

The Storyteller

PETHUEL PENNY'S SON.

On a bright midsummer day the few people passing along a country road in Northern Maine turned their heads toward a certain house with that expression of respectful awe which is man's tribute to the presence of death. The thin line of crape fluttering from the knob was unusual at Twelve Corners, where a house of mourning was wont to be undistinguished except by the drawn curtains of every room. Indeed, it was only after long consideration that Mrs Penny had yielded to a desire for doing things 'Massachusetts way,' and then she had arranged the crape with a little misgiving, lest she be subjected to neighborly criticism.

And Mrs Penny was not accustomed to base her acts on the opinions of other people. Pethuel Penny's married life had been lived according to her rule and method, his long illness conducted on the principles which she laid down and his demise had taken place at the time she arranged for Pethuel Penny, having once carried his way and settled in the up-river country of Maine against his wife's wishes, had been content with this victory or had learned so much wisdom by the experience that he had never again opposed her will.

'There isn't much to do,' she was now saying to the friendly neighbors who had come in with offers of assistance. 'I've been getting things ready, for I figured he wouldn't last longer than July. I don't know whether his sisters will come from down-river or not. They're the kind that, let 'em have ever so much warning, will never be ready. I wouldn't be surprised if they both had to get black dresses made after they got the word, although I've cautioned 'em all the spring it wouldn't be later than the middle of July. No, I ain't havin' anything new myself, for I thought I'd wait till fall and see what's being worn. Poor Pethuel!' Mrs Penny put her handkerchief to her eyes, but removed it presently to look after her baking.

'Some way sponge-cake seems sort of appropriate at a funeral,' she said, as she drew forth the golden loaves. 'Simple and plain-like yet respectful. I know Pethuel wouldn't want anything done for show, like frosting.' Having disposed of her baking Mrs Penny returned to her grief. 'It's hard to be left a widow with the care and responsibility of a place like this,' she mourned. 'Yes, Reuben's a good boy, but he's young yet.'

Two days later, in such mourning apparel as her wardrobe afforded, Mrs Penny was moving busily about the kitchen, looking after the final arrangements of the evening meal.

'Be sure and have the table set when we get back,' she instructed the friends who had kindly volunteered to 'stay at the house. It's a long ride and they'll all be hungry. I wouldn't have anything go wrong about the supper for the world. Sonny, run and get mother's best table-cloth from the table bureau. I'd go myself, but I don't want to get my feelings all worked up before the times comes.'

'Sonny,' a tall, loose-jointed lad of 16, with limp light hair and a pale complexion that turned to crimson whenever he was addressed, obeyed, pausing a moment in the darkened room for a fond look at his father's quiet face.

It was a large gathering, for Pethuel Penny's upright life and kindly nature had won the respect and affection of the neighborhood. Many a kindly word of regret was dropped in the ledgy doorway, where

the men stood uneasily awaiting the arrival of the minister from 40 miles below. They waited in vain.

Mrs Penny's dignified composure began to give way to anxiety lest her careful arrangements should come to grief.

'It wouldn't seem anything but appropriate to begin a little late,' she declared, stretched on tip-toe in the front doorway and peering down the road. 'But Pethuel was never so late as this. I wrote Elder Goodrich myself, and wrote it strong.'

Reuben just behind her, with face that rivaled the bouquet of peonies on the unused parlor stove, was fumbling desperately in his pockets, and remorsefully drew forth a letter, stamped and sealed.

'I forgot to mail it,' he said, feebly.

Mrs. Penny transfixed him with a look. 'That shows how much interest you take in your father's funeral!' she said, severely. But she was fully equal to the occasion, and continued, 'Well, since the singers are here to help out, maybe Deacon Colby'll oblige us by leading the services.'

Deacon Colby, who, for want of a church in the community, was deacon of the little brown schoolhouse at Twelve Corners, was quite willing to oblige, and the neighbors, and even Mrs Penny herself, agreed that he did his duty by Pethuel, and did it well. Yet it was a trying experience for Mrs Penny, and it was not perhaps surprising that anxiety for the service still absorbed her mind to the exclusion of grief. And it was for Reuben and his future that Mrs Penny thought during the long drive out to Twelve Corners and on down the river to the West Ridge burying ground. It was beginning to dawn upon her that he was fast approaching manhood's estate and that she had thus far been negligent in failing to map out the course of his future life. The result was that on the homeward drive she announced, 'I shall hire Freeman Briggs to look after the farm this winter. I mean for you to go to school.'

