

HER EXCURSION ALONE

By Hugh Pendexter

THE sour visage of Mrs. Weeger was turned on Mrs. Peavy in a diluted simulation of pity, as in a pulpit voice she declared:

"Of course, Mellie, we're sorry for you. But as a widder, with only your pension to live on, you shouldn't expect to take in the lighter joys of life. If I was you I wouldn't think any more about the excursion."

"We'll send or bring you some picter cards," soothed the president of the sewing circle.

But Mrs. Bige Pratt, whose booming bass usurped every situation it deigned to bother with, spoke more sternly and with less regard for Mrs. Peavy's depressed feelings.

"Mellie, how can you, a soldier's widder, think of such rinkums! Caleb was a martyr, and you should feel a gloomy pride in denying yourself."

Mrs. Peavy, however, often reckless in her despair, and presuming to linger where other members of the circle would not have the temerity to even hesitate, half protested, half wailed, "I don't see why I shouldn't think of excursions. When Caleb died for the Government he didn't plan that his death should keep me from mild, quiet joys. He died that we might be free. And now I find I ain't free!" And she sighed and could not see to bite the thread because of the welling tears.

"Mellie Peavy," coldly remonstrated Mrs. Pratt, stiffening her heavy frame in resentment of such bald mutiny, "how can you talk so! The women of this circle have planned to go on an excursion to Sebago Lake. You say you can't afford to go and must stay at home. Then why not make it a burden of love and not be a dampness on this meeting?"

Mrs. Peavy rolled her eyes in a vain search for resignation and let the sewing slip from her fat fingers as she lamented—"I'll have to stay behind, but I can't be jolly about it. If I hadn't heard you was to change cars I might have bore up better. But, oh, it's hard to remain behind when even in my dreams I can see you changing cars! I've always hankered to go somewheres and have to change cars. If Caleb Peavy was here now I'd go fast enough. I know what he'd say; he'd say, 'Mellie, go, and the Lawd be with you; and don't stick your head out the car winder.' There! I'll try and not say anything more about it. But it's hard, pesky hard. I had to wait twenty years before I could have a black silk and mourn for him."

A grim silence, accentuated by the disapprobatory pursing of the lips, continued for several seconds and was only broken by Mrs. Weeger, as she addressed her neighbor behind a confidential palm, and in a clear, penetrating whisper asked, "We're to meet at the station at seven, sharp?"

"Seven, sharp," mumbled the president. "And I think we all ought to meet at my house and march down, two by two. We must take care to keep together when we change cars in Portland. I s'pose we'll unpack the baskets and eat up in the grove."

"No; by the lake," hoarsely corrected Mrs. Pratt.

Mrs. Peavy, whose nervous hands had been twisting uncertainly as she greedily drank in all these delectable details, now eagerly obtruded: "If we eat near the lake we can wash the dishes quicker and have more time—Oh, dear! I can't make it seem real that I must stay to home. How much are the tickets, Myra?"

The president sighed in sad irritation, as she informed, "I've told you time and time again, Mellie, that they're three dollars 'n' sixty cents for the round trip."

"I declare," whimpered Mrs. Peavy, searching in futile haste for her handkerchief, "it seems a pesky shame that the widder of a man who died for the Government should be denied the trip just because of that! Myra, don't you s'pose they'd let a dead veteran's widder go cheaper? Seems 's if I've read somewheres that the Government—"

"No, Mellie; there's no such hope for you," broke in the rancorous voice of Mrs. Pratt. "You'd better be reconciled to stay to home. Why couldn't you go up to the cemetery and then over to the pine grove and— and meditate?"

Mrs. Peavy's ample bosom heaved tumultuously as she sought to restrain her emotions, but she could not resist complaining, "And must I go all my life without gitting a single sniff of the salt water?"

"I'll bring you a pretty shell, Mellie," soothed Mrs. Weeger.

"No, don't," shuddered Mrs. Peavy, working her hands convulsively. "It would only make it harder. But if you'd git the engine not to boot or whistle when leaving the station it might help some."

