

Choice Literature.

FOURTEEN TO ONE.

A TRUE STORY.

BY ELIZABETH STUART PHILIPS, IN "THE CENTURY."

It was almost deadly still. How long the evening! Seven—eight—half-past eight o'clock. She tried to sew a little, mending his old coat. She tried to read the religious news in "Zion's Herald"; this failing, she even ventured on the funny column, for it was not Sunday. But nothing amused her. Life did not strike her as funny that night. She folded the coat, she folded the paper, she got up and walked, and walked again.

Pretty little home! She looked it over tenderly. How she loved it. How he loved it. What years had they grown to it, day by busy day, night by quiet night. What work, what sorrow, what joy and anxiety, what economy, what comfort, what long, healthy, happy sleep had they shared in it! As she passed before the fire, casting tall shadows on the chintz curtains, she began to sing again, shrilly—

Home—home, dear, dear home!

Nine o'clock. Yes, nine; for the rickety old clock on the library shelf said so, distinctly. It was time to stop pacing the room; it was time to stop being anxious and thinking of everything to keep one's courage up; it was time to put the Johnny-cake on and start the coffee; he would be hungry, as men-folks ought to be; God made 'em so. It was time to peek between the hollyhock curtains, and put her hands against her eyes, and peer out across the cornfield. It was time to grow nervous, and restless, and flushed and happy. It was not time, thank God, to worry.

The colour came to her withered cheek. She was handsomer as an old lady than she had been as a young one, and the happier she grew the better she looked, like all women, young or old. She bustled about, with neat, housewifely fussiness. She knew that her husband thanked heaven for her New England home-craft—none of your "easy" Southern housekeeping for Levi Matthews. What would have become of the man? As she worked she sang unconsciously: "Dear, clean home!"

The Johnny-cake was baking briskly. The candles were lighted. The coffee was surred, and settled with the shell of an egg; it was ready to boil. It was quarter-past nine. Mrs. Matthews' head grew a little muddled from excitement. She began again at the top of her voice:—

How firm a foundation ye saviours of the Lord!
Is laid for your faith in an excellent home!

The clock wedged between the concordance and the dictionary struck half-past nine with an ecclesiastical tone; dogmatically, as if to insist on the point: as a tenet on which she had been sceptical.

Mrs. Matthews stopped singing. She went to the window. The coffee was boiling over. The corn-cake was done brown. She pulled aside the curtain uneasily. The pine-wood fire flared, and blinded her with a great outburst of light. She could see nothing without, and stood for a moment dazzled. Then she began to look intently, and so accustomed her eyes to the masses of shadow and the lines of form outside. The road wound away abruptly, lost in the darkness, like a river dashed into the sea. The cornstalks closed over it, stark and sear; she opened the window a little and heard them rustle, as if they were discussing something in whispers. Above the corn shot the gaunt arm of the prickly locust, burned and bear. The outlines of the mountain were invisible. The valley was sunk in the night. Nothing else was to be seen.

As she leaned, listening for the sedate hoofs of old Hezekiah, or the lame rumble of the blue waggon wheels, the rooster uttered from his pen a piercing crow, and the bantam hen responded with an anxious cluck.

She could have killed either of these garrulous members of her family for the interruption. The chicken always crowed when she was listening for Mr. Matthews. When the irritating sounds had died away on the damp air with long, wavering echoes, a silence that was indescribably appalling settled about the place. Nothing broke it. Even the cornstalks stopped. After a significant pause they began again; they seemed to raise their voices in agitation.

"What in the world are they talkin' about?" she said, impatiently. She shut the window, and came back into the middle of the room. The corn-cake was burning. The coffee must be set off. The supper would be spoiled. She looked at the Methodist clock. Mr. Cruden and the Rev. John Wesley seemed to exchange glances over its head, and hers. It lacked seven minutes of ten.

"But it isn't time to worry yet."

The woman and the clock faced each other. She sat down before it. What was the use in freezing at the window, to hear the rooster? and the talking corn? She and the clock would have it out. She crossed her work-worn hands upon her chocolate calico lap, and looked the thing in the eye.

What a superior, supercilious clock! What a theological, controversial clock! Was there ever a clock so conscious of its spiritual advantages? So sure it knew the will of the Almighty? So confident of being right about everything? So determined to be up and at it, to say it all, to insist upon it, to rub it in?

