DOWN SOUTH.

A MISSING BRIDEGROOM.

Limestone Township, Dec. 17.—For two or three days after Black Jake's interrupted interview with Mrs. Ayer we all lived in a state of expectation. We felt as if something were going to appen. When a man is engaged, and his betrothed professes herself anxious to be married, and the man declares himself "pussonally ready," people naturally expect a wedding. Mrs. Ayer said she ha quite intruded her presence upon Jake on several occasions, hoping he would resume the subject, but he did not. He went round about the farm with the most dejected air, looking longer and more gaunt than ever. It was depressing to see him. Mr. Ayer said he worked less than before, if it were possible to work less. He had not confided in him at all, but when the gentleman had asked him what was the matter he had groaned and said he was "crossed in lub." Nothing more was said. We all thought that if Jake continued to be thus crossed the mere sight of him would have almost as bad an effect upon us as though we also were crossed in love. The twins watched Jake with a furtive, but intense interest. He had suddenly assumed an attraction for them.

"Jake don't laugh no more," said Ella, at the dish washing.

"No," said Ellen, solemnly, "folks as is crossed in love carn't laugh, yer know."

It was not to be wondered at that a gloom seemed to be settling over the Ayer domain.

This state of things continued for about a week, and we were becoming so hardened as to be able again to enjoy the continued lovely weather and to think occasionally of something beside the pail which Jake had cast over us. It is doubtless dreadful to be crossed in love, but life must still go on.

We were discussing this very subject in a calmly cheerful way, the twins being on an expedition for chips, when a stranger appeared in the doorway. At my first glance I was struck with her figure and port. She was large, she held her head well back, her features were modelled with the same large freedom, an eagle nose between well-opened, handsome eyes, a mouth in keeping, she seemed a kind of rude, uncultured Zenobia. Here was an opulence of physical power and development that is rarely met. I had never seen any such woman before. She was colored, but her features were not like those belonging to the negro race.

"I reckon dis Mr. Ayer's place, ain't it?" she asked.

When her question had been answered, she said she reckoned she mought's well say ter wunst as she war er lurkin' roun' fur dat no 'count nigger, Long Black Jake.

I immediately felt, as I had not done before, that Jake must be a man of some consequence to have such a woman as this "lurkin' roun'" for him.

Mrs. Ayer acknowledged that Jake lived here, and she added that he had been very low in his mind of late.

The stranger smiled in a gratified way at this remark. Mrs. Ayer asked her to come in and sit down. She walked across the little room in a way that made the cabin seem spacious that it might accommodate this empress-like being.

"Yes'm," said she, "I ain't no ways s'prised ter year as Jake's low. He orter be low. I jes' bundle him outer my house neck 'n' crap when he thar lars' time. I flung him out wid dis fist."—she held up a large, handsome hand. Then she laughed, and her laugh had a ring in it very unlike the husky, unctuous laugh which usually belongs to the African. Still she seemed somewhat anxious. She went on:

"Natch'ly he thought, I reckon, dat our ingagement war broke. I don't hev no doubt as er gen'l'mun think ef he are hustled out widout no ceremony, neck 'n' crap, as de ingagement be broke. Dad's natch'l, ain't it, ma'am?"

Mrs. Ayer replied that she thought it perfectly natural for any gentleman, under such circumstances, to conclude that the engagement was broken.

"And a few bones, too, perhaps," said Amabel.

The visitor stared at her a moment, then laughed again. It is very rare to find the common negro understand humor in the least unless it be of the broadest burlesque kind.

"Dere war a promise 'twixt us," said the woman, "but de time I flung him I had 'nother gen'l'mun in view. Now de other gen'l'mun done married yister-d'y, an' I'se come roun' ter 'gin my p'omise ter Jake. I feared I mought git er fall 'tween two stools if I warn spry 'bout huntin' urp Jake, yo' see, ma'am."

Certainly she had made her position perfectly clear. We wondered how Jake would like it. She went on to say that she should simply state to Jake that she made a mistake "flingin' him out dat time," and she was now ready for "mejit wedlock." She looked out of the window at the log cabin.

"Dat's war we gwine to live, I reckon? I c'n work fur yo', Miss Ayer, an' Jake c'n work fur Mr. Ayer. I ain't had no ole man fur er long time. Gwine on two year sence my lars' ole man got tuk urp for stealin' an' war jugged."

"Then you have a husband living?" cried Mrs. Ayer.

"No, ma'am. Dey say he died in prison. I ain't seen him die, but de news was brought ter me mighty straight, an' I ain't gwine ter 'spute sich news as dat. 'Twouldn't be safe fur Bill ter turn urp 'live ergin now. I reckon Bill know dat; he'll stay daid, Bill will. He warn bright, but he bright 'nough ter stay daid."

We were absorbed in looking at this woman, who sat erect and majestic in her chair as if she were on a throne.

"I call myse'f er widder," she said, "an' I should meek er pint ob havin' er minister marry us. P'raps yo' got dat kindness in yo' heart dat yo'll let us hab de wedding hyar in dis house. Yo' see, I done give urp my room in Asheville dis mawnin' an' had my things moved to er cousin's. I war some back in my rent, an' some folks ain't no consideration fur er lady as is back in her rent. Dar am Jake now."

She was looking through the doorway as she spoke. She rose. Jake's long, drawn-out countenance changed to a look of wonder and then delight.

"Gawdermighty!" he cried out, "Is dat yo', Sally? Hab yo' come ter meek urp wip me, Sally?"

Sally was quite dignified. She allowed him to shake hands with her. He hastened to say he "hoped she'd 'scuse him fur 'bligin her ter trow him ou' de do' dad las' time he visited her in Asheville."

