

The Story of Prudence

SHE was nineteen when she was introduced to me, a girl with big, gray eyes, a red mouth matching the eyes in size, a quiet manner, and a sweet smile for you—if she liked you. Her two sisters had married early, but a love affair of hers had been broken off—it had been a real love affair, and had promised well at the time, with a chronic invalid at the time, with no hope of a change, and her mother did not feel herself equal to the care of him. Prudence acquiesced in this, as she had been everything they had planned for her, from the worn-out clothes of the girls, to their left-off dolls.

The old Academy was good enough for Prudence; she would never be pretty, and her common ways with poor people, which they could not induce her to leave off, would always be in her way. She had been seen to kiss the washerwoman's baby in the church before anyone who chose to look! Her excuse had been that the baby knew her, and had smiled at her, and was "such a darling," which sunk the poor girl into deeper depths of infamy, for Prudence had been in the habit of ironing their own wash, and one other, to pay for the washing of theirs, but none of them seemed to be aware of this. But it accounted for her acquaintance with the baby.

Now, the complaining old father was dead; he had complained of every ill that flesh is heir to during his life, but he died quite quietly, and painlessly, at last. His mother was to break up the home, and go to live with one of her daughters. The day was not dry on her father's grave when this mother came, and the tears rushed to the girl's eyes, before she could hide them. There would be no one to plant even grass upon it, if they left now.

"You have no consideration for me," moaned the widow, who reclined in becoming weeds upon a couch, while Prudence heaved the tea things. "Your poor father never had any feeling for me; he was always taken up with his own complaints, which were quite imaginary, and not real at all."

"Real or not, they killed him, mother. And I do not want to rush away until the grass has started up on his grave. And no one knows whether I should be welcome, or not."

"Welcome! Where do you mean?"

"At Henrietta's."

"I am going to Henrietta. I thought you might stay with me, as tenant, and that will give you time to look about you. You will have to get a situation of some kind."

Prudence looked at her mother in surprise, but the latter went on calmly: "That will be the most unjust in the world! The idea of giving you this house—deeding it to you years ago, and signing the deed quite unconsciously. It was an outrage! And to appoint that old idiot of a sister of his guardian! This was to keep me from getting any good of it! But I shall collect the rent all the same."

"Father meant to be just; he gave you all the rest, you and the girls. This old home isn't worth much, and he gave it because I love it."

"It will do you very little good, you will find. And this fact about not going in mourning! Every one will look down upon you."

"I have nothing to buy mourning with, mother, and you heard father ask me not to wear it. He thought it was foolish."

"No widow ever goes without, anyway. And the way they put in their white frilling now, makes even the caps becoming. I'm sure I'm glad of some change."

So Prudence was left alone in the house for a while, dependent upon a chance neighbour to come in and stay with her. The flowers had taken root upon her father's grave, and the grassy borders of it were green before she found the "situation." And then it was an aunt who came to her rescue: not the aunt who was her guardian, but another part of the Province. This aunt had written some essays which had been published, and also a sketch or two, so she posed as a literary character. So she took poor Prudence in in more ways than one, for there was a family of children, and not too much to live upon, with the farm running down. The children, the girls, neglected and unkempt, but they were affectionate and not lazy, and Prudence soon reorganized the household. The bent, overworked father took heart; he had his meals with regularity, and though plain they were wholesome. The garden was made most of, and so was the orchard. The poultry was looked after, the houses cleaned and whitewashed.

Prudence stayed here, busy and happy until she was thirty. The girls grew up and were married. The aunt still pottered with her "literary" work, though at the last it consisted of a scattering of papers, a collection of reference books, winding up with: "Prudence, this is the state of my life, this is under way now. You may finish it."

And Prudence would do as well as she could. If the thing turned out well, the praise belonged to the aunt; if ill, Prudence got the blame. This is the fate of some poor, groping souls in this world, and nothing ever changes fate, it is said. When the children were all married, a brother of the uncle came to live there, an invalid who reminded her of her father. Prudence was kind to him, chatting with him as he went about leaning upon his cane, and very feeble upon him without stint—too kind, she found at last. For the overworked master of the house died, and they three were left to keep themselves together—a household.

Time went on, Prudence was thirty-four. She was happy and content, for she had seen the man she had loved in her youth. He was stout, ill-natured and arrogant. His wife trembled at his frown, and wept when he scolded, which was not the treatment he deserved, Prudence felt. Her mother was dead, and one of her sisters; she was now almost without ties. Then this household also began to go to pieces. The old man, past seventy, now, and very feeble would be left alone. The aunt was soon to be married again.

"Prudence, why can't you take brother Jesse and take care of him? We are too poor, Prudence! Come, start the journey, and besides, he is not my brother—only my husband's. It will take a load off my mind if you will do this."

"Certainly I will do it if there is no one else."

The aunt kissed her with effusion. "You are too good, Prudence! Come, here, Jesse! Prudence says she will take you and care for you as long as you live."

Prudence was not looking, or she would have seen something which might have opened her eyes, and might not. She was singularly open and honest herself, and was not looking out always for dishonesty in

others. She heard the tap of the crutch, and sprang up when the old man bent over and kissed her.

"Oh!" she cried; "you needn't do that!"

The aunt laughed. "Prudence is an old maid, Jesse," she said, "and I reckon you needn't do that."

