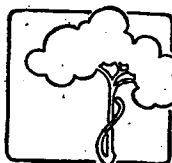




The Promise

BY HARRIET LUMMIS SMITH



WHEN Hiram Tedd, deep in the perusal of the Holy Scriptures, smote his knee and laugned aloud, his mother looked up scandalized from her knitting. But Hiram had his laugh out before he satisfied her curiosity.

"It's that there Jacob," Hiram explained, wiping his eyes. "He was foxy, all right. The old man was smart, but Jacob was smarter. He never let on that he thought he hadn't been treated right, but he got even." He leaned forward to continue the biography of his wily hero, and his zest did not savor of spiritual exaltation.

His mother's rocking-chair creaked rhythmically for a full minute before she offered any comment. "I s'pose you're likening yourself to Jacob," she observed dryly at last, "and the Widow Rice to Laban. But the widow's a good sight sharper than Laban ever was, and you've got considerable to learn before you're another Jacob. As far as the fourteen years of waiting go," added Mrs. Tedd, speaking with more than her usual deliberation, as if to give weight to her words, "I guess that's all right."

Her son's face reddened. "The widow is failing right along," he said resentfully. "She don't get to church now, even on the fine Sundays."

Mrs. Tedd sniffed. "Her Aunt Lucetia on her father's side was bedridden for twenty-seven years. She lived to be eighty-six, and the doctors began to give her up before she was fifty." The knitting needles clicked as with triumph.

Hiram ran his fingers thru his hair. His broad, kindly face, if exhibiting little of the craftiness of a Jacob, was not lacking in honest manhood. "My goodness!" he exclaimed desperately. "Sounds like I was hoping for Mary's mother to die, and the Lord knows I don't wish evil to a living creature. But as long as she says that we can't marry while she lives, it ain't in human nature not to be kind of looking forward." He

sighed, resting his chin on his great hand.

"It's a pity Mary Rice is so under her mother's thumb," Mrs. Tedd exclaimed disparagingly. "If she had the spunk of a field mouse——" She checked herself at her son's gesture. Easy-going and gentle as Hiram was, there were bounds which even his mother could not cross. She had seen him roused once, and the terrible anger of a patient man was something never to be forgotten. At the memory her fingers trembled, and she dropped a stitch.

"It's the good daughters that make the good wives," Hiram declared oracularly. "But even if that warn't so, Mary Rice is the only girl in the world for me." His lips settled into the line which defied pleading and protest, and his mother, her resentment the fiercer, because it could not be spoken, knitted in silence. She was a vigorous woman, happier in making a home for her son that she was likely to be after she had relinquished her authority to another, yet she had a curious impatience to see him "settled," as she phrased it. Her motherly pride was hurt by the realization that the intimates of his boyhood were married, with children growing up about them, while Hiram must wait for death to give him the desire of his heart.

The clock had struck nine, and Hiram had gone upstairs to bed when a knock sounded at the back door. Mrs. Tedd let her knitting fall. "At this time of night!" she exclaimed, and hurried to answer the summons. A small boy stood on the steps, radiating a certain pompous dignity as of one who has been trusted with important tidings. "Is Hiram here?" he asked deliberately.

"Hiram's in bed this twenty minutes, and sound asleep as a dormouse by now. What's wanted?"

"I've got a message for him." The boy's self-respect exacted a pause at this point. Then his anxiety to tell the news

carried all before it. "My mother sent me to tell Hiram that the Widow Rice is dead."

"My land!" exclaimed Mrs. Tedd. She set down the lamp, with a sensation of being altogether to blame, of which her conscience afterward acquitted her. Self-accusingly she recalled her reference to the Aunt Lucretia who had died at eighty-six. "It's an awful thing to be wishing a body's life away," thought Mrs. Tedd, trembling with unaccustomed self-reproach. "And when I was scolding because I thought she was going to live forever, and keep Hiram out of his own, the poor thing was dying." From these unavailing reflections her mind came back to something peculiar in the message. "You said your mother sent you. I suppose Mary asked for Hiram."

