

“Miss’s Child”

• 1905 •

“I JUST THOUGHT MAYBE YOU WOULD,” said Mrs. Herb, with a little scared catch in her voice at her own audacity. There was a dashed look across her eyes.

“You wasted just that much of your thoughts,” said Mrs. Purple calmly. Her lips were set in a straight, uncompromising line. She sat stiff and erect in her chair, like a gaunt stone rising out of the sea. It was a rocking-chair, but there was no rock to it when she sat in it. She held that rocking was for women with no backbone to them; like Mrs. Herb, for instance, who was now rocking to and fro almost wildly.

“Seeing you was the deacon’s wife,” added Mrs. Herb, faintly.

“Seeing I’m the deacon’s wife,” returned Mrs. Purple firmly, “is precisely why I don’t uphold sin.”

She arose, and, drawing a strong linen handkerchief from her belt, made little flicks and dabs at some imaginary dust on the lamp. Then she lifted her voice.

“Maybelle! Oh, Maybelle!”

A young girl came into the room, and her mother’s face softened at sight of her. She was just blooming into a beautiful womanhood. She was all soft curves and dimples. Her color was like a wild rose blending into cream. Her dark curls were tied together with a rose ribbon at the nape of her neck. Her eyes were large and softly dark, like a gazelle’s.

“Did you call, mother?”

“Yes, I called. Mis’ Herb’s here. My land! don’t you see her?” Maybelle blushed. “How-do-you-do, Mrs. Herb?”

"How-do-you-do, Maybelle? My! You look as sweet as peaches and cream. They can't a one of 'em give you come-uppin's, can they?"

"I guess they can't," bragged Mrs. Purple, seating herself and folding her hands across her waist complacently. "They can't a one of 'em hold a candle to Maybelle, if I do say it myself," she added proudly.

"Oh, mother!"

Maybelle sat down and her eyelids fell over her eyes; her face burned crimson.

"Well, they can't! An' the best of it is"—Mrs. Purple turned to Mrs. Herb again—"she's as good as she is pretty. She ain't got a fault an' she never done a wrong thing in her life. Smell that mignonette?" she added, suddenly turning toward the open window. "Congressman Smith, he sent me the seed from Washington. Fine—my-O/You can smell it to the cow-butter store in the next block. He sent nasturtiums, an' sweet williams, an' sweet peas, an' sunflowers. He's awful clever. I never see his beat!" She turned from the window. The beam dwindled out of her eyes. "An' then, me with a girl like Maybelle an' a son like Herbert, you set there an' want I should uphold a girl that acts up the way that M'iss Dement does!"

Mrs. Herb put back her thin shoulders and drew herself up.

"She don't act up so now," she said apologetically.

"Well, she did once," Mrs. Purple said, drumming the table with her fingers. "I don't know what she does or what she don't do now. But I do know that I'll fight her comin' into the church, tooth an' toe nail. I never see the sense myself of livin' decent an' doin' decent—an' then havin' people that's cut up all kind of capers set up on a level with you... Well, will you look at there? Will you just look at there?"

She pointed with a bony finger out of the window. A young woman was coming down the street. She was tall and of splen-

did figure. A wealth of blond hair was twisted around her head. She carried herself with a proud and swinging stride. She wore a black dress, made with a long train. This she was holding up with both hands. Suddenly she observed the three faces in the window. Instantly her head went up. As she turned across the street, defiantly facing them, she flung her train to its full length with a grand flourish and swept across, the dust trailing in a great cloud behind her.

"It's that M'iss Dement!" announced Mrs. Purple, drawing in her breath. "The impudent heifer! Seems to me you said she wa'n't actin' up any more. I'd like to know what you call that."

As the three women stood grouped close to the window, peering with narrowed eyes, the girl took another look at them. Her handsome brown eyes fairly blazed out a red fire. There was a water hydrant on the corner, and as she approached it she flung one foot with a flourish to the very top of it, and calmly tied her shoe in the faces of her scandalized observers. She tied it slowly, untied it, and tied it again, displaying a generous length of well-filled hose. Finally she pushed the ends of the laces down into her shoe, and, setting her foot upon the sidewalk with an audacious fling, she sailed on by, her train sweeping the dust behind her.

Mrs. Purple drew back from the window and sat down, drawing in her breath hard through close-set lips.

"Maybelle," she said sternly, "listen here. I don't ever want to hear tell of your so much as speakin' to that M'iss Dement again."

Maybelle did not reply. Her face was pale and scared-looking.

"You hear?" demanded her mother.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, see you mind. I don't care if she does live in the same block. I don't care if you did play with her all your life. M'iss Herb is goin' to stay to tea. You can be buildin' a fire 'n

the kitchen stove. Stir up a warm sponge cake an' make some rhubarb-sauce. You like rhubarb sauce, don't you, Mis' Herb?" she added, with a polite afterthought. "An' then fry the chicken an' cream the potatoes—an' I guess you'd better step spy. Mis' Herb an' I are goin' to a mothers' meetin' after tea."

