

Prize Package Polly

Written for The Western Home Monthly by Edith G. Bayne

CYRUS HARTMAN had only one more errand in the big store. He was glad of it. He didn't take naturally to shopping, but Nancy had given him that morning a lengthy shopping list of household necessities, comprising nearly everything from needles to saucepans, and he had been compelled to leave the sociable circle in the rotunda of the little hotel where he usually put up when in town and sally forth to negotiate the red-tape, the moving-stairway, the supercilious clerks and the fussy crowds of the big departmental store where Nancy always dealt. He hated the city and all that pertained to it—the hot and dusty streets, the unending procession of tired-faced people, the rush and clatter and jangle. The commingled odors of tar, gasoline-exhaust, five cent cigars, talcum powder and restaurant cooking made him ill. He always carried his bills safely pinned to an inner pocket, and looked upon all new acquaintances as possible four-flushers who might try to unload a gold brick on him. He dodged the street cars with admirable circumspection, and his head thrust forward like a duck in a thunderstorm. The "slick city feller" that got ahead of Cyrus would have to get up early. And Cyrus wasn't really happy till he got away—away out upon the winding green trail that led to home and Nancy and supper.

Yes, he had only that dad-blamed linoleum to get now, as he patiently awaited his parcel and change at the notion counter as he heaved a sigh of relief. In another ten minutes or even less he would be turning his horse's heads home ward.

He gazed unseeing at the hurrying throngs of shoppers. The saleswoman who had attended to his wants was discussing some topic of popular interest with two co-workers—store gossip, no doubt, he supposed. He looked at the group in a bored way. He couldn't see why on earth they couldn't just give him his purchases and let him go, instead of sending them all away somewhere in a wire basket first and keeping him waiting.

"It's a plain case of desertion! That's what it is!" came to his ears suddenly and sharply.

Cyrus turned and looked at the speaker as these words penetrated to his consciousness. She was a severe-looking woman with hair that was drawn back tightly from a narrow brow, little keen dark eyes, and the general appearance of a female Diogenes, without the lantern. It was she who had served him.

"Your change is coming," she snapped, as she caught his glance.

"Oh, Miss Crabbe, do you really think she was deserted?" asked a young girl who was measuring hat elastic beside her.

"That's what I call it," averred Miss Crabbe, as she rearranged some tumbled boxes. "And I've seen a lot of happenings in my time. I ain't worked here ten years for nothing. . . . Something for you?" she added, approaching another customer.

"But she's bound to turn up. The store is so well systematized—" began a timid-looking girl who was down on her knees, pulling out new stock.

"Oh she'll turn up all right enough, poor little thing," Miss Crabbe cut in, "and then she'll be sent to the Refuge or a Home for Orphans or something."

Cyrus now leaned across the counter. "Scus me," he said, addressing Miss Crabbe. "Has there been a-a-an abduction or anything round here?"

Miss Crabbe turned a cold eye on Cyrus.

"Abduction nothing!" she rapped out. "It's only rich kids that get abducted. This is a case of abandonment. Haven't you heard about it? . . . Two rolls of this madam? Very well. . . . Why the news is all over the store!"

"I didn't hear nothin', so help me Han-ner!" declared Cyrus.

"Well, she was the sweetest little thing you ever saw. She couldn't have been more than five years old, and she had lovely golden curls and big blue eyes and was dressed just swell, wasn't she, Nettie? The mother—though it's a sin

to call such a creature that—was here at this very counter right after lunch and she had the child with her then. You couldn't help but notice them, they were that striking. People turned around and stared wherever they went."

"And where was she lost?"

"Right here in this store, they say. About three o'clock. Up on the fourth floor. But, of course, it might have been anywhere. If the mother left her on the fourth floor she'd hardly go right to the store detective and tell him so, when she'd made up her mind to desert the kid," and a suspicious moisture gathered in the hard eyes of Miss Crabbe as she spoke.

Cyrus made clucking sounds with his tongue against his teeth, sounds indicating sympathy and horror and his utter lack of words.

"The mother," went on Miss Crabbe, "was one of those fluffy blondes that the men fall for. She had a babyish helpless look, but I guess it was all put on. I sized her up for an actress. Didn't you, Nettie?"

"Oh yes, she was certainly an actress," agreed Nettie. "My! I never saw such a pretty child in all my life. A perfect picture."

"You mean t' say her ma went an'—an'—" began Cyrus, inarticulate with wrath.