Mrs. Pratt frowned and waved her scissors for silence as she slowly proclaimed, "The engine will do its duty." For she had no intention of foregoing any mark of a triumphant exit. Then she continued: "But we've met to-day to make our last plans. If it is rasping to Mellie, she can leave. We'll wait."

"It would be kinder to yourself, Mellie, to go," shrilly whispered Mrs. Weeger.

"No, I'll stay," groaned Mrs. Peavy. "Next to being on that train I'd rather hear the plans talked about. But changing cars and—"

"Very well, then," interrupted Mrs. Pratt sharply, "she's picked her path, let her lie in it. Now, I've arranged to have Elder Witham buy the tickets. You're to give your money to me and I'll give it to him; then all we have to do is to be at the station in the morning."

"But why should he fuss to buy 'em?" gasped Mrs. Peavy, for the moment forgetting her isolation. "We could—oh, dear! To think I must be only an audience."

Mrs. Pratt turned a long, chilly gaze upon her, and as others in the circle began to look dubious, the dominating factor hurriedly decreed: "We must have a man buy the tickets. Elder can git 'em quicker than we can, and also be sure of the change. I've arranged for it all."

This effectually stamped out any revolutionary spark, and the members of the circle devoted themselves to discussing the matter of food. This topic furnished material for an enlivening debate for several minutes, and was only interrupted by the widow's reminder:

"But that makes three who say they'll bring doughnuts. Why don't Mrs. Weeger bring tarts instead?"

"Ah, Mellie," sighed the president, "it seems our pity has been thrown away and that you've chosen Mammon to innocent pleasure."

"Well, now we've learned her foolish secret," gruffly broke in Mrs. Pratt, "s'pose we return to our plans. Elder Witham—"

But Mrs. Peavy, having endured to the maximum of her nervous strength, waited to hear no more, and, blindly gathering up her sewing, she felt her way to the door, and, with her free hand gesturing wildly, hurried ponderously into the yard and away.

It was a characteristic of Mrs. Peavy to enter into complete anticipation of any possible pleasure and, unmindful of the fact that she might be disappointed, to move about with sunny brow, rejoicing and entirely optimistic. But despite the flaccid fiber of her mental make-up she possessed—in the eleventh hour—a peculiar element of strength. It consisted of a painful perseverance. When once made to perceive her inability to indulge in a certain enjoyment, it was her manner, after tearfully railing against her hard lot, to utilize the last

The storekeeper made as if to speak, but, unable to frame an appropriate query, he changed his mind and the muscles of his face, and only stared at her in perplexed impatience.

She, in turn, bowed her shoulders as one bereft of all earthly help, and cried, "Why is it, Mister Jessup, you're telling folks I can't go on the excursion?"

The storekeeper stepped back in amazement and turned an imploring, questioning gaze upon his gravely attentive friends.

"I repeat," she half sobbed, now dominated by a moist indignation, "why?"

"Good Lawd, Mellie! What d'ye mean? I don't understand," he exploded.

"Ye might have said it in fun," suggested Mr. Currier amiably, not at all chagrined to behold Mr. Jessup blindly on the defensive.

"Or said it before ye knew she intended going," added Bige Pratt, with no idea where the situation was leading to.

"I don't care when he said it," protested Mrs. Peavy,

thinking up something for yer good," suggested the hired man.

"Then I was mistook in him," whimpered Mrs. Peavy. With this conclusion she unrolled the parcel and allowed six metal disks to jangle out on the counter.

Mr. Jessup started back in a semblance of alarm. "What be they?"

"They're electric belts," she explained. "I give sixty cents apiece for 'em, and you can have 'em for a dollar each."

"But I don't want 'em," stuttered the storekeeper.

"Why, you said you'd take 'em!"

