

AN HUMBLE HERO

BY THOMAS P. MONTFORT

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(Continued from last week.)

She found her arms on the table and dropped her head on them and began to sob. Sam stood watching her, a sickening dread stealing over him. Uncertainly he hesitated for a moment, then went to her and put out his hand and began to stroke her hair. She drew away from him, and a cold shudder ran over her. He stood aloof and looked on her, his face painfully white and drawn and a hard, tense sensation clutching at his heart.

"Louesey," he said presently, "what does this mean? Why do you treat me like that?"

She made no reply, but continued to sob. He reached out his hand again and placed it gently on her head, and again she shrank from him as though his touch were poison. Her action cut him deep, and a pain, sharp and poignant, passed through his soul. When he spoke again, his voice was low and husky.

"Louesey," he said, "is it true, as Mary Mann says, that you don't love me?"

She did not answer, and when he had waited a moment he repeated his question. This time she looked slowly up until her eyes met his. From that moment there was no need for her to speak. In her eyes he only too plainly read her answer to his question. Slowly, as one in a dream, he turned to leave the room. There was a queer sensation of emptiness about his head, and everything around him bore a strange air of unreality. At the door he stopped and put his hand up to his forehead and for a full minute stood like one dazed. Then, turning his eyes once more on his wife, he said:

"My God, Louesey, you are killing me! You have broken my heart. Oh, please, please tell me it is not true, that look I saw in your eyes, and that you do love me!"

She did not raise her head, but between her sobs he heard her murmur:

"I can't, I can't, I don't love you!"

Without another word he passed from the room and went staggering uncertainly down the walk to the street. He felt that he had received a death-blow, and in reality he had received that which was far worse, for death would have brought an end to pain and suffering, and this brought pain and suffering only.

At the yard gate he stopped, and, leaning heavily against a post, he looked



"For God's sake, don't say that!"

ed back at the house. Through the window he saw his wife sitting as he had left her, and a great yearning came over him to take her in his arms and hold her to his bosom and kiss her. But the next moment he remembered the words she had spoken and the look she had given him, and, laying his head against his arm, he said sadly:

"But she is not mine! She is not mine!"

CHAPTER IX.

A DANGEROUS MEETING.

Although a couple of weeks had passed since James Melvin arrived on Possum Ridge, the public had by no means lost interest in him, and neither had his curiosity regarding him been in any degree satisfied. He was still an object of wonder, and speculation concerning him—his past life and character and his purpose in coming to the Ridge—was as rife as it had ever been.

Of course his statement to old man Turner that he had come there to prospect for mineral had spread abroad among the people, but there were very few who believed for a moment that there was a word of truth in it. There were no mineral developments in that section and, so far as any one knew, no indications of mineral deposits.

In view of these things, what likelihood was there of a company of capitalists sending a man there on any such mission?

Pap Sampson, so boastful of his ability to judge people at first sight, had been compelled to admit, though he did it reluctantly enough, that for once he had made a mistake when he so confidently asserted that Melvin was a preacher and that his object in coming to Possum Ridge was to hold some "meetings" at the Coon Run "meeting house." Jason Roberts, still having an excuse for holding to his first formed opinion, continued to argue that he was there for the purpose of buying something. But Jason was alone, or very nearly so, in his opinion, and both he and Pap had the satisfaction of seeing Jim Thorn, a mere upstart, holding the lead in public opinion for once.

Melvin soon observed that wherever he went the people watched him curiously and that the great majority of them showed an unmistakable disposition to avoid him. He could engage but few of them in conversation, and if he approached a group of them and undertook to show them the social side of his nature they immediately began to exchange furtive glances and presently, one by one, dropped away until he was left alone.

Of course this conduct on the part of the people was unpleasant to a stranger, for it made him feel that he was not welcome and that his company was less preferable than his absence. To Melvin it was more. It not only annoyed him, but it disturbed him. A man who is carrying in his bosom a dread secret is always under an apprehension that he is going to be found out, and any little peculiarity in the conduct of those about him is sure to excite his suspicions and awaken in him a feeling of uneasiness.

Several times during the two weeks Melvin had made visits to Beckett's Mill, ostensibly to make trifling purchases at the store, but in reality for a far different purpose. Each time, however, he had come back as he had gone, his purpose unaccomplished. But at last fortune favored him.