They walked toward the log cabin together. Sally retraced her steps to mention that she hoped there would be no objection to having the wedding there, and that she should insist upon having a real minister. It was not more than half an hour before Sally returned to us and Jake went to the wood pile and pretended to cut wood, but his axe flew very much at random and his eyes were on the house. He could see Sally through the window. This yellow woman had none of the negro slowness about her. She was shrewd, too, in taking her position for granted.

"Now, Miss Ayer," she said, standing with one hand on her hip and the other hanging down, her whole aspect one of strength and readiness, "I kin rerlieve yo' of all de hard work. I'm stronger'n mos' any man. I kin do ou' do' work or housework. I meek no bones er sayin' I kin do er smarter show in er day dan dat Jake. He's kinder triflin', he is. But I'll tend ter him. I ain't had no old man ter train in some time. I'll train him. You'll see he toe de mark. I kin do all de washin' an' cookin'. Jes' like's not yo'll let me hab er few mo' things in de cabin; on'y er few mo', meek us mighty com'f'ble."

I think Mrs. Ayer must have felt as I did, that to have Sally to the fore in regard to work would be to have a host. I never saw any man or woman who gave such a sense of effectiveness. The very curve of that un-negro-like nose was a sort of guarantee.

Mrs. Ayer said she would take Sally.

"Yes'm," responded Sally promptly, "I'll see yo' ain't sorry for dem words. An' now, what time shell we sot fur de weddin'? Dis eb'nin' 'bout eight? Dad'll give Jake time ter gwi' ter Asheville, git er few tings an' bring out der minister. He sh'll meek er soon start. Shell we say eight, Miss Ayer?"

That lady laughed and assented. Sally's face was very pleasant to see as she said:

"I'll be grateful ter yo' de longes' day I lib, mighty grateful. Jake sh'll be sont off 'n no time."

It was true. Jake was seen going down the mountain toward the State road for Asheville in less than five minutes. He was walking. It is not much for these people to walk six miles, or ten or twenty. Sally had just walked out from the town.

Having set things "er gwine," as she said, she took off her white apron and her sunbonnet. The removal of the latter showed her thick, waving hair with its threads of gray. She twisted a handkerchief round her head, pinned up her skirts and began setting to rights the log cabin where she was to live. She told Mrs. Ayer she would prepare the dinner in her own cabin and bring it down to us. She averred she was a "sure enough cook," and the dinner, of chicken and pone, and tomato-okra soup and baked sweet potatoes, was served in such a way as to prove her words true. Nothing seemed to fatigue her. She worked like a lion, only I believe lions do not work. She strode around, and "made things kinder whiz," the twins said.

Just before sun-down she came to Mrs. Ayer and said she believed all was ready. She had brought a bundle with her from Asheville. She had a pink cambric, the one "she'd ben married in de las' time. She had kep' it so's she reckoned it would do ter be married in ergin; ef she could on'y hev er flower-pot ter hold in her hand. She believed it was er good sign fur de bride ter hev er flower-pot. She had n't had none when she married Bill."

It turned out that by a flower-pot she meant a bouquet.

Having said this, she walked out with her grand step and left us to pluck the few chrysanthemums there were left blooming in the little wooden box at one of the windows. The sight of these had probably suggested her bouquet to her. I have never yet seen any member of the colored race who was backward about begging for what was wanted. The twins were sent out to glean evergreens from the mountain-side; Ristus and the baby came, and Ristus helped festoon this greenery until it seemed that we were anticipating Christmas. We were quite bowery. When Sally came in at dusk her yellow face glowed with joy as she looked about. She flung up her hands and gazed again, her magnificent figure full in the glare from the hearth.

"Master King!" she exclaimed. "I never was so outdone!"

She said "Master King" at intervals in the next few minutes and often smiled to herself. As the dusk deepened and the mountains encircling us grew blacker she became anxious about Jake. She said he wor sich er onusu'l triflin' nigger he might hev got de minister an' den los' him, some way. She wished she had gone herse'f, on'y Jake never'd cleaned urp de cabin.

She retired to her prospective dwelling soon after 7 o'clock, and when she reappeared she was in the pink cambric. If anything could have made her look like a common yellow woman this would have done it. But her noble physique dominated even over the tawdry finery. As Amabel remarked, Jake's betrothed could not be other than a kind of Semiramis or Boadicea, or "that sort of a person, you know."

As the clock ticked on and no Jake appeared, we became quite nervous with anxiety as we waited with the bride in the green-bedecked room. Sally still insisted that Jake had probably once secured the minister, but had afterward "lost him." She seemed to think that a minister might be lost something like a thimble or a jack-knife.

When it lacked but a quarter to 8 even Mr. Ayer could not pretend to read his paper any more. Ten minutes late, and Sally was quite rigid in her gay gown, sitting in the back of the room. When the twins were not running into the house to announce that they had been listening and couldn't hear nawthin', they were dashing out to listen. Once I went to the stoop. There was not a sound, save the mysterious mountain sounds. There was a faint glow behind Busbee, showing where the moon was.

Ristus was standing on the stoop. He had been invited to remain and witness the ceremony. Ole Pink's baby was asleep on our bed. He expressed great sympathy for Sally. He said it must be jist awful ter be marri, but it must be awfuller ter think yer gwine ter be marrit, and then not be marrit arfter all. He offered to go out looking for Jake.

Sally had come to the door and overheard this last remark. She said we might leave Jake to her. There was that in her voice and manner that made us all well content that Jake should be left to her.