Five minutes before ten—three—two. Ten o'clock. Ten o'clock, said in a loud, clerical tone, as if it were repeating ten of the Thirty-nine Articles to a bishop.

"But, oh, not quite time to worry yet!" Ten minutes past. A quarter past. Twenty minutes. The woman and the clock eyed each other like duellists. Twenty-five minutes past ten. Half-past. Deborah Matthews gasped for breath. She turned her back on the clock and dashed up the window full-length.

The night seemed blacker than ever. A cloud had rolled solemnly over the mountain, and hung darkly above the house. The stalks of corn looked like corpses. But they talked like living beings still. They put their heads together and nodded. As she leaned out, trembling and panting, a flash of unseasonable lightning darted and shot; it revealed the arm of the locust tree pointing down the road. A low mutter of distant thunder followed; it rolled away, and lapsed into a stillness that shook her soul.

She came back to her chair in the middle of the room, by the centre-table. The final struggle with hope had set in. It seemed as if the clock knew this as well as she. The ticking filled her ears, her brain, her veins, her being. It seemed to fill the world.

Half-past ten. It was as if some spirit appealed to the minister's clock. Oh, tell her so, softly. Say so, gently as religious love, though you be stern to your duty as religious law. Twenty-five minutes of eleven—a quarter of—

The woman has ceased to look the clock in the eye. It has conquered her, poor thing; and, now that it has, seems sorry for her, and ticks tenderly, as if it would turn back an hour if it could. Her head has dropped into her hands; her hands to her knees; her body to the floor. Buried in the cushions of the old rocking-chair, her face is invisible. Her hands have lifted themselves to her ears, which they press violently. She herself lies crouched like a murdered thing upon the floor.

Eleven o'clock. She must not, can not, will not bear it. Eleven o'clock. She must, she can, she shall. Past all feminine fright and nervousness, past all fancy and waste of weak vision, and prodigal anxiety, past all doubt, or hope, or dispute, it is time to worry now.

Deborah Matthews, when it had come to this, sprang to her feet, gave one piteous, beaten look at the clock, then stayed to look at nothing more. She flung open the door, not delaying to lock it behind her, and dashed out. She was as wild as a girl, and almost as agile. She ran over the rocks, and slipped in the mud, and sunk in the holes, and pushed into the cornfield, and thrust out her hands before her to brush the stalks away, and stood for a moment to get her breath underneath the locust tree. How persistently, how solemnly that black arm pointed down the path. She felt like kneeling to it, as if it were an offended deity. All the pagan in her stirred. Suddenly the Christian rose and wrestled with it.

"Lord have mercy!" she moaned. "He's my husband. We've been married thirty years."

"Hain't I prayed enough?" she sobbed, sinking on her knees, in the mud, among the corn. "Hain't I said all there's any sense in sayin' to Thee? What's the use in pesterin' God? But, oh, to mercy, if Thou couldst take the trouble to understand what it is to be married—thirty years—and to set here in the cornfield lookin' for a murdered husband. He can't," said Deborah Matthews, abruptly starting to her feet. "God ain't a woman. It ain't in nature. He can't understand."

She pushed on past the burned trees and out towards the highway. It was very dark. It was deadly lonely. It was as still as horror. Oh, there—

What tidings? For good or for ill, they had come at last. Deep in the distance the wheels of a bow-legged waggon rumbled dully, and the hoofs of a tired horse stumbled on the half-frozen ground. Far down the road she could see, moving steadily, a little sparkle, like a star. She dared not go to meet it.

Friend or foe might bear the news. Let it come. It must find her where she was. She covered her face with her shawl, and stood like a court-martialed soldier before the final shot.

"Deborah?"

Far down the road the faint cry sounded. Nearer, and advancing, the dear voice cried. He was used to call to her so when he was late, that she might be sure, and be spared all possible misery. He was infinitely tender with her. The Christianity of this old minister began with the marriage-tie.

"Deborah? Deborah, my dear? Don't be frightened, Deborah. I'm coming. I've got home."

