

Our New Serial Story.

"HIS FAMILY."

BY ERNEST POOLE, Author of "The Harbor."

[Ernest Poole is one of the most outstanding American writers of the present day. *The Farmer's Advocate and Home Magazine* is privileged to have secured the serial rights of this story "His Family," which is remarkable for its profound insight into character. The great majority of stories which treat of city and country begin with the country and end with the city: "His Family" begins with the city and ends with the country.]

CHAPTER I.

He was thinking of the town he had known. Not of old New York—he had heard of that from old men when he himself had still been young and had smiled at their garrulity. He was thinking of a young New York, the mighty throbbing city to which he had come long ago as a lad from the New Hampshire mountains. A place of turbulent thoroughfares, of shouting drivers, hurrying crowds, the crack of whips and the clatter of wheels; an uproarious, thrilling town of enterprise, adventure, youth; a city of pulsing energies, the center of a boundless land; a port of commerce with all the world, of stately ships with snowy sails; a fascinating pleasure town, with throngs of eager travellers hurrying from the ferry boats and rolling off in hansom cabs to the huge hotels on Madison Square. A city where American faces were still to be seen upon all its streets, a cleaner and a kindlier town with more courtesy in its life, less of the vulgar scramble. A city of houses, separate homes, of quiet streets with rustling trees, with people on the doorsteps upon warm summer evenings and groups of youngsters singing as they came trooping by in the dark. A place of music and romance. At the old opera house downtown, on those dazzling evenings when as a boy he had ushered there for the sake of hearing the music, how the rich joy of being alive, of being young, of being loved, had shone out of women's eyes. Shimmering satins, dainty gloves and little jeweled slippers, shapely arms and shoulders, vivacious movements, nods and smiles, swift glances, ripples, bursts of laughter, an exciting hum of voices. Then silence, sudden darkness—and music, and the curtain. The great wide curtain slowly rising.

But all that had passed away.

Roger Gale was a rugged heavy man not quite sixty years of age. His broad, massive features were already deeply furrowed, and there were two big flecks of white in his close-curling, grayish hair. He lived in a narrow red brick house down on the lower west side of the town, in a neighborhood swiftly changing. His wife was dead. He had no sons but three grown daughters, of whom the eldest, Edith, had been married many years. Laura and Deborah lived at home, but they were both out this evening. It was Friday, Edith's evening, and as was her habit she had come from her apartment uptown to dine with her father and play chess. In the living room, a cheerful place, with its lamp light and its shadows, its old-fashioned high-back chairs, its sofa, its book cases, its low marble mantel with the gilt mirror overhead, they sat at a small oval table in front of a quiet fire of coals. And through the smoke of his cigar Roger watched his daughter.

Edith had four children, and was soon to have another. A small demure woman of thirty-five, with light soft hair and clear blue eyes and limbs softly rounded, the contour of her features was full with approaching maternity, but there was a decided firmness in the lines about her little mouth. As he watched her now, her father's eyes, deep set and gray and with signs of long years of suffering in them, displayed a grave whimsical wistfulness. For by the way she was playing the game he saw how old she thought him. Her play was slow and absent-minded, and there came long periods when she did not make a move. Then she would recall herself and look up with a little affectionate smile that showed she looked upon him as too heavy with his age to have noticed her small lapses.

He was grimly amused at her attitude for he did not feel old at all. With that whimsical hint of a smile which had grown to be a part of him, he tried various moves on the board to see how far he could go without interrupting her reveries. He checkmated her, re-lit his cigar and waited until she should notice it. And when she did not notice, gravely he moved back his queen and let the game continue. How many hundreds of games, he thought, Edith must have played with him in the long years when his spirit was dead, for he now to take such chances. Nearly every Friday evening for nearly sixteen years.

Before that, Judith his wife had been here. It was then that the city had been young, for to Roger it had always seemed as though he were just beginning life. Into his joys and sorrows, too, he had groped his way as most of us do, and had never penetrated deep. But he had meant to, later on. When in his busy city days distractions had arisen, always he had promised himself that sooner or later he would return to this interest or passion, for the world still lay before him with its enthralling interests, its beauties and its pleasures, its tasks and all its puzzles, intricate and baffling, all some day to be explored.

