

Number 306.

BY FRANK H. SWEET.



HE morning was very pleasant, but, so far, all the mornings had been pleasant at this delightful, out-of-the-way resort. Mrs. Bradford drew a long breath as she descended the hotel steps. Her physician had certainly been right when he recommended a change of climate. Already she could feel the influence of the mild air and the long days spent out of doors. As she reached the sidewalk she paused with a questioning smile.

"Where to, Mildred?" she asked.

The little girl who was skipping along by her side looked up brightly.

"The plaza, of course, mamma. You can read and I will play. This afternoon we'll go down to the beach."

The street was very quiet. An occasional dray with its load of trunks and baggage, and here and there a group of pleasure-seekers on their way to the plaza or the beach. Overhead, a few buzzards circled lazily about, and from the direction of the plaza came a slight breeze, which was laden with the perfume of orange blossoms and the saltiness of the bay which glistened beyond the trees.

As they reached the corner a keen newsboy darted across the street, and his shrewd face broadened into a grin when his customer smilingly refused the change he offered.

Through the openings in the trees they could see the white sails of pleasure boats on the bay, and, beyond these, the green shore of Promontory Point. Near the extreme end of the point rose the tall white buildings of the state penitentiary. Mrs. Bradford shivered a little as she saw them. The grim buildings seemed out of place in the quiet winter resort.

It was not far to the plaza, but when they reached it they found that most of the seats were already occupied. They walked down one of the side paths and came back by the fountain. As they did so, Mildred turned suddenly.

"There's a seat that's most all empty!" she whispered eagerly.

It was a little off the path and half hidden by the low branches of a live oak. As they approached, Mrs. Bradford noticed that its only occupant was a tall young man, whose face looked strangely white and eager. He watched them curiously as they sat down, and his lips parted in a friendly smile. Then as if conscious of impropriety, he got up and walked back and forth uneasily. For a time Mrs. Bradford scarcely noticed him, then something peculiar about his step,

caused her to raise her eyes from the book she was reading. The young man seemed to have forgotten their presence and was walking back and forth with bowed head. Every few seconds he wheeled sharply and retraced his steps. Mrs. Bradford noticed with curious wonder that he always wheeled at exactly the same points. Then she saw that his left foot dragged behind the other, as though it carried a heavy weight. At first she thought he was lame, but even while she was compassionating him he raised his head with a quick, startled movement, and for a time the lameness disappeared and the walk was extended to the end of the path. Then his head once more sank upon his breast, the short turns were resumed, and the left foot again began its weary, dragging motion. Apparently he was conscious of his weakness, for several times she saw him recover himself impatiently and glance sharply around.

Overhead, the mocking birds were calling to each other, and something in their notes seemed to arouse him from his reverie. Presently he stopped beneath the tree and glanced up with a rapt expression on his face. Mrs. Bradford saw it and her eyes softened.

"You like the birds?" she asked pleasantly.

"I—used to," he replied hesitatingly. Then noticing the surprise in her face, he added apologetically, "I haven't seen any before for most ten years. They seem sort of strange."

He stood still for a moment, with the color deepening on his sallow cheeks, then he slouched forward and threw himself on the grass at the foot of the tree. Mrs. Bradford gazed at him curiously for a moment and then returned to her book.

Out on the path Mildred was playing with her ball. At length struck a limb and bounded toward the young man. He picked it up eagerly and half rose to his feet, but seeing the frightened look on her face he tossed it back and resumed his slouching position on the grass.

After awhile the ball again rolled to his feet. This time he did not offer to return it. As Mildred approached he looked up with a smile.

"The cover is coming off your ball," he said pleasantly. "If you will let me I'll fix it. I know how."

"But mamma said I'd have to take it to a shoemaker," she said, doubtfully. "Leather is awful hard to sew."

"Not if you have things to work with," he said, quietly. "See here." Taking a small package from his pocket, he opened and showed her several curious needles and some coarse, shining thread.

