

Sister Todhunter's Heart.

Century Magazine for July.

There was unusual excitement in Sweetwater. The new preacher, a young man of fine parts, accompanied by his wife had arrived a few days before, delivered a most effective sermon, and had been called upon with the promptness common to country communities where isolation renders local curiosity unbearable after twenty-four hours. The lady of the parsonage, whose husband was but lately a theological student and now engaged for the first time upon regular pastoral labors, came from the city, and dressed in a manner that was bound to win her the admiration or the hatred of half the village. Already that grand, interchangeable jargon common to all communities was sitting upon her case. "The term is used in a figurative sense," for the inquest was conducted from yard to yard, window to window and even across the one street along which Sweetwater was congregated. Wherever two or three were gathered together and two of the three happened to be of the cradle-roking order of society, Parson Riley's wife was the theme.

The climax was reached in the case when Parson Riley's wife sent out modest little notes inviting about twenty matrons to take tea with her next day. Then the jury led the main question pass while it resolved itself into committees of one, each of which began with almost frantic anxiety to look into the question of dress. Adaptation became the order of the day, for no time remained for new garments, even if Sweetwater could have furnished them. Twenty ladies drew out from their hiding-places twenty bonnets of varied shades, aces, and designs; twenty ladies shook to the breeze the empurpled folds of twenty bombazines, alpacas, and venerable silks; and twenty pairs of hands went to work with needles, thread, hot irons, stain-eradicators, and all the household help that could be mustered, to turn the water of ancient respectability into the wine of modern style as outlined in stray magazines and described by the occasional town visitor.

So it was, then, that when Sweetwater, as very properly represented by its leading ladies, assembled in Parson Riley's modest little parlor and gazed upon itself in all its glory, a somewhat satisfied air settled over it. Poor faded little Mrs. Brown in her dingy alpaca, which everybody knew she bought nine years before with money awarded her at the country fair for preserves and pickles, and had turned and returned until it was equally worn all over, smiled placidly upon Mrs. Bailey's watered silk she wore when she was a bride, and upon the bombazine gown that Mrs. Buckner inherited from her mother, and felt thoroughly comfortable. And Mrs. Buckner's little straw bonnet, that had been in fashion twice in the fifteen years of its service, rested easy upon her own artificial knot of hair when she beheld Mrs. Culpepper's Leghorn flare-front headgear, and noted the corkscrew iron-gray curls pinned around the serene brow of Colonel Ledbetter's wife just as they had been on state occasions for twenty years.

This feeling of comfort was greatly strengthened by the fact that Parson Riley's wife wore a plain dark close-fitting gown of some flexible material without ornamentation, and that her hair was brushed back without any attempt at the fashionable arrangements they feared would crush them. Then the little lady moved about among them with her sweetest smile, and the nicest tea, and a little notice for each of her guests. She had observed what an "elegant young woman" was Mrs. Buckner's Samantha, just back from Wesleyan College in Macon; and Mrs. Brown's son Tom was "handsome enough to be governor." As for Mrs. Culpepper's baby, why, it was "just too lovely for anything." She captured a very large-hearted woman entirely when she whispered to Mrs. Bailey that her husband was the finest looking man she had seen in Sweetwater,—"excepting my Phil, you know," she added. And this loyalty only sank the compliment deeper. Then she hurried off for a pencil, and begged Mrs. Colonel Ledbetter to give her her receipt for making the scuppernon wine she had heard so much praised, and she laid her book in the dear old lady's lap and wrote it as dictated. In an hour Parson Riley's wife was by unanimous consent established at the head of Sweetwater, and could afford to take the company in to see her lace curtains, baby and baby dresses, and all the little bric-a-brac that had been showed upon her as a bride,—without awakening a single jealous feeling.

