

A PEARL NECKLACE

"Just try a spoonful of this soup, Miss Courtney, and a bit of the breast of the chicken, do now," Mrs. Mahon urged, and Hilda Courtney raised herself from the well-worn sofa on which she lay at the entreaty of her kindly Irish landlady.

"I will," she said, "but you must tell me who is paying for all the delicacies I have had during my illness and since. I have asked you before, but you put me off. Now Mrs. Mahon?"

Mrs. Mahon lifted a cushion that had fallen from the sofa, patted, and replaced it before she said:

"Listen to her, then! Sure a sparrow would eat more than you do."

"Well, who is paying?"

"Faith, then, if you must have an answer, 'tis myself that pays for the few things—"

"Few things! Jellies, soups, wine, not to speak of constant nursing and attendance!"

"Arrah, what a fuss about nothing! Sure you'll soon pay it all back when you begin to give the music lessons again. Not that you should begin for a while yet," Mrs. Mahon added, hastily. "And here's one of them weekly papers about lords and ladies—I can't abide them myself. Give me the Weekly Freeman and home news for Sunday reading, and I'm satisfied. Well, well, if that's all the harm you're going to do I'll take the tray off with me."

Hilda Courtney's face wore a doleful enough look when Mrs. Mahon had closed the door behind her. Her father had been a London merchant, and his one child had been brought up to consider herself an heiress. At his death, however, he was bankrupt, and Hilda found herself obliged to earn her living. She had received an excellent musical training and some friends exerted themselves to find her pupils. For two or three years she managed to get along in a sort of fashion; but lack of nourishing food, and constant exposure to rain and cold slowly but surely broke down a none too vigorous constitution. She had no provision made for the proverbial rainy day when her illness came. Mrs. Mahon in spite of a long residence in London retained much of her Irish brogue, and all her Irish warmth of heart, and cared for the sick girl as if she were her own, and had drawn on her own scanty savings to defray the medical and other expenses of her lodger's illness.

"Mrs. Mahon must have spent a good deal upon me," Hilda thought with a sigh. "Even were I at work again I should find it difficult to repay her. I wish—oh, where's the good in wishing!" Hilda Courtney was naturally hopeful and brave, but the tears gathered and fell as she thought over her position. It was to distract her gloomy imaginings that she lifted the paper Mrs. Mahon had left. It was a weekly magazine that bore the name of the Globe, and it contained much information concerning the doings of the smart people in society. One page was devoted to the advertising of various articles—chiefly of dress or jewelry—which the owners wished to dispose of. One lady offered a set of Russian sables for half their value, another a gold watch as good as new, and so on. Hilda looked at the list of articles offered for sale, and suddenly started. A flush of color rose to her pale cheeks as she opened a drawer and took from it a small wooden box. The box contained a pearl necklace.

"I never thought of it!" she exclaimed. "The one wedding present I was forced to keep. Walter's aunt must have paid a good deal for it. If I could dispose of it! Perhaps if I advertised it in the Globe I might find a purchaser."

She fingered the stones lovingly. Two years before her father's death she had been engaged to be married to Walter Leigh. The wedding day was fixed, the wedding guest invited, when the match was broken off. "I don't like her," said Walter, "it is the only article of value I possess."

The advertisement she wrote out duly appeared in the weekly periodical; and a few days later Hilda received a letter signed Mary Dunstable, and dated from a fashionable London square. The writer mentioned a firm of bankers as reference, and asked to have the necklace forwarded on approval. Hilda managed to convey her parcel to the nearest post office, and registered it. The day was wet, and the first result of her walk was a cold that she found it difficult to shake off. Mrs. Mahon scolded and lamented, and was extremely indignant at Hilda's action.

"If I should have thought twice before buying that trashy paper," she said. "Like as not you'll never see your necklace nor its value. The world's full of swindlers."

In the meantime the necklace journeyed first to Miss Dunstable's London home, and from there to the country house she was visiting. She opened the box at the Woodside breakfast table, and gave a little cry of rapture. Her hostess, a sweet-faced woman of about sixty, looked up from the letter she was reading, and the only other person at the table raised his eyebrows inquiringly. Mary Dunstable explained to Walter Leigh and his aunt.

"Isn't it lovely? Oh, it must be worth more money than is asked for it. Must it not, Mrs. Leigh?"

Mrs. Leigh took the necklace in her hands and examined it. Walter gave his attention to his ham and eggs, till Mrs. Leigh in her turn gave a surprised cry, and turned to him.

"Walter, do you recognize this?"

"Is it Mary's necklace, aunt?" The gentleman held out his hand. "Why, it surely is the one you gave—Hilda!"