Kissing and clinging, laughing and sobbing, she got him into the barn. Whether she clambered over the wheels to him, or he sprang out to her, whether she rode, or walked, or flew, she could not have told; nor, perhaps, could he. He was as pale as the dead corn, and seemed dazed, stunned, unnatural to her eye. Hezekiah probably knew better than either of these two excited old people how they together got his harness off, with shaking hands, and rolled the waggon into the shed, and locked the outbuildings, not forgetting the supper of the virtuous horse who rests from his labours after fifteen miles on a Kennebec road, and at the age of thirty-one.

"Lock the doors," said the minister abruptly, when they had gone into the house-place. "Lock up everything. Take pains about it. Give me something to eat or drink, and don't ask a question till I get rested."

His wife turned him about, full in the fire-light, gave one glance at his face, and obeyed him to the letter. Perhaps, for the first time in her life, she did not ask a question. His mouth had a drawn, ghastly look, and his sunken eyes did not seem to see her. She noticed that he limped more than usual as he crossed the room to lay his old felt hat on the barrel top beneath the library.

"You are used up," she said; "you are tuckered out! Here, drink your coffee, Levi. Here. I won't talk to you. I won't say a word. Drink, Mr. Matthews, do, dear."

He drank in great gulps, exhaustedly. When she came up with the corn-cake, having turned her back to dish it, she heard a little clicking sound, and saw that his right hand closed over something which he would have hidden from her.

It was the old pistol; he was loading it, rust and all. The two looked at each other across the disabled weapon.

"It's all we have," he said. "A man must defend his own. Don't be frightened, Deborah. I'll take care of you."

"You might as well out with it," said the old lady, distinctly. "I'm ready to hear. I'm not a coward. New Hampshire girls ain't. I should think you'd know I'd been through enough in this God-forsaken country—for that."

"Well," slowly. "Well, I suppose you're about right, Deborah. The fact is, I've had a narrow escape of it. I was warned at the meeting. We had a gratifying meeting. The Spirit descended upon us. Several arose to confess themselves anxious—"

"What were you warned about?" interrupted his wife. "Never mind the anxious seat. I've sat on it long enough for one night. What's the matter? Who warned you?"

"I was warned against the Klu Klux Klan, that's all," returned the parson simply, picking up the crumbs of corn-cake from his knees, and eating them to "save" the bread. "They lay in wait for me on the road home. I had to come round over the mountain, the other way. It was pretty rough. I didn't know but they'd detail a squad there. It was pretty

late. The harness broke twice, and I had to mend it. It took a good while. And I knew that you—

"Never mind me!" cried Mrs. Matthews, with that snap of the voice which gives the accent of crossness to mortal anxiety. "Tell me who warned you. Tell me everythin', this minute!"

"That's about all, Deborah. A coloured brother warned me. He has been desirous of being present at all the means of grace, of late. But for the—the state of public sentiment, he would have done so. He is that convert brought to me privately, a few weeks ago, by our new brother, Deacon Memminger."

"I don't know's I half like that Deacon Memminger," returned the wife. "He got converted pretty fast. And he's a stranger in these parts. His speech ain't our speech, either. But it's a Southern name. Did he warn you?"

"He was not present to-night at the dispensing of the Word," replied the minister. "No, I was taken one side, after the benediction, without the building, by the coloured brother and warned, on peril of my life—and on peril of his—not to go home to-night, and to tell no man of the warning."

"But you did—you came home."

"Certainly, my dear; you were here."

She clung to him, and he kissed her. Neither spoke for many minutes. It seemed as if he could not trust himself. She was the first to put in whispered words the thought which rocked the hearts of both.

"When they don't find you—what will they do?"

"My dear wife, my dear wife, God knows."

"V'hat shali you do? What can we do?"

"I think," said the minister in his gentle voice, "that we may as well conduct family prayers."

(To be continued.)

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A STARTLING CONTRADICTION.

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DEAR SIR,—There is an old adage that says "a prophet is not without honour save in his own country," and the saying is generally accepted as containing much truth. Indeed it is expanded into the generally-accepted belief that true merit, whether it be that of an individual or that of some medicinary preparation, is much more likely to meet with popular approval at a distance than at home. Nasal Balm, acknowledged as being the greatest remedy for cold in the head and catarrh, ever offered the people of Canada, affords a striking instance of the fact that popular opinion, for once, at least, is wrong. From the outset its popularity in the home of its manufacture has been unbounded and constantly increasing. In evidence of this we offer testimonials from two Brockville gentlemen who are known throughout the Dominion.

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