

***MAY
SINCLAIR***

***THE RETURN
OF THE PRODIGAL***

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May Sinclair

The Return of the Prodigal

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"Stephen K. Lepper, Pork-Packing Prince, from Chicago, U. S. A., by White Star Line, for Liverpool." Such was the announcement with which the *Chicago Central Advertiser* made beautiful its list of arrivals and departures.

It was not exactly a definition of him. To be sure, if you had caught sight of him anywhere down the sumptuous vista of the first-class sleeping-saloon of the New York and Chicago Express, you would have judged it adequate and inquired no more. You might even have put him down for a Yankee.

But if, following him on this side of the Atlantic, you had found yourself boxed up with him in a third-class compartment on the London and North-western Railway, your curiosity would have been aroused. The first thing you would have noticed was that everything about him, from his gray traveling hat to the gold monogram on his portmanteau, was brilliantly and conspicuously new. Accompanied by a lady, it would have suggested matrimony and the grand tour. But there was nothing else to distract you from him. He let himself be looked at; he sat there in his corner seat, superbly, opulently still. And somehow it dawned on you that, in spite of some Americanisms he let fall, he was not, and never could have been, a Yankee. He had evidently forged ahead at a tremendous speed, but it was weight, not steam, that did it. He belonged to the race that bundles out on the uphill grade and puts its shoulders to the wheel, and on the down grade tucks its feet in, sits

tight, and lets the thing fly, trusting twenty stone to multiply the velocity.

Then it would occur to you that he must have been sitting still for a considerable period. He was not stout—you might even have called him slender; but the muscles about his cheeks and chin hung a little loose from the bony framework, and his figure, shapely enough when he stood upright, yielded in a sitting posture to the pressure of the railway cushions. That indicated muscular tissue, once developed by outdoor exercise, and subsequently deteriorated by sedentary pursuits. The lines on his forehead suggested that he was now a brain-worker of sorts.

Other lines showed plainly that, though his accessories were new, the man, unlike his portmanteau, had knocked about the world, and had got a good deal damaged in the process. The index and middle fingers of the left hand were wanting. You argued, then, that he had changed his trade more than once; while from the presence of two vertical creases on either side of a large and rather fleshy mouth, worn as it were by the pull of a bit, you further inferred that the energy he must have displayed somewhere was a thing of will rather than of temperament. He was a paradox, a rolling stone that had unaccountably contrived to gather moss.

And then you fell to wondering how so magnificently mossy a person came to be traveling third-class in his native country.

To all these problems, which did actually perplex the clergyman, his fellow-passenger, he himself provided the answer.

He had taken out his gold watch with a critical air, and timed the run from Liverpool to Crewe.

"Better service of trains than they used to have," he observed. "Same old snorer of an engine, though."

"You seem to know the line."

"It's not the first time I've ridden by it; nor yet the first time I've crossed the herring-pond."

"Are you making any stay in this country?"

"I am, sir."

He lapsed into meditation evidently not displeasing; then he continued: "When you've got a mother and two sisters that you haven't seen for over fifteen years, naturally you're not in such a particular durned hurry to get away."

"Your home is in America, I presume?"

"My home is in England. I've made my pile out there, sir, and I've come to stay. Like to see the *Chicago Advertiser*? It may amuse you."

The clergyman accepted the paper gratefully. It did amuse him. So much so that he read aloud several paragraphs, among others the one beginning "Stephen K. Lepper, Pork-packing Prince."

It was a second or two before the horror of the situation dawned on him. That dawn must have been reflected on his face, for his fellow-passenger began to snigger.

"Ah," said he, "you've tumbled to it. Sorry you spoke? Don't apologize for smiling, sir. I can smile, myself, now; but the first time I saw that paragraph it turned me pretty faint and green. That's the way they do things out there. Of course," he added, "I *had* to be put in; but I'm no more like a prince than I'm like a pork-packer."

What was he like? With the flush on his cheeks the laughter in his eyes he might have been an enormous schoolboy home for the holidays, and genially impudent on the strength of it.

"Fact is," he went on, "you didn't expect to find such a high personage in a third-class compartment. That put you off."

"Yes, I suppose it was that." It did seem absurd that a pork-packing prince, who could probably have bought up the entire rolling stock of the London and North-western, should be traveling third.

