

THE WIDOW'S PICNIC.

In one of the many neat but humble dwellings which encircle the thriving town of M—, situated on the line of the Southern Pacific Railroad, dwelt the Widow Harty, and her two boys and two girls. The departed spouse, Dennis Harty, had joined one of the beneficent Orders of the day, and had left his widow with a snug sum of money sufficient to keep the olive branches from raggedness and hunger. Her constant care was to regulate her little household and train them up in the way they should go. She never failed to regret the loss of Dennis, and cherished his memory with due diligence. She was a woman who had a "theory" that there was only one good husband for a woman; if she drew a prize the first time, she would likely get a blank in further ventures, and vice versa. She lived an easy-going, industrious life since her widowhood began, which was some two years past. She seemed likely to glide along in the quiet stream of her widowhood until she became mother-in-law to somebody, without a ripple on the tide. But this was not to be, for the appearance of Larry Hughes broke up the even tenor of her way, and her troubles began.

Larry was a countryman of hers who had a claim some ten miles up Dry creek. One day, passing by with his cart on his way to the town, he stopped at her gate to give some of her children a lift to the school-house. There were some half dozen urchins in the cart he had already picked up along the road, who, calling his attention to them as they were leaving home, he added them to his load. He was a good-looking, good-natured, merry specimen of an Irishman, to whom life's troubles seemed but trifles. She had often seen him pass with a lot of children, but this was the first time he had picked up any of her brood. She was at the gate as he drove up, and the compliments of the day were freely passed to and fro over the fence. This was the beginning of an acquaintance, continued with increasing intimacy and interest, till the widow began to overhaul the records to see if her "theory" of the result of a second draw at the lottery would hold water; she counted off the eyes on her right hand and the nays on the left, and was relieved and satisfied to find they came out even anyhow.

One day Larry drove up to the gate with his load of fruit and vegetables, and stopped. He told her there was to be a picnic at the grove May Day, and would she and the children like to go with him in the cart. Everybody was going. She was thinning out a bed of onions, and as soon as she could get some of the kinks out of her back, she took a survey of the cart. It was a likely looking affair enough. She minded seeing lots of women folks and children going into town on worse looking rigs than Larry's cart, and then, too, she wasn't proud. Indeed, what had she to be proud of unless of her children and her good name? She thought, too, with a slight blush, how pleasant such a ride would be "across the moor" beside Larry, and the children tucked out of the way at the tail of the cart. And she thought, too, (widows think awful fast) a little encouragement would not come amiss to Larry, who seemed inclined to play the laggard in love. It will be such a treat for the dear little darlings and she consented to go for their sakes. Larry didn't care for whose sake it was so she was along, and the thing was settled.

May-day morning came in soft and balmy; a light cool breeze was moving up the valley, invigorating and exhilarating. It was what was called a good season, and crops waved with the promise of abundance, and everybody felt as though now was the time for enjoyment. The widow had not been idle since the day of the invitation; and there was a fine large new basket with a rainbow handle, filled to the brim with evidences of her skill as a cook, which

was to serve the double purpose of contributing to the greatest pleasure of a picnic, that of feasting in the open air, and as a sort of domestic battery to bring Larry to business. It was covered with a nice tablecloth, and was placed forward in the cart. The young ones were stored away in the rear and with the widow beside him, on a fine buggy robe he had borrowed for the occasion from a friendly hostler in the town, Larry started in good style for the grove. They arrived in due time for the exercises provided for the day. By the time noon came, everybody was ready for the eating part of the programme.

The basket was placed against a tree and the snowy cloth spread under its branches. The cakes, pies, custards, tartlets, etc., were scattered picnic fashion. The widow sat opposite to Larry, with the children right and left. Everything was lovely. As Larry glanced over the feast spread by the widow's hand before him, he mentally vowed to engage her for life, if possible, on the way home. The widow took up a deep custard, and was in the act of passing it to him when a pig, which had found entrance to the grounds, thought he would prospect the basket at the foot of the tree. He got his fore feet into the basket; he became alarmed in the rear, and undertook to pass on through the basket instead of backing out, and the result of his fright was that he got the basket upon his back, with the handle firmly around his body like the cinch of a saddle. With a fearful squeal, he made a break straight ahead, overturned the first young one he came across, dashed between the widow and Larry just in time to fling the contents of the custard over his head and shoulders. It filled his eyes and hair instead of his mouth and stomach, and converted a joyful shirt bosom and collar into a picture of misery.

