

A Winter Night Tale

(Reclined Courier-Grand)

"Wal, if this ain't agoin' to be a master tough night, then I'll give in!" Farmer Prescott precipitated this sentence simultaneously with a huge armful of well-seasoned history, the one in the direction of the little woman in the chimney corner, the other into the capacious wood-box, exhorting, as he finished both feats, into the sober looking man-past by the side of the wood-box, by way of punctuation.

He might have been communicating his climatic prognostics to the wood box mentioned, for all the sign the quiet figure sitting in the old rocker made of having supposed it addressed to herself. She sat silent and motionless, save when the old rocker, from force of habit, now and then jogging thoughtfully back and forth. Her knitting-work lay idly in her lap, under her folded hands, and her dim gray eyes gazed absently into the ruddy-beds of the kitchen fire.

"What's the matter, mother?" queried Farmer Prescott, drawing his chair opposite to her, and preparing for his evening smoke. "Sixteen years ago to-night," she began, in evasive response to his query, though she did not move her gaze from the fire; "sixteen years ago to-night, Jack—our Jack—shouldered his little bundle and went out into the night, never to come back."

Something like a precursor of a thunderstorm rose on Farmer Prescott's shaggy brows, as he rose abruptly and went to the window, through whose frosty panes he could see the old elm, in front of the house, now ominously still for a moment, as if gathering all its strength to cope with its natural enemy, the wind, now throwing its long, slender arms wildly about in the fearful wreath of the storm.

"Yes," the little woman went on, persistently, "and its now night on to fourteen years since we laid Mary out there under the old elm, to wait for Jack, and in all that time not a word from the boy."

Farmer Prescott was about to make an angry reply, when his eyes fell from the writhing branches of the elm to the snow-piled mound beneath, and he remained silent. Graves have such an appealing, pathetic language, that the roughness of its growth calm as we stand before one, and our resentment dies a natural death.

With a suspicious moisture gathering in his eyes, the sturdy farmer left his place at the window, and resumed the occupation of filling his pipe. "P'raps we was too sot, father," she continued tremulously, and with the meekest apology in her voice for having ventured so daring a suggestion.

"P'raps so," he assented moodily. "They was young, and besides they loved each other—same as we did, p'raps, father."

loss and amazed spectator of the scene. "Father!" cried the little woman, bending above the prostrate form, "Father, it's Jack—don't you know I can and bring the harness—his horse!"

Thus adjured, the old man hurried to bring restoratives; and soon Jack opened his eyes. "Mother—father—where am I? Where is Mary?"

"Don't you know, Jack! She's under the old elm, waitin' for you!" "Oh, yes! I remember," Jack said; "warily. His voice had sunk to a whisper, and he went on slowly: "The doctor said I'd never live to come home, but I wanted to see you and to sleep alongside Mary."

"Oh, Jack, Jack! can you ever forgive us—me'n father?" "Yes, mother, I'm too near bein' with Mary now to have any hard feelin's against you for separatin' us," the old farmer wiped his eyes with his sleeve and said: "Thankie, my boy Jack, I'm sorry I was so sot."

"Never mind, father, it's all right now." No sound but the little woman's subdued sobbing, and the occasional buffet of the storm outside, broke the stillness, for several moments. Then Jack whispered: "What did she say, mother?"

"She said, 'Tell Jack, if he ever comes back, that I'm waitin' for him under the old elm, and tell him I shall know his step, and the little birds will talk to him for me!'"

Next morning when the sun had climbed the eastern hills, he looked down, and the wistful meadows were sleeping peacefully under his clear, bright gaze with all their daisies softly shrouded. And in the house of Farmer Prescott lay a form as still as the daisies, and with a shroud as white as theirs. The poor storm-tossed mariner was at last beyond the wrath of wind and sea.

Under the old elm two graves lie side by side. Mary waits for Jack no longer. When an aged couple tread the well worn path from the farm house to the smaller dwellings under the old tree, who, having vainly striven to recall the dreams of youth, are only waiting to realize the fulfilment of more glorious dreams. All through the bright days of summer the white daisies nod dreamily above the quiet sleepers; the leaves whisper softly as if in fear of disturbing their slumbers, and the birds talk to them both with many a tender song.

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