

The Low-Down, Dirty Blacksmith

BY L. C. NOTRUB, PORTLAND.

THE sparks were flying from the ringing anvil with a spiteful hiss as the steady whack of the heavy hammer resounded through the old blacksmith shop. The sound had continued for an hour with such steady regularity, that the very sound of the hammer seemed to denote a desperate determination, and the regular hiss of the bits of heated steel as they flew from the heavy anvil and lighted up the face of the man at work, only made the already determined look appear the more resolute. As the man turned to the flaming forge and the fire flashed on his sweat-begrimed face, you could see that something out of the ordinary was passing through the mind of James Stofor.

"They shall not keep me away from her simply because I am poor and a widower," repeated Jim, as he wiped the sweat from his brow with a red bandana handkerchief. He was in the habit of repeating the thoughts that passed through his mind to himself.

"No, sir, they shall not."

"What was you a sayin', Jim? I didn't 'zactly understand."

It was his brother, John, who spoke. They worked side by side in the old blacksmith shop, spending all their earnings to keep their father and mother and the large family of smaller children supplied with the necessities of life. Besides, Jim said that the children should have an education, no difference how hard he had to work to supply their needs.

Jim had been married when but a boy to a girl that he had met at a social gathering in the rural districts of Indiana. He had married without stopping to think whether he was in love or not. He was but a boy, far from home, with no one to guide him or offer a word of advice. And when he met this rustic beauty who sympathized with him in his loneliness, the result was a wedding, in a quiet little country church in less than two weeks after their first meeting. It was the same old story of a hasty wedding. There was nothing congenial between them and soon tiring of her and not knowing what to do, he took her to his parents in Illinois. In 10 short months a baby was born, but the mother never lived to look into the bright eyes and fully realize what the cooling and the soft touch of the first-born meant.

After the funeral Jim had gone into the old blacksmith shop with the determination to help his father and mother supply the needs of his child and never so much as think of another woman again, but after seven long years of toil now was deeply in love with the postmaster's daughter, Letta Barnes.

"Oh nothing, I was just thinking," replied Jim, "but, say, John, the old lady Barnes told me last night to never come inside her house again. She said that I was not fit to associate with her daughter, that I was only a blacksmith and that her daughter was a lady."

"Well, I knowed that somethin' was wrong the way you was poundin' that iron."

"John," and whack went the hammer down on a nearby table, "I can't stand this suspense any longer. I am going down to the postoffice and have a talk with Mr. Barnes."

Ten minutes later Jim entered the Postoffice door dressed in a plain, but neat-fitting suit of gray.

"Mr. Barnes, I have come to see if we can reach an understanding about myself and Letta. Your wife ordered me never to set foot in her house again, and you know that I love Letta better than my life, and that I never will give her up. Just think for a moment, and tell me what you would have done when you were young and in love with your wife, had her mother forbidden you going to see her. I know I am a poor man and a widower, but why should that debar me from seeing the one I love?"

"W-e-l-l, as how," here Will Barnes got down from a sugar barrel and took a slow walk across the store-room (for the postoffice was in a little dingy storeroom), then turning and walking back to where Jim stood, "w-e-l-l, as how I know just how to sympathize with ye, but I don't know what I'd do. I have no objection to yer coming to see my daughter, but Mary don't like ye, for some cause. As far as I'm concerned, you kin come ter see Letta whenever ye want to, but you'd better watch out for Mary."

It was a great relief to Jim to know that Will Barnes had no objection to him paying his respects to Letta, yet he was not sure that Letta cared for him, enough to disobey her

mother, and accept his attentions. But just then pretty Letta Barnes came into the store with a bright smile and a "hello" for Jim, and he then and there renewed the determination to never give her up as long as there was any hope.

"Letta, will you allow me to accompany you to church tonight?"

"Why, of course I will, Jim, if it is so I can. Can you spare me from the store tonight, papa?"

"Yes, I guess I can, but you'd better not let Mary know that yer goin' to church with Jim, or you'll not git ter go."

"Oh, I'll tell mamma all about it before I start to church. I'll not be a hypocrite and hide things from her that I have no reason to. I am not ashamed to go to church with Mr. Stofor," and the color came and went in her cheeks, making her all the more lovely. Jim's heart took a great bound, for in those words he read some hope and he knew that the color that came and went in her cheeks could not be feigned.

"I'll be ready to start at 8 o'clock, Jim. Be sure you are here at that time."

"Be sure you are here at that time" kept running through Jim's mind, as he slowly walked homeward. "Of course, I'll be there at that time. No one could keep me away."

When Letta reached home she found her mamma in a great rage. Something had gone wrong, and Mary Barnes blamed everything and everybody about, when she was mad.

