

## Choice Literature.

## FOURTEEN TO ONE.

## A TRUE STORY.

BY ELIZABETH STUART PHILIPS, IN "THE CENTURY."

There are certain situations inherently too preposterous for fiction; the very telling of them involves the presumption of fact. No writer with any regard for his literary reputation would invent such a tale as that which I am about to relate. The reader will agree with me, I think, that the conclusive events of the story are but another evidence that truth is the most amazing thing in the world. With this prefatory word, which may give force to the narrative, I need only proceed to record the circumstances. For reasons which will be sufficiently obvious, I shall not make use of authentic names of either the persons or the localities involved in the recital of one of the most thrilling incidents in modern American history.

The Reverend Mr. Matthews was hitching up his horse to go to the post-office. The horse was old; the man was old. The horse was grey; so was the man. The waggon was well worn of its paint, which was once a worldly blue, and the wheels sprawled at the axles like a decrepit old person going bow-legged from age. The Reverend Mr. Matthews did not use the saddle, according to the custom of the region; he was lame and found it difficult to mount.

It was a chilly day, and what was once a buffalo robe lay across the waggon seat; a few tufts of hair remained upon the bare skin, but it was neatly lined with a woman's shawl—an old plaid, originally combining more colours than a rag mat, but now faded to a vague general dinginess which would commend it to the "low tone" of modern art. The harness was as old as the buffalo robe, as old as the shawl, as old as the horse, one might venture to say as old as the man. It had been patched, and mended, and lapped, and strapped, and tied, past the ingenuity of any but the very poor and the really intelligent; it was expected to drop to pieces at the mildest provocation, and the driver was supposed to clamber down over the bow-legged wheels and tie it up again, which he always did, and always patiently. He was a very patient old man; but there was a spark in his dim blue eye.

The reins, which he took firmly enough in his bare hands, were of rope, by the way. He could not go to the post-office on Mondays because his wife had to use the clothes-line. He felt it a special dispensation of Providence that women did not wash on Saturdays, when his copy of "Zion's Herald" was due.

She came out of the house when he had harnessed, and stood with her hands wrapped in her little black-and-white checked shoulder shawl, watching him with eyes where thirty years of married love dwelt gently. Something sharper than love crossed her thin face in long lines; she had an expression of habitual anxiety refined to feminine acuteness; for it was the year 1870, and it was—let us call it, since we must call it something, the State of Tennessee.

Mrs. Matthews stood in that portion of the house which Tennessee does not call a loggia; neither is it a porch, a piazza, or a hall. It results from the dual division of the house, which rises on each side, uniting in one boarded roof and a loft. Two chimneys of stone or of clay, according to the social status of the owner, flank the house on each side. The Rev. Mr. Matthews' chimneys were of clay, for he was a minister of the Methodist faith. His house was built of logs; through the space which cut the building the chickens walked critically, like boarders discussing their dinner. The domestic dwelling of a comfortable pig could be seen in the background. There were sheds, and something resembling a barn for the horse. All were scrupulously neat. Behind, the mountains towered and had a dark expression. A clear sky burned above, but one had to look for it, it was so far, and there seemed so small an allowance of it—so much of the State of Tennessee; so little of heaven.

"Are you going to the post-office?" asked Mrs. Matthews, softly. She knew perfectly well, but she always asked; he always answered. If it gave her pleasure to enquire, he reasoned, why not?

"Yes, Deborah, said the old man, briskly. "Want to go?"

"I don't know. Is Hezekiah tucked out?"

"Hezekiah is as spry as a chipmunk," returned the minister confidently. Now Hezekiah was the horse, and thirty-one years old. He received this astounding tribute with a slow revolution of his best eye (for he was blind in the other, but no one ever mentioned the fact in Hezekiah's presence) which might have passed for that superior effort of intelligence known only to the human race, and vulgarly called a wink.

"Well," said Mrs. Matthews, doubtfully, "I don't know I'll go."

