

A Hostage of Thanksgiving

By Agnes L. Pratt

A SOLITARY figure limned against the drear background of the landscape plunged recklessly ahead as if pursued by demons. Frozen earth cut his thinly-clad feet cruelly; from gray and chilling skies globules of hail and snow lashed his face, his hands, impotently. The darkness of night fast wrapped the way ahead in indistinct hues. Yet on he pressed, avoiding the beaten highway, skirting far in the rear of sparsely scattered dwellings, and shying like a hunted animal when crackling twig or whirr of wings startled the silence.

Finally he neared a house. Its immense proportions loomed through the enshrouding shadows like a haven of rest, and instinctively he turned his lagging steps to its door. A brilliant light shone in every window. The curtains were raised, only a filmy drapery of lace filtering to his vision the view of comfort within. Effacing himself among the shadows, he gazed long and hungrily at the scene. A gray-haired man lounged in the big easy chair. A pleasant-faced matron rocked near by, and at the piano, touching the notes softly, a young girl sang songs of home and love and light. One great choking sob clutched at his throat desperately, as with tottering steps he approached the door. A long peal at the bell, hurried footsteps inside, then a flood of warmth and light, in whose searching rays he stood revealed.

"For God's sake, food and shelter! I am famishing."

From the doorway, where he leaned, the silvery-haired man regarded him sternly. The women had crept quietly to the hall, and now looked at him with pitying eyes. The tableaux remained thus fixed, for neither man, regarding the other with fixed and horror-stricken gaze, would speak. Then the girl pressed forward. "Father," she cried sharply, "why don't you let him in? Can't you see how cold and famished he looks?"

The elder man glanced stonily down at the newcomer.

"Speak!" he commanded. "Tell them who you are—what you are!"

With a dramatic gesture, the younger came into the full light, let fall a long, enveloping coat, and removed from his head the closely-drawn cap.

"An escaped convict." He laughed bitterly. "Wrongfully accused, unjustly imprisoned, and now—now—"

his eyes roved wildly around—"free—free; and because it is Thanksgiving season, because to-morrow you will sit down to your feast with your family and friends, and I had hoped"—falteringly—"that the loving kindness of the season, or—something else—"

would soften your heart—I ventured to ask you for the shelter without which I should have perished. It is bitterly cold out there."

He inclined his head toward the swamps from which he had emerged.

"Do you know me?"

Pushing his glasses high up on his forehead, the other bent a searching

stare on the pallid features of the youth.

"You are the judge who sentenced me."

There was no tremor in the hopeless voice. Icy despair seemed to clutch the very heart of him who stood for the second time before the stern eyes that had judged him.

"Oh, father, father!" A gentle hand was laid supplicatingly on his arm, a gentle voice pleaded. "You are not the judge now: he is so tired and cold and hungry! Whatever you do later, remember to-morrow is Thanksgiving day, and—and—"

She hesitated, then concluded, courageously, "Remember the vacant chair at our table and for whom it is waiting."

A little pathetic smile crept into the judge's face timidly, and abode there.

"I have not forgotten," he assured her, softly. Then—"Go now—you and the mother. Make ready some food for the wayfarer. I want a word alone with him."

He drew the youth into the wide hall where an open fire blazed cheerily on the great fire-place.

"Now tell me your story."

"You know it sir." Quite simply the answer came. "You knew me before it happened. It was the son of an old friend you sentenced eight years ago—the friend of your son."

"I but did my duty." The other man looked strangely gray and worn in the firelight streaming over his face, his hair, his figure, and the hand he laid on the mantel trembled impotently.

"Perhaps." The young man smiled

bitterly. "But you sentenced me to hell for the crime of another."

"Well,"—the judge sighed, dismissing this aspect of the case—"as long as you had the temerity to approach me for shelter, knowing my duty as you did, and the consequences of your rash act, you may stay to-morrow. It is Thanksgiving. There will be no guests at our table unless—unless—"

he brushed away a cobwebby vision uncertainly—"but that is not possible. We will make you as comfortable as we can, because it is Thanksgiving, and from this house no wanderer is ever turned away on that day. Then—then—"

the tenderness, unwonted, filtered from his voice, and he concluded judicially—"the day after will be the day of reckoning. In my position I cannot harbor an escaped criminal."

"Life is sweet to the young, sir." On the opposite side of the fireplace, his prison garb in strange contrast to the judge's conventional attire, the younger man raised his head proudly.

"I was exhausted—fainting—nearly dead, and I had still faith enough to believe my bitterest enemy would not cast me out. As for me, one day is enough. We learn—up there—he indicated the direction whence he had come—"we learn to live our lives a day—aye, one hour—at a time. So be it. I will remain with you to-morrow as your Thanksgiving guest—uninvited, unwelcome. The day after shall be the day of reckoning!"

The judge inclined his head acquiescently.



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