...

At eight o'clock that evening the mothers of the church were sitting solemnly around the sides of the church parlor. Mrs. Purple was the most important woman in the town, and she held herself with a great air. She sat erect. Her hands were folded in her lap; her chin was high and was set in determined folds. She was the only woman present in a silk dress and kid gloves. The handkerchief tucked in her belt was bordered with real lace, too.

When the last "mother" had entered and sunk hastily into her chair, there was an ominous silence. Invisible lightning seemed to be darting around the room, sending little shocks, half pleasant and half terrible, from one solemn-faced woman to another.

Presently, in a shadowy corner, Mrs. Eaton arose. Her face was pale and her voice shook as she began speaking.

"Sisters," said she, "we've met here to-night to talk over in a friendly spirit takin' M'iss Dement into the church. There's some of us for it an' some of us agen it. I'm for it myself. I think she's sorry for all she's done an' wants to do better. She thinks the church'll help her, an' I think the church had ought to help her."

She sat down and Mrs. Purple stood up.

"All is," she began in a deep voice, "I just want to know if the church is for God-fearin', decent people—or is it for riffraff?"

She sat down, breathing heavily. There was silence, save for much clearing of throats. It was almost like a bronchial epidemic. Then Mrs. Eaton spoke without rising.

"I think the church is for everybody that does right," she said, and her voice was steadier, "an' for everybody that wants to get started to doin' right."

"I don't agree with you," said Mrs. Purple in a cold way that had its effect. "I don't want to see any church I belong to desecrated with riffraff. If that M'iss Dement isn't riffraff, I don't know riffraff when I see it."

A new "mother" stood up. She had never spoken in meeting, and now at the sound of her own voice the blood rushed away from her face, her knees trembled, and she swayed to and fro like a lily in a storm.

"May I ask," she said, in a thin, piping voice, "what her particular sin was?"

She gave a final sway and sank limply into her chair. The funny Mrs. Deacon Lark—of whom it was said that she would like as not laugh at her mother's funeral, she laughed so at nothing—tittered right out in meeting.

"I've heard tell of original sin," she spoke up, "but I never did hear tell of particular sin. Now I'm particular about my housework and my clothes, and so the next time I have a sin I'm going to have a particular sin. I'm not sure but I'll have an especial sin."

Several mothers smiled but one glance at Mrs. Purple's face froze the smiles on their lips.

"This is no picnic," she said sternly, and every hair on her chin seemed to stand out straight.

"No, it's more like a funeral!" tittered back the irrepressible Mrs. Lark. "But it isn't *my* funeral. 'Tis poor M'iss Dement's. When I have a funeral I'll have a particular one."

No one answered the new mother's question aloud, but her

nearest neighbor whispered to her and both women flushed scarlet.

Mrs. Eaton arose again. She held fast with both hands to the back of a chair, but there was more determination in her manner.

"Maybe some of you don't know," she said, "what a hard life M'Iss Dement has had. So I'll tell you. She's never had any chance. Her mother was a good but coarse woman. She swore every other word she spoke. She swore just like a horse eats hay—without knowin' she did it. Nobody associated with her. M'Iss's father is just a low, drunken bum. Since Mrs. Dement died an' M'Iss has been growin' up, nobody has let their daughters or sons associate with her, although"—she looked full at Mrs. Purple—"they used to let 'em play with her when they was all little together. M'Iss got to talkin' rough like her mother, an' after her mother died she took to bleachin' her hair an' paintin' her face, an' havin' young men sittin' on the steps with her late at night. Now it seems to me that us mothers neglected our duties there and then. We might have talked to her, an' been kind to her, an' argyfed her out of it, instead of settin' ourselves up on Liberty statues. Some of us hold our chins so high we just about think we're Lord Almighty hisself."

Mrs. Purple's chin went an inch higher.

"Some of us have a right to hold our chins high," she announced in a deep bass. "People who live right an' do right aint no call to duck their chins down in front."

"Holdin' your chin high gives you more than one chin," piped up Mrs. Lark.

Mrs. Purple gave her a look.

"You can rub your extra chins away, though," persisted Mrs. Lark, returning the look undaunted, "if you do this."

She made swift passes under her chin with the palm of her hand to the right and to the left.

"I remember," continued Mrs. Eaton, not noticing the interruption, "one night, a year or so ago, Mrs. Purple's son Herbert was standing at the gate talking to M'Iss 'long about dusk, and, my land! Mrs. Purple come running out an' called him as if he was stealing. I think, says I, well, poor M'Iss *has* to take up with the low-down because the decent ain't allowed to so much as pass the time o' day with her."

