

THE PRODIGAL FATHER

I

Josiah Childs was ordinarily an ordinary-appearing, prosperous business man. He wore a sixty-dollar, business-man's suit, his shoes were comfortable and seemly and made from the current last, his tie, collars and cuffs were just what all prosperous business men wore, and an up-to-date, business-man's derby was his wildest adventure in head-gear. Oakland, California, is no sleepy country town, and Josiah Childs, as the leading grocer of a rushing Western metropolis of three hundred thousand, appropriately lived, acted, and dressed the part.

But on this morning, before the rush of custom began, his appearance at the store, while it did not cause a riot, was sufficiently startling to impair for half an hour the staff's working efficiency. He nodded pleasantly to the two delivery drivers loading their wagons for the first trip of the morning, and cast upward the inevitable, complacent glance at the sign that ran across the front of the building--CHILDS' CASH STORE. The lettering, not too large, was of dignified black and gold, suggestive of noble spices, aristocratic condiments, and everything of the best (which was no more than to be expected of a scale of prices ten per cent. higher than any other grocery in town). But what Josiah Childs did not see as he turned his back on the drivers and entered, was the helpless and mutual fall of surprise those two worthies

perpetrated on each other's necks. They clung together for support.

"Did you catch the kicks, Bill?" one moaned.

"Did you pipe the head-piece?" Bill moaned back.

"Now if he was goin' to a masquerade ball...."

"Or attendin' a reunion of the Rough Riders...."

"Or goin' huntin' bear...."

"Or swearin' off his taxes...."

"Instead of goin' all the way to the effete East--Monkton says he's going clear to Boston...."

The two drivers held each other apart at arm's length, and fell limply together again.

For Josiah Childs' outfit was all their actions connotated. His hat was a light fawn, stiff-rimmed John B. Stetson, circled by a band of Mexican stamped leather. Over a blue flannel shirt, set off by a drooping Windsor tie, was a rough-and-ready coat of large-ribbed corduroy. Pants of the same material were thrust into high-laced shoes of the sort worn by surveyors, explorers, and linemen.

A clerk at a near counter almost petrified at sight of his employer's bizarre rig. Monkton, recently elevated to the managership, gasped, swallowed, and maintained his imperturbable attentiveness. The lady bookkeeper, glancing down from her glass eyrie on the inside balcony, took one look and buried her giggles in the day book. Josiah Childs saw most of all this, but he did not mind. He was starting on his vacation, and his head and heart were buzzing with plans and anticipations of the most adventurous vacation he had taken in ten years. Under his eyelids burned visions of East Falls, Connecticut, and of all the home scenes he had been born to and brought up in. Oakland, he was thoroughly aware, was more modern than East Falls, and the excitement caused by his garb was only to be expected. Undisturbed by the sensation he knew he was creating among his employés, he moved about, accompanied by his manager, making last suggestions, giving final instructions, and radiating fond, farewell glances at all the loved details of the business he had built out of nothing.

He had a right to be proud of Childs' Cash Store. Twelve years before he had landed in Oakland with fourteen dollars and forty-three cents. Cents did not circulate so far West, and after the fourteen dollars were gone, he continued to carry the three pennies in his pocket for a weary while. Later, when he had got a job clerking in a small grocery for eleven dollars a week, and had begun sending a small monthly postal order to one, Agatha Childs, East Falls, Connecticut, he invested the three coppers in postage stamps. Uncle Sam could not reject his own lawful

coin of the realm.

Having spent all his life in cramped New England, where sharpness and shrewdness had been whetted to razor-edge on the harsh stone of meagre circumstance, he had found himself abruptly in the loose and free-and-easy West, where men thought in thousand-dollar bills and newsboys dropped dead at sight of copper cents. Josiah Childs bit like fresh acid into the new industrial and business conditions. He had vision. He saw so many ways of making money all at once, that at first his brain was in a whirl.

