

Copyright Story.

Unto You a Son is Born.

By ADELINE SERGEANT.

Author of "The Idol Maker," Etc.

The snow had fallen heavily. It lay in one smooth unbroken sheet over the roofs, the untrodden fields, the deserted gardens outside the town. Within the town itself the snow was speedily fouled and begrimed by the tramp of passing feet, but one had only to go for a short distance before meeting it in all its pristine beauty and purity. Overhead the sky was brilliantly blue, but the frost held in spite of the sunshine, and although there was plenty of life and animation in the streets there was little to be done within the confines of the farms or country homesteads which lay outside the limits of the town.

Bankside was the name attached to one small farmhouse, with its few surrounding acres, tenanted by John Thorn, as it had been tenanted by his forefathers for many generations. They had held it on easy terms from one of the local magnates, and had been considered fairly flourishing people in a small way, but the landlord of the present tenant was a hard man, and had lately raised rents all round; a proceeding which fell heavily upon small holders like John Thorn. Matters indeed had with him been going from bad to worse, and it was with a heavy, overcast countenance and a strangely unelastic gait that he trod the snowy yard, and passed along the nearly empty sheds and stalls, which presented to his eye a depressingly desolate appearance. A mild-eyed cow turned to his side towards him as he approached her, with a look of almost human recognition. He stopped for a moment before he passed to the house.

"Ah, Daisy," he said with a sigh, "you are the last to go, and I suppose I shall lose you before another Christmas. Well, when one loses so much it is folly to waste a word or a sigh over one poor dumb beast, but the last of anything's always hard to part with. There will be nothing but the 'House' for me and Maggie in our old age, now that the boy has disappeared. Perhaps it was all for the best that he should go; God knows; but there is one that will never think so, whatever I do: no, more than one, but he—neither knows nor cares." And with one last caressing stroke of his hand upon the animal's velvet sides he turned his back upon the outbuildings, and returned to the back door of the house, where he made a great parade of wiping his feet and scraping the snow from his heavy boots before he entered the house.

His wife was bustling about the kitchen. She was a small pale woman, who had once been delicately pretty, but there was a strained look of care in her eyes which destroyed the beauty of her face. Her fair hair was drawn tightly from her forehead, and fastened behind in a knot, her arms were bare to the elbow, and her hands were red. John Thorn stood and looked at her for a moment in heavy stupefaction.

"Where are the girls?" he said, as his eye roamed round the room.

"I have sent them away, John," said his wife apologetically. "It is Christmas Eve, and they were both pining to see their mothers, and I think, John—it will be better surely that they did not come back again. There is nothing more than I can do myself, and I don't want any help in the house."

John Thorn sank down in the nearest chair, putting his hands to his face with something like a groan. "You are not strong enough, Maggie; it is not right for you to be doing about in the house all day long. You will be laid up with your throat if you do."

"Oh, no, I don't think so, John," said his wife cheerily. "I keep this shawl tight round me, and I am warm with bustling about. Besides

Cissy Croft promised to look in this afternoon, and help me in anything I wanted, so that I shall be all right."

"Cissy's a good girl," said John, with his brows bent, and his eyes fixed on the floor, "but it is a poor life for her, teaching infants every day and lodging with that old Miss Nargle, whose very face is enough to turn the milk sour. Why she doesn't go away and better herself is more than I can make out."

"Oh," said his wife suddenly, with a curious thrill in her voice, "don't you know, John—don't you know why she stays?"

"Mr—how should I know?" said John, standing up. "She has got no ties in the place that I know, and the Vicar told me only last week that he could get her a much better situation in one of the big towns if she would go."

"I think the only ties she has are here," said Mrs. Thorn, turning her back on her husband so that he should not see the tears in her eyes, though perhaps the quiver in the voice betrayed her. "She can't bear to leave us, John. That's why it is. She is hoping for news from Bernard still."

"Then she's a fool," said John Thorn, rising to his feet and striking his hand sharply on the deal table. "and she is wasting her life on one who is a shame and disgrace to everybody connected with him, and who will never cross my threshold again as long as I am here to keep him out. If she is waiting for Bernard, tell her it is lost labour, that he has left us for ever, and that if I could I would not bring him back."

