THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN.

"Yes, mother, he will come. Of course he will come!" and the girl turned her drawn and anxious young face toward the cottage door, just as if her blind mother could see the action. It is probable that the old woman divined the longing glance from the change in the girl's tone, for she,too,half turned toward the door. It was a habit these two women had acquired. They constantly looked toward the door for the arrival of one who never came through the long summer days, through the quiet winter evenings; moreover, they rarely spoke of other things; this arrival was the topic of their lives. And now the old woman's life was drawing to a close,as some lives do, without its object. She herself felt it, and her daughter knew it. There was in both of them a subtle sense of clinging. It was hard to die without touching the reward of a wondrous patience. It was cruel to deprive the girl of this burden, for in most burdens there is a safeguard, in all a duty, and in some the greatest happiness allotted to human existence.

It was no new thing,this waiting for the scapegrace son; the girl had grown up to it, for she would not know her brother should she meet him in the street. Since sight had left the old mother's eyes she had fed her heart upon this hope. He had left them eighteen years before in a fit of passionate resentment against his father,whose only fault had been too great indulgence for the son of his old age. Nothing had been too good for dear Stephen—hardly anything had been good enough. Educated at a charity school himself, the simple old clergyman held the mistaken view that no man can be educated above his station. There are some people who hold this view still, but they cannot do so much longer. Strikes, labor troubles and the difficulties of domestic service; so-called gentleman shop-keepers and lady milliners—above all, a few colonies peopled by university failures—will teach us in time that to educate our sons above their station is to handicap them cruelly in the race for life.

Stephen Leach was one of the early victims to this craze. His father, having risen by the force of his own will and the capabilities of his own mind from the people to the church, held, as such men do, that he had only to give his son a good education to insure his career in life. So everything—even to the old parson's sense of right and wrong—was sacrificed to the education of Stephen Leach at public school and university. Here he met and selected for his friends youths whose futures were insured,and who were only passing through the formula of an education so that no one could say they were unfit for the snug government appointment, living or inheritance, of a more substantial sort that might be waiting for them. Stephen acquired their ways of life without possessing their advantages, and the consequence was something very nearly approaching to ruin for the little country rector. Not having been a university man himself, the rector did not know that at Oxford or Cambridge, as in the army, one may live according to one's tastes. Stephen Leach had expensive tastes,and he unscrupulously traded on his father's ignorance. He was good-looking, and had a certain brilliancy of manner which "goes down" well at the varsity. Everything was against him, and at last the end came. At last the rector's eyes were opened, and when a narrow-minded man's eyes are once opened he usually becomes stony at the heart. Stephen Leach left England, and before he landed in America his father had departed on a longer journey. The ne'er-do-well had the good grace to send back the little sums of money saved by his mother in her widowhood, and gradually his letters ceased. It was known that he was in Chili, and there was war going on there, and yet the old lady's faith never wavered.

"He will come, Joyce," she would say, "he will surely come!"

And somehow it came to be an understood thing that he was to come in the afternoon when they were all ready for him—when Joyce had clad her pretty young form in a dark dress and when the old lady was up and seated in the chair by the fire in winter, by the door in summer. They had never imagined his arrival at another time. It would not be quite the same should he make a mistake and come in the morning before Joyce had got the house put right. Yet he never came. A greater infirmity came instead, and at last Joyce suggested that her mother should not get up in bad weather. They both knew what this meant but the episode passed as others do, and Mrs. Leach was bedridden. Still she said:

"He will come, Joyce! He will surely come!"

And the girl would go to the window and draw aside the curtains, looking down the quiet country road toward the village.

"Yes, mother, he will come," was her usual answer, and one day she gave a little exclamation of surprise and almost of fear.

"Mother," she exclaimed, "there is someone coming along the road."

The old lady was already sitting up in bed staring with her sightless orbs toward the window. Thus they waited The man stopped opposite the cottage, and the two women heard the latch of the gate. Then Joyce,turning,saw that the mother had fainted. But it was only momentary. By the time she reached the bed her mother had recovered consciousness.

"Go," said the old lady, breathlessly; "go and let him in yourself."

Downstairs on the doorstep the girl found a tall man of 30 or thereabouts with a browner face than English suns could account for. He looked down into her eager eyes with a strange, questioning wonder.

"Am I too late?" he asked, in a voice which almost seemed to indicate a hope that it might be so.