"No, she didn't. When she came over for ma, ma says, 'O' course, you want Hiram.' And Mary squeezed her hands together an' she says, 'Oh, he'll know soon enough,' and then she began to cry."

"Your mother was quite right," Mrs. Tedd declared, but she understood Mary's scruples. From her own self-reproach she knew the pangs in the girl's tormented heart. "She feels as if she'd been watching for her mother to die," thought Mrs. Tedd, as she swiftly climbed the stairs to awaken Hiram. "She feels as if she'd done it herself, poor soul, and there never was a more self-sacrificing daughter in this world."

The awakening of Hiram was no easy task. The buxom little woman shook his shoulder, held the light where it would shine upon his face, and shrieked his name in his unheeding ears. Milder methods failing, she brought a dripping sponge from the washstand, and squeezed it resolutely. With a splutter Hiram sat up, the streams of water running down his face. "What's the matter? Is it morning?"

"Of course not. You haven't been asleep a half hour. The Widow Rice is dead."

"Dead!" The color left Hiram's ruddy face. Wide awake now, he stared at his mother without reply. Then a shiver shook his big body. "I feel as if I'd done it myself," he said brokenly.

"That's the way I feel," Mrs. Tedd acknowledged. "And you may be sure Mary does. Don't expect she'll act glad to see you. It's no more than natural that she should shrink away, as if you two had plotted to take her mother's life."

It was well for Hiram's peace of mind that his mother had given him the key for interpreting his sweetheart's mood, since otherwise Mary's attitude would have perplexed him sorely. She shrank from his embrace. Her eyes refused to meet his. She avoided being left alone with him for a moment. But after seven years of waiting, the most ardent lover can muster patience for a few days longer.

"You'd better give her a week after the funeral," Mrs. Tedd suggested, and Hiram did so. Then one night he drove over to her cottage with an exultant heart. The melody of an old love song rang in his ears. The waiting time was over, the mating time near. At last he had the right to claim what belonged to him.

Mary Rice greeted him with downcast eyes, and the color did not rise to her white cheeks. The hand she gave him lay cold and apathetic in his. When he would have kissed her she drew back. But even this shrinking could not change the quiet exaltation of his mood, for the waiting time was over.

"Mary," he said, without delay or preface, "for seven years I've loved you. When will you marry me?"

For the first time since her mother's death she looked full at him, and her eyes were like those of some hunted creature of the woods. "Hiram," she gasped, "I don't know how to tell you."

"Tell me what? When you'll marry me? Why, I'll save you that trouble, if you like." Hiram's laugh died in his throat. There was tragedy in the air. "If you're blaming yourself, Mary," he began.

She made a gesture of denial. "I know what you mean. It isn't that." She was nerving herself to go on. "I'm not free even now," she whispered at last. "Before mother died she made me promise something."

Her lover's eyes were on her face, and she writhed under their fixt gaze. "Don't

hate me," she implored. "She was dying and I couldn't help saying whatever she asked." She rocked back and forth as if in bodily pain, while Hiram waited, every muscle in his body tense.

"What was it?" he demanded at last. "Your promise, what was it?"

"She made me promise that I wouldn't marry while Uncle Jimmy needed me."

"Uncle Jimmy!" Hiram's cry of amazement brought the little old man briskly from the next room. "Did you call me, Hi?"

Hiram had found his tongue. "Why, this is nonsense. Uncle Jimmy will live with us. I took it for granted he'd come. You'd like it, wouldn't you, Uncle Jimmy?"

"Of course, I'm going to live with you and Hiram when you're married. What ails you, Mary?" exclaimed Uncle Jimmy, staring with amazement at his niece.

In the explanations and expostulations that followed, only one thing was made clear. The promise to her mother was paramount with Mary Rice. Whether the dying woman had acted with deliberate malice, as Hiram bitterly believed, or whether she had really been apprehensive as to her brother's welfare, in the household of Hiram Tedd, she had bound her daughter by pledges which could not be evaded. "She warn't so darned particular about my comfort while she was alive," snorted Uncle Jimmy, the tears of anger on his cheeks.