Mrs. Purple stood up and the very atmosphere seemed to tremble. "Them that have no young men sons," she said in her deepest voice, "can talk. Them that have young men sons like my young man son'll take care of 'em. Herbert never done a wrong act in his life. He never drank a drop, nor played a card, nor smoked a cigar, nor run around with onery girls. He's as near perfect as God makes 'em; an' I don't propose to have no M'Iss Dement in the church, like a snake in the grass, pretendin' to repent-up her sins an' do better—just so's she'll get a chance at our sons! Herbert's away in college, studyin' to be a minister; but he's comin' home soon, an' while I ain't afraid of his noticin' M'Iss Dement *now*, with all the disgrace she's piled on herself, still I don't want such persons in my church with a young man son around." Mrs. Purple was growing more excited; her face was a dull crimson and she was breathing heavily. "If M'Iss Dement wants to come into this church, let her confess up. Let her tell us the name of the father of her child! That's what we want to know."

"Oh, my!" cried Mrs. Lark, throwing her hand over her face and peering through her fingers in a shocked way. "See me blush!"

Mrs. Eaton cleared her throat.

"Well, now," said she deliberately, "the finest thing I know about M'Iss is just that—that she won't tell. There's something fine in a girl that takes a thing like that all on herself, and won't tell on the man."

"I'd like to give the man a skimmity-ride!" cried Mrs. Lark. "I'd go along and whip the donkey to make it go on a trot."

"No girl ever went through such disgrace as M'iss has been through," went on Mrs. Eaton. "All we could find out was that she had a child. We couldn't get a word out of her. She cried day and night, till some of us felt sorry for her and turned over every stun to get her to tell who the man was. We told her we'd make him marry her, an' then we'd overlook it—"

"I'll tell you what!" cried Mrs. Lark. "Let's appoint a committee of three to go and ask her once more. We'll give her one more chance. It'll work just like heads an' tails. If she tells, she's in, if she won't tell, she's out. I'll suggest Mrs. Purple and Mrs. Eaton and"—she spread her hand modestly over her heart—"me. We'll be a committee to make fur fly."

There was a general murmur of approval, and a stirring of relief among the mothers. "I'm willing," said Mrs. Eaton.

There was quite a silence. Then Mrs. Purple said: "Well, I'm willing, too. But first I feel it my duty to tell you all that I see M'iss Dement do a sinful thing this very day. Mis' Herb, she see it, too, with her own eyes, an' my innocent Maybelle, as chaste as the snow, she see it, too. It proves that M'iss Dement ain't repented-up very fast."

"What did you see her do?" cried the new mother, unable to restrain her emotions longer.

"I see her kick clear over the hydrant on the corner by my house!"

There was another silence—a longer one. Then Mrs. Lark burst into a wild peal of laughter.

"I'd like to see her do it! I'm a high kicker myself. I can kick the electric-light bulb in our sitting room every time I try. I kicked a stick of wood off the deacon's shoulder one day. I slipped and fell and hit my head on the door knob. It took three doctors to bring me to—"

"It's all settled then," said Mrs. Purple, firmly interrupting.

"You ladies can call at my house at two to-morrow afternoon. But I'll say right here an' now, that when that M'iss Dement comes into this church, I an' my pocketbook go out."

At that the face of the minister's wife, who had taken no part in the discussion, grew long.

Mrs. Lark looked back over her shoulder at Mrs. Purple.

"You'd ought to be a railroad company!" she said flippantly.

"My, oh, me! I like human nature! I tell you, I could have human nature for breakfast, dinner, and supper, and never get enough of it."

...

M'iss Dement lived in a little four-room house in an old orchard. There was a general air of neglect and shiftlessness about the whole place. The paint was all peeling off the house, showing different colors underneath. The fence was so rotten that it seemed to go around the orchard in undulations. The leaves of the trees were curled tightly and eaten by aphides. The grass had never been cut. It grew tall and rank on both sides of the narrow, crooked path leading to the front door.

"I expect it'll take all of us to get this gate open," complained Mrs. Purple. "It sags so."

"The hinge is broken in two," said Mrs. Lark, who was unusually quiet.

"I never saw a place go all to rack so," said Mrs. Purple.

"Well, what can you expect?" asked Mrs. Eaton. "M'iss can't keep it up. Her father's drunk all the time, an' she can't hire it done. I guess she has enough to do without fixin' hinges."

"Humph!" said Mrs. Purple. After a moment she added: "I'd think she could fix a hinge on a gate."

