

Mrs. Tracy's Lesson.

Dinner was approaching, but dinner dragged. Bridget had a way of forgetting the coal fire until it was so far gone as to require a lengthy petting up in order to be in time for cooking.

"Never mind," she said to herself, as she returned to the nursery, "Harvey will probably be late, too. He usually is. I'm glad for once."

But to her dismay, Harvey was even then coming up the walk with a quick step.

"Dinner ready, I hope, Amy?" he said. "Business is pressing to-day."

"No, indeed, it is not," she said, with a cloud spreading over her face. "It really seems as though the only times you ever come punctually are the days when there is trouble in the kitchen."

It did seem so. Harvey was so habitually late at meal time that Mrs. Tracy felt justified in feeling very cross as she again went to the kitchen, and after fifteen minutes of exertion, which bore poor results in the ill-served dinner, seated himself, hot and worried, at the table, in a mood which would have prevented her enjoyment of a much better repast.

"Did you get good seats?" she asked, after the children had been helped.

"Seats? What seats? Bless me if I've had a thought of those seats since I went away this morning. I'm sorry, Amy, I'll step in on my way down."

"You needn't. Mrs. Rice was here a little while ago and she said every good seat was taken two hours after the plat was opened."

"I've been more than usually bothered of late, Amy. I've been trying to make arrangements to get a safe for my office, for I have a great many valuable papers and I don't feel like risking them. Fussed all the morning, but still failed of it. But I'll get the tickets for to-morrow night."

"It will do no good, I had all my arrangements made for to-night, and I can't go out to-morrow night."

The manner was more ungracious than the words. Mr. Tracy looked appealingly at her as he expressed his real regret for the carelessness which had brought her such a disappointment. He had a very tender appreciation of the fact that his wife's cares were very pressing and burdensome. She seldom got out, and this missing of a fine musical entertainment was no light thing to her.

There was no response to his apologies. She was recalling the time, only a few weeks since, when he had promised to go out with her, then had become absorbed in business, send her a hasty note, to say he could not dine at home, and she had seen no more of him till half-past ten at night. It is not to be wondered at that the cloud on Mrs. Tracy's face deepened. It reflected itself on the faces of the children, one of whom, after a few whispers of discontent over the unsatisfactory meal, was dismissed with sharp words from his mother.

"Well, well," exclaimed Harvey, a few minutes later, impatiently pushing away his plate, "if a man is to be treated like a criminal because he has forgotten some concert tickets, he'd better look for a pleasanter place than home."

He strode away, leaving her, with some reason, perhaps, to consider herself a very ill used woman. She was always busy about the house or trying to bring up arrears of sewing. Intervals for reading or going out were rare, and always becoming rarer. She was willingly giving her best energies to the work of making the most of small means, taking her full share in the struggle which her husband was carrying on to get a foothold in business. But she was forgetting that husband and children should not be left to live by bread alone—that they looked to her for something more valuable than the mere keeping of a house. She was many a time so wearied with her round of duties in the care of their bodies that she lost sight of their higher needs, not realizing that a smile or a cheery word from her could go far toward making amends for a much more serious household failure than a poor cooked meal. Her face was rapidly taking on a

look of combined anxiety and impatience, and she was forgetting the sweetness of loving forbearance toward little faults and shortcomings.

"Tag, tag, tag," she said, fretfully, "I'm tired of it all. Harvey has no more thought of me than if I were a pack horse. How would he like if I thought no more of his comfort than he does of mine, I wonder?"

The fretful mood and the fretful expression, fast coming to feel at home by long indulgence stayed by her as the hours wore on. The children looked inquiringly at her when occasion brought them in her way, but wisely made such occasions as few as possible. As the tea hour approached Mrs. Tracy would not have acknowledged to herself that her brow was taking on an added cloud at the prospect of her husband's return. He had left her in anger after sinning against her so unpardonably, and need not expect to be pleasantly received.

If, however, he should come home early, she might relax a little toward him. But the hour came and passed without him, and Mrs. Tracy grew angrier. If he was staying away to punish her, he might stay as long as he liked—she would never care.

But as another hour passed she grew uneasy. With all his trying word of punctuality, Harvey never really missed a meal without sending her a word of explanation. It was already growing dark as she pressed her face anxiously against the window pane, when her little boy rushed in.

"O mamma! there's such a big fire down town. Can't I go and see it?" She had heard an alarm an hour or two before, but had paid little attention to it.

"No, of course you can't, Willie, it is too late for you to be out. But where is the fire?"

"I don't know, but it's a great great big one, I know. Hear how the whistle blow—and see, the folks are running more and more."

She caught a few words from some passers by which brought a look of dismay to her face.

"The Phoenix Block—and spreading fast. Trouble with water freezing in hose."

Breathlessly she ran into the house and threw on her wraps. Then, with a few words of directions to the servant girl, she took Willie's hand and hurried in the bitter cold of the fast losing winter night through the streets, becoming more and more crowded as they drew nearer the business precincts with others, whose faces well all turned in the same direction.

Her husband's office was in the Phoenix Block. A chill, dardier than that of the inclement air struck to her heart, as through her mind ran one after another dread imagination of what might be. She remembered his worry about the safe—how little she had heeded him in her selfish resentment over a little disappointment! Her steps quickened with a wild fear as she thought of the papers he had spoken of—she knew the first instinct of his faithful soul would be to peril his life for the safety of what others had confided to his care.