Mr. Jessup closed his eyes and rumbled his coarse hair with both hands, and finally, in artificial calmness, said: "I'll give eight pounds of sugar for the lot." Something of metal dropped to the floor on the storekeeper's side of the counter and gave forth a sharp clink. As Mr. Jessup angrily stooped to recover it his scowling eyes detected a fat, round coin, embellished by all that characterizes a silver dollar, while as if carved from flame stood out the figures "1864."

When he stood up again the men at the stove did not know he held in his hungry hand what he believed to be worth some two thousand dollars.

He coughed, and then said:

"Mellie, I guess the boys was right."

"Good for ye, Aaron!" endorsed Mr. Currier warmly.

"You mean—what?" choked Mrs. Peavy, pawing at the scales.

"I mean, Mellie, that I'm going to buy the belts," he announced. "I'm going to give you a dollar and a half apiece. Nine dollars for the six. Here's ten—and I'll keep this that you dropped and call it square."

"Oh, thank you! thank you for your noble deed! But," she timidly warned, "it's so old I don't believe it's worth a dollar—"

"Tut! tut!" he said hurriedly. "We'll say no more about it."

The uneasy activity of the excursionists gave the station platform an unusual touch of color and life at an early hour.

One woman repeatedly sounded a nervous laugh without apparent incentive. Mrs. Pratt, cast in a sterner mold, resolutely maintained a rigid posture on a crippled baggage truck and only evidenced her perturbation by continually pulling on her gloves. Whenever she shifted her position an end of the truck would descend with much clamor.

"Is the train on time?" hoarsely demanded Mrs. Pratt, removing the right glove as she drew on the left.

The station agent, mildly dazed by the circle's insistence in treating him as a stranger, despite his life-long residence in the neighborhood, consulted his watch critically, and informed: "She's whistling at the cut now, ma'am."

"Then, Mrs. Pratt, come over here and stand with us," begged the president.

Mrs. Pratt banged the truck down smartly and pulled on the other glove as she explained, "I'm waiting for Elder Witham. He has the tickets."

"There he comes with Mrs. Witham!" cried the station agent. "And—yas, by Judas! Mellie Peavy is passing 'em!"

Mrs. Peavy, panting and apprehensive, inquired, "Be I in time?"

"You can see we are here, Mellie," replied Mrs. Pratt in her deepest throat tones. Then she cried, "Why, mercy sakes! Mellie, what have you got? A box?"

Mrs. Peavy smiled radiantly, and gasped, "Yes; I sat up late cooking."

"Be you going?" demanded Mrs. Pratt sternly, rolling her gloves in a ball.

"Of course I'm going," said Mrs. Peavy, joyously. "Didn't Bige tell you? I sold the belts to Aaron Jessup for ten dollars. Wasn't he kind? He even joked when buying 'em and said he'd give only nine dollars, and made me throw in an old souvenir and pretended it was his change. It looked like a dollar on one side, you know; and on the other it tells you to buy X L N T thread and git a dollar's worth for a nickel."

The exigency of the moment precluded any comment on the widow's fortune.

"I bought my ticket last night," panted Mrs. Peavy almost hysterically.

"Step lively!" bawled the brakeman.

But, to the amazement of all, Elder Witham's faded eyes blinked stupidly, as his shaking fingers searched pocket after pocket.

"The tickets!" gasped Mrs. Pratt.

The elder's head sank, as in muffled voice he confessed, "I ain't got 'em. Nor I ain't got no money. They're in my wallet in my other clothes."

"All aboard for the last time!" sang the brakeman, and the engine coughed.

"I can go!" cried Mrs. Peavy. "I can go, and I be!" Before it could be realized, she had passed inside the car and was settling herself at an open window.

And as the wheels began to move she leaned out and called back, "Picter cards for all—if I can— And the rest was lost in the escaping steam."



"THE TICKETS!" GASPED MRS. PRATT.

"Mellie," remonstrated the president compassionately, "why don't you try to forget?"

"I know, I know," feebly admitted the disconsolate woman; "but if I hadn't bought them electric belts I might have squeezed out the money."

