WHEN SPARROWS FALL

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WHEN SPARROWS FALL

BY

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Author of "The Viking Heart"

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DEDICATED
TO
NELLIE L. McCLUNG

Who has been a voice for the voiceless
The humble women of her land.

BOOK I.

CHATTER

IN THE DAWNING SPARROWS CHIRP INCESSANTLY.

When Sparrows Fall

CHAPTER I.

Just where the hills come down on their knees by waters of Lake Superior, for all the world like green-clad giants at prayer, the charming city of Alueez has sprung to vigorous life.

Its citizens are exceedingly proud of their great harbor, of their excellent bridges, of their parks and driveways, and of their substantial schools and municipal buildings. They grow boastful at times when discussing the shipping industries—the great cargoes of ore and lumber—and they point with satisfaction to the angry glare that lights the sky above the blast furnace.

They point also with proprietary airs to the vast field of water lying beyond the harbor, as though it were something of their own making and an accessory to Alueez. But it is quite probable that the majority of these good folk, in their enthusiasm to point out the virtues of their city, omit to either patronize or praise the hills. Yet upon them it nestles secure and sheltered, and when first sighted from the lake appears like some shining jewel upon a broad and mothering bosom. Tier on tier the hills lift the little city lights until they laugh and twinkle, a merry miniature of the friendly stars above them. The strength of Alueez is the strength of the hills, and by virtue of their beauty it is lifted out of the mediocrity of small cities.

A temperamental place is this Alueez, scattering its houses carelessly along the lake front to the east of its harbor and business section, and flinging them as from a careless hand up a mile or more into the hills. To the westward it settles down into a sedate procession following the swerve of the hills away from the water front over a considerable plain. Here the city loses itself eventually amid another cluster of hills—little brothers of the great range—and here are the houses of the poor.

On the very outskirts, where the streets tumble of a sudden into an old river bottom—a pleasant place, where the grass is very green in springtime and slender willows nod above a singing brook—a few scattered dwellings huddle confidently under the shadow of the western hills.

Here Stephen Freeman had built his unpretentious house, a very ugly house, ridiculously high of pitch and severely weatherbeaten. It reminded one of some sorely starved wilderness thing, continually standing on watchful tiptoe to look out of the valley. Under the glare of a noonday sun it appeared as blankly expressionless as a bald man bereft of eyebrows, and it faded into the hills at dusk as readily as some lean grey ghost.

Ephemia Freeman deplored this gaunt old habitation and considered it a crying reproach to the gracious surroundings—found it, in fact, as incongruous as a fishmonger in an iris bed. Only at night, when it grew very black down in the valley, was she tempted to consider it fondly. Then, upon occasion, with its long windows agleam with light under that high and narrow gable, it seemed to smile out of the darkness like an eager and kindly spirit.

But if she hated the bleak old house, she loved with corresponding intensity the rock-ribbed hills about it, the boisterous brook which threatened to bore its way into her father's turnip patch on the steep and broken banks above it, and the green slopes that swerved so willingly to follow the brook on its dancing way to the great lake in the distance.

Upon a certain early spring evening in June, Ephemia's father stopped to regard her sternly where she sat on a hillocky, green sofa in the dining-room poring over the "Sky Pilot."

"You surprise me, my child, sitting there reading and knowing your poor mother to be washing the dishes right in the next room."

Ephemia bent her head a little closer over the book, turned a page deliberately, but made no reply. She was, in fact, watching her father's feet, which seemed so firmly rooted before her; she had a feeling they were very hostile and scowling. She felt, moreover, deeply injured. Here she had been wandering joyously over the Alberta foothills, and now to be dragged down rudely to the level of greasy dishwater! Without glancing at him she knew he was shaking his head in an exasperated "Dear-me-what-can-we-do-about-it" manner.

"You surprise me," he reiterated, in a voice which implied that worse might be said, and, still shaking his graying head, passed on.

She heaved a tremendous sigh of relief, but nevertheless flung aside her book. To her temperamental mind it was now past belief that ever again would she follow the fascinating "Pilot" through those far Alberta hills without seeing an unending pool of dishwater disagreeably near, yet in the

midst of her irritation she experienced a sudden wave of deep compassion for her mother.

As if drawn by this surging affection, Mrs. Freeman stepped to the doorway and looked in. A slight frown clouded her fine brow, but on finding her daughter so comically serious she burst into a merry laugh. Mother Freeman laughed, as a bird sings, upon the least provocation.

"Do lock up the chickens, my dear, and see that they are all in. Then you must run to the Halson's with the evening's milk; after that you may please yourself until bed-time."

Ephemia, leaping up as if released by a spring, caught her mother in a passionate embrace.

"Oh, I'll work like a slave on Saturday; I'll sweep and dust, and beat the pillows, and take the eggs to the market, and . . . ."

"Yes, yes," Mother Freeman chuckled, pushing the girl away, "but you better make no promises about the dishes."

Once outside Ephemia became another being; swinging her arms in wide circles, wind-mill fashion, she sang and shouted joyously on her way to the chicken-yard. A big rooster, with magnificent black and green tail-feathers eyed her haughtily while she slipped the little trapdoor of the fence into place.

"Sweet dreams, Sire," said she, saluting him in solemn courtesy.

Her task done, she hurried to the summer kitchen—a small shed standing at the back of the garden—found the pail of milk, and set off up the hill to the Halsons.

Having returned with the milk tickets, she decided to visit the Strom's. If Mrs. Strom were not in a contrary mood she might permit Lily to go out for awhile; in which case they could slip away to their favorite retreat on the banks of the brook.

The Stroms, like most others in that valley, were Norwegians, and, on the whole, were a good-natured but improvident lot. To Ephemia, at least, it appeared that the Strom fortunes consisted mostly of beds, old clothes, and babies. Though there was, to be sure, a Strom cow of artistic and unprecedented temperament, and hens which cackled and fluttered about indifferently, and were loved by the little Stroms, who made such a game of hunting the eggs—generally the hunt exceeded the eggs in importance.

