

# A Modern Prodigal,

BY

Mrs. Julia McNair Wright.

Author of "The Captain's Bargain," "Freddy's Son," "The Story of Rasmus," "A Made Man," etc.

## CHAPTER I.

### THE SENTENCE PRONOUNCED.

The trial was ended. Mid-afternoon had passed. The jury by their foreman had returned their verdict. The judge, with slow emphasis, pronounced the sentence—"Ten years in the penitentiary." Standing, his eyes fixed upon the judge, the prisoner, Thomas Stanhope, heard.

During the weeks of his imprisonment the ominous red flush had faded from his face, his big figure had lost its tremulousness, his eyes their wavering lurid light. Exorcised for the time of his demon drunkenness by the firm hand of the law, clothed and in his right mind, he heard his doom, which every one of his fellow townsmen, standing in the Ladbury court-room, received as just and merited.

The sheriff approached to lead away the prisoner. Then Thomas Stanhope, for the first time during the trial, spoke: "Judge, I want to say something." As the judge did not reply, and the sheriff laid his hand on his arm, Stanhope cried out in an agony of entreaty: "Judge! Harry Noble! let me speak!"

It may have been among the dreams of Harry Noble's early ambition that he should reach the bench, one of the youngest judges in the country, but nothing had foreshadowed to him that almost his first official act must be to pronounce so hard a sentence on a companion of his boyhood, or that a prisoner at the bar should entreat him as "Harry Noble."

The words were as a spell to conjure with. Swifter than light, memory carried him back to those early days when a young student from the Latin school, or from college, he came back to this, his native place, greeted by none with more enthusiastic devotion than by Thomas Stanhope, a little little lad, who looked up to him as to a demi-god. On what fishing or hunting excursions had this faithful henchman carried his bag or his gun! How had he built the fire for their noon-day bivouac, and listened with admiring awe to his tales of college life!

This vision of the past was instantaneous; the judge bent his head, the prisoner swept one look about the thronged court-room and spoke:

"I don't find fault with my sentence, judge, it is just. I have heard all that the witnesses said, I know them, they are not men to lie. No doubt they told the truth, and if they did tell the truth, all I can say is the sentence should have been for life; I am not fit to be free!"

At these words a little stir, a deep drawn breath, passed through the court-room, and then a profound silence, as the prisoner went on.

"You know me, you know my family before me, most of you—we were as good a family and creditable as any in Ladbury. Who would have thought when I was a little boy playing in these streets, that I, Thomas Stanhope, would become a house-breaker; that I would break into my neighbor's house, plunder his goods, fire on him with intent to kill—as far as I had any intent at all, for I did not know what I was doing? I have no recollection of what I did. It was not I, but the devil to which I have given room. I am like that man I used to read about in the Bible, exceeding fierce and living among the tombs, that none could bind, even with chains, and the devils in him were legion. He, as I recollect, found Some One to cast out his devils; I never did. I have wanted to reform! I have hated myself, I have cursed my folly, I have tried, I have vowed on my knees, but wherever I went there the demon was free. I saw it, I smelled it, I always fell before it. You know me—I have been more demon than man. The law, judge, gives me only one safe place—a prison. Because a prison is the only place the law keeps free and clear of that whiskey devil. I tell you, now that I am

sober and have been sober for weeks, I had rather spend all the rest of my days a prisoner, but in possession of myself, than free and in possession of a demon!

"But I didn't get up to speak about myself, I have a word to say about them—my family—up on the mountain there—Mercy and the children. You think I do not care for them. I have acted as if I did not. I have neglected them, abused them, robbed them, left them to starve—they would not have a roof over their heads today, if I could have either sold or mortgaged that place up there! No one knows better than I do how bad I've been to them—a demon instead of husband and father, but—I do care for them when I am in my right mind. Now I am going away, forever I suppose, and what I want to say is—don't hate and despise Mercy and the children. Give them a fair chance, as I never did. Don't be hard on them because Thomas Stanhope is a miserable drunkard, housebreaker, felon! There's good stuff in those children, they take after Mercy, and the Stanhopes that were my forebears. Forget that those children belong to Thomas Stanhope, the convict—remember that they are good old Deacon Stanhope's grandchildren! They are well off, rid of me, but oh, neighbours—you I played with as a boy—lend a hand to Mercy and the children!"

He turned, and stepped from the prisoner's box beside the sheriff. The crowd in the court-room openly wiped their eyes, and blew sonorous blasts through their noses. One and another, as the convict came down the aisle, held out a hand to clasp his, or touched him on the shoulder, saying, "Bear up," "It might have been worse," "You might have killed Andrew," "Don't fret for the folks," "They'll get on," "We'll do well by them."