The pig continued on his course, making a wreck of every home circle he entered and demoralizing the whole institution. He was perfectly crazy with fear, stood up on his hind legs, then on his fore, like a California broncho; tried to roll over, and then to shake off the horrible thing on his back; tried to rub it off against anything or anybody he could see, meanwhile keeping up the most frightful and piteous squeals ever heard. He was the liveliest thing that ever dropped in at a picnic. What with the pig and the screams of laughter from those who succeeded in getting upon the wagons and the fence, and the shrieks of the women and children as he raged among them and over the dishes, there was no time for manners, much less courting. As soon as Larry could get enough of the custard out of his eyes to see which way to go, he made for the fence. The widow had just time to jerk two of the youngest into a wagon as the pig again came around, when she made a bold dash for her basket. The pig wanted she should have it, but offered it in such haste that she sat down quicker than she ever did before in her life. Then she climbed into the wagon with her hat under her arm.

She screamed over to Larry to get the basket, but somehow Larry couldn't hear her, leastways he told her so on her way home. Every time the pig circled around near by her she would exclaim, "Oh, my basket, my beautiful basket." The pig finally found the gap he came in at and away he went down the road with the beautiful basket on the top of his back forever.

In spite of the terror and destruction created, it was voted that the fun and excitement was worth it all; nobody was seriously hurt and there was yet plenty to eat. Everybody was in high glee except the widow; she was cross, the loss of her basket for which she had paid \$2.50 was no trifle. The feast she had spread with so much pride was no longer a thing of beauty or a joy to the soul, and not the least of her sorrows was the selfish escape of Larry to the fence, leaving her to look out for herself and family as best she could. She was very cool to him for some time and felt herself aggrieved. But who can sulk long or be cross at a picnic among a tribe of young folks bent on fun and frolic? By the time breaking up came she had recovered her usual good humor, and

Larry and she were again on loving terms. The remains of the feast, dishes, etc., were stowed away under the seat and the table cloth placed over them. This was the only recourse, as the basket was gone and there was no box to be had. They jogged along comfortable-like towards home. The widow was in fine spirits, said nothing was so bad but it might be worse, and they had had a splendid time anyhow. Larry's spirit rose with the occasion and he thought it was now or never. He asked the widow for her hand and offered to divide all his worldly possessions with her in exchange—singing:

"I've built me a nate little cot, love,
I've pigs and potatoes in store,
And I've twenty bright pounds in the bank, darling,
And it may be a pound or two more."

The memory of the departed spouse came suddenly to her, as no doubt it comes to all widows under such circumstances, and she hesitated. The memory of all the loving kindness of Dennis rushed like a flood into her heart, that loving care and forethought too, which had kept the sting of poverty and distress from her widowhood, and her tongue refused to utter the ready affirmative that was in her heart.

"It was so sudden," she said. She hadn't dreamed of such a thing. She thought all along it was the children he was so fond of; she wanted a little time to consider. Would he call Sunday week for an answer. Yes, he would call every day of the week for the matter of that. But little more was said, as each kept up a busy thinking till they arrived at the gate.

"Hould the lines, Mrs. Harty, while I tend to the children; I'll have ye all out in the twink of an eye," said Larry; and he did sure enough. She took the lines, and he sprang to the ground. The bolt which kept the bed of the cart in position had, unbeknown to him, worked out, and as he jumped off, the equilibrium was destroyed, with the balance of power with the children at the tail of the cart. As soon as he reached the ground the rest were dumped like a load of rubbish in front of the gate.

The widow resumed her proper position in the world as soon as possible. Which end of her struck first she never knew; that she made one revolution she was certain. Her car was full of molasses and her hair of gray, and her hat was jammed down over her eyes with the rim between her teeth. As for the children, they looked as though they wouldn't need to ask for preserves for a month, if allowed to lick themselves clean.

Mrs. Harty was mad as a hornet. This second catastrophe was too much for her love, and it went out like a match. "Is this the way to bring a lady home, you villain? If I catch ye within my door I'll have ye out in the twink of an eye!" and she shook her fist at him. The cart, relieved of its load, righted up with a bang which set the old horse thinking about home, and he started off at a rate which presumed that the result of his mental investigation was, that he thought it was late. Poor Larry gave a beseeching look at the widow, and an anxious one after his rapidly disappearing vehicle. She looked so ferocious and warlike that he quickly decided it best to look after the cart and old Mike.

The widow stood as though dazed, for some minutes; but a string of teams from the picnic were coming rapidly up the road, and that was no place for her and her family in such a queer muddle; so she scraped the debris into the tablecloth, gathered up the four corners, and pushing the young ones ahead of her, she dragged the wreck through the gate, into the house, and closed the door behind her. Here, shut out from the rude world, she let her feelings have full sway, and woman's best friend in such times came to her relief, and she shed tears in abundance. Such a day she had never experienced in all her life. It seemed a month since morning. What a day it had been!

"This day so wildly welcomed,
This day my soul had singled out of time
And marked for bliss."