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"Just Once."

BY MARY MORRISON.

Abner Stone was dead and buried. The very breezes seemed to blow about the old house with more freedom than they had done for years, even daring to flutter the staid white curtains in the solemn front room through a raised sash which was itself an innovation. "Windows were made to let in light not wind," so had declared the law and the prophets, to which Almira Stone had meekly assented. She usually opened the door for a weekly airing, but to-day there were sashes raised, to-day when Almira Stone was to go forth over the worn threshold for the last time. "There would be nothing to call her back to the home of Abner Stone's children," she thought with almost a feeling of joy which she quickly suppressed. It was not seemly, here where the dead had so lately lain. Joy indeed might come with the morning when she should have put the old life far behind her, but not to-day. Her belongings were all packed. They were not many; only her meagre wardrobe of bare essentials and a few quilts and blankets. Almira Stone had not brought great plenishings when she came to Abner Stone's house as his second wife, and the years had made sad havoc with that little. One modest box and a small iron-bound trunk bore the address of "Miss Mabel Ross, East Bradford." She had directed them to Mabel Ross rather than to Mrs. Almira Stone. Some way she felt that they were more sure of reaching a tangible destination. Mrs. Almira Stone and East Bradford were as yet incongruous elements with but two things in common—Mabel and Gilbert. They were her's, and East Bradford had welcomed them into its ranks of workers. Henceforth they were to share one home as they had done years ago when Mabel was a child of ten and Gilbert a baby of four; when she had done washings and ironings for the people of Temple. In those days Mabel had trudged about and gathered up bundles of soiled linen and carried them back renovated and cleaned. Now she sat all day in the private office of Morris and Crane and translated queer hieroglyphics on the keys of an instrument that clicked distractingly.

Gilbert was doing well, too, for a boy of fourteen. He earned fifty cents a day as errand boy in the same establishment. They were both smart children, very much like their father.

The kitchen was very quiet; the slow tick of the clock seemed to cut the silence into solid intervals that rebuked her idle hands. How many hours she had sat here at the window and filled each one with regular precision, so many stitches of knitting, so many of patching, so many of coarse needle-work. There were no intervals for idle thought in Abner Stone's household. She looked up apologetically as John came into the kitchen. John Stone was very much like his father.

"The train goes at half-past three. I suppose you will be ready in half an hour," he told her.

"I can be ready any time, John," she said humbly. There was a certain briskness in his manner which impressed her. It had always seemed to her that he regarded her in the light of an intruder, especially since his father had signed over the place to him. Since then she had felt that she was there only on sufferance.

Mabel and Gilbert had not come to the funeral. They had been forbidden the house three years ago.

It was evening when the train ran into East Bradford station. Amid the confusion of strange faces she stood bewildered for a moment, then a familiar voice greeted her heartily.

"Hello, mother. You're here safe and sound, ain't you? Right this way," he said, as he led her to a waiting cab with a grand air of ownership. There were the street-cars, but they would not do for this occasion. This was his carriage for the time, and no stranger should intrude upon its privacy. When he had closed the door he threw his arms about her neck boyishly. "I wanted my ma," he told her. "I wanted to hear somebody say again, 'Gilbert, put on your overcoat and tie your throat up good this morning.' Nobody cares anything about a fellow up here as long as he is able to 'get there.' There was no one to observe his blushing cheeks as she kissed them again and again. He was her baby still, she thought fondly, though he had grown so tall and so manly.

At the door of a modest flat, Mabel met her and welcomed her home with a tender embrace.

"It is only a wee nest, but it is big enough to hold the mother-bird and her two nestlings, and that is big enough isn't it, mother," she asked gaily.

It was for this she had saved and planned, the hope that one day they should all be together again as they had been years ago. She had been in a very fervor of joy ever since she had realized that her mother was free. At last it was coming, this dream of hers, and she worked feverishly for its fitting completion. All her little savings had gone for its beautification, and she felt justified as she regarded her mother's worn face and quiver-

ing lips, that had no words with which to answer her. She took off the rusty black bonnet and smoothed back the faded gray hair, with smiles that were very near to tears.

