

## Too Old to Dress Well

By Mrs. John J. Funk

"Mamma, I do wish you would fluff your hair like Mrs. Susie Barker," said twelve-year-old Flossie Stone.

"Mum hasn't any hair to fluff, besides she's too old for such nonsense," announced Percy Stone; "I've heard her tell dad so loads of times."

The Stones sat at breakfast. The summer sun shone brightly. Father Stone, a mild-eyed, rosy-cheeked man, shook his head at his son Percy speaking with the ten-year-old bluntness of boyhood, then looked quizzically across at Mother Stone.

"Mrs. Stone vouchsafed no reply to the remarks of her children, but a flush crept upward from the severe, highly-cut collar of a faded gown, over a thin, sal-low face and disappeared among the wisps of straw-colored hair. She rose hastily from the table and spoke sharply, 'It's school time, children.' While the youngsters seized hats and luncheon, Mrs. Stone cleared the table with nervous haste and as they scampered away faced her husband with a pair of flashing black eyes.

"You needn't stare so, Father Stone. Nice way to allow children to sauce their mother. Maybe, I can't fluff my hair! Maybe, I am too old for such nonsense," bitter scorn in every tone; "but, pray, why is it so? Nothing else than slavery! Work, work from morning till night, but, what is far worse, is the everlasting mention of Susie Barker. Her perfections are flaunted on all occasions!"

"Why mother, mother, no need to get worked up so. You don't need to work so hard, I've often pleaded with you to take a bit more leisure, and—," Mr. Barker heard a door slam and finding himself alone shook his head muttering, "No use to follow her in the present mood," and taking his hat from its nail proceeded to his out-doors labors.

Mother Barker, seeing from the sitting room window the form of her husband walking slowly toward the barn, returned to the kitchen and commenced washing the dishes in a perfect frenzy of motion.

"Susie Barker, Susie Barker, bah!" she soliloquized contemptuously; "Pa is always quoting Susie Barker to me as an example as how I should dress or live or work. That's bad enough, but when Flossie and Percy begin to harp on Susie Barker and my old looks—God, it's too hard to bear!" Her lips trembled for a moment, then compressing them into a firm line, Mrs. Stone never ceased her toil until her whole large house was in apple pie order, even to the scrubbing of the cellar stairs.

As the clock struck twelve at midnight, Mother Stone crept wearily in bed beside her sleeping husband. "Maybe they'll forget the thin hair and old looks when I'm dead and a sloven comes to keep the house. Like as not Pa will marry Susie Barker. She's a widow now and only cares to fluff her hair, wear peek-a-boo waists and display a goodly length of silk stocking. I—" but Mrs. Stone was sleeping.

As she slept she dreamed. Susie Barker and Father Stone stood together in the parlor of the Stone farm house. Susie Barker played with the lapel of Father Stone's best broadcloth coat and smiling up into his face observed sweetly, "Your first wife was dreadfully thin and homely. Remember the wispy, straw-colored hair and sallow face?" Susie Barker laughed gleefully. Father Stone with sudden ardor clasped the yielding charms of Susie Barker to his heart and Mother Stone in Spiritland heard him murmur fondly, "But, now you're my wife, Susie." The fluffy head was resting on the broadcloth coat. A peek-a-boo waist opened boldly at Susie's white throat. "Oh, my God," said Mother Stone in Spiritland; "Oh, my God." The agony of protest broke the chains of slumber. Mother Stone awoke to earthly scenes and senses.

The early rising sun shone in a glory of crimson and gold. Father Stone stretched lazily, and sleepily inquired, "Time to get up, Mother?"

Mechanically, Mrs. Stone performed her morning duties. Her mind was dazed with that dreamland picture. As

soon as the chattering children were off to school and Father Stone had gone for a day's journey to the hay fields, Mrs. Stone betook herself to her sleeping chamber. There she sat before the long mirror of her dresser. "You do look a perfect fright," she told her image in the glass. "How lovely Susie Barker looked last night." Mrs. Stone tore open the tightly closed collar of her gown. "My neck is just as white as Susie's but I am too thin. The curves which should be soft and full are angular and flabby. Oh, dear, no wonder they all quote Susie Barker for an example. Pa must surely be in love with her, else why is he always talking of her? Why the dream of last night?" She raised her eyes above the mirror—a calendar came to view; listlessly she looked for the date, then sprang erect: "August 12th, why it's my birthday, and I'm thirty-four years old. Susie Barker is forty next month. I should look younger than she. What was that I heard at the health lecture I attended last week so scornfully at Pa's request. Let's see," Mrs. Stone dropped again into the chair which faced her image in the glass. "Ladies," the trained nurse said, "keep your good looks—they mean more than spic-span houses. Tonic the falling hair, soften the wrinkling skin with a good cold cream, use rice powder sparingly, dress prettily, be young, be happy, fulfill your beautiful duties as wives and mothers, but," how sweetly the nurse spoke then, "keep the place where gods do dwell, beautiful, entire and clean." Mother Stone stood erect once more, and running to a wardrobe drew forth a hat and coat. "Oh, my God forgive my long neglect of self. Help me to gain the love and admiration of husband and children. What a pretty, soft, young thing you are, mamma, how well I remember those words spoken by Pa when Flossie was a baby and to think I could just as well be soft and pretty now. I will be too; why you're only thirty-four to-day," shaking her head at the mirror's reflection, for, at the looking glass she was now standing, hastily adjusting hat and coat.

"Susie Barker is forty and she's a vision of loveliness."

Mrs. Stone ran lightly down stairs and out into the dewy freshness of the morning. "Gobble, gobble," said a flock of turkeys whom she flustered in her sudden flight. Mother Stone laughed delightedly. "What a lovely world it is. Look at the beauties around you, Mother Stone; sniff the sweetness of those roses among the shrubbery! Aren't you the lucky woman, though—only thirty-four and Susie Barker forty. Oh, I'm young, young and I'll yet be white and soft and curvy. Once more I want my husband's love and caresses. 'God's in His Heaven; all's right with the world.'"

Down the white ribbon road hurried Mrs. Stone to the town, seen only a quarter-mile distant from the farmstead.

Mr. Stone, returning from the hay fields, stopped in the town also. Then hurrying home, sneaked upstairs and washing, dressed carefully in his second best suit. "Mother'll scold me for being so silly, but, nevertheless, here goes. I do hope the children'll remember what I told them."

The children did remember. Soon the trio found themselves awaiting Mother Stone in the dining room where supper was wont to be spread.

Approaching footsteps. The door opened, "Happy birthday," shouted Flossie and Percy in unison; "Many happy returns," called Father Stone. Then there was a silence. Was that Mother Stone, that smiling sweet faced woman courtesying before them—a sparkle in her eye, a fluff to her hair, a flush in her cheeks and—wonder of wonders—a soft, white, frilly gown which fell gracefully away from a slender, white neck!

The children ran to their mother and clasping her hands gazed adoringly into her smiling eyes. "How pretty you are, mother," said Flossie, almost fearfully. "You bet, she's pretty," avowed irrepressible Percy; "puts Susie Barker in

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