"Well, maybe she could, if she don't have too much else to do. Maybe she don't have the heart to fix up things. I've noticed

that when folks get down an' other folks stand all over 'em with both feet to keep 'em down, they ain't got much heart to slave an' fix up things. I've noticed—"

She stopped abruptly. The three women stood still. They had turned a bend in the path, and there under an old apple tree sat M'Iss, deep in the grass. She wore a gingham dress, open at the neck. Her blond hair had been recently washed and shone like gold in the sun. In her arms was a child about a year old. He was trying to catch the tossing locks of her hair, and shrieked with delight when he succeeded.

Mrs. Purple could scarcely breathe for amazement.

The look of love and tenderness on the girl's face was a revelation. The child reached up and patted her cheek; she stooped quickly and burst into tears as she pressed him to her and kissed him passionately.

The next moment, straight through her tears, she saw the three women.

She stood up slowly. The child saw them and toddled to them through the tangled grass. They saw that he was very beautiful. He had large dark eyes and dark curls. He looked sweet and well cared for. He was making straight for Mrs. Purple, clutching a dandelion in his hand.

M'Iss stood like a statue; her arms hung down at her sides. Her face had grown very white, but her eyes were steady.

"What do you want?" she asked, looking straight at Mrs. Purple. But for once Mrs. Purple did not reply. Mrs. Eaton took two or three steps forward.

"Why, M'Iss—" she began kindly, but the girl lifted her hand impatiently.

"I asked Mrs. Purple what she wants here, and she's got to answer or go."

The child began pulling at Mrs. Purple's dress, offering her the flower. "Dan'yine—dan'yine," he kept saying, but she paid

no attention.

"Well, M'Iss Dement," she said slowly and sternly, "we're a committee of mothers come to ask you once more to tell who's the father of your child."

A scarlet stain went across the girl's face, as though it had followed the blow of a hand. The tears seemed to still stand, frozen in her eyes.

"What's that to you?" she demanded defiantly. "I'm its mother. I've never denied it. I've never hid it or cast it off on somebody else. I take good care of it, and own it right out to the whole world. What's it to you who its father is?"

"You've been wantin' to come into the church," said Mrs. Purple in a cold way. "We had a mothers' meetin' about it. I'm agen takin' you in unless you tell who its father is. That's what it is to us. You tell, an' maybe we'll take you in; you don't tell, an' you can stay out."

There was a long silence; then the girl spoke slowly but passionately.

"Lord God Almighty," she said, and it didn't sound like an oath, even to Mrs. Purple; it sounded more like a prayer. "If the church is made up of people like this, I'll stay out. Now, you listen here. I've got some things to say, and then you can go; and if you ever come here again on such an errand I'll turn the dog loose. Now listen here. You all know just how much chance I've had alongside of other girls. You let your daughters play with me while we were little, but as we grew up you weaned them away from me, one by one, and I felt more and more alone. After my mother died I got desperate—here alone day after day, father drunk. I went to acting wild and impudent, as if I didn't care—she burst out suddenly into a kind of terrible laughter—"flinging my foot up on top of hydrants and that kind of thing, just to dar' you and tantalize you and egg you on, but"—her face grew as suddenly serious—"it never did

me any good. I was always ashamed and sorry; but I couldn't come to you and say I was sorry, like other girls can. You'd only have sneered at me and asked me where I got my baby at and who its father was. So all I could do, after I showed up smart-Ellic like, was to come home and go to bed and hold the baby in my arms and cry all night—and envy my poor mother up there on the hill. You *good* women”—her tone was fierce with bitter scorn—“you never think that girls like me have any feelings or any remorse. You think we go to the bad with our eyes open, knowing what we're going into and not caring. You don't know how easy it is to go in, step by step, never realizing till it's too late. We don't have love and tenderness, like—well, like Maybelle, say”—her voice broke—“and when some man, that oughtn't to, speaks kind and gentle to us and acts as if he cared for us, we're so starved for that kind of thing that it just seems like heaven, and then the next thing we know it's too late. We're bad, without ever meaning to be bad, and you good women, you set your feet on us and you won't ever give us another chance to get up and be somebody again.”

There was a silence; then Mrs. Purple said, in a tone that surprised even herself: “We're givin' you a chance now.”

“Yes,” said Miss, wearily, “but what kind of a chance? You come here and act as if you was handling a boa constrictor with a pair of tongs. You make me feel like a devil in the bottomless pit, instead of a human being with a soul that might be saved by kindness. If my mother was alive, or even if my father was ever sober, I might strand it; but for a year it's been—well, it's been—a cold perspiration started out on her face and she wiped it off with her sleeve—“just hell. Just that. Awake or asleep, day or night, just that. For a year I ain't thought of a thing except what to do for the child, and how to bear the shame. Night after night I've prayed to God to make me kind and gentle, and then the minute I'd see anybody look at me

cold and sneery, and draw their skirts up when they passed me, that minute I'd fly all to pieces and seem to go crazy. I'd fling up my head and go strutting, and maybe I'd burst out whistling ‘Yankee Doodle’ right in their faces. That day I saw you all peering out the window”—she looked at Mrs. Purple—“I'd have gone shrieking crazy if I couldn't have flung my foot to the top of that hydrant to shock you. It eased up my nerves. But I came home and cried myself sick. Father happened to be sober when I come in, and he said: ‘Daught, I've bought some lylocks to take out to your mother's grave.’ That finished me... The child had found Mrs. Purple's hand and locked his chubby fingers around one of hers... ‘Hunh! Tch, tch,’ she muttered, looking down at him grimly. He crowed with delight and good fellowship.