Almira Stone looked about the small sitting-room, with its bright breadths of wool carpet, its comfortable rockers and cozily cushioned couch, its pale tinted walls upon which hung a bit of tender green woodland, and a gray old shepherd guarding his flocks upon the gray hills, over which the lamp shone softly. Through an open door she could see a tiny tea-table set for three, and smell the fragrance of steeping tea. She wiped her eyes furtively. This was more than home, it was heaven; in-to it could creep no querulous fault-finding, no petty exactions, no grudging toleration.

She went about in a dazed condition for the next few days. It was so strange, these long, restful hours, while the children were away at their work; so new to find her wants anticipated and supplied without remark, so new to be the recipient of service which all her life long she had rendered. The labor required to keep the home sweet and dainty seemed so little in return. She did not take into account the mother-love that her dear ones wore daily as an armor of protection against the sharp corners which lie in wait to rend all the world's servants, be they ever so willing and able, and which made them strong for the day's battle. She yearned for some more tangible expression of her love.

One day Mabel slipped a ten dollar bill into her hand. "For a new dress, mother," she said. "The sale's are all on now; you had better go down this afternoon when we go and look around. It will do you good to get out."

They left her at a corner gay with fluttering fabrics. "Enjoy yourself until six," they told her as they hastened down the street.

She followed the hurrying throng inside and looked about her timidly. Counters brilliant with lengths of lustrous ribbon, gleaming with sheen of silk, bewildered her with their gorgeous display, each one a bargain. She wandered on between interminable lengths of counters each loaded with bargains and each presided over by a smiling saleswoman whom she regarded with respectful awe. It was all so totally different from anything she had ever seen before.

Just ahead was the counter of black wool goods; she paused beside it. Here were serges and cashmeres and brillantines and crepons, and unfamiliar goods with unpronounceable names, that charmed her by the peculiarity of their weave. They were beautiful and suitable for her use. Just across the aisle a collection of rare-hued muslins appealed to her with dainty tints of color that drew her irresistibly toward them; rose and lavender and blue—the blue of the wood violet. She stood there silent, dreamy-eyed. Mabel's face, a rosy childlike face, looked up into hers from filmy folds of seashell pink that she had never been able to buy for her before. She was such a pretty child; it had always been a sorrow to dress her in dark, unlovely colors. She remembered seeing a wide sash of silk that matched the muslin in exquisite shades of color. There were other counters glittering with golden ornaments at which she stood a long time also. When she left them she held a tiny golden chain in her hand.

She went feverishly from one counter to another; silk ties; laces and books were added rapidly to her collection; even a grotesque jack-in-the-box found its way inside the bundle that grew into generous proportions.

The day passed quickly; it was sunset when the children came. Gilbert carried home the precious package which she refused to intrust to other hands.

When it was untied they examined it with undisguised astonishment.

Sue looked from one to the other, deprecatingly. A sudden sense of the unfitness of the articles seemed to strike her for the first time.

"I'm afraid they won't be much good to you—now," she said. "I never bought anything like that for you before, and I've wanted to, always. I felt as if I'd got to see how it would seem to do it—just once. I guess I must have been a little crazy," she laughed consciously. "Years ago I wanted to get a pink dress for you like this, Mabel. I dreamed about it nights and scribbled and saved—but Abner said we was out o' tea. And that neck chain is just like one I watched in Parsons' window for weeks, thinking how pretty it would look on your white dress, but I wasn't ever able to get it. I don't suppose that blue tie with the white anchors embroidered on the ends is suitable for a boy as big as Gilbert, nor them Robinson Crusoe books, but he always used to want 'em and I never could get 'em for him before. I've wasted the money I s'pose." Her manner was appealing.

A sense of all that her mother's life had missed came to Mabel with new meaning; all its repressed longings, its starvation of soul. In the light of it each token became a precious thing.