"You see, I never used to go anything but third on this old line or any other. I'm only doing it now to make sure I'm coming home. I *know* I'm coming home, but I want the feel of it."

He folded the *Chicago Advertiser* and packed it carefully in his portmanteau. "I'm keeping this to show my people," he explained. "It's the sort of thing that used to make my young sister grin."

"You have—er—a young sister?"

"I had two—fifteen years ago."

The clergyman again looked sorry he had spoken.

"All right—this time. They're not dead. Only one of them isn't quite so young as she used to be. The best of it is, it's a surprise visit I'm paying them. They none of them know I'm coming. I simply said I might be turning up one of these days—before very long."

"They won't be sorry to have you back again, I imagine."

"Sorry?"

He smiled sweetly and was silent for some minutes, evidently picturing the joy, the ecstasy, of that return. Then, feeling no doubt that the ice was broken, he launched out into continuous narrative.

"Going out's all very well," he said, "but it isn't a patch on coming home. Not but what you can overdo the thing. I knew a man who was always coming home—seemed as if he couldn't stop away. I don't know that *his* people were particularly glad to see him."

"How was that?"

"A bit tired of it, I suppose. You see, they'd given him about nine distinct starts in life. They were always shipping him off to foreign parts, with his passage paid and a nice little bit of capital waiting for him on the other side. And, if you'll believe me, every blessed time he turned up again, if not by the next steamer, by the next after that."

"What became of the capital?"

"Oh, *that* he liquidated. Drank it—see? We've all got our own particular little foibles, and my friend's was drink."

"I don't wish to appear prejudiced, but I think I should be inclined myself to call it a sin."

"You may *call* it a sin. It was the only one he'd got, of any considerable size. I suppose you'd distinguish between a sin and its consequences?"

"Most certainly," replied the clergyman unguardedly.

"Well. Then—there were the women——"

"Steady, my friend, that makes two sins."

"No. You can't count it as two. You see, he never spoke to a girl till he was so blind drunk he couldn't tell whether she was pretty or ugly. Women were a consequence."

"That only made his sin the greater, sir."

"Ye—es. I reckon it did swell it up some. I said it was a big one. Still, it's not fair to him to count it as more than one. But then, what with gambling and putting a bit on here, and backing a friend's bill there, he managed to make it do duty for half a dozen. He seemed to turn everything naturally to drink. You may say he drank his widowed mother's savings, and his father's life insurance; and, when that was done, he pegged away at his eldest sister's marriage portion and the money that should have gone for his younger sister's education. Altogether he reduced 'em pretty considerably. Besides all that, he had the cussedest luck of any beggar I know.

"Not that he cared for his luck, as long as he got enough to drink. But he wore his friends out. At last they said they'd get up a subscription and pay his passage out to the States, if he'd swear never to show his ugly face in England again. Or at least not till he knew how to behave himself, which was safe enough, and came to the same thing, seeing that they didn't believe he'd ever learn. He didn't believe it himself, and would have sworn to anything. So they scraped together ten pounds for his passage, intermediate. He went steerage and drank the difference. They'd sent on five pounds capital to start him when he landed, and thought themselves very clever. The first thing he did was to collar that capital and drink it too. Then he went and worked in the store where he'd bought the drink, for the sake of being near it—he loved it so. Then—this is the queer part of the story—something happened. I won't tell you what it was. It happened because it was the worst thing that could have

happened—it was bound to happen, owing to his luck. Whatever it was it made him chuck drinking. He left the store where the stuff was, and applied for a berth in a big business in Chicago. It was a place where they didn't know him, else he wouldn't have got it.

"Then his luck turned. If it wasn't the same luck. Just because he hadn't an object in life now—didn't care about drinking any longer, nor yet about women, because of the thing that had happened, and so hadn't got any reasonable sort of use for money—he began to make it. That's the secret of success, that is. Because he didn't care what he called a tinker's cuss about being foreman he was made foreman—then, for the same reason, manager. Then he got sort of interested in seeing the money come in. He didn't want it himself, but it struck him that it wouldn't be a bad thing to pay back his mother and his sisters what they'd lost on him, besides making up for any little extra trouble and expense he might have been to them. He began putting dollars by just for that.

