

GUARDIAN SHORT STORY

On Thin Ice.

By JAMES NORTON.

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When the letter from Aunt Salina was received announcing that she would arrive on a visit the next week, mother and daughter looked at each other for a long minute, then the former said:

"We must keep it from her."

"If we don't she will certainly talk right up to the deacon and make things worse than ever. Your Aunt Salina is not afraid of any living man. You just act as natural as you can, and don't let her catch on to a thing."

And yet five or six days later, when the guest in question arrived, she had not been in the house half an hour before she set her jaw and said to Mrs. Thompson, her widowed sister:

"Now, Ruth, while Mary is upstairs I want to hear all about it. There's some skulduggery been going on here, and I want to get at the root of it. It's no use to put on that innocent look, for I'm a woman that can't be deceived."

Then the widow had to fix it up. Her daughter Mary, now twenty years old, had been "keeping company" with Deacon Bromley's son James, and the marriage day had once been set. Deacon Bromley had then favored the match. The widow had a fine farm adjoining his, and if she took forty acres off of hers and the forty off of his the young folks would have a good start in life. She as well as he could also contribute considerable cash toward building the new house and barn. Yes, it would be a good match all around, and everything was going swimmingly when the deacon took in a summer boarder.

He was what might be called a half cash boarder—that is, for two weeks he paid half the price of board and lodging in cash and the other in information which changed the deacon's nature all over. The boarder had made a study of family trees, so he asserted, and after scratching his head and consulting the signs in the family almanac for a fortnight he announced that the Bromleys were direct descendants of Lord Bromley of England, while Lord Bromley himself was a grand-nephew of William the Conqueror.

The deacon had always been rather a stiff necked man toward the community, and this information added to his pride. He did not question the stranger's information, and after a time it began to get in its work. He wasn't rich, but he had the blue blood in him, and that was even better. In four weeks he was walking as if he had a poker down his back, and at the end of four more he said to his son:

"James, there is nothing that hurts a family more than a misalliance. What is the world going to say when it hears that a Bromley has married a Thompson?"

"Are you talking about Mary Thompson, father?" asked James.

"I am. I am seeing things a great deal different from what I did a few weeks ago. Where did the Thompsons spring from? Who are they? Was the first Thompson a lord or duke or only a cooper?"

"But, you know, I'm engaged to Mary Thompson, and you know that the family is respectable. No one can say that there has been anything against them, from grandfather down."

"Um, um! None of them has been in jail that I know of, but I ask again, 'Who are the Thompsons?' We know who the Bromleys sprang from, and I cannot consent to any plebeian alliance. Until I know who the first Thompson was I shall feel justified in opposing this match. It will be no use whatever to argue the matter with me. I am determined to preserve the purity of our blood as it has come down to us."

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James did not cease to call at the widow's, but it was not long before she realized that he had something on his mind, and he was finally prevailed upon to state it. He held in direct opposition to his father, but that did not satisfy the insulted mother or the high spirited daughter. Strained relations followed. Such was the situation when Aunt Salina arrived. She listened to the story with a grim look on her face, and when it was finished she said:

"Ruth, you were never any good at handling cases like this, and you must leave things to me. I know all about the Thompsons and the Bromleys, too, and I've heard a thing or two about William the Conqueror since I went to Michigan to live. You just keep out of the fuss and let me settle it my own way."

"But you won't go to the deacon and call him an old idiot?" protested the widow.

"I can't tell what I'll do. Providence generally takes a hand in cases like this, and I shall depend a good deal on Providence. We won't say a word to Mary about it."

Providence didn't wait long before taking a hand. December had come. Instead of being married on Christmas day, as the young couple had hoped for, they were as good as estranged.

Between the house and the barn was a goose pond of a considerable depth, and, though this had been frozen over solid for two or three weeks, a recent south wind had gone far to weaken the ice, and the hired man had skittered the pond in going to and fro.

On the forenoon of the very next day after the story had been told Deacon Bromley came walking toward the widow's house. He was taking a short cut across the fields, and when he reached the pond he stepped boldly on the ice. It began to crack, and, though

(Continued on page 5).

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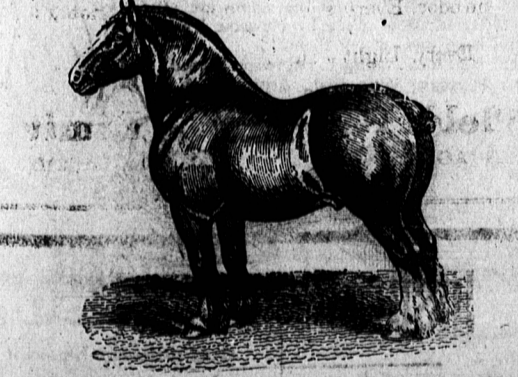
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