At the same time, being sane and conservative, he had resolutely avoided speculation. The solid and substantial called to him. Clerking at eleven dollars a week, he took note of the lost opportunities, of the openings for safe enterprise, of the countless leaks in the business. If, despite all this, the boss could make a good living, what couldn't he, Josiah Childs, do with his Connecticut training? It was like a bottle of wine to a thirsty hermit, this coming to the active, generous-spending West after thirty-five years in East Falls, the last fifteen of which had been spent in humdrum clerking in the humdrum East Falls general store. Josiah Childs' head buzzed with the easy possibilities he saw. But he did not lose his head. No detail was overlooked. He spent his spare hours in studying Oakland, its people, how they made their money, and why they spent it and where. He walked the central streets, watching the drift of the buying crowds, even counting them and compiling the statistics in various notebooks. He studied the general credit system of

the trade, and the particular credit systems of the different districts. He could tell to a dot the average wage or salary earned by the householders of any locality, and he made it a point of thoroughness to know every locality from the waterfront slums to the aristocratic Lake Merritt and Piedmont sections, from West Oakland, where dwelt the railroad employés, to the semi-farmers of Fruitvale at the opposite end of the city.

Broadway, on the main street and in the very heart of the shopping district, where no grocer had ever been insane enough to dream of establishing a business, was his ultimate selection. But that required money, while he had to start from the smallest of beginnings. His first store was on lower Filbert, where lived the nail-workers. In half a year, three other little corner groceries went out of business while he was compelled to enlarge his premises. He understood the principle of large sales at small profits, of stable qualities of goods, and of a square deal. He had glimpsed, also, the secret of advertising. Each week he set forth one article that sold at a loss to him. This was not an advertised loss, but an absolute loss. His one clerk prophesied impending bankruptcy when butter, that cost Childs thirty cents, was sold for twenty-five cents, when twenty-two-cent coffee was passed across the counter at eighteen cents. The neighbourhood housewives came for these bargains and remained to buy other articles that sold at a profit. Moreover, the whole neighbourhood came quickly to know Josiah Childs, and the busy crowd of buyers in his store was an attraction in itself.

But Josiah Childs made no mistake. He knew the ultimate foundation on which his prosperity rested. He studied the nail works until he came to know as much about them as the managing directors. Before the first whisper had stirred abroad, he sold his store, and with a modest sum of ready cash went in search of a new location. Six months later the nail works closed down, and closed down forever.

His next store was established on Adeline Street, where lived a comfortable, salaried class. Here, his shelves carried a higher-grade and a more diversified stock. By the same old method, he drew his crowd. He established a delicatessen counter. He dealt directly with the farmers, so that his butter and eggs were not only always dependable but were a shade better than those sold by the finest groceries in the city. One of his specialties was Boston baked beans, and so popular did it become that the Twin Cabin Bakery paid him better than handsomely for the privilege of taking it over. He made time to study the farmers, the very apples they grew, and certain farmers he taught how properly to make cider. As a side-line, his New England apple cider proved his greatest success, and before long, after he had invaded San Francisco, Berkeley, and Alameda, he ran it as an independent business.

But always his eyes were fixed on Broadway. Only one other intermediate move did he make, which was to as near as he could get to the Ashland Park Tract, where every purchaser of land was legally pledged to put up no home that should cost less than four thousand dollars. After that

came Broadway. A strange swirl had come in the tide of the crowd. The drift was to Washington Street, where real estate promptly soared while on Broadway it was as if the bottom had fallen out. One big store after another, as the leases expired, moved to Washington.

The crowd will come back, Josiah Childs said, but he said it to himself. He knew the crowd. Oakland was growing, and he knew why it was growing. Washington Street was too narrow to carry the increasing traffic. Along Broadway, in the physical nature of things, the electric cars, ever in greater numbers, would have to run. The realty dealers said that the crowd would never come back, while the leading merchants followed the crowd. And then it was, at a ridiculously low figure, that Josiah Childs got a long lease on a modern, Class A building on Broadway, with a buying option at a fixed price. It was the beginning of the end for Broadway, said the realty dealers, when a grocery was established in its erstwhile sacred midst. Later, when the crowd did come back, they said Josiah Childs was lucky. Also, they whispered among themselves that he had cleared at least fifty thousand on the transaction.