"It is, I am quite certain." Aunt and nephew looked at each other.

"Have you seen it before?" Mary Dunstable asked. "It isn't stolen property, is it?"

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A MARKED PASSAGE

If I could tell you how the sun comes a-neighboring through my shop window, afterwards, and how it puts a patch on this calfskin soul of mine and makes me tap more blithely, then I could tell you how cheery love has been to me. But if I could handle such slippery pegs as words, if I could hammer them in as easily as I do these wooden ones, I'd think I'd be sitting here in Main street cobbling shoes?

"Cobbling shoes?" one lady said to me. "Dear me, such a smelly business!"

Even so, my nose has ceased a bit with long wearing, has sort of tanned itself in the leathery airs of my small shop. Then, too, I hold a pipe convenient to my nostrils and smoke a mixture stronger than leather. I chose it purposely, a kind of substitute—to please my customers.

Yes, I'm a cobbler. You can see for yourself my bowed shoulders. How many shoes I've still I'd have mended, had I kept a still spine in my back? How you—you, too, I'll bet, have the marks of your calling. Give me your hand. Look at the ink on your fingers!

I'm a cobbler—one of the last. Shoes are too cheap these days to fetch much mending. The trade is dying, though it makes no odds to me. Short as its time is, mine is shorter. I'm an old man now—an old cracked boot of a man, uppers warped and wrinkled, run down at the heel, half-soled so often I'm only fit for the ash-heap. You wouldn't think I was ever red-topped and copper-toed with a boy in me.

Here I go rambling—from love to cobbling. You'd know I was a child again. Love—it's love, I tell you, makes these last rheumatic years worth living. I have a daughter, never a man had a better than Mina. She came late to me—wife went early—and now there's Mina and Mina's Jim.

Mina was only fifteen when she first met Jim—age when they wear long braids and their skirts to their ankles, and boys walk home with them after school and hang about and giggle at the gate. Well, I scowled at Jim. Jim, little cuss, didn't flinch a mite, but—

"How d'ye do, Mr. Sniffin?" says he, as big as life and twice as natural. It made me huffy, but I kind of liked it in Jim.

"Mina," says I one night, clearing my throat to soften what I had to say. "Mina, you're—don't you think—pretty young for this here—cobbling round with Jim?"

"Daddy," says she, and her face all flushed, "you forget I am 'most sixteen."

"Fifteen's young, Mina, ain't it?" says I.

"I'm in High School," says she. "Besides, there's no harm in Jim."

"I don't doubt that," says I, "but remember—remember," says I, "you're all the little girl I'll ever have, Mina."

"Daddy," says she, and I'm blessed if she wasn't crying in my arms, poor little thing. Well, that was the beginning of Jim.

I didn't spy or pry, but I watched unbeknown to them, and it was as pretty a sight as you ever saw. I tell you, to see them plotting and planning at the gate—Jim on one foot, then on the other, or walking cracks—Mina beaming, but awful grim. Prim—oh, my! that wasn't the name for it, the way she'd hold up her little round head—sweet little head with the brown hair brushed straight back from her white forehead, and her eyes modest and shining, and her little red mouth just so. Could I blame Jim?

Leigh was thinking of Mary as well as Hilda. "I am going to pay some calls, Mary. Will you come?"

"Yes, certainly," Mary answered promptly.

That same evening Mrs. Mahon was astonished not a little by the arrival of a visitor for Miss Courtney. She eyed the gentleman doubtfully.

"Miss Courtney isn't at all well," she said, "and I don't know if your visit might be pleasant to her or not."

Walter Leigh smiled. "I don't think it will be unpleasant—at least I hope not," he said, and Mrs. Mahon moved aside, and pointed to the staircase.

"The door at the top of the landing," she said. "Now I trust I've done right!"

Mrs. Mahon was satisfied on that point when, an hour later, she was introduced to Mr. Leigh.

"I cannot thank you sufficiently for all your kindness to Hilda," he said, holding her hand in a warm clasp. "I have just given her three days in which to prepare for our wedding. Magdalen Rock, in Beniger's Magazine."

And then to watch them, apart just kind of dreaming—dreaming those lovely secrets that the whole blamed world could read, easy, in their eyes. Didn't just happen to strike them, somehow, that Old Man Sniffin had ever been there, beforehand—ever hung around gates or dreamed any secrets. But how could they know? Pshaw! how many now—how many of us old folks act or talk as if we were ever young?

Miss Jenks was worried—Miss Jenks lived next door.

"Mr. Sniffin," says she, "did you know Mina was a-hanging around with Jim?"

"Well, I have noticed something or other," says I.

"Noticed! Something or other!" says she, gasping. "But what are you going to do about it, Mr. Sniffin?"

