

## \* \* The Story Page \* \*

### "Naturally Born to Fears."

BY ALICE MORGAN.

Evangelistic meetings were in progress in Mountville and the town was vocal with gospel hymns.

Flutterings of pleasant excitement pervaded the Old Ladies' Home one evening, for the president of its Board of Managers, who always insisted that "her old ladies" should take in something of every pleasure that was available, had sent carriages to convey them.

But dear old Mrs. Black had more than one excuse for remaining at home.

"For one thing," she said, "I like the old tunes best; you see I don't have to strain my ears to catch the words." Upon a little "candle-stand" lay her old half-bound hymn-book. She laid a hand upon it, fondly outlining its edges with her short, plump fingers, and went on smilingly. "Now here's 'O for a thousand tongues,' 'A charge to keep I have,' and 'Crown him Lord of all,' and plenty more beside that I know all by heart, and if anyone only just hums the tune I know what word's a-come next all the way through; and there isn't anything newer than that's prettier."

"But we've allowed both the domestics to go," said the president, "and the matron and her family have planned to go too; it doesn't seem right to leave you here alone."

The old lady laughed merrily. "Why, what harm can come to sister Sudie and me?" she said; "we'll just sit here in my room as safe and snug as a bug in the rug, and we'll 'Auld Lang-Syne' it till you all come back."

"Well, good-bye both of you," she said, hesitating in the doorway, "I think you'd better lock the door after me; nobody'll trouble you, of course, but then it's always best to be on the safe side."

"So it is," said Mrs. Black, and limping to the door, she turned the key.

"I'm glad they've got off in good time," she said, coming back into the room; "it's only early candle-light now."

"Candle-light!" laughed her companion; it's funny, sister Mary Lib, how you do cling to the old fashions and expressions; it must be living this secluded life that keeps you so far behind the age."

Both sisters were "in their seventies," and there was only three years difference in their ages. But in their intercourse they made a great deal of that three years. Mrs. Black always insisted upon sister Sudie's sitting in the cushioned rocking-chair because "you are the baby, you know," and sister Sudie always overcame that argument with: "Sister Mary Lib, you are really getting along in years—you begin to show it, too—and you're entitled to easy-chairs and foot-rests and all the comforts that come along."

On the stand lay a gray yarn stocking, in which four needles were bristling in the close quarters of "toeing-off." Mrs. Black seated herself and began to knit, her eyes meanwhile wandering over her glasses to the crazy patchwork her sister was feather-stitching.

"In that album quilt," she said, "that you helped me put together the year before I was married, there's one piece that I can't exactly call to mind, whether 'twas old Aunt Anne's husband's mother's frock, or Cousin Malvina's; maybe you can tell, Sudie."

She fetched the quilt, and they spent an hour in going from piece to piece, identifying each, and refreshing their memory of long ago. Now and then they had to dry their glasses, but oftener they laughed in age-mellowed but happy trills. Over all the pieces they lingered, as loth to part with old friends, and some they smoothed gently and with unsteady fingers.

Said sister Sudie, "I don't know when I've enjoyed such a pleasant evening; there I"—drawing a corner of the quilt into plainer view—"Rache Harrison had that very frock on when the robbers came. Remember how they tied her fast in a chair while they ransacked the house, and didn't find but two shillings and sixpence? Catch hold now, Mary Lib," springing suddenly to her feet, "and we'll fold it up."

Having hung the carefully-folded quilt over the back of a chair, she sat down again. "And speaking of robbers, Mary Lib, there's another thing where progress has been made since you were young. Robbers accomplish a sight more now than they used to. Why, Sister Mary Lib, you're mewed up here in this quiet place, and you don't begin to know what's going on in the world."

Mrs. Black had placidly resumed her knitting "Where ignorance is bliss," she said, "it's folly to be—"

"It's folly to be ignorant of robbers' doings, Mary Lib. You want to be posted so that you know how to act when they come. Why, Mary Lib,"—the sisters looked earnestly over their spectacles into each other's eyes,—"'it's all the fashion now for robbers to torture old people to make them tell where their money is."