“But with all I was so wild and lawless,” went on Miss steadily, “I never done any real wrong but once. I never led any young man into wrong, and he didn't lead me into wrong. Thank God, I've never fell low enough, in all I've suffered for it, to blame him. He didn't mean to do wrong any more 'an I did.”

“Then why don't he marry you?” asked Mrs. Purple, breathing deeply but silently.

A dull red went across the girl's face.

“Yes, why?” she said bitterly. “Because he belongs to a good family—a family with no drunkards or coarse oaths in it; with daughters that don't paint and bleach their hair, and fling their feet to the tops of water hydrants.”

“You could stop all that,” spoke up, for the first time, the strangely subdued Mrs. Lark.

“Yes,” said Miss, giving her a brief look, “but his family'd throw it in my teeth to the last day of my life. I guess I know.”

There was a silence. No one contradicted her.

Suddenly she burst out wildly: “Oh, you *good* women! If you have any feelings I wonder where you keep 'em! Can't you

put yourself in my place? Can't you see how terrible sweet sin can look before you get into it? And how awful afterward? Can't you guess what it is to go along the street and have people you've known all your life look the other way, or else stare you in the face so cold and hard that you nearly go mad with despair? To see men grin, or women run and peer out the windows at you with shocked faces? To have little children draw away and stare curiously at you, whispering among themselves, knowing you're different from other women? Can't you guess any of these things—and have more pity?"

She was sobbing now convulsively. Mrs. Eaton was weeping in sympathy, and there were tears in Mrs. Lark's eyes. As for Mrs. Purple—Mrs. Lark declared afterward that she "just stood there lookin' every which way for Sunday." But even Mrs. Eaton dared not approach the girl with any offer of tenderness; there was something lone and terrible in her grief that forbade it.

She controlled herself as suddenly as she had given way.

"It seemed as if I just couldn't go on like this any longer, as if there'd got to be a change one way or the other. In spite of all you think about me, I'm not naturally bad, and I just couldn't go down lower. I wanted to get a start the other way, for my own sake and the child's. So I thought if I'd join the church, you'd believe in me and help me up, and maybe learn to respect me by the time the child grows up. And what is the first thing the church does? It turns around and asks me to do the lowest thing I could do, before it'll take me in. As if it wasn't enough for my life to be ruined, without ruining the life of a young man, too!"

Mrs. Purple's face flushed darkly.

"It's not for the likes of you to criticise the church," she said sternly. "I guess, when all's said and done, the young man don't belong to such a terrible fine family. Terrible fine families don't raise sons that get girls into trouble and then desert 'em. They—"

Miss put up her hand with a compelling gesture.

"I told you once he didn't get me into trouble. He wasn't to blame. And what's more, if it'll ease you any, seeing you're bursting with curiosity, I'll tell you this much: he doesn't know there is a child."

"My Lord!" said Mrs. Lark. Then there was a silence.

It was broken by Miss.

"Now, I've told you everything there is to tell about myself. But I want to tell *you*—she looked full into Mrs. Purple's eyes—"that, bad as I am, outcast that I am, I wouldn't change places with *you*, riding around in your carriage, holding your chin up and lording it over all creation! I'm glad you've come here. It's going to help me bear my life. It makes me see things different. I wouldn't swap my chance of heaven, church, or no church, for *yours*! I never harmed anybody but myself. Till this minute, I never judged anybody but myself. I never belonged to a church and then slandered that church by asking people to do lower, meaner things to get into it than they'd ever done in all their lives before. Having one woman like you in a church hurts the church more'n all your old pocketbook helps it. You needn't have me up in your mothers' meetings again—tearing me to pieces! I wouldn't *be* in your old church while you're in it! So there! You can put that in your old sanctimonious pipe and smoke it."

She caught the child up in her arms and went sweeping away, with the air of an outraged queen, through the long grass to the house.

...

It was a pleasant afternoon a month later. Mrs. Herb had run in to see Mrs. Purple. The two ladies were in the sitting room, darkened to keep the heat and the flies out. Mrs. Purple

was working at Battenburg lace for a sideboard cover. She held it close to her face, wrinkling up her eyes as she worked.