"Well, as to that," says I, "you'll have to ask Mina," says I, scratching my head.

"Ask Mina!" says she. "Aren't you her father?" says she, scowling.

"True," says I.

"Then," says she, "will you not put a stop to what's going on beneath your very nose?"

"That's it," says I. "I kind of thought, Miss Jenks," says I, "that beneath my nose was better than behind my back," says I.

"But that isn't the point," says she. "It oughtn't to go on at all," says she. "And what's more, Mr. Sniffin, since Mina hasn't a mother or an elder friend or anybody," says she, "to guide and guard her, I'm going to speak to her," says she. "That is, if you don't forbid me, Mr. Sniffin."

"Oh, no," says I; "but—"

"But what?" says she.

"Nothing," says I.

And the next time I saw Miss Jenks:

"Mr. Sniffin," says she, snapping-turtly, with her eyes blazing, "I never dreamed," says she, "that such a sweet-looking girl as Mina could be so impudent," says she, and flounced away before I could get a word in edgewise.

"Mina," says I, that evening, "was Miss Jenks speaking to you recently?" says I, soft-like, so as not to startle her.

"She was," says Mina, also snapping-turtly.

"And were you," says I—"did you

"I did," says she.

"I kind of—thought so," says I. "Ought you, do you think, darling?" says I. "Miss Jenks is an old—"

"Fool, fool, fool!" cried she stamping her foot, and her cheeks the color of red geraniums.

"I wouldn't, darling. You'll break the dishes," says I. "And there's the door bell."

"Why," says Mina, beaming again, "I declare—if it isn't Jim."

Now I liked Jim. Plain, honest school-boy, great-hand to argue. He and I, and Mina, would sit there evenings by the fire, and—

"Jim," I'd say, "how's the election?"

"Well," he'd say, "Cleveland'll win."

"Think so?"

"Know so."

"Well, you're wrong, Jim."

And then we'd have it—Great Scott!—hot and heavy, back and forth, right and left, and he was level, Jim was, and he'd debated, Jim had, in school, and had the dates down fine. Well, we'd sit there and argue—I a smoking between times and Jim a-laying down the law with his hand and Mina—Mina sewing and taking it all in, and calming us when it got too hot, and yawning when it got too deep. Why, many's the time we've sat and argued till the clock struck eleven—yes, tir, and Jim he'd rise and say:

"Well, good-night, Mr. Sniffin—but Cleveland'll win."

And Mina—Mina would see him politely to the door, and I'd wait for her by the fire, and like as not, fall asleep—just waiting.

Now, it was pleasant evenings like that, and I kind of got over any of those little feelings I might have had toward Jim. And things ran along till Mina was seventeen, and then eighteen and nineteen—and always on every birthday a book of poems.

To Mina, From Jim.

And Jim, he'd mark passages—things he wanted her specially to see, things he seemed to think she'd somehow know were true and beautiful. And Mina, she'd mark verses; but you could always tell her marks from Jim's, for his were heavy and hers were light—faintest streaks, they were, as if she were half afraid of telling what she knew.

Nights, sitting alone there by the fire with Mina gone—gone tired to bed, or out to parties, maybe, along with Jim, I'd take down one of those books of hers from the parlor shelf. Says I to myself, "What's good for your young heart won't hurt your old one." I'd wipe my glasses and smoke and read; and, sir, do you know, reading those poems and musing the lines she'd marked, seemed getting nearer to my little girl.

Daughters don't say much to their daddies about what's passing in their young hearts. Mina, she'd never say a word, even to me, about loving Jim; but there in those books of hers, books that they'd read and marked together, the whole story seemed written down—and it brought back to me things I'd never dreamed of remembering.

And it was wonderful, wonderful, too, I tell you, how those two young ones had picked out the truest things that I learned by heart and said over and over again to myself there is the firelight—here in the shop—out in the street. And so, a muttering those marked passages, and without their guessing it, I kept just even with Mina and Jim.

So, to myself, "How then, old boy, says I, 'are there not three of you in this here love story?'"

Now, I liked that. I liked that very well, I tell you, and fell to thinking, and one day said to myself again as I tapped away on my bench:

"I'll mark them a pretty passage," says I, "aye, in a book of poems, too," says I, and burst out laughing.

And I did. Oh, it was a merry book, sir, that I gave them—just laid in their trembling hands on Christmas morning—aye, a very poetical little book, I tell you, but bound plainly in a stiffish paper of a yellow brown. And on the first page was a lovely poem, copied in a fine and flourishy Spencerian hand, and just at the very end, this one marked passage:

"Mina, I love thee, as thou lovest me."

To Mina and Jim.

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