She pronounced these words with marked, almost painful, hesitation, in an accent foreign to her environment. Her movements and dress were after the manner of Tennessee, but her speech was the speech of New Hampshire. They had been Northerners thirty years ago. Weak lungs brought him and a parish kept him. Thirty years—and such years!—seemed a long time to stay true to the traditions of youth and a flag. The parishioners and people whom, for courtesy, one called one's neighbours in those desolate, divided mountain homes, expressed themselves variously upon the parson's loyalty to the national cause. The Border State indecision had murmured about him critically, for the immediate region had flashed during the civil war, and remained sulky still.

The Confederacy had never lacked friends in that township. Of late the murmur had become a mutter. The parson had given offence. He had preached a sermon treating of certain disorders which had become historic, and for which the village and valley were acquiring unenviable notoriety.

"If I thought I could prevent anything," proceeded Mrs. Matthews anxiously, "I'd—I'd—I don't know but I'd go. Are you goin' to hold the meetin'—after all?"

"Certainly," replied the minister, lifting his head. "I shall dispense the Word as usual."

"Well," said his wife sadly—"well, I s'pose you will. I might have known. But I hoped you'd put it off. I was afraid to ask you. I can't help worryin'. I don't know but I'll go, too. I can get my bunnet on in a minute."

Her husband hesitated perceptibly. He did not tell her

that he was afraid to take her; that he was almost equally afraid to leave her. He said:—

"The lock of the back door isn't mended yet; I don't know but things need watching. That speckled bantam's dreadfully afraid of weasels when she's setting; I don't know's I blame her."

"Well," returned the old lady with a sigh, "I don't know but you're right. If it's the Lord's will I should stay at home and shoo weasels, I s'pose He can look after you without my help, if He has a mind to. Will you take the sweet potatoes along? There's a bushel and a-half; and two dozen eggs."

The two people loaded the waggon together, rather silently. Nothing further was said about the prayer-meeting. Neither alluded to danger. They spoke of the price of potatoes and chickens. The times were too stern to be spend-thrift in emotion. One might be lavish of anything else, but one had to economize in feeling, and be a miser in its expression. When the parson was ready to start he kissed his wife, and said:—

"Good-by, Deborah."

And she said, "Good-by, Levi."

Then she said: "Let me tuck you up a little. The but falo ain't in."

She tucked the old robe about the old legs with painstaking, motherly thoroughness, as if he had been a boy going to bed. She said how glad she was she had that nice shawl to line it.

"Thank you, Deborah. Keep the doors locked, won't you? And I wouldn't run out much till I get back."

"No, I don't know's I will. Have you got your lantern?"

"Yes."

"And your pistol?"

"No."

"Ain't you going to take it?"

"No, Deborah; I've decided not to. Besides, it's a rusty old affair. It wouldn't do much."

"You'll get home by nine, won't you?" she pleaded, lifting her withered cheek over the high, muddy wheel. For a moment those lines of anxiety seemed to grow corrosive, as if they would eat her face out.

"Or quarter-past," said the parson, cheerfully. "But don't worry if I'm not here till half-past."

Hezekiah took occasion to start at this point; he was an experienced horse; he knew when a conversation had lasted long enough at the parting of husband and wife, in 1870, and in Tennessee. No horse with two eyes could see as much as Hezekiah. This was understood in the family.

A rickety, rocky path, about four feet wide, called by courtesy "The Road," wound away from the parsonage. The cornfield grew to it on each side. The tall stalks, some of them ten feet high, stood dead and stark, shivering in the rising wind. The old man drove into them. They closed about his gray head. Only the rear of the muddy blue waggon was visible between the husks.

"Levi! Levi! I want to ask a question."

She could hear the bow-legged wheels come to a lame halt; but she could not see him. He called through the corn in his patient voice:—

"Well, well! What is it? Ask away, Deborah."

"What time shall I begin to worry, Levi?"

To this essentially feminine enquiry silence answered significantly:—

"My dear," said the invisible husband after a long pause, "perhaps by ten—or half-past. Or suppose we say eleven."