Mr. Strom had built his house at the foot of a jutting hill; then, as his family increased alarmingly, the house, to accommodate his brood, kept stretching out, as it were, until it was swallowed by the overhanging hill. Whereat he found cause to rejoice, explaining that the last kitchen was the warmest they had known, and that the hill had saved him considerable lap-board.

Ephemia never visited the rambling house without a calculative wonder as to the possible result were other little Stroms to enter this wicked world. She felt, moreover, out of her element whenever she entered that house, for its mistress, though a kindly soul, was such an uncertain quantity! She drifted about as indolently as her own hens, and her mental exertions were no more startling than her physical endeavors. Moreover, Ephemia had found her promises equally unstable; she might grant her permission to this and that, in apparent good faith, and at the eleventh hour retract her promise without a single qualm of conscience. Once in a while the situations were reversed, but no less to Ephemia's amazement, whose own mother was like a rock, unyielding and ever reassuring. She concluded eventually that Mrs. Strom was rather like a moth which flitted from pane to pane and candle to candle in foolish rotation; and except for the stirring of a cake, or the baking of a waffle, she seemed never to accomplish anything definite.

Yet she possessed one superlative accomplishment; she was an excellent seamstress and could turn out an amazing lot of sewing in a day if the spirit so moved her. There was a pressing reason for this passion—she hated to wash; and so until her daughters were old enough to do that disagreeable business for her, she much preferred the sewing of a new frock to the laundering of an old one. It must be added also that a closely allied passion was her love of rummage sales—where bits of cloth were sold cheaply—and she willingly rose with the lark to drift from store to store in search of remnants when the exigency of the children's clothes began to prey upon her mind.

Her husband was very proud of her prowess in such matters, and was altogether the most satisfied of men. Of course he had been known to storm a bit at times, blustering through the house like a Norwegian sea-squall; but for the most part he was a contented and indulgent man.

Even Ephemia realized that once Mrs. Strom had been a beautiful women, a delicate type of blonde Northern beauty; but now she had a wilted and weary look. Reflecting upon this, the girl sometimes scrutinized the dimpled young Lily and wondered if she could ever become so like a wavering ghost of a previous incarnation.

But nothing had astonished her so much as the sight she beheld one morning when she had come to call for her young friend on the way to school. The usual scramble for caps and mitts had apparently converted the household into a battlefield, in the midst of which whirlwind activity poor Lily was doing her best to feed the next youngest Strom. Her mother, meanwhile, had sat in seeming peace by the rusty heater, impervious and indifferent to the noise about her. But just when Lily had begun a hasty brushing of her pretty yellow hair with a most discouraging brush, she emerged from her lethargy long enough to command the child to find something to put on the baby.

It was then, on accompanying Lily to an outer shed, that Ephemia comprehended the mystery of Mrs. Strom's eternal sewing. There was, literally, a mountain of dirty clothes in that shed, and after feverish hunting Lily came up triumphant with the "least grimy" dress for the baby! She may have read horror in Ephemia's face, for she had explained hastily, "Mamma is going to wash when spring comes."

But despite her indolence in most matters, Mrs. Strom was the soul of hospitality, and on Saturdays the entire family turned to and whisked things into decent order for the Sabbath; for then, peculiarly enough, a crowd of visitors would foregather at the ramshackle house under the hill.

Her husband was no mean assistant in household affairs, and proved himself adequate upon most occasions; it was all one and the same to Mr. Strom whether he milked the fractious cow, cooked a cabbage or baked the bread—perhaps the heaviest labor performed in that house—when his adored but inefficient Tina was laid up with a cold or a new baby.

She, be it known, performed these maternal miracles with singular ease, though not without sacrifice, since it necessitated giving up the pursuit of sales until the new baby could be left to the care of her daughters. Then, however, she picked up the broken thread of her sewing, as it were, until a like emergency again claimed her.

However, upon this June night in question, when Ephemia knocked at the door, Mr. Strom called lustily for her to enter, and by the sound of his voice she knew that for the present all was well and that her errand promised to end happily.

"Ha, ha, young Miss," said he, "and how many beaus is it now?" This was his favorite greeting when in a particularly jocund mood. Ephemia knew that pleasantness was the order of the day when the conversation began that way.

“You shouldn’t put notions in her head,” his wife rebuked him, while she buttered a bun for the baby and smiled at the visitor. The children, chattering like so many monkeys, set up a great howl of laughter and turned eight pairs of expectant eyes upon her, but Ephemia wisely ignored them.

“I was wondering, Mrs. Strom, whether Lily could come out with me a while,” she began when the noise subsided. Long experience had taught her the futility of expecting Lily to express her desire in any matter.

Mrs. Strom was in a mellow mood; she had found a great bargain in percale that day—twelve yards for a dollar fifty—and the effect was still strong upon her.

“Oh, I guess so,” she assented, “but she’ll have to put the baby to bed first.”

As soon as possible Ephemia slipped into the kitchen, where Lily was scraping the dishes into a greasy stove.

“Quick, Lily, put the baby to bed and let’s run before your mother changes her mind.”

“Ma!” Inga screamed, “Lily’s leaving the dishes.”

“Well, you ran off this noon,” said her mother with unwonted justice. Thus encouraged, Lily set about the trying business of washing the baby’s sticky face and hands, and after a tussle tucked it, howls and all, into the rickety cradle beside the folding bed.

On quitting the house the girls ran straight into the willow thickets that skirted the Freeman acres, a deceptive and precautionary measure lest some little Strom spy their course and follow them. Their real objective was Ephemia’s rock, a huge boulder rising proudly from the bank of the brook, and lifting its head on the level with Mr. Freeman’s garden patch. This ancient rock had been chiselled by the elements into a V-shaped tunnel, which terminated in a smooth slate-colored ledge overhanging the water.

