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Pretty Jane and the Pedlar.

FIFTY years ago, the two principal characters of this story, were well known in one of the central counties of Vermont, and to this day the older inhabitants often talk of them, and the sad incidents connected with their lives. The first character we will introduce to our readers is Widow Slade, who was known all through that county as "Pedlar Molly."

A woman of middle age at the opening of my story, she had devoted herself, since an early widowhood, to secure a decent competence for her declining years, and for her only child the means of fitting him for the vocation of his father—that of a schoolmaster. Summer and winter there were few days in which the light, active figure of Pedlar Molly might not have been met on her accustomed round, ever neat, clean and suitably attired, and there were few houses that she frequented, in which her cheerful smile and her kind, clear voice were not gladly welcomed, for her conversation was as pleasant as her conduct was irreproachable. Even among the gentry of the district, a place was always freely allotted to her amidst their domestic circle, in consideration that, however homely might have been her training, her appearance and whole bearing bespoke her a lady of Nature's own patent.

The dwelling Widow Slade occupied, and which it was a ruling object with her one day to call her own, was a cottage of the better class, a square, stone building divided into three apartments—two small chambers and a larger room in to which they opened. In this outer room, which, in the words of the old song, served "for parlor, for kitchen and hall," the pedlar woman, one intensely cold morning in December, sat at breakfast. The first snow of the season had come the night before, and lay thick and unbroken on the surrounding fields, while heavy masses of leaden colored clouds, drifting wildly before the keen north wind, threatened to add another fall to its depth. But none of the external gloom had found entrance within the walls.

The savory odor of a plate of plump, brown sausages, and the foam-like lightness of a wheaten loaf, the staples of the repast, testified to the skill of the hand that had compounded them, while the exhalations of a tiny, black coffee-pot betrayed the presence of a luxury that, in those days, would hardly have been remarked on such a board without reprehension. But it was one in which Widow Slade seldom indulged, and never except when she needed its harmless stimulus against the fatigues of a tour of unusual length and difficulty.

"Well, Heaven be praised for a warm house and a bountiful meal!" she ejaculated, rising from the table with an expression of gratitude on her fresh un-wrinkled face; "if this world requires much care and hard work of me, it also yields me many blessings to be thankful for!"

Her words were directed to her son—a tall, mature looking lad of fourteen or fifteen, whose strongly marked, though handsome features were singularly impressed with the character of turbulence and self-will. He was engaged in preparing a new rifle for use, and occasionally alternated his employment, as if unconsciously, by tracing, with a pointed stick, the device on the broad side-plate of the stove, the tragedy of Judith and Holofernes, represented the anarchistic machinery of a stack of bayonets and a pile of cannon-balls, to give a warlike aspect to the tent. Without appearing to have noticed his mother's address,

he threw down the stick and said abruptly, "I shall want some money today; if you are going out on your beat, be sure that you leave me some."

"Money to-day!" she repeated, stopping with surprise in her occupation of removing the breakfast things; "where can you be going, George, that you will need money on such a day as this?"

"To the shooting-match at the Elk; there's to be a famous one, and I want to win either the prize bear or a prime old turkey for our Christmas dinner."

One of the turkeys of our own feeding will do well enough for our Christmas dinner, George, and as to the bear, I want no such beast about me. Besides, it is a bad habit for a boy like you to get into, this going to shooting-matches."

"Good or bad, I intend to go," said the lad insolently; "so you may as well leave me the money to pay for my chances; if you don't choose to do it, I dare say I could find out where there is enough kept to answer my purpose."

The widow turned with a deep sigh to a window, and her eyes wandered vacantly over the wide expanse of snow before it, but after a moment they rested on a dwelling, the only one within sight of her own, which stood at the farther side of a trackless field, and her train of thought was changed.