"I don't see what keeps Maybelle so," she said. "She's taken to slyin' off in the orchard with a book every day lately. If I always had my drethers, though, I drether she'd spend her time that way than runnin' around. Some girls traipse so. She's a perfectly avaricious reader. Some girls are common an' associate with everybody. Maybelle's exclusive."

"She's certainly the nicest girl I know," said Mrs. Herb cordially. "Is the bishop comin' to dinner to-night?"

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Purple loftily. "He always comes to our house to dinner. Congressman Smith, he comes, too, when he's in town. If he don't go nowhere else, Mr. Purple, he always brings him here."

Mrs. Herb wiped her glasses.

"I declare, my eyes are gettin' sore! There's a new eye oculist in town. I'm goin' to see him."

"I want to know," said Mrs. Purple, polite but uninterested.

"Oh, here's Maybelle. W'y, you look as peakid! Where you been?"

Maybelle was indeed pale.

"Out in the orchard," she said faintly. She laid a book on the table and turned away.

"You shouldn't read so. Your eyes are all swelled up. You look as if you'd been cryin'. Is the dining room all red up?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, then, you can make a tapiocy puddin'. Get the colloger an' the sparrow-grass ready to put on. Your pa'll have a duck-fit if dinner ain't on time when the bishop's here."

"He's just that way, too," smiled Mrs. Herb. "I guess they all are, when it comes to that. He tews if breakfast's a minute late."

"That's the way. Oh, Maybelle! I had a letter from Herbert. He'll be home to-night or to-morrow mornin'. Is his room

ready?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Maybelle's eyes burned a long searching look out of her pale face at her mother. Then she went out of the room.

Mrs. Herb was tating. She fidgeted about in her chair. Twice she cleared her throat to speak, but each time her courage failed. She sat making swift, regular jabs into her left hand with her shuttle.

Suddenly she spoke; her voice seemed to leap right out of the middle of her throat.

"I suppose you know about M'iss?"

Mrs. Purple spoiled a stitch. Her brows drew into a scowl.

"What about her?" she asked in a cold way.

"W'y, she's awful sick."

"Hunh."

"She's been sick a week."

"Hunh."

"They don't think now she'll live."

Mrs. Purple spoiled another stitch.

"Mis' Eaton goes in every forenoon, an' I go in every evenin'; an' her father's sobered up an' stays right with her. It's turned out to be appendiktis."

"Hunh."

"It's pitiful to see her. She will have the baby right on the bed, an' holds his hand against her lips all the time. The little fellow just worships her, an' won't be satisfied a minute away from her except to eat. She know's she's goin' to die, an' she just moans to God day an' night, to know what'll become of her baby."

Mrs. Herb knew she was on a dangerous subject. Since the committee of mothers had called on M'iss, no one had dared to mention her name to Mrs. Purple; so what her thoughts were on the subject no one knew.

She held her chin higher than ever, and swept into church with the haughty pride of a duchess, to sit with stiff, level shoulders through the sermon. She never sagged down to one side or the other like the frivolous Mrs. Lark, who was constantly resting her cheek on her hand. She was always a deacon's wife, the entertainer of Congressman Smith, and the first lady of the town.

She was the chief patroness of the Children's Home, the Normal School, the Library, the Hospital, and the Asylum for the Blind.

Mrs. Herb took heart from the silence. "I never was so sorry for anybody. 'What'll become of my boy?' she wails over an' over; she's getting fainter now. 'I don't care what becomes of me; but what'll become of my boy?' You know how a voice sounds when it gets death in it? Well, I can hear her all night long, moanin', 'What'll become of my boy?' If I didn't have so many children I'd take him myself."

"Nice stock," said Mrs. Purple sternly. Her face had a gray look.

"Well, it's bad on her side, but I guess the father must be of good fambly. I never saw a finer boy. Handsome—my-O! An' sweet disposition. Mis' Eaton has children an' a sick mother on her hands, or she'd take him."

Mrs. Herb was so frightened now at her own audacity that the shuttle was fairly flying under and over the thread.

"I hope Maybelle gets a good 'do', on that puddin'," said Mrs. Purple calmly. "If it's bad her pa'll be able to step on his own chin."

"Is that so? That fly-away Mis' Lark would of took him in a minute; but Lark, he set that big foot of his down. Mule!"

"Herbert graduated at the head of his class," announced Mrs. Purple. She never bent her proud and stubborn old head over her work. When she could not see, she held the work

higher. She lifted it higher now.

"They're makin' a terrible fuss over him. The head professor, he says Herbert'll make his mark in the world. They talk about my holdin' my chin so high. I've good call to, I guess. Children like my children don't grow on trees, so's you can walk along an' pick 'em off. They come from generations of right-livin' people. There's never been any disgrace in my family—clear back."

