

darkness. "Two corners to the right," he reminded himself, and when he had successfully accomplished them and turned again he muttered hopefully, "Three corners straight ahead and third house from the corner, if I ever get there."

He plodded on doggedly. Somehow the exhilaration which had upheld him in his first encounter with the storm seemed to have evaporated. He was tired, the fight had been too unequal, he was quite ready for retreat with honour. When

at last he arrived at the third house from the corner, capless, thoroughly chilled and almost choking, his usually placid temper had ragged edges and he banged into the hallway with unnecessary violence. Snow-covered as he was he strode directly to the door of the room where he had left his comfortable relatives.

"How any one *can* live in a hole like this—" he began explosively, and then stopped. Leversage's portly form was not reclining in its usual

chair before the fire, in fact there was no chair and no fire and no Leversage. Mrs. Leversage, too, had unaccountably disappeared. He was standing in a room he had never seen and addressing vacancy.

"Glory be!" said Rutherford under his breath. It did not take much reasoning to guess what had happened and his one idea was to retreat unseen. He wheeled precipitately experiencing with great

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THE CROOK IN THE ROAD

By LILLIAN K. BEYNON

"HOW much do I want fur that piece of land, with the old shanty on it?"

"Nothing, sir, nothing. It's not fur sale."

"You want to run a railroad through it?"

"Well, I'm glad to hear that. It's many a day we've wanted a railroad in these parts; but you can jest put a little crook in it, and run the road furninst the shanty there, and lave the old shack be."

"You want to buy it?"

"I'm thinkin' you'll be wantin', fur I'm not sellin' I say."

"What'll I take fur it?"

"Will you lave me be. That shack's me conscience, and I'm hopin' St. Peter'll let take a fotygraf of it with me, to hang on me pearl bed post, to save me trouble whin I begin housekeepin' up yonder."

"What do I mean?"

"Well sit down and be comfortable, fur it will take awhile to tell. There, that's alright."

"It happened on Christmas Eve."

"What happened, you ask?"

"Why, the one great thing that happens to every man, some time or other, between the beginning and the end of things fur him. With some it's bein' born. Everything worth while dates from that auspicious occasion; while with others it's bein' married, or makin' a bisnis hit, or maybe swatin' a ball over the fence or owin' a bull pup what took a prize fur bein' more useless than all the other bull pups. It all depends on the nature of his soil, what a man's special 'It' is."

"Mine happened on Christmas Eve. The fact is it had been happenin' fur many a Christmas Eve, and all the eves between, and I did not know. Why the Lord did not scoop up a bit of clay, it bein' so plentiful, and make woman on the same plan as man, when he was about it, has puzzled me many a day. It would have saved many a misunderstandin' I'm thinkin'."

"Anyhow, I did not understand, and a storm was brewin' under me feet fur fifteen year, and I was a stirrin' it up now and agin', thinkin' all the time because nothin' was botherin' me, that the weather on the other side of the matrimonial barque was fair. But it wasn't. And on Christmas Eve, the wreck came."

"Of course it was nothin' much that snapped the cord. Some words, what men and women keep only fur them as are jined closest to them; words what when once said, lave a scar that no amount of love and furgettin' ever rubs out. And then she sed she never wanted to see me again, and I sed I would oblige her; and she sed she would git a divorce, and I sed she couldn't git it too quick fur me. Then I ketched me cap in me hand, and struck fur the door but before I got out, Jessie run after me callin' 'Daddy, daddy, come back,' and stretchin' out her arms to me."

"Yes, Jessie is the youngest. She was only five then."

"Her mother called her back sharp, and she stopped, but she did not go back. She stood haltin' in the middle of the floor, until I put out me arms, and she run into them. She kissed me and coaxed me not to lave her (Jessie and me had always been great pals) and then avil spirits rose up in me, and blabbered thots into me mind that no dacent husband and father should have, and I cussed men fur makin' it possible fur me to take from a woman the little kids she had suffered fur, and gone to the edge of things to git. But I was better nor me thots, and I sent the little kid back to her mother, and I guess we both knowed as we saw her between us, that nature had us tighter nor any law could undo. And then I went away."

"Have you ever gone away from home, fur the last time, when there was no other home to go to, and it didn't make no difference to nobody whether you ever showed up any place again?"

"You never did?"

"Then you have never felt all a man can feel. That is hell, and you do not need to cross any dark and stormy river to get there. It ain't so bad as long as you can feel mad and hard and abused. That is comfortable, to the time that comes after, when you take a look into your own side of the boat, and see that the mice have been doin' damage; and your old reliable that you always banked on, has been leakin' bad, and you are mostly responsible fur the trouble, when you might have plugged up the holes, or cleared out the mice, and kept the barque sailin'."

"It was not angels singin' peace, that kept me company that night; it was devils urg'in me on to destruction, and they spent the night with me and all Christmas Day, and it was Sunday."

"On Monday I straightened up me bisnis, and left Eliza and the kids what I had, and next day I left fur here. I built this shanty, and I lived alone in it fur fifteen years."

"The life has aged me, you say?"

"No, not that alone. It was that Christmas day, and the Christmas days that have followed. A man does not fight devils a day and a night and come out without any scars."

