

A PRODIGAL'S RETURN

Settled among the tall pines stood a villa, a quaint old-fashioned home, in front of which a long green stretch sloped gently to meet the edge of a small lake. What a picturesque body of water! Not a ripple on its smooth surface, shining under the sun's last rays of the departing day. Far to the west could be seen the rugged mountains with their jagged peaks, standing out in dark contrast with the deep red of the horizon.

Within the spacious living-room of the villa, sat Judge Walker and his wife; the husband, a man of some fifty years slightly gray and of noble bearing; his partner, a woman of kind and motherly appearance, a few years his junior. They were chatting earnestly and excitedly, so that one might infer that they were anticipating some happiness in the near future. Every few moments, Mrs. Walker would look, first at the great hall clock and then down the road that led to the little town of Exeter.

"I wonder why the train is so late this evening," she remarked as she returned hurriedly from the door. "Perhaps there has been an accident, and it will not arrive to-night."

"Tut-tut! My dear, have patience; you know it always takes Jerry a long time to go to the station, and anyway the train is only due now," kindly reassured her husband, as he lighted his pipe and turned to his evening paper.

As his wife hurried about in her excitement, Judge Walker could scarcely forbear a smile. His paper affording him no pleasure, he laid it aside and began to talk freely. Always a stern man, to-day he appeared unusually happy; not once did he enter his study where he was accustomed to spend the greater part of his leisure hours with his books, for he received a telegram from their only son, saying that he had successfully passed his final examinations and was coming home. It was three years since Frank Walker had gone away to Morton University to complete a classical

education, and only by sheer hard work had he succeeded in making the four year course in three. Ever since he had entered, his ability and good fellowship had been readily acknowledged, and at graduation, he left behind him a splendid record of steady application to study that brought him success, and many great friends looked to him for something great in his future life.

"I wonder John, what Frank will do when he comes home," Mrs. Walker continued casting a longing glance from the window. "He is so young and inexperienced; I do hope he will be content to remain at home for a time anyway."

"There is plenty of work for him here, and every chance for a bright future", answered the Judge. "When I came here twenty years ago, there were not the opportunities that there are today. Since the oil discovery, this town has grown rapidly. He must take a good rest and then we shall see what can be done."

He had scarcely finished speaking when Spot, the dog, set up a loud barking which immediately brought the Judge and his wife to the door.

Sure enough, they were coming; Jerry, the faithful old coachman, overjoyed at the return of his young master was talking with such animation that, before he was aware, he had nearly passed the gate. In a few moments, Frank was coming up the garden walk, and was soon clasped in the embrace of the happy father and mother.

"I have come to stay for a long time," were his first words after the greeting was over. "I didn't expect to be home this soon, but managed it in spite of all the difficulties. It is certainly wonderful to be with you both again and to see you looking so well. For myself, I never felt better in my life, and I shouldn't mind starting work right now; but I'm good and hungry after my trip, so I must have a bite first."

After dinner the family retired to the living room where Frank talked of his three years at college, to which his par-

ents listened with eager interest. "And now," he continued, "I have come home to make my own way in the world. Do you think, father, that I'll do well here at home?"

"Why yes, my boy; that you would remain near home, has been your mother's earnest hope; she thought you would not be contented here, but I need an assistant in my office, and as soon as you have had a good rest, I intend to make you an offer."

"Just the thing, father. I shall be pleased to be of service to you."

The three sat and talked long into the night, and then Frank knelt once more beside the bed which had been his in boyhood years, there to present to his God his prayers and petitions.

After three months had passed, Frank began his duties in his father's office. He soon became a general favorite with his associates, and endeared himself to all with whom he came in contact. Before long, he took keen interest in the oil rush, and his activities were rewarded. It might have been well had fortune not lavished on him such success, for of great riches there is no real use, unless it be in the distribution; the rest is but conceit. Nobody ever dreamed that Frank was anything but an honest man, and no one at Exeter to this day dare say a word against his character.

"Why do you remain away so late at night, Frank?" his father asked one evening, as his son was about to leave the house.

"I promised to meet a friend to-night, and I don't wish to dissappoint him" was the answer as he turned to go.

"I do not wish to be harsh," his father continued, "but I do wish that you would not remain out so late; you are causing us a great deal of worry."

"Don't worry about me, father, I am well able to look out for myself," he replied with some hauteur; he closed the door and disappeared in the dark.

