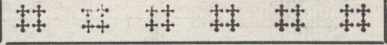


THE HILL OF FOLLY



ment for his sin, for it was well known that when he got into special trouble, as he had in the recent affair with Driver, his good wife drove the lesson home by thrashing him soundly when he returned to her.

Toot guessed he had nothing to say. It was plain that he was a backslider and needed drastic treatment. Without mincing matters, Hallie addressed him in sound, plain terms, for everybody knew of his sin, and there was nothing to conceal.

"You've not been playing fair again, Toot. You've taken all that's belonging to you, and more,"—Toot winced—"and you've given nothing back to the Lord, no time, no prayer, no work, no money. If you frisk Him out of His share, you can't expect a square deal. All you fellows know you've got to play fair with God."

Toot whimpered that he wasn't even expectin' God could forgive him—anybody with sense would draw the line somewhere.

At that Hallie warmed up. His favorite theme was God's forgiveness past all human understanding.

"Have some of you fellows been casting these things up to Toot Lucas?" he asked, with flashing eyes. "Shame on you! Can't you forgive and forget? God would do better than that, though against Him and Him only was the iniquity. When there is no sin any more, because He has blotted it out, how dares any human being stand up and accuse whom God has acquitted?"

Unwittingly, Hallie preached that part of his sermon to Dawn Courtenay. A strange pallor blanched her face at the words, as memory flew back to one awful day, years and years ago, when she said to one who had sinned: "God may have forgiven you, but I never can!" And she had loved that sinner, too—how much, was measured by the depth of the wound he left in her heart. But she had never let him see it, never uttered the forgiveness her soul longed to pronounce. Now she never could. Dumbly she wondered what her life—his life—would have been, if she had allowed her love to conquer her pride.

The service was drawing to its close. In the judgment of Hallie, it had been a good meeting, marred by none of the uproars and disturbances with which he was painfully familiar. There only remained Daisy's song, which had been left to the last purposely—a benediction sweet and holy as the brushing past of an angel's wing. Haist, who sat beside the girl, with arms tightly folded over an aching heart, rose to let her pass to the platform. The stern look he bent on the rough faces around him was calculated to impress one and all that nothing but absolute silence would be tolerated for the next few minutes. His warning was quite unnecessary. Already heads were bent forward to catch every syllable of whatever song their adored child might choose to sing for them.

But just as Mrs. Lucas struck a mellow chord on the old guitar, an ominous sound from without disturbed the tense, expectant atmosphere. It gathered strength as it came, resolving itself into a clatter of horses' hoofs and the maudlin shouting and singing of drunken men—a weird dithyramb improvised to the wine-god.

Haist was the first to interpret the medley of sounds. Bloomy Bill and his companions had not reported. Hallie had privately expressed a fear that they had been tampered with. Bill was a notorious disturber of the peace when under the influence of the booze. Knowing that all the railroad authorities along the line did their utmost to keep liquor from the laborers, it was Haist's private opinion that Theodore Driver carried a goodly supply for his own use, distributing it freely to those who did his bidding.

Instantly the young man was on his feet. Would Driver forever triumph over all the forces of good—and they were many—in that beautiful country? Shame on the other men that he triumphed so easily!

Before Haist could reach the door, a disreputable trio, headed by Bloomy Bill, entered the room. They scuffed their feet along the bare floor-making open intention on disturbing the meeting. Scoot, however, intended otherwise, as with no gentle touch he shoved the leader into a corner and sat on him.

"Stop your noise, will you?" he cried, beside himself with anger. "There is singing going on!"

"We've come t-to hear the m-music," muttered an unsteady voice.

Daisy, uncertain but scarcely frightened, had turned her eyes on Dawn, as usual waiting for her friend's direction.

"Sing it, Precious," whispered Miss Courtenay, unconsciously adopting the pet name her father had reserved for his own use. "They will listen."

Hallie moved his chair quite near the girl, as if to insure her protection, and Mrs. Lucas struck the prelude a second time. Suddenly with startling power, the words of "The Ninety and Nine" floated through the room. Simple and old was the melody and the story its words conveyed; hauntingly sweet were the voice and face of the youthful singer.

Before the first verse was concluded the hall was reduced to absolute silence. Through the numerous verses the silence became tenser, while the girl sang on and on with the startling pathos which only comes from deep and true feeling. Even Dawn, who had often heard Daisy sing, forgot all else in her genuine admiration of the girl's noble gift of song.

When it was over the men immediately filed out in orderly array, until Sunshine Hall was empty.

"Theodore's little disturbance was ill-timed," Haist remarked to the parson.

Hallie nodded.

"But for our good angel here it might have been a poor conclusion to an excellent meeting. Little girl, you have your life-work mapped out for you. I wish I had your power of doing good. Oh, I earnestly intreat you, make a habit of singing to hungry, sin-sick souls wherever you find them, and the Lord will reward you as you deserve."

Daisy felt the truth of his solemn words. Her life-work was, indeed, coming to her without any planning of her own. She must accept the responsibility. No longer dared she remain an idle child. Her talents, carefully wrapped up in a napkin, cried to shine in use. A host of unborn deeds, thoughts never put into action, and hours upon hours of time carelessly idled away, all rose up and accused her.

