

HIS FIRST PENITENT

BY JAMES OLIVER CURWOOD

AUTHOR OF "THOMAS JEFFERSON BROWN," "THE HONOR OF THE BIG SNOWS," ETC.

IN a white wilderness of moaning storm, in a wilderness of miles and miles of black pine-trees, the Transcontinental Flier lay buried in the snow.

In the first darkness of the wild December night, engine and tender had rushed on ahead to division headquarters, to let the line know that the flier had given up the fight, and needed assistance. They had been gone two hours, and whiter and whiter grew the brilliantly lighted coaches in the drifts and winnows of the whistling storm. From the black edges of the forest, prowling eyes might have looked upon scores of human faces staring anxiously out into the blackness from the windows of the coaches.

In those coaches it was growing steadily colder. Men were putting on their overcoats, and women snuggled deeper in their furs. Over it all, the tops of the black pine-trees moaned and whistled in sounds that seemed filled both with menace and with savage laughter.

In the smoking-compartment of the Pullman sat five men, gathered in a group. Of these, one was Forsythe, the timber agent; two were traveling men; the fourth a passenger homeward bound from a holiday visit; and the fifth was Father Charles.

All were smoking, and had been smoking for an hour, even to Father Charles, who lighted his third cigar as one of the traveling men finished the story he had been telling. They had passed away the tedious wait with tales of personal adventure and curious happenings. Each had furnished his share, of entertainment, with the exception of Father Charles.

The priest's pale, serious face lit up in surprise or laughter with the others, but his lips had not broken into a story of their own. He was a little man, dressed in somber black, and there was that about him which told his companions that within his tight-drawn coat of shiny black there were hidden tales which

would have gone well with the savage beat of the storm against the lighted windows and the moaning tumult of the pine-trees.

Suddenly Forsythe shivered at a fiercer blast than the others, and said:

"Father, have you a text that would fit this night—and the situation?"

Slowly Father Charles blew out a spiral of smoke from between his lips, and then he drew himself erect and leaned a little forward, with the cigar between his slender white fingers.

"I had a text for this night," he said. "but I have none now, gentlemen. I was to have married a couple a hundred miles down the line. The guests have assembled. They are ready, but I am not there. The wedding will not be to-night, and so my text is gone. But there comes another to my mind which fits this situation—and a thousand others—'He who sits in the heavens shall look down and decide.' To-night I was to have married these young people. Three hours ago I never dreamed of doubting that I should be on hand at the appointed hour. But I shall not marry them. Fate has enjoined a hand. The Supreme Arbiter says 'No,' and what may not be the consequences?"

"They will probably be married to-morrow," said one of the traveling men. "There will be a few hours' delay—nothing more."

"Perhaps," replied Father Charles, as quietly as before. "And—perhaps not. Who can say what this little incident may not mean in the lives of that young man and that young woman—and, it may be, in my own? Three or four hours lost in a storm—what may they not mean to more than one human heart on this train? The Supreme Arbiter plays His hand, if you wish to call it that, with reason and intent. To some one, somewhere, the most insignificant occurrence may mean life or death. And to-night—this—means something."

forced to wage
they are writ-
hy not write
and *technic*
cheque and
nique?

any simpler
se them the
pen to recall
few of them
ho has ever
us printed is
forms; and
ning to use
though and

ed spellings
owadays the
he authority
rs have now
rs. Indeed,
e now been
nd are seen
that they no
y.

that of all
ie most gra-
ue, one may
t of the sim-
acceptance
selves with-
is no overt
now. What
y of the fact
e on the lips
its orthog-
antly chan-
ion of vital-
t and there
usage.

ly declared,
f "Modern
resent Use,"
lling, as in
ge, we must
opinion and
for the ac-
shall be of

A sudden blast drove the night screeching over their heads, and the wailing of the pines was almost like human voices. Forsythe sucked a cigar that had gone out.

"Long ago," said Father Charles, "I knew a young man and a young woman who were to be married. The man went West to win a fortune. Thus fate separated them, and in the lapse of a year such terrible misfortune came to the girl's parents that she was forced into a marriage with wealth—a barter of her white body for an old man's gold. When the young man returned from the West he found his sweetheart married, and hell upon earth was their lot. But hope lingers in young hearts. He waited four years; and then, discouraged, he married another woman. Gentlemen, *three days* after the wedding his old sweetheart's husband died, and she was released from bondage. Was not that the hand of the Supreme Arbiter? If he had waited but three days more, the old happiness might have lived.

"But wait! One month after that day the young man was arrested, taken to a Western State, tried for murder, and hanged. Do you see the point? In three days more the girl who had sold herself into slavery for the salvation of those she loved would have been released from her bondage only to marry a murderer!"

II

THERE was a silence, in which all five listened to that wild moaning of the storm. There seemed to be something in it now—something more than the inarticulate sound of wind and trees. Forsythe scratched a match and relighted his cigar.

"I never thought of such things in just that light," he said.