"Strange that I should have been so forgetful," she observed, as if in self-reproach; "this is no time, George, to be disputing about your idle amusements, while a fellow creature near us may be in grievous want of our aid. I ought not to have neglected till this late hour my duty toward poor Margaret Wilmot. There is not a curtain drawn from her window, nor a curl of smoke rising from her chimney; perhaps she is too weak to leave her bed, and is suffering for food and fire. I must go and look after her, though indeed it will be hard enough for me to spare the time. I promised to be at Colonel Melvin's against twelve, with the white peeling ribbon for Miss Julia's wedding-dress, besides leaving the paregoric for old Madam Greely on the way."

"But the money—the money for the shooting-match," interrupted George, impatiently, and with a pertinacity that showed his determination to carry his point.

His mother hesitated and then replied as if relieved to be able to make her conscientious weakness subservient to some good purpose; "If you will go to the Elk, George, your nearest way will be by Margaret Wilmot's, and on condition you do my errand there, I will gratify you this time in what you ask. Will you promise me to stop and do any thing for her that she may require?"

George carelessly nodded, and with a brightened countenance his mother prepared him for his mission. "I shall put up some victuals for her," said she, "and you can give them into her own hand. Here is a loaf of bread with some rusks and cold meat for herself, and a bottle of milk for the child. See that there is water in plenty from the spring, and make a fire for her—a good one that will last awhile; and carry in wood enough to do till to-morrow. Should she be so much worse as to need my help, wait to let me know when you reach the toll-gate, and I can turn into the lane and stop with her; there will be a good excuse for it, and I hope my customers would rather put up with a little disappointment than that she should suffer. If, however, she is as usual, keep on your course, and, as I return in the evening, I will come that way and look after her."

The pedlar woman took from the till of a strong oak chest a few pieces of silver, which she gave to her son, and saw him depart with the basket of provisions in his hand and the rifle on his shoulder. She then changed her home dress for a better one, and placing in her basket some of the various little commodities which comprised her stock in trade, started off as usual upon her daily task. A walk of a mile brought her to the gate at which she was to decide upon the result of her arrangement with her son. He had evidently passed on, for in the lane connected with the dwelling of Margaret Wilmot, which there joined the main road, foot tracks that she knew to be his, the only ones by which a path had been opened, and satisfied with the belief that the necessities of

her sick neighbor were provided for, she proceeded on her round.

Accustomed as the pedlar woman was to the inclemencies of a winter's day, those she now encountered were so unusually severe that she was often discouraged in the prosecution of her undertaking. But one of her most strongly confirmed habits was that of strict adherence to her work, and to be able to fulfill her promises to furnish trimming for the wedding dress of her pretty favorite, the belle of the settlement, and to administer a remedy for the cough of an invalid patroness, also shared her concern. These purposes at length were accomplished, and though urged to rest over night, and tempted, at one place, by blazing fires and rich potions of warm mulled cider, and at the other by overgrown turkeys, towering cakes, and matchless transparent jellies, in preparation of a grand wedding supper, when a wedding was a really grand affair; she set out on the return which she had compromised to her benevolent scruples in the morning.

The shades of evening were closing in when she came in sight of the dwelling of which an apartment or two had been granted as a temporary abode to the object of her anxiety—a low structure of stone, though spacious, and what was called a double house. There were no new tracks in the lane, and those of George had almost disappeared for though the wind had lulled, a brisk snow was descending. As she advanced she saw that the windows were closely covered with their curtains of checked linen, which she had, herself, drawn over them the evening before, as she remarked them to be in the morning. The entrance door was unlocked, and when she pushed it open she beheld her own little basket as full as when she had given it into the charge of her son, standing on the passage floor within reach of her arm. Her heart sunk, for she felt that the boy had not entered the house. She gave a hasty rap against the inner door, to which no sound was returned but the feeble wail of a child, and she hurried into the room whence that proceeded. The last embers had died in the wide, stone hearth, and the snow flakes, which straggled down the chimney, rested unmelting on the few handfuls of gray ashes scattered over it. The child a delicate looking little thing, some eighteen months old, sat upon a bed that had been drawn near the fire place, and with its blue shivering fingers, stroked the attenuated but youthful face resting beside it on the pillow.