It was an entirely different store from his previous ones. There were no more bargains. Everything was of the superlative best, and superlative best prices were charged. He catered to the most expensive trade in town. Only those who could carelessly afford to pay ten per cent. more than anywhere else, patronised him, and so excellent was his service that they could not afford to go elsewhere. His horses and delivery wagons were more expensive and finer than any one else's in town. He

paid his drivers, and clerks, and bookkeepers higher wages than any other store could dream of paying. As a result, he got more efficient men, and they rendered him and his patrons a more satisfying service. In short, to deal at Childs' Cash Store became almost the infallible index of social status.

To cap everything, came the great San Francisco earthquake and fire, which caused one hundred thousand people abruptly to come across the Bay and live in Oakland. Not least to profit from so extraordinary a boom, was Josiah Childs. And now, after twelve years' absence, he was departing on a visit to East Falls, Connecticut. In the twelve years he had not received a letter from Agatha, nor had he seen even a photograph of his and Agatha's boy.

Agatha and he had never got along together. Agatha was masterful. Agatha had a tongue. She was strong on old-fashioned morality. She was unlovely in her rectitude. Josiah never could quite make out how he had happened to marry her. She was two years his senior, and had long ranked as an old maid. She had taught school, and was known by the young generation as the sternest disciplinarian in its experience. She had become set in her ways, and when she married it was merely an exchange of a number of pupils for one. Josiah had to stand the hectoring and nagging that thitherto had been distributed among many. As to how the marriage came about, his Uncle Isaac nearly hit it off one day when he said in confidence: "Josiah, when Agatha married you it was a case of marrying a struggling young man. I reckon you was overpowered. Or maybe

you broke your leg and couldn't get away."

"Uncle Isaac," Josiah answered, "I didn't break my leg. I ran my dangdest, but she just plum run me down and out of breath."

"Strong in the wind, eh?" Uncle Isaac chuckled.

"We've ben married five years now," Josiah agreed, "and I've never known her to lose it."

"And never will," Uncle Isaac added.

This conversation had taken place in the last days, and so dismal an outlook proved too much for Josiah Childs. Meek he was, under Agatha's firm tuition, but he was very healthy, and his promise of life was too long for his patience. He was only thirty-three, and he came of a long-lived stock. Thirty-three more years with Agatha and Agatha's nagging was too hideous to contemplate. So, between a sunset and a rising, Josiah Childs disappeared from East Falls. And from that day, for twelve years, he had received no letter from her. Not that it was her fault. He had carefully avoided letting her have his address. His first postal money orders were sent to her from Oakland, but in the years that followed he had arranged his remittances so that they bore the scattered postmarks of most of the states west of the Rockies.

But twelve years, and the confidence born of deserved success, had

softened his memories. After all, she was the mother of his boy, and it was incontestable that she had always meant well. Besides, he was not working so hard now, and he had more time to think of things besides his business. He wanted to see the boy, whom he had never seen and who had turned three before his father ever learned he was a father. Then, too, homesickness had begun to crawl in him. In a dozen years he had not seen snow, and he was always wondering if New England fruits and berries had not a finer tang than those of California. Through hazy vistas he saw the old New England life, and he wanted to see it again in the flesh before he died.

And, finally, there was duty. Agatha was his wife. He would bring her back with him to the West. He felt that he could stand it. He was a man, now, in the world of men. He ran things, instead of being run, and Agatha would quickly find it out. Nevertheless, he wanted Agatha to come to him for his own sake. So it was that he had put on his frontier rig. He would be the prodigal father, returning as penniless as when he left, and it would be up to her whether or not she killed the fatted calf. Empty of hand, and looking it, he would come back wondering if he could get his old job in the general store. Whatever followed would be Agatha's affair.