"Belts, Mellie! What did you want of 'em?" cried Mrs. Weeger, eyeing the other's portly form in amazement.

"Oh, I don't know why I bought 'em!" lamented Mrs. Peavy, rocking her body in a minor display of emotion. "But the agent let me have 'em forty cents cheaper if I'd take six—and I took 'em. They're good for rheumatism, you know."

"Lawd, Mellie! I never knew you had rheumatiz," said the president.

"I ain't," sniveled Mrs. Peavy; "but they seemed such a bargain!"

"Mellie Peavy," reproached Mrs. Pratt's discordant voice, "by your own words you prove we've been wasting our sympathy!" And her bony features assumed the expression of one who has been cheated, as she glared at the tearful countenance of the offender. "Here we've been trying to arrange for your happiness, and it seems that all the time you've been wasting your pension money on gewgaws. Mellie, how much did you pay for 'em?"

"Just three dollars 'n' sixty cents," confessed Mrs. Peavy in a protracted groan.

"Mercy sakes alive!" cried Mrs. Weeger, throwing up her hands as one who suddenly beholds a serpent. "Then you could have gone on the excursion if you'd wanted to; but instead you've spent your money for finery!"

sixty minutes in endeavoring to wrest victory from defeat.

As she now trailed her skirts through the middle of the rough road, too utterly dispirited to take advantage of the grassy path on either side, her grieving soul was reminded that the time was ripe for an ultimate essay. No longer could she revel in the nerve-tingling fantasy that something might turn up. So with mournful mien she bowed her head and turned her despairing steps towards Aaron Jessup's store. Had not this objective point been occupying her thoughts from early morning she might not have left the circle until the last excursion sandwich, figuratively speaking, was eaten. It happened that the storekeeper had played an important part in her jumbled dreams the night before, in which every one she ever knew sought to prevent her from boarding the picnic train.

Head Selectman Currier had just surrendered to the full enjoyment of a prophecy that he would be reflected to office and was complacently bristling his stubby beard preparatory to proclaiming his willingness to serve, when she entered the store. She ignored the loungers about the rusty stove, and with gaze that only beheld the rough floor, slowly made her way to the counter; halting, she leaned limp and forlorn against the sugar scales.

"Don't nobody move," she begged, in a dull, weary voice and without turning to the stove; "I'm too flustered to set down. Besides, I'm alone in the world and nobody cares whether I stand or not. My errand is soon done." And what was begun as a jeering laugh at fate quickly faded into a moan and her fingers desisted from a futile attempt to unroll her parcel.

as two big tears made little paths down her dusty cheeks. "What I want to know is, why did he say it? How does he know I can't go?"

"If Aaron has wronged ye, he'll make it right," kindly assured Mr. Currier's hired man.

But the storekeeper, now rallying from his stupor, pounded the counter with his fist to hold attention, and loudly exclaimed, "I never said any such a thing, I tell you! I never said a dod-rotted thing about anybody, or any excursion!" Then, in forced calmness and with a coaxing tone, "Now, Mellie, what makes you think I did?"

Mrs. Peavy controlled her trembling lips with difficulty long enough to explain, "I dreamed three different times last night that you was laffing at me and saying I couldn't go on the excursion."

The storekeeper glared helplessly at her for nearly a minute before his astonishment would allow him to expostulate, "Well, I snum! I—I—and d'ye mean you're pulling me over the coals on the strength of a dream?"

"But why should I dream it three times if it wa'n't so?" she wildly demanded.

"Dreams ain't all bosh," observed Mr. Pratt, staccato, as he gazed vacuously at the ceiling.

The storekeeper darted a malignant look at the stove, and, reverting to his accuser, cried, "Why in sin, Mellie, should I care whether you go or not? I tell you, it's all nonsense."

"It's hard to hear you say you don't care," she sobbed, leaning far over the counter. "And it's pesky hard to be talked about when I ain't got any chance of going."

"Mebbe Aaron is kinder'n ye think. Mebbe he's