

The WIDOW WREN

by MINNIE BARBOUR ADAMS

Illustrations by HAMILTON WILLIAMS

ADDISON WREN gave a start and drew himself stiffly erect, as his horse's hoofs struck the pavements of Yarrow. With a tortured grimace, he stretched his neck and ran a soothing forefinger around, inside his infrequent linen collar. He thrust from beneath the laprobe two big feet shod in patent leather, and, evidently pleased with his appearance, a smile overspread his rugged face as he flicked a bit of chaff from the sleeve of the first tailor-made coat of his life. Then, "Whoa!" he ordered peremptorily; and the well-trained colt stopped in its tracks.

It was very early, and there were few of the inmates of the Nippen boarding house as he tied the colt, and, with a last shrugging shake into his unaccustomed garments, walked boldly up the path and rang the bell.

"I want to see a Mrs. Wren that boards here," he announced curtly.

"She isn't up yet," objected the girl who had come to the door. "She never gets up till nine



"Ah! Mrs. Wren, I believe," he boomed out

Sunday mornings, poor soul! It's only eight now, and—"

"Not up yet?" Addison interrupted amazedly; then, he remembered himself. "Well, I guess you'd better call her," he said politely. "Tell her there's a gentleman wishes to see her particular; but she's not to hurry."

He was almost sorry, however, for this generous concession as the clock on the mantel ticked the slow seconds into minutes and the minutes into hours, as it seemed to him. He shivered from nervousness, and repeatedly cracked the joints of his big, hard hands. All at once, a dreadful notion made him gasp. What if she did not come at all?

The light died from his face, and the hopefulness in his eyes was replaced by apprehension. But he'd wait a while longer, he told himself; and then, if she did n't come, he'd send a very different message.

Meanwhile, the inmates of the house came and went along the hall, and up and down the stairs, all in plain view from where he sat; and the clock attended faithfully to the passing time. A door closed, and a quick step sounded along the corridor.

"It's her!" he whispered excitedly; and, with his face paling and flushing and his hands clenched before him, he watched a woman descend the stairs.

She was a little woman, slender and gracefully erect despite her years; and, though ill health and overwork were plainly recorded on her face, it still possessed a certain unquenched girlish brightness.

His face fell as he noted her pretty gray dress, edged with something fluffy and pink at wrists and throat; it fell still more at sight of the white combs and pins that confined the silvery hair. He had hoped—but she had reached the door, and was peering inquiringly into the gloom of the parlor. Wonderingly, almost fearfully, she stared up at him. She was about to speak; but he found his voice first.

"Ah! Mrs. Wren, I believe," he boomed out, extending his hand. "The Widow Wren?"

"Wh—why—?" she stammered, her eyes widen-

ing with alarm, and her face paling; but he hurried on.

"Now, Mrs. Wren," he began pompously, to hide his agitation, "I want to have a little speech with you. Sit down here by the window and, as I'm a very plain spoken man, I'll tell you what I come to say in just about two minutes. To begin with, I'm a widower, just as you are—no! no! don't interrupt!" he begged, extending a deprecating hand; "but hear me out!—I'm a widower, and a most all-fired lonesome one, at that; and when I heard of you living over here all alone among strangers, I said: 'By Crickety! I'm going over and cheer her up.' I said it just that way, Mrs. Wren. But as it's too far to come traipsin' over here every Sunday night, as I'd a' done once, I just thought I'd come early and make a day of it while I was about it."

"But what if I ain't in need of cheering up?" she asked, smiling. Her momentary alarm at the big man's words and manner had gone, and there was about her, now, an air of self-possession that disconcerted her visitor.

"You may say you ain't; but you are," he maintained stoutly; "and so am I. Of course, we don't know each other"—her smile suddenly faded and she shook her head—"but we ain't no spring chickens, Mrs. Wren; and I calculated that it was nobody's business if we chose to go ridin', with may be dinner over at the Falls a listenin' to the band—"

"You don't mean it?" she interrupted breathlessly. "I've never been to the Falls, and I never heard a band but once in my life." She had been looking him over from head to foot with wondering approval; but, now, her face fell. "What have you got to go riding in?" she asked abruptly.