But a storm was brewing, and its first mutterings were heard when Mrs. Culpepper thoughtlessly mentioned "Sister Todhunter." "Sister Todhunter?" said Parson Riley's wife, looking from one to the other, a puzzled expression shadowing her pretty face; "have I met Sister Todhunter? Dear me, can I have made a mistake after all? She had tried so hard

to please everybody, and here was trouble at first move. "No, my dear," said Mrs. Culpepper, promptly; "it was I who made the mistake." But poor Mrs. Riley noted the ominous look upon the faces of several and the glances they exchanged. "I am sure," she said earnestly, "I would have been glad to have had Sister Todhunter if I had known in time. Does she live in the village?" "No dear," said Mrs. Colonel Ledbetter; "she is disagreeable old thing who lives out on her farm about a mile from here. You haven't lost anything by not knowing her." Mrs. Ledbetter was a power in the land, and her iron-gray curls shook in a dangerous and threatening manner as she declared herself. "She is sometimes pleasant, to be sure, but if it wasn't for her husband, poor man, who married her out of pity, although she was only a 'cracker' and he a man of education and standing, she wouldn't be noticed."

"I think," said the poor faded little Mrs. Brown meekly, "that Sister Todhunter has a good heart, and I'm sure she always treated me kindly." "And who wouldn't?" interposed Mrs. Culpepper, laughing. "You see some good in everybody, Sallie, and everybody sees some in you. But as for Sister Todhunter, she is better at long range."

Presently there was a movement among the ladies, and soon Parson Riley's wife, the recipient of twenty kisses and as many warm handshakes, was left alone with her empty cups and the memory of Sister Todhunter.

When Parson Riley heard the description of his wife's tea-party from her own lips, told with many a smile and an occasional sigh, his first resolution was to call upon Colonel Todhunter and his wife. So it was that early next morning he saddled his patient mare and ambled out to the Todhunter farm.

As Parson Riley approached the little cottage, he saw sitting on the steps a man with his chin in his hands. The first thing that impressed him was the air of extreme dejection about the individual, an air that had become more marked after he had dismounted and advanced toward the house. Rousing himself from his reveries, the individual rose slowly and fixed a pair of tired, watery blue eyes upon the parson. The clothes he wore were broadcloth, but they were faded now, and stained down the front with tobacco juice; and they shone with a polish evidently acquired, like good manners, through long wear.

"This is Colonel Todhunter, I believe," said the visitor, holding out his hand. "I am the Rev. Mr. Riley." The gentleman in the polished suit held the proffered hand as he replied, in a singularly low and sweet voice: "You're the new parson, I reckon. You will have to speak louder; I am a little deaf."

"Yes," said the parson, elevating his voice. "How is your family?" "What did you say?" inquired the low, musical voice, while the blue eyes brightened a little. "How is your family?" "Oh, very well, I believe. Come in and set down." He led the way slowly, with a slight limp, toward the little porch. As they ascended the steps Parson Riley caught sight of the figure of an enormous woman in a calico dress and a white apron, that loomed up in the doorway. She carried in her hand a broom; and a broad, square, almost fierce face with black eyes was turned upon him.

"Mandy," said the colonial gently, "this is the new parson." "The new parson?" stepped forward quickly and extended his hand. "My dear madam, I am glad to meet you," he said, a smile kindling on his handsome face. She looked at him suspiciously, gave him her left hand, and said: "Howdy!" "I hope you are well, madam?" "Toler'ble," she replied. And then she turned her back and moved off with an elephantine amble.

"So this is Sister Todhunter," thought Parson Riley. "Well, I shall have trouble here." The men sat down, and the conversation began. Colonel Todhunter proved to be courtly, almost womanly, in his manners, but his few opinions were rendered with a diffidence most painful, and the parson was glad when the time came to say good day. He was about to mount his mare again when the colonial, who had followed him out, touched his arm.

"I want to speak to you on a private matter," he said softly. "Suppose we walk a little." So arm and arm they moved off. "I want to speak to you about Mrs. Todhunter," said the gentle voice again. "To tell you the truth, Parson, I am leading a life here that is almost unbearable, and I think you can help me."