One evening he had left the village to return to Turner's, where he was still stopping, when in passing through a thick wood he came suddenly face to face with Mrs. Banks. Both started back in surprise, but Melvin recovered himself quickly, and, grasping her hands in his, he looked full into her face and cried:

"Thank God, Louisa, I have met you at last!"

Then he caressed her hands, his mind in such a tumult that he could find no further words to speak, and when after a moment she would have drawn her hands away he held them fast.

"Don't, please don't!" she said in tones of soft remonstrance, looking anxiously around. "Please let me go!"

"No, no!" he replied. "Don't ask me to do that. It would be cruel after I have hungered and starved for a sight of you all this long time. Oh, Louisa, you don't know how I love you and how I have missed you and yearned for you! Oh, my darling!"

He made a movement to put his arm about her, but she tore herself from his grasp and, staggering back, stood leaning against a tree. She was trembling all over, her face red and white by turns and an uneasy, scared expression in her eyes.

After a momentary pause he advanced toward her, but she held up her hand to stop him.

"You forget," she said in low tones. "Forget what?" he asked, his eyes fixed eagerly on her.

"That—that I am married."

He hesitated an instant, then said slowly:

"No; I don't forget that. I wish to heaven I could and that you could forget it too. But I love you, Louisa, and if you were married a thousand times I'd love you. It may be wrong, but I don't believe it is; but, right or wrong, I love you, and I'll always love you. I can't help it."

A light of heavenly bliss swept over her features, then quickly died away.

"Don't say that," she pleaded. "You have no right."

"But I have," he replied. "I love more right than any one else, for I love you more, and you love me. Isn't that true, Louisa? Don't you love me?"

She made no reply, but hid her face in her hands. Presently he repeated: "Don't you love me, Louisa?"

She waited a moment, then looked up appealingly.

"You are cruel, cruel!" she cried. "If you were not, you'd spare me. You have no right to ask me that."

"Then it is true," he cried joyfully, "and you do love me."

She looked up into his face and said quietly:

"God knows I do! It is wicked, but it is true, and I cannot help it. I love you with all my heart and all my soul."

"It is not wicked!" he replied. "We learned to love when we had a right, before you married that man. It is not as though we had begun to love now. You were mine—your heart and your soul—before you became his. We loved each other then, and it is not wicked in us that our love will not die."

"I don't know," she answered thoughtfully. "It seems like all happiness is wrong and that we can't do right without being miserable. Oh, I don't know why we should ever have met!"

"Say rather that you don't know why we should ever have parted," he said.

"Oh, Louisa, why did you go away from me when you knew I loved you and wanted you to be my wife? Why did you leave me when you loved me?"

"I didn't know then."

"Didn't know what?"

"That I loved you."

"Didn't you know it then?"

"No. I knew I liked you, and I thought of you sometimes in a different way from what I ever thought of any one else, but I was young, and I didn't know what love was."

"Why did you marry—that other?"

"My parents urged me, and I liked him. I even thought I loved him. Afterward there was an awakening, and then I knew the truth. That awakening was bitter and cruel."

"And you suffered," he said softly, placing his hand on her head. "My poor little girl!"

"I suffered," she replied wearily, "and God alone knows how much I suffer yet."

"I know," he said, again taking her hands in his. "But there is the future."

She shook her head slowly.

"It will be the same as the past and the present. I shall go on suffering to the end."

"But you need not."

"I must."

He was thoughtfully silent for a little while. Then he said:

"Louisa, you have no right to sacrifice your life and happiness, and not only your life and happiness, but mine. It would be a sin, a far greater sin than—the other."

She knew his meaning, and she drew away from him. When she spoke, there was resentment in her voice.

"I don't think I have given you any excuse for saying that," she said. "If I have, I didn't mean it. You must let me go."

"Have you nothing more to say to me after all our long separation?" he asked in hurt tones.

"I have said too much already," she replied.

"I did not mean to say anything to hurt you, and I humbly and sincerely



"Don't, please don't!"

beg your forgiveness. Loving you as I do, I would not hurt a hair of your head. Won't you believe me, Louisa?"

"I—yes; I believe you. Now let me go."

"No, no, not yet! Think how long it has been since I saw you! Don't go just yet."

"I must."