"Ugh-h-h." Mrs. Black drew her feet close up under her skirts.

"Yes, sir!"—The excited narrator hitched her rocking-chair round and clapped a hand upon her sister's knee. "A new-fashion robber'll put the bottoms of your feet against a red-hot stove, or if there isn't a stove he'll blister them with matches!"

"Why, I'd give up my money, Sister Sudie." The shivering old lady felt of her lame foot with her hand.

"I don't know's I would—not till I felt a blister rising, anyway. But suppose you hadn't enough money to satisfy them, and you couldn't make them believe you hadn't any more?"

"Oh, I don't know, I'm sure. My foot's hurting terribly. Are you sure I locked that door, Sudie?"

"Yes, I heard it click. Hark! don't you hear somebody coming up the walk?"

The door-bell clanged peremptorily. For a moment the dear old ladies held their hands over their fluttering hearts, then—

"I'll go," said Mrs. Black, "and, Sudie dear, you crawl under the bed."

But Sudie was sooner at the door. "Who-h, who-h, who-h's there?" she panted, with her ear close to the keyhole.

"Is this the Old Ladies' Home?"

"It's a man's voice," whispered sister Sudie, "and it's fierce as a lion's."

Mrs. Black softly shoved her away, and bent her own head to the keyhole.

"Ve-yes, it is," she quavered, "but there's nothing here that you want—you'd better go away—there's nobody here but just two poor old—"

"O-h-h, for goodness sake!" whispered her sister hoarsely, "Mary Lib, Mary Lib, don't tell him that! O-h-h, you're so unsophisticated! See here," she called out, sternly, "there's two men down in the kitchen, and we've got a great, big, savage dog here;—he's chewed up ever so many thieves,—robbers, I mean—he's chewed up ever so many travelers, and if we let him out on you I won't be answerable for the consequence, so you'd better move on."

"O-h-h, Sister Sudie! no lie prospers!"

"Don't be frightened; I only want to find out where—"

"We never keep a bit in this house; every one of us has been down to the bank this afternoon and deposited our very last cent, but I'll tell you what I have got; I've got a pistol here that'll shoot seventy-five times, and—"

"Oh-h-h," Mrs. Black wrung her wrinkled little hands, and aspirated a remonstrance. "What a—tangled—web we—we—are." Why, dear Sister Sudie, he'll know that's a misrepresentation. No pistol can shoot seventy-five times!"

"Mary Lib, there's only one way to deal with them. Then shouting, 'I'm ready for you!' The little defender lifted her frock skirt and took something from the pocket swinging by her side.

"Pray listen to me: don't be frightened; I wouldn't harm you for the world."

"O I know you wouldn't," with a fine sarcasm, "but I suppose you wouldn't move on—not if our lives depended on it."

"I wouldn't be too severe, Sister Sudie. 'A little word in kindness spoken,' you know." Then Mrs. Black appealed plaintively:

"You wouldn't come in to burn our feet, would you? We're only two old women—at least I am. Sister Sudie isn't so very old, and we've only just a little money, and—"

"If you'll only tell me—"

"Where we keep our money?" No, sir, I won't, but I will tell you that we're prepared to defend it to the very last penny. This pistol of mine," she grasped her weapon resolutely in both hands, as if to impress the men on the other side of the door, and pointed it at the keyhole, "is in first-rate order, and it'll shoot—well, ten times, I'm sure!"

"O-h-h, dear Sister Sudie, I can't let you do it! I can't let you send him to judgment before his time! Let me speak to him." Mrs. Black pushed in front of the keyhole. "Poor man, if you'd come in the daytime I'd be willing to spare you a little money, just to keep you till you could get honest work to do."

"My pistol's pointed right at you, and it'll sure shoot twice!"

"Won't you please tell us what you want, poor man?"

It was what he'd been trying to do all along.

"I'm looking for my mother—and I've heard she's in this Home; maybe you are she. Aren't you Mrs. Mary E. Black?"

