

## \* \* The Story Page. \* \*

### When Elsie Graduated.

BY EMMA M. WISE.

The minute Mr. Dolan came to the pump to wash, Mrs. Dolan left the sizzling ham and the half-mashed potatoes and went out to see him.

"What's Dave Harper been pokin' round through the woods and fields all the afternoon for?" she asked with a show of unusual interest. "Hillary says he quit plowin' right away after dinner. n' has been wanderin' up an' down through our woods an' Mis' Tracy's ever since. I lowed he must be threatened with another attack of rheumatiz an' was huntin' yarks to fight it off."

Mr. Dolan pumped the big tin basin full of sparkling water and treated his red face to a refreshing souse before answering.

"No," he said, at length, "it ain't rheumatiz this time. Nor yarks, either. Elsie gradyates tonight an' he's been gatherin' a bouquet o' flowers to take 'er."

Mrs. Dolan fingered her apron strings nervously as was her wont when excited or aroused to excessive feeling. "Land alive!" she exclaimed. "That's so. This is Elsie's commencement night. I declare if I hadn't clean forgot all about it. Mis' Tracy was tellin' me yesterday that she's been sendin' invitations to some o' her folks. There comes Dave down the road now. I'm goin' down to the gate to see his flowers an' hear what he's got to say. You set the ham back, Hi, so it won't burn."

Mrs. Dolan did not wait to hear whether her husband acquiesced in her plan of news gathering, or objected to it. She drew one corner of her apron over her head and went quickly down the path to the roadside. When Mr. Harper came opposite the gate she raised her hand as a signal for him to stop, and he, surprised into prompt obedience, pulled hard on the lines and brought the big bay horse to a standstill close beside her.

"Whoa, Ned," he said, in kindly tones that belied the vigorous see-sawing on the bit. "How do, Mis' Dolan. How're you feelin'? It's a nice evenin', ain't it?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Dolan, "it is. I'm pretty well. Hiram tells me you're goin' to Abbottsville tonight, Mr. Harper, to see Elsie gradyate."

The old man's bearded lips parted with a pleased smile and his pale blue eyes danced with delight. "Yes, Mis' Dolan, that's where I'm goin'," he said, proudly. "It'll be quite a sight, I low, to see Elsie an' all the rest of 'em gradyate. There's ten of 'em all told, seven girls an' three boys."

The fond happy pride vibrant in his soft voice touched a tender chord in Mrs. Dolan's heart and the idle curiosity that had brought her down to the gate to get a glimpse of his flowers and hear a bit of gossip, was superseded by a thrill of gentle sympathy.

"Land!" she said, "it does me good to hear you talk about it. I'd like to see 'em, myself. I almost wish I was goin', too. My, but you must be awful proud of Elsie, Mr. Harper."

"I am," said Mr. Harper, clicking the tips of his heavy boots against the dash-board. "I am proud of 'er, Mis' Dolan. I see right to be. Elsie's all I've got, n' she's a mighty good little girl. See, I'm takin' her this posy. She let it out the last time I seen her that people that was her true friends would be expected to give her a bouquet, or a book, or what not. I picked these this afternoon. It's pretty airy for any o' the big, showy kinds o' flowers, but these is fresh an' sweet an' I know they won't have any nicer down Abbottsville way. Elsie'll be kind o' prised an' tickled to see that I c'd get so many this time o' the year, I guess."

As Mr. Harper spoke he carefully removed the sheet of heavy brown paper that was tucked over the top of the little willow basket that sat on the seat beside him, and took therefrom a bouquet of the early spring flowers of the Ohio Valley. There were feathery leaves of the tender young fern, and nestling amid their meshes a few delicate wood anemones, violets, star-eyed daisies, buttercups and a spray or two of honeysuckle and spring everlasting. A piece of wet brown paper was wrapped round the stems and held in place by thick, yellow twine.

"They ain't fixed nice as they might be," he said, with half-shamed glance at the cumbersome wrappings. "My fingers is stiff an' bunglesome an' I couldn't get 'em arranged just right. Anyhow, I guess I ain't got the best taste in the world. But Elsie can put 'em together again if they don't suit 'er. She's real handy about such things."

The ready tears gathered in Mrs. Dolan's eyes as she listened to his apology for the arrangement of the fragile flowers that had been bunched awkwardly together with a wholesale disregard of the rules of art and harmony, and she said, impulsively:

"Don't you talk like that, Mr. Harper. That bouquet is just as pretty as can be. I've got some tulips an' geraniums beginnin' to bloom an' I could give you a spray or two to put in with your flowers just as well as not, only they don't need a thing to set 'em off. May the good Lord forgive me if I've told 'im something that ain't so," she muttered under her breath, "but I couldn't bear to hurt his feelings by telling him that his bouquet could be improved on. Good-bye, Mr. Harper," she added, as he began to shake the lines and urge the big bay horse to "G' up." "I won't keep you any longer. You've got a long drive before you. I hope you'll have a nice time tonight. I s'pose Elsie'll come home with you."

"Yes, I s'pose she will. G' up, Ned. Good bye Mis' Dolan. I'll tell Elsie you asked about her."

