

The Story Page.

Only Two Owls.

BY ALLAN FORMAN.

It was on the platform of a little water-tank railway station in the West that I first made the acquaintance of the Doctor and the Judge. The train had been crossing a hot, dusty prairie all the morning, its monotonous level only broken by the mounds of the prairie-dogs' villages; here at the station it was quite as bare and uninteresting. The water-tank was the only structure that looked as if it had been built to stay; the station was a rickety shanty, and the half-dozen houses which formed the "town" were "dug-outs" which did not appear much more like human habitations than the dogs' burrows which dotted the prairie in the distance. The engine stopped under the great iron tank, and I sprang to the platform to stretch my legs. From the little group of station loungers a small boy detached himself and came toward me. He had on a pair of trousers miles too large for him, and carried a small starch-box under his arm; aside from the layers of soil with which his face and hands were incrustated the trousers and a fragment of a calico shirt were his only attire.

"Say, Mister," he began in the usual whine of the professional beggar, "Mother's sick an' the baby's a-dyin', and we ain't got any money to buy no med'cine, an' father's dead an'—"

"Oh, go away," I exclaimed, for I could see not only by the boy's manner, but by the grins of the station loungers that he was a juvenile confidence operator.

"S'trew, honest s'trew, Mister," pursued the young rascal, unabashed; "an' I've got ter sell my two pet owls;" and here he began to snivel and held out the box.

"Have you got two owls in that box?" I asked.

"Yes, sir," he answered, brightening up, for he saw his victim was biting. "Don't open it now or they will git away," he added. "They's two fine owls, an' s'ich pets!"

"How much do you want for them?" I asked.

"Twenty-five cents," was the unexpected and hasty answer.

It seemed that his elaborate tale of woe should have been worth at least a dollar, and on the impulse of the moment I produced a quarter. He clutched it and dashed off across the prairie amidst the guffaws of the station loungers.

"So he's took you in," remarked the Pullman conductor who had come up at the moment. "He's a young imp, he is; his father is one of the section hands, but his mother died a couple of years ago and he's run wild sence. What did he say was in the box? Last trip he sold one of my passengers a prairie-dog in a box, same way. Oh, it was thar all right, only I reckon it must have been dead a week or so by its smell."

"He said that there are a pair of prairie-owls in the box," I replied, rather stiffly; for I was nettled at having made a fool of myself.

"Mebbe thar is," said the conductor. "'Bout a week ago he sold a passenger a Rocky Mountain bat; and when he opened the box he found half a brick—brick-bat, y' know?" and the conductor walked off chuckling.

I debated in my own mind whether or not to fling the box out on the prairie; but my curiosity was too strong, besides I could feel something moving inside; so I took it into the car and, closing the door of my stateroom, I prepared to investigate my purchase. I cautiously slid the cover and almost dropped the box, for I was greeted by a whirring sound that, to my excited fancy, seemed like the warning of a rattlesnake; a glance reassured me the boy had told the truth, he had sold me two owls, but such looking objects! They were not more than three days old, and there was not one feather to the pair; they were covered with scanty down, powdered white by the starch which still remained in the box. They stood erect, close together, as if ashamed of their nakedness, yet glaring at me indignantly and defiantly with their big, round eyes. I began to ponder what I should do with them. I could not turn them loose. I did not know how to keep them, they were so young they would probably die, and they hadn't feathers enough to stuff. My meditations were brought to a close by my mother, who entered the stateroom and asked what I had there.

"A pair of owls," I replied, sheepishly. Then I told her the story of how I had been victimized. There were a few motherly words of advice about the desirability of not buying "a pig in a poke" or an owl in a box, and then, mother-like, she rose to the occasion and solved my doubts.

"You were very foolish to buy them, but now you have them you must take care of them. Go and get them something to eat."

"What do owls eat?" I queried, doubtfully.

"Mice and small birds."

I suggested that the opportunities for catching mice and small birds in a Pullman car were, to say the least, limited.