"Mrs. Todhunter is a violent woman, Parson,—I use the term advisedly; she is a violent woman, and unless I can bring about a marked change in her character, I do not know what I shall do. She uses language towards me that is altogether unchristian-like and unbecom-

ing. And worse; when she gets over her spells upon her, she assaults me with anything nearest at hand. Only this morning I received several blows from her broom that have nearly lamed me. Parson,—they had reached the friendly shelter of the barn by this time, and the colonial straightened up a little, while his eyes actually glittered. "I am tired of this dog's life, and I want your assistance. I think if Mrs. Todhunter is formally reported to the church, and humiliated, it will bring about a change."

Parson Riley's face showed his surprise, and the colonial added at once, "I have had this in mind a long time, and once I brought the matter to the mind of Parson Thompson, who preceded you,—a worthy man, but timid. He would not move in the matter. Now will you?" Parson Riley was young and combative.

"I will," he said promptly. "What?" The deaf man placed his hand to his ear. "I will," he shouted the parson. "Sister Todhunter shall be disciplined." The colonial looked pleased.

"I was a church member myself once," he said softly, "but this eternal quarrel drove me out. I could not break bread feeling as I do towards Mrs. Todhunter." His chin trembled. He filled his cheeks with wind and blew it out under the pressure of his emotion. "You cannot imagine to what extent this persecution has gone. Why, sir, there have been times when I considered my life in danger. I am not a dissipated man," he continued, resting his blue-veined hand upon the parson's shoulder and turning the blue eyes earnestly upon him, "but of course I take a julep now and then, you understand; habits of an old-time Georgia gentleman,—and sometimes I have taken too much. I admit that Mrs. Todhunter has had some provocation in that direction, but not enough, Parson, to justify her in regarding me as a dog." His breast heaved convulsively.

"A woman," said the young man firmly, touched by the pathos and emotion of his disgraced companion, "has no right to strike her husband except in defense of her life." "Hey?" Colonel Todhunter cupped his left ear deftly with the transparent hand.

"I say a woman has no right to strike her husband." "Why, bless your soul, Parson, that's a small matter, and a very small matter indeed! A sad smile fitted across the lips of the speaker. "A very small matter." He fixed his eyes upon his companion with a sudden resolution. "Why, do you know, Mrs. Todhunter came near smothering me, only last week?" "Smothering?" "Hey?" "Come near smothering you?" "Yes, sir. To tell the truth, Parson, I was a little mixed,—had taken a little too much, you understand. Had been camping out a week down at Bidowley's mill with Colonel Ledbetter and others, fishing, and drank a little to much. Unfortunately I came home a little under the influence of stimulants, and found Mrs. Todhunter on fire about the cotton being in the grass. As I was preparing to lie down, being also ill, Mrs. Todhunter, with her superior strength and weight, forced me between the mattresses and sat down on me. And there she sat, Parson, three hundred pounds, and it is a July day, and knitted all the afternoon. "I'll swear that whiskey out of you," she says; and she did. The perspiration that oozed from my pores soaked through the mattress and dripped on the floor. I do not know how I lived through it." He drew out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead, to which the memory of his sufferings had actually brought the moisture. "When will you move in the matter?" he asked more cheerfully.

"At once." "Hey?" "At once. I'll have her up next Sunday."

Parson Riley was half Irish, a little Welsh, and the rest American. Besides, he was young and inexperienced. "Your case will be up next Sunday morning. You can come or not, as you please." He said this with a somewhat unclerical but very natural emphasis, and, turning on his heels, left the spot. The last words he heard were, "I ain't 'feared o' you nor all the Mount Zions in the world."

As Parson Riley mounted his mare, Colonel Todhunter crawled through the hedge a few yards off, looked cautiously around, securing his pipe from the porch, and went back silently the way he came. A smile forced itself upon the face of the young preacher, and a little farther down the road he laughed outright.