In response to this last entreaty, Old Ned conscientiously aroused himself and sought the middle of the road which stretched out into five dusty, yellow miles

between home and Abbottsville. Mrs. Dolan stood watching the retreating figures for a few minutes, then with the corner of the ever-convenient apron pressed to either eye she went back to the neglected ham and potatoes and her somewhat impatient spouse.

"Well," queried Mr. Dolan, testily, "what did you find out?"

"I wouldn't be tryin' to cast insinuations, if I was you, Hi," she said, in a manner that was strangely subdued. "I found out one thing, an' that is that Dave Harper is the best hearted man the sun ever shone on. I've been thinkin' as much for some time, an' now I know it. The only thing I'm sorry for is that Elsie's got so uppish an' snippy that she don't half 'preciate him. Mis' Treadway, the woman she boards with in Abbottsville, says it's scandalous the way she treats him when he comes there for her—just as if she was ashamed of him. She seems to've forgot what a struggle he's made for her education, an' how he mortgaged his little farm, an' everything, to get the money to put her through Abbottsville high school."

All unconscious of these reflections on the filial duty of Elsie, David Harper proceeded at a steady, measured pace toward Abbottsville. He was very happy. He could remember but two days in his whole life when he had been quite so happy. One was the day he married Elsie's mother; the other was the day Elsie was born.

He had known a great deal of sorrow and it may be that that made those three festival days show forth with unusual splendor. To start with, he had seen Elsie's mother wooed and won by another. But he loved her and waited, and years after when he was getting to be an old man, and her husband and the three little boys had been taken away from her, she came to him for comfort. She died while Elsie was still a very little girl. Her brothers and sisters came to David then and offered to take Elsie off his hands and bring her up as their own. But he couldn't let her go. He had waited so long for happiness that he could not willfully resign the portion still left him. He didn't say much—it wasn't his way—but one or two who had learned to divine the deep music of these life-songs without words understood that "to take Elsie off his hands" would be a mortal blow, and by common consent they desisted from further persuasion.

So he and Elsie continued to live in the little frame house that had been such a pleasant home for them. They did their own house-keeping, for sickness and death had cost so much that there was nothing left to hire help with. David did his work in the fields as usual and helped Elsie sweep and cook and wash and iron. In winter when she went to school the greater part of the housework fell on him.

"We get along first rate," he always said, in answer to friendly inquiries. "Elsie's smart for her age, an' I learned such a big heap when mother was sick that housekeepin' comes right handy to me now."

After Elsie went away to Abbottsville to school he was very lonesome. Ned, the horse, and Major, the dog, were his only companions. He cooked and ate his simple meals in silence, and at night when he went to bed, the awful stillness almost frightened him. But the glowing reports he had of Elsie's "smartness" and her popularity, made any sacrifice seem light, and he furnished her the needed funds and made the long trips to and from Abbottsville through fair weather and foul, as she requested without a murmur. He felt that this was a duty he owed to Elsie, for he realized that in living alone and working as she had done, her life had been in a measure destitute of the common joys of girlhood.

And at last Elsie was to graduate—with honors. Because of this she was to have the valedictory she had told him. David didn't know just what valedictory she had, but he supposed it must be something very nice. Well, whatever it was, he felt sure that Elsie deserved it. Dear Elsie. He would give her the flowers as a token of his love and pride. She had said she hoped everybody would give flowers, she loved them so. Oh, happy he was.

The early May day had drawn to a close when David Harper reached the place where Elsie boarded. He hitched Ned to the post at the side of the house and taking the flowers from the basket, he went up the steps. Several girls dressed in white were standing near the door. They drew back as he approached and one of them who evidently recognized him as Elsie's father, said:

"Just come right on in, Mr. Harper, Elsie's dressing. She'll be ready in a minute."

"Thankee," he said. "It don't matter. I can set most any place."

He clutched the dainty, fragrant flowers tightly, and sat down in a quiet corner of the large parlor. The room was brilliantly lighted and prettily dressed women and girls were hurrying to and fro.

"They're makin' a mighty big fuss about Elsie's gradyatin'," he said. "My, but I ought to feel glad to see her made so much of by all these big bugs."

But somehow, in spite of his joy, David felt strangely lonely and out of place in the gay scene. No one spoke to him or seemed to know him, but presently a door was opened from somewhere and a voice called out:

"Elsie, here's your father."

And then, in an inner room, he saw Elsie. She was standing in a glare of light and was surrounded by a bevy of laughing, chattering girls. She looked out and nodded carelessly then went on with the finishing touches of her toilet. By and by she came out to see him.

"Why didn't you put your hat on the hall-tree, father?" she asked, in greeting. "It doesn't look well to hold it in your hand that way."

For a moment he did not answer. He was never a demonstrative man, but that night he had meant to kiss her, and tell her how nice she looked in her stylish white dress, and how he scarcely recognized her as his daughter. But her unexpected reproof stunned him for a time. After a little he remembered his flowers and held them up as a peace offering.

