

POOR FOLKS' SHOES

by Beth Slater Whitson

"Lige" banged the door as he came in; his three tow-headed children scurried like startled rabbits to the corner of the fireside where Aily sat nursing the baby and also laboriously darning a great hole in a coarse woolen stocking.

"What'd you come in like a storm fer, Lige," she complained; "you most skeered the children to death."

"I ain't no b'ar," retorted Lige sullenly, holding his numbed fingers close to the blaze of the open fire. "There ain't no call fer 'em to run like that from their own daddy. 'Pears to me you might 'a' bin puttin' in some of your idle time a-learnin' 'em better."

A hot flush crept over Aily's face up to the roots of her drab hair, and there was a dangerous calm in her voice.

"Accordin' to nature, Lige," she said, "they oughta not need to be learnt that lesson."

Lige huddled closer to the fire without replying, successfully hiding from his wife the glow of shame that her admonition had brought forth.

It had been a bad day for the "dump men" at the furnace -snowy, with a bleak, piercing, biting wind; even the usually patient, plodding cart mules had shivered and refused to stand without being haltered while the shivering men filled the carts with slag. Once during the day the mule that Lige had driven had become unmanageable and had come perilously near backing off the high embankment at the end of the dump. Only the quick spring of Lige from the cart and his iron grasp at the wheel saved them. His arm ached fiercely still from the great strain, but to him it had merely been a part of the daily grind and he never thought of mentioning such a trivial occurrence to Aily. Instead, he only scowled at the twinge of pain as he thrust his big palms toward the grateful warmth of the burning brands.

Aily, watching, was suddenly resentful of the scowl -- was suddenly resentful of the whole scheme of existence in so far as it concerned herself. Her gaze deliberately and carefully swept the small room as if she were seeing it for the first time. It took in each ugly feature -- bare ceiling, bare walls, bare floor through whose yawning cracks the wind whistled drearily, even puffing up in spots the old bed-quilt on which the children sat huddled together, quiet as little mice. Their coarse unlovely clothing came in for a share of Aily's minute inspection and deepened her resentment. She noted the yarn threads tying the little girls' blond, stubby braids, and it was as if she had never observed them before, or only now for the first time recognized them as a mark of the poor -- the very poor.

She had a swift mental picture of the superintendent's children with their white-aproned nurse, and the outside difference between those children and her own poor little brood cut deeper than ever before. Feeling an utter hopelessness, she turned with

a shudder to the fire. Close to the embers Lige's great, rough, damp shoes smoked visibly, and Aily, noting them, looked down at her own foot covering, the resentment that had only smoldered before bursting into sudden flame.

"I got to have some new shoes, Lige," she announced sharply. "These are just off'n my feet."

There was a sort of challenge in her voice that brought Lige upright and made him stare at her.

"Guess you'll haf to wear what you got fer a while or get some with your own money," he said sullenly.

Aily's hands trembled and she dropped her darning into her lap and faced Lige, her voice unsteady with anger.

"You now I ain't got no money, Lige," she accused hotly. "I ain't ever had a single cent to call mine since you 'n me have bin married!"

"And I ain't had none neither," returned Lige. "With you' n these children to pervide fer it's all I can do to keep....."

"Pervide fer! You can call this pervidin' if you don't keer what *you* say, Lige." Aily glanced contemptuously about the bare room. "I call it jes' keepin' soul and body together; I bin keepin' up my end of the row's well as I could, but I ain't gain' to do it any longer without shoes to my feet. And I done wore these rags my last hour, Lige; see if I ain't - "

With a swift, unexpected movement she snatched off the broken, shapeless remnants of what had once been shoes, and together flung them deliberately into the heart of the blaze.

Lige gave a little gasp of surprise -- stooped as if to rescue the offending pieces of leather, then giving his wife a bewildered look, slammed out of the room with even more vehemence than he had entered it.

It was growing late, but Aily, instead of building a fire in the tiny cook stove, as usual, sat on until the dark had fallen, nursing the baby and staring with dull, expressionless eyes at the bits of writhing leather where she had thrown the worn-out shoes.

The little girls had dropped their homely make-shifts for dolls, and the boy his stick and jack-knife, and all sat watching their mother. Presently the smaller one complained of hunger, and Aily, putting down the sleeping baby, hastily cooked a kettle of mush, which the children ate avidly with cups of milk. When the meal was finished they crept into one bed, the three of them, and Aily, after washing the soiled dishes, tucked the worn covers closer about the quiet little, pinched bodies, and resumed her darning.

Presently Lige came in, carrying an unshapely package which he dropped, without a word, into his wife's lap; and, without a word, Aily untied the bundle. There was a look of misgiving on her face as she pulled at the wrappings, and when she exposed to view a pair of shoes as coarse and heavy as Lige's own, her expression changed to one of indignation, and with a glance of defiance at her husband, with all her small strength she threw the offending shoes to the farther end of the room, and stood trembling from head to foot.

"You can take 'em back!" she cried shrilly; "I'll never in the world wear sech shoes. I ain't had a new pair in nigh on two years, and you have wore out a dozen pair. I ain't had no clothes either -- jest changing rags -- one week I wear this rag I got on now and next week I wear ernother rag while I wash this'n; and the children the same way. You talk about supportin', Lige -- if you'd jest stop makin' me bring more little bodies into the world to be cold sometimes and hungry sometimes and naked all the time, I wouldn't min' goin' naked myself. Every time one little fellow comes I wish I could die before ernother one comes, me and what air here already. But jest wishin' to die don't take anybody out'n the world, and I guess it's right fer us to have to stay on and suffer with what we've brung into life, and I got to have shoes, Lige, so's I can keep gain' and doin' the best I can fer these little fellers that you'n me air responsible fer."