In a few days people began to question the aunt. "What was it to be, and whether she meant to move to her own house, or stay on there. She was agast, and went to her aunt for an explanation. "Mrs. Brown has just told me that there is a story out that I am to marry Uncle Jesse."

"Uncle Jesse! Why he is not akin to you, child."

"I know. She said, you had told her so. Is that true?"

"Certainly it is true. Did you not promise him in my presence?"

"No, I did not! I said I would take care of him if there was no one else. I don't see where you got that other notion. Certainly I never said that. He doesn't understand it in that way!"

"Doesn't he?" quoth the aunt with sarcasm, and ask him.

She did ask him. He shilly-shallyed awhile, but owned that that was what he "understood." The aunt had followed her, and now said: "I am sure I do not see how you meant to take care of him, and live, just you two in a house by yourselves, without marrying. You must be a fool, Prudence."

"There would have to be a ceremony, I suppose," faltered the old man, meekly, "if only to stop the mouths of the gossip, but, my child, that would be all. You would be free, except for the services you might choose to render me." There was a queer look on the aunt's face as she went out of the room, but she said no more. Her victim had entered the toils, founder as she might, she would only the more surely connect with the aunt.

The preparations for her own wedding went on, the aunt enjoying the situation very much, for the man she was to marry had asked Prudence first, had insisted, and been exceedingly hard to put off. The poor old "uncle" took to his bed and meekly yielded, or seemed to. Prudence waited upon him, at last making concessions which raised him from the death-couch with an alacrity which would have been suspicious, if poor Prudence had noticed it. He had no money, so there was no objection: if he had had even a moderate fortune, it is doubtful if Prudence would have been offered a living sacrifice, as she was. It followed that they went to a squire's office, and were married a week before the aunt's death.

Prudence went about her preparations for leaving calmly, and not unhappily. After all, it would be no worse than she had done all of her life. There had always been some body that needed her, and it might be "Uncle Jesse" as well as another. If, only she had noticed that horrible truth, that she was a sacrifice in that manner, sooner! There was no doubt that the newly-made husband was renewing his youth.

Prudence went on. She did not trouble her mind, but she was always at her elbow, and she did not like it. Her temper was not the best; although she was usually so patient, there were things she had no patience with whatever, and when on the evening of that other wedding, he pulled her down upon his knees, after the others had left them, with some awkward, lowly, and awkward, she flew into a passion and nearly struck him. For a long time afterwards, she wished she had struck him; it is certain that she "Gave him well chosen words" in which she made him understand his position, and hers, were as great a shock to him as a thrashing would have been.

When that other bride returned

from her wedding trip, and the once again meek and lowly Jesse informed his sister-in-law that "she" had told him that he was now so strong, and well that he might have a share of himself, her rage was fearful. The allowance Prudence made him helped to save her wounds, however, for Prudence had fallen heir to a snug property when the old aunt, who had been her guardian, died.

So she kept the poor, mistaken man in her family, and helped him try for a divorce, which had led to a snug property when the old aunt, who had been her guardian, died. She was a little writing, a little sewing, and goes out not a little among the poor and unfortunate.

"After all," said the aunt, "I ought not to have expected anything else from Prudence; she was always such a fool. She worked all that time for me without pay; didn't she even get her clothes? To be so started her in literature, and it is queer how she goes on in it now she is away from me, for she is such a ninny."

A Progressive Farming Community

"Life is what we make it," is very evident by the motto of the community of farmers in a thriving county of south-western Ontario, for here are some homes that have been improved after modern fashion, with modern conveniences, thus adding much to the desirability of farm life, and doing more than anything else to induce the young people to remain on the farms. Among the additions to the average farm home may be noticed tanks, in which the water supply is governed by automatic floats in the barnyard and stable, whole villages of modern conveniences, and last but not least, where on nearly every living room table may be seen many of the farm papers of the day, including The Canadian Dairyman and Farming World.

"Oh, but these are luxuries which cost a lot of money," some may say. Not necessarily a great lot. Take for instance, the water supply on the farms of Henry Johnson and James Ogilvie, whose houses are nearly opposite each other, on the same road. These progressive men believe in cooperation. They built a reservoir on a rise of ground between their two places. They joined issues in putting down a well, and in putting up a windmill, after which each led the water at his own expense from the reservoir to his buildings.

"Isn't this telephone service expensive?" was asked of one man. "Well, no," was the reply. "You see we own the phones; and the wiring cost us but very little, and that's about all. We are many times more than the cost of the phone in a year, by being in touch with our local stockkeeper, who sends us the latest market quotations, and the only demand is, and everything of that nature."

"How about the poles, the setting and putting up?" "Oh, we don't count that much. We cut the poles out of our own woods, and performed the labor together."

"Does the pleasure and profit derived from the telephone repay you for the outlay?"

"It certainly does, both from a social and a business standpoint. The ward, lowly, and awkward, she flew into a passion and nearly struck him. For a long time afterwards, she wished she had struck him; it is certain that she "Gave him well chosen words" in which she made him understand his position, and hers, were as great a shock to him as a thrashing would have been.

"Now, if you had 'Free Rural Mail Delivery,' you wouldn't feel the much-talked-of isolation of farm life."

"That's true, and we will have it some day."