HOME THEY BROUGHT HER WARRIOR: A STORY: PATIENCE BEVIER COLE

It was nine o'clock when Mrs. Grout touched bottom in her capacious ironing basket, and that was pretty quick work, considering that the basket had been level full of little dampened rolls when she put the irons over at four that morning. Mrs. Grout heaved a sigh of weariness as she shook out the last damp piece, a waist with a foolish amount of tucking and lace insertion, flung it over her ironing-board, snatched a hot iron from the stove and bent to her work with a feverish energy. She was dog-tired, but it would never do to slack up now. She was glad she had scrubbed the kitchen the night before, after the children were a-bed. She glanced while changing irons, with approval and satisfaction, at the clean floor, the snowy, starched curtain at the window, the general air of neatness and freshness about the tiny flat kitchen. Annie Grout dearly loved cleanliness and order, and toiled heroically to keep her little three-roomed home spick and span.

She felt a little glow of pride, too, as she lifted her eyes from the ironing-board long enough to survey the freshly painted walls. She had wrangled bitterly with the superintendent to obtain that new green paint, and though it had been nuisance enough to keep up her ironing and rescue the baby hourly from the paint buckets, those two days that the painter had invaded her little domain, the result was brilliant and soul-satisfying beyond belief.

She was so happy this hot, July morning, that she burst into song unconsciously, in spite of her weariness. "Love me—and the wor-rld—is mine!" she sang, in shrill, triumphant joy, flipping the last garment, finished, from the board, and tossing it lightly over a line stretched across one end of the room, where twenty-six other equally crisp, fresh, snowy waists, dangled jauntily, each on its separate coat-hanger. Mrs. Grout swept the irons to the back of the stove with one swift stroke, scurried the ironing-board into its place behind the kitchen door, and sank into a chair, gasping. There were remnants of the children's breakfast still on the table. Mrs. Grout poured herself a cup of cold tea and munched a bit of roll. Her energetic labors had long since burned up all stimulating effects of the meal which she had snatched, standing, three hours before.

"My lands, I'm that tired I don't know what to do first," she mused aloud, and straightway sprang up, cleared off the table, brought a pile of newspapers and a saucer of pins, and began to fold the waists, tenderly, so as not to spoil their dainty crispness. She piled them lightly into the big empty clothes-basket, donned a shabby hat, cast off her apron, and staggered down the stairs to the street with the
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basket. There she found the children, Danny the creeper, Benny the toddler, Clarence the swaggerer, and anxious little Annie, aged seven, the oldest of all, a homely miniature copy of her mother, with a plain, freckled, serious face above a thin, under-sized body, already drooping, round-shouldered, from over-heavy burdens. She sat now, alert and worried, on the stone step of the entrance, jiggling the baby in the broken-sprunged old carriage, watching the play of the other two children, occasionally adding her shrill cry of warning or admonition to the din of traffic which roared up and down Amsterdam Avenue. She sprang up at sight of her mother and clutched the woman’s skirts apprehensively.

“He ain’t comin’ just yet, is he?” she faltered.

“Lands no, I hope not, till I get you kids slicked up. Here, take ’im,” she caught up the fat baby, hugged him ecstatically, plumped him down in little Annie’s lap and hoisted her basket atop the ramshackle carriage.

“Watch ’em good, honey!” she cautioned the child, and away she sped, southward along the busy street. It was an irritation to have to deliver laundry on this, of all days, the day that Dan was coming home. But business is business, and painstaking Annie Grout never dreamed of allowing herself a half-holiday or of disappointing her clients. “My young ladies,” she always called them proudly, the Teachers’ College girls, those delightful creatures who always had more soiled waists for her, no matter how often she called at Whittier Hall. Every soiled waist meant two little silver dimes for Annie Grout’s shabby pocketbook, and during the year of Dan’s absence she had made, as she herself had told him, “a grand living.” Not that she had told him how grand! She wanted, of course, to allay any natural anxiety he might feel over her fate and the children’s; but not for worlds would she have confessed how very successful she had been in paying old debts, and getting a new foothold. Their fortunes had been at a pretty low ebb the year before, when Dan left, with the new baby but a few months old, Annie out of work for a half year past, the little tenement shorn of everything that wasn’t too shabby to pawn or sell, and a certain wolf, famous in song and story and very justly feared, grinning at them with more unpleasant nearness than ever before in all the years of their marriage. With affairs at such alarming low tide, it had seemed at first a crushing blow to be bereft of Dan. But plucky Annie Grout had wasted no time in lamentations. Before Dan, in his distant retreat, had grown accustomed to his new clothes and new rules of conduct, his wife was already hard at work over her tubs, washing the first batch of waists from the summer-school students.
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Within a fortnight she had become abnormally popular as a laundress, both for the excellence and cheapness of her work. At the end of a month she had bargained with Mrs. Timmons, across the hall, to do the washing, and was devoting herself wholly to the delightful task of ironing from twelve to fourteen hours a day.