"I got you some shoes," said Lige defensively.

"But I cain' t wear sech shoes," Aily persisted; "they hurt my feet, Lige; you'll haf to wear 'em this time."

Lige poked the fire fiercely, and Aily's face grew whiter.

"Lige," she said presently, and her voice was husky, "I bin a good wife as I knew how, but I'm done with cookin' fer you till I get some shoes I can wear. You needn't call me in the mornin' to cook your breakfast, and you can cook your own dinner and your own supper and your breakfast again, till you bring me some more shoes!"

Picking up the sleeping baby, Aily went into the adjoining room. It was cruelly cold, while the only makeshift for a bed was a rickety cot, and she shivered under the thin covering as she hugged the baby closer to keep it warm.

Presently Lige came to the door. "Come on back in here, Aily," he called; "you and the baby will mighty nigh freeze."

"Will you get me some more shoes in the mornin', Lige?" Aily questioned.

There was no answer, and directly Lige closed the door between them, and the little house of the poor --the very poor -- as Aily had only that day recognized it -- became silent except for the occasional falling of the gray, burned-out coals on the hearth and the soft beat of the snow outside.

It was late when Aily woke on the following morning; the snow was deep outside, but the clouds had blown away during the night and the sun shone through the one little window of the room where she had slept. There were rheumatic pains in her bones as she crept stiffly from the cot, fully dressed as she had been the day before. Even the

coarsest night-gown was a luxury Aily had never owned. When the weather was pleasant she slept in her chemise and petticoat, but the night before she had kept on all her scanty garments for warmth. As she stood fastening a loosened band here and there, her toes stuck out through great holes in her stockings.

She found the children awake and huddled on their quilt before the fire; a stack of dishes freshly washed showed that they, too, had eaten, and on the little stove, piled neatly on a plate, were the remains of the breakfast. She questioned the quiet little brood, and finding that all had breakfasted, she drank a cup of coffee and ate a bit of bread in a mechanical way.

As she ate, she noticed the shoes still lying where she had dispatched them in her paroxysm of anger the night before, and when she had finished her breakfast she went back where they lay and gave them a vengeful little kick that sent them into the corner – which must have hurt her unshod foot.

The day wore on to noon, and Lige, coming in, cooked himself a hasty bite of food, and when he had gone, Aily did the same thing for herself and the children.

She sat through the short afternoon answering at random the few questions of her little flock and staring ceaselessly at the fire, as if she hoped to find there an answer to the puzzle of existence.

It was after nine that night before Lige came. The children were all asleep, and Aily had looked anxiously toward the door many times before she heard his step, yet when he came she asked no questions and he volunteered no information. As Lige went awkwardly about getting his supper, Aily patched industriously on the boy's poor little trousers; and when he had eaten, they sat opposite each other at the fireside, neither speaking until Aily took up the baby and started for the little cold bedroom as on the previous night. As she reached the door, Lige said huskily:

"I think it about time this foolishness was stopped, Aily; you and baby'll take your death o'cold."

"It won't stop," Aily cut in coldly, "till you git me some shoes, Lige."

"But I got *you* some shoes, Aily." There was a note of appeal in Lige's voice.

"But you know I cain't wear them kind," returned Aily, and, getting no answer, she went out, closing the door, while Lige sat on far into the night, his face hidden in his great toil-hardened hands.

Another day and night and still another passed in the same manner. Each morning Aily found breakfast left on the stove for her -- each day she noted an added gentleness in the manner of Lige toward herself and the children, and he was not out late again. On the afternoon of the fourth day she left off staring at the fire as in hopeless of ever solving the puzzle, and, going to the corner, brought out the hated shoes and sat down to put them on. Then it was that she felt the first pang of remorse, for in each shoe she found a new stocking; coarse and heavy, but new and clean, they made a very strong appeal to Aily. Running for a wash basin, she took off the ragged

ones she wore, and when she had soaped and washed her feet scrupulously, she put on the new ones and laced up the heavy shoes with almost the ghost of a smile.

Lige came in a few minutes late that night, carrying a package and with something akin to buoyancy in his step. He stopped short at the sight of a smoking supper on the stove and Aily hovering over it in a clean, much-mended dress. Then he went over, and, putting the package in her hands, almost boyishly bade her undo it.

Aily gave a little gasp of amazement as she discovered the contents of the bundle. She was holding the prettiest pair of shoes that the company store kept in stock --a pair that Aily had admired as something altogether out of her reach, and here was she not only with them in her possession, but Lige was trying to convince her that they were her very own. She tried to say something, but choked over the words, and, sinking into a chair, she bowed her head on the table and sobbed unrestrainedly.

It was then that Lige noticed for the first time the shoes she was wearing, and, stooping, he laid his rough hand tenderly on the bowed head and said anxiously:

"Hush, Aily girl; hush, Honey – it air all right."

"But I was so mean, Lige," sobbed Aily, "and these new shoes air too good fer folks like me."

"There ain't nothin' too good fer you, Honey, and you air goin' to keep these jest the same." Stooping, Lige drew the drab head awkwardly against his shoulder.

"It was like this, Honey," he went on: "I was in debt a little at the company store, and t'other night Knox as mad at somethin' and wouldn't let me have no decentlike shoes, but I bin workin' some extry fer two days after we cleared the dump, and I done bought and paid fer these purty ones; and, Aily, girl, maybe things ain't goin' to be so bad no more, fer I done got a job on the night engines at two dollars! What do you think o' that, Aily girl?"

Aily, hugging the pretty shoes tight, was looking at Lige with big, wet, excited eyes. "I think –" she said breathlessly – "I think you must have your supper right this minute, Lige; you and the children –while I fix somethin' nice'n extry fer you to carry erlong fer midnight."

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