The door flew open, whether he pushed or she pulled doesn't signify. It had been slightly ajar all the time, for she had turned the key prematurely, and the bolt had not shot home.

"Your voice shook so, mother, that I didn't recognize it—not till you began to repeat the hymns."

He carried her and set her down in the very chair she had rocked him to sleep in times without number. "And Aunt Sudie, too," giving her one hand, and patting her shoulder with the other, "clear grit, same as ever."

"You bad, bad boy, why didn't you make yourself known?"

"O my Robert wouldn't frighten us of purpose, Sister Sudie; he never had any bad tricks like that."

"Now, Mary Lib, I want to know if you're going to begin again to humor that boy the way you used to twenty-odd years ago?" At variance with her tone, Aunt Sudie's look was fond and happy.

"She didn't humor me." Settled on the arm of his mother's chair, Rob threw his arm over her shoulder. "I'll acquit her of that charge. The way she used to make me sit in the corner and learn hymns! Why, I consider that I've expiated all the sins of a lifetime that way, and earned some indulgences beside."

Aunt Sudie tried to look shocked, but the mother hadn't heard. She had caught sight of a muddy boot.

"Now, Robert, your feet are wet!"

"No, mother, as dry as a bone."

"I'm afraid they're a little damp. We'll find some dry stockings."

He followed her to the bureau.

"That one," she designated the lowest drawer, and he drew it open. It was nearly full of knitted stockings, the work of all her leisure moments for four years.

He looked up into her face, his eyes full of self-abasement and pathetic inquiry.

"Oh, I knew you'd come to wear them," she said, half ashamed, but ecstatic, "and you were always hard on your stockings."

He let himself down upon one knee, aimlessly handling the balls of stockings. She could reach him now, and she laid her hand upon his shoulder with a stroking motion. He had "filled out so," she said. She let the longest of his hair drift over her hand; it had "grown so dark," and he was "brown as a berry."

"Will those do?" he asked, handing a pair up to her without raising his head.

She unfolded them for him, smoothed them out, and made him sit down before the fire and put them on.

Of course his explanation of four years' absence and silence was satisfactory to her, and for justice's sake, I must say that it would have convinced a jury of less partial people than men's mothers are apt to be. But Aunt Sudie, affecting an ironical wag and tone, said:

"O, yes."

She was gently reproved: "Rob was never a story-teller, Sister Sudie. And right now, Sudie dear, before I forget it, I want to tell you that I do disapprove of your carrying concealed weapons, but if you insist upon doing it, let Robert examine that pistol and see if it's safe. He's been to the war, and he knows all about shooting machines."

Aunt Sudie came forward with the mien of a culprit, explored her capacious pocket and produced—her spectacle case.

Her sister looked shocked but unutterably relieved, her nephew writhed with laughter.

"Talk about being 'humored,' Aunt Sudie, why twenty years ago if mother'd caught me fibbing like that, she'd have made me learn Watts from cover to cover."—The Interior.

### \* \* \* When the Cap Fitted. \* \*

Duke looked up from the bone he was gnawing and glared at his little mistress and her visitor. His bushy, bushy tail did not even hint at wagging, there was a fierce light in his eyes, and a low growl rumbled down in his throat.

Ruth caught Marian by the arm. "Oh, let's run!" she cried. "He's going to bite us."

"No, he won't if we don't touch his bone." Marian felt ashamed of her dog, and vainly tried to think of some excuse for his conduct. "I don't know what makes him act so," she said, as the two walked on.

"Is he always as cross as he has been since I came?" asked Ruth.

"He didn't use to be," returned Marian, sorrowfully. "But now he's getting crosser and crosser all the time."

They had reached the front porch by this time, and behind the woodbine stood Marian's brother Paul. His face was red with anger, and his fists were clinched.

"I'm going straight to mamma, Miss!" he exclaimed, as he saw Marian. "We'll see if she lets you talk that way!"

"What way?" asked Marian in astonishment; and Ruth thought of her own brother and felt very glad he was not as ill-tempered and unreasonable as Paul.

Paul paid no attention to his sister's question, but he went into the house, slamming the door very hard. A