Now, pushing her creaky old carriage swiftly along, Mrs. Grout’s heart swelled with honest pride to recall all she had achieved in one year. Not only were old debts all paid and old Lares, scattered at a dozen pawn shops, restored, but the children had enjoyed unusual and almost unbelievable quantities of food and new clothing, and there had even been enough financial margin for Annie to attain several of her heart’s desires in the way of lace curtains, a flamboyant “Smyrna” rug (whereon a vivid yellow lion stalked majestically across a field of burning crimson), and a patent swing rocker of astonishing and, to the uninitiated, dangerous motion. But all these extravagances and luxuries had been unmentioned during Annie Grout’s wifely visits to Dan; they were to surprise and delight him upon his return. She had pictured that home-coming to herself dozens of times. He would swing her up off her feet to kiss her, in the old way. He had always said it gave him a crick in the back to stoop over. Next he would catch up each child in turn to bestow a fatherly embrace, exclaiming over the growth and improvement of each. And then he would look about, and see the results of her industry and thrift, would sit down to a feast of all the dishes he liked best, would praise her, perhaps even caress her; and they would plan for their future and forget the lonely year of separation, for it had been a lonely year.

Annie Grout hadn’t minded the hard work, but oh, she had pined for Dan. She had worshiped him since the day when he had carelessly picked her, a slip of a girl scarcely larger than little Annie, from under the noses of two great rushing delivery horses.

“Fighting Dan” they had called him then, the gang of half-grown hoodlums who followed where he led. “Fighting Dan” he was still, of an ugly, brawling disposition these later years, but still splendid and gallant in Annie’s faithful, adoring eyes. Women are so reluctant to cease admiring their men.

For loyal Annie the year of absence had blotted out many harsh memories. Forgotten were all Dan’s minor imperfections of character and of conduct; and daily his virtues had been magnified in Annie’s loving reminiscences, until, indeed, it seemed a wonder that so rare a spirit as Dan had ever dwelt on Blackwell’s lonely isle in any other capacity than chaplain.

Well, it was over now! This was the month, and this the happy
morn! In another hour or two he would be at home. This thought lent wings to her tired feet, sped her to her destination, and hustled her back along the hot sidewalks with her empty chariot. She paused once or twice on the homeward journey to attend to some last bits of provisioning for the feast, and drew up at the foot of her own stair quite flushed and breathless.

"Come on quick, Annie, they ain't a minute to lose now," she panted, gathering her recent purchases in one arm and taking the baby in the other. "Get the kids an' bring 'em along." She sped up the stairway and into her tiny flat. The child, Annie, corralled her brothers and followed, slowly. She seemed puzzled by her mother's joyous excitement, which she plainly did not share.

In the bedroom, Mrs. Grout was spreading out on the beds four piles of garments, all unmistakably new. She turned and regarded her offspring with shining eyes.

"I'll do you first, Annie. I can trust you to stay clean, an' help watch the others." She pounced upon the solemn little girl, stripped her of her faded gingham dress, scrubbed the anxious, pinched face with the wet end of a towel, wiped it with the dry end, and spun the child around, to unraid and brush out the four mercilessly tight pig-tails into which the straight limp locks had been braided the night before.

"Now be sure an' ketch up the ends o' yer sash an' kind o' pull 'em around whenever you go to set down," she warned, when the child, very crumpy as to her hair, and looking very much awed in her new finery, was finally set free. "Set in the front room, darlin', while I do the boys, now." She fell upon the astonished and loudly protesting Clarence, before he could escape. Soon all four children were dressed, and drawn up in imposing array, in the bright, diminutive parlor, and their mother, flushed and panting from her swift labors, surveyed them proudly.

"You certainly look grand, if I do say it myself," she said, taking off her apron. "Don't let 'em grab that tidy, Annie," she added to that small person, who was once more in charge of the baby, and in an agony lest he touch her flowing hair or snatch her new ribbons.

"Now I'm goin' to leave ye go downstairs ag'in, 'cause it's eleven o'clock an' he's likely to be comin' any minute now; but fer the land's sake don't git mussed, er don't set down on no dirty steps, er don't eat anythin', er don't play, er don't do anythin' but keep clean an' ready. What makes you look so scared, Annie?"

"'Cause I am scared," confessed Annie, reluctantly.