At length, after much cautious scrambling, they were settled in their peculiar retreat. They sat there quite still for a time, Lily rejoicing to be rid of the ever-present babies and Ephemia enamoured, as usual, of the grey brown water below. She loved the brook in every season, but best perhaps when, like now, swollen with spring rain, it ran deep and dark, throwing up yellow foam like clouds of old ivory laces; and the way it splashed upon the stones and tumbled in cataract to the deep brown pools gave her inexplicable delight.

“Do you think you’ll pass this term?” Lily broke the silence.

“I guess so—except spelling,” came the unimpassioned reply. “But do you know, I wrote a poem in civics class to-day.” From her sweater pocket she produced several scraps of paper and, selecting the required bit, read:

“I don’t see why the Government,
Forty-eight states and a president,
Should make me blue and discontent
On a day in June.”

“I don’t see why some darn old X,
A robber from Spain or a Latin Rex,
Should make me swear and forget my sex
On a day in June.”

“My goodness!” giggled Lily, “aren’t you the limit?”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” her friend returned graciously, “I’m writing my masterpiece now.”

“A what?”

“A book,” said she.

“My goodness! Have you got some of it with you?”

Ephemia nodded and produced a few wrinkled pages from a scribbler.

“This is the sad tale of the Lady Jacobina,” she read, to the round-eyed amazement of her friend. “I haven’t got it all figured out yet—only the distressing part where Sir Ronald plays her false.”

“Does what?” gasped Lily.

“Well, listen,” snapped the budding genius.

“And the fair Lady languished beside the willows in her garden from day to day, growing ever weaker—but he came not. It was like a ravaging sickness, and her cheeks, that had been red as hollyberries, grew white as snowflakes. Then said the great Lord, her father: ‘Something must be done ’ere my pretty dove perish. We must bring the knave back.’

“Then the young guardsman, he who was tall and straight as the poplar trees, offered to give up his life to the quest. . . . .

“That’s all I could do to-day—Miss Wagstaff is such a nosy teacher and so unromantic,” sighed the author.

“My goodness! isn’t it grand? You should put it in the paper. It’s ’most as nice as ‘The Lady of the Lake,’ and much easier to see through. But what’s the guard going to do to Sir Roland?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I haven’t been inspired yet—but that won’t be difficult, there are plenty of ways to kill him.”

“My goodness! But it’s a sin to think wicked things. Pastor Neils says so.”

“Your minister,” came the reply haughtily, “is a man without a piercing mind.”

“A what?”

“I said, a piercing mind—he doesn’t see beyond the flesh.”

“My goodness! You’re so funny, Ephemia! I can’t understand you half the time.”

“I don’t expect you to. But, say, I have ten cents coming to me for delivering chickens, we could run to the grocer’s after school to-morrow and get a can of syrup for a candy pull.”

Lily gave a dismal wail. “Oh, but I have to stay in to learn that ’Topsis something poem.”

“Dear me, haven’t you finished that yet?”

“I’ve got to ‘like one who wraps his couch about him and lies down to pleasant dreams!’ ”

“Lily! How can you be so crazy—how could any one wrap a couch about him?”

“How should I know? They do such queer things in poetry!”

“Oh, dear, dear! You get worse right along. I could tear my hair at hearing you talk like that about a nice old man like Bryant with as lovely a white beard as Moses!”

“What’s his beard got to do with it?” asked Lily testily; “anyhow, Moses wasn’t so much—didn’t he make a gold calf, and didn’t all the poor people get snake-bites from looking at it?”

This was so delightfully ludicrous that, notwithstanding her warm affection, Ephemia screamed with derisive laughter; and the solemn hills, startled no doubt at such hoydenish glee, flung it back in pealing showers.

“Oh, oh, if your pastor Neils had only heard you now! I’d give my cat to have seen his face,” she managed to articulate at length. “Oh, Lily, you’re so much funnier than you know—perhaps that’s why you are so funny.”

Lily slumped dejectedly for a moment, but being in truth the best natured little soul imaginable, joined the merriment wholeheartedly, feeling in fact that she had attained near brilliance by provoking such contagious humor. Nevertheless she stood in awe of Ephemia’s sharp tongue and overly critical mind.

“I know where there’s a robin’s nest across the creek,” she offered, deeming it wise to touch on more common ground.

“Wonderful!” cried her volatile friend. “Let’s go and see it at once; father is teaching me about our birds. I’m going to surprise him with what I know—but mind,” she cautioned, as they scampered away, “you must not touch the nest or the little mother won’t come near again.”

CHAPTER II.

Several days after school closed for the summer Ephemia was idling out in the backyard near her mother, who was busily plucking chickens. Somewhere nearby her little brother Harold was playing merrily, his childish laughter spilling about them in silvery ripples of sheer joy.

“I could do a chicken if you would let me, Mamma,” she offered, taking a seat on the back steps of the summer kitchen in a rather belying attitude.

“Certainly not! you would simply destroy the skin; moreover, it would sicken you to hang above these irritating feathers.”

Ephemia shivered; even the sight of a dead chicken was distressing enough to her imaginative mind, aside from the appalling thought of stripping it of its natural covering. Her offer had been one of mere politeness, made in the secure knowledge of its refusal. She watched her mother broodingly, as she watched each and everything in her quiet moods, thinking it strange, this living only to work, with never an idle moment. Sometimes she felt herself exhausted merely watching such endless activity, and wondered curiously whether her mother had always been so cheerfully resigned in the midst of monotony. It seemed altogether incredible.

Mrs. Freeman worked on swiftly, for there were a dozen fowls to be prepared for market, and these common labors helped to swell the family income. But though she seemed so absorbed in her task, her mind was engaged elsewhere. She was musing upon Ephemia, who was soon to leave care-free girlhood behind; and she dreaded the thought of what the future might hold for this temperamental child of hers.