"I suppose you think that when he'd raked together enough dollars he sent them home straightaway? Not he. He wasn't such a blamed idiot. He knew it was no manner of good being in a hurry if you wanted to do a thing in style. He pouched those dollars himself and bought a small share in the business. He bought it for *them*, mind you. You'd have thought, now he was interested and had got back a sort of object in life, that his luck would have turned again, just to spite him. But it didn't. He rose and he rose, and after a bit they made him a partner. They had the capital, and he had the brain. He'd found out that he'd more brain than he knew

what to do with. Regular nuisance it was—so beastly active. Used to keep him awake at night, thinking, when he didn't want to. However, it dried up and let him alone once he gave it the business to play with. At last the old partners dropped off the concern—gorged; and he stuck to it. By that time he had fairly got his hand in; and the last year it was just a sitting still and watching the long Atlantic roll of the dollars as they came tumbling in. He stuck till he'd piled them up behind him, a solid cold five million. And now he's ramping on the home-path as hard as he can tear. The funny thing is that his people are as poor as church mice—three brown mice in a fusty little house like a family pew. But that's the house he's going to. And that five million's just as much theirs as it is his, and perhaps a little more."

"Ah," said his fellow-passenger, "that's pretty. That sort of thing doesn't often happen outside a fairy tale."

"No," said Stephen Lepper simply, "but he made it happen."

"Well?"

"Well? Do you think they'll be *sorry* to see him? I don't mean because of the dollars—they won't care about them."

"Of course they won't. My dear sir, it's fine—that story of yours. It's the Prodigal Son—with a difference."

"A difference? I believe you!"

At this point Stephen Lepper was struck with a humorous idea. It struck him on the back, as it were, in such a startling manner that he forgot all about the veil he had woven so industriously. (His companion, indeed, judged that he had adopted that subterfuge less as a concealment for his sins than as a decent covering for his virtues.)

"That prodigal knew what to do with his herd of swine, anyhow. He killed and cured 'em. And I reckon he'll order his own fatted calf—and pay for it."

He stood revealed.

The clergyman got down at Rugby. In parting he shook Mr. Stephen K. Lepper by the hand and wished him—for himself a happy home-coming, for his friend a good appetite for the fatted calf.

His hand was gripped hard, so that he suffered torture till the guard slammed to the door of the compartment and separated them.

Mr. Lepper thrust his head out of the window. "No fear!" he shouted.

The clergyman looked back once as the train moved out of the station. The head was there, uncovered, but still shouting.

"No durned——"

He saw the gray hat waved wildly, but the voice was ravished from him by the wind of the train.



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The train reached Little Sutton at seven. Just as he had traveled third-class, so he had preposterously planned to send his luggage on by carrier, and plod the five miles between town and station on foot. He wanted to keep up the illusion.

The station, anyhow, was all right. They had enlarged it a bit, but it was still painted a dirty drab (perhaps there used to be a shade more yellow ochre in the drab), and the

Virginian creeper still climbed over the station master's box, veiling him as in a bower. If he could have swallowed up time (fifteen years of it) as the New York and Chicago Express swallowed up space, he might have felt himself a young man again, a limp young man, slightly the worse for drink, handed down to the porter like a portmanteau by the friendly arm of a fellow-passenger, on one of those swift, sudden, and ill-timed returns that preceded his last great exodus. Only that, whereas Stephen Lepper at thirty-nine was immaculately attired, the coat of that unfortunate young man hung by a thread or two, and his trousers by a button; while, instead of five million dollars piled at his back, he had but eighteenpence (mostly copper) lying loose in his front pockets. But Stephen Lepper had grown so used to his clothes and his millions that he carried them unconsciously. They offered no violence to the illusion. What might have destroyed it was the strange, unharmonizing fact that he was sober. But he had got used to being sober, too.

The road unrolled itself for two miles over the pale green downs. It topped the spine of a little hog-backed hill and dipped toward the town (road all right). To his left, on the crest of the hill, stood the old landmark, three black elms in a field that was rased and bleached after the hay-harvest. They leaned toward each other, and between their trunks the thick blue-gray sky showed solid as paint (landmark all right).

In the queer deep light that was not quite twilight things were immobile and distinct, as if emphasizing their outlines before losing them. The illusion was acute, almost intolerable.