After this time seemed to fly. It became 9 o'clock very soon. Mr. Ayer kept piling the wood on the fire, and the flames made the green festoons look very lovely; but what was their loveliness but a mockery? We were part of a Bridal Party, with a Missing Groom. We almost felt as if we were portions of an illustrated sensational story. Involuntarily I began to make headings for chapters—I composed some extremely good headings.

The clock struck 10. I asked Mr. Ayer in a whisper what he thought was the matter. He said he thought the matter was that Jake had got drunk in Asheville and would not be able to get out of that city before the next day. He further said that sometimes Jake took a glass, and if he took one he always took a great many more.

At 11 o'clock Sally rose and went out without speaking. Ristus took the baby and departed in the moonlight for the hovel where he lived.

In a few moments Sally returned in her old dress. She had a large, thick comforter in her arms. She asked permission to "wrap it 'bout her an' lay on our floor.

So we all retired. The dogs were evidently greatly confused that, after all this preparation, nothing had happened.

A LONG COURTSHIP ENDED.

From Chattanooga dispatch to The St. Louis Republican.

A courtship of thirty-five years' duration ended to-day in Knox County by the marriage of Joshua Shipe and Miss Margaret Douglass. In 1853 the couple became engaged, but owing to opposition from a sister of the man and the mother of the girl, the wedding was postponed from time to time. The obstinate sister died a few days since. The mother relented, and an unexampled love-making ended happily.

A MISAPPREHENSION SOMEWHERE.

From The Chicago News.

Many of our most distinguished society leaders complain that Colonel McVicker deceived them into attending his theatre last week. They say that it was announced with a great flourish that Mme. Hading, of the Gymnasium at Paris, would participate in the Coquelin entertainments. Accordingly the creme-de-la-creme turned out en masse and patronized the entertainments, fully expecting that the beautiful Parisienne, attired in appropriate costume, would perform upon the trapeze, or the slack rope, or the horizontal bars. It appears, however, that so far from giving any gymnastic exhibition, Mme. Hading simply took a speaking part in the plays, and sedulously avoided every display of those calisthenic and acrobatic arts for the promotion of which gymnasiums are built. It is suspected that this Mme. Hading is an impostor, that she never belonged to a gymnasium, and that she doesn't know a dumb-bell from a vaulting-horse. Professor August Blish, the well-known professor of vaulting and ex-director of our turnverein, has written to Paris to find out all about it, and until an answer is received public judgment should be deferred.

BUSINESS, NOT SCIENCE, WANTED.

From The Detroit Free Press.

"What sort of a winter are we going to have?" he asked of a farmer at the Central Market the other morning.

"Very cold, sir," was the reply.

"Is it?" returned the citizen, in great surprise. "Why, sir, I —I—!"

And off he went, and the farmer looked after him and said:

"That's like me—always making a fool of myself. If I had predicted a warm winter I could have sold him three of four bags of potatoes."

THE SERMON WAS NOT PAID FOR.

From The Detroit Free Press.

Not a thousand miles from one of the valley towns of the Black Hills, an industrious representative of Scandinavia, Mrs. Johnson by name, presided not long since over the culinary affairs of a family whom we shall call Jones. There had been a male Johnson, but he had departed from this world of woe and drugged whiskey, not too much regretted by his spouse.

When her husband died, a neighbor went with her to the undertaker's. Introducing her, he began: "Mrs. Johnson wants to get a coffin for her husband, who died this morning. She has not the money now, but will pay you soon. If she should not, I will——"

Mrs. J. interrupted in disgust, "Not much! Yonson will pay for Yonson's coffin or Yonson can't have any."

The clergyman who officiated at the funeral of said Johnson had been promised a load of hay for his services. The clergyman reminded her of her promise unfulfilled some time afterward.

"And what do you think that preacher said, Mr. Yones? Why, he leaned over and pointed to Yonson in the coffin and said: 'There lies a man who drank himself to death.' Yes, he did, Mr. Yones. Of course 'twas the truth, but I didn't thank him to tell it right there. Why, Mr. Yones, he preached Yonson plum to ——, and now he wants me to give him a load of hay." Not much."

And she did not.

WORSE THAN THIRTY DAYS OF QUAIL.

From The Chicago Herald.

"Talk about your thirty-day quail contests," said a young man yesterday, "I'd like to know if a man has ever tried to eat turkey for a month. I'm at it now. Had a big turkey Thanksgiving and we got away with about an eighth of it. Since then that turkey has been appearing on our boards in its entire repertory—turkey hash, turkey soup, boned turkey, giblets of turkey, minced turkey, turkey salad, eggs a la Turk, turkey croquettes, etc. I've tried to escape it at the restaurant, but we are having the bird in all its disguises up at Kinsley's. I shall never be able to look a turkey in the face again. Changed my route to the street car yesterday because I had to pass a market where they hung out turkeys. Even last night I was reminded of Turkey by taking up Lew Wallace's 'Ben Hur.' He used to be over there, you know—and the volume was bound in Turkey morocco at that."

"DEUCED CLEVER," DON'T YOU KNOW.

From The Lewiston Journal.

A friend of mine was visited not long ago by an English gentleman, who seemed to take a great interest in whatever was shown to him and to be highly appreciative of American institutions, howbeit, his admiration was rather monotonous in expression.

My friend piloted him through one of our cotton mills.

"Deuced clever, old boy, deuced clever," he said, as they came out.

Then his host showed him a large Auburn shoe factory.

"George, that's deuced clever!" he exclaimed enthusiastically.

On the way across the bridge the English gentleman stood still for a few minutes and gazed at the foamy falls roaring down over the rocks.