"Tap wood," said Mrs. Herb briefly.

"Aigh?"

"Tap wood."

"What say?"

"I say *tap wood*. W'y, when you brag, if you don't tap wood, it'll happen the other way. Some of your folks 'ud turn right around an' disgrace you. You'd best tap wood."

"I'm no dumb loon," said Mrs. Purple. "I don't have to tap wood to keep my folks from disgracin' me. I ain't afraid."

"Well," said Mrs. Herb, sighing, "I reckon I'm a dumb loon. I tap wood every time I brag. An' if I held my chin as high as you hold your'n, I don't know but I'd carry a stick o' wood around with me an' beat a regular tattoo on it all the time. As I was sayin', Miss can't bear to think o' the Children's Home. She just means to God for some good Christian fambly to take him an' bring him up right."

"Hunh."

"Well, I'll have to be goin'. I've set quite a spell. I've felt to enjoy it."

"I've felt to enjoy havin' you," said Mrs. Purple, rising with cold and formal politeness. "You must run in again."

"I will so."

When Mrs. Herb was gone, Mrs. Purple stood for some time looking out the window with unseeing eyes.

She had laid down her Battenberg lace and stood with one hand resting heavily on a chair; with the other she slowly

stroked her chin.

"I don't know what it is to me, anyhow," she said at last, drawing a deep breath. "I can't waste my time on a trollop like her."

All at once she seemed to feel the clasp of a soft baby hand around her fingers. She looked down at her hand in a startled way.

"He was awful sweet," she said reluctantly. "An' he's the only child that ever did come to me, as if he'd took a notion to me." Then her face hardened. "There's no call for me to think about it," she said, going toward the kitchen. "I've got dinners to get for bishops."

...

At nine o'clock that night Mrs. Purple sat in the seldom-used parlor, awaiting her son. Mr. Purple had gone to meeting with the bishop. She sat in state, the lights turned low, her hands folded in her lap. Maybelle had gone down to the gate to meet her brother.

It seemed a long time after the train whistled before Mrs. Purple heard them coming. When she finally heard them in the hall, it seemed strange that they were not talking. Then she heard her son's step coming alone to her door. It was slow and dragging, and before the door opened she knew that something was wrong.

She leaned rigidly forward in her chair, grasping its arms with both stiff hands, but unconsciously holding her head as high as ever.

At sight of his face something seemed to clutch her heart. A grayness flashed over her face, making her look years older. It brought out every wrinkle in the dim light. She tried to get up, but something held her to her chair.

"Herbert!" she gasped out. "Oh, my son, my son! What is it? What's happened?"

She had expected to have him come home so proud and handsome; his head up, with a springing step and the exultant look of success. She had pictured him over and over in her mind.

But here he was staggering across the room to her, his face wild and convulsed with suffering, a cry of horror bursting from him. He flung himself upon his knees—he, her pride, her joy, the light of her hard old heart!—and buried his face in her lap.

"Oh, mother, mother! What shall I do? What *can* I do? To come home to you like this! In such shame, such disgrace, such agony! And I never knew—I never knew!"

"What are you talkin' about, Herbert Purple? Answer up. Who dar's to mention shame and disgrace in the same breath with a Purple? If it's debts, I'll pay 'em, if your father won't. If it's college pranks—"

"Oh, God help me! It's a debt that can never be paid. To think what she must have suffered for nearly two years—and never a word from her! Maybelle knew it all the time; she made Maybelle promise she'd never tell. She wouldn't have told me now if there was any hope. But it's too late, too late!" he burst out wildly. "While I was graduating and having honors heaped on me, she was lying there, dying, disgraced, dishonored."

"Herbert Purple!" cried out his mother, and as long as he lived he never forgot her voice; he felt her rising up from her chair powerfully, as if by no will of her own; a violent trembling had seized her. It seemed as if her words shook against her teeth. "Who are you talkin' about? If you mention Maybelle an' shame in the same breath—"

"Oh, mother! As long as Maybelle lives, as long as you live, we will never any of us get away from shame again—and all

through me! Oh, how can I bear it? How can we all bear it? Wretch that I am, to even think of myself while poor M'Iss—"

His mother uttered a hoarse cry that was like the cry of an animal in torture.

