

The Prodigal's Mother

Elouise Bell

"Pray you, friend, sit, sit. Take this new cushion—
goose-down and very soft.
You'll not mind if I go on about my weaving?
Yes, it's as you say: a household this large
sometimes imprisons us
As the meanest hovel cannot do.
Within, without, the kitchens, the flocks,
Carding and weaving, buying and selling—
And of course *you* know both sides of the loom about
Servants! Which is worse: doing without them,
Or dealing with them?
Well, I tell you something, Sariah—
You and I have shared so much,
Shall I hide any kernel from you now?—
I tell you this: I am rapacious for the work,
These ashen days.
I devour whole mornings in the vineyards,
Outstripping the fastest girl we've got
(And she knows it too, and pouts);
I tear at the afternoon's work with both hands,
Till the sweat drops like water wrung out of a cloth
from the dye vats.
Late into the evening I gnaw at the shreds of whatever labor
I can sniff out, in storehouse or smokehouse,
granary or garden.
And still the hunger is there, the hollow gapes.
"No. No, nothing from him yet.
Of course we hope. Every day we hope.
In fact, when the last caravan went north,
I weighted our agent's palm with—
Well, it wasn't copper—
To seek out any news of him, any *scrap*.
Nothing.

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"Excuse me, what did you—
Oh, the other one?
Fine, fine, I trust. Hard at it with his father
 in the fields.
A sober boy, that one; you'd almost call him sullen,
Not at all like—
Well! Here, have some honey-cakes, fresh as fresh.
Baked them myself before this day was full-term born.
Sariah, oldest friend, no mock honey ever oozed
 from your lips,
So tell me: where was I amiss?
If only someone would tell me!
This endless chasing after 'maybe's'
Like some dulled ox chained to his round—
I fear I will end by wandering the hills,
A madwoman in shreds and shards!
Maybe I didn't teach him well enough
In earliest days, when he tugged about my skirts
(Always crying for dates and figs, he was).
But goodness knows, I did my best!
'Wine is a mocker,' I recited by day and by night,
Before the boy was scarcely weaned.
'He that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man,'
 I quoted from Solomon.
'Honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the
 firstfruits of all thine increase,'—
Have we ever done other in this household, I ask you?
Or maybe we were too hard on him, these recent years.
A new-sprung man loves more than fertile soil
 and swelling harvests!
Maybe I should have begged some favors from his father—
A journey to distant lands goes far to slake
 youthful thirsts.
Tell me, Sariah, I implore you!
What did I *do*? What did I *not*?

"What's that? Sleep? Oh, woman, don't wish sleep on me!
Each night shows me more horrors than he could live out
 in a lifetime,
Yet in my dreams, I must live them all—must see him
Freezing and frying,

Limp with starvation and bloated with wine,
Miserably alone and miserably companied—
His worst days cannot possibly out-devil
my mildest nights.

“Micah? Ah, well—ask the neighbors.
Ask the dozing ones in the temple courts.
What woman knows her husband’s heart
When he would have it hid?
He prays, it seems—so do we all—
From first light until last—
Stands often on the hill beneath the giant olive tree—
Look you now and tell me if he’s not there—
Stands and rakes the landscape with his eyes,
Combing the highroad, the footpaths.
Oh, Sarele, to see that great man droop, and slow his pace,
And leave his steaming bowl half-full,
Who once could out-eat both his sons
And twice their labors in the field perform!

“Ah, so soon? Verily? Can you not spare one more
turn of the glass?
Well, the sands have run more swiftly for your company,
dearest friend.
Ah yes, yes, do that, Sariah.
Do pray for me and mine.
For our son, for Micah, and for me.
And should anyone ask you,
Tell them this:
There can be starvation in the midst of plenty.
The fields here groan with harvest,
The vines hang heavy,
The fatted calf lows in its pen—
But there is a hunger that grips
beyond the reach of these.
Yes, yes, we will still hope.
Every day we will hope.
Hope makes a thin broth,
But it is all we have.
Farewell . . . and His peace go with you, too.
His peace go with you.”