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Mrs. Bassett's Fall

By ELIZABETH ROBBINS

A COMELY woman in her fiftieth year, but straight and almost as slender as when a girl, with hardly a wrinkle on her fair, pleasant face,—a woman to whom one felt instinctively drawn. Such was Mrs. Bassett. She stood in her cheerful, immaculate kitchen contemplating the two pies she had just taken from the oven and set on the table; pies with delicately browned, flaky crust, diffusing a delicious fragrance. "I believe I'll take one over to Emma; there'll be just time before dinner," she soliloquized, glancing at the clock. "Will is coming home to-day and she will be glad to have it."

Her daughter's house was on another street but by going through her own back yard and across a small field she had only to climb a wall to be in her daughter's yard. "I declare!" she laughed, as she squeezed through a gap in her back fence, pie in hand, "if there isn't Emma starting over here!"

The younger woman did not wait till they met before speaking. "Will has come," she said, "and what do you think? He's had a splendid position offered him, out there,—twice as much salary as he's been having, and the work hardly any harder."

"Is he going to take it?" Mrs. Bassett asked.

"Why, of course he'll take it, mother," the daughter answered, a little irritably. "We're going to be-

gin packing up right away. Will hired a house there before he came home. I'm glad to have the pie,—how good it smells. It's the first apple pie I've seen this season. Well, I must hurry back, I was only coming over to tell the news.—I'll run in again towards night.

"You haven't heard from Edith?" she paused at the wall to call back.

"Yes, day before yesterday. They were at Liverpool, just about to go aboard the steamer. They're probably in New York now. Her father was homesick, she said."

"Well, he ought to be," commented Emma severely. "It was the greatest idea, his going with them on their wedding trip."

"Well, I don't know," mused Mrs. Bassett, as she returned to her own house. "It seemed to me the most natural thing for Mr. Morrison to go, seeing how devoted he and Edith have always been to each other. You don't often find a father so all wrapped up in his daughter as he is. In all the twelve years they've boarded with me, I never have known him to speak a harsh word to her, or think of himself first. And she was worth all his care and thoughtfulness. Edith is a dear, good girl. It most broke my heart to have her go away, and I'm going to miss her dreadfully,—and her father too. Mr. Morrison is a good man if ever there was one.

"But dear me! what a mother I am to be thinking of them, and here's

my own daughter going away out West to live," she reminded herself reproachfully. "Emma never liked here, and she always wanted to live in a city, so she's pretty well pleased, I guess, though she probably couldn't live anywhere but what she'd find something to worry about. I declare! I don't see how Will stands it. He couldn't if he hadn't the evenest disposition that ever was. I wish it wasn't so far. But then, it's only two days' travel after all, and with Will's salary she can afford to come back on a visit once in a while."

Mrs. Bassett was one to whom a refined way of living had become a habit, so that her table for one was set as carefully and daintily as though she had been expecting the most fastidious guest. Everything was ready and she was thinking how lonely it was to dine alone, when the outside screen-door opened and closed and a man appeared at the dining-room door,—a prosperous looking man of middle age, with a kindly face.

Mrs. Bassett's face lighted up. "Why, Mr. Morrison!" she exclaimed.

They shook hands cordially and were frankly glad to see each other. In the manner of neither was there a trace of self-consciousness. "How is Edith?" Mrs. Bassett asked, as she went to get another plate and knife and fork.

"She's nicely. I left them in New York, this morning. They're going to stay at Sam's aunt's, while they are getting ready to go to house-keeping," Mr. Morrison answered. "I thought I would come and get the things I left here, before beginning to work again. I've engaged board with the Willetts. You've heard me speak or them?"

"Then you are not going to live with Edith?"

"No, nor retire from business," Mr. Morrison answered, a shade crossing his face. "That was what we planned at first, but—well, Sam is a good fellow and well meaning but he's young and naturally somewhat thoughtless and selfish and I don't feel as if I could stand his way with Edith always. I'd be likely to speak out sometimes and it would make trouble. They have got to get used to each other and it will be better for them to have no third party around to complicate things. I thought it all over and that is the conclusion I've come to."

"I think you're right about it," said Mrs. Bassett, "though it's hard on you,—and on Edith too. But you will be going to see her often."