"No, Stephen," she answered. "But mother cannot live much longer. You are just in time."

The young man made a hesitating little movement with his right hand and shuffled uneasily on the clean stone step. He was like an actor called suddenly upon the stage, having no knowledge of his part. The return of this prodigal was not a dramatic success. No one seemed desirous of learning whether he had lived upon husks or otherwise, and with whom he had eaten. The quiet dignity of the girl, who had remained behind to do all the burden, seemed in some subtle manner to deprive him of any romance that might have attached itself to him. She ignored his half-proffered hand, and, turning into the little passage, led the way upstairs. Stephen Leach followed silently. He was rather large for the house, and especially for the stairs; moreover,he had a certain burliness of walk, such as is acquired by men living constantly in the open. There was a vaguely pained look in his blue eyes, as if they had suddenly been opened to his own shortcomings. His attitude toward Joyce was distinctly apologetic. When he followed the girl across the threshold of their mother's bedroom the old lady was sitting up in bed, holding out trembling arms toward the door. Here Stephen Leach seemed to know better what to do. He held his mother in his arms while she sobbed and murmured out her joy. He had no words, but his arms meant more than his lips could ever have told. It would seem that the best part of happiness is the sharing of it with someone else. "Joyce" was the first distinct word the old lady spoke, "Joyce, he has come at last. He has come! Come here, dear. Kiss your brother. This is my first born—my little Steve."

The young man had sunk upon his knees at the bedside,probably because it was the most convenient position. He did not second his mother's proposal with much enthusiasm. Altogether he did not seem to have discovered much sympathy with his sister whom he had left in her cradle. Joyce came forward and leaned over the bed to kiss her brother while the old lady's hands joined theirs. Just as her fresh young lips came within reach he turned his face aside, so that the kiss fell on barren ground on his tanned cheek.

"Joyce," continued the old lady feverishly, "I am not afraid to die now, for Stephen is here. Your brother will take care of you, dear, when I am gone."

It was strange that Stephen had not spoken yet, and it was perhaps just as well, because there are occasions in life when men do wisely to keep silent.

"He is strong," the proud mother went on, "I can feel it. His hands are large and steady and quiet and his arms are big and very hard."

The young man knelt upright and submitted gravely to this maternal inventory.

"Yes," she said, "I knew he would grow to be a big man. His little fingers were so strong—he hurt me sometimes. What a great mustache! I knew you had been a soldier. And the skin of your face is brown and a little rough. What is this? what is this, Stephen, dear? Is this a wound?"

"Yes," answered the prodigal speaking for the first time. "That is a sword cut, I got that in the last war. I am a colonel in the Chilian army, or was, before I resigned."

The old lady's sightless eyes were fixed on his face as if listening for the echo of another voice in his deep, quiet tones.

"Your voice is deeper than your father's ever was," she said, and all the while her trembling fingers moved lovingly over his face, touching the deep cut from cheek bone to jaw with soft inquiry. "This must have been very near your eye, Stephen. Promise me, dear, no more soldering."

"I promise that," he replied, without raising his eyes.

Such was the homecoming of the prodigal. After all he arrived at the right moment in the afternoon, when the house was ready. It sometimes does happen so in real life, and not only in books. There is a great deal that might be altered in this world, but sometimes, by a mere chance, things come about rightly. And yet there was something wrong, something subtle, which the dying woman's duller senses failed to detect. Her son, her Stephen, was quiet and had not much to say for himself. He apparently had the habit of taking things as they came. There was no enthusiasm, but rather a restraint, in his manner, more especially toward Joyce. The girl noticed it, but even her small experience of human-kind had taught her that large, fair-skinned men are often thus. They go through life placidly, leaving unsaid and undone many things which some think they ought to say and do. After the first excitement of the return was over it became glaringly apparent that Stephen had arrived just in time. His mother fell into a happy sleep before sunset, and when the active young doctor came a little later in the evening he shook his head.

"Yes," he said, "I see that she is asleep and quiet—too quiet. It is a foretaste of a longer sleep. Some old people have it."

For the first time Joyce's courage seemed to give way. When she had been alone she was brave enough, but now that her brother was there,womanlike she seemed to turn to him with a sudden fear. They stood side by side near the bed,and the young doctor involuntarily watched them Stephen had taken her hand in his with that silent sympathy which was so natural and so eloquent. He said nothing, this big, sun-stained youth. He did not even glance down at his sister, who stood small, soft eyed and gentle at his side. The doctor knew something of the history of the small family thus momentarily united, and he had always feared that if Stephen Leach did return it would only kill his mother. This, indeed, seemed to be the result about to follow. Presently the doctor took his leave. He was a young man engaged in getting together a good practice, and in his own interest he had been forced to give up waiting for his patients to finish dying.