"Here's a bouquet I brought you, Elsie," he said. "You wanted flowers, you know. I hunted all over Tracy's an' Dolan's woods for those." Elsie looked at

the proffered bouquet but did not take it from his hand. "O father," she said, with a fretful little laugh, "is that the best you could do? These are nice, of course, but I couldn't have them sent up on the stage, you know. They look so—so ragged. What would people think?"

Elsie's glance involuntarily rested on a great cluster of American beauty roses that lay on the table near by with a card attached bearing her name. David's eyes followed hers and he caught his breath in astonishment.

"You're right, Elsie," he said, huskily. "These of mine don't belong with them. I'll put 'em back in the wagon, I lowed nothin' better than 'nemoes an' honey-suckle growed down this way, but I see I was mistaken." David Harper went out to the wagon and laid his flowers back into the willow basket. Then he stood smoothing Ned's glossy neck until Elsie came out.

"Here's your ticket, father," she said. "You know where the town hall is—that great building with the tower, four blocks down the sreet. The usher'll show you where to go."

"Why, ain't I goin' with you, Elsie?" he quavered. "Oh, mercy, no, you couldn't," she laughed. "I have to go with the girls. They're going round to the dressing-room with me to fix my hair and give me a few extra touches just before I go on the stage. Good-bye, Popsy. You'd better hurry."

The group of girls crossed the square and started merrily down the street. David put his basket of flowers under the wagon seat and followed slowly along behind them. He was too loyal to Elsie to admit even to himself that he was disappointed. If anybody had told him that he felt very much alone, and that there was a gnawing pain at his heart, he would have scorned the idea. Nevertheless, he could not deny that graduating was not just what he had expected it to be. But could Elsie help that? Had she made the social rules and regulations that govern commencements? Of course not. If anybody was to blame it was he, who was old enough to know better than to let his imagination run away with him and paint such beautiful pictures as he had been reveling in for several days past.

The incidents of the commencement impressed him as a strange, beautiful dream. There were flowers, there were beautiful costumes, there was music, there were essays and orations, there was applause. Through it all, David Harper sat like one dazed; hearing, yet hearing not, seeing, yet seeing not. And last of all came Elsie—his Elsie. Every sense was on edge then. He watched her eagerly as she came toward the footlights, but when she had made her stiff curtsy and commenced to speak, he bowed his gray head in his hands and remained so throughout the address. Once, when Elsie looked round over the crowded house she saw him sitting thus, and wondered what he was thinking of. It is doubtful if David, himself, could have told her. There are times when the earnest hopes, prayers and longings of the heart can be put into words by none but God.

It was all over at last. The music ceased, the lights were out, and they were back in Mrs. Treadway's parlor in the midst of the baskets and bouquets of flowers with which Elsie had been remembered.

"Won't you stay all night with us, Mr. Harper?" asked Mrs. Treadway. "It is quite late and you have such a long drive home."

"Oh, dear no, he won't stay," put in Elsie quickly.

"He won't mind going home, will you, father?"

"Oh, no," said he. "I won't mind. Ned an' I always rest better at home, anyway. How long will it take you to get ready, Elsie?"

"Take me to get ready!" echoed Elsie. "My goodness, I'm not going. Whatever put that into your head. 'Seem's school's out, I thought mebbe you'd want to," he faltered. "You ain't been home for so long, you know."

"I know. But the idea of your wanting me to go to-night, father!" said Elsie, crossly. "It's so foolish of you. I'll get enough of the lonesome old place this summer without rushing off the minute school closes. I want to stay over for the Alumni banquet Wednesday night."

"I could bring you back for that," he said, timidly.

"I told Mis' Dolan you'd come back with me."

Well, I can't, that's all. I don't see what it is to Mrs. Dolan whether I come or not. I'm too tired to take that long ride tonight. Come over Thursday morning. I'll be ready then."

Elsie's veins were throbbing and leaping with the excitement that thrills any young girl on her graduation night, yet she was not so happy as she had expected to be. Praise, adulation, triumphant success were hers, but there was something lacking. Not even when she fell asleep, at last, was she at rest. Over and over in her dreams she saw her father sitting with his gray head bowed in his hands as she had seen him at the commencement. Or, perchance, the scene changed and he was driving away, alone, in the moonlight, with the bouquet of rejected flowers on the seat beside him. And through it all Elsie was conscious of feeling very miserable.

It was about 4 o'clock in the morning when she was awakened from this troubled slumber by the sound of men's voices out outside her window.

"You're out early—or late—whichever it is, Johnson," said one of them facetiously.

"It's early," replied Johnson. "I'm on my way to the city with the marketin'. I like to get a good start. What are you doin' here in Abbottsville at this hour?"

"I'm just gettin' home from the city," was the reply. "I'd been along here three hours earlier, but there was an awful accident back at ten-mile bridge about half past twelve, an' I stayed to help. A man, horse an' wagon went overboard. The horse is smashed into a jelly, but the man's still alive. He can't last long, though. Somebody recognized him as a farmer that lives back in the country some place, an' they've taken him home. He'd been into town to the commencement last night. Horse must o' got scared, I reckon, or mebbe the old chap couldn't see. Folks has been petitionin' the commissioners for the last five years to put a railin' round that bridge. Now that the mischief's done, I s'pose they'll do it."

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