This deep zest in Roger Gale had been bred in his boyhood on a farm up in the New Hampshire mountains. There his family had lived for many generations. And from the old house, the huge shadowy barn and the crude little sawmill down the road; from animals, grown people and still more from other boys, from the meadows and the mountain above with its cliffs and caves and forests of pine, young Roger had discovered, even in those early years, that life was fresh, abundant, new, with countless glad beginnings.

At seventeen he had come to New York. There had followed hard struggles in lean years, but his rugged health had buoyed him up. And there had been genial friendships and dreams and explorations, a search for romance, the strange glory of love, a few furtive ventures that left him dismayed. But though love had seemed sordid at such times it had brought him crude exultations. And if his existence had grown more obscure, it had been somber only in patches, the main picture dazzling still. And still he had been just making starts.

He had ventured into the business world, clerking now at this, now at that, and always looking about him for some big opportunity. It had come and he had seized it, despite the warnings of his friends. What a wild adventure it had been—a bureau of news clippings, a business new and unheard of—but he had been sure that here was growth, he had worked at it day and night, and the business widening fast had revealed long ramifications which went winding and stretching away into every phase of American life. And this life was like a forest, boundless and impenetrable, up-springing, intertwining. How much could he ever know of it all?

Then had come his marriage. Judith's family had lived long in New York, some had died and others had scattered until only she was left. This house had been hers, but she had been poor, so she had leased it to some friends. It was through them he had met her here, and within a few weeks he had fallen in love. He had felt profound disgust for the few wild oats he had sown, and in his swift reaction he had overworshipped the girl, her beauty and her purity, until in a delicate way of her own she had hinted that he was going too far,

that she, too, was human and a passionate lover of living, in spite of her low quiet voice and her demure and sober eyes.

And what beginnings for Roger now, what a piling up of intimate joys, surprises, shocks, of happiness. There had come disappointments, too, sudden severe little checks from his wife which had brought him occasional questionings. This love had not been quite all he had dreamed, this woman not so ardent. He had glimpsed couples here and there that set him to imagining more consuming passions. Here again he had not explored very deep. But he had dismissed regrets like these with only a slight reluctance. For if they had settled down a bit with the coming of their children, their love had grown rich in sympathies and silent understandings, in humorous enjoyment of their funny little daughters' chattering like magpies in the genial old house. And they had looked happily far ahead. What a woman she had been for plans. It had not been all smooth sailing. There had come reverses in business, and at home one baby, a boy, had died. But on they had gone and the years had swept by until he had reached his forties. Absorbed in his growing business and in his thriving family, it had seemed to Roger still as though he were just starting out.

But one day, quite suddenly, the house had become a strange place to him with a strange remote figure in it, his wife. For he learned that she must die. There had followed terrible weeks. Then Judith had faced their disaster. Little by little she had won back the old intimacy with her husband; and through the slow but inexorable progress of her ailment, again they had come together in long talks and plans for their children. At this same chessboard, in this room, repeatedly she would stop the game and smiling she would look into the future. At one such time she had said to him,

"I wonder if it won't be the same with the children as it has been with us. No matter how long each one of them lives, won't their lives feel to them unfinished like ours, only just beginning? I wonder how far they will go. And then their children will grow up and it will be the same with them. Unfinished lives. Oh, dearie, what children all of us are."

He had put his arm around her then and had held her very tight. And feeling the violent trembling of her husband's fierce revolt, slowly bending back her head and looking up into his eyes she had continued steadily.

"And when you come after me, my dear, oh, how hungry I shall be for all you will tell me. For you will live on in our children's lives."

And she had asked him to promise her that.

But he had not kept his promise. For after Judith's dying he had felt himself terribly alone, with eternity around him, his wife slipping far away. And the universe had grown stark and hard, impersonal, relentless, cold. A storm of doubts had attacked his faith. And though he had resisted long, for his faith in God had been rooted deep in the mountains of New England, in the end it had been wrenched away, and with it he had lost all hope that either for Judith or himself was there any existence beyond the grave. So death had come to Roger's soul. He had been deaf and blind to his children. Nights by the thousand spent alone. Like a gray level road in his memory now was the story of his family.