She gathered them impulsively into her arms. "They are more than clothes and ornaments now, mother; they are treasures laid up in heaven," she said softly.

Gilbert examined the tall building opposite through the magnifying power of two big tears and whistled cheerily. Then he turned suddenly away from the window.

"I've always wanted to read Robinson Crusoe and now I mean to do it—after supper," he said.—Interior.

* * How Dick's Hair Was Cut. * *

"Do it while I am away, then," said Dick's mother. Then she looked down in her plate, and her lips trembled.

Dick looked first at his father, who was smiling; then at his mother, who was not. After that he felt of his girl curls. He did want them cut; but if his dear mother felt sad about it—so his lip began to tremble, too.

"All right, Momsey dear," said Dick's father. "We will have it all done when you get home to-morrow night from grandmother's. And Dick will be a real boy then."

"Us men's don't wear curls, you know, Momsey," said Dick, anxiously. And then they all laughed.

The next morning, Dick and his father ate breakfast alone, for mother and Mary Esther, Dick's sister, had gone.

"Here, Dick," said his father, after breakfast was over; "here is a quarter; you go down to the barber shop where I go, and get your hair cut."

"All alone?" asked Dick, delighted.

"Yes," said his father; "you know the way. I shall be away all day, I am afraid, but I will be back to eat dinner with you to-night, if not for luncheon this noon, and you can eat luncheon with Harlow."

So Dick started down the street directly after breakfast. But on the way he passed a well-known toy shop, full of wagons, and Dick had been longing for a wagon for weeks.

"A quarter," said Dick, fumbling it, "is really too much for hair, and just about enough for a wagon."

So he went inside. "How do you do, Mr. Burns?" he asked, affably, as he saw his friend, the proprietor, approaching. "I thought I'd buy one of your wagons. I've considerable money for it with me."

"All right, Dick," said Mr. Burns, smiling. "Which one do you want?"

Dick showed his good judgment by selecting a fine one. The price was four dollars, but Dick did not ask the price. He put down the quarter and walked off with the wagon, and Mr. Burns charged Dick's father with three dollars and seventy-five cents.

Dick found the wagon heavy—or else it was his conscience—something at all events, made him walk slowly, as he came near home.

"I'm glad my father isn't home," he thought; "for now I will have to cut my own hair, and it's better to do it over at Harlow's house."

Harlow was very much interested in it all, and they went to the barn, and with Harlow's dull, round-pointed scissors and a great deal of trouble, Dick cut his curls very short in some places and quite long in others.

"You look," said Harlow, critically looking at him with his head on one side, "as though you had buttons on your head."

"It doesn't make any difference how I look, if I only don't look as if—as if—I did it," said Dick, anxiously.

"It does, though," said Harlow.

"Do you think it will look that way after dark—'bout dinner time—when my father comes home?" continued Dick, still anxious.

"Maybe not," said Harlow, doubtfully.

"Well, I will stay here till dark, then," said Dick, taking what comfort he could from Harlow's doubtful assurance. It was a very long day, and by no means a happy one. Harlow brought him some luncheon in the barn, and he kept out of sight as much as he could from Harlow's relatives.

But dinner-time came at last, and Dick went slowly home, leaving the wagon in Harlow's care.

"Come here, Dick," said his father, who was sitting under the brightest electric light in the house. "You are late. Let's see how you look. Why, what on earth—?" And the forlorn little figure sobbed out his story on father's shoulder.

Dick's mother always thought Dick's father was a little too indulgent, but he straightened up now, and said, gravely, and in what Dick thought a very dreadful voice: "You may take that wagon back to-morrow morning, Richard, and tell Mr. Burns all about it, get your money, and then go to the barber shop and get your hair properly cut."

Dick thought the way of the transgressor was indeed hard, the next morning, when he trudged down the street, his tam far over his funny-looking head, and dragging the now detested wagon after him.