"Yes, she made me promise that." He looked thoughtful for a moment, then changed the subject. "Mrs. Bassett, your dinner tastes the best of anything I've eaten since I went away. Talk of French cookery! American cooking beats it out of sight. I'd rather have a slice of your bread and butter than anything I saw or ate all the time I was gone. And Edith said the same thing." He looked about the room, and drew a deep breath of the September air that was drifting in through the open windows. "Everything is so clean and sweet and wholesome here," he said. "Oh, why must young people go and get married?" he questioned whimsically. "It does seem as if Edith was a great deal better off with her old father than she is now,—but they will do it," he added with a sigh.

Then he began talking of the sights he had seen while abroad, and continued to talk after they had finished eating and while Mrs. Bas-

sett cleared off the table and washed and wiped the dishes, she making a comment now and then or asking a question. "I've missed the train I meant to take," he said, "but the next one will do as well. However, I think I'll go and get those things ready for the expressman, before I say any more."

Mrs. Bassett had changed her dress for the afternoon and was in the sitting-room sewing when he returned. He had thought of something more to tell her, and so came near missing another train. "Oh!" he exclaimed as he rose to go. "I nearly forgot that I was to give you Edith's love, and say that she will write the first minute she gets and that you are to make her a long visit next winter."

"She's a dear girl," said Mrs. Bassett, with emotion.

"Yes, she is," her father agreed. "And you made a happy home for us all these years. I wish it needn't have been broken up."

Mrs. Bassett watched him go down the street. "Yes," she said, half aloud, "Edith is a good girl, and I don't wonder he feels broken up. I somehow feel worse about her going away than I do about Emma's going. I must be a very unnatural kind of a mother. I'll go over and help Emma pack. There's nothing especial to keep me at home now; I can go day-times as well as not."

Then her thoughts went back to Edith and wandered to next winter and her visit to New York. It would be something pleasant to look forward to all the fall.

A little while after supper, Emma came in. She sank into a chair with a sigh that was almost a groan. "It seems as if I never was so tired in all my life," she complained. She was always so thin and nervous and

worried that she looked nearly as old as her mother. There were some who insisted that she looked older.

"Will and I have decided that you must go with us, mother," the younger woman said presently. "There's nothing to keep you here, now the Morrisons have gone, and I shouldn't have a minute's comfort thinking of you all alone here. There's plenty of room in the house Will has rented, and you can let this house. Will thinks we could find someone who will take it just as it is, all furnished,—or you could sell it."

Mrs. Bassett's work had fallen in her lap, and she was staring at her daughter as if dazed. "But—why, Emma, I don't want to go!" she gasped, as soon as she could find her voice.

"Now, mother!" Emma protested, in the tone of impatient long suffering one might use with a fractious child, "of course you want to go. It will be ever so much pleasanter in every way than it is here."

Mrs. Bassett was silent. She had never been one to argue; it seemed to her like quarreling.

"You must go," her daughter continued. "You wouldn't want me to be perfectly miserable in my new home, thinking of my mother all alone here, so far away?"

"There's nothing to harm me here, Emma," pleaded Mrs. Bassett.

"Nothing to harm you!" cried her daughter scornfully. "Do you never read the papers, mother? There's always some dreadful thing happening to women who live alone."

"Perhaps I could get someone to live with me," said Mrs. Bassett. "I might take a boarder."

"Yes, and slave yourself to death! You've worked enough in your life;

you ought to take things easy now, —and don't you have any affection for me?" pursued the daughter in an aggrieved tone.

"Of course I do," Mrs. Bassett answered, with a touch of indignation.

"Then you will go with us and not make any more fuss," Emma concluded. "Will can put the place in the hands of a real estate agent to-morrow morning—"

"Oh, no! he must n't," cried Mrs. Bassett agonizingly.

"Why, what will you do, then?"

"Oh,—leave it empty—if I go."

"Yes, and have people breaking in to steal the furniture, and boys breaking the windows and everything going to pieces. Now, mother, do be reasonable."

There was a short silence.

"I saw a man that looked like Mr. Morrison going by the corner this noon," Emma said. "He hasn't been out, has he?"

They talked about Mr. Morrison and his daughter for a while and then Emma returned to the former subject, and so persistently did she argue and plead and scold that when she went away she had extracted a half promise from Mrs. Bassett that she would go West with her.

But when she was again alone, Mrs. Bassett's soul rebelled and she wept bitter tears. She could not go and leave this pleasant home endeared by precious memories. It seemed a part of her very life. And there were her friends and neighbors and acquaintances; she personally knew nearly everybody in the town and loved them and was interested in all that affected them. There was her church, also. How could she leave it all and go to a strange city where she knew no one?