"Abandoned her? Well, what else does it look like? The store has been

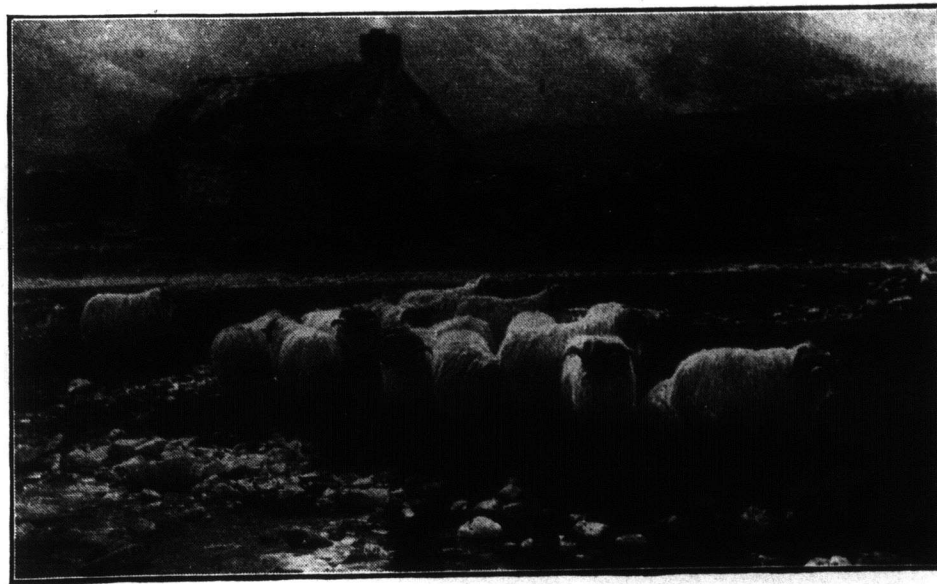
tive frame of mind. Elevators were his especial horror, so he trudged up the four flights of stairs till he arrived in the section where Nancy's roll of linoleum, which she had picked out from a bargain lot last time she had been in town awaited him.

"That's one thing they can't put in a wire basket and send for a ride!" chuckled Cyrus, and then perceiving the clerk, waved his hand after the manner of a signalman telling a freight train that the way was "all clear" and hailed him thus: "Where's that there roll o' oilcloth my old lady told you to keep for her, young feller? . . . Eh? The name? Why, Mrs. Cyrus Hartman o' the Bar K ranch to be sure!"

After a short search the bulky package, tied about the middle with a bit of rope, was found and Cyrus "hefted" it and finally decided that although it weighed a mite more than he had expected he would nevertheless scorn the assistance of any "store help" and just take it down and out to his wagon himself. He always carried his own parcels, he said.

The clerk humored him, but told him he would have to take the freight elevator to the ground floor.

"Well, well," said Cyrus, resignedly. "Mebbe goin' down won't be so disagreeable as goin' up. I do hate that all-gone feelin' at the belt line though. Still, come t' think now I couldn't be more empty there than I am, cuz I had my lunch in one o' your caffays here and they didn't gimme enough to keep a bird alive an' stuck me four bits jest



Aristocrats of the Downs

searched all over twice and there isn't a trace of the little thing. They say the mother took on terrible up in the manager's office, but, of course, that would be part of her role. She claimed that she had left the child in the toy department while she looked at some rugs—what an actress would want with rugs beats me—and that all of a sudden she caught sight of a friend and they stopped to have a chat—the usual bunk—and that when she went to get the child she wasn't to be found. . . . Cashier! Rustle this gentleman's change and be quick about it."

"I bet you could find her," remarked Cyrus admiringly. "I'll be gosh-durned if you don't look like a sister o' Sherlock Holmes!"

"I've got sense," admitted Miss Crabbe, reaching up to the parcel-carriage that now came trundling along. "Sorry 't have kept you," and she emptied the change into Cyrus's big brown paw and handed him his package.

"An' you say she was an actress, eh?" observed Cyrus, stowing his parcel into his capacious pocket. "My my, ain't it a pity them stage folk have to have children at all!"

To his single-minded integrity the profession, especially for women, was the ne plus ultra of iniquity. Miss Crabbe merely smiled a tight-lipped smile at his shocked accents.

"Oh, we mustn't be so narrow as to disparage what is sometimes a noble calling," she said generously. "Still that kind of life is bad for children, and I just hope some decent honest hard-working person finds the little girl and keeps her."

Cyrus went on his way in a rumina-

the same. Gosh-all-hemlock! It beats my time how you fellers manage to keep body an' soul together! So long, an' beggin' your pardon. No harm meant."

The clerk watched Cyrus disappear and then shrugged his shoulders and murmured something about "fresh old rubes"; but as the store's biggest trade came from just such as Mr. Hartman he was perforce obliged to be philosophical over the matter.