Sunday morning brought an enormous crowd to Mount Zion church as the village edifice was called. This was natural, as on that day Presiding Elder was to deliver a sermon, and a visit from the Presiding Elder of the district always drew a crowd. But the fact noted about throughout the land, that Sister Todhunter had been summoned and was to be tried, also operated powerfully as an assembling factor, and many people who had long neglected their church duties put in appearance. Farmers for miles around came bringing their wives and daughters in their waggons. Young men in buggies with their sweethearts were numerous, and the grove about the church, was full of vehicles and "tied out stock" when service time arrived.

About ten o'clock a sudden movement at the doorway indicated that preaching was about to begin, and the congregation filed slowly within, the men on the left, the women to the right. Parson Riley, sitting in the pulpit with the portly form of Elder Hamlin beside him, watched with an abiding interest the faces of the comers. When the last was in and settled, he heaved a deep sigh of relief,—Sister Todhunter was not present; she was going to remain at home and let the trial go by default.

He did not know Sister Todhunter. Elder Hamlin at last arose, his red countenance glowing like a beacon above the sea of faces, and in a voice like a trumpet's opened the meeting with prayer. He asked Divine blessing upon Mount Zion Sweetwater, and the remainder of the world, invoking a helping hand for "the b-r-a-v-e young soldier of the cross" who had "come among these people to battle for the right."

"Hey?" Colonel Todhunter cupped his left ear deftly with the transparent hand. "I say a woman has no right to strike her husband." "Why, bless your soul, Parson, that's a small matter, and a very small matter indeed! A sad smile fitted across the lips of the speaker. "A very small matter." He fixed his eyes upon his companion with a sudden resolution. "Why, do you know, Mrs. Todhunter came near smothering me, only last week?" "Smothering?" "Hey?" "Come near smothering you?" "Yes, sir. To tell the truth, Parson, I was a little mixed,—had taken a little too much, you understand. Had been camping out a week down at Bidowley's mill with Colonel Ledbetter and others, fishing, and drank a little to much. Unfortunately I came home a little under the influence of stimulants, and found Mrs. Todhunter on fire about the cotton being in the grass. As I was preparing to lie down, being also ill, Mrs. Todhunter, with her superior strength and weight, forced me between the mattresses and sat down on me. And there she sat, Parson, three hundred pounds, and it is a July day, and knitted all the afternoon. "I'll swear that whiskey out of you," she says; and she did. The perspiration that oozed from my pores soaked through the mattress and dripped on the floor. I do not know how I lived through it." He drew out his handkerchief and wiped his forehead, to which the memory of his sufferings had actually brought the moisture. "When will you move in the matter?" he asked more cheerfully.

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Parson Riley paused. The vast presence of Sister Todhunter had passed around the corner of the barn. There was a painful silence of about two seconds, and then her voice arose. "So," she said loudly, with her eye on the coffee, who started as though shot; "so! This is your game is it? Tell lies upon your wife to every stranger that comes along. I'll teach you better manners, if I have to break every bone in your soft, cowardly body." She made a rush at her offending lord, which he easily and promptly avoided by stepping briskly away, leaving his late companion to hold the field as best he might.

"Madam," said Parson Riley, raising his hand as if about to ask a benediction,—it was his most impressive attitude,—"I beseech you to remember that this gentleman is your husband and that you are a member of my church."

"What have you got to do with it, you little chincinest thing you?" She had turned upon him with war in her eye and war in her whole make-up generally. "A pretty sort of person you air, sin't yer, hangin' roun' decent women's houses list'nin' ter lies an' slanders. Oh I know what he wants; he wants to git me up 'fore Mount Zion church. He tried hit on ole Thompson,

but he darsn't move er peg. I tote him, an' I tote you, er they have me up 'fore Mount Zion, hit'll be er bad day for Mount Zion." She shook her clenched fist at him.

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flower laden flare-front bonnet, stood before him. As if by instinct everybody knew she was there, and every head save one was turned toward her. She paused long enough to survey the crowd contemptuously, then with a great waddle she marched up the aisle, took a chair out from under little Major Brown almost before he could vacate it, placed the back against the pulpit, and sat down.