"By Jove! That's deuced clever!" said he.

ARE THERE ANY HUMAN BEINGS THERE?

From The Lewiston Journal.

There has been found in Maine a village in which there is neither a dog nor a cat. A model community.

A LITTLE GIRL.

MR. WRANGLER'S SEARCH FOR PAREGORIC.

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On your way to the Cortlandt-st. ferry, which is on everybody's way to everywhere, and on the left-hand side of the street when you turn out of Broadway, and not very far from the ferry-house itself, there is a little, old, low brick building which has stood there a good many years and is going to stand a good many more if Billy Warlock knows himself, and he thinks he does. You may talk about progress all you please, but Billy will soon give you to understand that the only kind of progress which will take that house from him or him from it is the progress toward the stars, and that, while he hopes to take it in the Lord's good time, he isn't ready for just yet. Billy Warlock owns that house and lives in it and does business there, and the great big heart that thumps in Billy's great big body and gives strength to Billy's great big arm, loves every individual square inch of brick and earth and planking and plaster in that old house from cellar to scuttle. Part with it! Speculate on it! Sacrifice it to progress! Well, scarcely. Not if you were to offer him its weight in solid gold. Not if its neighbor on one side were a Mills Building and its neighbor on the other an Equitable. Not if you were to build an elevated railroad around it and run ten trains per minute, day and night. So long as Billy Warlock can keep himself above ground, so long will that old house keep him company and so long will his forges blow fiery sparks in the cellar while he hammers and hums and hums and hammers on the anvil by his side.

It was just twelve years ago on Christmas Eve that Billy Warlock bought the smithy in the cellar of that little old house. Billy had been working for the man who owned it, and the man who owned it, being a little short of wind and a trifle weak in his legs, had decided to sell and retire. Billy had become the purchaser, and not without many qualms and doubts as to the wisdom of assuming such heavy responsibilities. Billy knew he was a good mechanic, and could put a tire on a wheel or a shoe on a horse as quick and as well as the next man. But it took a good big pile of dollars, as Billy counted dollars, to get those forges, and before he turned them over to his late employer Billy scratched his head a good many times and did a power of thinking. But at last he let go the dollars, and laid his big fist on the biggest forge and blew a blast through the coals that made them glow brighter than ever they glowed before. For it was the master and not the man who sent the draught through them.

O, WHAT AN ARM WAS THAT OF BILLY'S!

He bade the men good-night and wished them a Merry Christmas, closed the doors, locked them tight and looked his property over. It was worth being proud of, make no mistake. It was all any man need wish for. It was well stocked and in prime condition. The house, in the cellar of which his smithy stood, was mainly let in lodgings. On the first floor, raised just far enough above the street to give his customers a fair passage out, there was a saloon and eating-room. Back of these were Billy's own rooms, two nice big rooms where his mother took care of him and cooked his meals and washed his clothes and aired his bed as only good old mothers can. Over this floor were two others, let, as I have said, in lodgings—to whom, who knows? Who ever knows to whom lodgings are let in this big, crowded city?

Billy finished his dinner and drew up his chair and one for his mother by the stove and filled his huge mug with beer, and his huge pipe with tobacco, and talked it all over with his mother. She was a fine woman was Billy's mother, and she drew a straight, steady rein over her big, burly, good-natured boy. She was Billy's best friend, and he knew it, and when she told him she would stand by and help him and save for him and look out after him, Billy reached forth his brawny arm and drew her over on his knee and danced her up and down, smoothing back her gray hair and kissing her old cheeks as if she were a baby.

Then, when the clock struck nine, she got up to wash the dishes and Billy took his lantern to go down among his forges again. Not that he had anything particular to do, though there never was a time when Billy couldn't find something, but the novelty of owning a business was strong with him and he wanted to hammer just for the fun of hammering. He descended into the cellar through a side door which opened from the back hall upon a short ladder. The street doors were barred and bolted. He set his lantern on the ladder steps and lit an oil lamp that hung over his anvil, picked up his iron and his hammer, thrust the one into the coals and laid the other on his anvil, and blew away. Oh, what an arm that was of Billy's! How it made the bellows bulge and the wind roar up the great chimney! How the black coals reddened and flamed and blazed! How the iron glowed and whitened with the heat, and when Billy drew his great hammer down upon it with a hoarse grunt accompanying each blow as if to give it effectiveness, how the sparks scampered about in a furious effort to escape!

Billy was hammering and grunting at a great rate and the forge fire was throwing upon the ceiling fantastic illuminations and causing a thousand still more fantastic shadows, when, wholly without preliminary warning or greeting, Billy felt a slight touch on his arm. It was a slight touch, as I said, but a cold one, a very cold one indeed. Billy turned swiftly around with his hammer in one hand and his red-hot iron in the other. Standing almost beside him with the glare of the fire working a curiously weird effect upon one-half of him, while the other half was almost hidden in the dense shadow beyond, was a tall, spare, angular man with queer little snappy eyes that flashed like diamonds in the light of the forge. His hand was stretched out in a friendly way, and a bland smile stretched across his face following the lines of his wide, extended lips.

"Aha!" he said, cheerily, "how d'ye do? But I forgot! You don't know me and I don't know you. Awkward, eh? But soon fixed, soon fixed. My name's Wrangler, and yours is,—er, what, by the way, is yours?"

"Warlock," said Billy, laying down his iron and his hammer, and gazing amiably at the stranger, "Billy Warlock."