"Listen to the wind," said the little priest. "Hear the pine-trees shriek out there! It recalls to me a night of years and years ago—a night like this, when the storm moaned and twisted about my little cabin, and when the Supreme Arbiter sent me my first penitent. Gentlemen, it is something which will bring you nearer to an understanding of the voice and the hand of God. It is a sermon on the mighty significance of little things, this story of my first penitent. If you wish, I will tell it to you."

"Go on," said Forsythe.

The traveling men drew nearer.

"It was a night like this," repeated Father Charles, "and it was in a great wilderness like this, only miles and miles away.

I had been sent to establish a mission; and in my cabin, that wild night, alone and with the storm shrieking about me, I was busy at work sketching out my plans. After a time I grew nervous. I did not smoke then, and so I had nothing to comfort me but my thoughts; and, in spite of my efforts to make them otherwise, they were cheerless enough. The forest grew to my door. In the fiercer blasts I could hear the lashing of the pine-tops over my head, and now and then an arm of one of the moaning trees would reach down and sweep across my cabin roof with a sound that made me shudder and fear. This wilderness fear is an oppressive and terrible thing when you are alone at night, and the world is twisting and tearing itself outside. I have heard the pine-trees shriek like dying women, I have heard them wailing like lost children, I have heard them sobbing and moaning like human souls writhing in agony—"

Father Charles paused, to peer through the window out into the black night, where the pine-trees were sobbing and moaning now. When he turned, Forsythe, the timber agent, whose life was a wilderness life, nodded understandingly.

"And when they cry like that," went on Father Charles, "a living voice would be lost among them as the splash of a pebble is lost in a roaring sea. A hundred times that night I fancied that I heard human voices; and a dozen times I went to my door, drew back the bolt, and listened, with the snow and the wind beating about my ears.

"As I sat shuddering before my fire, there came a thought to me of a story which I had long ago read about the sea—a story of impossible achievement and of impossible heroism. As vividly as if I had read it only the day before, I recalled the description of a wild and stormy night when the heroine placed a lighted lamp in the window of her sea-bound cottage, to guide her lover home in safety. Gentlemen, the reading of that book in my boyhood days was but a trivial thing. I had read a thousand others, and of them all it was possibly the least significant; but the Supreme Arbiter had not forgotten.

"The memory of that book brought me to my feet, and I placed a lighted lamp close up against my cabin window. Fifteen minutes later I heard a strange sound at the door, and when I opened it there fell in upon the floor at my feet a young and beautiful woman. And after her, dragging him-

self over the knees, there

"I closed crawled in: the floor, and woman. She long, beautiful, and her big, dark and in them never beheld over her, into but in another self upon the with her and burst from her had uttered. intelligible that trees out in plainly enough was dearer to

"I knelt! was breathing way, and that ing at the very first time that and his lips loose at the marks on his "I'm all for breath, 'We should more—if it your window

"The young him, and then my cot. When man, and he to stand upon man went to her beside the cot heavy masses and shoulders maintained with hers; then he woman—his passed between hour. During received my man was of penitent."

It was grow Father Charles black coat close lighted his ci transient pass gust of wind l threatening h

self over the threshold on his hands and knees, there came a man.

"I closed the door, after the man had crawled in and fallen face downward upon the floor, and turned my attention first to the woman. She was covered with snow. Her long, beautiful hair was loose and disheveled, and had blown about her like a veil. Her big, dark eyes looked at me pleadingly, and in them there was a terror such as I had never beheld in human eyes before. I bent over her, intending to carry her to my cot; but in another moment she had thrown herself upon the prostrate form of the man, with her arms about his head, and there burst from her lips the first sounds that she had uttered. They were not much more intelligible than the wailing grief of the pine-trees out in the night, but they told me plainly enough that the man on the floor was dearer to her than life.

"I knelt beside him, and found that he was breathing in a quick, panting sort of way, and that his wide-open eyes were looking at the woman. Then I noticed for the first time that his face was cut and bruised, and his lips were swollen. His coat was loose at the throat, and I could see livid marks on his neck.

"'I'm all right,' he whispered, struggling for breath, and turning his eyes to me. 'We should have died—in a few minutes more—if it hadn't been for the light in your window!'

"The young woman bent down and kissed him, and then she allowed me to help her to my cot. When I had attended to the young man, and he had regained strength enough to stand upon his feet, she was asleep. The man went to her, and dropped upon his knees beside the cot. Tenderly he drew back the heavy masses of hair from about her face and shoulders. For several minutes he remained with his face pressed close against hers; then he rose, and faced me. The woman—his wife—knew nothing of what passed between us during the next half-hour. During that half-hour, gentlemen, I received my first confession. The young man was of my faith. He was my first penitent."

It was growing colder in the coach, and Father Charles stopped to draw his thin black coat closer about him. Forsythe relighted his cigar for the third time. The transient passenger gave a sudden start as a gust of wind beat against the window like a threatening hand.