"A little piece of raw meat, cut very fine, would do," she replied, ignoring my flippant remark and busying

herself in brushing the starch from the youngsters' fur.

I hunted up the cook of the dining-car and secured from him a bit of raw beefsteak for which I was obliged to "tip" him a quarter (and I may remark that it cost me a quarter every time those birds ate until we reached New York; and their appetites were something enormous. When I returned my mother had the two snugly cuddled on her lap under her hands, and she fed them on the raw meat until they stood up with crops distended like a couple of pouter-pigeons. Their aspect of complacent, self-conscious dignity was so irresistibly funny that we named them Doctor and Judge at once.

The remainder of the railway trip was uneventful, except that Doctor and Judge grew amazingly and sprouted feathers, so that by the time we arrived in New York they were almost full-fledged. They learned to snap their bills together when they were hungry, which was a signal for my mother to send me off on a foraging expedition. They were very intelligent, and in less than a week learned their names; they would turn their big eyes up inquiringly when my mother spoke to them. In time they grew very fond of me, and apparently recognized me as their master; but, during all their lives, and I kept them for over two years, their affection and confidence were given to my mother; if anything alarmed them, which was not often, for they were plucky little creatures, they would fly to her for protection, and they delighted to snuggle down in her lap, under her hands, making a queer, purring noise like a couple of contented kittens.

When I reached home I got a cage for them which they never liked, so I allowed them to roam about my room at their own sweet will. They soon found congenial quarters in a couple of empty pigeon-holes in my desk, where they would sit by the hour while I was writing; but the moment I lay down my pen or pencil they would dart out like a couple of young pirates, pounce upon it and drag it back into the pigeon-hole, whirring in triumph; they would play hide-and-seek with each other in the dark corners of the room, under the furniture, and sometimes, as a special treat, I used to close all the doors and let a live mouse loose on the floor. The owls would rise and float, like a bit of thistle-down, just over the mouse, then drop suddenly on it, fixing their strong little claws in its back; they did not torment their victim like a cat, but tore its head off at once and proceeded to make a meal of it.

I regret to be obliged to record the fact that, notwithstanding the very evident affection which existed between the two upon all other occasions, they relapsed into savagery when feeding; and the one who was fortunate enough to secure the mouse scolded the other until the unfortunate rodent was snugly tucked away where it could not be got at. I generally tried to have two live mice for them at a time, and all our neighbors and the near-by grocery-stores laid under contribution to meet the demand. One curious feature of their manner of eating mice was a never-failing source of amusement; they had a habit of bolting the head and fore-quarters first, and then swallowing the rest without tearing it into bits, with the result that they would stand with their little paunches swelled out to an enormous size and the mouse's tail sticking out of the corner of their mouths for all the world like a fat old man who has finished his dinner and was enjoying his after-dinner cigar.

Their flight was absolutely noiseless, they seemed to float rather than fly; but they were very swift on the wing for short distances, as many a sparrow discovered to its cost. When I went to the country for the summer I took them with me, and used to carry them in my pockets when I went out for walks. The English sparrows were becoming very plentiful about our place, and were driving away the more desirable song-birds. With the active co-operation of Doctor and Judge I declared war upon the impudent foreigners, and when I came upon a party of the little feathered ragamuffins I would set my two plainmen free. They would float down among the sparrows, and seldom failed to catch a couple. Sometimes in the excitement of the chase, if one of them failed to catch a sparrow, he would start off after the nearest song-bird; but a sharp call never failed to bring him back, obediently, to my shoulder. It was in this matter of obedience that they showed the only difference in their dispositions. When recalled from the chase Judge would turn at once, circle about me and settle contentedly on my shoulder, but Doctor was more minded to have his own way. He would float off after a song-bird like a bit of down on the breeze; when he heard me call he would flap back to me as heavily as an old crow, and would further display his vexation by snapping his bill close to my ear.

