

'Please, sir, let my brother go home a little while,' she said. 'The sight of him will keep mother from dying, and we can't get along without mother.'

'Who is your brother, and where is he?' I asked, though I had guessed promptly enough that he was a criminal at work in the mines.

'His name is Nathan Peel, and he's—he's down there,' she said, pointing to the shaft. 'It's nigh about killed mother, sir,' she added. 'She would take a turn for the better and get well if she could just see him at home for a while. And Nathan didn't do what they said he did, Governor. He didn't do it.'

A light that was fierce seemed to spurt up in her eyes as she spoke and her face became mottled with color.

'He ain't that kind,' she continued. 'But the law put him down there, and he'll work faithfully. Only let him come home this once—only let him! only let him!' she pleaded.

I remember her words well, but to tell how her voice sounded is out of my power. I know it made me feel like taking the young man by the shoulder and hurrying him home without a moment's delay. Instead, however, I asked the questions one in a similar position would be expected to ask. I found that the family lived fifty miles away; that the girl had walked the distance alone; that her father was dead, and that the mother had been in bed ever since the arrest of her son.

'You are a brave daughter and sister, my girl,' I said, 'but I cannot promise to let your brother go home. I will have to look into the matter before I promise anything, but I will see him. When I come up I will have something more to say to you, if you are here.'

She watched me hungrily as I spoke, and by the time I had finished every atom of spirit had died out of her face. It was the most hopeless thing I ever looked at, and she turned from me listlessly, saying: 'Mother said you would not let him come.'

She sat down on a block of wood and I stepped to my place and was lowered into the mine. By and bye Nathan Peel was pointed out to me. He and his sister were strikingly alike. He was tall and thin and pale and dispirited, but he was working like a beaver.

'This is the first year of a sentence of ten years for assault with intent to murder,' some one told me.

I said I thought it a light sentence.

'There seems to be certain facts on his side, despite the overwhelming circumstantial evidence,' was answered.

'For one, he never could be made to admit his guilt—never has done it.'

An impulse, strong as it was sudden, moved me, and I approached the young fellow; he was barely twenty-three. He rested on his pick a minute and looked at me.

'I am told that you say you are innocent,' I remarked bluntly.

He eyed me as he wiped his brow, and evidently thought me a meddling visitor, nothing more. Then he grasped the pick and returned to work, merely saying, 'I am innocent.'

The spiritless way in which he said it reminded me of his sister's tragically hopeless words: 'Mother said you would not let him come home.' I turned aside, feeling that a cruel wrong was breaking all their hearts and that I would become a party to the wrong if I did not do something to redress it. But, really, what could I do?

When I got up to the light of day again there sat the girl on the block of wood, and there stood the same group of idle men. I was scarcely away from the shaft before a grizzled-haired man of fifty or sixty years confronted me. He was in his shirt sleeves, and was evidently a poor, hard-working man.

'Governor,' he said, 'we have been talking to this young gal, and, sir, if you'll write out the papers I'll take her brother's place and do his work while he goes home to see the sick woman. I'll just be Nathan Peel until he comes back, and if he never comes back I'll be Nathan Peel until his sentence is worked out.'

Every man had pressed closer, and there was a double row of faces, white, stern, tense, before me.

'Do you know Nathan Peel? Is he a friend of yours?' I asked the old man. He was unconsciously breaking to bits a dry twig.

'Never saw him in my life,' he said. 'Never heard of his case till to-day. But I feel main sorry for him and his folks, and I believe in 'em.'

So did I feel sorry for them, and so did others, doubtless. But folks have different ways of proving their sympathy with another's sorrow, and I honored that old man's way: it counted.

Their faces did not even try to smile, but looked solemn. Their eyes seemed to nudge my heart, and before I could control myself I had said:

'Gentlemen, will you uphold me?'

'In whatever you do,' sounded on all sides.

'Then let us hear what Nathan Peel has to say,' I continued, beginning to write an order on a page of my note-book.

One of my friends took it, and in a little while Nathan stood among us. His sister, quivering, had met him at the mouth of the shaft, her face looking like a dozen deep emotions blended into one. She remained at his side, silent. I stated the case in the plainest of terms, pointing out the old man to Nathan. The young fellow was

naturally amazed, and gave the old man a critical survey, but as he turned back to me I thought I caught the shine of water in his eyes.

'If you will allow me to go home, I will come back when you say,' was all he said, and he looked me full in the eyes.

I would have taken his word without witness or hostage, but I held to the terms. I wrote out the agreement, which he and the old man signed. Then I wrote his leave of absence for two days. He received the latter with a hand that was shaking, and in quick succession he grasped my hand and that of the old man. 'Day after to-morrow, at 12 o'clock, I will be here,' he said, looking an unutterable something into the eyes of his friend.

'I ain't a-doubting that, son,' was the hearty response. Then we all stood bareheaded near the shaft and watched the old, grey-headed hero go down to his noble task, his permit in hand. I dream about this sight to this very day.

Nathan and his sister went home on the train, and he had enough money to buy his return ticket.

A little after the train time the next day but one, my party and I stood near the shaft of the mine, and close by were gathered a crowd of men, women, boys, girls, and babies never before so far from their cradles. Every one watched the road that led from the railway station, and few were the words spoken by anyone. By and bye I kept my watch open, and it seemed that the minute hand was caught so that it could not move. Then, suddenly, atop the rise of ground in front of us, the form of a young man appeared, walking briskly. It was Nathan Peel. The rough-coated crowd looking on sent up a yell, and women joined in it, the young man coming steadily on. Then the air was split with three cheers for him, closely followed with three for the old man down in the mine and three for the Governor. They screamed themselves hoarse, and so did my party, and so did I. Some say I lost my head and cheered the Governor as lustily as I cheered the others. We had a good time, anyway.

I ordered the old man up, and he and Nathan gripped hands and looked deep into each other's eyes.

'How is your ma?' he asked.

'A great deal better—left her sitting at the window,' the young fellow answered.

'And the sister—how is she?'

'Just as brave as ever, and well.'

'That's good, that's very good,' the old man said, thrusting his hand in his pockets. 'It's pretty tough work you have to do down yonder, my boy; but there comes a night o' rest after every workday, and time will pass, bound to do it. And now I am going to set to work to see about this here "innocence" business. You must not er had no friends in your trouble, did you, son?'

The young man shook his head, looking off at the sunny landscape.

The kind words had found a tender place in his heart.

'Well, you got one now,' said the old man. 'And when Jacob Connor sets out to be a friend, he's a hustler. You just be a man, and the fust thing you know you'll be alongside the home folks for good and all. Jacob Connor ain't never yet pinned his faith to a horse that wouldn't go.'

His coal-blackened hand was on Nathan's shoulder, and his voice was the heartiest I ever heard. Afterwards I had a talk with the old man, and we separated good friends.

In less than five weeks he had the 'innocence' business sifted to the last handful of dust. With his vigorous help justice put her fair hands on the real wrong-doer, and Jacob Connor went back to the mines with Nathan Peel's release in his keeping.

I would have paid a good price to have seen Nathan and the old man meet each other, but I could not leave home at that time. I have seen both of them since, however, and I believe the whole family would attempt to go to the crater of an active volcano in order to serve Jacob Connor.

He'd had bronchitis several times,
His doctors ordered 'Warmer climes.'
But then, alas! the man was poor,
Or he'd have gone away before.
'Do this, do that,' 'tis easily said,
But poor men have to earn their bread,
Thanks be, they may become seure
'Gainst coughs and colds by Woods' Peppermint Cure.

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