

My Father's Wife

MARY M. CLEMENS.

There were four of us—Jo, Nell, Tess and I. Jo was twenty-five, and we looked on her as a sort of mother. Nell and I came next; we were the twins; and Tess, darling Tess, came last. Tess was everybody's pet, and as much of a spoiled baby at seventeen as she was at seven. Father doted on her; she was his harum-scarum, his mad-cap, his tom-boy and a dozen other pet names which I cannot recall. Father's health had been failing for two years, and when the doctor ordered him South for a year at the very least, we were heart-broken. Tess wanted to accompany him, and she coaxed and wheedled him so that even the rest of us thought he could not refuse, but he remained obdurate. Tess must finish her education, he said, and she at last to it. Poor Tess, how we all pined her; every time she would enter a room and see us packing father's trunks she would sit down and cry as though we were going to bury him. But at last the packing was over, the final farewells were said and father was off, and I was really glad for Tess's sake. It was in the latter part of November when father left us, and so we looked forward to Christmas we felt very blue, and we were all glad when that Christmas was a thing of the past. Still we had letters regularly, and we were so glad to think that father's health was improving. Now we were so one another he will come back so strong that we will have him with us for years and years. As everything comes to an end, so did our year of waiting, Christmas was coming around again, and though father did not write and tell us he was coming we each felt that the five days more until Christmas and we was as busy as a bee trying to dress half a dozen dolls for the hospital and vainly trying to coax Tess to help me, but Tess had holiday fever in its worst form, and all she could or would do was to go to the post office after the arrival of every mail to look for a letter, only to come back disappointed. She had already made two trips this day, and she came home looking heart-sick. I felt sorry for her, and to console her I said:

"Now, Tess, you don't want father to come in on us suddenly and find you looking as though you had been wrung about him ever since he's been gone, do you?"

"No," answered Tess. "It's not that. Oh, Kittie, I have such an odd feeling. I can't describe it. I feel as if something was going to happen. I'm sure father must be sick or he would have written."

"Nonsense, Tess; you know father wrote last month and said he would surely be with us for the holidays. Come, cheer up, Tess, for I do not intend to give up hope until Christmas Day."

"Well, then, neither shall I," Tess stoutly asserted. "But, Kitt, I must go to the post office just this once to see, you know."

"All right," I answered; "run along and be back for tea."

Off she flew, happy-go-lucky Tess. I ran her from my window; she has taken Sport, the big house dog, with her, and I watch their mad pranks. Now they are hid by trees, now they are racing again like mad and I watch them out of sight. Left alone by my thoughts, I begin to wonder what father really intends to do. Surely if he were sick some one would have sent a telegram. A telegram? Why didn't I think of that before? The very thing! Yes, I'll do it. I'll telegraph to father immediately and tell him to write or wire and let us know what he is going to do; this suspense is killing on all of us, but more so on Tess. By the way, I'll not let Tess know anything about it until I hear from him. I start up, put my sewing aside for the day and look out of the window. Surely that is not Tess in the distance. Yes, it is Tess, for there is Sport racing with her; now she is resting against a tree, now she is running. Oh, she sees me! What is she saying? Up goes the window in spite of the frosty air, and I can see she has a letter. I sink on my knees and say a fervent thank God as Tess comes bounding in. Nell follows; Tess looks around and says:

"Hain't Jo got back yet? It's addressed to her."

"No," says Nell; "but you open it, Tess. Jo won't mind."

"Well, here goes," says Tess, as she tears the envelope open. "I don't care whether Jo minds or not." So she straightens out the letter and begins:

"My Darling Daughters—Christmas this year is something which I look forward to with much joy, for will it not unite us all once more? Well, girls, you will have your poor old father with you again on Christmas Day. Did I say old? Why I said I don't know, for I feel as young as any boy out for a holiday. (Darling father, we all say.) Now, girls, I am going to bring home a lovely Christmas present. I will not beat about the bush and keep you guessing. I will tell you in the plainest English I can muster. I am going to bring home the sweetest little wife—"