Ephemia was fifteen years old, full of budding vanities and ambitions; full, too, of a vast impatience with her uneventful life, and of eager and endless curiosity. She was troubled now as she sat there on the sloping steps with her mother, a fact Mrs. Freeman knew intuitively.

“Mother, I should have confessed something last week, but I didn’t,” she said, restlessly stirring the sand at the bottom of the steps with her slippered foot. “Jerry Hill gave me a box of candy when the school closed.”

Her mother bent close above the bird in her hands as though fascinated by its pin feathers.

“A nice boy, I should say, this Jerry,” she remarked non-committedly.

Ephemia glanced suspiciously at her mother, but seeing her so calm and undisturbed, realized the foolishness of all her fears. After all it was nothing—but the girls in school had made such a turmoil about it. Girls are so foolish anyway, she reflected contemptuously.

"Yes, he's all right, Mother, but his ears are so big!"

Her mother was seized with a fit of coughing.

"Dear me, these feathers are a caution for tickling a body's throat!" she sputtered.

Ephemia wasn't deceived. There was a sort of unspoken language between them and very little reserve.

"Now, Mother, you're laughing at me. But it's true. I simply couldn't cherish anyone with big ears—oh, never!"

"No, child, I wasn't really laughing at you. I was thinking how life repeats itself; for instance, there was a lad in the old country whose nose quite offended me." She chuckled in the mirth-infected manner which was hers. "A very stubby nose it was, Ephemia; but he's a great judge now."

Immediately Jerry and his offending ears passed out of existence; Ephemia was hot upon the trail of romance. How wonderful to have had a judge for a father! But then to be inflicted with a pug nose—ah, well, one ought to be resigned to one's fate.

"I think I'll run over to Clare's after delivering the chickens."

Mrs. Freeman frowned upon the fine white fowl in her hand, and her daughter knew what to expect.

"I would rather you saw less of Clare. It's really disagreeable living with you when you're much together."

"Why, Mother?"

"It's true, my dear; unconsciously you mimic your companions—you seem always on the alert for some new patterns. I would rather you found a more charming model."

"But I like her, Mother, and she's so honest—honest as the devil."

"Ephemia!"

"Oh, I wasn't swearing," explained Ephemia impatiently, "that's just a simile; I simply mean that she is as honest as that. It seems to me the devil is about the only one who doesn't pretend he's something that he isn't—you

see, he is always bad and proud of it. But even the angels that visited Abraham pretended not to be angels, and God. . . .”

“There, there,” her mother broke in hastily, “that’s enough philosophy for to-day. Suppose you find something less startling for comparisons.”

“Oh, dear, you misunderstand me so, Mother. How can common, ordinary facts be startling?” Then, returning to the first issue: “I think you should permit my going—I’ve promised, and Clare always keeps her promises.”

Mrs. Freeman understood the fallacy of breaking an independent spirit. Ephemia was strong willed, but amenable to reason and passionately attached to truth as she perceived it.

She was, in fact, a small edition of her mother, singularly capable for her years, and yet she likewise possessed to a marked degree the fanciful and ideally romantic tendencies of her father.

“Very well, then,” Mother Freeman sighed, “if you have promised you must of necessity go, but do try to avoid imitating poor Clare’s execrable manners and tone of voice. I detest this shouting and nonsense girls indulge in nowadays.”

Small Harold came dashing up in breathless interruption, a wee chicken dangling limply from his hands.

“Oh, look! Oh, look!” he gasped, “it’s almost deaded. I found him in a tomato can. He must have been having a baff and got much too wet!”

“Give him to me, Harold,” Ephemia cried impetuously, and cuddling the little chicken against her warm cheek, she ran into the house, there to labor over its restoration in determined tenderness. Many an ailing chicken had she saved, for there was a gift of healing in her hands. Perhaps her love of every feathered thing bestowed this power. Birds she loved with passionate fervor, and in joyous moments called them her “little free brothers.”

CHAPTER III.

One afternoon, in the middle of July, Lily, with the Strom baby tipping dizzily from her small hip, made her way with apparent eagerness toward Ephemia, who sat in lazy contentment on the side porch stroking Trotty, her tortoise-shell cat. When Lily set the sprawling baby down beside her Trotty lifted her back haughtily and pointed a long, vigorous tail straight toward the sky—a well-born cat's protest to be interpreted: "Heaven here witness my refusal to associate with such common company!"—then leaped away to seek a sunny rendezvous.

The baby stared after the animal with its blinking beads of eyes, but being an extremely sensible baby, soon consoled itself by squirming along the porch in a hopeful expedition of discovery. Queer, furry "jump-abouts" might be disappointing, but one could always find nice little stones to roll about on one's tongue. Life has its compensations, even for a baby.

Ephemia realized at once that her visitor was bursting with news, but had no intention of spoiling the surprise by tiresome questions.

"I'm going to begin my 'Forklaring' next week—I'm to be confirmed this fall," Lily finally announced in breathless importance. When no response was forthcoming she added, in manifest disappointment, "It's lots of fun, really, and you get such nice clothes, too. I wish you'd come, Ephemia."

"But I'm not a Norwegian," her disappointing friend retorted, with maddening indifference.

"Oh, well, you almost are, and, besides, you can have it in English." Lily intimated that this wondrous thing might be dished up in any style.

"But I'm not sure I want to be a Lutheran," came the amazing response, to Lily's utter bewilderment.

"But aren't your mamma and your papa?" she demanded, incredulously.

"I guess they were once, but do I have to sell harness and horse blankets just because my father does?"

Reasoning was not one of Lily's strong points; she traveled the road of least resistance, did as she was expected to do, thought as she was advised to

think, and considered every departure from so simple an arrangement odd, to say the very least.

"I like the Baptists pretty well," the irritating logician ran on placidly, "they have *such* a handsome minister—his eyes are simply lovely. I think it's really a shame he should be a minister."

"But why?" Lily was no less curious than bewildered.

"Well, I've heard that ministers are mostly ministers because they are reverenced, without having to know too much or think too hard; but a nice man like that ought to know everything possible."