"Warlock," Mr. Wrangler repeated. "Exactly. Well, then, Warlock, Wrangler. Wrangler, Warlock. And now the formalities have been observed. I don't know how it is with you, Warlock, but I'm a great stickler for the formalities. 'Pon my life, I consider them the web upon which the social fabric hangs together. They're not to be dispensed with upon any account whatsoever. While I was abroad recently, the American Minister and I were walking along the Mall together. 'Ah,' he suddenly said, 'my dear Wrangler, here comes the Prince. Of course you know him.' Now, it so happened that H. R. H. and I had never met. I didn't have time to reply, for just as I was about to speak the Prince stopped us and, after greeting the Minister, utterly regardless of the formalities, he told me that he hoped he saw me well. I gave him a look, Warlock, my boy, that he will never forget, and coldly replying, 'Sir, I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance,' I walked on. That afternoon the Minister sent me an apology, but for which damme if I'd ever have spoken to him again."

During this speech, to which Billy listened with great attention and some little awe, he examined Mr. Wrangler carefully. Mr. Wrangler's clothes were harmoniously seedy. In the degree of their wornness his hat was a match for his coat, and his coat a match for his trousers, and his trousers a match for his boots. Although the weather was desperately cold, and a heavy Christmas snow had fallen, he had on neither overcoat nor overshoes. He did not appear to notice Billy's inspecting glances, but having caught his breath, he went cheerily on.

"I am glad and proud to know you, Warlock, old fellow, and I want you to be glad and proud to know me. And you shall be; 'gad, you shan't be able to help it. And you'll find, as you know me better, that while you won't know any great good of me, you won't know any great harm."

Billy contemplated Mr. Wrangler for a few moments more and then amiably replied: "Well, that's all right. What more could a man ask?"

"AHA!" HE SAID, CHEERILY, "HOW D'YE DO?"

"Precisely so," answered Mr. Wrangler, dusting off the anvil and sitting down upon it. "That, I take it, is quite enough. I have not broken in upon your privacy, Wrangler, old fellow, without serious occasion. In fact, I'm troubled, sorely troubled."

"I'm sorry for that," said Billy.

"Of course you are, dear boy, and well you may be. The trouble I'm in is a sad one, sad and novel. Not that trouble in itself is a strange experience to me, for I've had my ups and downs. My life hasn't been one of unmixed gayety, I assure you, not by a long shot. But, you see, I have a habit of bowing to the inscrutable will of Providence. Some people experience a great deal of difficulty finding out what the inscrutable will of Providence is. That doesn't bother me in the least. Having ascertained what my own will is, I know the chances are ten to one that the Providential will is exactly the reverse. That is simple and direct enough, isn't it?"

Billy was very much interested in this glib but melancholy stranger, and he resolved, if it came in his way, that he would do the man a favor. So he turned his hammer with the handle to the ground, sat himself upon the head of it and remarked: "It's right enough, Mr. Wrangler, to make the Lord's will yours. I try to do my best in that line, too. But, still, there is a point, you know, where it comes hard."

"True, dear boy, very true; and how much harder it is to find yourself in a situation which you did nothing to bring about, for which you are in no sense responsible, which is wholly in conflict with your own will, and to the best of your belief with the will of Providence also! This is my unparalleled situation at this particular moment, and it all comes of being the uncle of a little girl baby."

"No?" said Billy, inquiringly, "you don't mean it?"

"I knew you'd be surprised," said Mr. Wrangler, edging up to the forge, which Billy had kept going at a gentle heat to warm their hands now and then. "It ought to be an occasion of unalloyed happiness to be the uncle of a little girl baby. But I was not intended for such a position. It was clearly a mistake to thrust me into it."

"I don't scarcely see how you could help it," said Billy.

"No, I couldn't, could I? It came upon me suddenly and without my knowing it. I had no time for preparation. My brother, who was one of the evils to which, under the will of Providence, I have bowed, called me to him recently, and without so much as a drop of brandy to break the force of the blow, he said: 'Cephas,' said he, 'you are the uncle of a little girl baby!'

"Pale and for a moment speechless, I leaned against the wall and shook with emotion. 'Courage, old man!' said he, 'bear up! bear up!' At first I refused to believe him. 'It is false, Orlando,' I said, 'it can't be so.' But he shook his head sadly. 'It is true, Cephas, he replied, 'and I guess I ought to know.' That argument was of course conclusive. It admitted of no reply. I only asked him how could he so have wronged me. He said nothing in defence of himself. He could say nothing. He simply bent his head and cried for pardon."

"Well, well," said Billy, "this is queer. It seems to be like a big to-do over a very little matter."

Mr. Wrangler looked up with an expression of dismay. "Little!" he cried. "Little! May I ask, Mr. Warlock, if you have ever been the uncle of a little girl baby?"

"No," said Billy, "I never was."

UPON THE BED LAY AS PRETTY A CHILD AS HE HAD EVER SEEN.

"Ah, well, that explains it. Then you can't know the bitterness of that hour. You can't put yourself in my place. I forgave him. I told him with a sob that it was all right. Then, in the name of our mother, he implored me to do him a favor. The infant was in California. He had left it there to—er, learn the language, I reckon. He bade me go and fetch it. At first I hesitated, all but refused. But who can withstand a appeal made in the name of his mother? I pressed his hand in silent acquiescence and took the next train West. I found the child and folded it to my heart. I bought it a milk-bottle with a fancy nozzle, a bulls eye and a rattle. It wept, and I dried its tears. Then I brought it back with me. Fancy my feelings, Warlock; picture to yourself my lacerated, bleeding heart, when upon reaching town this afternoon I learned that my brother was dead! Yes, Warlock, old man, dead and buried and cold in his grave, and another party living in his flat. It was all in vain that the tears streamed from my eyes, all in vain that I begged him at least to take the child. I called him brother, kinsman, royal Wrangler, and bade him remember that this was a matter of honor between him and me. I begged him to think of the situation he had placed me in, for I feared the laugh of callous cynics as much as the cry of the innocent child. But the ungrateful dead answered not."