While it was evident that the strong sunlight annoyed them they seemed to see quite as well in the daytime as at night and, naturally, all their hunting was done in the daylight, though I tried to select cloudy or overcast days for their excursions. They never seemed to have a desire to get away, and, indeed, I fancy it would have

been difficult to have made them go very far from some member of the family. They would sit on the branch of a tree not far from my window, but at nightfall they sought the family sitting-room, where they made themselves comfortable on my mother's lap. In the city they delighted in sitting, for hours at a time, on the window-sill watching the people passing in the street and conversing with each other in low, chirping monosyllables. They had a dove-like fondness for caressing each other and sat close, side by side, motionless except as from time to time they would turn their heads and rub their bills together.

One evening I was romping with the Doctor and he was wrestling with my finger, a play in which he took an especial joy. We were in the midst of our frolic when he lost his balance. I heard a slight snap and he fell over on his side; he picked himself up again and tried to continue his sport, but I saw that his right leg hung limp and helpless. I quickly examined him and discovered that it was broken just above the knee. Though I handled him as gently as I knew how, he squealed with pain and made a bee-line for his haven of refuge, my mother's lap. We bandaged up the leg as best we could; but it was of no use, and after four days of suffering he died. During his illness the conduct of Judge was almost human. The evening of the accident he discovered that for some reason he could not comprehend, Doctor was absorbing the attention of the family; he protested violently, flew on my mother's lap half a dozen times, only to be driven off, and finally, in a fit of rage and jealousy, he retreated under the sofa and sulked. The next morning, however, he discovered that there was something really wrong with his companion and his anxiety knew no bounds. Our aim was to keep Doctor as quiet as possible, but Judge seemed to believe in that treatment that some well-meaning people deem so efficacious—he wanted to do something "to take up the patient's mind;" he tried to lure the poor Doctor into games of hide-and-seek and excursions to the window-sill. When feeding-time came he absolutely refused to eat until Doctor had been fed, which was an entirely new development, as in the past they had both been greedy over their meals. When Doctor finally succumbed, Judge was frantic; his grief and loneliness was most pathetic; he would run about the room for hours, peering behind pieces of furniture and under sofas and chairs and continually keeping up that whirring chirp with which they used to call each other. He could not seem to get it out of his head that the Doctor was hiding from him, and his search was heart-rending. He refused all food, though I tempted him with every dainty I could think of—live mice, fresh meat, a small bird and a nest full of baby mice failed to attract him, and he grew emaciated with surprising rapidity. He would look at the food, then start off on his fruitless search, whirring piteously the while. After hunting under all the chairs and sofas he would go out into the middle of the room, stretch out his little neck and whirr so pleadingly, so caressingly, with exactly the same note that they used when rubbing their bills together on the window-sill, that I have seen grown-up members of my family furtively wiping their eyes.

He grew very weak and only seemed contented on my mother's lap. One evening he was lying cuddled up under her hand, apparently asleep.

"Poor Judge," I said, "he will never get over the loss of the Doctor." The familiar name aroused the little fellow; he staggered to his feet, looked about with great round eyes, which were already glazing in death, summoned all his strength and gave one last whirring call and fell back dead.

Pets die, and our most intimate human friends covertly sneer at our grief. For our own part we generally resolve never to keep another pet. But it was a long time before our family forgot our little prairie owls; it is some comfort for me to feel, that being taken so young and never having known freedom they were as happy with me as they could have been, exposed to the dangers and privations of their wild life. They certainly gave me a warmer sympathy with the whole animal kingdom.—Independent.

Too Late.

The old farmer died suddenly, so that when Judge Gilroy, his only son, received the telegram, he could do nothing but go up to the farm for the funeral. It was difficult to do even that, for the judge was the leading lawyer in X—, and every hour meant dollars to him.

As he sat with bent head in the grimy little train that lumbered through the farms, he could not keep the details of his cases out of his mind.

Yet bitter grief he felt was uncalled for. He had been a good respectful son. He had never given his father a headache; and the old man had died full of years and virtues, "a shock of corn fully ripe." The phrase pleased

him; it seemed leaving room for the village walked up to you," said thoughts were his cry was for "If I could" "He was half-yearly of his life. "Last Spring" "I urged him you on your "No. He

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