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The Mother's Love.

By Phoebe Stevens, Oxbow.



HE great hall at Fernleigh was quite dark and deserted. A little later, there would be tea served here, and the silence would be broken by the sound of merry conversation, and, perhaps, by a little music from the old organ in the corner—the latter never interfering with the former in any way. Only when the mistress of Fernleigh, herself, condescended to sing to her guests, was there ever an exception to this agreeable rule. The voice that had charmed the thousands, had the same subtle influence over whosoever might chance to be as a guest beneath her roof.

But, just now, the silence in the room was unbroken save by a few, chirping remarks from the little daughter of the house, who sat in the window-seat, with her great black dog beside her.

Fern was talking to him now. "It is snowing very hard, Wolfie," she said in the voice that somehow reminded one of her mother's lullaby songs. "It has snowed for an hour, and to-morrow is New Year's. Do you know what New Year's means, Wolfie, dear? But of course you do. You are so very wise. Nurse says you're the most 'felligent dog she ever knew. And father said one day, 'No harm could come to that child while this fellow is with her.' D'you 'member Wolfie?"

Wolfie's tail wagged in modest approval of this remark as Fern went on:

"Nurse says it's the proper thing to make resolutions on New Year's Eve. S'pose you and I do, right now, Wolfie, 'fore Nurse calls us to tea. I 'spect you think of your blessings first—same as at Thanksgiving. Then you make resolutions to be better. D'you see?"

Now, if you're ready, Wolfie, I'll start by telling you 'bout my mother. I'm so thankful for my dear mother. She is so pretty and she has a beautiful voice. I'm glad she wears such pretty things. She looks so lovely when she's all dressed for dinner. She's far beautifuler than 'Cinderella' or the 'Sleeping Beauty.' Do you know that, Wolfie? I wish I looked like her, but I don't. I look like my daddy. Nurse told me that. And I've got freckles!—this most discontentedly. "Father says, 'Never mind little maid. Freckles are a sign of health.' I'd sooner be pretty than healthy."

There was a moment of silence: Then the little voice went on. "I wish my mother loved me, and would hold me in her arms, same's Muriel's mother does." Her voice grew plaintive. "Muriel's mother taught her 'Now I lay me,' and 'Our Father,' and Lighten our darkness," and "There's no dew left," and ever so many things. She tells her stories!—this very plaintively. "But she can't sing like my mother can. My mother hasn't time to teach me things. She's so busy!"

"But I do wish my mother had time to sing to me. That's one thing I wish! Just me alone, Wolfie, with me all tucked up tight in her arms—so! And no one here but you and me and mother!" The grey eyes were wistful. "But Nurse says that mother has so many people to sing to. I musn't 'spect her to sing to me. There's the hospital children and those dear, old ladies at the Home, and the little Mission boys, and at church—sides so many people to entertain."

"Father loves to hear her sing. He sits in that big chair by the fire, and he puts one hand up to his head, and sometimes he shuts his eyes. And that hides all the happy shine in them. But it's there."

"One day I was going by the French window and he called me in and held me on his knee while mother sang a lovely 'Good-night' song about babies and wee angles. But when mother saw me, she stopped singing and told me it was bed-time."

"Mother stays home now that we've come here to live. 'Fore that she used to tour. Nurse told me that. She sang at big concerts every night 'most. But, since my new father brought us here to live, she has stopped touring. Father is so good to us all. I'm so thankful for him, Wolfie. He calls me the 'Little Maid.' And he comes up to see me every day, and, if Miss Joslyn is there, he asks if I'm good."

"One day she sent for him. I wouldn't play my scales. All the smile went out of his face and then he put his arm 'round me and talked for ever so long. He told me I must hurry and practise hard so's I could play mother's 'complaints, by and by so I always practice for minutes and minutes now! Nurse says father takes a great int'rest in me."

"I'm dreadfully thankful for Nursie. She tucks me in at night and calls me her wee lambie. I love her."

"And you are my greatest comfort, Wolfie. I'm never lonely since you came."

"I'm thankful for my lovely home. Father brought us here. It's a lovely place to play, Wolfie, isn't it?"

"Then there's my stories—my fav'rites that Nurse tells me 'bout when I was littler than I am now. Nurse's so obliging! Wolfie—let's go up and ask her for one now, eh Wolfie? Come on, old fellow! Shall we race?"

"Hello! Who's here?" and a pleasant face followed the pleasant voice, as the door from the south verandah opened suddenly.

He was a young-looking man—this new father of Fern's, and the rather sharp blue eyes softened, as he picked up the child and looked gravely into her face.

"You are pale, Fernie," he said gently. "I'm afraid you don't get enough play these days. Tell Nurse that she must send you out for a good romp to-morrow. Wolfie looks seedy too, eh, old boy?" as the dog's tail thumped on the floor.