"We are deeds!"

Thou should'st have achieved us.

Doubt, the throttler, has crippled and riven us.

On the day of judgment we'll come aflock,

And tell the story, then woe to you!"

CHAPTER XII.

THEODORE SCORES.

"MADAM, I am at your service. I have now no care in the world but to do your bidding."

Hallie reined in the little shaggy mare he called Debbie close beside the ridge of rocks on which Miss Courtenay sat reading a lapful of letters. Alexis Lucas had just brought up the mail. Daisy had run away with her precious budget, and Mr. and Mrs. Strong had retreated into the shack to read a long-delayed missive from an absent son. Dawn allowed them all to leave her, and remained sunning herself on her rock by the door. Selecting the Barnes letter—all three inclosed a message at each writing—she had just broken the envelope when Hallie stopped before her.

The missionary had not dismounted, for fear of disturbing her pleasant occupation, but she immediately invited him to tie his horse as she had many things to discuss with him.

"It is time we had a serious conference," she told him. "Mr. Barnes's letter is full of trouble. All his plea is to hold the Old Wrangle property at any cost. It is going to be immensely valuable."

"Good advice," commented Hayes. "But until we know the whereabouts of Aaron Wind a move on our part would be very impracticable. We might leave Tete Jaune Cache to-day to hear to-morrow that the old fellow had drifted in."

"When do you imagine the uncertainty will end?" she asked.

"Very shortly. My inquiries must bring results soon."

Hallie liked to suggest to Miss Courtenay plans that she must needs follow. He liked to think that she had to rely on his judgment. She was so proud

and independent, it hurt her to accept his lead as much as it pleased him to offer it.

"I know something!"

She looked over the bank at him with a mocking little smile.

"Do you intend to keep your knowledge to yourself, Mr. Hayes, or would it be your pleasure to impart it to me?"

She was wearing a small hat, which closely fitted her bright, alert face. More than once Hallie had owned to a feeling of jealousy toward that hat, which, all unrebuked, caressed the beautiful, calm brow with its heavy nut-brown tresses. No one knew better than he what madness was in the thought. Her eyes were squarely on him, and in his great confusion he jerked Debbie's girth up so tightly that the incensed animal laid back her ears, switched her tail, and kicked out a hind foot dangerously near his ribs.

"I should like to tell you what I know," he explained hastily. "In fact I came over for the express purpose of doing so."

She moved her position slightly and he sat down on the rock at her feet. Debbie stood tied at a tree below.

"I think I know something Theodore Driver does not," he asserted, with the enthusiasm of a boy who has discovered a bird's nest. "The mining recorder—a new man appointed since the fire—is coming up here this week."

"I don't just see—"

"No? Then let me continue. To-day is the twenty-ninth of June. To-morrow it will be a month since Mr. Ravenden attempted to renew his certificate and pay up his fees—in other words it is a month since the fire. The law is that if a man has carelessly allowed a claim to lapse, or has been negligent about his settlement work, as Ravenden undoubtedly was, he may pay his hundred dollars to the mining recorder within thirty days after the last of May and have his rights re-established. This ends all trouble, unless some other individual holding a free miner's certificate stakes the same claim over again in the meantime. Now, supposing that Ravenden's certificates never are found, we might see the day when we would wish that we had gone to the recorder and paid all over again."

"Ah," she exclaimed, drawing a quick breath, "at present there is nothing to prevent Theodore from re-staking Mr. Ravenden's claim in the name of one of his friends, Miss Sandys for instance. By all means let us go and pay the recorder the extra hundred dollars—or any other fee he may demand. I see your reason for guarding your secret so jealously."

"You see my idea? We dare not wait till the agent arrives at this point. We must go to meet him. It may surprise you to know that some three hundred and fifty-two claims were recorded in the vicinity of Tete Jaune Cache last year, so the recorder is not making this merely a pleasure trip. He is a man much harassed by individuals in all kinds of trouble, so the sooner we put in our plea the better."

"The morning is going rapidly," Dawn Courtenay put in briskly. "Let us start at once. How shall we make the trip? Might not the freight trains on the construction work be used for part of the journey? Or the supply boats on the river? Or the gasoline launches for hire? Or do you prefer riding the horses?"

"The horses are my choice," Hallie replied. "With them we are masters of the situation and may move on as we please. It is early yet, and we should come to one of the principal camps down the line by noon or shortly after."

Dawn Courtenay jumped up with alacrity.

"That point being settled, let us make ourselves ready at once."

"If only I could make this trip for you," he sighed.

Her answer was decisive.

"Unfortunately, Mr. Hayes, my presence is indispensable. I am the only representative of Mr. Ravenden on the Yellow-head."

He bowed.

"Please do not quibble," she begged. "Will you saddle Ruffles and bring him up beside Debbie? That will give me time to get into a riding-suit."

He went to do her bidding with that friendly, faithful look in his tawny eyes which is only found in dumb animals who worship men because they do not understand them. Fifteen minutes later they met at the door, mounted, and rode silently down the trail.

No white dress now. That favorite garb was replaced by the plainest and most serviceable of riding-suits. Miss Courtenay was a very able horsewoman, and had been longing secretly for the time when she could

(Continued on page 20.)



The river gurgled on its course.