

Power Lot--God Help Us

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. PROUTY OF PROUTY'S NECK.

It was Rob's custom to work in the long, long twilight after supper. From six o' the clock until ten he made another day. This evening he did not change once more into his old clothes and go into the field; his heart was too restless. Doctor Margate would soon appear for another chat with Mary, and he, Rob, would be in the way. Bate had devoured his supper contemptuously and gone the way of the River. Rob sought to still the tumult in his brain by a solitary stroll of his own along the heights.

Passing through the dooryard he espied the astounding vision of a choice—an especially choice—cigar lying in the grass. He hesitated a moment, then stooped and picked it up; it was one that had been quenched almost as soon as lighted, gallantly tossed away by the doctor when he had first met Mary on the porch. Rob observed how intact it was, put it sweetly to his nostrils, ah, no molasses and ginger in this product. He made a mouthpiece of a bit of paper, inserted the cigar, and puffed rapturously as he tramped on. Velvet reclining chairs, blazing chandeliers, soft-footed attendants, the clink of iced champagne—all swayed his senses once more in seductive memory, with the fumes of that delicious cigar. A hearty voice broke the spell.

"Hold on, Rob, I can't keep up with you." Doctor Margate overtook him, breathing rather heavily and laid a hand on Rob's shoulder.

"Ah my boy, not so very long ago, you could not keep up with me. And, now—but even in my heyday I had not your physique. Ah, but you're to be envied—envied." The doctor spoke with exuberant frankness, his hand still resting on Rob's shoulder.

"That" thought Rob—"is his considerate way of appearing not to have noticed the fact that I'm smoking his discarded cigar." It was such a bald confession of penury, of classical beggary, of hopeless, weary, utter resignation, to smoke a cigar that one has picked up in the yard. Rob's face had been dyed with blushes. But after the first hot wave, despair makes a man fearless, and bold; and he said:

"You are the one to be envied, Doctor Margate—if you are engaged to Mary Stingaree."

"But I'm not, Rob. Let's walk on a little. I am not. I asked her, but she would not have me."

Rob said nothing. Wonder, infinite relief, the pang of hopeless love on his own part, pity and a sudden mood of valiant championship for the doctor; all these possessed him.

"Life is no tangle here, is it Rob?" said the great man looking away to the scene spread before them. "Plain toil, plain struggle, the river, the basin, then the tremendous tides out yonder—what is that passage there? What do you call it?"

"The Gut."

"Aye, out through the Gut at last, into the open—and, faith, God works well. We'll believe that, though the cup we long for gets dashed from our lips." He stood with bared head, and seemed to forget where he stood as he gazed. Bob looked at the familiar gray head and rapt face. It appeared that Rob himself was seeing visions. The gaudy tinsel of the cigar laden atmosphere faded out of sight and sound, and cathedral organs of the long ago pealed through his senses with revelations, dim to him once, divinely clear to him in this instant;—and life was not much, and death was not much, but only to play true that was all.

"You have doubted me a good deal, I suppose, Robert?"

Rob woke from his trance and met the doctor face to face.

"No, never—your honesty. I can remember still how my father used to talk about you. But I've written you and never received any answer, and I do not understand. It is very strange, it seems to me, that a fortune such as my father left should go to the dogs so completely and suddenly as mine did. What was the matter? Is not there anything to be saved out of it?"

"Oh, a great deal to be saved—a great deal, Rob, my boy. Go back to

New York to-morrow, if you want to, and find out for yourself whether those who have the stewardship have been faithful."

Rob gasped. His own revulsion of feeling staggered him. Mary—never to see her more. Mary—left in the house with Bate, unprotected. The sea, the land, even his crop of potatoes—the wondrous product at last of his painful toils—the very air he breathed, all seemed dear to him of a sudden, and he spoke impulsively, almost fiercely, words strange to his own ears.

"I don't want to go back," he said. "I understand, Rob. I would not go back yet, if I were you."

So absorbed were the two in their own thoughts they did not realize that they were passing Caroline Treet's place. She, however, had heard of the celebrated man's arrival at Power Lot; and Rob saw her standing in her own porch door and beckoning with a black kid-gloved hand.

"Look out, she's got on her black kid gloves; she's going to make a set at you, Doctor," he murmured low.

"She—who? You amaze me—that so handsome a woman should be put to it to pluck adorners from a foreign tree. Who is she?"

"Come in," called Caroline smoothly; fiends known and unknown, come right into the Room."

For at Power Lot God Help Us, they called the parlor or place of state simply the Room, and to enter it was, in itself, to fulfill the holiest of social obligations. Not every family had a "room," but as for Caroline Treet, hers contained more bouquets from the grass of forgotten harvests, and mortuary wreaths under arched glass, and portraits, framed in sea-spoil, of those gone before, than, perhaps, any other house in Power Lot, and though she was considered everywhere as more of a kind-hearted than a vain woman, yet she could not quite banish from her manner, especially when in the very presence of these relics, a certain palmy and serene consciousness of elegance.