She ran out into the corn to see him. It seemed to her, suddenly, as if she should strangle to death if she did not see him once more. But she did not call, and he did not know that she was there. She ran on, gathering up her chocolate-coloured calico dress, and wrapping her checked shawl about her head nervously. At the turn of the path there was a prickly locust tree. It had been burnt to make way for crops after the fashion of the country, which is too indolent to hew; it had not been well burned, and one long, strong limb stretched out like an arm; it was black; and seemed to point at the old man as he disappeared around the twist in the path where the returning-valley curved in, and the passenger found a way to the highway. The parson was singing. His voice came back on the wind:—

How firm a foundation, ye sa-ints of the Lo-ord!

She wiped the tears from her eyes and came back through the corn, slowly; all her withered figure drooped.

"I don't know but I'd ought to have perked up and gone with him," she said, aloud, plaintively.

She stood in the house-place, among the chickens, for a few minutes, looking out. She was used, like other women in that desolate country, to being left much alone. Those terrible four years from '61 to '65 had taught her, she used to think, all the lessons that danger and solitude can teach; but she was learning new, now. Peace had brought anything, everything, but security. She was a good deal of a woman, as the phrase goes, with a set strong Yankee mouth. Life had never dealt so easily with her that she expected anything of it; and had given her no chance to become what women call "timid." Yet as she stood looking through the stark corn on that cold gray day she shook with a kind of horror.

Women know what it is—this ague of the heart which follows the absent beloved. The safest lives experience it, in chills of real foresight, or fevers of the imagination. Deborah Matthews lived in the lap of daily dangers that had not alienated her good sense, not suffocated that sweet, persistent trust in the nature of things, call it feminine or religious, which is the most amazing fact in human life; but sometimes it seemed to her as if her soul were turning stiff, as flesh does from fear.

"If this goes on long enough, I shall die of it," she said. "He will come home some day, and I shall be dead of listenin', and shiverin', and prayin' to Mercy for him. Prayer is Scripture, I suppose, and I haven't anythin' against it; but folks can die of too much prayin', as well as a gallopin' consumption or the shakes."

Only the chickens heard her, however, and they responded with critical clucks, like Church members who thought her heretical. Since chickens constituted her duties, she would gratify heaven and divert her mind by going out to see the setting bantam, who took her for a weasel and protested violently.

Mrs. Matthews came back to the house indefinitely com-

forted, in a spiritual way, by the secular interruption, and prepared to lock up carefully, as her husband had bidden her. It was necessary to look after all the creatures first: the critical chickens, the comfortable pig, the gaunt cow, and the rooster, for whom, as he was but one, and had all the iordliness of his race, and invariably ran away from her, and never came till he got ready, Mrs. Matthews had a marked respect, and thought of him as spelled with a capital. It took a great while that evening to get the Rooster into the pen, and while her feminine coax and his masculine crow ricocheted about the cornfield, the old lady cast a sharp, watchful eye all over the premises and their vicinity. Silence and solitude responded to her. No intrusion or intruder gave sign. The mountain seemed to overlook the house pompously, as a thing too small to protect. The valley had a stealthy look, as if it were creeping up to her. The day was darkening fast. The gloom of its decline came on with the abruptness of a mountain region, and the world seemed suddenly to shrink away from the lonely spot and forget it.

Mrs. Matthews, when she had locked up the animals with difficulty, deference, or fear, according to their respective temperaments, fastened the doors and windows of the house carefully, and looked at the clock. It was half past six. She took off her muddy rubbers, brushed them neatly, folded away her shawl, and started the fire economically. She must have a cup of tea; but supper should wait for Levi, who needed something solid after Friday evening meeting. She busied herself with these details assiduously. Her life was what we might call large with trifles; she made the most of them; there was nothing better that she knew of to keep great anxieties out of the head and sickening terrors out of the heart.