A scream from Tess as she drops the letter and has fallen to the floor in a faint. In a moment the letter was forgotten and we all turned our attention to Tess, and it was fully an hour ere she roused herself by a sign of consciousness. The first words she said on opening her eyes were, "The letter! Oh, Kittie, I must hear it all!" Jo had returned in the meantime, and vowed that Tess should not see or hear another line, but Tess would not be put off. Indeed, I feared she would work herself into a fever, so I begged Jo to let me read it to her. After a great deal of coaxing Jo unwillingly consented, and I continued the letter where Tess left off, it said:

"Now, girls, I know you will one and all be surprised and I hope pleased, but even though you are not, you must remember that I can do as I please. I have reason to believe you will all look with more favor on my action than Tess, poor child (Tess groans), but even she must not think she can control all my actions. Therefore, tell her Jo, that I command her to show my wife the respect that is her due, and I hope she will not disobey me. You can have everything in readiness for our return. We will be home in time on Christmas Day to eat our Christmas dinner with you—probably sooner."

"Your Always Loving Father."

Poor Tess! Her grief was terrible, but I let her exhaust herself ere I spoke to her; then I tried to reason with her, but to no purpose. Finally Jo and Nell entered, both looking as though they had lost their best friend. We all ran and threw our arms around Jo's neck and sobbed:

"What shall we do? Oh, Jo, what shall we do?"

"What shall you do?" echoed Jo. "Why you must do as you please. As for me, I shall marry Tom (she is engaged), you know, in February. I told him some time ago that I would not marry him until Tess graduated, but I'll tell him I've changed my mind and I'll marry him just as soon as he wants me to."

"You will, oh?" says Tess. "Well, then, listen to me. Just as sure as you go away with Tom and leave us here with that female Bluebeard, I'll leave school and marry the first man that asks me. And if one doesn't soon ask me, I'll ask him."

This staggered Jo, who says: "For heaven's sake, Tess, talk sense—not sensibly."

"Talk sense! Act sensibly? Did daddy do so sensibly? He didn't; but that's no reason why you should talk like a little impleton. We don't want a scandal. You are rest assured that I'll not marry Tom until you graduate after hearing such threats."

"Well, scandal or no scandal," says Tess, "I'll put the same threats into execution if you leave us."

"Oh, I know you'd do anything so we'll not talk about that. We'll all have to put our heads together and see what's to be done."

"See what's to be done!" says Tess. "There's only one thing to be done that I can see. That's to give her the cold shoulder. Shut up the house. We'll go off to spend the holidays ourselves. Father need not know we got his letter. What do you say, girls?"

Before we had a chance to either agree or disagree, Jo spoke up:

"What's the use of us running away? We may as well face the music first as last, for we'll have to face it in the end anyhow; besides, I can read through the lines of father's letter that he'll stand no fooling from us, so if one will consented to be civil to her in father's presence at least."

"Oh! as to that," says Tess, "we'll all have to be civil to her in father's presence, I suppose. But in father's presence! Ah! that's where I'll get in my work, and she'll wish many a time she had not come among father's four daughters!"

"Well, Tess," says Nell, "I would not have so much to say if I were you, for you're one of those impulsive creatures that one can never depend on, and you might actually fall in love with her."

"This is no time for joking, Nell," says Tess with fine scorn. "Fall in love with her indeed! I can fancy myself."

"Well," says Jo, "suppose you all fancy yourselves getting things ready for their welcome, for much as we dislike it we'll have to do it; but she'll often wish herself back South or wherever she came from."

That settled it. As long as Jo intended "to make it so disagreeable for her, we felt privileged to set as we pleased, although I often thought that we were four pretty tough customers for a poor bride to come to. It seemed settled now that we were to give her the cold shoulder, as Tess had said, so we said no more about her, but turned to our respective duties. We each had our own work to do, as we only kept one housemaid and one hired man. We were kept pretty busy right up until Christmas Eve. We always had a tree; father declared Christmas was not Christmas without one. At first we vowed we would have no tree, but we felt blue enough, and we knew we should feel ten times worse without a tree, so we decided not only to have a tree, but to decorate the whole house with greens and wreaths, and when we were through the house

presented a beautiful sight, both inside and out.