Lily was scandalized. "My goodness! But pastor Neils knows everything. My mamma says so."

Ephemia snapped her fingers disdainfully.

"A wise man knows his limitations—I read that in a book," she added honestly; "but I'll ask my father about this Lutheran business."

"Why not ask your mother now and have it all settled?"

"My father settles all the foolish things in our house," said Ephemia. "He tells us how often one should breathe per second, and why there were mummies in the Pyramids; but my mother tells us where the rubbers are in wet weather and when to put on our winter underwear. You see, my father is the one who encourages us to think, and my mother tells us how to live," she explained to her mystified friend.

That evening, when supper was out of the way, the Freemans gathered in the shabby dining-room, as was their habit. Father Freeman stretched himself upon the rather lumpy lounge to read a very old and disreputable looking book. His wife moved her seat as close as might be to the wall lamp and began sewing buttonholes in little Harold's blouse. Their daughter stood by the window, facing out over the ravine, watching the coral shades of the sky fading into faintest lavender and purple. She could never escape a twinge of sadness when the patient gray came into its own—a feeling that something palpitating and glorious had just died.

Young Harold had built himself a tower of blocks, but its foundation was sadly insecure and it fell to the floor with a terrific clatter. The noise brought Ephemia out of her dreams. She decided then and there to question her father, though she knew he disliked being disturbed while reading, howsoever many times he might have read that same book.

"Do you think I should be a Lutheran all my life, Papa?"

He looked at her over the rims of his reading glasses, surprise in his mild gray eyes.

"Why do you ask?"

"Most of the girls are going to be confirmed this fall—even Lily—I was thinking I might as well join them."

Mr. Freeman had a sense of humor. "An excellent reason, my dear—in fact most folk take on religion much that way—much as one dons a frock to be in fashion," he told her, smiling whimsically.

His wife looked across at him severely. There were certain things she never permitted. But Ephemia grinned.

"That's what I think too, Papa, but I don't know if I'll like this fashion. Do you think it is a nice religion?" she asked naively.

Mr. Freeman laughed.

"So, so I guess it won't hurt you—there's only one faith which ever could."

"Now, Stephen," Mrs. Freeman cut in, with an edge to her voice which her husband knew quite well. He sighed and picked up his book.

"Do what your mother thinks best," he advised after a moment, and then lost himself in the story of Burnt Njal.

"I think it would do you good, Phemy. At least it will teach you to listen in patience to another's viewpoint. If one wishes to arrive at any conclusion one must begin somewhere . . . almost anywhere will do," said the good lady, squinting under the light as she re-threaded her needle. And so the matter was settled.

Clare, too, was determined to join the confirmation class after being informed of her friend's decision. As might be expected, Mrs. Bergen at first refused point blank to sanction a procedure entailing so much worry and expense, but finally consented in the sullen, grudging way which was characteristic of her.

Pastor Neils had chosen Saturday afternoons as the most suitable occasions for the imparting of the ancient faith to the budding generation. This seemed a misfortune to Ephemia, who had always found the sixth day of the week quite dull enough, but she sensibly decided to make the best of it. When her parents asked her why she didn't study her lessons since she had undertaken this thing she told them with her usual candor that she

intended to read the Catechism every Saturday at exactly one o'clock. They were still puzzled, so she explained further that if she left this uninteresting duty until the eleventh hour it would force her to hurry through the other disagreeable things which were her lot on this drab day of the week.

The method worked like a charm—at least on the first Saturday—and after the beds were made and the nick-nacks in the china-cabinet all carefully dusted, Ephemia climbed to the top of the porch, whence the view of the valley was both beautiful and alluring. Once her father had commented on so strange a place for study and had been told that is was much easier to learn stupid things when the *insides* of one could watch the brook skipping down the valley.

This particular day was one of rare loveliness. The whole valley was drunken with sunshine, and the little fleecy clouds appeared to hang motionless in the sky, as though they were enamoured of the soft green earth below, or, perhaps, of their own dainty reflection in the quiet pools of the brook.

" 'I believe in God the Father, Maker of Heaven and Earth'. Who needs to learn that from a book?" said Ephemia to herself as she let her eyes wander back to the scene before her. She saw where the willows dipped gently down to the water, swaying gracefully at each breath of the summer wind—a wind so soft it seemed scarcely more than a whisper—and she imagined that they were saying something very interesting, something which the brook carried on in gleeful haste to the waiting sea. And here was she, forced to learn the creed and an extract from the laws of Moses!

The thought was not agreeable and Ephemia put the book behind her. Like some graven image, she sat there on the sloping roof, letting the soft breeze lull her into dreams. She fancied that innumerable fairies danced upon this breeze, and that as they passed her their little hands teased at her hair or swept across her cheek in warm caresses; and she tried to define the perfume of their choosing. Sometimes she imagined that she caught the pungent, woody smell of the evergreen, and instantly pictured the forest nook whence they had come; a place where the light fell yellow and slantingly through the strong trees, and where the land was settled down into a small cup to hold the moisture and endow the grass with mossy softness and sweet odors.

Ephemia was just losing all sense of time and place when a strident voice recalled her from her musings. Clare Bergen was coming down the slope as fast as her feet would permit, and the very swish of her garments

told Ephemia that she was laboring under some unusual excitement. Clare was a stormy petrel, with, nevertheless, something winsome and lovable about her. She was a large-featured girl, sandy-haired, sallow-complexioned, and with a forehead so high that it gave her a somewhat bald appearance. But her eyes were very fine, large and gray, and entirely fearless.

Ephemia saw that her friend's face was streaked with tears when, all out of breath, she cried: "Come down, Ephemia; I've got something awful to tell you! Come down by the brook where no one will hear."

Ephemia flung aside her Catechism disrespectfully and slid down the porch pillar. She was all excitement, wondering what this horror could be, and hoping against hope that it might be a ghost. She had always wanted to see a ghost, but had never quite succeeded. "Hurry, then," she said, "it will soon be time to go to church."