Down there lay the town, literally buried in the wooded combe. Slabs of gray wall and purple roof, sunk in the black-green like graves in grass. A white house here and there faced him with the stare of monumental marble. In the middle a church with a stunted spire squatted like a mortuary chapel. They had run up a gaudy red-brick villa or two outside, but on the whole Little Sutton was all right, too. He had always thought it very like a cemetery—a place where people lay buried till the Day of Judgment.

The man he had been was really dead and buried down there. It was as if a glorified Stephen Lepper stood up and contemplated his last resting-place. The clothes he wore were so many signs and symbols of his joyful resurrection. If any doubted, he could point to them in proof. Not that he anticipated this necessity. To be sure, his people had once regarded the possibility of a resurrection as, to say the least of it, antecedently improbable. They had even refused to accept his authentic letters, written on the actual paper of a temperance hotel, as sufficient proof of it. He had not altogether blamed them for their Sadducean attitude, being a little skeptical himself.

Nevertheless, the resurrection was an accomplished fact. There had been a woman in it. She was to have been his wife if she had lived. But she had not lived, and her death was the one episode as to which he had been reticent. She was the sort of woman that drives men to drink by marrying them; for she had a face like an angel and a tongue like a two-edged sword, sheathed in time of courtship. The miracle had happened so long ago that it had passed into the region of things unregarded because admitting of no doubt. He had

never been what you might call a confirmed drunkard—he hadn't been steady enough for that—and fifteen years of incontrovertible sobriety had effaced the fitful record of his orgies. So it never occurred to him now that his character could be regarded otherwise than with the confidence accorded to such solid and old-established structures as the Church or Bank. He dreaded no shrinking in the eyes of the three women he had come to see. But supposing—merely supposing—anything so unlikely as a mental reservation or suspension of judgment on their part, there was that solid pile of dollars at his back for proof. And because the better part of five million dollars cannot be produced visibly and bodily at a moment's notice, and because the female mind has difficulty in grasping so abstract an idea as capital, he had brought with him one or two little presents—tangible intimations, as it were, of its existence.

He had had two hours to spare at Liverpool before his train left Lime Street. They had flown in the rapture of his shopping. To follow his progress through Castle Street and Bond Street, the casual observer would have deemed him possessed by a blind and maniac lust of miscellaneous spending. But there had been method in that madness, a method simple and direct. He had stalked first of all into a great silk-mercantile's and demanded a silk suitable for an old lady, a satin suitable for a young lady, another satin for a lady—not so young. Then, suddenly remembering that his mother used to yearn even in widowhood for plum color, while Minnie (who was pretty and had red hair) fancied a moss-green, and Kate (who was not pretty) a rose-pink, he neither paused nor rested till he had obtained these tints.

Lace, too—his mother had had a perfect passion for lace, unsatisfied because of its ideal nature—a lace of her dreams. He had decided on one or two fine specimens of old point. He supposed this would be the nearest approach to the ideal, being the most expensive. Then he had to get a few diamond pins, butterflies, true-love knots, and so on, to fix it with. And, while he was about it, a diamond necklace, and a few little trifles of that sort for Minnie and Kate. Then their figures (dimly dowdy) had come back to him across the years, one plain, the other pretty but peculiar. He accounted for that by remembering that Kate had been literary, while Minnie was musical.

So he had just turned in at a bookseller's and stated that he wanted some books—say about twenty or thirty pounds' worth. The man of books had gauged his literary capacity in a glance, and suggested that he had better purchase the Hundred Best Books. "Well," he had said (rather sharply, for time was getting on), "I reckon I don't want any but the best." In the same spirit he had approached the gentleman in the piano-forte emporium and ordered a Steinway Grand to be forwarded when he knew his permanent address. For as yet it was uncertain which county contained it, that princely residence—the old manor-house or baronial hall—in which henceforth they would live together in affluence. He didn't exactly see them there, those three queer, dowdy little women. God forgive him, it was his fault if they went shabby. He remembered how they used to stint themselves, eating coarse food and keeping no servant, so that Kate had never any time for her books nor Minnie for her music. He would change all that now.

As he walked on he dreamed a dream.