It was close on to midnight when we finished and thoroughly tired out we went to bed. I was one of the last to sleep, but by thinking and wondering what sort of a person this creature was whom father was going to bring over us. When I heard the clock strike six I arose, dressed and called the girls, wishing them a merry Christmas! But they looked anything but merry; they even looked at me with reproach for wishing them to be merry. Breakfast over, we all pitched in to do our share towards making the Christmas dinner a success. It was just about 2 o'clock when Tess entered and said:

"Where's Jo? I hope she doesn't intend to wait for them if they're not here in time! Really, Kit, I don't believe ten stepmothers could spoil my beautiful appetite, for I'm starving!"

"And so am I," I assured her. As Jo entered an aid:

"The hired man (the hired man) to the station with the team, for the walking is bad, and if they're not on the train, they won't be here until 7 p.m."

"Which will be quite soon enough!" says Tess.

"No," answered Jo; "I for one want this suspense ended, and if they don't come for dinner, I'll be disappointed."

Tess was about to make some rejoinder, when Nell rushed in, all excitement and said:

"Girls, the carriage! Quick, quick! I think they've come!"

We all rushed to the window, and sure enough, there was Jones actually making the poor horse run, and as Jones was never known to hurry except on state occasions, we felt that father had arrived. Nor were we mistaken, for in two minutes more they were entering the gates. Jones jumped off the box with the agility of a schoolboy, opened the door and out stepped the object of our curiosity! She was small—decidedly small—we thought, for we were all tall, excepting Tess. Farther than that we could not see, for she was muffled up to the ears in furs and heavily veiled, as it were bitter cold. I took a side-long glance at Tess. She was flushing and paling by turns. At last she set her lips firmly together and started to leave the room. Fortunately at that moment Jones threw the door open and said:

"There, master, are all your girls waiting for you!"

Before father could open his mouth we all closed in around him, like so many bees; all our resentment was forgotten in the joy of seeing him once more after so long an absence. Even his wife was forgotten as we kissed and hugged him and told him how glad we were to have him once more. It was fully five minutes ere father could get loose from us and assure us that he had never forgotten us, that he had longed for us even as we had longed for him!

"But, girls," he said, "I am forgetting something most important. I must make you all acquainted with my wife. He took her hand, drew her to him and said: "My dear girls, these are my four darlings, that I have told you of so often. I hope you will all get along nicely together and love each other for my sake."

"The four darlings" acknowledged the introduction very coolly, while father's wife came forward, shook hands with each one of us and said in the sweetest voice imaginable:

"I hope, as your father does, that we shall all be very happy together."

Like an automaton four heads bowed very stiffly, but not without a warning glance from father, who saw at once his glance with one of defiance, which I knew the bride saw and I felt heartily sorry for her, although I would not dare let anyone know it. After a few more remarks from father Jo stepped forward and said:

"If Mrs. Merrishew will allow me, I'll show her to her room, where she can dress for dinner."

I don't know how long it had taken Jo to prepare this little speech, but the bride took such an uncontrolable fit of laughter that her sides shook. When she could regain her breath she went over to father and said:

"Now, Jim, tell them, won't you, to call me May? Mrs. Merrishew sounds so distant from your daughters."

Father assured her that her wish would be fulfilled—that we should call her May; but that was where he "put his foot in it," so to speak, for I saw by Tess' face that it would be Mrs. Merrishew to the bitter end. When father had finished speaking, May looked at Jo and said:

"If you will be so kind as to show us to our room, we won't keep dinner waiting much longer, for I am nearly famished."

Jo nodded assent and marched on before father and May to pilot them to their room. Not a word was spoken until Jo's return; then we all looked at her, and in one voice asked:

"Well?"

"Well?" snapped Jo in return. "You know what we mean," I answered. "What is she like without all those furs? We could see nothing but her eyes, nose and mouth."

"You are much more interested in her than I am. You should have

volunteered to take them to their room and you might have found out."

"This is a case of 'silence is golden,'" thought I, and I wisely kept my mouth shut, knowing that my curiosity would be fully satisfied at dinner.