"W'y, what you scared at?"

"At——himm." The child's voice was almost inaudible.
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"W'y, what a thing to say!" cried Mrs. Grout, good-naturedly. "'Fraid o' yer own papa! I guess you ain't 'fraid. I guess you jest don't remember 'im, bein' gone a whole year this way. Now run on down, an' be careful to keep clean." They filed out, immaculate, self-conscious, miserable. At the door the little girl, sagging under the weight of the heavy baby, turned.

"I ain't forgot him," she said gravely. "I remember him, mamma." Then she went down the stairs.

"If that kid don't beat all!" ejaculated the mother, flashing about, putting the last touches upon her festive preparations, and running to the front window every minute or two to lean out and look down the street. She, too, had new raiment, a polka-dotted lawn of much crispness. This she hurriedly got into, after curling her front hair and putting in her "rat" for the first time in more than a year. Then she fell to work joyfully to get the grand dinner. She had been prodigal in her expenditures, and there was an array of foods that would have daunted an ostrich: corned beef and cabbage boiling madly on the stove, pickled pigs' feet, a watermelon and sliced cucumbers cooling delightfully in the ice-box; onions were sliced ready to fry, potatoes were baking in the oven, a juicy blueberry pie stood ready for Dan's knife and spoon; in all, it was a feast to delight any man, to say nothing of a man who had subsisted on Blackwell's colorless fare for a twelvemonth.

At eleven-thirty all was in readiness, the table set with resplendent new red table-cloth, the foods ready to be whisked onto the plates, the pitcher ready for Annie to run out for the beer. Mrs. Grout folded her apron on the front window-sill, and regardless of the midday sun beating down upon her, leaned there to watch. Her heart had begun to beat violently now, and although she was unaware of it, her happy excitement was fast becoming nervousness.

The twelve o'clock whistles sounded, and her nervousness increased. She had expected Dan by half past eleven at the latest, and now she began to worry for fear something had happened. She went downstairs and got the children, who still presented an appearance sufficiently festive and neat, thanks to poor little Annie's agonizing care. She hated to disturb the splendors of the table, set for Dan; but the children were clamorously hungry, as well as hot and cross. So she spread an apron on the floor, set them down upon it, and fed them, picnic style, with a good deal of apprehension lest Dan arrive before she got their sticky hands and faces washed again. The hot foods were long since cooked, and set aside to wait. Annie Grout was in great perturbation about keeping them warm. The baby dozed off to sleep and she put him in the bedroom, and sent the children down
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to the street again. By one o’clock her anxiety had grown into an acute alarm, and she joined the children downstairs. It was a relief just to be among people, to talk to fat Mrs. Heinz, who kept the delicatessen, to scold the children for getting dirty.

Along about two o’clock, old Bill Christy came limping by. He stopped at sight of Annie Grout, shifted the wad of tobacco in his cheek and remarked affably, “Yer man’s looking fine, ain’t ’e?”

“Oh—did you see him? Where’s ’e at?” cried Annie.

“Down to Mooney’s place,” informed old Bill Christy. “Him an’ Flannery an’ Jawn McCord an’ a few others. They was all to meet ’im whin the boat landed, an’ they’re bringin’ ’im home in state, stoppin’ at ev’ry saloon along One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street from Third Avynoo to Amsterdam, he-he-he!”

Bill Christy had a caustic vein, and an unpleasant sniggering appreciation of his own wit that Annie Grout had always particularly hated. He seemed diabolic now, a sinister old prophet and messenger of evil. It made her sick at heart to hear that already Dan was with his old cronies, the roistering, brawling, drinking crowd with whom he had spent most of his time and all his intermittent and meager earnings. Why hadn’t it occurred to her that the old gang would be expecting him, actually waiting for him! She had suggested meeting him herself, on her last visit to him two weeks before, but he had advised against it. She wondered, with quick suspicion, whether he had known then that “the boys” planned to meet him and celebrate his return.

She left the children playing on the sidewalk and dragged herself back up to her rooms, where the baby still slept in the hot bedroom. She sat down in the kitchen where the stiff new red table-cloth mocked her, and the postponed feast grew stale, for the hot dishes were all cold by now, and the cold viands (her ten cents’ worth of ice having melted) were growing warm. Annie Grout folded her little red tired calloused hands in her lap and waited. The small clean room had lost its charm, her crisp lawn dress was beginning to look limp, and down on the street, she knew very well, the boys were again happy and disheveled and dirty, while even careful little Annie’s toilet had lost its pristine freshness. Her celebration was all a failure, sacrificed to that other celebration of “the boys”! The patient, downcast creature there in the tidy kitchen knew that she was supremely wretched, but quite failed to recognize the old familiarity of her plight. Just so had she waited, timorous and sick with apprehension, hundreds of times before. She felt no bitterness toward Dan, the beloved, but just a despairing rage at “the boys” for detaining him.