For two months the offence continued every night, till finally, one morning in early fall, it was discovered that he

had not returned the previous night. That day, the father and mother spent in fearful anxiety, awaiting for their much loved boy; he did not come

Word was sent abroad and the whole countryside turned out to find the missing man. Every effort to trace him failed. The only clue to his whereabouts was, that on the previous night, the station agent remembered selling to a stranger two tickets for Fallsboro, a small mining town some fifty miles distant, but upon inquiry it was learned that the train had not stopped at the town the previous night.

Six weary months rolled by and the search continued, Judge Walker sparing neither money nor effort to find his son, and when at the end of that time, no word was forthcoming, he believed him dead.

The next few years saw a great change over the old man; his friends saw it and feared for his health. Sorrow had left its indellible mark on him; the once square shoulders were bent under their weight, but despite his grief, he strove to hide his feelings and to appear cheerful to his beloved wife who bore the loss with great courage, and never gave up the frail hope that he might return. Their home was not what it had been, for the vacant place could never be filled, except by Frank's return.

Five years had passed; Judge Walker rarely left his home. It was rumored that he was about to resign and retire, although he never hinted it to anyone.

The last case was before the court; in the dock sat a man, his face covered with a heavy beard; . His name was unfamiliar. He sat with his head buried in his hands and moved only when spoken to.

His case was a serious one and there was no evidence in his favor beyond his plea of innocence, his trial was destined to be brief. The Great Western Oil Company had been defrauded to the extent of many thousands of dollars. The assistant secretary was suspected and upon investigation, several of the missing bonds were found in his rooms. Op-

posed to the prisoner were the witnesses of the Company, who testified that it was impossible for any one to obtain possession of the money without the aid of the prisoner. The last witness had resumed his seat, and the Judge began his address to the jury. He outlined briefly the case before them and the responsibility that was theirs. The jury retired and after a short consultation returned with the verdict of "Guilty."

Ten years of hard labor was the sentence imposed, and the prisoner was led back to his cell from which he would be removed on the morrow to serve his term of punishment.

While taking his accustomed walk in the garden one morning, about a year after the event just mentioned, Judge Walker was hailed by a messenger.

"You are wanted immediately at the hospital sir. There has been an accident, and the message says to hurry."

"Who wishes to see me?" asked the Judge, as he hurried off.

"The doctor gave no name."

Upon arrival at the hospital, Doctor Ross, his old friend and classmate, met him at the door. "What has happened doctor?" he inquired as he took the outstretched hand.

"The patient was taken in here last night badly hurt in a railway accident and has not yet been identified," replied the doctor. He has been calling continually for you; perhaps you know him," and he pushed open the door to admit the judge.

On the bed lay a man of middle age; from his heavy breathing it was evident that death was near. The Judge bent over the prostrate form. "I don't know the man at all," he said. Slowly the patient opened his eyes.

"Good morning friend, the judge began. "I received word that you wished to speak with me. If there is anything I can do for you, do not be afraid to speak."

The injured man turned his head, and motioned to the doctor to retire. "Judge Walker you do not recognize be-

fore you, the man who has been the cause of your grief. My end is near, but thank God that I am able to explain why I sent for you this morning. It was not until last night, and this accident occurred, that I felt remorse for my deeds. I it was, who lured your son from his home, and placed him where he is today. But he is not dead, as you believe him to be; he still lives."

"My God! My son alive. In God's name" he continued, "tell me where he is, and why he left home."

"After your son's disappearance," said the dying man, "he entered the employ of the Great Western Oil Company, and in a short time was made assistant Secretary. During all this time he looked on me as a true friend; he never distrusted me. One evening, while I was in his office, he went into an adjoining room for some papers. While he was gone I snatched from the open safe a package of notes, and carefully locked the door. To escape suspicion, I managed to conceal several bonds in the room. The loss of the money led to an investigation, and your son was suspected. He was found guilty and sent to prison, while I went free until last night."

His story cost him a great effort, and he paused a moment to recover himself. "You see why I sent for you; you thought your son was dead, but no, he was innocently condemned to prison by you, his father."

A mist came over the old man's eyes. Was all that he heard true? Was his son still alive? He sat for a short time with his head bowed and his eyes fixed in a vacant stare. "You have done me a great injustice, but in the name of Him who forgives all, I forgive you. He clasped the hand of the dying man and was gone.

In the house among the pines, everything was astir early next morning, and two people looked out upon a world of happiness and smiles, for their sorrow was lifted and their son was returning.

The Judge paced up and down the floor in feverish im-

patience. Mrs. Walker hustled about the final work of preparation for the great event.

Suddenly the sound of an approaching carriage attracted their attention; the front door flew open; there on the threshold stood Frank the object of their dreams, and the old Judge muttered a fervent "Thank God." as he clasped the boy to his breast.

E. F. D. '24