In the foreground of his dream (rich parqueterie) three figures went to and fro, one adorable in plum color and point lace; one, the one with the red hair, still beautiful in green; and one, not beautiful, but—well—elegant in pink. Now he saw a dining-room sumptuously furnished, a table white with silver and fine linen, and the same figures sitting at it, drinking champagne and eating the fool messes that women love to eat, queer things cooked in cream, and ice-puddings, and so on. And now it was a lofty music room, and Minnie taking the roof off with one of her So-nahters on the Steinway Grand; and now a library (the Hundred Best Books had grown into a library), and Kate, studious, virgin, inviolate in leisure. Then slap through it all went the little mother driving in her own carriage, a victoria for fine weather, a brougham for wet. (It was before the days of motor-cars.) Somewhere on the outskirts of his dream (moorland for choice) there hovered a gentleman in shooting clothes, carrying a gun, or on the uttermost dim verge, the sky-line of it, the same vague form (equestrian) shot gloriously by. But he took very little interest in him.

Ah, there were the cross-roads and the Bald-faced Stag at the corner. Not a scrap changed since the last time he visited it—day when he rode the Major's roan mare slap through the saloon bar into the bowling-alley. Did it for a bet, and won it, too, and bought his mother a stuffed badger in a glass case with the money, as a propitiatory offering. Only another mile.

His road ran into the lighted High Street, through a black avenue of elms as through a tunnel. Reality assailed him

with a thousand smells. No need to ask his way to the North End.

He turned off through an alley into a dark lane, bordered with limes. The thick, sweet scent dropped from the trees, a scent dewy with the childhood of the night. It felt palpable as a touch. It was as if he felt his mother's fingers on his face, and the kisses of his innocent girl-sisters.

He went slowly up the lane toward a low light at the end of it. At the corner, where it turned, was a small house black with ivy and fenced with a row of espalier limes. The light he made for came from the farthest window of the ground floor. Through a gap in the lime fence he could see into the room.

The house was sunk a little below the level of the lane, so that he seemed to be looking straight down into a pit of yellow light hollowed out of the blackness. Two figures sat knitting at the window on the edge of the pit. His mother and Kate. A third, in the center of the light, leaned her elbows on the table and propped her head on her hands. He knew her for Minnie by her red hair. Beyond them a side window was open to the night.

There were two ways by which he could approach them. He could go boldly in at the iron gate and up the flagged path to the front door. Or he could go round to the side, up the turning of the lane, where the garden wall rose high, into the back garden. Thence, through a thick yew arch into a narrow path between the end of the house and the high wall. By the one way they would be certain to see him through the front window. By the other he would see them (through the side window) without being seen. Owing to a certain moisture and redness about his eyes and nose he

was not yet quite ready to be seen. Therefore he chose the side way. Sitting on a garden seat in the embrasure of the arch, he commanded a slanting but uninterrupted view of the room and its inmates.

There, in the quiet, he could hear the clicking needles of the knitters, and the breathing of the red-haired woman. And he longed with a great longing for the sound of their voices. If one of them would only speak!



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"The question is"—it was the red-haired girl who spoke, and her tone suggested that the silence marked a lull in some debate—"how much do you mean to advance me this year from the housekeeping?"

The younger of the two knitters answered without looking up.

"I've told you before; it depends upon circumstances."

"I see no circumstances."

"Don't you? I thought it was you who were so sure about Stephen's coming home?"

"That makes no difference. If he doesn't come I shall go away. If he does I shall go away and stay away. In that case I shall want more money, shan't I? not less." Minnie dug her sharp elbows into the table and thrust out her chin.

"You'll have to want," said Kate. "You know perfectly well that if he is here none of us can go away. We must keep together."

"Why must we?"

"Because it's cheaper."

"And suppose I choose to go? What's to keep me?"

"To *keep* you?"

"I see. You mean there won't be a penny to keep me?"

Kate was silent.

"If it hadn't been for Stephen I could have kept myself long ago—by my music. That's what I wanted."

"Well, you didn't get what you wanted. Women seldom do."

"I want to go to the Tanquerays. There's no reason why I shouldn't get that."

"You can't go to the Tanquerays as you are."

Minnie gazed at her clothes, then at her reflection in the opposite looking-glass.

She wore a shabby, low-necked gown of some bluish-green stuff, with a collar of coarse lace; also a string of iridescent shells. Under the flame of her hair her prettiness showed haggard and forlorn.

"Yes, you may well look at yourself. You must have new things if you go. That means breaking into five pounds."

Minnie's eyes were still fixed on the face in the looking-glass.

"It would be worth it," said she.

"It might be if you stopped five months. Not unless."