Once safely hidden from inquisitive eyes—eyes which in reality were nowhere about, but which the girls believed ever-present—Clare burst out with her tale of woe.

"Well, she's done it again!"

"Done what? Who?"

"Ma! She's got another baby!" Clare gasped it out in hollow, shuddering tones.

Ephemia wasn't impressed. Such trifles meant nothing in her world; babies had come and babies had gone in the Freeman household, and she had learned to mark it all dispassionately.

"Oh, dear! I *was* hoping it was something stirring. Babies are so ordinary."

Clare kicked a rock viciously. "You don't understand. I hate it, I hate it! I tell you, I won't touch it ever! I'll die first! I'll commit suicide!"

"You won't have to if you die first," giggled Ephemia wickedly. Then she sighed. "It is a funny world, isn't it, Clare? But, after all, your babies are successful. Ours always failed."

But Clare was not to be consoled. She cried and kicked her feet like a bad child in a fit, and Ephemia, who was used to these outbursts, watched her from the corners of her eyes and said nothing. She was aware that her friend would be very good and sweet for at least an hour after this eruption.

The storm subsided eventually, but Clare's lips retained their rebellious line and her eyes were cold in their hardness. Evidently this was more than a mere shower to clear the mental air.

"It isn't right," she said, with emphasis. "Whenever I need a thing there's never any money, and the other kids are all so patched and pressed and made over; and now there's another one to squeeze for!"

"Women are such fools," said Ephemia, in stoic impartiality.

This offended her perturbed friend none the less. "I'm not so sure of that —Pa isn't so wise! Besides, you ought to stick up for your kind; you'll be a woman one day," Clare rebuked her.

Ephemia flung a stone into the brook and leaned forward dangerously to peer after it. Her young brows corrugated with irritating thoughts. "It's no choice of mine," she replied at length, peevishly, thereby betraying the peculiar distaste, bordering on contempt, which she entertained for her sex.

"It seems to me," she suggested, "that women are too patient. You see, if they weren't they wouldn't be so put upon. Oh, look! what a lot of minnows, the silly little fish! I wonder where they go when they die."

"Ephemia! Ephemia! Ephemia!" Mrs. Freeman's voice came floating faintly over the hubbub of the riotous brook. The girls heard and leaping to their feet, scrambled up the rocky ledge and sped to the house.

"There's fresh coffee in the kitchen, my dear, if you desire it," Ephemia's mother proffered by way of greeting. Then, catching sight of Clare's stormy face, she demanded sharply, "You haven't been quarreling, surely, and the both of you on the way to church!"

"No, mamma, it's just a sorrow she has," her daughter explained, "a terrible sorrow. May we have a doughnut with out coffee?"

CHAPTER IV.

Clare and Ephemia were more curious than impressed when they followed Lily into the schoolroom at the back of the Norwegian church. The latter, be it owned, felt tremendously important, conscious that for once she was on firmer ground than they.

“I’ll introduce you to everyone after lessons,” she whispered.

The minister came to meet his new pupils kindly enough and seated them in the front row. Perhaps he desired to keep an eye upon them, they being, as it were, the first culls from a strange flock.

Ephemia, at least, was quite as anxious to place him in her mind, and scrutinized him soberly while he explained his prospective program. She rather liked his face, despite its mechanical reserve, and she concluded his unfortunate expression had resulted from a deplorable lack of humor—a misfortune for which he was to be pitied and not blamed. While he addressed the others in their native Norwegian she amused herself by analysing them, by deciding who was stupid and who merely lazy, and by wondering what made them sit so solemn and so glum, as though they were being fed dust and ashes rather than the glory of their Lord. She longed to cry out impatiently in the long, dragging silences that followed when the good pastor endeavored to make his little flock express itself.

“What do you think, Ida?” or “What do you think, Ole?” It was always the same. Evidently Ida and Ole did not think; but they chanted the creed verbatim with great gusto when called upon to do so.

“And now,” said Pastor Neils, “perhaps you, er—Ephemia, can give us the creed.”

“I have always known that God made the world,” she avowed brightly; “it seems unnecessary to make a lesson of that—no one else could have made it so beautiful.”

Horror spread over the face of the little flock. Somewhere at the back of the room a girl giggled. Ephemia made a mental note of that giggle—something should be said to that merry one later. Pastor Neils lifted startled and incredulous brows, but when the appalling child continued glibly enough with the rest of the creed he relaxed into a sort of relieved amusement.

“Not so bad, not so bad; and now for the Old Testament verses.”

“I’ve never been encouraged to learn verses like a parrot,” she explained firmly; “but of course I can repeat their meaning if you wish.”

The puzzled minister cleared his throat uncomfortably. He was sorely at sea. Would this insurgent upset his regime, would she be a bad example to the rest of his class? Then, as Ephemia recited in emphatic and picturesque language her conceptions of the text, he concluded that on the whole she had absorbed as much as might be expected.

Clare was not quite so glib, but her answers satisfied him, and on the whole he was inclined to think rather well of his new pupils.

“Next week . . . take heed!” he announced stentoriously, “we will learn about the fall of man and the first intimation of God’s covenant later made manifest to Abraham.” Pastor Neils took his religion seriously, in regular doses, as one takes quinine to ward off bad colds. And one might have thought that he wished to imply with his chilly manner that God’s vengeance was far from lifted from these descendants of Fallen Perfection.

“I don’t like this ‘fallen’ business,” Ephemia confided to Lily and Clare as they made their hurried way toward the hills. “It makes me think of God as a mean old man . . . but I know He isn’t like any man at all . . . I think He is very like the sun.”

CHAPTER V.

It was in September, when the summer had mellowed into gentle moods, as though the glory of her youth had been stored away in her heart and now tempted her to dreams and quietness, that Mrs. Bergen experienced something close to excitement and happiness.

