

BOYS AND GIRLS

The Driver's Apology

(By David H. Talmadge, in 'The Wellspring'.)

The driver was not a loquacious fellow. During the ride of twelve miles across the prairie he had confined himself to replies, short but not ill-natured, to the questions put by the traveller in whose service he was, and the traveller, who was a native of New England making his first visit to northwestern Iowa, had all but despaired of bringing him out. The driver puzzled the traveller somewhat, for there was that in his face which suggested good companionship. It was an honest face. The eyes, although small and rather deeply set, looked straight and unshiftingly into the eyes of him with whom he spoke. The mouth was a firm one, and the chin was square.

At last the traveller, after a long silence broken only by the grinding of the wheels in the soft earth and the clinking of the metals of the harness, delivered himself of a desperate question.

'Why is it,' he asked, 'that you do not like to talk?'

The driver smiled. 'I do like to talk,' he replied, frankly; 'but when I'm going over this road I'm reminded of things that crowd all else out of my mind. If we'd gone north from town, or east, or south,—land! I'd be talking like a cyclone; but going in this direction it's different. Somehow out here I'm not the same that I am anywhere else. It's a sort of homesickness, I guess, the kind of homesickness that makes a chap want to crawl into his shell.'

'You should have warned me of this,' said the traveller, in mock severity. 'I engaged you this morning because your appearance encouraged me to believe you one whose fellowship would be not only pleasurable but educational. I still think my choice was made in good judgment, but—'

'You're disappointed,' interrupted the driver. 'I'm sorry, and I'm willing to make amends if I can.'

'Then tell me,' said the traveller, snapping at the opportunity thus presented, 'why it is that you are so affected by the atmosphere in this quarter.'

'It isn't the atmosphere'—The driver looked keenly into the traveller's eyes, hesitating. 'Well, I will tell you. Perhaps you won't be able to understand it, but if not 'twill do no great harm. When I came to this country ten years ago with my wife and little girl, I took up a claim on this very spot. All this land that we're driving over was mine. I built a little house in that hollow yonder, and I built a big barn and put up a windmill. I intended to make it my home for life. The future looked brighter to me then than it did later.'

'Yes?' said the traveller, softly, for he thought he scented a tragedy. 'And then?'

'And then,' said the driver, flicking a fly from one of the horses with his whip, 'I gradually lost my hold on things. I had too much land. The taxes swallowed the profits. There were two or three wet seasons running, followed by bad winters. We got along until the third winter, and then we broke down.'

'Yes?' said the traveller again. The driver was gazing toward the spot where his home had been, and there was a suggestion of moisture in his eyes.

'The end came with a crash,' continued the driver, taking up the thread of the story after an interval. 'The cold was bitter that day, and the snow was deep. Our house was nearly buried. My wife had been sick in bed

for weeks, owing to overwork and worry, I suppose, and I was barely able to drag myself round. It makes me groan even now when I think of the pain that was in my head and bones. But I had to keep up. A man can do almost anything when he has to, you know. Our little girl, eight years old,

'No, she didn't worry. She went about the house, singing like a bird. She was mightily pleased at having the dishes to wash and the kitchen floor to sweep. I had to smile—couldn't help it—when I looked at her, bustling about with so much importance, and I tried to seem cheerful. But I couldn't for-



SHE DIDN'T SEEM TO REALIZE WHAT SHE HAD DONE.

was well. If she had been sick I believe that all of us would have been in our graves long ago.'

'She did not worry,' said the traveller, putting stress upon the pronoun.

get that the supply of coal was nearly exhausted, and that the provisions were running low. Something told me, too, that I was on the verge of a bad sickness, and that wasn't exactly comforting. The thought of