"Now," she said looking at Parson Riley while she adjusted the folds of her dress, "go on with yer lies; I'm ready." Parson Riley turned pale and then red. Some of the thoughtless young people snickered, and there was a general stir of expectation. Colonel Ledbetter, sitting out bending a particle of his enormous and ever-blooming dignity, looked at Major Brown and winked with both eyes. Brown put his hand over his mouth and coughed violently. But the parson soon rallied, and turning to the congregation said firmly:

"Brothers and sisters, for such you are in the holy union of the church, and I trust soon to say in the affectional bond of joint and self-sacrificing labors, I have a painful duty to perform this morning one that I ain't avoid, but—

"Oh, sakes, what you are going to say and don't plover so much." This of course, came from Sister Todhunter. He paused a second for the new sensation to subside, and without looking at her he continued: "It is a duty, and of such there can be no avoidance without guilt."

"Very pretty. B'en all the week er learnin' hit?" "I am called on to present you this morning an erring sister," he continued, linking his hands together and bowing them before him palms downward while he rocked back upon his heels and brought his toes to the ground again, "who not satisfied with violating at home the proprieties of the domestic circle and the commands and precepts of the Scriptures, has come into the house of the Lord defiant and rebellious, with ucers upon her lips and contempt for his minister and his people in her heart. The evidence of this latter is before you of the former, her husband, a gentleman whom you all know, will speak."

"Colonel Todhunter was sitting on the front seat at the elbow of Parson Riley, his chin upon his shirt front, and deep dejection written in every line of his face. There was also a pallor there, he was probably the only person in the church who had not seen or heard his wife enter. The parson was forced to rouse him with a touch.

"Get up, Colonel," he said, "and state your case." "Hey?" The parson motioned to a spot in front and then to a sea of expectant faces turned toward him. He understood and aided along with his white face to the crowd, his blue eyes searching every bench, until he reached the place indicated, then he folded his poor white hands together and drew a long breath of relief: Sister Todhunter was not in sight. He opened his mouth to speak, when an event occurred that threw the crowd present into a most intense excitement. In moving to the front, Colonel Todhunter came within four or five feet of his wife, to whom his back was half turned. He had just satisfied himself that he was secure, and had said "I," when Sister Todhunter leaned forward, extended her crooked-handled umbrella its full length, deftly hooked in the collar of her husband's coat, and with one jerk landed him backward and head first into her lap. So sudden was the act, so utterly unexpected, that every body for an instant averted and gazed in open-mouthed astonishment. Then those in the rear tumbled over each other for better positions, and the Colonel's assistance. The angry woman met the rescuer with such an expression that his alarmed neighbors were compelled to lead him outside and pour water on his head.

In the mean time Major Brown, Colonel Ledbetter, Elder Buckner, Mr. Culpepper, and others were struggling to release Colonel Todhunter, who was convulsive face of legs and arms expressive of face indicated approaching dissolution. The united strength of six men was sufficient at last to effect this, and the colonial, breathless, arose.

"You hurt much, Colonel?" shouted good Mrs. Buckner, who had crowded to the front. With one hand on his head and the other struggling for his handkerchief, which was in the wrong coat-tail pocket, and with tears rolling down his cheeks, he replied softly: "I had only a little hair left, gray hair, madam; I fear she has pulled that out too."

hotly; "that woman ought to be ducked." "Ought she, indeed?" said Sister Todhunter, catching the remark. "The you better git John Edgerly ter help you. His grama was ducked for tathin', an' I reckon he'll know how to go about hit." This terrible dig drew all eyes upon Elderly, and he turned as red as a turkeycomb.

"Madam," said Colonel Ledbetter, advancing to a prominent position in all the dignity and confidence of his high standing in Sweetwater. "I trust you will let your old friend advise you."