"Jane, my pretty Jane, what ails you?" asked the kind neighbor, trembling with apprehension, as she approached the bedside. The child sobbed anew, and leaned across the bosom of its mother in a vain attempt to reach a chair which stood against the bed.—"There was a crust of bread upon it, and a bowl that had contained water, but now was filled with ice and cracked by its expansion."

"Margaret! Margaret Wilmot!" gasped the pedlar woman, laying her hand upon the smooth, high forehead of her she had named. There was no movement at her touch, no shrinking of the pallid flesh, and the child covered afrighted down to the pillow as her shriek rang dimly through the lonely walls. She knew the rigidity to be that of death and for many minutes she stood transfixed with intense horror. At length her recollection returned so far as to prompt her to seek assistance, and reaching the horn which hung against the chimney, she blew it as a signal of alarm. The time seemed long to her almost beyond endurance, before the summons was answered, yet not half an hour had elapsed when three or four neighbor men appeared.

"Dead, and frozen to death!" exclaimed a stout farmer, looking at the corpse, and he grew pale and shuddered like a woman.

"Frozen to death and in the midst of us, the Lord forgive us all!" rejoined another, and he added in self-entenuation, "I never heard she was so low near as I live, or I would surely have looked after her. Your house is nearer still, neighbor Slade, and you women always feel for each other."

"God knows how much I felt for her!" exclaimed the pedlar woman, clasping her hands; "a widow a poor young

thing in her first deep sorrow, penniless, and without the strong body and resolute mind that supported me when I was thrown in the same way upon the world! My last prayer at night and my first thought in the morning have for many a day been for her!" and too much shocked herself at the consequence of her son's neglect to have any wish to palliate his conduct, she gave a hasty recital of the occurrences of the day.

An older farmer shook his head. "That boy will cause you many a heart-sore yet, neighbor Slade," said he; "there is not as forward a lad of his years, nor as headstrong in the whole country round. He is beyond the management of a woman."

The grave looks of the other auditors attested their concurrence in his opinion but one of them, as if to afford some relief to the mind of the mother, remarked:

"Yet it may not have been the boy's fault; we are not certain but that she died in the night."

"No, no," returned the widow, with truthful earnestness; "did I not say that for a few moments I had seen that curtain raised? and I, myself, carried in wood, more than enough to last her till the morning."

The assemblage was now increased by the arrival of several women who had obeyed the signal of the horn as soon as the difficult walking would allow, and they were clamorous in their expressions of grief and horror.

"Poor thing! she must have died without a struggle," said one of them; "her face is as calm as if she had passed away in a sweet sleep. Dreadful as it is, because it might have been prevented, they say freezing is an easy death to die."

"And she died like a Christian, with the Bible open on her breast," added another.

The tears of Widow Slade fell fast, as, for the first time, she observed that the arms of the dead woman were stiffened across the open volume so firmly that the restless motions of the famished child had not displaced it from the bosom whose agonies it had often soothed. "It was but yesterday," she remarked, "that she begged me to read the merciful promises to the widow and fatherless, which had been my comfort in my own days of trial."

"And what is to become of this poor lamb?" asked one of the women, carrying the child to the fire, which the men had kindled; "there are no relations to claim it, for more than one of us heard Henry Wilmot tell, when he first brought his young wife among us, that she was as much alone in the world as himself. Poor innocent!—it may have a hard life before it!"

"Not if Heaven continues to bless me as it has done!" said the pedlar woman, clasping the child in her arms, while her fine blue eyes brightened with a noble resolution; "she shall share my portion with me!"