Mr. Wrangler paused and touched his handkerchief to his eyes, while Billy gazed at him in amazement, uncertain to what category of disease his case should be assigned. "I don't know as I ever heard a queerer tale than this," he said at length. "What did you do about it?"

"I'm doing now," answered Mr. Wrangler. "It is on a special mission that I'm seeking you, Warlock, dear boy, you don't happen to have a bottle of paregoric with you, do you, now?"

"Paregoric!" exclaimed Billy. "Why, is the child sick?"

"Hanged if I know!" Mr. Wrangler replied, with evident sincerity. "I'm not what you'd call a connoisseur in infantile disorders, but I guess she's sick. Anyhow, something's the matter. It may be malaria, or chills, or measles, or whooping-cough, or Bright's disease. But whatever it is, it keeps her very wakeful at night. It disturbs her rest sadly. That might, perhaps, be overlooked; but as an intimate consequence it also disturbs mine. At first I supposed it was because she did not get enough nourishment, so, as she wouldn't drink any more milk from her bottle, I bought a syringe, and filling it with milk, I played it down the little darling's throat."

"Great Scott!" cried Billy, "it's a wonder she didn't choke to death!"

"Is it?" asked Mr. Wrangler, innocently. "Well, to tell the truth, she did come dev'lish near it, and so I inferred that I hadn't correctly diagnosed the case. After she had got done coughing her spirits seemed more than ever depressed. I went to bed in the vain hope that her supply of tears would in time become exhausted. As the hours drew along and that hope died away, I concluded she must have a headache. I had one, and I thought it only natural that she should, too. The question was what remedy should I apply? In a happy moment paregoric occurred to me. I seemed indistinctly to remember that when I was a child paregoric did the business. How fortunate one is, dear boy, in such moments as that to have the memories of his boyhood to fall back on. I got up, dressed, and went out to hunt a drug-store. Unfortunately, the only two I came across were closed. I returned disconsolate, but as I entered I heard the sound of your hammer and saw the glimmer of the lantern on your ladder. I descended hither. I looked upon you and said: 'Here is a friend.' Warlock, old fellow, find me some paregoric!"

"I don't know much about babies, Mr. Wrangler," said Billy, slowly and rather sternly, "for I never had one, and I never was throwed with 'em. But I think the chances is that you'll kill your'n before morning."

Mr. Wrangler was standing in the shadows where Billy couldn't see him very well, but his snappy little eyes were shining in a way that Billy didn't like.

"How old is the baby?" asked Billy.

"I haven't an idea, not one," answered Mr. Wrangler, laughing merrily, as if his not knowing were a monstrous joke. "But she can walk and talk."

"And you trying to feed her on milk in a bottle!" exclaimed Billy. "How'd you like to be fed on iron filings? I rather think they'd make a good diet for you!" Billy was indignant, and he fetched his hammer down on a log that lay near with a blow that split it through and through. Mr. Wrangler stepped back into the shadows still further, and his little eyes glowed in the darkness like a cat's.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed; "good, very good. But you mustn't make fun of me, old fellow. It isn't fair, now, really."

"Where is the child, anyhow?"

"Upstairs."

"Here, in this house?"

"Precisely."

"Come on, then; take me to her, and let's see what the matter is."

"That's a good fellow!" cried Mr. Wrangler. "As soon as I saw you I knew you would prove to be my deliverer. Come."

The forge fire had now gone out, and directing Mr. Wrangler to stand on top of the ladder, Billy took the lantern, blew out the hanging lamp, and both ascended from the smithy into the hall of the house. Billy locked the door behind him and followed Mr. Wrangler upstairs into the third story. They paused before the hall bedroom and bent forward to listen. Not a sound broke the night's stillness, and softly Mr. Wrangler turned the key and opened the door. Billy moved noiselessly ahead and lit the dull gas.

Upon the bed, with one hand under her cheek and the other one, small and dotted with dimples, resting lightly on her plump neck, lay as pretty a child as he had ever seen. Her eyes were closed, for she was sleeping heavily, as if repose had come to her only when her little frame was utterly worn out. A great mass of thick, tangled curls clustered on the pillow about her head. A dark line down her flushed cheek marked the course of the tears she had been shedding, and the pillow that supported her was still wet with them.

HE CARRIED HER DOWN INTO HIS OWN ROOM.

Billy stooped down and kissed her half-parted lips and her white forehead, while Mr. Wrangler, leaning jauntily against the door, hummed in low strains a melodious lullaby.

"Nothing ails this child," said Billy, when the sound of Mr. Wrangler's voice had died away. "Nothing at all."

"Warlock, dear boy," replied Wrangler, "I think you told me you had never been an uncle. The man who has not drank the bitter waters of an uncle's experience for himself is—pardon me but I must say it—wholly incompetent to speak as to the woes of childhood. How often have you wooed sleep amid the wailings of an infant voice? I'm disappointed in you, Warlock!"

"Don't talk so loud, you'll waken her."

"Spare us that. Let me have my hat and stick. I'll get that paregoric if I have to commit burglary!" and Mr. Wrangler started back as if fully prepared to carry out his threat.

"Be quiet," said Billy, "and look here. My rooms are down stairs where I live with my mother. It's too cold in here for the child. That's one thing that ails her. I'll take her down with me, and when she's had her breakfast in the morning, you can come for her."