When had this spirit begun to awaken? He could not tell, it had been so slow. His second daughter, Deborah, who had stayed at home, with her father when Laura had gone away to school, had done little things continually to rouse his interest in life. Edith's winsome babies had attracted him when they came to the house. Laura had returned from school, a joyous creature, tall and slender, with snapping black eyes, and had soon made her presence felt. One day in the early afternoon, as he entered the house there had burst on his ears a perfect gale of laughter; and peering through the portieres he had seen the dining-room full of young girls, a crew as wild as Laura herself. Hastily he had retreated upstairs. But he had enjoyed such glimpses. He had liked to see her fresh pretty gowns and to have her come in and kiss him good-night.

Then had come a sharp heavy jolt. His business had suffered from long neglect, and suddenly for two anxious

weeks he had found himself facing bankruptcy. Edith's husband, a lawyer, had come to his aid and together they had pulled out of the hole. But he had been forced to mortgage the house. And this had brought to a climax all the feelings of guiltiness which had so long been stirring within him over his failure to live up to the promise he had made his wife.

And so Roger had looked at his children.

And at first to his profound surprise he had had it forced upon him that these were three grown women, each equipped with her own peculiar feminine traits and desires, the swift accumulations of lives which had expanded in a city that had reared to the skies in the many years of his long sleep. But very slowly, month by month he had gained a second impression which seemed to him deeper and more real. To the eye they were grown women all, but inwardly they were children still, each groping for her happiness and each held back as he had been, either by checks within herself or by the gay distractions of the absorbing city. He saw each of his daughters, parts of himself. And he remembered what Judith had said: "You will live on in our children's lives." And he began to get glimmerings of a new immortality made up of generations, an endless succession of other lives extending into the future.

Some of all this he remembered now, in scattered fragments here and there. Then from somewhere far away a great bell began booming the hour, and it roused him from his reverie. He had often heard the bell of late. A calm deep-toned intruder, it had first struck in upon his attention something over two years ago. Vaguely he had wondered about it. Soon he had found it was on the top of a tower a little to the north, one of the highest pinnacles of this tumultuous modern town. But the bell was not tumultuous. And as he listened it seemed to say, "There is still time, but you have not long."

Edith, sitting opposite him, looked up at the sound with a air of relief. Ten o'clock. It was time to go home. "I wonder what's keeping Bruce," she said. Bruce was still in his office downtown. As a rule on Friday evenings he came with his wife to supper here, but this week he has some new business on hand. Edith was vague about it. As she tried to explain she knitted her brows and said that Bruce was working too hard. And her father grunted assent.

"Bruce ought to knock off every summer," he said, "for a good solid month, or better two. Can't you bring him up to the mountains this year?" He referred to the old New Hampshire home which he had kept as a summer place. But Edith smiled at the idea.

"Yes, I could bring him," she replied, "and in a week he'd be perfectly crazy to get back to his office again." She compressed her lips. "I know what he needs—and we'll do it some day, in spite of him."

"A suburb, eh," her father said, and his face took on a look of dislike. They had often talked of suburbs.

"Yes," his daughter answered, "I've picked out the very house." He threw at her a glance of impatience. He knew what had started her on this line. Edith's friend, Madge Deering, was living out in Morristown. All very well, he reflected, but her case was not at all the same. He had known Madge pretty well. Although the death of her husband had left her a widow at twenty-nine, with four small daughters to bring up, she had gone on determinedly. Naturally smart and able, Madge was always running to town, keeping up with all her friends and with every new fad and movement there, although she made fun of most of them. Twice she had taken her girls abroad. But Edith was quite different. In a suburb she would draw into her house and never grow another inch. And Bruce, poor devil, would commute and take work home from the office. But Roger couldn't tell her that.

"I'd be sorry to see you do it," he said. "I'd miss you up in the mountains."

"Oh, we'd come up in the summer," she answered. "I wouldn't miss the mountains for worlds!"

Then they talked of summer plans. And soon again Edith's smooth pretty brows were wrinkling absently. It was hard in her planning not to be sure