

# WOMEN'S HOUSEHOLD GIRLS

## FICTION - TWO PAGES OF RECIPES AND IDEAS - PAGE for MISSES

# STEEL - By JAMES OPPENHEIM

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"THEY'VE a new man on the crane—green as grass," muttered the steel worker.

His wife left the dishes at the sink, zigzagged across the neat, crowded kitchen, and leaned over him.

"Martin!" her voice was sharp with anxiety. "It's time you quit that job. You're not as young as you used to be."

"I ain't scrap iron yet," chuckled Martin, "nor slag, either."

His wife took him under the chin, and lifted up the eagle-like face with its weathered lines and ashy mustache and sharp eagle eyes.

"Mart," she whispered, a throb of fright in the words, "they'll bring you home—dead. I'm waiting for it." She paused. "I've always waited for it. Every time there's a knock I think it's you on a stretcher. And now with this green crane-man—"

He reached out long arms and drew her close—so close that she kissed him.

"Old woman," he whispered, "I've handled steel, man and boy, 50 years. I've had no more than enough burns to make me used to fire. Not a thing else. Do you think I'm feared of steel? Yet," he mused, "better to burn up in an oven than rust out in the yards."

"But, Mart," she cried drawing his head to her broad bosom, "if that crane-man rolled an ingot at you—if you got scalded—"

She closed her eyes as if to shut out the scene.

"Ugh!" she shuddered, "you can't know how I've shook for you these long years. I never get over it. It's the fear—the fear." Her voice deepened. "I hate the mills—I hate 'em—I hate 'em! What have they done for you and me?"

He smiled sweetly at her.

"Well, you know what they do to dirty iron ore—make steel of it. Guess they made a man of me."

"A man of you?" her voice was a little hoarse. "They've ground you up. It's all machinery nowadays, and men just tend on the machines. The men ain't nothing; the machinery's everything. And those machines have used you 12 hours of every living day, and sent you home worn out, and we ain't had a home, and the children ain't had a father. That's why—"

But she stopped there, and turned away, feeling her way blindly back to the sink and letting her tears splash among the steaming dishes. She was a neat, gray-haired woman, with a calm, large face and sweet, gray eyes, and the tears became her nobly.

Martin took a thoughtful pull at his pipe, and at once his face became old and as ashy as his mustache. His heavy eyebrows lumped over the eagle eyes, and slowly he clenched his free fist.

"Mother," he whispered, "has he been home today?"

"No," she sobbed softly.

"No?" he repeated dully.

There was a sharp silence, in which the noise of clattering dishes and splashing water seemed to echo through the bright room. Martin shuffled his feet on the neat linoleum and gazed up at the unglazed gaslight. Then he arose, though not to his full height. Fifty years of steel were on his back and bent it. He trudged slowly over to his wife and stood very near her.

"Mother," he began in a slow, broken, old man voice, "mother, I'm less feared of steel than of my boy, the boy's breakin' me—" He lifted his clenched fist. "The boy's—killin', killin' me!"

Tears splashed on the dishes again.

Then Martin loosed the lashing whine of a broken man.

"To think of a boy of mine stealin'—his voice rose to a cry, "even if it was 50 cents worth—and we Youngs come up through '76 and the rebellion and steel. Do you think I'm feared of a green crane-man?"

The mother turned and seized him with her wet hands.

"Mart, the boy's not all to blame. Who put adventure in his head? Who told him stories of the Spanish main? Who was so used up in the mills he hadn't time for his own son, to bring him up right and show him the way? Mart, he was at the reformatory four years—"

"Yes," cried Martin hoarsely, "and all those years a dollar and a half a week came out of our stint to keep him!"

"But he's your son, Mart—he's ours—our only boy—he knows you're cold against him—it takes the nerve out of him."

"Shh!" whispered Martin in a hard voice, "it's him!"

They turned from each other as the door opened.

A pale, pimply boy of 18 came in timidly, a soft cap on his head and some newspapers under his arm.