For answer, he pulled aside the curtain, and she saw the sleek black colt at the gate, the silver mountings on its harness, and the polished buggy behind it glistening in the sun.

"My land!" she ejaculated under her breath. "You thought may be I had a pair of mules and a lumber wagon out there?" Addison chuckled. "But you'll go, won't you?" he added anxiously.

The Widow Wren did not answer for some time; but eyed him speculatively, her face very grave; while he, feeling that he was being weighed, shifted uneasily and cracked his finger joints.

"I'll go!" she said at length, in her quick, bright way. "Just wait till I get my hat."

"Better bring along your shawl," he called after her; "the evenings get sort of coolish."

She was half way up the stairs; but she stopped short, pursing up her lips disdainfully and thrusting out her chin at him. "I don't wear a shawl, I'll have you to understand, Mr. — Widower," she flung back at him before a turn in the stairs hid her from view:



"Tore out partitions . . . yanked off stoops and put on verandies"

"Well—I'll—be—darned!" Addison chuckled delightedly. There was spirit for you! But what did she mean about the shawl? Esther, his wife, had always worn one. But, then, Esther's hair had always been combed back smoothly, and Esther's Sunday dress, as far back as he could remember, had been a shabby black alpaca. His sigh of remembrance was cut short by her reappearance.

Ah! He understood about the shawl now. They were likely old fashioned, for she carried on her arm a little gray jacket, and it had pink edging on it, just as her dress had. And look at that bonnet! He gasped and steadied himself against the door casing. By Crickety! It was n't a bonnet at all; but a hat all made of little lavender posies that, round the edges, snuggled down into her white hair as if they loved it. He'd always thought that hats were for girls. Esther had worn a black bonnet for years; but, then, Esther had been old, he told himself remorsefully. He had never seen her "come a-kitin' down stairs like a girl, a-buttonin' white gloves, and her cheeks as pink as pineys."

"I'm ready," she reminded him; but when he stumbled dazedly toward the door, she barred his way and laid a detaining hand upon his arm.



"I've got to tell you something that I'd give my right hand if it never had happened"

"Are you sure we ought?" she asked primly; but there was mischief in her eyes. "Are you sure it's proper?"

He lost his head as he caught her shy, upward glance. "Proper be damned!" he burst out fiercely. "You come along!"

"Yes," the Widow Wren was saying as, with dinner over, they strolled out on the lawn above the Falls, "I do love pretty things. I only get a dollar a day at the dressmaking shop; but I sew for Mrs. Nippen nights to pay my board, and that way I manage to have 'em."

"It must be a mighty hard life," he ventured hesitatingly.

"Yes," she agreed. "But I don't mind sewing till midnight if I can look up once in a while at the cunning little pictures I bought at the ten-cent store, and at all the pretty little fixings I've made, or am making, for my room."

Addison groaned. And such trifles would make a woman happy and content, he thought bitterly. If only Esther—

"Then, too," Mrs. Wren was saying, complacently smoothing the white silk gloves in her lap, "good clothes make you have more respect for yourself. And I don't get half so tired sewing in a pretty white waist, as I did—as I would in a ragged old calico."

"You don't say?" the man interpolated thoughtfully.

"And people treat you different, too," she continued, her soft voice growing harsh. "They don't forget you're living, or slight you if they do happen to remember; and you don't despise yourself all the time for being what you are."

"My God! Hush!" Addison broke in hoarsely. He was very pale. "I did n't know—I never knew women felt that way."

"Well, they do!" she told him shortly.

"Mrs. Wren," he said, after a long silence; "I've got to tell you something."

"I—I would n't be rash," she warned him faintly, her sudden anger gone. "I—I'd think it over well before I spoke, Mr. — Widower."

"I have thought it over! I have n't thought of anything else for months," he returned bitterly; and, again, silence fell between them.

Far down the shaded lawn the band was playing, "Silver Threads Among the Gold." It brought him thoughts of Esther and what might have been. His heart ached fiercely, and the tears sprang to his eyes. He must tell this woman all about it; he must lay bare to her every corner of his miserable, selfish old soul. What would she say? he wondered.