Hiram's patience gave way at last, and the storm of his anger broke. "Damn your promise," he screamed. "No woman would keep such a promise if it stood between her and a man she loved. It's all a trick," he raged, the veins of his forehead swelling in his frenzy, "You've played with me for seven years, and when you found you were caught, and there was no way out of marrying me, you made up this lie to throw dust in my eyes." He towered over her, his great hands working convulsively, as if the temptation to do her bodily harm was almost irresistible.

The girl lay back in her chair as if she had not life to shrink from a blow. "You're mistaken, Hiram," she said with gentle listlessness. "I'd rather be your wife than a queen, but I guess it's never to be. There's plenty of girls you could

marry without waiting, and I'll pray with my last breath for your happiness." A tear ran from her half-closed eyes, and suddenly she found herself crushed to Hiram's heart, while he sobbed over her. "If we've got to wait, we'll wait," said the man. "But you're the only girl for me."

Uncle Jimmy was a pathetic figure as he followed Hiram to the door. "I'm so darned healthy, Hi," he cried apologetically. "and I'm not so old either, only sixty-one. But then," he added hopefully, "you can never tell. A touch of pneumonia, and that would be the last of me. And I was always careless about changing my wet shoes."

The naïve unselfishness of the little man went to Hiram's heart. "I don't know as you'll believe it," he exclaimed, wringing the other's hand, "but I hope you'll live to be a hundred."

If Mrs. Tedd's anger over the unexpected delay to her plans was less impressive than Hiram's, she did not surrender as readily as he had done. She went over to see Mary next day, resolved, as she told her son, to laugh her out of that piece of foolishness. When her efforts proved futile, she sent the minister to assure Mary that the breaking of such a promise was more commendable than keeping it. The minister readily undertook the commission. "It's an outrage for her to think herself held by such a pledge," he exclaimed. "It's no more binding than if it had been extorted under torture." But priestly absolutism could not free Mary Rice. "She made me put my hand on the Bible," gasped the girl. Then, as if the words had called up the night when her new bondage began, her face turned ashen, and she sank back half fainting in her chair. The minister went away perplexed.

It was to Uncle Jimmy that Mrs. Tedd's thoughts turned at last. But her plan now required diplomacy and caution. She began by asking Hiram if he meant to take Mary to the county fair the following week.

"I don't know. I hadn't thought of it," Hiram said, listlessly. He was a changed man since his disappointment. Setting himself to wait with grim resolution, he seemed to have grown years older in as many weeks. It was as if the

buoyancy and hopefulness of youth had been replaced by the weary patience of age.

"I'd go if I were you. I think Mary needs a change. She's looking very peaked," said Mrs. Tedd, stirring her coffee. "Her Aunt Betsy died of galloping consumption, you know."

The startled look on Hiram's face told her that the shot had taken effect. The next step was to buttonhole Uncle Jimmy at church and whisper in his ear, "Hiram and Mary are going to the fair, Wednesday. I want to see you about something particular. Don't speak about it to a soul, but come over as soon as they're gone."

Uncle Jimmy followed her instructions with an exactness which proved him fit to be a conspirator. Not long after Hiram's departure he made his appearance, a dejected figure. He sighed heavily when Mrs. Tedd inquired after his health.

"I'm well as ever, Sophy," he replied, in the melancholy tones of one who recounts a grievance. "I did catch a little cold at church two weeks ago, but I got over it in no time." He sighed again and took his seat in the least comfortable chair in the room, as if determined to lose no opportunity to crucify the flesh.

Mrs. Tedd sat down opposite him. "Jimmy Westhill," she exclaimed, "we've got to do something to help those children."

"I'm doing all I can, Sophy." Uncle Jimmy's voice broke in the earnestness of his protest. "I don't eat hardly nothing, tho Mary's cooking is so good that it's terrible tempting. And I lay awake nights a good deal thinking. Mary watches me so that I don't have much chance of getting into drafts, but I'm doing every living thing I know."