"The child is mine. Oh, mother, I never knew there was one! Yet I did want to do what I could. I wanted to marry her before I went away—I begged her to marry me—it seemed the only thing that could make me hold up my head again—but she wouldn't; for your sake and Maybelle's she wouldn't. She said she was different, and it would nearly kill you to have me marry her. She said it wasn't my fault any more than hers; that we were so young we'd live it down, and it would be a lesson to us forever—she tried to comfort *me*, mother, and make it easy for me. She said I must go away and study, and put it behind me, and grow to be a good man, so God would forgive us and would forget it. M'Iss Dement, the drunkard's daughter, talked that way to me, mother, to your son. And it did help me. I went away and worked hard and prayed to be forgiven, and I did outgrow it, and feel that God was forgiving me and blessing me in my work—and all the time there was a child, and I never knew! She wouldn't tell. She bore the shame for both of us! She was an outcast—disgraced, deserted, trodden upon. While I was going higher she was sinking lower. Maybelle says she tried at last to get into the church—the church to which *my* life is dedicated!—and they wouldn't let her in—while *I*—oh, I shall go mad with thinking of it! A lifetime's service to God will not pay the debt to her; will not atone for what she has suffered through me—alone, motherless, cast off!"

He ceased, conscious, of a sudden, of the convulsive shuddering of his mother's whole body. She was standing; and he, too, got to his feet, releasing her shaking, unresponsive hand, and faced her. He looked once, and once only, into her eyes. The supreme anguish written upon her proud old face was

more than he could bear. He bowed his head and stood before her dumb.

Through the early June dawn Mrs. Purple came out of her home and went through the orchard to the house where M'Iss lay dying. The air was sweet with all sweet, blowing things, and musical with the song of birds. The pale green foliage floated above and about her. Cherries hung scarlet from the trees, and currants in rich ruby globes from their vines; early apples were yellowing among their leaves, and the indescribable fragrance of strawberries mingled with the breath of old-fashioned flowers. But Mrs. Purple saw none of the beauty, heard none of the melody, smelled none of the sweet. She was an old, broken-down woman. She had lived—somehow—through a night of such suffering as she had never dreamed could be for her. She had never had much sympathy for people who suffer. "Let 'em do what's right an' they won't have to suffer!" had ever been her hard thought. She had kept her head high; she had held herself aloof from wrongdoers, judging them without mercy and crushing them with scorn.

For the first time her own head was low. It was bowed with shame. It seemed to her that the very path she trod was red with shame. Along this same path her son's feet had gone on their way to ruin; her daughter's, on their secret missions of the mercy and charity that had never been in her mother's heart.

The old woman saw everything clearly at last. She had not been spared one torturing thought, one remembrance of her own hardness and pride. Every denunciation of sin and sinners she had ever uttered, every sneer at shame, every bitter judgment, had come back to her in the long hours of the night. God's message had come to her as she deserved—without mercy; had written itself through her consciousness with a kind of exquisite torture. In the pitiless searchlight turned upon her heart she had read all the truth there.

Her head was low and her heart was broken; but she was a better woman than she had ever been before.

The dying girl shrank at sight of her, but only for a moment. Her first look at the face on the pillow, gray and drawn with physical suffering and with such mental torture as she herself was passing through, broke down the last remnant of the old woman's pride. Great tears came slowly to her eyes and filled them full; they stood there for a moment, cold and blinding; then they brimmed over and fell upon M'Iss's hand—slowly at first, then faster and faster—until, at last, she burst out into passionate sobbing and fell upon her knees beside the bed.

"Oh, M'Iss, M'Iss," she uttered chokingly, "if ever a mortal woman was sorry, I'm sorry for the way I've treated you. God had to make me suffer to make me see my sin. I don't ask you to forgive me; but I want you to trust me enough to give me the child. I promise you before God that I'll raise it right—an' by *rights* I don't mean proud an' hard, like I've been livin' myself. With that child near me, I'll never be hard again; I'll never judge any livin' soul again. I'm a greater sinner than you, an' I'll work to the last day o' my life to atone-up for the way I've treated you."

Death was so close to poor M'Iss that she could scarcely speak.

"I'm—sorry—too," she whispered, in the slow and painful utterance of the dying. "But I wasn't—as bad—as you thought—as I acted... Don't worry—you didn't know... May God forever—bless you—bless you—" There was silence in the room while she tried to finish the sentence; when the words came they were barely audible—"for taking—the—child."

M'Iss's hand moved weakly to reach Mrs. Purple's head, but fell back upon the bed in pitiful helplessness. But M'Iss's child stretched his hand over his mother's still form and patted the old woman's bowed head.



"M'Iss's Child" was awarded a prize of \$400 from *Collier's Magazine* which published the story on 4 November 1905. It was reprinted in the collection *Collier's Prize Stories* in 1916.

"M'Iss's Child" is a mystery story that is set in a rural town. The main character is unmarried M'Iss Dement whose mother has died and whose father is an alcoholic. M'Iss has had a child and has defiantly refused to tell anyone who the child's father is. The story centers on her steadfast refusal and the resolute efforts of the other women in town to determine both the child's paternity and how they should act toward this young woman whose behavior has been and continues to be so flagrantly disruptive. In "M'Iss's Child," Higginson considers questions of morality, judgment, and privacy.