"Be pleased to seat yourselves, friends, known and unknown," Caroline repeated the happy phrase with a soft emphasis on the "unknown," and the doctor's heart might be supposed to thrill; but he had a less sentimental emergency to reckon with, for the "room" being shut dark, and his glasses in his vest pocket, he sat down hopefully on what proved to be a very stout woman, who repudiated him with the angry lash of her arms and a scream of unflattering disgust.

"May God forgive me," drawled Caroline, at once letting in some light through a shutter; "fade as fade may, let's see what's going on here amongst ourselves." On discovering the doctor standing dismayed and immovable in the safe centre of the room, she sought to reassure him through the methods of a formal presentation:

"Let me introduce you to Mis' Prouty of Prouty's Neck."

Mrs. Prouty of Prouty's Neck observed the doctor's low and remorseful bow without much concern either way. Her mind, it was plain, was absorbed in other grievance. The light through the shutters revealed also two boys, respectively seven and eight years of age, their faces likewise distorted with misery.

"They been talkin' all winter an' all spring about comin' over to the Baptis' 'cherry-carnival,' an' I made 'em some decent clo's, the Lord knows how, an' fetched 'em over an' paid fifteen cents apiece for 'em, like all the rest—that filled up to the brim an' runnin' over—an' after all this how-de-do an' takin' on that's nearly wore me out"—expounded Mrs. Prouty, the indignant mother—"them little sneaks pipped up all of a sudden without no warnin', like a collick hummin' bird, an' never et five cents worth, the two on 'em together."

"We thought as how there 'd be cherries to a cherry carnival," complained the older boy loudly, taking courage from the extended dimensions of his audience.

"An' when it was explained to you that this wan't the bearin' yer f'r cherries, you little slouches put yerselves in rebellion ag'in the Lord on high, 'stead o' condemnin' down all the good vittles ye could hold like the rest on us with sweet pickles, an' be thankful."

"The pickles they giv' me wan't sweet," declared the boy, in tones of

cold and resentful recollection.

"Hear to him!" cried the exasperated Mrs. Prouty.

"Sides we eat more bread 'n meat anybody else thar" now spake the younger, rising stoutly to his brother's defense.

"Bread and meat!" sneered Mrs. Prouty; "makin' wild hoodoos o' yerselves, as though ye'd never seen Christian dainties afore an' was scared of 'em."

"I wan't afraid," maintained the elder. "I tasted onto every kind o' pie an' cake the' was."

"An' why didn't ye eat 'em?"

"Cos," he explained, without any nice reservations, "they tasted just like your ha'r oil smells. Ma."

"Vanilla's a mighty expensive spice, you little wild b'ar's cub."

"I can't help that, Ma," he answered, having now grown quite bold. "it makes me want to vomick."

"Wal', when an air of wind comes up your father 'll be over to sail us home, an' thar' you'll stay f's all o' any carnival you'll go to ag'in."

The boy, now verging on the bounds of the "saucy," was about to express, to his mother's wrath, his complete satisfaction with this dictum, when Doctor Margate himself interposed.

"I—I came to this beautiful country, hoping to find cherries, too," he advised the boys, and they read him literally, nor relished the depth of pathos in the great man's confession; "but for me, too, I find it is not a cherry-bearing year. I doubt if I shall ever gather many more cherries. But I like little boys to prefer bread and meat to cake; such good sense deserves its reward, and I wish your good mother would take this slight appreciation of my regard for you and spend it for you as she deems wisest."

It was a five-dollar note, and the disaffected family clasped each other's hands and beamed as one. "That pays for not having them fill up, doesn't it?" the doctor enquired of the mother in his simple way, that was on the rational and unassuming level with the crying needs of any situation.

"A few minutes ago," replied Mrs. Prouty, "I really didn't know what I come for. But the guil'din'-hand was after me same as usual. I was meant to come, an' I come, an' now I see why I come."

She clasped the greatly augmented treasures of her purse firmly.

"And now, Mis' Prouty," said Mrs. Treet hospitably, you'll take off your things, bein' far away an' seldom seen, an' make yourself at home."

"No," responded Mrs. Prouty gracefully, "I'll set here jest as I be an' pray for an air o' wind. I was never one that felt easy settin' round away from home. But I'm glad to see ye, Car'line. What this I hear about old man Trawles?"

The question was so uncompromisingly put it reflected the terrors of a court of law, and the whole company appeared startled.

Except Caroline.