It was but fifteen minutes later when father and May appeared, and we marched into the dining-room and sat down to a veritable feast. And never did anyone appear lovelier than May. She came to the table in a pale blue dinner gown, and she looked wonderfully lovely, as she was a golden blonde (not chemical either), with a saucy face, laughing blue eyes, and I defy anyone to say she was a day past nineteen! I think of that bit of girl our stepmother. Strange, wasn't it? But none of us thought that by any possible chance she could be young. I myself thought she would be a prying sort of a person of about thirty-five summers. But this surprise was really pleasant, and she was so bright and witty that, before dinner was over, I was more than half in love with her, and I felt like a culprit, but I vowed the girls should never know it. The rest of the day passed very quietly, and we all retired rather early, for we knew that father and May had travelled for two days and needed rest. Before we separated for the night we held a meeting in Jo's room to air our different opinions, and we did air them with a vengeance.

"Well," said Nell, "fire away, Jo—your turn first. Are we still to give her the cold shoulder, or are we to bury the hatchet?"

"Bury the hatchet!" said Jo; "never! Think of a girl not much older than Tess coming in here to lord it over us. Why, it's ridiculous. If father had married a woman, in time I may have forgiven him; as it is I never shall."

"Next!" says Nell.

"Well, girls," I spoke up. "I don't think father wants our forgiveness, and the first thing you know he'll be making us see for his and May's."

"This was a bombshell, and before I gave them a chance to answer I added:

"Another thing; I think it rather a compliment to all of us for anyone as young and pretty as she is to marry anyone as old as father."

"As old as father!" snaps Jo. "I don't believe you really know how old father is. One would think father was a freak to hear you."

"No fighting," says Nell. "Your turn, Tess."

"Well, says Tess, "I can tell you all I have to say in three words—I hate her!"

"Oh, Tess!" says Nell; "that is not fair or unkind," says Tess. "It is the truth: I hate her. Tess' she stolen my place? Wasn't I father's companion? Where did he go with me? And now he'd never have time for any of us. Why shouldn't I hate her?"

"I agree with Tess," says Jo. "The poor child will be slighted unmercifully."

"Now that you have all had your say," says Nell, "we may as well retire, and I tell you candidly that if she were anyone but father's wife I believe I should love her. As it is I shall do nothing to make it disagreeable for her. I shall simply set indifferently."

"Humph!" says Tess; "you're afraid of father."

"Well, girls," I cut in, "suppose we adjourn. I confess I'm sleepy." For once we all agreed, and we all sought our beds.

The next day, and in fact every day during the holidays passed very much alike. Father and May were continually together, and no one would snub May before father; but I noticed that both Jo and Tess kept out of sight as much as possible. After the first of the year father decided on retaining his profession once more (that of lawyer), and as his office was in town, he was away from home the greater part of the day. Poor May! It needed but a few days for her to fully realize that she was not wanted by anyone but father. Jo's haughty demeanor I could not or would not stand, had I been May; but May never deigned to notice it. As for Tess, I don't believe she spoke a dozen words to May in a month. I think she fared better with Nell, as Nell often told me she liked May tip-top. For myself, when I did speak to her it was always civilly. One day—she had been with us about two months—was passing the music room, the door was ajar. I looked in and there sat May playing on the piano. I knew she must be thinking of home, and in the shadow, where you could scarcely see her, sat Tess with a book, which I am positive she was not reading. Now, thought I, I'll just watch and see for myself how they get along. I had not long to wait; in a short time Tess sat her book with a bang, which made May jump almost off the piano stool. She looked at Tess and said: "You frightened me! I thought I was alone."

"A likely tale!" answers Tess. "Why, Mrs. Merrishew, no matter where I go to read, it seems to me you are always prying!"

"Prying, Tess? Why, if I were prying, I should hardly be sitting here as large as life, playing. I would be peeping—something I would never be guilty of," says May.

"Oh, well, whatever you call it, it is very annoying," snaps Tess.

