

The Measure of a Man.

The Pleasant Tale of a Person Who Never Amounted to Anything.

By Juliet Wilbur Tompkins (in Mumsey.)

"Well, exit Felix, R.U.E. I must go down and rehearse"; and Felix rose from the dinner table, dropping his napkin in a crumpled heap. "I wish you would change your mind and take part in the thing, Mils—when I wrote 'Lucile' in especially to fit you."

"But you know I can't act, Felix," Mildred protested, picking up his napkin to smooth and fold it.

"Exactly. 'Lucile' doesn't have to," he said triumphantly. "I told you I wrote the part especially for you. Whoop hoo!" And he crowed happily as he went out.

Mildred laughed helplessly.

"Will he ever grow up?" she said, turning to her father.

He shook his head.

"I don't see why Felix doesn't amount to more," he said in puzzled dissatisfaction. "He certainly had every chance my own boys had. And as for example—Ned, I don't believe you or Harvey ever lost a good opening in your lives; while Felix will refuse the Presidency if he happened to be busy with an amateur play."

"Well, it's having a miserable little income of his own, and half a dozen miserable little talents—that's what has spoiled him," said Ned, lighting such a cigar as a prosperous young business man may afford himself. "And he hasn't any application; one week he will do nothing but drum, and the next it's painting, and the next theatricals or poetry. And not any one done well enough to justify him—a fellow of twenty-eight."

"And yet he is the happiest person I know," said Mildred, in the tone of one fully awake to the feebleness of her protest.

"I'm not down on the boy," her father went on, when he had finished his lecture on a man's duty to the world and himself; "he's as sweet and good a fellow as ever breathed. In all the twenty years he has lived with us, I've never seen a mean or ugly trait about him. It is just that he doesn't amount to anything. Harvey, did you see Ritter to-day about that contract?"

The talk turned to business, and Mildred, escaping to the empty drawing-room, seized the half hour of quiet to get a chapter of "The History of the Philippines" read. It did not really interest her, but she had been brought up to a conscientious sense of the value of time and the necessity of information—self-improvement, she called it, true to the family traditions. When she found her attention wandering, she grasped it firmly and made herself go back to the beginning of the paragraph. That is one reason why she did not cover much ground in her diligent two hours a day of solid reading.

The evening went by somewhat heavily. Harvey went out, but Mr. Alden and Ned recurred to business at intervals, and grew ominous over politics. Janet made them sit breathlessly still while she added her accounts, and became very cross when some one forgot and spoke, obliging her to begin all over again. Mildred, oppressed by the stretch of Philippine history still before her, kept her finger in her place and mastered an occasional page or two in the pauses. She was planning a retreat to bed when the click of Felix's latch key made her change her mind. They all glanced up with an unconscious relaxing of their faces when he came in—a look of mild expectancy with a laugh ready to follow. He went without a word to the piano, and after playing a few bars of Handel's beautiful "Leave Me to Languish," sang in a pathetic tenor, light but true and sweet:

"Leave me to languish, harshly explicit,

Language not fit for a lady's ear! They are not actors, brains are deficit—"

"Felix, Felix!" broke in Janet. "You shall not spoil that song—I won't have it. Don't laugh at him, father; it just encourages him."

"It doesn't spoil it," Felix protested. "I could sing you the other version this moment without moving a muscle."

"But I should laugh," she said. "You have utterly ruined the 'Garden of Sleep' for me. I can never hear anything in the poppy part but 'It is there that the regal red puppies are born.'"

"Oh, well, that song needed to be spoiled," Felix took his hands from the keys and turned about on the stool. "You never saw such acting, Mildred! They got worse with every rehearsal."

"What are you going to charge for the show?" asked Ned.

"Fifty cents to come in and a dollar to go out," said Felix, promptly. "We'll make enough to furnish the whole club house before the end of the first act."

Mr. Alden's eyes twinkled.

"And I always thought you were not much of a business man, Felix!" he said in mock apology.

Felix smiled at him, the little-boyish smile of assumed shyness and deprecation with which he turned aside unwelcome topics, and went back to his playing.

"Come and sing, Ned," he suggested.

Ned had a good bass voice, though it would never have occurred to him to use it of his own accord. He came over to the piano indifferently enough, but was soon rumbling through "Im Tiefen Keller" with evident enjoyment. A new spirit awoke for the moment in his face, obliterating the look of material prosperity based on concentrated business purpose that usually dominated it. Mr. Alden listened complacently, stocks and bonds for the moment forgotten. An hour or two went by before they remembered bed.

Felix and Mildred lingered after the rest, he playing abstractly. She wandered restlessly about the room, then paused with sudden determination, standing behind him.

"Felix, when are you going to do something?" she demanded.

"What?" he asked, frowning over an experiment in chords. "You mean earn more money?" he added.

"Yes; anything that counts, that proves energy and purpose. You can't live along like this forever!"

"Why not?"

"Well—some day you may want to marry."

He broke into the wedding march, then looked up at her with a smile of happy inspiration.

"Perhaps the lady will have something, and then we can do it Dutch treat," he suggested.

She would not be amused. "It isn't the money, Felix," she said impatiently. "It's the amounting to something, counting among men. No girl worth having—"

She broke off and turned away. Felix let his hands drop from the keys.

"Would have me?" he finished finally, without looking up.

"Would be satisfied with you," she amended, half under her breath. After a strained silence she shrugged with an attempt at lightness.

"Well, having delivered my lecture, I will say good night," she said. Felix drew a long breath and looked up at her. Something in his eyes struck from her a quick, pained "Oh, Felix!"

He took the hands she held out and kissed them gently, one after the other, then let them go.

"Good night, Mils," he said.

She hesitated, but he had turned back to his playing, so she went slowly up stairs. At the top she paused. The music had stopped, and the drawing-room below seemed very still. Suddenly she turned and ran down again. He was leaning against the fireplace, staring into the coals.

"Felix, I have hurt you—I can't stand it!" she said breathlessly, coming close to him. He put his arms about her and buried his face in her shoulder.

"It's all true, Mils," he said. "I shall always be what I am now—an unimportant person on a small salary. I can't make myself over. Ned's life—there isn't an hour of his day that seems to me worth living! And yet he is what people point out as desirable. I must be wrong, of course; but to give my soul as well as my days to money making—Mildred, I ought to have died young!"

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She drew his head closer and bent her cheek down to it. "Oh, Felix, how I love you!" she whispered.

II.

Mr. Alden was perplexed, irritated.

"Oh, it won't do, it's impossible," he reiterated. "Until a man has proved himself—and I don't want to be harsh, my dear boy, but you are twenty-eight, and you haven't proved yourself, have you?"

"No," said Felix sadly. "Well, then—" said Mr. Alden, his palms turned out to show his helplessness.

And so Felix packed his paint brushes and his music and his Meredith with his clothes and went out over the wide sill that had meant home to him for twenty years. Mildred said good by to him with passionate courage.

"It will come right; you will do something and it will come right. I know it," she said.

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