"Look here, Kate. It's all very well, but I consider that the house owes me that five pounds. Mayn't I have it, Stephen or no Stephen?"

"It's no use asking me now. It will depend on Stephen."

"And Stephen, I imagine, will depend on us."

"Probably. Do you hear what Minnie says, Mother?"

The old woman's hands knitted fiercely, while her sharp yellow face crumpled into an expression half peevish, half resigned.

"I hear what you both say, and I think I've got enough to worry me without you talking about Stephen coming home."

Her voice was so thin that even Minnie, not hearing, had missed the point. As for the man outside, he was still struggling with emotion, and had caught but a word here and there.

Kate's voice was jagged like a saw and carried farther. It was now that he really began to hear.

"Do you suppose he's made any money out there?"

"Did you ever hear of Stephen making money anywhere?"

"If he has he ought to be made to pay something to the housekeeping. It's only fair."

"If he's made anything," said Minnie, "he's spent it all. That's why he's coming. Look at the supper!"

The table before her was laid for the evening meal. She pointed to the heels of two loaves, a knuckle of ham, a piece of cheese, and some water in a glass jug. Oatmeal simmered on a reeking oil-stove in a corner of the room.

"How much will it cost to keep him?"

Kate's narrow, peaked face was raised in calculation. Kate's eyes became mean homes for meaner thoughts of which she was visibly unashamed.

"Ten shillings a week at the very least. Fifty-two weeks—that's twenty-six pounds a year. Or probably fifteen shillings—a man eats more than a woman, at any rate more butcher's meat—that's thirty-nine pounds. That's only what

he *eats*," she added significantly. "*What* did you say, Mother?"

The old lady raised her voice, and the man outside took hope. "I say I think you're both very unfeeling. For all you know, poor fellow, he may be quite reformed."

"He may be. I know the chances are he won't," said Kate.

"How do you know anything about it, my dear?"

"I asked Dr. Minify. He has a wide enough experience of these cases."

Minnie turned fiercely round. "And what made you go and blab to him about it? I think you might wash your dirty linen at home."

"It's only what you'd have done yourself."

"Not to him."

"Why not?"

There was terror in Minnie's face. "He knows the Tanquerays."

"Well—it's your own fault. You went on about it till it got on my nerves, and the anxiety was more than I could bear. The porridge will be boiling over."

"Well?"

"Well, I can't mind porridge and my knitting at the same time."

Minnie threw herself back, pushing her chair with her feet. She rose and trailed sulkily across to the stove. As she moved a wisp of red hair, loosened from its coil, clung to her sallow neck. She was slipshod and untidy.

She removed the porridge abstractedly. "What did he say?" she asked.

"He was extremely kind and sympathetic. He treated it as a disease. He said that in nine cases out of ten recovery is impossible."

"Well, / could have told you that. Anything more?"

"He says the chances are that he won't hold out much longer; his health must have broken up after all these years. I don't know how I *can* stand it, if it is. When I think of all the things that may happen. Paralysis perhaps, or epilepsy—that's far more likely. He's just the age."

"Is he? How awful! But, then, he'll have to go somewhere. You know we can't have him epilepsing all over the place here."

The old lady dropped her knitting to raise her hands.

"Minnie! Minnie! Have a little Trust. He may never come at all."

"He will. Trust *him*."

"After all," said Kate reflectively, "why should he?"

"Why? Why?" The girl came forward, spreading her large red hands before her. "Because we've paid all his debts. Because we've saved money and got straight again. Because we're getting to know one or two decent people, and it's taken us fifteen years to do it. Because we're beginning to enjoy ourselves for the first time in all our miserable lives. Because I've set my heart on staying with the Tanquerays, and Fred Tanqueray will be there. Because"—a queer, fierce light came into her eyes—"because I'm happy, and he means to spoil it all, as he spoilt it all before! As if I hadn't suffered enough."

"You? What have you suffered?" Kate's sharp face was red as she bent over a dropped stitch. Her hands trembled.

"You were too young to feel anything."

"I wasn't too young to feel that I had a career before me, nor to care when it was knocked on the head. If it hadn't been for him my music wouldn't have come to an end as it did."

"Your music! If it hadn't been for him my engagement wouldn't have been broken off—as it was."

"Oh *that*? It was the one solitary good day's work Stephen ever did."