The long hot afternoon wore away somehow. The baby woke,
hot and sticky and cross. The children came up occasionally for
drinks and "pieces" and she made half-hearted attempts at restoring
their festive aspect, but they looked, as she admitted, like picnickers
returning from a hard day at Coney. Even Annie's sash, which the
child had tried to guard with jealous care, had suffered grievous hurt
when one Abie Steinberger had shied an over-ripe peach at Clarence.

At six o'clock old Bill Christy, passing by, sent up word by little
Annie that "They've got as far as Thompson's place now, and onless
the human stommick can be stretched indefinite, he otta be home
afore midnight, 'cause he's most full now."

Annie Grout gnashed her teeth in helpless wrath. She knew
every man, woman and child along the block was on the qui vive for
Dan's home-coming, and her proud heart burned to think that the
other women were probably pitying her—as indeed they were. She
marched downstairs with a fine assumption of indifference, collected
her tired, drabbed brood with cool deliberation, passed the time of
day with Mrs. Tulley and remarked upon the heat to Mrs. Donahue,
and retreated once more to the flat upstairs.

There wasn't any use in trying longer to keep up the semblance
of festivity. She set the children at the table for their supper, put
the food on, and let them gorge themselves as they chose. Wee
Annie alone seemed to notice and share her mother's depression.
She ate nervously, and afterward, on her way out, following the
others for more play in the street, she stopped to lay a timid hand on
her mother's knee.

"It's just like it used to be, ain't it?" she asked earnestly. "I
remember. It was allus this way when he used to live here before." Her little old sober face was close to her mother's. She breathed a
tiny sigh, and her small plain features settled into lines of patient
submission. Annie Grout might almost have been looking into a
mirror, so like her own was the sad little face into which she gazed.

"Us women have a pretty hard time of it, I guess," concluded the
child gravely, and went out.

Half an hour later she burst in again where the woman sat rocking
the baby.

"He's—he's 'most here," the child panted. "They're bringin'
him. Oh mamma—I jest wish we could run away quick an' lay down
somewheres an' die!"

They came lurching heavily up the long flight of tenement stairs,
and appeared at the door of Annie Grout's little flat, "Fighting Dan,"
home from doing his year's time on the Island for his last brawl,
swaggering Mike Flannery and John McCord, all of them pretty
unsteady.
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“Well, we brought 'im home to ye, Mis' Grout,” announced Flannery jocosely, “an' if anybody was to ast ye, ye can be tellin' 'em we're goin' to fix that damn cop that got 'im in, too. Sure we are, Danny ole boy! Well, Jawn, we mi'z well be goin' on. See ye first thing in the mornin', Dan.” The escort lurched down the stairs, leaving Dan face to face with Annie.

Dan was of the type that grows surly, not silly, when drunk. And he was drunk now. He stood sagging up against the wall, dull, sullen, threatening.

With almost incredible swiftness and tact (considering that she had had no practice for a whole year) Annie Grout slipped back into her old conciliating manner.

“My, you're hot, Dan,” she said by way of greeting, turning to lead him in. “Come set here by the winda an' cool off.”

Dan lowered his great hulking body into the new swing rocker, kicked off his shoes, and sat, inert, sweating, breathing heavily.

The baby, who had been on the point of dozing off when his parent returned, began to wail fretfully. July is pretty hard on tenement babies' nerves, anyhow. Dan, who even in his cups had never been accused of any paucity of invective, roused himself sufficiently to request silence upon the part of the infant. For the first time the tears welled into tired Annie's eyes. A woman may forgive slights upon her own charms, her cooking, her attire, her every effort to please, but upon her baby—never! Annie Grout hugged the fat baby to her flat breast, wiped her tears on his little limp dress, and hustled him off to the child Annie, who lurked, miserable and afraid, in the hallway. Then she came back and sat down in the front room, which Dan seemed wholly to fill—his great sweltering body, his coat flung on a chair, his shoes sprawling on the floor, his drunken breath polluting the air. And it had all been so neat and shining to receive him!

After a while he roused a little, noticed her sitting there.

“Come here!” he commanded gruffly.

She came to his side, like a faithful dumb creature to its master. He pulled her down onto his lap, kissed her rudely. He was too drunk to have any personal feeling for her. But at his stupid caress all the wife in her leapt to love again, all the mother to condoning pity.

“My lands, Dan!” she cried happily. “It's jest grand to get you home again.”