"They gave them to me when I left the—the place where I learned my trade," he said in a low voice. "I suppose I shall never use them. My folks will not let me do that. But I shall always keep them near me. Some time I may need advice, and this little package will be able to tell me a great many things—a great many things which you will never understand, little one," he added gently.

Mildred gazed at him wonderingly, but as she saw the skilled fingers draw the leather over the ball and fasten it securely in place her look of wonder changed to one of pleasure.

"I am ever so much obliged," she said, gratefully. "I'd hate awfully to lose the ball. Grandpa gave it to me." She watched him a few moments in silence, and then added, with a sudden burst of confidence: "Grandpa lives at our house, and we're going home as soon as it gets warm."

The young man sewed on for some moments in silence. At last the ball was finished, and he carefully replaced the needle in his pocket.

"I'm going home, too," he said, gravely, as he handed her the ball. "I'm waiting for the train now."

"And have you got a mamma?" she asked, with sudden interest.

"Yes; and she has been waiting for me a long, long time. Poor little mother!" The last too low for her to hear.

As the little girl was moving away he recalled her with a sudden gesture.

"I wish you would take this," he said, earnestly, as he gave her a tiny box of exquisite workmanship.

"I made it from a piece of ivory which was found on a battlefield, and intended to give it to my sister. You make me think of her."

"But won't she want it?" Mildred objected.

"She is dead," was the grave answer.

The little girl's face grew sympathetic.

"I'm sorry," she said, gently, "and I'd like to have the box ever so much, but I must ask mamma."

In a few minutes she returned. "Mamma says I mustn't take gifts from strangers," she said; "but I'm ever so much obliged, just the same."

The sun spots moved slowly across the grass and disappeared, one by one, in the thicker shadows of the trees. The young man watched them listlessly. At length a clock began to strike in the distance, and he counted the strokes carefully. When it ceased he got up and once more began to walk back and forth. But row his head was erect and his left foot had lost its dragging motion. And on his face was a tender, expectant smile.

Mildred had grown tired of her ball and was watching the water

as it fell splashing into the broad basin of the fountain. As the young man approached she looked up timidly.

"Are you going now?" she asked. "Not for another half hour," he replied. "I had rather wait here than down at the depot."

For some moments he stood gazing at her. Evidently her face brought up some memory of the past, for he sighed as he turned away.

A little later Mrs. Bradford was aroused by excited voices. Several figures rushed past her. For a moment she gazed around wondering, then she rose and followed. Near the fountain was a group of excited people, and in the open space beyond she recognized Mildred playing with her ball. What was the matter?

But even as she wondered came the wild rush of a pair of frightened horses into the open space. What followed happened so quickly that she could not realize it until it was over. Mildred was placed, sobbing, in her arms, and a hushed group closed about a silent figure on the ground.

"It was the bravest thing I ever saw," said one man in a low voice.

"But a sad thing for the poor chap and his people—if he had any," said another, compassionately.

Two of the guards from the penitentiary now joined the group. A moment later one of them gave a few quick directions to a hackman standing near.

"It is Number 306," Mrs. Bradford heard him say. "Poor fellow! and he has only been out a few hours. I must telegraph to his folks."

Mrs. Bradford watched them until she saw them place the motionless figure in the hack, then she walked slowly back to the settee.

Under the live oak she saw something glisten. Picking it up, she found it was the little ivory box.

"Here, Mildred," she said in a low voice, "you may keep it."

A Prayer Cut Short.

Two Highlanders found themselves unable to get into harbor in their boat, the waves driving it out to sea so persistently that Donald, after obstinately battling with the elements, cried out to Duncan, in a dialect which we will not attempt fully to represent, "Go doon on your knees, mon, and offer a bit o' prayer." But before Duncan was on his knees the boat's keel grated on the beach, whereupon Donald shouted, "Stop praying; we've come ashore by our own exertions, and I'll no be beholden to anybody."

Chaplain.—"What do you do for your spiritual welfare?"

Jolly Tar.—"Drink everything in sight."