The old lady nodded shrewdly over her needles. "Yes, my dear, you might be thankful for that mercy. You couldn't have married Mr. Hooper. I'm afraid he wasn't altogether what he ought to be. You yourself suspected that he drank."

"Like a fish," interposed Minnie.

"I know"—Kate's hands were fumbling violently over her stitch—"but—but I could have reclaimed him."

Her eyes lost their meanness with the little momentary light of illusion.

Minnie laughed aloud. "If that's all you wanted, why didn't you try your hand on Stephen?"

"Don't, Minnie."

But Minnie did. "Fred Tanqueray doesn't drink; I wouldn't look at him if he did. What's more, he's a gentleman; I couldn't stand him if he wasn't. Catch him marrying into this family when he's seen Stephen."

"Minnie, you are *too* dreadful."

"Dreadful? You'd be dreadful if you'd cared as much for Charlie Hooper as I do for Fred Tanqueray."

"And how much does Mr. Tanqueray care for you?"

A dull flush spread over Minnie's sallow face; her lips coarsened. "I don't know; but it's a good deal more than your Hooper man ever cared for anybody in his life; and if you weren't such a hopeless sentimentalist you'd have seen that much. Of course I shan't know whether he cares or not—now."

And she wept, because of the anguish of her thirty years.

Then she burst out: "I *hate* Stephen. I don't care what you say—if he comes into this house I'll walk out of it. Oh, how I hate him!" Her loose mouth dropped, still quivering with its speech. Her face was one flame with her hair.

But Kate was cool and collected.

"Don't excite yourself. If it's only to influence Fred Tanqueray, he won't come," said Kate.

Then the red-haired woman turned on her, mad with the torture of her frustrate passion.

"He *will* come! He *will* come, I tell you. I've felt him coming. I've felt it in my bones. I've dreamt about it night after night. I've been afraid to meet the postman lest he should bring another letter. I've been afraid to go along the station road lest I should meet *him*. I'm afraid now to look out of that window lest I should see him standing there with his face against the pane."

She crossed to the window and drew down the blind. For a moment her shadow was flung across it, monstrously agitated, the huge hands working.

The man outside saw nothing more, but he heard his mother's voice and he took hope again.

"For shame, Minnie, for shame, to speak of poor Steevy so. One would think you might have a little more affection

for your only brother."

"Look here, Mother" (Minnie again!), "that's all sentimental humbug. Can you look me in the face and honestly say you'd be glad to see your only son?"

(The son's heart yearned, straining for the answer. It came quavering.)

"My dear, I shall not see him. I'm a poor, weak old woman, and I know that the Lord will not send me any burden that I cannot bear."

He crept from his hiding-place out into the silent lane. He had drawn his breath tight, but his chest still shook with the sob he had strangled. "My God!" he muttered, "I'll take off the burden."

Then his sob broke out again, and it sounded more like a laugh than a sob. "The dollars—they shall have them. Every blessed one of the damned five million!"

He looked at his watch by the light of the gas-lamp in the lane. He had just time to catch the last train down; time, too, to stop the carrier's cart with the gifts that would have told the tale of his returning.

So, with a quick step, he went back by the way he had come, out of the place where the dead had buried their dead—until the Day of Judgment.

THE GIFT

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He had not been near her for two months. It was barely five minutes' walk from his house in Bedford Square to her rooms in Montagu Street, and last year he used to go to see her every week. He did not need the reminder of her letter, for he had been acutely aware, through the term that separated them, of the date when he had last seen her. Still, he was not sure how much longer he might have kept away if it had not been for the note that told him in two lines that she had been ill, and that she had—at last—something to show him. He smiled at the childlike secrecy of the announcement. She had something to show him. Her illness, then, had not impaired her gift, her charming, inimitable gift.

If she had something to show him he would have to go to her.

He let his eyes rest a moment on her signature as if he saw it for the first time, as if it renewed for him the pleasing impression of her personality. After all, she was Freda Farrar, the only woman with a style and an imagination worth considering; and he—well, he was Wilton Caldecott.

He would go over and see her now. He had an hour to spare before dinner. It was her hour, between the lamplight and the clear April day, when he was always sure of finding her at home.

He found her sitting in her deep chair by the hearth, her long, slender back bent forward to the fire, her hands glowing like thin vessels for the flame. Her face was turned toward him as he came in. Its small childlike oval showed