His wife came up and laid both her thin hands upon his arm. "It goes to my heart to hear you talk so hard, John," she said, "and on Christmas Eve of all days in the year."

"There is no reason why one should be more soft on Christmas Eve than on any other day in the year, that I can see," said Thorn. "Right's right all the world over, and at any time and season. And even at Christmas Eve I cannot forget that the boy was a disgrace to us while he lived here, and took away what didn't belong to him when he went away."

"But if he came back," said Mrs. Thorn, "if he came back—"

"He will never come back," said her husband, "and if he does he will find the old place shut up, or let to another man, for I don't see that I can go on any longer, and there is nothing before us but the House."

"Oh, no, no, John, it won't come to that," said Mrs. Thorn piteously, and the tears flowed over the sunken cheeks, while a sob choked her throat, but John Thorn, usually an affectionate husband, did not stay to console her. He turned away from the kitchen, remarking that he had business in the town, and didn't know when he would be back.

Mrs. Thorn was left to weep in silence, and for a minute or two she sat down in the old wooden armchair near the fire, and wiped her tears with her apron.

Thus engaged she did not notice that someone had entered the house. A girl in a hat and jacket of the plainest kind put her head in at the kitchen door, and looked anxiously at the mistress of the house. In another minute she was kneeling at Mrs. Thorn's side with her arms around the good woman's neck.

"What is it, dear?" she said. "Have you had bad news?"

"Oh, Cissy, my dear, I am glad you have come. I don't know that I ought to be, for father's in a dark mood this morning, and he says that you are wasting your life in coming here."

"Oh, he doesn't mean it, never mind what he says, he would miss me very much if I didn't come," said Cissy, giv-

ing the elder woman a kiss, and looking at her with fond smiling eyes.

She was five and twenty, and had never perhaps been distinguished for her beauty, but there was a sweetness in her face which made it attractive, and her large brown eyes were somewhat pathetic in expression. There was a certain prettiness, moreover, about her silky fair hair which was allowed to cluster a little around her forehead with a natural grace that was infinitely becoming; indeed, there was a delicacy and gentleness in her appearance which made it more pleasant to many people's eyes than a rougher and more pronounced style of actual beauty.

John Thorn and many of his neighbours were apt to call her "a poor puny thing," but in the town people often looked at her twice when she passed, as though aware of a certain distinctness in her air which set her apart from the rest of the world.

Perhaps this distinction proceeded chiefly from the elevating and refining influences of Cissy's faithful love for Bernard Thorn, the only son of his parents, who, after a wild and disappointing career, had suddenly disappeared from the neighbourhood, and had been heard of no more for a period of years.

Cissy shared his mother's longings for the boy's return, and it was for his sake that she persevered in ungenial work, and consecrated her spare hours to the work that always required doing at Bankside Farm.

"Father's so hard," Mrs. Thorn repeated, "he says he won't never let Bernard cross the door again."

"Have you heard anything of him?" said Cissy quickly.

"Not a word, my dear, and I did think that this being Christmas—"

Cissy's young arms clasped her closer. "He will come home, some day, mother," she said, whispering the name that she used only in moments like these. "He will come home and put everything right. It was Christmas Eve when we saw him last, remember. I am sure that some Christmas Eve will see him home again."

"Oh, but, my dear, what will be the use of it if the house is shut up and we're ruined, and me and my good man in the House?" said Mrs. Thorn, with an irrepressible burst of tears. "Better not at all than too late, Cissy."

"No, no, mother, better late than never," corrected Cissy, and then she kissed the tear-wet cheek again. "Don't fret any more," she said, "and I will help you with what there is to be done, so that the house may be quite clean and tidy when Mr. Thorn comes home again."

"Bless you, my dear, I wish you were always here," said Mrs. Thorn, fervently, and then she went about her daily work, consoled by Cissy's presence quite as much as by the manual help rendered by Cissy's willing hands.