As soon as he saw his father he put on a defiant attitude, tossed his cap on a chair, and shuffled his feet.

"Evening," he muttered.

Martin nodded slightly. The mother turned.

"Jack," she cried breathlessly, "come here."

The boy looked at her sharply.

"What you want?"

As she could not speak any further she went trembling to him and took his arm.

"Are you afraid of your mother?" she whispered.

"He's looking!" muttered Jack.

"Jack, kiss me, anyhow—kiss me in front of him. Show him what you are!"

The boy broke loose from her.

"Aw, I'm goin' to bed. I've sold enough papers." Then he snapped: "Don't be afraid, old man, I've 50 cents for you!"

He began to whistle shrilly and fung out of the room.

The mother went back to her dishes—but dry eyed. It had gone beyond tears for her. She only wished she was dead, or that she had never had any children.

But Martin crumpled up on a chair, and leaned his elbow and his head over the table.

"So he's the last of the Youngs," he whimpered. "Good God—Andy Carnegie and I started together, and Andy's got the world, and I've got—this!"

A hoarse whistle shrilled through the night like a summons for lost souls that walked abroad—a summons back to the flames. Martin arose with the mechanical precision of half a century of mill work.

"Good night," he said softly.

She turned, flinging her arms about his neck.



HE STOOD CLENCHING HIS FISTS IN A SULLEN FRIGHT

"Mart! Mart! don't go! I can't lose you yet awhile!"

"Who thinks of losing me?" he asked.

"But the new man—" her voice quivered with quiet terror; "the crane, Martin—stay by me tonight! They've no business to put on green men."

"There! there!" he said, patting her. "I've stayed by steel 50 years. Steel ain't agoin' back on me."

"But, Mart—I feel it in my bones—" He chuckled.

"If I'd a gone by your bones these years, a precious poor millman I'd been."

He gripped her close and kissed her.

"There, old woman, you keep a stiff upper lip! My beauty!" He struck her shoulder familiarly. "God, it's good to kiss your sweet face!"

He kissed it, laughed, and picked up a frayed copy of Hamlet and stuck it in his overall pocket. This copy, whose every page was dented and cut with fine steel dust and black fingermarks was to help out the lunch hour. Then he turned at the door.

"Send me with a smile."

She won out then, for it was a smile to remember, and she laughed gayly as he shut the door. The house was on a mud street that clung midway up a steep hill. There were rows of similar neat houses either side. The night was soft warm; the air bitter sweet with the smell of soft coal smoke. Martin trudged to the end of the street and started down a long slant of wooden steps. Then he paused to look at the mills, for his heart was fighting in his breast.

Down the center of the valley flowed the Monongahela, a sheet of smooth water, and for a mile on either bank stood that stupendous organism that is the mother of steel, and brings her sons to birth day and night. There was a multiplicity of mills; smoke filled the skies from a thousand chimneys; and

flames fled over the earth like a town afire. The smoke clouds shuddered red; mill windows glowed like molten gold; tongues of red flame leaped through roofs; and over the river, crowning all, a swirl of golden cloud fire rolled toward the skies showering sparks up like an inverted fall of golden snow.

"H'm," muttered Martin, "they're tapping a heat."

He could see it all, for he had been through it all. How the iron ore, mixed with coke and limestone, is dumped into the top of the big bellied blast furnace; how a hundred jets of blazing gas play on it for four hours; how the tap doors are then opened at the bottom, and like streams of golden water the fluid iron runs off into ladle cars. How the cars go carefully after the yard engine over the switches and across the bridge to the open hearths, where the fluid is poured into great furnaces and subjected to the purification of air blasts. And so steel is made—it is being really purified iron. How it is then poured back into ladles, and from ladles into ingot moulds, that hold the fluid until it hardens on the surface. How the ingots are transported to the soaking pits, and dropped into fire to reheat the surface and make it one with the hot heart. How then the perfect ingot, the 10 ton ingot, is carried to the rolls, and goes through the great wringers, with the howling of a lioness, until it is flattened into long steel plates, and sheared.