"When did you come ter be my friend?" she replied with terrible sarcasm. "When when you charged me twelve per cent. for the loan of er hundred dollars, or was it when you made me pay for er hundred bushels of corn bec'm' my mule set five?" Taking his hat and cane, the colonial walked outside and sat down on a stump.

"Gentlemen," said Parson Riley suddenly, seeing the force rapidly falling away, "the only thing to do is to carry her out and send her home. If you will all take hold we can carry her out quickly." The men were ready for any occasion from the merciless lashing the women was giving them. With a rash they seized her, chair and all, she fighting desperately, and bore her outside. After a brief rest, during which the assaulting party repaired damages, they lifted her again and made for the wagon. The rail fence furnished her a hold when they tried to lift her over, and it became necessary to take it down, then another nerve struggle ensued at the wagon. Finding herself overmatched, Sister Todhunter gave vent to a shrill scream that brought Colonel Todhunter to her side in repentance and alarm. He attempted to soothe her, but she was no sooner lifted into the wagon than she kicked the dash board off and seized him by the ear. It took the efforts of the crowd again to release him. Elder Hamlin, who had recovered his wind and rallied, climbed into the wagon with the others to help hold her while the rest hitched up her mules. Then, led by Billy, he ten year-old son who had watched the proceedings in sullen silence, the strange lod moved off, a delegation accompanying it to keep things straight. As they crossed the creek, Sister Todhunter by a sudden movement managed to throw Elder Hamlin overboard. He stood up in the water and swore a great round oath that horrified everybody. But Sister Todhunter laughed hysterically.

"Put him out, put him out er Mount Zion too! Don't yer hear him er cousin back there!" Elder Hamlin had retired to the bank, and was denouncing the whole race of obstreperous women, but not swearing. His one oath was confessed in open meeting afterward, and willingly forgiven.

This, however, was Sister Todhunter's last effort. She was seized with a collapse on reaching home, and begged to be placed on the grass. Then sitting, she declared that death was near, and begged them to leave her. Her husband came up and ministered to her, and she was heard to say Billy to lead her to the well, as she wanted to jump in and end her misery; and Billy told her he wished she would. Then the committee returned. It transpired afterward that Sister Todhunter rallied enough to go into her house, and, in a sudden return of her passion, she opened the door on the neck of Colonel Todhunter, and held him prisoner until a mutual understanding was effected. As may be well understood, the terms were not liberal for Colonel Todhunter.

Of course Sister Todhunter was summarily expelled from the church. The furnished Sweetwater with a sensation for several weeks, but by and by it grew to be an old topic, and Sister Todhunter could venture into town upon her shopping without attracting universal attention and comment. She was a cash customer, a fact that helped wonderfully to gain her defenders, and besides, many people regarded her as victorious in the church fight, and enjoyed the way she laid about her. There was no friendship between the female side of Sweetwater and Sister Todhunter. She had talked too plainly.

Reader, did you ever see a baby fade away without apparent cause, baffling the wisest physicians and wringing the very life from its mother, hour by hour, day by day,—watch its poor little face grow old and pinched, and its great eyes grow brighter until they seemed to burn like candle-flames in the empty sockets? So faded the little babe that nestled in the depths of its soft nest when the parson's wife showed the assembled matrons of Sweetwater her lace and curtains in the shadowed room back of her parlor. Day by day the mother sat in her low rocker, her tender eyes upon the wasting form, a fever in her own brain, and a weight upon her heart that had driven out every tear-drop and left her powerless to weep. By day and by night she sat there, bathing the babe in the dry grief of despair. The little fame lay bared before her—legs of a thimble's thickness, with the skin crumpled upon them, arms that were the arms of a doll, and hands that scarce checked the light that fell upon them when the mother lifted them again and again in her mute despair.

The doctor had yielded up hope; and save one or two, the neighbors had withdrawn; and to-day, the day of which I write, the mother sat waiting for the rustle of the angel's wings. As there she sat, suddenly the doorway was darkened, and Sister Todhunter from the mountain of her awful presence looked down upon the scene.