At the court-house door the prisoner for the first time lifted his eyes. Towering above Ladbury was the mountain, now, in the early spring, covered with a red and purple mist of the budding maple and larch. There on one of the level reaches was the home he had destroyed—were Mercy and the children! There on that mountain he had spent his boyish holidays in innocent sport. O Nature! mother Nature, why had he wandered from thy side? O hard and shameful years, down which he had come, recreant to every duty and every vow, since on that mountain one summer evening, long ago, he had asked Mercy to be his wife! He gave one deep sob. The sheriff looked keenly at him as he led him into the corridor where was the cell, where only he had had opportunity to come to himself.

Perhaps it was as well that the prisoner could not see what was enacting up on the mountain. His heart was full, his burden like Cain's was already greater than he could bear. True, like Cain, he had made his own burden, but, oh, sirs, that does not make it the lighter!

Up on the mountain was a house, with three rooms below, and two under the eaves in the attic. It had been built with a good old-fashioned honest workmanship, which caused it still to stand squarely erect with a solid roof and level floors, through years of shameful neglect. There had been a porch once, looking toward the town and the sunset; it had been torn away. Most of the fence pickets had been also used for firewood. When on winter nights a woman hears her children cry with cold, she may make a raid, in their behalf, on her own fence pickets or front porch, although by nature a thrifty housewife. The windows of this house were badly broken. Some of the damaged panes had been pasted up, some empty spaces had been filled with shingle or pasteboard.

Around the house certain apple, cherry, and pear trees, which had survived the general misfortunes of the place, were breaking into a flourish of white and pink bloom. Paint was wanting to the house, and weeds contended with the grass in the yard. Dock and plattain striving with unaided grass have about the same fortunes as evil habits warring with native good instincts unassisted in a soul. In this fallen world the weed, vegetable and moral, has much the better chance.

This house on the mountain had long been uninhabited; the door swung open, the windows were curtainless, not a hen clucked

and scratched, not a bee boomed in the sunshine about it.

Still, lending a careful ear in the spring stillness of the mountain side, now and then a sound might be caught as coming from behind a broken-down barn at some distance from the house, and a little higher up. Following this hint of life we pass behind the barn, and there, in a little yard with an unused water-trough fed by a hill-side spring, a yard bare and desolate, and partly surrounded by a broken-down rail fence, we find four children. On the end of the trough, idly plashing the water with her hand, sits Letitia, her perplexed and melancholy face belying the name given by an over-sanguine mother. Letitia is twelve, neatly combed, clean, and patched, and barefooted, her uncovered feet and ankles ever trying to hide themselves under her woefully short and scanty skirts. Perched on the fence is Samuel, aged six. Samuel of old, we are informed, had a new coat every year. This Samuel, though his mother's will was good enough, had never had a new coat. At present its place was supplied by a shirt-waist with only one sleeve and rent down the back, and a pair of trousers with very little material left in either knees or seat. Samuel's head, above this assemblage of rags, showed the brow of a philosopher and the smile of a saint.

Accommodated on a little box for a stool was Patty—abbreviated from Patience—who had spent three years in this wicked world, looked frightened nearly out of her wits, and had found already ample opportunity for the exercise of the quality suggested by her name.

These three children were gravely looking at an exhibition. The exhibitor was their eldest brother, age thirteen—Achilles, called Kill for short. Nature had sent two more children to occupy the place between Letitia and Samuel, but fate had proved too hard for them, and two little graves without stones were now all that suggested their existence; thus Achilles was robbed of two more admiring spectators of his exhibition. He was walking around on one leg and one arm, and carrying the other leg and arm aloft, like the antennae of an insect.

Suddenly he stopped to rest and besought Letitia to look down the road and see if anything was coming. Letitia looked and reported the road vacant as far as she could see it.

"Don't you s'pose they're done long ago?" demanded Achilles, "He did it, and they know he did it. They won't let him off, will they? If I see him coming up the road I'll run, and never, never come back!"

"And leave mother?" said Letitia reproachfully.

"No, I can't leave mother. I say, Letitia, they won't let him out, will they? They can't! Why they ought to give him a life! If I was Judge Noble I'd shut him up in the jug for life, so I would!"

"O Kill, don't!" said Letitia. "He's your father."

