

The Storyteller

THE MAN WHO SAVED BROWN

Daniel Holman was planting peas in his garden. A fine large village garden it was; its soil a dark sandy loam that gave promise of fruitfulness. Orchard trees blossomed around him; birds flitted through the air with wisps of straw in their beaks, intent upon home-building. The very atmosphere had the invigorating breath of Spring. The old man dropped the seeds with a liberal hand in the furrow he had opened; then walked backward, treading it down as he drew the moist earth over it with his hoe. There was a subdued joy in his kind old face, a zest in every movement: the joy of a willing labor performed in a glad faith of the harvest.

A voice called sharply from the house:

'Daniel! Daniel Holman! Come right here!'

'Yes, mother.'

He gathered up his tools and the tin bucket that held his seeds and plodded toward the house, gazing wistfully back in the direction of the vegetable patch. In the doorway his wife awaited him, the frown that had graven deep lines on her forehead drawing her face into unlovely lines. She had on her best black cashmere dress and her bonnet and was drawing on a pair of long-wristed black taffeta gloves.

'Daniel Holman, what you been a-doing now? Ain't you a pretty sight to go and see a dying man?'

He looked guiltily down upon his muddied shoes and the earth stains on his garments.

'Why, you see, mother,' he said meekly, 'you wasn't quite ready; and I've been so late getting in those peas and the shower last night made the ground just nice and moist. I guess a little brushing'll make me pass muster.'

He wiped his feet on a grassplot back of the house, then came up the steps. From a shelf on the back porch he took down a blacking-brush and did his best to restore the polish to his muddied boots, following the process with a violent brushing of his shabby best clothes. Hurriedly scrubbing his face and hands at the kitchen sink, he went in to eclipse himself in the big roller towel that hung beside it, emerging rosy of countenance and serene of mind.

'Here I am, spick and span and handsome as the day you married me, mother!'

Upon the woman's face there was no answering smile.

'You've never made anything of yourself, and you never will, Daniel Holman. The idea of your joking and planting garden seeds when your old friend and comrade, Eben Miller, lies dying! A hero like him, too!'

Had she been looking at him, Mrs. Holman might have seen a quiver of pain that shot for an instant over his placid face, but she straightened her bonnet before the little glass on the kitchen wall, then passed out into the sunshine, herself waiting to lock the door and hide the key under the doormat outside.

As they passed along the village street, lined with tall trees just coming into leaf, the sunshine, filtering through the half-clad branches, made a dancing fretwork on road and sidewalk. Early as it was in the forenoon, other friends and neighbors were out, clad in their best Sunday clothes, silent and decorous and grave of face, all going in one direction—toward Eben Miller's house; for word had been sent around the night before that the old soldier, measuring the little space of life still left him, as a brave man may, had expressed the wish that all who had loved and honored him during his lifetime should gather at his home for a last farewell.

Ever since the day when young Eben Miller had come staggering into camp at Fort Donelson bearing in his arms the insensible form of his Colonel, shot through the thigh, he had been the hero of his native Northern town. The Colonel had been retired because of permanent disability; but Eben, serving until the war was over, had on his return been met at the train by a band of music and flying colors, to take his lifelong place among the most distinguished men of the community. Col. Brown had succeeded to the estates and interests of his father, the old Judge, one of the richest and most influential men in the county; and Eben, who before the war had been accounted a young fellow of less than average promise, helped along by the Colonel's backing, and borne aloft on the flood of popular favor, had built up a prosperous mercantile business and become known as one of the 'solid' men of the place, serving a couple of terms as president of the town council. Living as he had in a cloud of glory, it

had been reckoned as not least among his virtues that he had always borne his honors modestly, deprecating all references to his gallant deed, and been faithful to his old friends and obscure comrades, chief among these Daniel Holman.

'Strange how luck favors one and slights another,' said Mrs. Holman, as she saw the straggling villagers focusing into a veritable procession near the Miller house. 'Take you and Eben Miller. You started out in life together in this very town and enlisted in the same company!'

'Yes, we fought side by side,' assented Holman. His thoughts were far away on a Southern battlefield.

'I remember the day you marched away,' continued the wife, softening at the memory. 'Daniel, I never told you before, but I was so proud of you! You were the handsomest man in all the company—handsomer than the Colonel. You know,' she added shyly, 'I could have had Brown.'

'I know,' he said, and for a moment age and the years, with all their disappointments, fell away as they looked into each other's eyes.

'I was prouder of you than he ever was of his commission,' said Holman.

'I thought you'd come back with a general's stars,' added the grey-haired woman, and her voice took on a bitter tone, with reminiscence. 'But see how it all turned out. Of course the Colonel had his start made for him; but the fact that he served three months in the War of the Rebellion has done a lot for him. It sent him to Congress and it's made him one of the first men of the State. And Eben Miller's been a big man all his life, and they say his name's got into history. While you! All you got out of that very battle was a flesh wound in your arm that's made it a little stiff and given rheumatism a chance at it; and you re-enlisted and fought the whole four years and came out the same high private you went in and nobody's cared. You wouldn't so much as ask a pension; and here you've grubbed and toiled all your life, and I've slaved and slaved, and our children—'

'Don't, Maria!' protested Daniel.

'I'll say my say,' insisted the woman. 'Tisn't often I speak. Our children have never had a rightful chance. They're orphans,' she went on drearily, 'with just the same miserable outlook. And you know as well as I, Daniel, we'll never be able to meet the next interest on the mortgage, and our home—'

There was no need to speak further. The threatened loss of their comfortable little home, where they had dwelt during all the years of their union and where their children had been born and reared, was the heaviest shadow that overhung their lives.

They had come up with some of their neighbors and were included in the slow procession. A carriage dashed up the street and a portly gentleman threw the lines to the man in livery beside him and descended to the pavement, walking with a slight limp. Meanwhile glances were exchanged. It was fitting that the village magnate should honor with his presence the deathbed of the man who had saved his life.

At the gate Daniel Holman, who had been singularly reluctant to join his wife in the proposed visit, held back.

'I think I won't go in, Maria. You tell Eben I'll come in after a while, when the people are gone. You know it ain't as if I hadn't been going to see him pretty much every day since he was taken sick.'

'Daniel Holman, you come right along with me!'

said his better half in a fierce whisper. The room in which Eben Miller lay was a large apartment on the first floor. Even with the curtains drawn, the light filtered in so that the face of the veteran, with its lines of pain and age, was plainly visible to the friends who stood about the bed or gathered about the open doors leading into adjoining rooms. As they drew near they heard his voice, in the piping tones of extreme weakness, ask:

'Where's Daniel Holman? Hasn't Dan Holman come yet?'

'Here's Mr. Holman, father,' said his eldest daughter, a matronly woman of middle age.

Colonel Brown, sitting at the head of the bed, moved aside to let Holman approach. His recognition of the newcomer was not a cordial one. Like the rest of his fellow-townsmen, he held Daniel Holman in light esteem, regarding him as a man of little force of character, harmless and well-meaning but somewhat of a failure in life. Few men are kindly to failures among their kind.

But Eben Miller caught at Holman's hand with the first sign of animation he had shown that day and conversed with him in whispers. Those who looked on were surprised to see the eagerness in the sick man's face, and more surprised still to see Daniel Holman shake his head and frown, in sullen denial or refusal of his request.