"I've had a cold," said Fern, patiently. "Such a cold! Nursie says it's too stormy outside for little girls with colds."

She struggled a little to get down. "I must go, father—please!"

He could feel the little form tremble in his arms, as a door beside them opened, and her mother entered. "Good-night, Little Maid," he said, quietly, as he set her down upon the rug, and turned to greet his wife.

Her face had darkened perceptibly at sight of the group before the fire-place; but, as Fernie quickly disappeared up the broad stairs with Wolfie in close attendance, she came over to where he stood.

"I wonder where the others are," she said. "Isn't it tea time, Jack?"

"They have timed themselves to a two-mile walk," he answered smiling down at her. "I left them at the corner. Their pace was too much for me in this storm."

"Is it stormy?" She shivered slightly at sight of the whiteness outside.

He stood for a moment and watched her, idly, as she paced slowly to and fro across the dimly-lighted hall, the fire-light playing lovingly over her quaint corn-colored gown, touching into a flame of radiance the jewels on her arms and fingers, entangling itself in the dusky hair, and passing on to lose itself amongst the organ-pipes beyond.

It was her voice that finally broke the silence between them.

"Tired, Jack?" she said gently.

He roused himself abruptly. "Come here, Mona," he said drawing a chair into the circle of light spread by the glowing fire. "We can't have tea yet—they'll not be back for half an hour, and I want to talk to you."

She sat down obediently, and he stood with his elbow on the mantel shelf and faced her.

"You will be vexed at my question," he said quietly. "You have forbidden this subject, but I did not promise to

obey. I never make rash promises, and that I knew I could not keep. My question is this: What are you going to do with Fern?"

All the soft light died out of her face. "Is she not well?" she said slowly.

"Not that, Mona," he answered. "His face grew a little hard. 'Don't purposely misunderstand. It is the unnaturalness of her life—the child feels it already. Can't you see that—or,' with a sudden impatience, 'do you never try to see?'"

"You are right," she answered. She had risen from her chair, and her face had become strangely white while he was speaking. "I never see her, because the sight of her recalls all too vividly what I pray God daily—hourly, to let me forget."

"It is not her fault—the past," said her husband, gently. "Can you be so unjust as to blame the child for her father's sins and her mother's mistakes? She is a sweet, lovable child, and you are depriving her of her birth-right—her right to a mother's love and care. Why do you do this Mona? You are love, and light, and life itself to me. Have you nothing left for the little child God has given you?"

He would have taken her hands in his, but she resisted.

"You will never understand," she said bitterly. "The horror—the degradation I endured for her sake."

"How you must have suffered!" he murmured pityingly, and then she held out her hands to him, and let him draw her to his side.

"Tell me—all," he whispered, and she went on brokenly. "I lived with him a year before I knew—that he had married before. His wife died the day I heard. We were married again—at once. It was for her sake. She was born a month later. I tried to leave him after that. He would not let me go. I had no money except what he gave me—no friends—no one to help me. It was a life of bitter shame! She is his child—the very image of him. Jack! Jack! How can I love and cherish his child?"

The tears were falling fast now, but he wiped them away with a firm kindly hand. "Would you care to give her away?" he said watching her closely. "Her father's relatives? I have heard several times from the grandfather in England. They want her, and," slowly, "they would perhaps take an interest in her—and love her."

And then he repented at sight of the piteous look in her wide, beautiful eyes. He gathered her into his arms. "Dear, dear heart, forgive me," he said with regret. "I ought never to have spoken so to you. But you are wrong in saying that she is all his. It is because she is yours—a part of you—that I love her."

"Poor child, poor child," he muttered to himself as he ran lightly up the stairs later on that afternoon, and turned into his study, and whether he was thinking of his wife or the child in the nursery across the hall, he hardly knew.

He threw himself into a chair before the fire. "The sins of the fathers," he quoted sadly. "A man's selfishness, a woman's innocence, and a little life: unwelcomed and unloved."

His thoughts were interrupted by Fern's voice. The nursery door was ajar, and he could see the child curled up in her favorite place by the window. "Now tell me all about it, Nursie dear," she was saying. "It's just the night for my own dear story. Please! Please!"

"Well, my dearie," said Nurse indulgently, for when did she ever refuse a favor to her wee nestling? "It happened the summer you were three years old, and as naughty and wilful as could be imagined at straying away. I could not keep you in sight, though I did little else but to mend your torn frocks, and watch that you came to no harm. We were living in the country then, and I was actually afraid you'd be eaten by the bears, you were that venturesome. Many a night's sleep did I lose over it."

"You should have tied me up, Nursie," said Fern wisely. "That's what you should have done."

Well, one day—it was a hot day in July. I mind the day well," went on Nurse, with a far-away look in her kind, old eyes, "you had kept me busy. Five