought a vivid picture of the homestead and of all my "folks" gathered around the big grate in the sitting room, with the Christmas tree shut into the darkness of the front room, and all the children with their eyes at the crack between the folding doors, trying to catch a glimpse of the mysterious tree, the tree that had a woolly horse tied to the topmost twig for me.

Suddenly the piercing shriek of the danger signal, followed by a terrible crash, and the hissing of escaping steam broke into my reverie and sent me bounding out onto the platform where I fully expected to see the engine and cars piled up in one heap. But it was a scene of twilight peace. The horses hitched to the waiting hacks were dozing. The sounds of the little town came faintly to my ears. A dog barked far away and everything was undisturbed. Up and down the track nothing was in sight but a dead train of freights on a siding. In the baggage room the men were busy sorting out the trunks to go on the coming train.

"Didn't you hear a whistle just now?" I asked the baggage-master. "No," he said, "the express is twenty minutes late. It'll not be here for half an hour." I thought to myself that I had just dreamed the most vivid dream of my life. Then my eyes fell on my own baggage. It was battered and bent. The iron bands to my sample cases were twisted and wrenched out of shape, and my large zinc trunk had a hole in the side which looked as though it had been used as a testing target for a Gatman gun. From the hole in

its side a brown silk tassel protruded. As soon as I bent over to examine it, the hole disappeared and the iron bands to the sample cases straightened themselves as quickly as a schoolboy in mischief assumes the attitude of deportment when he finds that the eyes of the teacher are sternly fastened upon him. I rubbed my eyes and took a turn around the depot only to have the same phenomena repeated when I returned. This time I walked cautiously up to within a distance of four feet in order to catch the baggage unawares. As I backed away from it the hole in the trunk reappeared and there was the brown silk tassel again and the battered sample cases. I concluded that I was either drunk or dreaming, and if the former it was a distant after-effect, for I swore off many months before this occasion.

Then a friendly hand was on my shoulder and I was whirled about to gaze into the wholesome face of Bob Hayes who traveled for another house. "Hello! old man," he said, "Going home to hang up your stocking?" "Yes," I answered, "are you?" "Sure, I can't miss Santa Claus," he said. "But how are you anyway? I have not seen you for a coon's age." "O, I am all right," I said, "Business has never been better. How do you stack up?"

We took several turns up and down the platform and I edged him over to the baggage room and asked him if my baggage looked battered and broken. Bob looked at it carelessly and said my trunk and sample cases looked a little the worse for wear but no worse than any other cases this time of the year. I asked him if he could not see the hole in the trunk and the pathetic brown silk tassel. He looked at me as a man sometimes looks at a respected friend whom for the first time he suspects is the worse for a drink of whiskey. He said again that my baggage was "all right" and that if he did not know me so well he should think I had been drinking. Then he gave me a cigar, lighted one himself and fell to studying me as men study friends whom they suspect of aberrations. Bob tried to conceal his suspicions of me by praising the cigar he had given me. He said it was given him by a fussy old nabob who had his cigars made to order for a fabulous price.

As we strolled up and down the platform Bob told me about the presents he had bought for his mother and sisters. "And this year," he said, "I have bought a diamond ring for the sweetest girl," and he tapped his breast. "Confound that old lumber wagon, why does it not come along?" said my friend. "We shall both be late for those who wait. I have an engagement at nine o'clock and here it is ten minutes to six."

A whistle announced the belated express, as he spoke. We walked to the edge of the platform to watch the engine round the curve. We stood in the glare of the headlight. The spell was upon me again for the glittering lamp was a death's head and grinned horribly.

Bob swung himself aboard and called to me to come on. "Bob," I called, "don't go on that train tonight. There's something wrong. Anyway I am not going." "Are you crazy? Get on board quick or you'll get left. This is not an accommodation train and you will have to hurry. Jump on, you lunatic!" shouted Bob, but I turned toward the waiting room as the train pulled out. Then the reaction set in and I called myself a chump who did not know enough to get on his train when it came in. I thought of my wife and boy and mother who were holding the merrymaking and the impatient children back in order that I might share it. Of the dinner spoiling an hour overdone while a silly mother's son waited and let his train go by because he was afraid of the cars.

The station agent smiled when I asked him what time the next train went, supposing that I had missed the train in the usual way. A local train passed in half an hour and as I watched it coming no one's head

grinned at me. I got aboard, and as I took my seat in a real self-disgust I reckoned that I should still be on time for my mother's dinner. I knew she would wait till the last minute for me.

As we drew into a small village I noticed an unusual bustle on the platform. As I jumped off I heard the word "horrible wreck, terrible loss of life." Sick with apprehension, I learned that on account of a train-dispatcher's blunder the express had collided with an extra, just a few miles the other side of the village.

The local had orders to proceed slowly to the place of disaster where the passengers would be transferred to a special sent out from the city.

When we got to the wreck I looked for Bob among the survivors who were helping to carry the wounded and the dead from the burning, smoking mass of wood and iron; among the wounded who were temporarily sheltered near. But my search was fruitless and I sought the place where they had laid the dead.

There under the light of a flaring torch, I found him. The merry eyes were shut forever, and the fine, strong young body was crushed to shapelessness. His frank, manly face was unscarred. As I stood looking down on the body of my friend, I asked myself what force had disarranged my vision and my hearing so that I saw the mask of death in place of the headlight and heard before it happened the crash that would kill my friend. I gave the officials Bob's address that his body might be carried into the home where they were waiting for him with quips and cranks and mirthful wiles, the echo of his own happy temperament.

It was half-past eight when the little house-maid answered my ring, and I entered the dining room where dinner was half over. A faint, strange feeling came over me as wife, mother, father, brother, and sister rushed to greet me, and over all the shrill voice of my little son called a welcome. He dodged under the elbows of the grown-up people and shouted "Father, I bought you a woolly horse and it is tied to the top of the Christmas tree." Then I bowed my head over the yellow curls and the tears rolled over them. I would not tell them anything to mar their pleasure, merely explaining my tardiness by saying that I came in on a local and the local was late.

The next day I went to the union station to claim my trunks. They had a familiar look. They were battered and bent, the iron bands of my sample cases were twisted and wrenched out of shape and a brown silk tassel hung out of a ragged hole in the zinc trunk. And this time as I bent over the trunk I could feel the silken fibres of the tassel with my hand.

I am not a man who is easily influenced. I do not always take advice even when I know it is good; my wife will corroborate that. Even the emphatic commands of the donor of the woolly horse are not always obeyed. But since the wreck I do not disregard the admonitions of my psychic self.

* * *

Brothers

Katherine Melick.

The Reverend James Matthiason had a brother who had followed the St. Lawrence to the sea, while James was a jockey on the Toronto course. For twenty-five years the only reminder of the rover had been the two chromos

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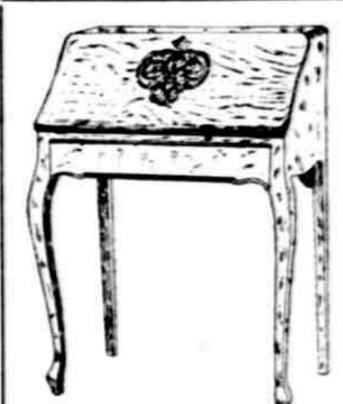
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