

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

THE missionary was young and she was from the North. Her brows were straight, her nose was rather high, and her eyes were clear and gray. The upper lip of her little mouth was so short that the teeth just under it were never quite concealed. It was the mouth of a child and it gave the face, with all its strength and high purpose, a peculiar pathos that no soul in that little mountain town had the power to see or feel. A yellow mule was hitched to the rickety fence in front of her and she stood on the stoop of a little white frame-house with an elm switch between her teeth and gloves on her hands,

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

which were white and looked strong. The mule wore a man's saddle, but no matter—the streets were full of yellow pools, the mud was ankle-deep, and she was on her way to the sick-bed of Becky Day.

There was a flood that morning. All the preceding day the rains had drenched the high slopes unceasingly. That night, the rain-clear forks of the Kentucky got yellow and rose high, and now they crashed together around the town and, after a heaving conflict, started the river on one quivering, majestic sweep to the sea.

Nobody gave heed that the girl rode a mule or that the saddle was not her own, and both facts she herself quickly forgot. This half log, half frame house on a corner had stood a siege once. She could yet see bullet holes about the door. Through

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

this window, a revenue officer from the Blue Grass had got a bullet in the shoulder from a garden in the rear. Standing in the post-office door only just one month before, she herself had seen children scurrying like rabbits through the back-yard fences, men running silently here and there, men dodging into doorways, fire flashing in the street and from every house—and not a sound but the crack of pistol and Winchester; for the mountain men deal death in all the terrible silence of death. And now a preacher with a long scar across his forehead had come to the one little church in the place and the fervor of religion was struggling with feudal hate for possession of the town. To the girl, who saw a symbol in every mood of the earth, the passions of these primitive people were like the treacherous streams of the

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

uplands—now quiet as sunny skies and now clashing together with but little less fury and with much more noise. And the roar of the flood above the wind that late afternoon was the wrath of the Father, that with the peace of the Son so long on earth, such things still could be. Once more trouble was threatening and that day even she knew that trouble might come, but she rode without fear, for she went when and where she pleased as any woman can, throughout the Cumberland, without insult or harm.

At the end of the street were two houses that seemed to front each other with unmistakable enmity. In them were two men who had wounded each other only the day before, and who that day would lead the factions, if the old feud broke loose again. One house was close to the frothing hem

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

of the flood—a log-hut with a shed of rough boards for a kitchen—the home of Becky Day.

The other was across the way and was framed and smartly painted. On the steps sat a woman with her head bare and her hands under her apron—widow of the Marcum whose death from a bullet one month before had broken the long truce of the feud. A groaning curse was growled from the window as the girl drew near, and she knew it came from a wounded Marcum who had lately come back from the West to avenge his brother's death.

"Why don't you go over to see your neighbor?" The girl's clear eyes gave no hint that she knew—as she well did—the trouble between the houses, and the widow stared in sheer amazement, for mountain-

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

eers do not talk with strangers of the quarrels between them.

"I have nothin' to do with such as her," she said, sullenly; "she ain't the kind——"

"Don't!" said the girl, with a flush, "she's dying."

"*Dyin'?*"

"Yes." With the word the girl sprang from the mule and threw the reins over the pale of the fence in front of the log-hut across the way. In the doorway she turned as though she would speak to the woman on the steps again, but a tall man with a black beard appeared in the low door of the kitchen-shed.

"How is your—how is Mrs. Day?"

"Mighty puny this mornin'—Becky is."

The girl slipped into the dark room. On a disordered, pillowless bed lay a white face with eyes closed and mouth slightly

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

open. Near the bed was a low wood fire. On the hearth were several thick cups filled with herbs and heavy fluids and covered with tarpaulin, for Becky's "man" was a teamster. With a few touches of the girl's quick hands, the covers of the bed were smooth, and the woman's eyes rested on the girl's own cloak. With her own handkerchief she brushed the death-damp from the forehead that already seemed growing cold. At her first touch, the woman's eyelids opened and dropped together again. Her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

In a moment the ashes disappeared, the hearth was clean and the fire was blazing. Every time the girl passed the window she saw the widow across the way staring hard at the hut. When she took the ashes into the street, the woman spoke to her.

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

"I can't go to see Becky—she hates me."

"With good reason."

The answer came with a clear sharpness that made the widow start and redden angrily; but the girl walked straight to the gate, her eyes ablaze with all the courage that the mountain woman knew and yet with another courage to which the primitive creature was a stranger—a courage that made the widow lower her own eyes and twist her hands under her apron.

"I want you to come and ask Becky to forgive you."

The woman stared and laughed.

"Forgive me? Becky forgive me? She wouldn't—an' I don't want her—" She could not look up into the girl's eyes; but she pulled a pipe from under the apron,

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

laid it down with a trembling hand and began to rock slightly.

The girl leaned across the gate.

"Look at me!" she said, sharply. The woman raised her eyes, swerved them once, and then in spite of herself, held them steady.

"Listen! Do you want a dying woman's curse?"

It was a straight thrust to the core of a superstitious heart and a spasm of terror crossed the woman's face. She began to wring her hands.

"Come on!" said the girl, sternly, and turned, without looking back, until she reached the door of the hut, where she beckoned and stood waiting, while the woman started slowly and helplessly from the steps, still wringing her hands. Inside, behind her, the wounded Marcum, who

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

had been listening, raised himself on one elbow and looked after her through the window.

"She can't come in—not while I'm in here."

The girl turned quickly. It was Dave Day, the teamster, in the kitchen door, and his face looked blacker than his beard.

"Oh!" she said, simply, as though hurt, and then with a dignity that surprised her, the teamster turned and strode towards the back door.