To the unobservant it might have been difficult to believe this, for the very spirit of solemnity seemed hewn into each feature of her face. She was of medium height, but appeared taller because of her spareness and angularity. Her shoulders were too broad, and her back and hips might have been those of a man. Taken all in all she was an uninteresting woman, though she was not without a certain regularity of feature which should have lent her grace. Her hair was of the same sandy shade as her daughter's and as hopelessly straight, and her eyes the same grey, but without that eagerness and fire which made of Clare's veritable lamps in her plain little face.

But there was on this day a strange exultant emotion struggling for life in Mrs. Bergen's breast. She was expecting her husband, who had been absent for some months, and she was wondering just what he would say about the new baby. Mr. Bergen was a lumberman, and much of his time was spent in the woods. The cares of fatherhood rested lightly upon his huge shoulder. The ways of the moose were perhaps his ideal rather than the more strenuous habits of man. He was a healthy, good-natured man, and on his flying visits home laughed boisterously at everything and everybody. He was like a rude wind which rushes through a garden, whirling away the dry and dusty leaves, but tearing also, without discrimination, delicate bud and blossom.

Heretofore Mrs. Bergen had experienced no enheartening emotion at the thought of her husband's return. It was just an established fact, like cold weather or rain. However, it was different now. As she sat before the kitchen stove, nursing her baby, she kept musing upon his possible comment on this additional member of the family, her tiny Alma. There were reasons for this inner turmoil which had nothing to do with the newness of her offspring. It was because this small bit of humanity was a girl. Clare was not Mr. Bergen's daughter, but the child of a former and unfortunate marriage, and thus far, he had been honored with sons only.

The baby lay in its mother's arms, its rosy face against her shrunken breast, and, somehow, the sight was incongruous, as though every maternal

rite were out of place in the person of Mrs. Bergen. When she caught the sound of her husband's heavy step upon the porch she made no attempt to rise, but drew closer about her the thin shawl which draped her sharp shoulders. Something in the simple act reflected prudery.

Mr. Bergen flung himself into the room, at the same time emitting a roaring greeting and sending his shabby old telescope valise hurtling across the room. He was no believer in stealthiness. "I'm an honest roughneck, by Gar!" Noise was something of a virtue to him, charming him as a tin whistle charms a child.

Mrs. Bergen clutched the little one closer and, half turning in her seat, spoke her usual welcome. "So you are back, Toré; I hope you're well."

"Well! me?" he shouted in rough humor, as he flung down his hat on the floor. "And how's things going, old woman, eh?"

Then it dawned on him that something was amiss in his wife's behavior. What's eating her now, he wondered, was it sickness? Why wasn't she flying about getting up a meal? She might have guessed that he would be hungry. Then he saw the unmistakable bundle in her arms and his jaw dropped foolishly.

"Well, holy mackerel! Why didn't you tell me?" he roared, as soon as his astonishment permitted.

His wife shrugged helplessly. "What good?" said she, "what good?"

What good indeed? That was true, he admitted. Still in some way his dignity was wounded—a man ought at least to be notified that he is about to be blessed with parenthood the sixth time.

"Damn it, I ought to have known—something might have happened," he finished lamely.

Mrs. Bergen understood that kindness, not censure, prompted this remark and was mildly pleased. She eased the sleeping infant down upon her lap and began fumbling at her dress with uncertain fingers. Her husband, who had his own notions as to what was proper respect toward the gentle sex, averted his gaze. When the intimate business of buttoning her blouse was accomplished she smiled and said timidly: "It's a pretty mite, Toré—see!"

He tried to walk softly as he hurried to her side; the occasion seemed to call for some especial deference. It was indeed a pretty baby, this tender little thing that slumbered on despite his scrutiny. Nature, revelling in

pranks, had turned one of her tricks, and even Mr. Bergen found it hard to believe that this lovely downy-haired creature was flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone. He was deeply moved; like many another rough man of the open, he had his hidden fount of sentiment, and now he felt strangely subdued and humble before this little helpless thing he gazed upon.

"She's very pretty, my little Alma," his wife crooned, rocking her knees ever so slightly in unconscious effort to make more sweet the baby's slumber. For a moment the significance of her remark did not impress itself upon him; then he stooped down, and, peering into her face, demanded incredulously, "What'd you say, old woman?"

"I said pretty . . . my little Alma."

"Well, I be damn'd!" he shouted, giving his wife a good-natured slap on the shoulder. "I'll be clean damn'd! So it's a girl at last!"

Mrs. Bergen slipped her red, work-hardened hand over the baby's ear, and for all his roughness her husband understood and felt justly rebuked.

"I beg pardon, Ma'am," he said solemnly and sincerely, quite as though he had forgotten that she was his wife—the faded drudge that he bullied or neglected according to his mood.

A faint wave of red swept across her face, for it was years since she had met with such courtesy. She smiled and lifted the baby against her bosom.

"She's a pretty little mite—good, too, and, for a girl, big, Toré." He bent almost double to observe better the many charms displayed for him—the small pink toes, the plump little limbs—and he admired anew the sunny little head. Tentatively and half ashamed, he put out a huge finger and ran it along the baby's fat arm down to the tiny palm that lay like an open flower on the folds of its dress. Perhaps for all his cautiousness the pressure was too great, or perhaps the baby's catnip was at an end—at any rate, the small Alma fastened tenacious tendrils about the exploring finger, opening at the same time a pair of very blue eyes upon her startled father.

A doctor might have made a disparaging remark about the grimace which crossed her tiny face, but to Mr. Bergen it was a miracle.

"Well, I be damn'd, Ma'am! I be clean damn'd if she doesn't know her old father!"

Something in his voice robbed the crude words of their legitimate meaning and made of them a caress.