That was the Machine—and the men? Martin shook his head. There was a time when men, not machines, made steel; now the men merely pulled levers and let the Machine have its way. Martin could see the men whenever there was a golden, intolerable glare and a shriveling, eating heat, hurrying to and fro like the demons, half in shadow, half in fright.

Used as he was to the sublime hell spectacle—the flames and smoke playing among a thousand black chimney pipes—he felt the glory of it all afresh. That Man had wrought this—that all these miles of mills, joined by veins of railroad track and nerves of telephone, should be one living organism, a living Mother of an infinite brood—the very Mother of civilization—for whence arise our cities and our railroads, our tools and our telegraph—made him throb with pride.

"Old Mother!" he muttered, shaking a friendly fist at the hell glare. "I've helped be midwife to yer 50 odd years! Good luck to you!"

Then he went on down the flight of crazy steps. His heart began its right again. He had to admit the failure of his life; he thought of Carnegie; he thought of the young days when he earned \$16 to \$20 a day; he thought of his present meager \$3 a day. Times had changed, and he knew, too, that he was old. Soon he would be laid off by the pitiless Machine, and at best he could only be night watchman at a dollar and a half a night. Fifty years he had shifted, week in, week out, 12 hours a day, and then 12 a night, with the "long turn" of 24 steady hours on the Sunday between the shifts. There had been no home life—or only an hour and a half a day.

"Steel means workin' and sleepin' for a man," he had often said. And yet he loved it—he loved the danger, he loved the smoke and the flames, he loved that battle, as great as any in history, of Man against Steel. And was he not a seasoned veteran? He looked back toward the romance of great beginnings; he himself was a part of the process; he had helped create the modern world. The new men, of course, were dissatisfied. They wanted a labor union—they wanted a shorter day—

they wanted something besides toil and sleep. Well, times change!

And then he thought of his son. He had to grope for the filmy banister then. Yes, he was a failure—a down and out failure; he had never been any good; he had hung about sauntering, he had been guilty of petty thefts. And then came the burning disgrace of arrest, the appearance in court, the commitment to the reformatory. After that when Martin looked a man in the eyes he hid it defiantly. And gradually his life went to pieces within, until now, with the boy selling papers on the street, and impudent at home—a constant challenge to his father—Martin felt very old.

"Well," muttered Martin with a thought of the green crane-man, "if I'm out of the way and his mother after me, he can do as he pleases. There's no steel in slag."

But he stopped and gave that terrible whine again.

"If he'd only an inch of backbone—if he only wasn't all slag—" He looked up toward the smoke hidden stars. "Livin' and breathin' Gawd, it's more'n I can bear!"

Then he remembered that he was a little late and so he hurried down the last steps, and down a slanting street, past dark smoke blackened houses, and on down to a little bridge.

He gave his check and "Good evening" at the time keeper's, crossed the bridge over the main line tracks, and was soon in the yards, among the flaming mills, with the dinky engines whistling shrilly as they swung over narrow gauge, with men waving lanterns and setting switches in the fraction of a second. He picked his way over the rails, a mill at either side making him radiant and distinct as he walked, and roaring in his ears. The terrible, end-

less birth scene, with its torture, its shrieks, its sweat and hurry, was being acted all about him.

He walked to the river and saw with a quick eye the reflected flames falling like Niagaras into the still waters. A mighty locomotive whizzed by with a dozen cars, cinders flying. Martin breathed deeply, a man again—for was he not a natural part of all this? Was not this his life? Was not this his life? Steel still needed him. He chuckled, rounded a mill, and entered by its wide open river side.

Men greeted him, and a man at a lever made way for him. Martin took the lever. The night's work had begun.

Overhead, resting on two far apart runways, was poised the crane. Double girders bridged across, and at one end hung a cab—a steel box in which the crane-man sat. Running over the girder was a "trolley," a bunch of wheels from which was suspended an immense pair of steel tongs that hung down like an eager jaw. The crane-man ran the crane like a trolley car. A lever pulled sent it traveling down the runways, another sent the bunch of wheels across the girders, a third lowered or lifted the tongs, a fourth opened or closed the tongs. But the crane was at rest then.