"You are cruel, Louisa."

"It is you who are cruel."

"How?"

"Can't you understand what your keeping me here means?"

"I can understand that it means a taste of heaven to me."

"And more pain and suffering for me."

"Why should it do that?"

"Do you think I have no conscience?"

"No, but—"

"Do you think it costs an honest woman nothing to keep a thing like a secret from her husband?"

"I don't know. But, there, I will not keep you, though it is hard to let you go. When shall I see you again?"

"Never."

"No; don't say that! I must see you."

"It is best that we should never meet again, best for both of us."

"Never?"

"Never in this world! We should never have met this time."

"Do you regret our meeting?"

"Nothing good can come of it, nothing but more pain and more misery. Why did you come here at all?"

"I couldn't help it. You were here, and I couldn't stay away."

"When you knew I was married. You are weak—weak—than I, and you are a man."

"No; I love more. If you loved me one-half as much as I love you, you would not be so cold and exacting."

She looked at him a moment with an incredulous smile on her lips.

"Listen," she said. "I have told you that I love you, and now I may as well tell you this. I love you so much that I worship your very shadow, while one drop of your blood, one atom of your flesh, is more precious to me than all the millions of human beings on this earth. Is your love greater than that?"

"No. But yet you drive me from you."

"I do, because I know it is best and because I am strong enough to resist temptation. You must leave here, and we must never meet again. Goodbye."

"Wait a moment. Did you receive my note that first day I came?"

"Yes."

"I am glad of it. I was afraid the boy I sent it by might lose it or get it misplaced. You knew you were from?"

"Of course."

"And I presume you wondered what it meant?"

"Naturally. I could not understand why you should be so anxious to keep your name a secret."

"Shall I tell you?"

"Just as you please."

"I think I would better. I am in hiding."

"In hiding! From what?"

"From the law."

She started back with a little cry of surprise and pain and placed her hand on her breast.

"Oh, Frank!" she cried. "You have not committed a crime? Don't tell me you have!"

"Louisa," he said in all seriousness, "I have done something dreadful, something I would give all the world to undo. But it was not my fault. I did it because I could not help it."

She looked up at him wonderingly, while a terrible sensation of fear and dread tugged at her heart. With that keen, unaccountable intuition peculiar to women she guessed the truth at once, but she would not accuse him even to himself. She drew a little nearer to him and spoke in low tones.

"Frank," she said, "tell me the truth. What have you done?"

"Are you sure," he asked, "that I had better tell you?"

"Yes; I must know."

"But it is dreadful, Louisa."

"Yes; I expect the worst."

"The very worst."

"And you do not shrink from me?"

"No, because you say you were not to blame and that you couldn't help it."

"But I tremble to tell you."

"Have no fear for me. I believe what you have said. You have—"

"Taken the life of a fellow man!"

CHAPTER X.

NEIGHBORLY GOSSIP.

"You uns may say what you please, an you uns may say it just as long as you uns please; but as I have said before an as I'll continue to say, that's somethin' pow'ful heavy a-weight on Sim Banks' mind."

"Lord, Pap Sampson, you're been a-sayin' them words till we uns have all done learnt 'em by heart, an you can keep on a-sayin' 'em till you're wore 'em plumb out, if you want to, but I tell you right now you're barkin up the wrong tree. I've said before, an I say ag'in, that all on earth's the matter with Sim Banks is that he's fixin to have a spell of fever."

"You have said that, Jason Roberts, an mebbey you have said somethin you know, an mebbey you hain't. My notion is you hain't. But if you'll allow me I jest want to ask you one question."

"You jest go ahead, Pap Sampson, an ask all the questions you please. I'll answer all I kin of 'em, an when you ask one I can't scrape up no answer for I'll holler."

"Very well. Now, then, Jason Roberts, can you tell me why a feller fixin to have a spell of fever would go moppin round for two long weeks, not a-feelin sick nor nothin, but jest actin for all the world like he'd lost ever cent he owned an ever friend he had to his back? Can you jest tell me that?"

"Couldn't a feller fixin to have the fever act that a-way?"

"Mebbey he could, Jason, but he don't. You hain't answered my question, though."

"My notion is, Pap, that that ain't no need of him answerin it, for I reckon you an Jason's both got the wrong pig by the tail."