The crowd grew thicker as she neared the fire, until she could move only with difficulty as she still pressed on. They had not lived in the place for any length of time and the faces about her were all strange, until at length a voice said:

"You here, Mrs. Tracy? This is no place for you."

She grasped the speaker's arm.

"Mr. Brand—do tell me! Is it serious? Is it the Phoenix?—and have you seen Mr. Tracy?"

His face was more troubled than he wished her to see as he tried to lead her away from the crowd.

"Well, a large fire is always more or less serious, you know. It began in the Phoenix."

"I want to hear about it," she insisted, as she paused. "How are things there now?"

"The fire went up the elevator shaft, so there has been difficulty in getting the occupants. But I do as sure you, Mrs. Tracy, that no lives are known to be lost. The last I saw of Mr. Tracy he and the other lawyers were working like beavers trying to get out their belongings."

"When was that?" she gasped.

"Perhaps an hour ago."

"I'm going to get nearer," she said, and, as her friend could not dissuade

her, he took her arm and they slowly worked their way toward the large building to which the fire was now confined.

It was a strange and magnificent sight. Winter had laid his pitiless finger on every attempt to interrupt the progress of the ruin, seeming to rejoice in promoting the advance of the fire flood. All the noble engineering of the fire department was in full play, but many a bursted hose had been thrown aside, and other difficulties from clogging ice, which shone and sparkled in the gaslight like the famed Russian palace, and against which many a stream of water fell in rattling hail. Banks of ice from leaking hose, lay across the streets, while around the burning building lay a piled up mass of ice, mingled with books, carpets, and furniture, which had been thrown out, to the depth of ten or twelve feet.

The fire was by this time, however, well under control, and painful interest was now centered upon the perilous condition of a man who could be seen through the window of one of the upper stories.

"That is the old watchman of the building," exclaimed Mrs. Tracy's escort; "he is not in any immediate danger, but it will be difficult to reach him, and it is feared he may lose his head and fall. Some other men are on a balcony around the corner, not far below him—they are positively in no danger as yet, but I heard someone say they were refusing to be helped down until the old man is safe—are doing all they can to encourage him. Mr. Tracy may be among those."

To Mrs. Tracy's eyes there must be danger. Bricks and portions of the wall were continually falling. And Harvey might not be there—nobody could know certainly where he was. No lives are known to be lost—that was how her friend had phrased it.

The falling of a portion of the roof drove back lookers-on and workers in a confused crowd.

"Do go home, Mrs. Tracy," urged Mr. Brand. "You can do no good by staying; you are risking your health and the child's too. I will surely see that you have the very first news of Mr. Tracy that can be secured."

Her teeth were chattering and her whole frame shivering, although she had not realized that she was cold. She felt that she could not go, but, after a glance at little Willie, who would not complain, she allowed herself to be persuaded.

Arrived at home, she was thankful for the cares demanded of her by the sleepy children. But in due time the clamor of the little voices was hushed and then nothing remained for her but to pace restlessly to and fro—now feeling as though another moment of suspense would drive her wild, now shrinking in dread from the thought of what the end of that suspense might be.

He left her in anger. She had, in her pettishness at his forgetfulness, refused him look or smile: she had been harboring bitter thoughts against him while he was exposed to danger, perhaps death. How far she had gone aside from the ideal she had formed of her duties as a true wife! how far failed in making for him the sunny home they had long ago pictured! And now, what if she should never more have opportunity to show him how dearer to her than all else on earth was his happiness and that of their children?

In her misery it seemed that hours had passed before she heard a footstep at the door. And then she sprang up in terror. Was it his step or that of another, come to tell her—?

"Amy—at last. Poor wife, did you think I would never come? But don't come near me yet, dear!"

But she clung to him for a moment and then stood back in amazement at his appearance. Smoke-begrimed, drenched, and with ice clinging to his dress and hair—she would not have known him except for his voice. As she hastily brought him dry clothing and hot coffee, he gave her an outline of his experience for the past few hours.

"It was a tight place we were caged in," he said, in concluding—"freezing on one side and almost burning on the other. But we got the poor old man

safe at last. And all my papers are safe."

"And would you really weigh any kind of property against your life, Harvey, even though it might belong to other people? Is that all you care for us here at home?"

"Well Amy," he said, smiling at her half anger, "if it were deliberately placed before me to choose I might perhaps, hesitate; but all of a sudden you find that a sacred trust is in danger, what remains but to use your best endeavor even though there may be risk in it, with faith in the kindly and powerful arm which has brought me out of it?"

His voice had taken on a reverent tone, and she could not say he was not right.

But she lay down to rest with a great thankfulness in her heart that she could yet reach him with looks and tones of affection, and an earnest prayer that the lesson of the past few hours might not soon grow dim and be forgotten.—Arthur's Home Magazine.

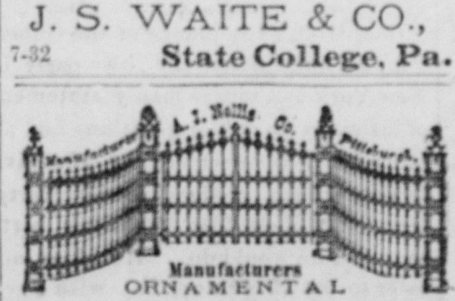
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