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The Old Man.



THE OLD MAN.

I called him the Old Man, but he wuzn't an old man; he wuz a little boy—our fust one; 'nd his gran'ma, who'd had a heap of experience in sich matters, allowed that he wuz for looks as likely a child as she'd ever clapped eyes on. Bein' our fust, we sot our hearts on him, and Lizzie named him Willie, for that wuz the name she liked best, havin' had a brother Willyum killed in the war. But I never called him anything but the Old Man, and that name seemed to fit him, for he wuz one of your sollum babies,—alwuz thinkin' 'nd thinkin' 'nd thinkin', like he wuz a jedge, and when he laffed it wuzn't like other children's laffs, it wuz so sad-like.

Lizzie 'nd I made it up between us that when the Old Man growed up we'd send him to collige 'nd give him a lib'ril education, no matter though we had to sell the farm to do it. But we never cud exactly agree as to what we was goin' to make of him; Lizzie havin' her heart sot on his bein' a preacher like his gran'pa Baker, and I wantin' him to be a lawyer 'nd git rich out'n the corporations, like his uncle Wilson Barlow. So we never come to no definite conclusion as to what the Old Man wuz goin' to be bime by; but while we wuz thinkin' 'nd debatin' the Old Man kep' growin' 'nd growin', and all the time he wuz as serious 'nd sollum as a jedge.

Lizzie got jest wrapt up in that boy; toted him round ever'where 'nd never let on like it made her tired,—powerful big 'nd hearty child too, but heft warn't nothin' 'longside of Lizzie's love for the Old Man. When he caught the measles from Sairy Baxter's baby Lizzie sot up day 'nd night till he wuz well, holdin' his hands 'nd singin' songs to him, 'nd cryin' herse'f almost to death because she dassent give him cold water to drink when he called fr it. As for me, *my* heart wuz wrapt up in the Old Man, *too*, but, bein' a man, it wuzn't for me to show it like Lizzie, bein' a woman; and now that the Old Man is—wall, now that he has gone, it wouldn't do to let on how much I sot by him, for that would make Lizzie feel all the wuss.

Sometimes, when I think of it, it makes me sorry that I didn't show the Old Man some way how much I wuz wrapt up in him. Used to hold him in my lap 'nd make faces for him 'nd alder whistles 'nd things; sometimes I'd kiss him on his rosy cheek, when nobody wuz lookin'; oncet I tried to sing him a song, but it made him cry, 'nd I never tried my hand at singin' again. But, somehow, the Old Man didn't take to me like he took to his mother: would climb down outern my lap to git where Lizzie wuz; would hang on to her gownd, no matter what she wuz doin',—whether she was makin' bread, or sewin', or puttin' up pickles, it wuz alwuz the same to the Old Man; he wuzn't happy unless he wuz right there, clost beside his mother.

Most all boys, as I've heern tell, is proud to be round with their father, doin' what *he* does 'nd wearin' the kind of clothes *he* wears. But the Old Man wuz diffrent; he allowed that his mother wuz his best friend, 'nd the way he stuck to her—wall, it has alwuz been a great comfort to Lizzie to recollect it.

The Old Man had a kind of confidin' way with his mother. Every oncet in a while, when he'd be playin' by hisself in the front room, he'd call out, "Mudder, mudder;" and no matter where Lizzie wuz,—in the kitchen, or in the wood-shed, or in the yard, she'd answer: "What is it, darlin'?" Then the Old Man 'ud say: "Tum here, mudder, I wanter tell you sumfin'." Never could find out what the Old Man wanted to tell Lizzie; like 's not he didn't wanter tell her nothin'; may be he wuz lonesome 'nd jest wanted to feel that Lizzie wuz round. But that didn't make no diffrence; it wuz all the same to Lizzie. No matter where she wuz or what she wuz a-doin', jest as soon as the Old Man told her he wanted to tell her somethin' she dropped ever'thing else 'nd went straight to him. Then the Old Man would laff one of his sollum, sad-like laffs, 'nd put his arms round Lizzie's neck 'nd whisper—or pertend to whisper—somethin' in her ear, 'nd Lizzie would laff 'nd say, "Oh, what a nice secret we have atween us!" and then she would kiss the Old Man 'nd go back to her work.

Time changes all things,—all things but memory, nothin' can change *that*. Seems like it wuz only yesterday or the day before that I heern the Old Man callin', "Mudder, mudder, I wanter tell you sumfin'," and that I seen him put his arms around her neck 'nd whisper softly to her.

It had been an open winter, 'nd there wuz fever all around us. The Baxters lost their little girl, and Homer Thompson's children had all been taken down. Ev'ry night 'nd mornin' we prayed God to save our darlin'; but one evenin' when I come up from the wood lot, the Old Man wuz restless 'nd his face wuz hot 'nd he talked in his sleep. May be you've been through it yourself,—may be you've tended a child that's down with the fever; if so, may be you know what we went through, Lizzie 'nd me. The doctor shook his head one night when he come to see the Old Man; we knew what that meant. I went out-doors,—I couldn't stand it in the room there, with the Old Man seein' 'nd talkin' about things that the fever

made him see. I wuz too big a coward to stay 'nd help his mother to bear up; so I went out-doors 'nd brung in wood,—brung in wood enough to last all spring,—and then I sat down alone by the kitchen fire 'nd heard the clock tick 'nd watched the shadders flicker through the room.

I remember Lizzie's comin' to me and sayin': "He's breathin' strange-like, 'nd his little feet is cold as ice." Then I went into the front chamber where he lay. The day wuz breakin'; the cattle wuz lowin' outside; a beam of light come through the winder and fell on the Old Man's face,—perhaps it wuz the summons for which he waited and which shall some time come to me 'nd you. Leastwise the Old Man roused from his sleep 'nd opened up his big blue eyes. It wuzn't me he wanted to see.

"Mudder! mudder!" cried the Old Man, but his voice warn't strong 'nd clear like it used to be. "Mudder, where *be* you, mudder?"

Then, breshin' by me, Lizzie caught the Old Man up 'nd held him in her arms, like she had done a thousand times before.

"What is it, darlin'? *Here* I be," says Lizzie.

"Tum here," says the Old Man,—"tum here; I wanter tell you sumfin'."

The Old Man went to reach his arms around her neck 'nd whisper in her ear. But his arms fell limp and helpless-like, 'nd the Old Man's curly head drooped on his mother's breast.

1889.

Transcriber's Note

Page 219. 'her' changed to 'here'

[End of *The Old Man* by Eugene Field]