And with Emma! Mrs. Bassett

recalled the years of her married life. She had formed a romantic attachment for a man considerably her senior,—a nervous, fretful, exacting invalid—and after a brief courtship had married him at nineteen. Her disillusionment had been swift and complete, and the three years in which he lived had been very unhappy ones for her. Emma had grown to be like him. It was very wearing to have her come only to spend the day; what would it be to have to live with her?

But how could she help it? She knew from many past experiences that when Emma set out to have her way there was no withstanding her; she simply wore one out so that one had to give in to her.

Mrs. Bassett could not sleep that night. She thought over the many years of happiness she had had in the beloved home and all of she would lose in leaving it, and the more she thought the worse she felt.

Along toward morning, she suddenly resolved that for once in her life she would not give in. She would assert her right to stay where she wanted to stay, and she tried to think of all the reasons she could bring forward to fortify her position.

"But, oh, dear!" she sighed, as the dawn began to show in the east, "when I see her and she began to talk, I shall just do as she says, the same as ever."

Emma returned to the fray immediately after breakfast, and, as she had feared, Mrs. Bassett found herself yielding inch by inch.

"Of course," said Emma at last when she felt that her case was nearly won, "if you had some one to take care of you—if for instance you were married, or even expecting to be married—it would be a very different matter." She wished

her mother to see that she was not wholly unreasonable.

If she were married, or even expecting to be married. To Mrs. Bassett, seeking wildly for some way to escape, a sudden inspiration came. To be sure it was deceit but was not even deception justifiable in one so sore beset? She hesitated but for an instant.

"I *am* thinking of getting married," she said desperately.

"You—are thinking of—getting married!" Emma gasped.

"That was what I said."

"Well, well!" ejaculated her daughter, recovering from the shock. "Of course it is to Mr. Morrison. He must have spoken yesterday, when he was here. Why didn't you tell me before? How could I know why you were so set on not going West with Will and me?"

"I hardly know myself, yet," Mrs. Bassett answered. "And, Emma, you must not tell anybody,—not *anybody*, do you understand?"

"Of course not, if you don't want me to. When is it to be? Soon I suppose, as long as there is no reason for putting it off. Hadn't you better go with us after all, and be married from our house?"

"When I marry it will be from my own house," her mother answered with dignity.

"Well, then, I don't see but what I shall have to give up my plan of having you live with me," Emma said slowly.

Mrs. Bassett's heart thrilled with exultation. She was free once more, and how easily it had been accomplished.

"As soon as I get my own work done I'm coming over to help you pack your things," she said calmly.

"I shall be glad to have you,"

Emma said. "It seems if it would take forever, there is so much stuff;" and she departed with a subdued and vanquished air that caused Mrs. Bassett to laugh inwardly.

"I hoped you were going with us, mother," Will said significantly, as they were working together that afternoon, "but under the circumstances I don't suppose we can expect it."

So Emma had told him! Mrs. Bassett was vexed. "I thought I made her understand," she thought uneasily. "Will Bradley is the best fellow that ever lived but everybody knows he can't keep anything to himself." She took pains to caution Emma again. "You must impress it on Will that what I told you this morning isn't to be mentioned to a living soul till I give the word."

"I did," said Emma a little guiltily. "I don't think he will tell,—though I don't see why you need to be so terribly private about it. It is what everybody has been expecting for years."

Will was to go to the city on an errand the next day and Mrs. Bassett was in an agony of apprehension lest he see Mr. Morrison or some mutual friend and mention the forbidden subject. But when he returned there was nothing in his manner or words to indicate any such encounter or disclosure and she breathed more freely.

Mrs. Bassett well knew there was to come a day of reckoning with her conscience, but she postponed it. For the present it was enough that she was not forced to go away from what she held so dear. Indeed, she was so busy that she had little time to think.

But at last Will and Emma were gone, and with the return of her simple, quiet life, Mrs. Bassett's

conscience began its work. Now that she was face to face with herself she was aghast at what she had done. She, a Christian woman, to so far forget herself as to tell a lie! And so indelicate, so shameful a lie! What would Mr. Morrison think if he knew? She was as sure as that the sun shone that the idea of marrying her, or any other woman, had never entered his head. How could she look him in the face if she should ever see him again?

Well, one thing was clear: she must give up her class in Sunday-school and cease to attend Communion service.

