

# UNCLE DAN'S MORTGAGE

A Christmas Story

By JEAN BLEWETT

"WHEN an old fellow that hasn't been in the saddle for a score of years mounts an evil-minded, raw-boned nag—and goes pounding along a country road, by way of showing off, he deserves all he gets." Daniel Wilson spoke with feeling, also with authority; he was the old fellow referred to. Back in the village the liveryman had warned him, but when had dour Daniel listened to warning?

"The roads are bad," so had urged the liveryman. "Not much but humps an' hollers and patches of ice twixt this and Thornhedge."

"I've ridden over them when they were worse. Put on the saddle."

"Better have the bay mare and cart, mister. The chestnut's an ugly brute if he don't get his way."

"So am I. Twenty-five years ago I left Thornhedge on horseback and I've the whim to go back the same fashion. Tighten that girth and—clear the track."

Daniel's face was grim, his air morose as he rode along. He was on his way to pay a visit, a long promised visit to his brother Jacob at the homestead. Why not? Christmas Eve was the time when all the prodigals came straggling back.

The chestnut took Waterman's bridge on the gallop, and with a crunching of thin ice and scattering of frozen mud went up the hill, on past the church, the graveyard, with the tall stones looking over the wall like a row of ghosts curious to know what was going on in the outside world, past the wood, the brown pasture land, the creaking windmill by the silent creek.

Daniel knew the road, right well he knew it, had ridden over it in the day time, night time, in the small hours of morning, ridden at a madder pace than this chestnut would ever strike. Wild Dan Wilson, the neighbors had called him; and, yes, he had earned the name.

His father had been unjust. Daniel's face grew grimmer still as he recalled how his father magnified his faults into crimes, prophesied for him disgrace, poverty; called him spendthrift, roysterer, ne'er-do-well. Never mind, he had more money now than any Wilson of the name, and he was on his way to settle up with Jacob. How hard they had been on him! and after all he had been but a headstrong young fool with a genius for getting into scrapes, and a burning desire to pose as being worse than he was.

He had tried to justify his father's poor opinion of him, and with such success that presently he had found himself disinherited in favor of his brother. Jacob—the name suited—had always grudged him a place in his father's heart, an interest in the old home; had been glad to see him ride away from Thornhedge for good that winter night. He felt bitter, meant to feel bitter, wanted to feel bitter. He was going to the homestead on this Christmas Eve for no other purpose than to get even with Jacob. The hard years, the homeless years, the unhappy years, these had to be settled for.

"I wonder," with a mirthless laugh, "what mother's pretty boy will find to say for himself?"

Something soft and tender touched Daniel's grimness, softened his mouth, warmed his eyes. It was only for a moment, but it told. A memory he had been thrusting back, keeping back—back—with the force of his strong will, had insisted on coming forward, the memory of his mother. She had died young. He saw her now in her week day gown of plainest material and make, saw her in her Sunday gown, a rose flowered thing with skirt billowing out around her little figure, pointed waist, and sleeves which did not cover the pretty arms but fell back from them. There was a flowered cashmere shawl with fringe, and a bonnet which tied under her dimpled chin. What a quaint picture she made with her hair combed low over the ears, and her face—ah! her face! Daniel saw the dark eyes love-filled, wonderful; saw the smile on her lips, heard her whisper of peace and gentleness; saw and heard all this as plainly as though it were only yesterday Jacob and he, two fair haired little boys, had quarrelled and made up in the garden at Thornhedge. He put the memory away. Nothing, not even his love for his mother, should shake his resolution to square accounts with Jacob.

From Gardiner's hill he got his first glimpse of



"Who was this with the billowing rose-flowered frock, the shawl with the silken fringe?"

the homestead—a rambling stone house with all its western windows red from the sunset glow—but he had still some hard riding to do. It was almost dark when he opened the farm yard gate. He put the chestnut in the stable and walked stiffly toward the house. Two lads were out doing chores, their lantern making a cheery glow here and there. He stood still to watch them.

It was quite natural that they should climb the straw stack for the fun of sliding down; that they should quarrel as to whose turn it was to pump the trough full of water; that one should throw the other's cap through a hole in the granary door and dare the owner to face the dark in search of it. Daniel knew without looking that the tow-headed one carried a lazy man's load on his pitchfork when he went toward the cow stable. It had been a trick of Jacob's in the old days. So these were Jacob's sons! It was in the nature of things, he told himself with a sneer, that Jacob would have a home, a wife, a family.

"What's wrong with Dad?" called the smaller of the two. "He's awful down in the mouth about something."