"Jimmy Westhill," Mrs. Tedd cried. "To my way of thinking that sort of suicide is as bad as any."

Uncle Jimmy looked at her in consternation. "But, Sophy, you said yourself—"

"What you want to do," said Mrs. Tedd briskly, "ain't to kill yourself, but to get married."

The little old bachelor jumped at the

word. "Married!" he repeated and blushed ingenuously. "Land, Sophy! There's not anybody that would have me."

Mrs. Tedd made a sound of impatience in her throat. "Jimmy, it's all put on when a man makes such a speech. There never was a man who was such a poor specimen that he couldn't find a woman to have him." Then as Uncle Jimmy sat silent, apparently overwhelmed by this view of the case, she bestirred herself to help him out. "There's Almira Mears. She's got quite a good bit of property."

Uncle Jimmy cleared his throat. "Sophy, Almira is a mighty nice woman. I ain't saying a thing against her. But I've always been kind of particular about a woman's looks. I can remember you, Sophy," continued Uncle Jimmy reminiscently, "when your cheeks were the color of Baldwin apples, and your eyes were as black as a piece of coal." He glanced at her obliquely. "And you're as good looking as ever to my way of thinking. But it don't seem as if I could bring myself to sitting across the table from Almira three times a day."

Mrs. Tedd, while sniffing at the compliment, was not oblivious to Uncle Jimmy's closing appeal. "How'd Sarah Stockbridge do? She's good looking enough, I'm sure."

Uncle Jimmy sighed. "I always think of handsome is that handsome does when I look at Sarah. I'm a man of peace, Sophy, but Sarah's been in hot water all her life. She'd drag me into quarrels with my neighbors, and rile me till I wouldn't know myself."

Mrs. Tedd appeared nettled. "I declare, Jimmy Westhill," she exclaimed, "for a man who thought nobody would have him, you're mighty particular. Well, pick out somebody you want and ask her."

There was a pause. "Will you?" said Uncle Jimmy with sudden explosiveness.

"Will I what?" After vainly waiting for an answer, Mrs. Tedd looked hard at her visitor. He was smiling sheepishly and his withered cheeks were faintly flushed. Mrs. Tedd's amazement finally crystallized into comprehension.

"Jimmy Westhill, you don't really mean——"

"Yes, I do," exclaimed Uncle Jimmy. "Nobody else."

"The very idea! It's years since I've had the least notion of marrying!" cried Mrs. Tedd.

"Same with me till you put it into my head," acknowledged Uncle Jimmy. "But, Sophy, when I was a boy of fifteen, and thought about the wife I'd have some day, I always told myself that she'd got to be like you. And I guess the reason I never married was because I never found the woman who could hold a candle to you." A tremor of sincerity had crept into his voice. In his wiry old figure there was something suggestive of the ardor of youth.

"The very idea," said Mrs. Tedd, but it was plain that she was weakening. Her eyes sought the floor. Uncle Jimmy rose from his chair and approached her; his hand touched her arm, stole around her shoulder.

"Of all things," ejaculated Mrs. Tedd in a tone that acknowledged surrender. The comely color came in her cheeks as

Uncle Jimmy stooped for his kiss. "Well, anyway, it's for the children's sake."

The two sat on the porch, watching the sunset colors in the sky when Hiram's runabout came in sight. He drove into the yard and helped Mary to alight. The girl's eyes were downcast. She came forward hesitatingly, and was close to her uncle before she discovered his presence. Then she recoiled with a little cry, "Uncle Jimmy!"

Another voice spoke from the rocking chair placed suspiciously near the first. "You don't need to look so scared, Mary," said Hiram's mother with a hint of asperity in her tone. "And there's nothing to keep you and Hiram from making a match as soon as you like, for your Uncle Jimmy and I were married this afternoon."

With a cry the girl threw her arms around the neck of the older woman. Her burning cheek was prest close to that whose roses Uncle Jimmy so vividly remembered. Happy sobs delayed for a moment the whispered confession:

"So were we."

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