"And I wish he wasn't my father! I don't want such a father! What kind of a father has he been? Did he ever give us clothes or presents or good things? Didn't he swear and rage and kick and cuff? Didn't he hunt us out of the house up into the mountain, night after night? I say, Tish, how often did mother and we all huddle here in the barn freezing last winter, while he was ripping and tearing and breaking things in the house? Do you want to try that again? I don't."

"Maybe he'd be good—now he's been to jail," vouchsafed the philosophic Samuel.

"Maybe he wouldn't," retorted the wrathful Achilles, "he don't know how to be good. He'd need more'n six weeks in jail to settle him."

"I think mother'd feel awful if he went to the penitentiary," suggested Letitia, with womanly instinct.

"Mother wouldn't be so foolish," declared her brother. "What good does he do mother? Hasn't he said he'd kill us all? Won't he do it some time? If Judge Noble lets him off, I mean to go down there and tell him we'll all be murdered up here, and it will be his fault. I say, what good did he ever do mother? Didn't he sell every nice thing she ever had? Don't he take away all she earns? Wouldn't she have me part of her life if he was gone for good? If he comes back I'll get a lag rope the first time he gets dead drunk, and

I'll pull him out here to the barn, and tie him hand and foot, and keep him here tied forever."

"He'd holler," said Samuel, the practical. "I'd gag him so he couldn't. I'd give him a blanket, and I'd feed him—some."

"He won't come back. Folks say he's sure of the penitentiary," said Letitia, in a dull, despairing tone.

"If they'll only keep him there till I grow to be a man," said Achilles, "it would be all right. I'll be strong and big as he is, and I'd see to it that he behaves. He shouldn't hurt a hair of any one of us. I'd take care of you all. You should have shoes, Tish; I'd buy you breeches, Samuel."

"It must be awful to be in the penitentiary, though," said Letitia, with a woman's relinings.

"Not half so awful as he deserves," said her brother stoutly. "Didn't he break up our bedstead, and sell our cow, and give our pig to the saloon man, and carry off all the hens to trade for rum; and he sold my steer that I earned my own self and took care of, and was going to buy us clothes and a blanket with him, and he sold him for rum, and came home and turned us all out. He ought to go to the penitentiary forever; he sold my steer!"

Now this steer was the Patroclus of the modern Achilles. Letitia was silent, evidently not fully approving; Samuel looked like a pitying angel; the exhibition failed to attract, and Achilles sought for an ally. Little Patience had sat silent, to her he appealed. "You don't want father to come, do you, Patty?"

Patience lifted up her voice and wept. "Never mind," said Achilles, "he shan't come, he shall go to jail. He shan't scare you any more, Patty!"

As Patience caught her breath and relapsed into her usual silence, the strained ears of the children caught the sound of a horse's feet coming up the road. The horseman, a rough mountaineer, did not see the four anxious child-faces peering around the corner of the old barn. "Hi there! Mis Stanhope!" shouted the rider, stopping by the crazy stile that gave entrance to the yard. "Hullo! the house!" There was no answer. Not that the house was empty. Within, in that desolation which should have been a happy home, sat Mercy Stanhope, rocking herself to and fro in wordless anguish, her old blue check apron flung over her head. A ripple of wind through the house whisked forth one corner of the apron, and waved it as a flag of distress. The man on horseback, grating his neck to look in at the open door, saw the fluttering rag; from that apron corner he divined Mercy within earshot. "Hullo there, Mis Stanhope!" he howled. "Trial's over, an' your man's got ten years!"

Ten years fell the knell on Mercy Stanhope's heart. She need not tremble now at his home-coming. She need not cover under fear of a maniac with murder in his soul. Ten years, ten years of silence, of calm, of safety—at what a price! Ten years in the penitentiary, ten years a prisoner! The woman and the wife in her forgot her wrongs, thought only of his shame, his misery, his doom. Ten years! the playmate of her childhood, the lover of her youth, the husband of her choice—ten years in the penitentiary! Mercy rocked to and fro, and wrung her hands, and wept aloud.

The delegation at the barn corner heard the news. Achilles caught up Patty and hugged her.

"He'll never scare you again, Patty. No more father, no more father for you, Patty. Do you hear, Samuel? Ten years! We've got our chance! I'll be a man when he comes back, big enough to stand up for you." And the four barefooted ones rushed off to congratulate mother. But Letitia's steps were slowest—she dimly guessed that congratulations were not in order.

(To be continued.)

Is it not strange that beautiful little boys and girls will use so much slang, and so many rough, unchaste expressions, while our language contains so many nice, refined words? Also, that parents, while very careful as to how their children use their feet and hands, frequently neglect seeing to the use of the unruly member, the tongue?