"Oh, my, ya as, what's this I hear, an' what's that I hear," she murmured discursively. "Somebody on ev'ry hand is allus hearin' somethin'. The neighbors drop in here often, an' allus welcome an' their yarns listened to, whatsoever. Cap'n Belcher was passin' this mornin' an' reeled me off a yarn, that, ef it's true, some folks in an' aroun' Power Lot, God Help Us, is ignorant enough to need missionaries sent to 'em, an' no more so amongst them that fires in the sun naked on the isles o' the sea. What think you?"

They were all too interested to push their enquiries further than by the appeal, of open mouths. Only the doctor said kindly:

"What was his yarn?"

Caroline blushed; her attitude toward the doctor seemed to be eminently that of approval, and the rest realized that for all practical purposes her audience was an audience of one.

"You don't know old Tim Tibbits, 't 's kind o' half baked—in the line o' bein' silly, I mean—an' allus aroun' in the woods, huntin'?"

"Not yet," replied the doctor earnestly; "I do not know him yet."

"Wal', perhaps you won't be so anxious to make his acquaintance after you heard what was told to me. Cap'n Belcher swore it was true in ev'ry line an' precep' of it, an' I leave him to his judge, only tellin' of it as he told me. T seems, one o' these 'ere religious

agents, Church o' England this one must 'a' been—wal', he lit onto this region, prospectin' around, with his arms full o' prayer an' hymnal books; an' what should he do, to get a sample o' the folks 'round here, but run afoul o' the bresh with his gun slung over his shoulder.

"Good-mornin', sir," says the man, to Tim; "are there any 'Piscopalians' round here?" says he; "an' whar', ef you please, be they, sir?" says he.

"'Piscopalians?' says old Tim Tibbits—who's allus got to be good-natured an' oblige everybody, whether he knows what they mean or not. 'Piscopalians?'—wal', now I think on it," says he, scratchin' his old fool of a head, "I did see somethin' queer over thar' by the aidge o' Fin'ly's woods this mornin'," says he; "but I didn't fire. Yes," says he, "now I think on it, that must 'a' been it," says he, an' grinned at him all over in his obligin' way; "but I was goin' down to the store to sell my skunks' fur, an' I never stopped to fire," says he; "why, do you want one?" says he; "why."

"No," says the man an' walked on, an' wobbled his coat tails direc' right out o' sight an' hearin' o' the whole place, never stoppin' to exchange a word with somebody 't was morn'n half-witted, so as to get a better sample; but lit right out an' how he'll spread it 'round about us here, only the Lord knows; but as for me I consider that our luck was poor, an' the sample, so fur as I have any feelin's, one that I should never have selected to have myself spread abroad by."

"Them that is ignorant won't have it laid to their charge," said Mrs. Prouty of Prouty's Neck, solemnly.

"I s'pose not," said Caroline, "but I'd rather have somethin' charged up ag'in me, and not be quite so simple, I believe."

"It must 'a' been the same agent," continued Mrs. Prouty, "that hove along thro' the Neck a spell ago; an' talkin' o' samples, Car'line, I doubt ef he took a much better one of us, an' ef you got spread around for your innocence we're likely spread fur an' wide for our wickedness, him tumblin' first thing onto Rip Wiz'll, an' askin' of him, 'Have you giv' yourself to the Lord?' 'Giv' myself to the Lord!' says Rip Wiz'll, says he—'who in nation is a-goin' to do my hayin?'"

"Bad as that is," said Caroline, surveying the rigid expression of Mrs. Prouty's features without dismay, and folding her own gloved hands elegantly; "the's somethin' cuter about it, after all, than the's in the sample we've gone out by."

"How long ye goin' to stay in Virginny's?" Mrs. Prouty inquired of Doctor Margate, in her severely inquisitorial tone, turning to him without other warning.

Doctor Margate, quite unacquainted with the first name of his hostess—Mrs. Byjo—was at a loss for an instance, but made answer:

"Only a very short time, I regret to say, madam."

"Maybe it's as well," said Mrs. Prouty without further explanation; but Caroline knew that she referred in this discreet way to the potency of her (Caroline's) own charms amongst the male sex; and she was neither vexed thereby nor did she preen herself with vanity, but remained as ever the serene queen of her own drawing room.

"Mary Stingaree's a girl," she murmured opportunely, "that if you can't respect her then who can you respect?"

The company turned their thought of one accord into the trend of Caroline's leading, save Mrs. Prouty, who leaped regardless to a conclusion out of sight:

"You done mighty poorly, Robert Hilton," she said, fixing her inflexible gaze on poor Rob. "From all we heart to Prouty's Neck, ye've let them Teebos scoop ye in. Ye're a shapely, pleasin' young man, an' ye ought ter done better."

This challenge lying by way of severe reproach untended by condolence, Rob, having no defence prepared, was about to let the case go by default, when Doctor Margate fixed the redoubtable Mrs. Prouty with an unflinching eye of his own; so great was the kindness of his expression, however, she forebore, for

(Continued on page 963)