"If you're so smart, Jim Thorn, why don't you retch into the pen an git a hold of the tail of the right pig?"

"I have."

"Then you jest show that pig to us an let us see its color, will you?"

"I will. All on earth's the matter with Sim Banks is jest this. He's in love with the Widder Mann, an he's mounin round 'cause he can't have her."

"That's the color of the pig you got by the tail, is it?"

"It are."

"Then, Jim Thorn, all I got to say is that you didn't even git your pig outen the right pen. The one you got's a plumb stray."

"That's jest your notion, Pap Sampson, but you jest wait an you'll see."

Pap thumped his cane down almost viciously.

"Jim Thorn," he said, "you'll never make me believe no sich a thing as that of Sim Banks, not if you preach it till your head's as bald as a pumpkin. I've knowed Sim since he wa'n't no bigger than a cat, an I can say, an say it open an aboveboard, that I ain't never yet knowed him to do ar'y a single thing that he had any call to be ashamed of."

"My land, Pap, do you think beln in love with Mis' Mann is anything to be ashamed of?"

"It would be for a man that's already got a woman shorely, an I don't know, Jim Thorn, but what I'd be ashamed of it even if I didn't have no woman."

There was a general laugh at this, which caused Pap to straighten up and look important.

"That's a putty hard knock on the widder," Hicks observed presently, "but if Pap was a widower I bet he wouldn't talk no sich a way."

"Nary time he wouldn't," Jason agreed. "Lord! if Pap was single, he'd be cuttin round after the women wuss'n a hungry cat after cream."

"That's all right, Jason," Pap said, "an I reckon you ain't talkin so moughty much out of your head as some folks mought think. Lord a-massy, it's a pow'ful good thing for these young chaps round here that I hain't single. Lord, I'd soon have all their noses out of joint even if I am risin on to 70."

"You 'low you could cut 'em all out, Pap?" Hicks asked.

"Jest as easy as fallin down a well. Why, shucks, Jake, don't you know I'd have the pick and ch'ice among the women?"

"Mebbey you wouldn't, Pap," some one said, "if that Mr. Melvin were to turn loose an take to sparkin round."

"Reckon Sim Banks' wife is the only woman Melvin keers 'bout sparkin," young Sam Morgan observed.

Pap Sampson brought his cane down emphatically.

"Sam Morgan," he said, "do you mind how Sim Banks done Jim Thorn that, right here on this platform, the other night?"

"I guess I do," Sam replied.

"Then let me tell you that if you ain't achin to be done the same way, you'd better tighten the reins on your hosses a little an be sorter keeful whar you drive."

"I hain't afeard of Sim Banks."

"You better be if you git to lettin your tongue run on Louesey."

"I hain't said nary a word about Louesey, have I?"

"Waal, mebbey not exactly."

"But I will say this, Pap Sampson. I wouldn't want no wife of mine meetin that feller out in the woods an standin a-talkin to him, with him a-bolt of her hands."

"You mean to say, Sam Morgan, that Louesey Banks done that?"

"I ain't callin no names, Pap Sampson, but I reckon most anybody ort to see through a board if it's got a auger hole in it."

The men exchanged a surprised glance, but for a little while no one

spoke. Finally, however, Hicks broke the pause.

"Sam," he said, "have you been seein that Melvin an some woman doin like you said?"

"Thout mentionin no names, Jake, I'm bound to say I have."

"When was it, an whar?"

"Yistiddy evenin, right down here in Sim Banks' own piece of timber land."

"Tell us all 'bout it, won't you?"

There was a concerted hitching of chairs up closer around Sam, and a hush almost as still as death fell over the little group. There was little, very little, of excitement or interest in the lives of the citizens of Possum Ridge, and when anything strange or out of the common did happen they liked to make the most of it and enjoy it to the fullest possible extent.

Then, too, in this instance, they scent-ed something in the way of scandal, and that made them all the more eager listeners. Unsophisticated and simple as they were, they possessed that insatiable curiosity and that morbid love of the unsavory which are not altogether things apart from the lives of many of the more cultured.

Sam Morgan, finding himself the center of an eager group who waited with open mouths for him to speak, felt his importance, and it was excusable in him that he remained silent for a little while to enjoy the situation. It was not every day he could occupy a position like that, and it was very natural that he should desire to make the most of it.

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