As the days passed she went less and less among her neighbors; she was no longer fit to associate with good people, she told herself. She who had been the busiest, the cheeriest, the most neighborly of women, now stayed closely at home and would sit for hours at a time brooding over her wrong doing. She was very lonely, and the days dragged interminably. She dreaded the long nights in which she could not sleep, and when morning came there seemed to be nothing in life worth getting up for.

Her many friends became quite concerned about her. They had not thought she cared so much for Emma, they told each other. Some of them came in often and tried to divert her mind and others thought she was ill and urged her to see a doctor. But to none of them, not even to the minister, could Mrs. Bassett tell her trouble.

At last, one morning in November she arose with the light of a new determination in her face. She had neglected her housework somewhat of late and the forenoon was spent in restoring everything to its accustomed state of order and clean-

liness. After dinner, when she had made herself nice for the afternoon, she sat down to her desk to write to Emma. The body of the letter was short,—“I am ready to come and live with you, if you still wish it. I am not to be married.” A great peace filled her heart as she addressed and sealed the envelope. Her home and all connected with it was as dear as ever, but a clear conscience was above everything and surely to give up all she had sinned for would atone for the sin.

“I will put on my things and carry it to the post office right away,” she said to herself. Her step was elastic and her eyes bright as she started across the room.

As she was passing through the little front hall the door-bell rang. “Some peddler, it is likely,” she thought, and opened the door. She started back involuntarily, the color rushing to her face, for the person standing on the doorstep before her was Mr. Morrison.

“Did I frighten you?” he asked.

“You startled me a little,” she answered, with a nervous laugh. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

He took off his hat and overcoat, and they went into the sitting-room and sat down. Mrs. Bassett made a heroic attempt to conceal her embarrassment and appear as usual. She asked after Edith and talked of the weather and other commonplace subjects.

For some reason Mr. Morrison did not seem as responsive as usual. Was he embarrassed too? He certainly no longer looked at her in the old frank, impersonal way, but rather as if he now saw her for the first time and was studying her face. The conversation was fitful, and there were awkward pauses.

Mrs. Bassett grew more and more

uncomfortable. "Have you noticed my rose tree?" she asked finally, rising and going to it. "There are twenty-seven roses and buds on it. I remember you always admired it very much."

He came and looked down on it, absent mindedly. "No, I hadn't noticed it," he said. Then suddenly he turned toward her. "Mrs. Bassett," he began, "I have something particular to say to you and I might as well out with it. A week or more ago a friend referred to my 'approaching marriage.' I was somewhat taken aback, he spoke so confidently, but I recovered myself immediately and asked him how he happened to know of it. He said he had it from a mutual friend. Then I asked him of the mutual friend had mentioned the name of the lady and he said that he did, and that it was Mrs. Bassett."

Mrs. Bassett had averted her face. Her heart was beating wildly, and she bit her lip to keep it from trembling. The way of the transgressor was indeed hard.

"It seems incredible now," Mr. Morrison went on, "but such an idea had never entered my head till that moment. The more I thought of it, however, the more attractive it seemed. I have always had the very highest regard for you, but since I heard that I was going to marry you my esteem has changed to a much strong sentiment,—I came here today to ask you to be my wife."

The tears came to Mrs. Bassett's eyes as she bravely faced him. Of course he would despise her but he should know the truth. She had had enough of deception.

"Do you know where that report started?" she asked. Then, without waiting for him to answer, "It started with me. Emma wanted me to go West and live with her and I felt as if I *couldn't*. She would have made me go but she happened to say that if I was married she wouldn't expect me to, and I told her I was thinking of marrying. She thought it was you and I let her think so." She covered her burning face with her hands. "You see now that what you ask could never be. You wouldn't want—a liar—"

He put his arms around her protectingly. "Wouldn't I?" he said. "There may be two opinions about that."

"Are you sure you understand?" she faltered.

"Perfectly sure, little woman," he answered. "I am quite well acquainted with Emma and I see just how it was. The temptation was too strong for you and you succumbed to it,—and have no doubt suffered for it and repented."

"Yes," she answered eagerly, "I have and I wrote to Emma today."

"Ah!" he said. "Is that the letter on the table? May I read it?"

"If you want to."

He opened it and ran his eyes over the few lines. Then he deliberately tore it in three pieces and put the pieces in the stove. "It isn't true now, you know," he said as he came back to her, "for you are *not* going to live with Emma, and you *are* going to marry me." And then he drew her to him again and kissed her.