"I am glad you are here," he said to Stephen, who accompanied him to the door. "It would not do for your sister to be alone; this may go on for a couple of days."

It did not go on for a couple of days, but Mrs. Leach lived through that night in the same semicomatose state. The two watchers sat in her room until supper time, when they left their mother in charge of a hired nurse, whose services Joyce had been forced to seek. After supper Stephen Leach seemed at last to find his tongue, and he talked in his quiet, almost gentle voice, such as some men possess, not about himself and the past, but about Joyce and the future. In a deliberate, business-like way he proceeded to investigate the affairs of the dying woman and the prospects of her daughter; in a word, he asserted his authority as a brother, and Joyce was relieved and happy to obey him. It is not in times of gayety that friendships are formed, but in sorrow or suspense. During that long evening this brother and sister suddenly became intimate, more so than months of prosperous intercourse could have made them. At 10 o'clock Stephen quietly insisted that Joyce should go to bed, while he lay down, all dressed, on the sofa in the dining-room.

"I shall sleep perfectly; it is not the first time I have slept in my clothes," he said simply.

They went upstairs together and told the nurse of this arrangement. Joyce remained for some moments by the bedside watching her mother's peaceful sleep,and when she turned she found that Stephen had quietly slipped away. Wondering vaguely whether he had intentionally solved her difficulty as to the fraternal good night, she went to her own room. The next morning Mrs. Leach was fully conscious and appeared to be stronger; nevertheless she knew that the end was near. She called her two children to her bedside and, turning her blind eyes toward them, spoke in broken sentences:

"I am ready now—I am ready," she said. "Dears, I am going to your father—and * * * thank God, I can tell him that I left you together. I always knew Stephen would come back. I found it written everywhere in the Bible. Stephen—kiss me, dear!"

The man leant over the bed and kissed her.

"Ah," she sighed, "how I wish I could see you—just once before I die. Joyce!" she added, suddenly turning to her daughter, who stood at the other side of the bed, "tell me what he is like. But I know * * * I know—I feel it. Listen! He is tall and spare like his father. His hair is black, like his father's—it was black before he went away. His eyes, I know, are dark—almost dark. He is pale—like a Spaniard!"

Joyce looked across the bed with slow horror dawning in her face, looked into a pair of blue eyes beneath tawny hair,cut short,as a soldier's hair should be. She looked upon a man big, broad, fair—English from crown to toe—and the quiet command of his lips and eyes made her say:

"Yes, mother, yes."

For some moments there was silence. Joyce stood pale and breathless, wondering what this might mean. Then the dying woman spoke again: "Kiss me," she said. "I * * * am going. Stephen first—my first born! And now, Joyce * * * and now kiss each other across the bed! I want to hear it * * * I want * * * to tell * * * your * * * father."

With a last effort she raised her hands, seeking their heads. At first Joyce hesitated,then she leant forward, and the old woman's chilled fingers pressed their lips together. That was the end.

Half an hour afterward Joyce and this man stood facing each other in the little dining room. He began his explanation at once.

"Stephen," he said, "was shot—out there—as a traitor. I could not tell her that! I did not mean to do this, but what else could I do?"

He paused, moved toward the door with that strange hesitation which she had noticed upon his arrival. At the door he turned to justify himself.

"I still think," he said gravely, "that it was the best thing to do."

Joyce made no answer. The tears stood in her eyes. There was something very pathetic in the distress of this strong man, facing, as it were, an emergency of which he felt the delicacy to be beyond his cleverness to handle.

"Last night," he went on, "I made all the necessary arrangements for your future—just as Stephen would have made them—as a brother might have done. I * * * He and I were brother officers in a very wild army. Your brother was not a good man. None of us were."

His hand was on the door.

"He asked me to come and tell you," he added. "I shall go back now."

They stood thus, he watching her face with his honest, soft blue eyes, she failing to meet his glance.

"May I come back again?" he asked suddenly.

She gave a little gasp, but made no answer.

"I will come back in six months," he announced quietly, and then he closed the door behind him.

A YEAR'S EMBEZZLEMENT.