"I'm sorry to annoy anyone," says May. "How is it, Tess, that no matter how hard I try, I cannot get on friendly terms with you girls? And I have tried you know best of all how much! Why, if anyone had told me I should ever humble myself as much as I have to you girls, I would have laughed at them. And I don't have to do it, Tess; you know I don't; but I do it for your father's sake. Do you know what your father told me Tess?"

"Oh," says Tess, "father is not accountable lately for either his words or his actions!"

"I will not notice your slurs, Tess. Your father told me if I were not perfectly happy and contented here—that if I had to put up with any slights from you girls, I had but to mention it and he would rent apartments in town."

"And," says Tess, "I suppose you will run to him as soon as he comes in and tell him?"

"That is beyond me, as you know," says May.

"They sat looking at each other for awhile, when May suddenly asked: "How old are you, Tess?"

"Old enough to get along without a stepmother over me, at any rate," says Tess, as she frowned boldly out of the room—but not by the door where I was listening, or I should have grabbed her and made her apologize.

This last dig was too much for poor May. She looked after Tess a second, then threw herself down on the couch and cried as though her heart would break. And this was too much for me. I went in, put my arms around her and said, "Poor May. Had it only been father who overheard Tess' cruel treatment instead of me! But she'll bear it; for if you don't tell him I shall!"

"No, no, you must not," sobbed May. "I have brought enough unhappiness among you without taking your father away, for he loves you all so much! And now that I know you care for me a little, I will be happier."

Then I left her, but not without the knowledge that she had gained a friend. I went straight to Tess' room and pitched into the subject at once.

"Tess," I said, "I overheard a conversation between her and May—"

"Tess cut in with, "I know she was a tattler!"

"You knew nothing of the king," I answered. "The truth is I listened intentionally."

"Sneak," she hissed; "what if you did?"

"What if I did?" I rejoined. "Why, just this; that you will go to May and apologize or I shall go to father!"

"You can suit yourself about going to father," says Tess; "but go to May! I certainly shall not! So there!"

And "so there" it was. I could not go to father without making May even more miserable than she was, and "so there" the matter dropped. And Tess cut me almost as dead as she cut poor May. But May really liked Tess and often told me that she could stand her cuts and slurs with better grace than Jo's haughty manner towards her, which was unbearable. After a short time May and I became the best of friends; we went shopping, visiting and driving together, and to any person not prejudiced May was a fine character. So things went on from day to day. We were now preparing for Easter, and Tess received an invitation to spend the Easter holidays with a school friend in New York, an invitation which father allowed her to accept, for he had an idea that Tess was making it unpleasant for May. She was to be gone two weeks.

Four days had already gone by since her departure, and it was on the fifth day of her absence when May and I started out for a drive. As we reached the station there was a train due, and out of curiosity we waited to see if anyone would alight. Imagine our surprise when out of the train stepped Tess, bag and baggage. We wanted her to drive home with us, but she refused, and as May knew she would not enter the carriage while she was there she got out herself, and on seeing me she made her re-entrance. She said she could tell by Tess' face that she was a very sick girl, and so she was. On our way home I enquired the reason of her sudden return home. Her friend, she told me, was very sick; the doctor sent Tess home, and ordered the house closed immediately. Her friend, she said, had all the symptoms of small-pox. The next morning Tess' condition was alarming, and May thought father had better see her before going to town. Father summoned the best doctor in town immediately, who pronounced it small-pox. Then came the task of getting someone to nurse her. Neither one of us girls knew first thing about nursing, and we had never had any doctors, and we were afraid. It was then May volunteered. At first father would not hear of it; he said May should not place her own life in danger for anyone who cared so little for her; but May won the day, and denying herself to everyone, even father, she went to nurse Tess back to health and strength. And then it was father told us how very near death's door he had been while South. His doctor sent May to nurse him, and father said she left him neither day nor night, and the doctor gave her nearly all the credit of saving his life.

"Was it so very unusual," he asked, "that he had fallen in love with and married her?"