The man who made way for Martin stopped to whisper a word.

"Look out for the crane! That guy's liable to spill stuff. He's lost his nerve!"

Martin laughed good naturedly.

"Get your supper and take a snooze!" he chuckled. "Don't teach Martin Young about steel!"

"Just the same—" began the man.

But just then a dinky engine—a queer topheavy affair—came whistling and bumping into the mill with ingot molds standing upright like little men on tiny flatcars. A laborer ran along, knocking the molds open, and the ingots stood revealed. One could see how their shells were getting gray hard, though their hearts stayed red soft. They needed re-heating.

The crane man pulled his lever and the enormous traveling bridge came rumbling and whizzing like a trolley car. It passed over Martin's head, stopped above the ingots, the tongs moved over quickly to position, reached down like two fingers and picked up a red ingot very delicately. Martin pulled a lever, and a steel trap door set in masonry of the floor opened back like a huge mouth, revealing the "soaking pit." This was a well of fire—white hot—intolerable to the eye. Nor could the flesh come near it. But the big tongs never faltered. They moved over with the red ingot and lowered it like a lost soul into the pit.

But the tongs released, gave a queer flying motion, very near Martin, so that he cried out:

"Damn you, what are you doing?"

They were gone in an instant, and the trapdoor shut over the steel soul in its living hell.

A strange feeling flowed through the mill on top of Martin's cry. The engineer in the dinky engine instinctively leaned out of his cab, ready to jump. The laborers stood at attention.

But there was no pause. Again the tongs came down and seized an ingot from the flatcar. It was held suspended a moment, absolutely still, and then it was given a strange swirl. Martin bent his head, clutched the lever down, ducked lower. There were days in that second of time. And then there was merely a world of fire, and a fall into bottomless space, and nothingness.

Men came running from all directions.

"Curse him! curse him!" screamed the engineer, leaping down and running. "By God, it's got him! By God! it's got him!"

There were wild cries from all lips, a wild, terrible howling. The ingot swung away, and a sane laborer had enough sense to bring over a fire bucket and dash water on the strange heap.

"Marty! Marty!" the engineer was leaning at the fallen heap, and sobbing like a child. "Marty, old boy!"

The laborer knelt, leaned, and put a hand on the body.

"Ye," he muttered in a foreign voice, "dere's life still in de lump. He stuck out an arm—jes' his tamm luck!—and zip, de steel sizzled it off. Dat's all—chust an arm." He laughed hoarsely.

"I guess he loses a suit of clothes, too."

"Shut up you blamed Hunky," roared a skilled worker.

Martin spoke in a low voice.

"No hospital—no ambulance—no fussin'. Take me home to my wife. It's good night for me boys!"

The company doctor could do no more than place a wad to soak up the blood. Then six strong men bore the steel worker out on a stretcher, and Martin, on his last mill trip, heard the roaring of the Mother in her pain, heard the music that had sung in his ears half a century, smelt the good smoke, felt the cinders falling on his face. They bore him over the bridge and up the hill and by a roundabout way to avoid the wooden stairway.

A blanket was borrowed from a neighbor and Martin was mercifully shrouded to his neck.

Then a man went to the kitchen door and knocked softly.

The mother opened the door. Her face was deadly calm. She spoke in a low, even voice.

"You've brought Martin home." The man could only murmur. "He's still living." and turn his face away. Something struggled in his throat, and he gasped strangely.

"Bring him in very quiet—into the sitting room. Don't make a noise—my boy's asleep."

Then came six silent workmen and the burden on a stretcher between them. The face above the blanket was very white, but the mother did not look at it. She followed the men very quietly into the sitting room. A light burned brightly in the neat place, with its red strong patterned wall paper and its comfortable upholstery. The stretcher was lowered on to the long leather couch.

Then the men made way, and the calm, sweet woman knelt down.