John Thorn did not come home to dinner; and, after an early cup of tea, Cissy announced her intention of retiring to the schoolhouse, where she lived with Miss Nargle, because she had promised to assist in the contrivance of a Christmas tree, which the vicar's wife was giving to the school children. She was coming to spend Christmas Day with the old couple, and would be in time to go to church with them. So, after an affectionate farewell, she made her way back to the town, and Mrs. Thorn set to work on the few duties that still remained for her to do.

There were still some fowls in the poultry yard, and she went out to feed them with a shawl folded tightly round her head and shoulders. Her husband had swept the ground near the fowlhouse free from snow, and hens and cocks gathered round her with a great flutter and clatter and hullabaloo as she scattered the grain before them. Then for a moment she turned her face to the west, looking at the setting sun, and thinking of the boy who had followed his fortune in the track of that golden light. Where was he now, she wondered, and what had been his fate in the lands of the west?

"Oh, my boy, oh, my Bernard," she half sobbed to herself, "would that God would send you back to me again."

She had spoken aloud without knowing it, and was startled beyond measure when an answer fell upon her ear.

"Would it be a good thing if he

came home again?" the voice asked her.

"Who spoke?"

She turned round hurriedly, her eyes a little blinded by the wintry glow of the golden west, and she was so flurried and upset that the sight of a tall dark figure standing between her and the house did not tend to restore her confidence.

She started and trembled a little, so that one or two eggs which she had found fell from the basket and were broken upon the ground.

"Who—who is it that asks?" she said, trembling all over, yet scarcely knowing why. But she knew the next moment, for two strong arms were around her, and a bearded face was pressed close to her own.

"Mother, don't you know me?" said the voice, and although it was so much deeper and more manly than when she had heard it last, she could no longer mistake it for any but her son's voice. It was Bernard himself who had come back to her from the wilds, or rather, as it seemed to her, almost from the dead.

"My son, my son," she cried, clinging to him and nearly fainting on his breast in the excess of her joy, "my son that was lost—"

"You may well say that, mother," said the young man, "for lost I have been, it is true; but found again now I trust, and home again with you and father—and Cissy. She is here still, is she not? though perhaps I ought not to hope it. And yet I always trusted Cissy."

"Cissy was here to-day," said his mother between laughing and crying, "and it is not half an hour since she left the house. She has never forgotten you, no fear of that. It is your father that I am afraid of, for he is a hard man sometimes, and he has never forgiven you, my dear, for going away as you did."

The young man's face grew grave. He put his arm round his mother's waist and drew her gently towards the house. It was easier to explain matters inside than outside on a cold Christmas Eve.

Meanwhile John Thorn was returning from the town where he had transacted business to the best of his ability, but with no satisfaction to himself. Everything was going wrong with him. He owed money, and he could not meet his obligations, and this was the worst, because he was a strictly upright and honourable man. A long series of misfortunes only had brought him to this pass, and as he came along his homeward road he looked back to the years that were gone, and thought harshly of the son who had deserted him in his old age, and had not only deserted him but carried away with him some of the hard won savings of John Thorn's early life. It had not been a large sum with which Bernard Thorn had decamped, but the memory of it lingered in his father's mind as a worse loss than any he had experienced.

"It's a hard thing," he said to himself, "to see children grow up around you, and then, when they come to an age when they could be a help and a comfort, find that they have no mind to do anything but start off on their own account, leaving you to sink or swim as the case may be. But I should not have minded it so much if he had not taken that which was not his own to take. It is a thing I cannot forget or forgive. There's no man been a better father than I was to him when he was young, and it's a shame and disgrace that he should have treated his mother and me in this way."

He seldom thought about it so long, or put his thoughts into such concise words, and the effort made him hot, so that he stayed for a moment with his hat raised as if to cool his brow, in spite of the bitter cold of the winter night. The sun had almost set, but a yellow light lingered in the west. The sound of bells floated to his ear through the calm still atmosphere. The ringers were practising the peal for Christmas morning. He had heard those bells on Christmas Eve for more than sixty winters, and knew well what they signified. "The coming of a Saviour to the world—the coming of a Son sent by the Father, who loved the world well enough to redeem it in this way." The thought was familiar enough to his mind, and the words in which it had been announced by the angels to the listening shepherds on the plain were so well known to him that their meaning had become dulled by repetition. Yet the sound of the