Too much depressed to feel any disposition for assisting in the last offices to the dead, the pedlar woman wrapped the child in her cloak, and prepared to discharge her self-imposed duties by conveying it to the home which she meant it should share. The neighbor who had so freely expressed himself about her son, offered his services to carry her basket, and as they walked together he said kindly, "Don't be so down-hearted, neighbor Slade, nor fancy that you are more to blame in this sad affair than the rest of us. I hope, though it will be a lesson to that hard-headed boy of yours. Take my advice and put him to a trade, or some place where he will have a master over him. If you don't his idle habits will grow upon him, and may cause you trouble to the day of your death. Make up your mind what you would best like to do for his good, and if you need any one to help you in looking out a place for him, you may depend upon me. But cheer up! cheer up! and don't take this so much to yourself."

The gloom, however, upon the spirit of the conscientious woman could not be so easily removed. She raked together the live coals that were embedded in the ashes of the stove, and added a warm draught of milk to the food which her basket had supplied to the sobbing child; then, throwing herself upon her knees,

she prayed to know the extent of her culpability, and for power to make reparation for it. She was interrupted by the entrance of her son, who noisily dashed down his rifle, of which the barrel was broken, and with his foot pushed aside the little guest seated upon the floor.

"What is this brat doing here?" he asked petulently.

She is here as a means of trial to me, George, to prove if I can do my duty toward a child by bringing it up more in accordance with the commandments of God than I have done my own son.—There is a fearful sin and reproach upon you since you last left this door. Your disobedience to me has made this little creature an orphan. Margaret Wilmot is dead, and died of cold and hunger."

The face of lad flushed, but it was rather with anger at his mother's tone of severity than with any emotion for its cause.

"Then why did you not look after Margaret Wilmot yourself?" he demanded with the rudeness habitual to him in his intercourse with his mother; "I have paid dearly enough on her account already. Look here, if you had not been troubling me about her, and had let me attend to my own concerns, I would have loaded my gun without mistake, and saved myself from this."

He extended his hand, unrolling from it a thick wrapping, and his mother saw that he had shot away the fore-finger at the second joint. She started with a momentary shudder, but suppressing her feelings, she remarked, "Your punishment has come soon after the offence, George; I can only pray that no other may be sent upon you."

As her own mind acquired relief from the shock occasioned by the fate of Margaret Wilmot, the pedlar woman saw, with deep sorrow, that it had made no impression upon that of her son. He even seemed to find satisfaction in proving so to her by every act of petty tyranny that he could wreak upon the infant she had adopted, and her perception at once thoroughly awakened to his faults, she became solicitous to follow the advice of her neighbors, and place him where he would have steady employment and be under beneficial restraint. But he was hardened in self-will beyond his years. He scoffed at the idea of labor and control, and a few months after the change had been suggested, he suddenly disappeared, and with him, from her secret depository, the hoardings of several years. His death could scarcely have been an affliction to her more acute than such a desertion. Undutiful as he had been, and inclined to evil ways, he was the only hope of her widowhood, and to her grief was added the reproaches of her conscience for the weak indulgence that had failed to form him to better things.

To those acquainted with her circumstances it was touching to witness the devotion of the pedlar woman toward the child of her adoption. Dependent upon her daily exertions for her own livelihood, it was a burthen to her, and a heavy one, yet to acknowledge it so even to herself, never entered her generous mind. Many a time, when her out-door business might have flourished profitably, she was kept at home for days by its infantile infirmities, and not only then but constantly it was a serious hindrance to her vocation, for her house having no other inmate she made it the companion of her rounds whenever its strength and season allowed. Nestled against her shoulder if awake, or, if asleep, carefully sheltered in a basket balancing that of her multifarious wares, she bore it uncomplainingly with her during the first year or two of her guardianship, and, as it increased in size and vigor, as patiently she led it by the hand and accommodated her own pace to its uncertain steps. It was however, well worthy of her affection, for seldom has the heart treasured or the eye rested on a gentler or a lovelier child. Ever fair, delicate and graceful as a lily, notwithstanding its exposure and its humble nature, with its long, soft flax-curls floating around its stately neck, and with an expression of angelic purity and meekness on its beautiful features, there was not a family in the country, no matter how high their estate, that would not have been proud of such an offspring. Its beauty and sweetness were the glory of the foster-mother, and