"Can't you speak, dear?" she asked. "Yes," came a distant murmur. "Get the boy."

She arose and passed out. She climbed the stairs. She knocked on her son's door.

There was no answer, and she entered the dark room quietly.

"Jack!" she whispered.

She shook him gently.

He sat up, confused and dazed. "What's up?"

She spoke very quietly.

"Jack, your daddy's dying. Come downstairs."

He got out of bed, and she threw an overcoat over his shoulders. He followed her down the stairs.

The men were all in the kitchen, standing silent; none looked at the mother or the boy.

And then the two stepped into the sitting room. The house was so strangely hushed that one could hear the far off roaring of the mills.

The boy went stealthily up to the couch and looked at his father. Then his face went very pale, and he stood clenching his fists in a sullen fright.

The mother stood near him, her eyes on her son's face.

Every footstep, every creak was painfully audible, and it seemed ages before Martin spoke. Then he spoke faintly.

"Jack, I haven't much breath left, and I'm not a talker—I'm a laboring man. When I was 9 years old I went to work down at the mills. I've earned as much as \$20 a day and supported my family, my brother's family and my sister's family. I've been an athlete in my day—used to train boat crews—loved to wander in the open. I had as many opportunities in my day as Carnegie did. But I hadn't quite the education. All my old comrades are millionaires or killed. And now—" he paused, "I'm killed, too."

The boy stood as if he were frozen. Martin went on.

"I used to think my boy would go into Steel after me. Think of those mills—why, they're like a work of Nature—like the ocean, or the Grand canyon, or Niagara. When I think that man created them, it seems to me he's pretty much of God—and so perhaps I've been part of God by working in steel. Perhaps you don't know it—but Pittsburg's the real heart of America—and if Pittsburg was wiped off the map America would go, too. This world is built on steel and steam—steel, body, steam, spirit. Understand?"

The boy did not move.

The father lowered his voice and it came with a plaintive tenderness, an old loveliness long lost—the old father voice when the boy was a baby.

"You and me, Jackie, we've been on the outs. But I reckon it's my fault, boy. I used to put in my evening hour—remember—you on the floor, I in the armchair, telling you of our ancestors, how they sailed the Spanish main with cargoes of gold, and how they were shipwrecked, and how they came to Baltimore after twenty-six weeks at sea. Do you mind how, when they struck storm, the old captain preached daily of the text about the needle's eye and the rich man, and each day dumped overboard a shoveful of gold to appease God's wrath, and so they come to port with no gold left? I put them ideas into your head. I'll take the blame."

The boy still stood, with his sullen, frightened face. Then Martin tried to rise and fell back, and his face was screwed up with agony, and suddenly he loosened a terrible cry that went vibrating through the hushed house like the cry of tortured steel.

"Jack—Jack—Jack! You've got to come to me! I've got to get you. Forgive your father!"

Then the boy swayed, his mouth opened wide, his body trembled from his feet to his throat and he gave a wild, piercing moan.

"Father! father!"

He flung himself down and he sobbed like a small boy. A moment later a trembling big hand crept out of the covers and touched his head like a blessing.

"Ah," said Martin softly, tenderly. "I got him that time—his my own son—he's a Young after all! Boy, you're adventurous—that's your trouble. Go into Steel. It's like going to war. Hard it is and terrible, and it gets you in the end, but it has a way of turning out men. You'll go into Steel!"

The father waited, gasping. He could not die a failure; he would not. He waited, hanging on to this world with all its spiritual strength. Through his mortal eyes he gave a last keen look at the room, the light, the red wallpaper, the two faces—all so real, so strangely real. He waited—and then at last, on a strange, half choked sob, it came, the sweetest sound he had heard in years.

"I'll do it—I'll do it—Father!"

"There was a deep silence, and then: "Make room for your mother!"

The boy edged away; a quiet face leaned near, and there was a long, long kiss. Martin had still one arm to draw that head close.

"Listen," he whispered, "you'll be happy with Jack, and I'm happy. And, old woman—my beauty—kiss me again! Kiss me—"