A voice not quite so shrill made answer. "You ain't s'posed to know. You're too young."

"I know more'n you think, Danny. I keep my eyes an' ears open, I do. Some guy's got a mortgage on the place, but sakes alive! the mortgage is most as old as me. Dad ought to be kind of used to it." Both boys disappeared in the cow shed with fork loads of bean straw. By and by they came out, the younger still talking. "Not take it away from us! You don't mean he—sho! you're tryin' to scare me, Dan Wilson. Nobody could put us out in the road right at Christmas, an' Sis havin' a shine, an'—"

So there was a Sis. It was not enough that Jacob had those two strapping boys, he must have a girl as well. And Sis was having a party. This explained the lights upstairs and down. Well, there would be one uninvited guest.

As he went up the path to the kitchen door a man came out, broke the ice in a rain barrel, filled a hand basin with water, and went in again. It was not Jacob, oh no; Jacob was slim and sleek and straight as a hickory pole. This stout old chap with the bent shoulders and grizzly whiskers must be the hired man. Yet it was the same man who came forward hesitatingly when Daniel entered. The two men peered curiously at each other. The

lamp burned dimly, the eyes of neither were what they used to be.

"I've called to see Jacob Wilson on business," said Daniel.

"Has the—has the business anything to do with the homestead?" asked the other.

"It has," snapped Daniel, who resented the stranger's knowledge of affairs, "and I'll thank you to let him know I'm here."

"Hope you're not too big feeling to make yourself at home in the kitchen, Mr. Hall—that's the name, isn't it? Fact is," pushing a chair forward and speaking with nervous haste, "our girl is having an old time party, sort of masquerade affair, and this is about all the free spot I can find. I was set against this party, but girls are persuasive things, eh?"

Not receiving an answer he favoured his visitor with a glance furtive but searching. "Burke and Halliday wrote you was going to foreclose."

"Burke and Halliday are right. How soon can you get out of here?"

"I hoped," he put his hand over his lips to smother the trembling from them, "we could come to some agreement. I'd like to stay on and work the place on shares. It's all the home I've ever known, or my children have ever known. It can't mean as much to you as to me."

"You've let it slip through your fingers, though," broke in Daniel, who every moment seemed to be growing angrier with his brother, himself, the whole world.

"Things haven't prospered with me," tears of self pity stood in Jacob's eyes. "Crops have been poor; a stranger cheated me out of—"

"Better a stranger than a brother." His fierceness made Jacob draw back in alarm.

"Of course, of course," soothingly, "but a man hates to have somebody cheat him out of his eye teeth. The sharks aren't all in the city, stranger; the country has 'em too."

"I believe you, I believe you. A country shark did me out of all I had, all I had—house and home, family affection, and that sort of thing. I can see him now leaning on my father's shoulder, whispering in my father's ear, see him smiling innocent as you please over the mischief he made. But it's a long lane, you know the rest." He took his hat from his head and faced the other squarely. "So you haven't been able to hold what your craft won? You're a poor affair, Jacob."

"Daniel!" Jacob's eyes were fixed in a horrified stare on the other's face. "Why, you're an old man, Daniel!"

Strange to say Daniel resented this. True he was fifty-five, but young and active for his years. A nice thing indeed for this grey-headed cringing brother of his to pretend to be shocked at his appearance.

"I'm no Rip Van Winkle," he retorted. "I've kept wide awake. I told you at the time you couldn't hold the old place, told you it would come to me in time. You laughed, Jacob; thought it a joke. You were always laughing in the old days. You said, 'I've kept the exact words in mind, you said, 'Your room is better than your company. You'll find no welcome at Thornhedge.' Well, I kept away till I was sure not of my welcome but of Thornhedge. You laughed when I left home—your home. You're not laughing to-night, Jacob."

Not a particle of color remained in Jacob's flabby cheeks, his voice was beyond his control. "A dozen years ago we heard of a Daniel Wilson who was making money hand over fist in the west, but never thought it was you," he jerked out at last. "I—I've wondered where you'd gone, Dan, and to—"

"Just confine your wondering to where you're going to take yourself in the near future," cried Daniel, and struck the table with his fist.

Jacob's head went down. "You're plannin' to turn me and mine out of doors by way of evening things up?" he cried.

"You've hit it," with aggravating unction, "that's the programme up to date."

"But where'll we go?" asked the other helplessly. "Couldn't you help us, Danny? Couldn't you forget what's past, and not be hard on us?"

"Listen, Jacob," Daniel got to his feet and This is the time I've waited for. I wouldn't forget if I could, wouldn't—"