A New York fidelity company has compiled statistics of the embezzlements of public and private funds during last year. The sum aggregated $11,154,530.

READS LIKE A DIME NOVEL

DESPERATE GANGS OF MEN IN THE KLONDIKE REGION.

A Returned Klondiker Gives His Experience—Some of His Friends Murdered for Their Gold—A Chicago Man's Experience With the Ghouls of the Mountains.

The expected is happening. The sudden rush of desperate men into the Klondike region late last season is being followed by the appearance of tales of violence and robbery in the new El Dorado.

Dawson City itself is believed to be fairly safe, as the desperate characters there are overawed by numbers. The worst that can happen to a man is to be cheated of his hard-won gold-dust in a gambling den. But in the sparsely settled region round about murder and robbery are rife.

George F. Barry, a recently returned Klondiker, makes this statement:

"My story sounds so much like a dime-novel adventure that I am almost ashamed to talk about it. I went over the Dyea trail with a party of six early in March, 1897. The trail was then new and in bad shape, and we were compelled to throw away a lot of supplies. We finally settled in what is now known as Dead Mule Valley, and laid out our claims. We had fair luck, and before the winter set in had cleared up nearly $2,000 apiece. In the mean time twenty other miners had come down from the Klondike region and made their homes in the valley.

"Toward the last of September, two strangers, claiming to be unlucky prospectors, wandered into camp and spent a week with us. By that time we were all anxious to get back to Dawson but had not made up our minds as to the best way of reaching the town. The two strangers said they could lead us through the passes to the Dawson trail. A deal was made with them to act as guides for the party, their pay to be $500 each.

"I don't know how it was, but in some manner I became suspicious of the strangers, and at the last minute Pete Farrel, 'Dutch' Bauer and I dropped out of the party. Our only fear then was that the guides were making a bold 'bluff' to earn the $1,000, and might get us

LOST IN THE MOUNTAINS.

We had no idea they were pilots for a band of ghouls, as they afterward turned out to be. We tried to induce the other campers to wait, but the strangers had won them over, and early in October Farrel, Bauer and myself bade the others good-by. Nobody has even seen or heard of any member of that party, except the guides, since that day.

"One week later Farrel, Bauer and I struck camp and took up a trail to the west. After a five-weeks' struggle and great suffering our little band of three reached Dawson, and we were surprised to learn that our friends had not arrived there. We waited nearly a month for them, and then started for home. Dawson is full of energetic newspaper man and the arrival of a party of twenty men with fully $100,000 in gold dust could not have been overlooked. All three of us made efforts to induce the Dawson people to get up a rescuing party, but were unsuccessful.

"As I have said, we waited for nearly a month, and then got ready to start for home. Just as we were about to leave town I ran into one of the ghoulish guides in a gambling house, and at once asked him where our friends were. The chap was drunk and ugly and replied, with an insolent leer: "If you'll go back a few hundred miles on the trail you'll find them waiting for you.' The boldness of his answer made me lose my head, and instead of letting the matter drop there I started in to 'mix up' with him. This was a job I got the worst of, as the room was full of desperadoes who were plainly in sympathy with him, and at the first opportunity I turned tail and ducked out of the den, something I should have done at the beginning before speaking to the bandit.'

"Hunting up Farrel and Bauer, I told them of what had occurred, and we at once went to the authorities and laid the matter before them. Inside of an hour a posse of

THIRTY ARMED MEN

was ready to surround the gambling-house and take out the ghoul, but the fellow had been taken away by his companions and we could not pick up the trail.

"Later we learned that the man went under the name of 'Yellow Tom,' and was an all-round bad man. Two days before we reached Dawson he had shown up with a big lot of gold dust, which is now plain was stolen from the men he murdered. Stronger proof than this was found in a sled which was owned by one of our Dead Mule Valley party. This was unearthed in a second-hand supply store along with some guns and blankets which I had no trouble in identifying, and the proprietor said positively he had bought the stuff from 'Yellow Tom.'"

F. L. Keating is a Chicago man who has had experience with the ghouls of the Klondike. Mr. Keating's story is as follows:

"I came out of the Klondike district with two comrades early in November last by the overland route. For two weeks we struggled on over mountains of ice and snow, and, being pretty well tired out, got a little careless. Suddenly two strange men were with us. Nobody seemed to know where they came from; apparently they had just sprung up out of the underbrush, and I didn't like the way the thing looked.