By the time he said good-bye to his staff and emerged on the sidewalk, five more of his delivery wagons were backed up and loading.

He ran his eye proudly over them, took a last fond glance at the

black-and-gold letters, and signalled the electric car at the corner.

II

He ran up to East Falls from New York. In the Pullman smoker he became acquainted with several business men. The conversation, turning on the West, was quickly led by him. As president of the Oakland Chamber of Commerce, he was an authority. His words carried weight, and he knew what he was talking about, whether it was Asiatic trade, the Panama Canal, or the Japanese coolie question. It was very exhilarating, this stimulus of respectful attention accorded him by these prosperous Eastern men, and before he knew it he was at East Falls.

He was the only person who alighted, and the station was deserted. Nobody was there expecting anybody. The long twilight of a January evening was beginning, and the bite of the keen air made him suddenly conscious that his clothing was saturated with tobacco smoke. He shuddered involuntarily. Agatha did not tolerate tobacco. He half-moved to toss the fresh-lighted cigar away, then it was borne in upon him that this was the old East Falls atmosphere overpowering him, and he resolved to combat it, thrusting the cigar between his teeth and gripping it with the firmness of a dozen years of Western resolution.

A few steps brought him into the little main street. The chilly, stilted aspect of it shocked him. Everything seemed frosty and pinched, just as the cutting air did after the warm balminess of California. Only several persons, strangers to his recollection, were abroad, and they favoured him with incurious glances. They were wrapped in an uncongenial and

frosty imperviousness. His first impression was surprise at his surprise. Through the wide perspective of twelve years of Western life, he had consistently and steadily discounted the size and importance of East Falls; but this was worse than all discounting. Things were more meagre than he had dreamed. The general store took his breath away. Countless myriads of times he had contrasted it with his own spacious emporium, but now he saw that in justice he had overdone it. He felt certain that it could not accommodate two of his delicatessen counters, and he knew that he could lose all of it in one of his storerooms.

He took the familiar turning to the right at the head of the street, and as he plodded along the slippery walk he decided that one of the first things he must do was to buy sealskin cap and gloves. The thought of sleighing cheered him for a moment, until, now on the outskirts of the village, he was sanitarily perturbed by the adjacency of dwelling houses and barns. Some were even connected. Cruel memories of bitter morning chores oppressed him. The thought of chapped hands and chilblains was almost terrifying, and his heart sank at sight of the double storm-windows, which he knew were solidly fastened and unraisable, while the small ventilating panes, the size of ladies' handkerchiefs, smote him with sensations of suffocation. Agatha'll like California, he thought, calling to his mind visions of roses in dazzling sunshine and the wealth of flowers that bloomed the twelve months round.

And then, quite illogically, the years were bridged and the whole leaden weight of East Falls descended upon him like a damp sea fog. He fought

it from him, thrusting it off and aside by sentimental thoughts on the "honest snow," the "fine elms," the "sturdy New England spirit," and the "great homecoming." But at sight of Agatha's house he wilted. Before he knew it, with a recrudescing guilty pang, he had tossed the half-smoked cigar away and slackened his pace until his feet dragged in the old lifeless, East Falls manner. He tried to remember that he was the owner of Childs' Cash Store, accustomed to command, whose words were listened to with respect in the Employers' Association, and who wielded the gavel at the meetings of the Chamber of Commerce. He strove to conjure visions of the letters in black and gold, and of the string of delivery wagons backed up to the sidewalk. But Agatha's New England spirit was as sharp as the frost, and it travelled to him through solid house-walls and across the intervening hundred yards.

Then he became aware that despite his will he had thrown the cigar away. This brought him an awful vision. He saw himself going out in the frost to the woodshed to smoke. His memory of Agatha he found less softened by the lapse of years than it had been when three thousand miles intervened. It was unthinkable. No; he couldn't do it. He was too old, too used to smoking all over the house, to do the woodshed stunt now. And everything depended on how he began. He would put his foot down. He would smoke in the house that very night ... in the kitchen, he feebly amended. No, by George, he would smoke now. He would arrive smoking. Mentally imprecating the cold, he exposed his bare hands and lighted another cigar. His manhood seemed to flare up with the match. He would show her who was boss. Right from the drop of the hat he would show her.