Mr. Wrangler seized Billy's hand and shook it fervently. "Dear boy," he said, "you're the kind of a friend to have. Take her and give her a good night's rest."

Billy leaned over the bed, lifted the soundly sleeping child tenderly in his big arms and, followed by Mr. Wrangler, he carried her down into his own room and deposited her upon the bed. Then he turned to Wrangler.

"You'll come for her in the morning, you know?" he said.

"Certainly, old fellow. Good night, I must get some sleep."

"Good night," said Billy, "and a Merry Christmas to you."

Mr. Wrangler waved his hand with a grand farewell flourish, blew a kiss toward the little form upon the bed, and passed out into the hall. He waited there an instant as if undecided what course to pursue. Then he ran upstairs to the hall room, hurriedly crowded his personal effects that lay scattered around the room into his valise, and ran down again into the street. The front door closed with a sharp bang behind him and he quickly disappeared in the snowy night.

Billy could not help confessing to a sense of relief when his curious new acquaintance left him. Not that he felt any definite fear of Mr. Wrangler. The human being had yet to be born of whom Billy Warlock was afraid. But there was a something about Mr. Wrangler that he didn't fancy. "It's them eyes," said Billy, "and he don't make no noise when he walks." His own bed being occupied by the child, he piled a lot of blankets on the floor, stretched himself upon them and was soon asleep.

The Christmas sun was peeping obliquely into Billy's room and making, with the aid of his shaving-glass, all sorts of fantastic colors on the wall, when a slight tug at the blankets which covered him moved him to start, turn over, open his eyes, stare blankly before him, shut them, open them again, rub them desperately, and finally gaze with awakened consciousness up at the object which had disturbed his slumbers. She was leaning half over the bed, her little fat arms, shoulders and throat all bare, her bright, tangled hair knotted in bewildering confusion all about her head, and her big blue eyes looking down upon him with a curious interest. How long she had been awake he could only conjecture, but evidently her patience had at last been exhausted, and she had set about premeditatedly to arouse him. Billy was charmed by the little picture above him and smiled a cheery greeting. She smiled too, right merrily, and said, "What's your name?"

"Billy," said he. "What's yours?"

The smile straightway faded from her face like the color from a withered blossom and she glanced hurriedly and anxiously around the room.

"Where's the black man?" she whispered.

"The black man?" cried Billy. "What black man, my dear?"

"Don't you know him? He's had me ever so long."

Billy was puzzled. "A black man had you?" he repeated. "Why, you don't mean your uncle, do you?"

"Yes," she said, "that's him, and he says if I don't call him 'uncle' he'll cut off my big toe!"

Billy Warlock jumped upon his feet like a shot. "The devil he did!" he cried. "I'll punch his head for that!"

"And his knife has got six cutters in it!"

"I guess he was only funning," said Billy. "He didn't mean it."

"That's what he said," she insisted.

"Yes, my dear, but he didn't mean it. He was joking."

"That's what he said!" Her accent was very positive, and she added as if conning it over, "His knife had six cutters."

Billy felt himself somewhat at a loss to deal with this well-formed impression, so he contented himself with the remark, "But you haven't told me what your name is yet?"

She rose upon her knees in the bed and leaned over toward him. "My really name is Lotchen."

"Lotchen what?"

"That's all—just Lotchen."

"Where's your mother, Lotchen?"

"I don't know; do you?"

"There's something queer about this business," said Billy to himself. "And if that Wrangler man don't make it plain he'll find hisself in trouble. What is your father's name, Lotchen?" he inquired, aloud.

"Who's that?"

"Your father. Haven't you a father?"

"I don't know. The black man says he can turn me into a toothpick if he wants to."

Billy doubled up his fist, and looked at it grimly. "Well, he won't want to," he said. "Don't you be afraid. I'll take care of you."

"Oh, will you?"

"For a little while, anyhow."

"How long?"

"Well, till you get your breakfast."

"Where's he gone?"

"Who?"

"The black man."

"He's upstairs in his room. You can go to him after breakfast."

"I don't want to go. I'm afraid of his knife. I sit and hold on to my big toe all day. Have you got a knife, too?" She looked at him with an expression he could not understand. Perhaps her natural trust in mankind had been somewhat shaken.

"My knife won't hurt you," he said.

Lotchen crawled to the edge of the bed, leaned over and put her two hands on his, and said, "Then let's you and me run away from the black man."

Billy looked much amused. "No," he replied, "we won't do that, Lotchen; but I shouldn't wonder if he was to run away from us. Don't your uncle love you?"

"He loves his nose better," she replied.

"His which?"

"His nose. He's all the time rubbing it up and down."

"But don't he love you, too?"

"No."

"What makes you think that?"

"'Cause I'm afraid of him."

"When did you see him first, Lotchen?"

"Oh, ever so long. He's had me, you know."

"Yes, I know that. What's he been doing with you?"

The expression on her face was so bland that Billy saw, whatever Mr. Wrangler might intend, she knew nothing more than that she was being "had" under circumstances that caused her constant fright. He did not question her further, but went into the kitchen where his mother was getting the griddle hot for the buckwheat cakes and the spider hot for the sausages, and he told her of Wrangler and the child. She went in to see Lotchen, and snuggled the little one up to her close and tight, and told her she should have a merry Christmas and she mustn't be afraid of anybody, for her Billy, that is, Billy's mother's Billy, could whip anybody on earth, she didn't care who he was, and nobody should frighten this dear little soul, and the old lady began now to express her ideas in that strange language which is hidden from the wise and prudent, but revealed unto grandmammas and babes. "B'essings!" she said, "b'essings on 'e dear heart an' 'e 'ittie body, wiv 'e 'ittie youn' nose, an' 'e 'ittie b'u' eyes, an' 'e ittie youn' cheeks, an' 'e itt'e youn' ev'ysing an' nobody s'all bozzer her at all, not 'e 'east ittie bit, 'tause s'e was a sweet ittie fwing, and Billy, wiz him big fist, an' him date big arm, Billy dust take 'e b'ack mans an all 'e uzzer mans wot bozzer zis ittie soul an' 'e frow 'em yite in 'e Norf Yiver, yite in, not carin' 'tall 'bout 'e ice, but dus' frow 'em in an' yet 'em det out 'e bes' way zay tan. B'ess ittie heart!"

