TRUE LITTLE TALES OF MINOR REFORMERS.

4. The Islander's Wheat-Sack.

For The Public.

Once the young school-teacher started off on an exploring trip "all by his lonely." He took a little flat-bottomed boat with a center-board that he had built, and he went rowing and sailing up the San Joaquin river, fishing somewhat, and hunting within reason, and botanizing, and counting the stars at night, and meeting dozens of very interesting river-people. Sometimes he slept in the boat, and sometimes he camped on the bank, and now and then the nice people who had farmhouses along the river carried him off, and sent him back in the morning with milk and butter and eggs and fresh bread and home-made cake.

Finally the school-teacher went off into the great slough country, among many little half-reclaimed islands. People had told him that it was a forlorn region, but he found it very beautiful. There at last he had a rememberable experience with an earnest and struggling reformer.

There was a cabin on the bank of an island. A few oak trees were near. A small field extended across from slough to slough. A long-bearded man sat in the doorway mending a rake. Some children were building a raft out of driftwood. A woman was hanging clothes on the line. Everything was so near and clear under the springtime skies.

"Nice weather," said the young school-teacher, "and a lovely island you have. Just the size for one farm."

"Tie up," returned the man. "Set a while, an' pass the time o' day. We sees most no people out here."

So the school-teacher "tied up," and helped the five youngsters finish and launch their raft, with all sorts of improvements. Then he sat on the bank, telling them stories about Cuchulin and other legendary heroes. The children listened hungrily to every word; the youngest put up her face to be kissed. Never had he met with such quiet, pale children in all his out-door wanderings. "I suppose it's hot summers and malaria," he thought to himself.

The man finished mending his rake, put it down, and came to the water's edge.

"The children air lonesome like," he remarked. "We useter live near a town. But did ye ever set eyes on sich fine healthy young ones? You stay an' have dinner, an' you'll see why." He called out to his wife: "Sairy, this nice young man's bin tellin' yarns ter the children, an' now you just put on another bowl, an' we'll show him how to live right." She made no reply, but a flush spread over her face, as she went into the cabin.

It was noon, and in a few minutes they were called. The wan and sober-faced woman had placed bowls and spoons on the plain pine table and had filled the bowls with unground wheat from a sack in the corner of the cabin. She gave them cups of water, and then, taking her bowl of wheat, she sat down by the stove.

The children ate their wheat without displaying much interest in the matter. The pale little girl climbed into the school-teacher's lap, and slipped her hand into his.

"It's mighty good an' nourishin'," said the man, refilling his bowl from the sack. "Say, stranger," he continued, "people called me a crank when we lived on our farm near Lodi. But see how well an' strong we be, an' what white teeth we've got; all the elements of life are in wheat. It doesn't need to be cooked, nor made into bread, unless people are right down sick in bed an' must hev medicine. There's seven of us here, an' we live happy on the wheat we grow on less 'n an acre of ground. We hoe it in, and cut it with a scythe."

"Well," said the school-teacher, with great kindliness and perfect respect. "You are the most dead-in-earnest man I've found this year. How did you come to take this up?"

The man's whole nature stirred at the friendly tone.

"It's this way," he replied. "My wife taught school before we were married, an' I had a farm, an' we lived a while like other people—like beasts of the field. Then I got to thinkin' an' experimentin', an' I read a book about uncooked food, an' at last I worked it out myself towards wheat. Then we rented our farm to one of the neighbors an' come here four years ago. The money he pays us goes into bank, an' bimeby we'll travel an show people how healthy we be, an' lecture, an' try to convert people to sensible eatin'."

"I can see that all this was very difficult for both you and your wife," said the school-teacher.

"It was tough on Sairy; she didn't take kindly ter it at first. We were about ten years movin' up from cooked meats ter plain hard wheat. We tried fruits an' vegetables, an' corn, an' even rye, before we settled down on what is the absolutely perfect food. Mebbe it would have to be uncooked rice in some countries."

The wife now spoke up, with a slow effort, looking with troubled affection upon her husband and children. "Yes! Wheat is very nice, and it is excellent for all of us, except that I think our little girl Lily sometimes needs more variety. But it certainly would be a great blessing if people could generally adopt this idea. So much money would be saved, and the country would support so much greater a population."

The school-teacher, who had finished his bowlful of wheat, but gently declined another, felt troubled as he looked at the mother and children. The man went on with his story.

"An' one day last year some fellows came out huntin', an' got no game, an' lost their lunch, an'

wanted dinner here. But they wouldn't touch my wheat, an' they talked silly. Then they went off ter the county seat an' got out papers sayin' I was crazy, an' was starvin' my folks. They tuk me in, an' my wife staid here, an' prayed for me. The jedge asked me lots of questions. Then he said I was sound as a dollar on every subject 'cept wheat, an' as that was my religion I had a perfect right to my views."

The school-teacher thought deeply. Suddenly he questioned the man sweetly and yet earnestly: "And was that all the judge said to you?"

"Well, no," the man replied. "He tuk me off an' tells me that prob'ly wheat was good for me, but that women an' children needed more variety in their food, an' sometimes warm things. I told him that was not onpossible. An' I come home, arter the papers writ me up, an' put my picture in, an' I found that my wife had been poundin' up some wheat an' cookin' it, jest as medicine for the children, 'cause they had colds. I didn't mind it much for a few days, because women folks can't be martyrs to their faith."

The school-teacher thought of the mighty army of saintly women in all the ages who have gone to the fire, the sword, the wild beasts, the thirsty mob, for that which they believed. He looked at the pale and sober-faced wife, and suddenly he held out his hands to her: "I want to tell you that you are a noble woman, doing your best under difficulties." Meanwhile the man went ahead with his third bowl of wheat, and the children went out to their raft.

After a while the school-teacher took the poor eager-eyed wheat-reformer off by himself, and spent the afternoon in listening to him and persuading him that all reforms, especially such great ones, moved very slowly, hair by hair; and that women and children, as the wise judge said, often required more variety, and might even (medicinally) need it hot. The art of friendly and affectionate persuasion when used for worthwhile ends is one of the finest of all arts, and it was a happy school-teacher who came back to the cabin about sunset, with the man's concession to mortal weakness. Thereupon, inviting wife and children to his little boat, he spread out the contents of his locker; he made tea for the woman over his spirit lamp, and gave her nearly a pound of (medicinal) tea; he filled her and the children up with milk, bread and butter, cakes, cheese, and —audacity beyond speech—cold ham. Then he sat on the bank and talked long and earnestly with the woman, telling her what he had said to her husband. Then he kissed little Lily, and whispered that he would come back some day (which he truly did). Lastly, he hoisted sail and went out of the slough, waving his hat to the reformer who stood tall and dark against the afterglow, on the end of the island.

CHARLES HOWARD SHINN.

BOOKS

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