Josiah Childs had been born in this house. And it was long before he was born that his father had built it. Across the low stone fence, Josiah could see the kitchen porch and door, the connected woodshed, and the several outbuildings. Fresh from the West, where everything was new and in constant flux, he was astonished at the lack of change.

Everything was as it had always been. He could almost see himself, a boy, doing the chores. There, in the woodshed, how many cords of wood had he bucksawed and split! Well, thank the Lord, that was past.

The walk to the kitchen showed signs of recent snow-shovelling. That had been one of his tasks. He wondered who did it now, and suddenly remembered that his own son must be twelve. In another moment he would have knocked at the kitchen door, but the skreek of a bucksaw from the woodshed led him aside. He looked in and saw a boy hard at work. Evidently, this was his son. Impelled by the wave of warm emotion that swept over him, he all but rushed in upon the lad. He controlled himself with an effort.

"Father here?" he asked curtly, though from under the stiff brim of his John B. Stetson he studied the boy closely.

Sizable for his age, he thought. A mite spare in the ribs maybe, and that possibly due to rapid growth. But the face strong and pleasing and the eyes like Uncle Isaac's. When all was said, a darn good sample.

"No, sir," the boy answered, resting on the saw-buck.

"Where is he?"

"At sea," was the answer.

Josiah Childs felt a something very akin to relief and joy tingle through him. Agatha had married again--evidently a seafaring man. Next, came an ominous, creepy sensation. Agatha had committed bigamy. He remembered Enoch Arden, read aloud to the class by the teacher in the old schoolhouse, and began to think of himself as a hero. He would do the heroic. By George, he would. He would sneak away and get the first train for California. She would never know.

But there was Agatha's New England morality, and her New England conscience. She received a regular remittance. She knew he was alive. It was impossible that she could have done this thing. He groped wildly for a solution. Perhaps she had sold the old home, and this boy was somebody else's boy.

"What is your name?" Josiah asked.

"Johnnie," came the reply.

"Last name I mean?"

"Childs, Johnnie Childs."

"And your father's name?--first name?"

"Josiah Childs."

"And he's away at sea, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

This set Josiah wondering again.

"What kind of a man is he?"

"Oh, he's all right--a good provider, Mom says. And he is. He always sends his money home, and he works hard for it, too, Mom says. She says he always was a good worker, and he's better'n other men she ever saw. He don't smoke, or drink, or swear, or do anything he oughtn't. And he never did. He was always that way, Mom says, and she knew him all her life before ever they got married. He's a very kind man, and never hurts anybody's feelings. Mom says he's the most considerate man she ever knew."

Josiah's heart went weak. Agatha had done it after all--had taken a second husband when she knew her first was still alive. Well, he had learned charity in the West, and he could be charitable. He would go

quietly away. Nobody would ever know. Though it was rather mean of her, the thought flashed through him, that she should go on cashing his remittances when she was married to so model and steady-working a seafaring husband who brought his wages home. He cudgelled his brains in an effort to remember such a man out of all the East Falls men he had known.

"What's he look like?"

"Don't know. Never saw him. He's at sea all the time. But I know how tall he is. Mom says I'm goin' to be bigger'n him, and he was five feet eleven. There's a picture of him in the album. His face is thin, and he has whiskers."

A great illumination came to Josiah. He was himself five feet eleven. He had worn whiskers, and his face had been thin in those days. And Johnnie had said his father's name was Josiah Childs. He, Josiah, was this model husband who neither smoked, swore, nor drank. He was this seafaring man whose memory had been so carefully shielded by Agatha's forgiving fiction. He warmed toward her. She must have changed mightily since he left. He glowed with penitence. Then his heart sank as he thought of trying to live up to this reputation Agatha had made for him. This boy with the trusting blue eyes would expect it of him. Well, he'd have to do it. Agatha had been almighty square with him. He hadn't thought she had it in her.