There was one thing, to be sure. Mrs. Matthews called it faith and providence. The parson's wife had her share of it, but it took on practical, often secular, forms. Sometimes she prayed aloud, as she sat there alone, quaking in every nerve. Sometimes she pitched her shrill old voice, as she did to-day, several notes above the key, and sang:—

How firm a foundation, ye sa-ints of the Lo-ord!  
Is laid for your fa-ith in His ex-cel-lent word!

But she locked the house up before she sang. She made her tea, too, and drank it.

"I always feel to get a better spiritual attitude," she used to say, "when I've had my cup of tea."

The house was so neat that its rudeness became a kind of daintiness to the eye; and the trim old lady, in her chocolate calico with its strip of a ruffle at throat and wrists, sat before the fireplace, meditative and sweet, like a priestess before an altar. She used to hate that fireplace with hot New Hampshire hatred—the kettle, the crane, and all the barbarous ways of managing it; but she had contrived to get used to it now. It was the dream of her life to save money enough to freight a good Northern cook-stove over from Chattanooga. But she expected to die without it. The room winked brightly with shiny tin-ware hung above the fireplace, and chintz curtains at the windows. There were hollyhocks on the curtains which seemed like New Hampshire, if you made believe very much. There was a centre-table with a very old red and black tablecloth of the fashion of fifty years ago. The minister's writing materials adorned this table—his tall ink-stand, with its oxidized silver top; his first parish in New Hampshire gave him that inkstand, at a donation party, in a sleet storm one January night, with a barrel of flour and a bushel of potatoes. Beside the inkstand lay his quill pen sharpened with the precision of a man who does not do much writing; the cheap, blue-ruled letter paper, a quire of it; and the sacred sermon paper which Mrs. Matthews would not have touched for her life; she would as soon have touched the sermons. These were carefully packed away in the corner in a barrel covered with turkey-red, and surmounted with a broad top. The family Bible lay on the board.

Above rose the minister's "library." This was a serious affair, greatly respected in the parish and adored by the minister's wife. It took at least three poplar shelves stained by Mr. Matthews' own hand, and a borrowed paintbrush, to hold that library. Upon the lower shelf the family clock ticked solemnly, flanked by Cruden's Concordance and Worcester's Octavo Dictionary. For neighbours to these there were two odd volumes of an ancient encyclopedia, the letters unfortunately slipping from A to Z without immediate alphabetical connection. Upon such subjects, for instance, as alchemy or zoology, the minister was known to have shown a crushing scholarship, which was not strictly maintained upon all topics. Barnes' Notes on Matthew occupied a decorous position in the library. The life of John Wesley, worn to tatters and covered with a neat brown paper grocery bag, overflowed into two octavo volumes, which, after all, had the comfortable, knowing look of a biography which treats of a successful life-experience, opulent in fact and feeling, alert and happy. Besides the shrivelled career of this humble disciple, what a story!

The history of New Hampshire stood beside John Wesley. A map of the State of Tennessee surmounted the library. For the rest, the shelves were fatly filled with filed copies of "Zion's Herald" and a Chattanooga weekly.

There was an old lounge in the room, home-made covered with a calico comforter and a dyed brown shawl. The minister's slippers lay beside it; they were of felt, and she had made them. The lounge was Mr. Matthews' own particular resting place when the roads were rough or the meeting late. If he was very late, and she grew anxious, his wife went up and stroked the lounge sometimes.

Their bed-room opened across the house-place from the living-room. It held a white bed, with posts, and old white curtains much darned. Mrs. Matthews' Bible lay on a table beside the bed. The room was destitute of furniture or ornaments, but it had a rag carpet and a fireplace. When Mr. Matthews had a sore throat and it was very cold they had a fire to go to bed by. That was delightful.

When Mrs. Matthews had taken her cup of tea and sung "How firm a foundation" till she was afraid she should be tired of it, which struck her as an impiety to be avoided, she walked about the house looking at everything, crossing from room to room, and looking cautiously after her. It was very still.

(To be continued.)

If you suffer from catarrh why don't you take Hood's Sarsaparilla, the common-sense remedy? It has cured many people.