"But I can git out, I reckon," he said, and he never looked at the widow who had stopped, frightened, at the gate.

"Oh, I can't—I *can't!*" she said, and her voice broke; but the girl gently pushed her to the door, where she stopped again, leaning against the lintel. Across the way, the wounded Marcum, with a scowl of

[160]



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THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

wonder, crawled out of his bed and started painfully to the door. The girl saw him and her heart beat fast.

Inside, Becky lay with closed eyes. She stirred uneasily, as though she felt some hated presence, but her eyes stayed fast, for the presence of Death in the room was stronger still.

"Becky!" At the broken cry, Becky's eyes flashed wide and fire broke through the haze that had gathered in them.

"I want ye ter fergive me, Becky."

The eyes burned steadily for a long time. For two days she had not spoken, but her voice came now, as though from the grave.

"You!" she said, and, again, with torturing scorn, "You!" And then she smiled, for she knew why her enemy was there, and her hour of triumph was come.

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

The girl moved swiftly to the window—she could see the wounded Marcum slowly crossing the street, pistol in hand.

"What'd I ever do to you?"

"Nothin', Becky, nothin'."

Becky laughed harshly. "You can tell the truth—can't ye—to a dyin' woman?"

"Fergive me, Becky!"

A scowling face, tortured with pain, was thrust into the window.

"Sh-h!" whispered the girl, imperiously, and the man lifted his heavy eyes, dropped one elbow on the window-sill and waited.

"You tuk Jim from me!"

The widow covered her face with her hands, and the Marcum at the window—brother to Jim, who was dead—lowered at her, listening keenly.

"An' you got him by lyin' 'bout me. You tuk him by lyin' 'bout me—didn't

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

ye? Didn't ye?" she repeated, fiercely, and her voice would have wrung the truth from a stone.

"Yes—Becky—yes!"

"You hear?" cried Becky, turning her eyes to the girl.

"You made him believe an' made ever'body, you could, believe that I was—was *bad*." Her breath got short but the terrible arraignment went on.

"You started this war. My brother wouldn't 'a' shot Jim Marcum if it hadn't been fer you. You killed Jim—your own husband—an' you killed *me*. An' now you want me to fergive you—you!" She raised her right hand as though with it she would hurl the curse behind her lips, and the widow, with a cry, sprang for the bony fingers, catching them in her own hand and falling over on her knees at the bedside.

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

"Don't, Becky, don't—don't—*don't!*"

There was a slight rustle at the back window. At the other, a pistol flashed into sight and dropped again below the sill. Turning, the girl saw Dave's bushy black head—he, too, with one elbow on the sill and the other hand out of sight.

"Shame!" she said, looking from one to the other of the two men, who had learned, at last, the bottom truth of the feud; and then she caught the sick woman's other hand and spoke quickly:

"Hush, Becky," she said; and at the touch of her hand and the sound of her voice, Becky looked confusedly at her and let her upraised hand sink back to the bed. The widow stared swiftly from Jim's brother, at one window, to Dave Day at the other, and hid her face on her arms.

"Remember, Becky—how can you ex-

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

pect forgiveness in another world, unless you forgive in this?"

The woman's brow knitted and she lay quiet. Like the widow who held her hand, the dying woman believed, with never the shadow of a doubt, that somewhere above the stars, a living God reigned in a heaven of never-ending happiness; that somewhere beneath the earth a personal devil gloated over souls in eternal torture; that whether she went above, or below, hung solely on her last hour of contrition; and that in heaven or hell she would know those whom she might meet as surely as she had known them on earth. By and by her face softened and she drew a long breath.

"Jim was a good man," she said. And then after a moment:

"An' I was a good woman"—she turned her eyes towards the girl—"until Jim

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

married *her*. I didn't keer after that." Then she got calm, and while she spoke to the widow, she looked at the girl.

"Will you git up in church an' say before ever'body that you knew I was *good* when you said I was bad—that you lied about me?"

"Yes—yes." Still Becky looked at the girl, who stooped again.

"She will, Becky, I know she will. Won't you forgive her and leave peace behind you? Dave and Jim's brother are here—make them shake hands. Won't you—won't you?" she asked, turning from one to the other.

Both men were silent.

"Won't you?" she repeated, looking at Jim's brother.

"I've got nothin' agin Dave. I always thought that she"—he did not call his

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

brother's wife by name—"caused all this trouble. I've nothin' agin Dave."

The girl turned. "Won't you, Dave?"

"I'm waitin' to hear whut Becky says."

Becky was listening, though her eyes were closed. Her brows knitted painfully. It was a hard compromise that she was asked to make between mortal hate and a love that was more than mortal, but the Plea that has stood between them for nearly twenty centuries prevailed, and the girl knew that the end of the feud was nigh.

Becky nodded.

"Yes, I fergive her, an' I want 'em to shake hands."

But not once did she turn her eyes to the woman whom she forgave, and the hand that the widow held gave back no answering pressure. The faces at the win-

THE PARDON OF BECKY DAY

dows disappeared, and she motioned for the girl to take her weeping enemy away.

She did not open her eyes when the girl came back, but her lips moved and the girl bent above her.

"I know whar Jim is."

From somewhere outside came Dave's cough, and the dying woman turned her head as though she were reminded of something she had quite forgotten. Then, straightway, she forgot again.

The voice of the flood had deepened. A smile came to Becky's lips—a faint, terrible smile of triumph. The girl bent low and, with a startled face, shrank back.

"An' I'll—git—thar—first."

With that whisper went Becky's last breath, but the smile was there, even when her lips were cold.

A CRISIS FOR THE GUARD