We all agreed it was not. Slow, very slow, was Tess' recovery. Indeed, more than once we thought we should lose her, but between May and the doctor she was brought back to health once more. Poor May! She looked like the shadow of her former self when her long weeks of nursing were over, and the doctor told father he had better send her to the seashore to recuperate. But May would not leave Tess until she had fully recovered, so the seashore trip was abandoned for the time. One afternoon Tess—she had not left the sickroom yet—was sitting, deep in thought, while May was resting close by reading. May was interrupted by a sigh—a sob—and then, oh, faintly, "Mrs. Merrishew." No answer. "May—"

May turned and looked at Tess. Tess was crying. May went to her, put her arms around her and said:

"Tess, dear Tess, don't cry, don't cry."

"Oh," sobbed Tess, "how could you? How could you wish me to live? Can you ever forgive me?"

"Darling Tess, I have nothing to forgive. Remember that I always loved you, even though I knew you hated me."

"You're an angel," sobbed Tess, "and I—oh, I am not fit to live!"

I entered the room just as they were giving each other the kiss of peace. I assured Tess that her sickness had been a blessing in disguise, and she fully agreed with me. Even Jo went to May and asked her forgiveness for her cruel slights. Need I say that it was granted?

Altogether we were a very happy family when Tess got down stairs among us once more. As soon as her health permitted her to go out, father sent her along with May to the seashore, where they stayed all summer, with an occasional visit from each of us. This was one year ago, and we now have a second Mrs. Merrishew—i.e. my replica of our own dear Tess, and I can assure you all that there is no one happier in this world than father's wife.

The Holy Shroud.

A Reuters' telegram, dated Rome, says: "Under the heading 'A Marvellous Occurrence,' the 'Observer-Roman' publishes a letter from Turin relating that a photograph of the Holy Shroud taken by electric light has given an admirable reproduction of the Body of Christ. King Humbert at first hesitated to give authority to have it photographed lest the photographs should be used for commercial speculation."

Injustice to an Irish Regiment.

A great deal was made during the Africa campaign of the withdrawal of the 2nd Battalion of the 18th Royal Irish from the front. It was freely stated, in fact, in quarters where anything detracting from the Irish character is eagerly contributed that the regiment had been ordered back for what was nothing short of cowardice. Sir Henry Havelock Allan, an officer of the regiment, went out specially to investigate a charge which could be brought more credibly against almost any other regiment in the service than the gallant 18th Royal Irish. It was while he was engaged in that mission he lost his life. Now the Commander-in-Chief, after investigating all the circumstances officially, declares "that a grave injustice was done to the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Irish when it was recalled from field service." The question is who was responsible for this slight on the regiment and in what way is his or their responsibility to be made effective?

A BLACKSMITH'S STORY.

He Remains So Run Down That Work Was Almost Impossible—His Whole Body Ached With Pain.

From the Bridgewater Enterprise.

Mr. Austin Fancy is a well known blacksmith living at Baker Settlement, a hamlet about ten miles from Bridgewater, N.S. Mr. Fancy was one of the men in the locality in which he lives. He is another of the legion whose restoration to health adds to the popularity of Dr. Williams' Pink Pills. Mr. Fancy related his story of illness and renewed health to a reporter of the Enterprise as follows:

"During the last winter, owing to I suppose to overwork and impure blood, I became very much reduced in flesh, and had severe pains in the muscles all over my body. I felt tired all the time, had no appetite, and often felt so light as if I wished myself in another world. Some of the time, especially compelled me to undertake a little work in my blacksmith shop, but I was not fit for it, and after doing the job, would have to sit down and rest for a few days. I was advised to try Dr. Williams' Pink Pills, and after using a couple of boxes, I felt a decided relief. The pains began to abate, and I felt again as though life was not all dreariness. By the time I had used six boxes I was as well as ever, and able to do a hard day's work at the blacksmith shop, and without any fatigue, and those who know anything about a blacksmith's work, will know what this means. Those who are not well, will make no mistake in looking for health through the medium of Dr. Williams' Pink Pills."

Dr. Williams' Pink Pills cure by going to the root of the disease. They renew and build up the blood, and strengthen the nerves, thus driving disease from the system. Avoid imitations by insuring that every box you purchase is enclosed in a wrapper bearing the full trade mark, "Dr. Williams' Pink Pills for pale people."