"A rough stool was my confessional, gentlemen," resumed Father Charles. "He told me the story, kneeling at my feet—a story that will live with me as long as I live, always reminding me that the little things of life may be the greatest things; that by sending a storm to hold up a coach the Supreme Arbiter may change the map of a world. It is not a long story. It is not even an unusual story.

"He had come into the North about a year before, and had built for himself and his wife a little home at a pleasant river spot ten miles from my cabin. Their love was of the kind we do not often see, and they were as happy as the birds that lived about them in the wilderness. They had taken a timber claim. A few months more, and a new life was to come into their little home; and the knowledge of this made the girl an angel of beauty and joy. Their nearest neighbor was another man, several miles distant. The two men became friends, and the other came over to see them frequently. It was the old, old story. The neighbor fell in love with the young settler's wife.

"As you shall see, this other man was a beast. On the day preceding that night of terrible storm, the woman's husband set out for the settlement to bring back supplies. Hardly had he gone, when the beast came to the cabin. He found himself alone with the woman.

"A mile from his cabin, the husband stopped to light his pipe. See, gentlemen, how the Supreme Arbiter played His hand. The man attempted to unscrew the stem, and the stem broke. In the wilderness you must smoke. Smoke is your company. It is voice and companionship to you. There were other pipes at the settlement, ten miles away; but there was also another pipe at the cabin, one mile away. So the husband turned back. He came up quietly to his door, thinking that he would surprise his wife. He heard voices—a man's voice, a woman's cries. He opened the door, and in the excitement of what was happening within neither the man nor the woman saw or heard him. They were struggling. The woman was in the man's arms, her hair torn down, her small hands beating him in the face, her breath coming in low, terrified cries. Even as the husband stood there for the fraction of a second, taking in the terrible scene, the other man caught the woman's face to him, and kissed her. And then—it happened. It was a terrible fight; and when it

was over the beast lay on the floor, bleeding and dead. Gentlemen, the Supreme Arbiter broke a pipe-stem, and sent the husband back in time!"

III

No one spoke as Father Charles drew his coat still closer about him. Above the tumult of the storm another sound came to them—the distant, piercing shriek of a whistle.

"The husband dug a grave through the snow and in the frozen earth," concluded Father Charles; "and late that afternoon they packed up a bundle and set out together for the settlement. The storm overtook them. They had dropped for the last time into the snow, about to die in each other's arms, when I put my light in the window. That is all; except that I knew them for several years afterward, and that the old happiness returned to them—and more, for the child was born, a miniature of its mother. Then they moved to another part of the wilderness, and I to still another. So you see, gentlemen, what a snow-bound train may mean, for if an old sea tale, a broken pipe-stem—"

The door at the end of the smoking-room opened suddenly. Through it there came a cold blast of the storm, a cloud of snow, and a man. He was bundled in a great bearskin coat, and as he shook out its folds his strong, ruddy face smiled cheerfully at those whom he had interrupted.

Then, suddenly, there came a change in his face. The merriment went from it. He stared at Father Charles. The priest was rising, his face more tense and whiter still, his hands reaching out to the stranger.

In another moment the stranger had leaped to him—not to shake his hands, but to clasp the priest in his great arms, shaking him, and crying out a strange joy, while for the first time that night the pale face of Father Charles was lighted up with a red and joyous glow.

After several minutes the newcomer released Father Charles, and turned to the others with a great, hearty laugh.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you must pardon me for interrupting you like this. You will understand when I tell you that Father Charles is an old friend of mine, the dearest friend I have on earth, and that I haven't seen him for years. I was his first penitent!"

THE SUNSET

A PLEASANT smile and a light caress—
I ask not more and I want not less;
I do not plead for an ardent love,
That mantles the heavens or spans the sea;
I only ask that time shall prove
That you will be gentle and kind to me.

While memories flicker as sunsets fade,
And every ghost of the past is laid;
With love a truant and passion dead,
There still comes a glimmer of sweet sunshine,
As I think of the night when you bowed your head—
Bowed it and mingled your tears with mine.

Song and laughter that come and go,
Love and passion that ebb and flow,
The past seems a dim and receding shore—
The past with its vanishing, shattered years;
But the face that looks longest through memory's door
Is pallid with sorrow and wet with tears.

And so I ask, as the twilights fade,
That you walk beside me still unafraid;
As we watch the flow of the ebbing tide,
And near the shores of the unknown sea,
That you nestle closer by my side,
And share your sorrows with none but me.

Sam P. Davis

FAMO

X

IN the last century, England's brilliant armies had broken still further her came from Co seize the sceptre there was an grievous pove Revolution. I was still con: brilliant cour had the prest won for her, b ly small state. political chaos running blood faced the gall ership of Mc of the loss o rich and pros; were extendi seas.

At no tim court at Lond or such fine i who fled frc names and y the Crusade: ceived with t pitality. If or baron of tent to teac tradesmen in

EDITOR mances of hi logical proble Rachel" (At Gwyn" (Oct Ludwig of B: and Jean Arr Evelina Han and "Charl