Cyrus drove rapidly out toward the suburbs, humming a happy little tune meanwhile. Nancy would have fresh doughnuts and pancakes and maple-syrup for supper, in addition to his favorite pork pies and scalloped potatoes. Presently as twilight drew on he became silent, cogitating upon city life and its baleful effect on young people. That clerk now, the puny pale-faced shrimp! Wouldn't he be much better out on a farm doing a real man's work?

And he wasn't the only one. There were lots of others that slid through the draft because they were too insignificant, too small and spindling to bother with. Perhaps Mr. Hartman was a trifle prejudiced about cities. Back of all this was the experience of his own so well known to the neighborhood, when his only son Jim had rebelled and left the parental roof to seek a livelihood in town. He reflected gloomily on this, flicking the off horse with the whip from time to time, and wondering what Jim looked like now after nine years of living in towns and cities. Would he be a dressed-up dude with a sallow skin and socks and necktie that matched like that clerk? God forbid!

"Nine years, by heck!" muttered

Cyrus. "Swallowed up by the great maw o' the city. Went to Chicago an' Frisco an' then New York, an' in all them years he ain't sent us more'n four postcards. . . . Poor Jim. Never had no use for a plow, did Jim. Purty mean luck, an' me gittin' old an' sorter used-up in the hind-legs. . . . Always was strong for music—fancied he had a voice! Poor Jim. . . . The durn fool! . . ." and a great sigh rent the bosom of Mr. Hartman, wealthy rancher and deacon of the church. "I'm considered by some a hard-boiled old hypocrite, a heartless pharisee, cuz I licked the feller that time. . . . I wonder now. . . . I wonder if mebbe I wasn't a mite hard on him after all. . . . He was only seventeen. . . ."

The thought was by no means a new one, but to-day it seemed to acquire a fresh poignancy for some reason. Perhaps Cyrus was feeling more tired than usual after a trip to the city. Of late these journeys seemed to tucker him out quickly. He was getting on, he reflected. Yep! Pushing towards seventy now.

Coming apparently from some distance the wail of a child suddenly broke in on his reveries.

"Sounds like his pa was lickin' him good," muttered Cyrus, and the crying becoming more voluminous he added: "If I had my hands on the person that's makin' that kid howl I'd mop up the floor with him!"

A hot unreasoning, anger stirred him.

"I bet it's Bartlett. He calls me a harsh old bird. I'd sure like to demonstrate to him that he was right for once."

Bartlett was known to have once beaten his wife.

Cyrus heard the crying again several times, receding apparently now, as he whipped up his team. Cyrus was a trifle deaf, however, so he eagerly scanned the wayside for a stray child to be sure he overlooked no chance of seeing him. The sun was setting and the air was pleasantly cool now with a slight breeze stirring the restless poplars. A soft frog-chorus came from a nearby slough, intermittently. Birds twittered in sleepy strain. Cyrus had been smoking and now he put his pipe away for the buildings of the Bar K loomed suddenly up in the middle distance. Ten minutes later he drove briskly through his lane-gate and brought up with a loud "whoa!" at the side door of the ranch-house. Simultaneously Nancy appeared, a fresh white apron covering her neat alpaca dress.

"You're late," she greeted her spouse. "It's sech a nice night I was beginnin' to suspect you was out joy-ridin' with some designin' blonde widdler."

"You hadn't oughter put them ideas in my head Nance!" returned Mr. Hartman, descending rheumatically and throwing the lines to his hired man. "I don't deny I'd lots o' chances to flirt, but I swear they can't none o' them tempt me—not when I got sech a fine old girl as you to home! Supper ready?"

"Ready an' waitin'. Did you fetch that there linoleum for the settin' room floor?"

"Don't I always get what I go after? Tell the old man to pull down the stars an' he'll make a try at the job anyhow, you bet. Gosh! What's that?"

"What's what?" asked Nancy, stopping in her task of lifting parcels from the wagon. "I don't hear nothin'."

"Listen, then. . . . There. . . . Con-sarn it. It's a kid cryin'! I been hearin' it this half hour or more. Some folks have 'bout as much heart as a turnip. It seems to me some o' them got too many kids. If they had less (or none at all) they'd appreciate them more! . . . Great Caesar's ghost! You ain't let them young kittens out, Nance!" and Mr. Hartman peered under the wagon, for the sound seemed to come from a point near at hand now.

But Nancy made no reply. She was tugging frantically at a pair of small, white-stockinged legs that protruded, wriggling, from one end of the big roll of linoleum.

"I swan to cal'late!" muttered Cyrus, staring, stock-still.

"Don't give me no gab, Cyrus Hartman, but lay holt o' the roll an' pull from the other end," directed his wife.

"I guess it's one o' them Bartlett young ones, playin' tricks as usual. Mighty nigh smothered herself too, I reckon."

Cyrus obeyed and finding that the im-