"We left Dawson with $16,000 in dust, and this fact must have been known to the gang, for nothing else would have brought those men out there in that weather. They insisted that they were prospectors bound to the diggings, but they had no packs, no mining outfits, and only two days' rations of food and their rifles.

"We were then crossing the Dalton trail and were heading for Fort Selkirk. Repeatedly we had to lay down our weapons and assist in handling the packs and helping each other up and down the hills. The two strangers were always together in the centre of the party, and their guns were always close by them. I did not believe they would attack us alone, but suspected they would try to

LEAD US INTO A TRAP.

At the first halt I informed my companions of my suspicions. We decided upon a plan. We were to drop behind the strangers at the first open stretch of country and then do a little hold-up business ourselves. We were convinced that the strangers were robbers, and that they were after our lives and gold, which practically meant the same thing to us, for we had risked our lives for the gold and were determined to do so again. Phil Daly, one of my partners, was a big, strapping fellow, always ready for a fight. Nelse Thompson, my other comrade, was a fighter and full of nerve.

"All went well until about 2 o'clock that afternoon. We managed to keep the strangers in front of us, and our guns always ready for action. When the right moment came I sang out: 'Hold up your hands,' and at the same time our rifles came to a level. The strangers faced about, looked down the muzzle of our rifles, and up went their hands. Then Daly gave the strangers a short talk, plain and to the point.

"'We don't like your company,' said Daly, 'and you can't travel with us any longer.'

"Daly then ordered them to retrace their steps. The rascals swore and pleaded, but when at last Daly lost patience, and lifted his rifle, saying: 'Get along now, or you are both dead men,' the pair started on a run back over the trail. We could hear their curses and threats for ten minutes.

"We were determined not to be taken unawares, and I stood guard for the first three hours, of the night. Nelse took his turn next, and I went to sleep near Daly. Daly went on watch just before daylight. Suddenly I was awakened by

THE SOUNDS OF SHOT.

I jumped up, grabbed my rifle and ran toward my comrades, whom I saw kneeling behind a group of bowlders to the left of our camp. I did not know what was up, but Daly soon enlightened me by shouting. 'The devils are behind those trees and the woods are full of them.'

"We opened a steady fire, and the unseen enemy was just as wasteful of ammunition as we were. Finally, just as the light was growing, six men broke from the clump of trees and made a rush for a steep hill a hundred yards to their left. Two were wounded and had to be assisted. We recognized one of the wounded men as our companion of the day before, and among the uninjured bandits we distinguished the ugly features of the second stranger. We winged another of the bandits as he reached the bottom of the hill, but he was quickly caught up by his comrades.

"By the time we had made our way across the stream that divided our camp from the hill over which the bandits had retreated all trace of them had disappeared. We hunted for an hour, but finally gave up the chase and resumed our march.

"Ghouls? The mountain trails are full of them, and many an honest fellow, after months of suffering and hardship, has come out with a happy heart and full sacks of dust, only to be cruelly robbed and murdered.

"The transportation and outfitting companies will deny my story, but they have good reasons to keep the truth back."

WISE WORDS.

They who forgive most shall be most forgiven.—Bailey.

Charm strikes the sight, but merit wins the soul.—Pope.

Learning makes a man fit company for himself.—Young.

Sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.—Tennyson.

To know how to wait is the great secret of success.—De Maistre.

Who makes quick use of the moment is a genius of pendence.—Lavater.

Opportunity sooner or later comes to all who work and wish.—Lord Stanley.

Hard workers are usually honest; Industry.—Bovee.

To see what is right, and to do it, is want of courage or of principle.—Confucious.

The drying up of a single tear has more of an honest fame, than shedding seas of gore.—Byron.

A man's own good breeding is the best security against other people's ill manners.—Chesterfield.

Judge thyself with the judgment of sincerity, and thou wilt judge others with the judgment of charity.—J. Mason.

Make no display of your talents or attainments for every one will clearly see, admire and acknowledge them, so long as you cover them with the beautiful veil of modesty.—Emmons.

Let falsehood be a stranger to thy lips; shame on the policy that first began to tamper with the heart to hide its thoughts, and doubly shame on that righteous tongue that sold its honesty and told a lie!

CROWN OF PERSIA.

The royal crown of Persia, which dates back to remote ages, is in the form of a pot of flowers, surmounted by an uncut ruby the sizes of a hen's egg.