"This country was all wild then and I fought it, sir. I worked and grubbed and hoed early and late, and I only laughed when the hail come and knocked down every head of grain. And I laughed more when the frost froze it stiff, and the mange killed the cattle and the horses died, and other folks was weepin'. I didn't care fur grain and cattle. It was the gettin' them I loved. It made me ferget. But once a year I could not ferget, and that was Christmas Eve. I hated it, my life, how I hated it, but I couldn't get away, and my dreams were cursed and my Christmas Day was spent in hell. Them days came like a nightmare that followed me all the year, and Christmas began to chase Christmas faster and faster, until one was no sooner gone than, than I heard the other comin', and I was gettin' afraid the old man 'was losin' his hold on things."

"Then come the strangest thing. It was jest the week before the fifteenth Christmas since IT happened. I was sittin' in my shack there one night, afeared to go to bed fur the time would pass so quick until me dreams would come back, and I heard the latch of the door rattle. I run to the door hopin' it was some one to keep me company, but it was a clare moonlight night, calm and quiet, and there was not a sound or sign of a person or thing, so I closed the door and sat down again."

"It could not have been five minutes when the latch rattled again, and this time louder and more impatient-like, and I again hurried to it, but there was still no sign of anyone around."

"Then I remembered an old story me mother had told me, how the spirits come to her people when there was goin' to be a death or something very important goin' to happen, and I knew this must be a sign, so when it come again, I jest sat still and watched."

"And as I looked I was sure I saw the door move, and then I saw it was openin' slow and quiet. I was too much afeared to move. I sat quite still and watched the door openin' slowly, wider and wider. At last I could see outside. I saw the shadow of the wood-pile on the snow, and I saw me old sleigh and everything in the yard jest as I had left it. Then somehow, I do not know how, I was not lookin' into the yard on the prairie, but into the room where fifteen years before I had sed good-bye to me little Jessie. I saw it as plain as I ever saw anything. I saw there was a new carpet on the floor, and a new book-case beside the wall, and fur the rest, the room was much the same as it was fifteen years before. There was no one there at first, but soon an old woman came in. I did not think it was Eliza at first, fur her hair was white, and her shoulders stooped and her face wrinkled; but soon she turned her face toward me, and I

knew it was her. But it cut me sore to see her like that."

"Did I expect her to stay young? No, I guess not, but it isn't easy to see them you love, lave so much behind at one jump. It grips your insides somehow, and you want to stop things. You want to say it can't be, and by sayin' so make it so, and all the time you know the uselessness of your protestin'; then of a suddin' you give in and you shrink up, and a lump fills your throat, and fate looks big, so big you step back, and you wonder—you wonder if the things you lernt at Sunday School were maybe alright."

"Jest then Eliza looked into me face and said, 'Sam, will ye never fergive me, boy? Fifteen years is a sore long time.'"

"It was so parlysed at the sound of her voice that I couldn't spake a word, and I jest sat and looked at her. And again she said, 'Boy, boy, I would follow ye to the end of the airth, if I only knowed where you was. It is fifteen years, Sam, boy, come back.'"

"And I couldn't spake fur the lump in me throat, but I stretched out me arms and I made a gurglin' sound, and the door was still open and I was lookin' out into me yard, and I could see the shadow of the wood-pile on the snow, and me old sleigh and everything jest as I had left it."

"I was havin' a nap, you say? Well, maybe; slape explains many things, what we can't reduce to arithmetic any other way, but what followed wasn't any dream."

"Next day I shut up this shanty, and took the train fur me old home. I arrove on Christmas Eve, jest about the hour I had left. I went straight to the old house. I hadn't heard a word fur fifteen years, and I had often thot maybe Eliza was married agin, but I knew better now. I knew she was waitin' fur me as I was fur her. So I crept up to the windy, and looked in, and there if there wasn't the new carpet, and the new book case I had saw, and the other things much the same as they had been. Then Eliza come in jest as I had saw her, with grey hair and bent shoulders and wrinkled face and stood by the table, and I saw her lips movin' and I knew she was wantin' me to come back."

"I walked right up to the door and knocked, and Eliza come to the door, and she most let the lamp fall when she saw who it was; but I took it out of her hand and put it on the table, and then I faced her and said, 'Eliza, did you stand at this table three nights ago and say, Sam, will ye never fergive me, boy? Fifteen years is a long time.'"

"And Eliza looked surprised and said, 'Mayhap I did, Sam. I have sed somewhat like that many a time since that night.'"

"'But,' I sed, 'think hard. Did you say that, that night, and then after while did you say, Boy, boy, I would follow ye to the end of the airth, if only I knowed where you was. It's fifteen years, Sam, boy, come back?'"

"'Like as not I did,' said Eliza, and a blush like a young girl crept up over her old sweet face, and she looked like a girl to me agin; and you air men, so you know what I did."

"After a bit, I told Eliza how she had come to me and it made her nervous and she crept up closer to me, and I put me old tremblin' arm around her, and we babbled away fur hours; and she sed she had been callin' fur me in her heart fur years, but I had never seemed so close as a few nights before; and she needed me special, because Jessie was married and she was all alone, and sore lonesome."

"Now, Sir, you have me story. I know it does not explain things, but maybe you can do that. Life is smooth sailin' fur me now, and me Christmases are real Christmases, and that may not be any better fur me than it was before. So I keep this shack to remind me of them dark times, and to keep me minded, that smooth sailin' fur me may be on the rocks fur me partner; so you'll jest make a little crook in the road, and build it furninst the shanty, and let the old shack be."