The resolve he might there and then have taken was doomed never to be, for he heard the kitchen door open to give vent to a woman's nagging, irritable voice.

"Johnnie!--you!" it cried.

How often had he heard it in the old days: "Josiah!--you!" A shiver went through him. Involuntarily, automatically, with a guilty start, he turned his hand back upward so that the cigar was hidden. He felt himself shrinking and shrivelling as she stepped out on the stoop. It was his unchanged wife, the same shrew wrinkles, with the same sour-drooping corners to the thin-lipped mouth. But there was more sourness, an added droop, the lips were thinner, and the shrew wrinkles were deeper. She swept Josiah with a hostile, withering stare.

"Do you think your father would stop work to talk to tramps?" she demanded of the boy, who visibly quailed, even as Josiah.

"I was only answering his questions," Johnnie pleaded doggedly but hopelessly. "He wanted to know--"

"And I suppose you told him," she snapped. "What business is it of his prying around? No, and he gets nothing to eat. As for you, get to work at once. I'll teach you, idling at your chores. Your father wa'n't like that. Can't I ever make you like him?"

Johnnie bent his back, and the bucksaw resumed its protesting skreek. Agatha surveyed Josiah sourly. It was patent she did not recognise him.

"You be off," she commanded harshly. "None of your snooping around here."

Josiah felt the numbness of paralysis creeping over him. He moistened his lips and tried to say something, but found himself bereft of speech.

"You be off, I say," she rasped in her high-keyed voice, "or I'll put the constable after you."

Josiah turned obediently. He heard the door slam as he went down the walk. As in a nightmare he opened the gate he had opened ten thousand times and stepped out on the sidewalk. He felt dazed. Surely it was a dream. Very soon he would wake up with a sigh of relief. He rubbed his forehead and paused indecisively. The monotonous complaint of the bucksaw came to his ears. If that boy had any of the old Childs spirit in him, sooner or later he'd run away. Agatha was beyond the endurance of human flesh. She had not changed, unless for the worse, if such a thing were possible. That boy would surely run for it, maybe soon. Maybe now.

Josiah Childs straightened up and threw his shoulders back. The great-spirited West, with its daring and its carelessness of consequences when mere obstacles stand in the way of its desire, flamed

up in him. He looked at his watch, remembered the time table, and spoke to himself, solemnly, aloud. It was an affirmation of faith:

"I don't care a hang about the law. That boy can't be crucified. I'll give her a double allowance, four times, anything, but he goes with me. She can follow on to California if she wants, but I'll draw up an agreement, in which what's what, and she'll sign it, and live up to it, by George, if she wants to stay. And she will," he added grimly. "She's got to have somebody to nag."

He opened the gate and strode back to the woodshed door. Johnnie looked up, but kept on sawing.

"What'd you like to do most of anything in the world?" Josiah demanded in a tense, low voice.

Johnnie hesitated, and almost stopped sawing. Josiah made signs for him to keep it up.

"Go to sea," Johnnie answered. "Along with my father."

Josiah felt himself trembling.

"Would you?" he asked eagerly.

"Would I!"

The look of joy on Johnnie's face decided everything.

"Come here, then. Listen. I'm your father. I'm Josiah Childs. Did you ever want to run away?"

Johnnie nodded emphatically.

"That's what I did," Josiah went on. "I ran away." He fumbled for his watch hurriedly. "We've just time to catch the train for California. I live there now. Maybe Agatha, your mother, will come along afterward. I'll tell you all about it on the train. Come on."

He gathered the half-frightened, half-trusting boy into his arms for a moment, then, hand in hand, they fled across the yard, out of the gate, and down the street. They heard the kitchen door open, and the last they heard was:

"Johnnie!--you! Why ain't you sawing? I'll attend to your case directly!"