"Letta you have been wasting your time talking to Jim Stofor again. Didn't I tell you never to speak to him again? You are a mean, contemptible little hussy. You don't respect your mother at all. I'll tell you right now, if you ever speak to Jim Stofor again you will leave home. Now you can take your choice of staying here with me or taking up with that low-down, dirty blacksmith and never showing your face here again. He just wants you because you have a little money, and when you are married he will make you take care of that little girl of his, who is too low-down for any of my children to associate with. So there," and away she sped into the kitchen with her head held high, not even glancing backward.

Letta stood still, not knowing what to say or think. Her mother's stinging rebuke caused the blood to leave her cheeks, but when she referred to Jim as a "low-down, dirty blacksmith" the color came back and her heart seemed to stand still.

"So I'm a contemptible little hussy. Oh, why did mamma say that? Slowly the tears began to gather in her eyes and lower and lower drooped her head. Suddenly a mighty sob shook her frame and she fled to her room."

Mary Barnes was one of those women who labored under the impression that she was better than ordinary people—that her children were above the common people of the town. It was true that her husband had amassed considerable property, and his bank account was the largest of any person in the village. But when he married Mary Hill, he had nothing; while her early life had been spent in abject poverty, she now had no sympathy for anyone who did not have wealth. She was very quick-tempered—quick to become angry and slow to forgive, often pretending sickness for days after a "spat" with her husband.

It will never be known exactly, what passed through the mind of Letta Barnes, as she wept bitterly over the cruel words her mother had just uttered, but when a half hour later, she came from her room there was a look of determination on her face that showed that a great battle had taken place and that some definite conclusion had been reached.

"Mother, I am going to church with Jim tonight."

The words were spoken slowly, but with an air of determination that caused Mrs. Barnes to wince, when she glanced at the tear-stained face of the slight girl that confronted her.

"Will you disobey your mother and bring disgrace on the whole family by going with that low-bred fellow?"

"I am going to church with him, mamma, and there is no need of any further argument, as I have fully made up my mind to go. If you can give any sensible reason why I should not go, then I will do as you say, but otherwise I shall go." Mary Barnes saw that further words were useless, so she said no more, but 30 minutes later she was in bed, with what she called one of her "spells." This did not prevent Letta from keeping her appointment with Jim Stofor. On the

way to church Letta told Jim what her mother had said.

"This is the first time I ever disobeyed my mother, and oh, Jim, what shall I do?"

"Letta, I love you. Will you be my wife?" But before Letta had time to answer, the cry of "Fire, Fire!" rang out. They turned and lo, it was the Barnes residence on fire.

"Jim for heavens sake hurry and get my mamma out of the house. She is sick in bed. Oh, I know this is brought on me as a punishment for my disobedience."

They hurried to the burning building, but a crowd of men and boys had gathered and were carrying the bed on which Mrs. Barnes was lying, to a place of safety. The flames were spreading to all parts of the building rapidly. Mr. Barnes was comforting his wife the best he could, caring little for the loss, thinking that he had cause to be thankful for the preservation of all his family, when suddenly Mary Barnes rose up and shouted: "Where is my baby boy? Oh God, will no one save my darling boy? He is in the nursery, asleep."

No one stirred for the building was wrapped in flames.

"Will none of you rescue my child? Oh God, this is terrible. Stand aside and I'll rescue him myself, if you are all cowards," but a dozen hands grasped her and held her back as it meant certain death for her to attempt the rescue.

Just then a form was seen to leave the crowd and make for the burning building. A hundred voices shouted, come back—a hundred faces were turned heavenward in silent prayer for the brave man as he disappeared into the burning building. One second passed, two, three, four and still no form appeared. The seconds seemed hours to the anxious mother. "Oh, my God, this is a terrible punishment for my wickedness. Will someone else try to save my boy?"

At last the man appears with something wrapped in bedclothes, but just as he reaches the doorway, a crash, and the heavy floor falls from above and drags the man back into the flames. No, he is not dead. He is seen to rise. Again he reaches the doorway. Ah, thank God. He steps into the open air, but the clothes that cover him are in flames. A blanket is thrown around him, and he carries the bundle to the stricken mother. He unwraps it and discloses her darling boy safe and unhurt.

"Mrs. Barnes is the child alive?" and Jim Stofor sinks to the ground unconscious.

A dozen willing hands carry him to the nearest residence. A doctor is summoned who pronounces the burns serious but not dangerous. Mrs. Barnes arose from her bed clinging to her darling boy.

Will Barnes uncovered his head reverently and turning to crowd of men and boys, said: "Let us thank God for his goodness." But Letta stepped forward and said "Mamma," then stopped while the color came and went in her cheeks.

"What is it my child?"

"May I go and wait on that low-down, dirty blacksmith?"

"Go, my child—" but the answer is unnecessary. There will be a wedding in the little town church next Sunday.

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