Reuben offered no protest, although he hated school, and in his heart preferred work in a lumbering camp to any of the learned professions. He regarded it as a hopeful circumstance that his mother added thoughtfully, 'I haven't made up my mind what you're going to be yet, but you might as well be going to school while I think it over.'

To determine was with Mrs Penny to act. The long procession waited behind her while she stopped at the low farmhouse by the river and made a close bargain with Freeman Briggs for the coming winter. Freeman was a strong young man several years older than Reuben and the Briggs family were noted as excellent workers for others, although unable to get ahead for themselves.

Arrived at home, Reuben escaped in the confusion from the suffocating attentions of aunts, cousins, and neighbors, and concealing some bread and butter under his Sunday coat sought the little stream which cut across the Penny farm. Throwing himself down on the grassy bank and gazing into the wide arch of cloud-flecked blue above he found consolation. The stream had been a favorite resort of Pethuel Penny, and Reuben recalled long Sunday afternoons when his father had lounged on the bank with book or paper, while he a barefooted little fellow, played 'river-driver' in the shallow water above the fishing pool.

It seems lonesome,' he said to himself, brushing his gray coat-sleeve across his eyes to dispel a sudden blin. 'But I ain't half so

lonesome here as it would be up there with all those women.'

Mrs. Penny's plans for her son matured slowly. For the year after the funeral Reuben remained at school and Freeman Briggs had charge of the farm work under Mrs. Penny's supervision. Then Mrs Penny developed a belief that the medical profession offered opportunities for her son, and sent him for a year to a high school down the river, giving him instructions to pay special attention to chemistry and physiology.

A year later she recalled him, having secured a position for him as teacher of the district school. His strong muscles and breadth of shoulder went far to qualify him for the place. Yet here for the first time Reuben rebelled. 'He wasn't cut out for a school teacher!' he declared. 'Perhaps I do know enough. And, of course, I can handle the boys all right. But what'll I do when the big girls laugh at me?'

Mrs Penny would not admit the possibility. 'If you had a little respect for yourself,' she said impatiently, 'your scholars would maybe copy it.' And Reuben bent as usual to his mother's will, and found, though hardly to his relief, that the girl pupils were inclined to look up to a young man of his advantages, and treated him with a coquettish deference. In spite of his distaste for the work Reuben was a successful teacher, and parents and committee were loud in his praise. Mrs. Penny was gratified.

'I guess you'd better settle down to home for a spell,' she said. 'You can teach winters, and help about the haying summers.'

Reuben hesitated. He was standing by the window looking out upon an early fall of snow. As he watched a loaded team went past on its way to lumber camps far above. Two or three young men whom he knew swung their hats gaily in farewell. His heart rebelled against another winter in the school-room. The free air of the woods seemed calling him, and his blood tingled, urging him to be out among men engaged in some enterprise of his own.

'I told Deacon Colby yesterday that you'd take the school,' went on Mrs Penny, and Reuben, who had been taught to obey when he was spoken to, hesitated but a moment and answered, 'Well.'

It was some time before Reuben's twenty-first birthday that a new responsibility for his welfare engaged Mrs Penny's attention, and she began at once to lay her plans. His father had married at twenty a wife who had been the making of him. Yet, strange to say, with the shining example of Reuben's parents before her eyes, Mrs Penny proceeded to select for her son's wife the exact opposite of his father's choice. 'Reuben don't need a manager as long as his mother lives,' she argued truthfully. 'And it's to be hoped by the time I'm laid aside he'll be old enough to plan for himself.'

It was Deacon Colby's daughter who held preference over all other young women in Mrs Penny's favor. For Dorcas had been well brought up and was quite free from the independence of thought and action which most girls of her age affected. Mrs Penny had a long talk with Deacon Colby one morning, and the deacon confessed that he thought Reuben a worthy young man whom he would be glad to welcome into his family.

For the first time in her dealing with her son Mrs Penny decided that diplomacy was necessary. It was long before Reuben suspected the motive of the three-mile drive which he and his mother took so frequently to the Colby farm. There Reuben and the deacon would talk politics on one side of the kitchen fire and thin, faded Mrs. Colby would entertain Mrs Penny on the other while Dorcas, sitting in a corner, worked industriously in crewel stitch on a green felt lambrequin and said little, as became a