Then Lotchen smiled and put up her pretty face to be kissed, which she didn't have to do twice before it was kissed by them both, and Billy, who hadn't slung hammers all his life for nothing, rolled up his shirt sleeves and doubled up his fists and sparred away at the air as if to suggest what would happen to any one who laid as much as his little finger on her.

All through the breakfast Billy kept his eyes on that round, pretty face and wondered what he should say and do when the "black man" came to get her. He began to grow moody and sullen as the buckwheat cakes disappeared, and when thirty of them had been disposed of Billy felt himself ready to meet Mr. Wrangler. He had some questions he desired to ask Mr. Wrangler, and the oftener he thought them over the more he felt his fingers itch to close themselves around Mr. Wrangler's long and scraggy neck. He waited an hour, two hours, but no Mr. Wrangler came, and at last Billy concluded to mount the stairs and to interview Mr. Wrangler in the hall bedroom.

He told Lotchen to go into his room, where she had spent the night, and on her assuring him that she wasn't afraid, he locked her in and stowed the key away in his pocket. Then he shot upstairs to the hall bedroom. He knocked, but no answer came. He opened the door. The room was empty. The bed was just as he had left it the night before with the impression upon it of the little form he had carried away. It had evidently been without a tenant during the night. All that Christmas Day he waited and watched for Mr. Wrangler, but he waited and watched in vain.

Two days afterward an express wagon drew up before the smithy and a box was delivered to Billy marked with his name. It contained a liberal supply of child's clothing, which Lotchen recognized as hers. Little by little Billy and his mother drew from her fragments of her history. She remembered a big house by the water, and a little bed of lilies-of-the-valley under a couple of pear trees. She remembered a colored man named Pete, but there was no response in her memory to the words "father" and "mother," and the only woman who appeared to be impressed on her mind was one who called her "Lassie" and gave her horrid stuff from a bottle in a wooden spoon.

Days and weeks and years went on, and Billy Warlock's purse grew plumper and his heart grew lighter with each of them. His smithy in the cellar grew in dimensions and gradually he absorbed the little old house over it. The saloon disappeared and the room it had occupied became a parlor for Lotchen. The lodgers went out one by one until the whole house was Billy's dwelling.

One day when she was nearly fourteen years old, Billy received a letter that worried him a good deal. It was dated at the Newcastle Jail in Delaware. It read:

My Dear Warlock:

It seems to be definitely settled about my being an error of judgment. You can see by the enclosed newspaper clipping that I ought not to have been involved in the scheme of the creation. You needn't mention it to anybody else. I forget what name you knew me by, but I think it was

CEPHAS WRANGLER.

The newspaper clipping contained these words:

Nothing, therefore, remains for the Court but to pronounce the sentence which a jury, almost wholly of your own selection, has adjudged your fitting doom. The crime you have committed is the most dreadful known to the law. For it there is but one penalty, the requisition of your life in forfeit for the one you have taken. The sentence of the Court is that you be conducted hence to the prison from which you came and that you be confined there until Friday, the 15th day of March, following, and that you then, between the hours of 7 and 11 in the morning, be hanged by the neck until you are dead, and may God have mercy on you!

This is all that Billy Warlock knows or cares to know of the circumstances under which Lotchen became his child. He never made the slightest effort to discover more. It didn't interest him, and he didn't wish it to interest her. She was his child and that was enough—at least, it was enough for several years. The precise moment at which it ceased to be enough is not fixed in Billy's mind, but last Christmas, when Lotchen found a gold watch in her stocking, and when she came and put her arms around his neck and kissed him, which she hadn't done very often of late, and when she whispered that she wished she had something to give him, Billy turned his eyes to the floor and stuck his big fists in his trousers pockets, and did a power of thinking. He knew then, if he had not fully known it before, that for her to be his child was not enough. So he said very solemnly, "Are you sure you mean that, Lotchen? Now, don't answer without you know, for you might have something you wouldn't want to give me, and if I was to ask for it and you was to look hesitatin', I—well, I don't know what I should do."

"I don't have to think, Billy," Lotchen answered, promptly, "for I've been thinking a great deal and wondering whether you—"

She stopped there short, and her face, her pretty face, her dear, round, dimpled face, her truthful, honest, womanly face, got very red, and she jumped up and ran out of the room.

After that last Christmas, Billy and Lotchen talked and walked with each other on a different footing from that on which their intercourse had previously been conducted. He said nothing to her, nor she to him that referred to their interrupted conversation until October came, and then one day he said: "Lotchen, is my Christmas gift ready?" and he held out his hand to her, both hands, and smiled.

"Yes, Billy," she answered.

And on next Tuesday morning, Christmas morning, when the bells are ringing merrily and all the world is glad, Billy Warlock, as I said at the very beginning of my story, dressed in his big frock coat and the whitest of snowy neckties, will—but you know the rest, so what's the use of my telling it?

L. B. G.