An hour later, when Clare came home from school, she was so surprised at the sight which met her eyes that words failed her. Her mother was actually talking with animation while she fried the meat-balls for supper, and her stepfather, evidently highly pleased, sat holding the baby on a big pillow across his knees. And there was actually an air of contentment about the place! Clare believed in making hay while the sun shone, so she set the table without a murmur, and even washed the face of her youngest brother; then, having decided that the time was ripe for making the request she had in mind, she said: "Pa, I want to go to business college. I'll be through the grades at Christmas time. Oh, Pa, do let me; it won't cost much money—really it won't. Then I could get a good job and help with the kids."

Mrs. Bergen stopped stirring the gravy and glanced around at her husband anxiously. He had always been kind to this child of hers, but nevertheless she felt that there were natural limits to a stepfather's favors, and she considered this an extremely bold request. She need not have been troubled. Mr. Bergen was one of those genial souls to whom another's argument is merely so much jargon, needing neither to be considered in anger or otherwise. He laughed uproariously.

"What's the matter with learning to cook, eh? It's cheaper and a darn sight more sensible for a woman. I might even get you a job in camp when your biscuits pass muster." He thought this a rare joke and laughed over it until the baby started crying. After jiggling it into peace again, he addressed the now sulky Clare: "Where did you get these high-flown notions, anyhow? Ain't it good enough for you to be a decent woman like your ma? Answer me that, eh? If you'd only learn to control that devil's temper of your'n some man might take you—and a bad bargain he'd get at that," he chuckled.

Poor Clare was by nature impatient and detested ridicule. She felt helpless and enraged, and resorted to the one weapon which had served her successfully against her mother. She flew into a temper, stamped the floor, beat her clinched fists in air and screamed: "I wouldn't be like Ma for ten thousand worlds! I won't live like a pig all my life. I tell you, I won't! I won't! I won't!"

"Shut up! Shut up, or I'll spank you!" her father roared—"spank you on my knees." To tell the truth he was secretly amused. He had never laid finger on her, nor ever would, and she knew it. After a little more shouting and roaring between them she was forced to conclude that the battle was lost and slumped dejectedly into a chair by the window.

"*Krasi unge, krasi unge*," her mother kept repeating while hurrying from stove to table, "*krasi unge*," as if it relieved her feelings and effaced some of her daughter's unseemly conduct.

Yet it is quite possible that even Mr. Bergen would have been uneasy had he known what thoughts were forming in Clare's stormy young soul. It is true that her mother, days later, wondered with amazement that she should have given up her demand so quickly. Usually she would battle for her whims days on end; and poor Mrs. Bergen lacked sufficient imagination to understand that nothing is more difficult than the revealing of one's most worthy desires.

CHAPTER VI.

There were many things besides the forthcoming confirmation which kept the three young friends in an excited frame of mind. At Christmas they were to pass their entrance examination, and Clare had decided to go to work immediately afterwards. This seemed an appalling idea to Ephemia, whose sole ambition was to absorb as much book-lore as possible. However, all arguments were vain. Clare had made up her mind that she would accept no more favors from her stepfather. “I hate him,” she told her chum, “and I’ll sell papers rather than take another cent from him.”

It was on a mild November day, with flurries of soft snow whirling around them, that Lily and Ephemia were going over this subject anew on their way home to lunch.

“I think it’s just dreadful, Clare’s going to work! She ought to try for her third certificate. It looks as if she had no ambition!” stormed Ephemia.

Lily couldn’t see the good of ambition, since it was generally denied one anyhow. “I think it’d be just lovely to have your own money and buy your own hats and shoes,” she said, with a rueful glance at her ugly square-toed boots. “Of course I would like to be a nice girl, like Elsie Dinsmore, and marry a rich old gentleman who’d treat me with deep respect,” she added in a sudden burst of eloquence.

The unsympathetic Ephemia snorted; she entertained a deep-seated contempt for the sainted Elsie. “You make me tired, harping on that silly creature, as though she could even have lived and been so good!”

“I don’t care! Pastor Neils advised us to read the Dinsmore books and to pattern ourselves after Elsie. I think she’s perfectly sweet—and made her father so ashamed of his wickedness.”

“Look, oh look!” interrupted her friend, holding out a red-mittened hand to catch the flying snowflakes; “see these lovely stars, Lily! I think they are the bodies of little fairies whose souls have just gone to heaven.”

“Oh, Ephemia, what a whopper! My, but you’re silly!”

“I can’t see what anyone wants to get married for.” Ephemia returned again to the former subject, completely ignoring her friend’s criticism. “Can’t you think of anything more interesting than that?”

“Of course I can,” Lily returned, with unusual asperity, “but what good would it do me? Getting married is about the easiest thing I can think of, so I thought perhaps I could do that. But I don’t suppose I’ll ever find a rich old man!”

“Oh dear, you make me sick,” Ephemia exclaimed. Then a fresh aspect of the case dawned on her. In just a few more weeks these daily trips to school would end, and with them all the happy cameraderie between her and her friends. Her eyes filled with sudden tears and, to the utter amazement of Lily, she flung fierce arms about her.

“Oh, Lily, we’ll always love each other, won’t we, you and I and Clare, forever and ever, won’t we?”

Lily may have lacked imagination, but she was a warmhearted little thing. Here was something she could comprehend more readily than Ephemia’s fantastic sayings. She returned the embrace eagerly, and there in the lonely street, with the snow blowing down from the hills whirling about them, the two girls clung to each other like lovers vowing eternal devotion. In the midst of this ecstasy they heard Clare calling to them in no uncertain tones, and, facing about, they saw her running toward them through the gathering mist.

“What’s wrong, you babes in the woods?” she yelled; “have you gone crazy, or what?” Her friends sped to meet her and fell upon her neck in an abandonment of affection.

Clare was callous about their declaration of eternal friendship. “Well, say, what’s got into the both of you, anyhow? What else could we be, I’d like to know?” she demanded sensibly enough. After listening impatiently to a jabbered and incoherent explanation, she shook herself free of their entwining arms and, giving Ephemia a good-natured shove, said emphatically: “I want you to come home with me for supper to-night. Ma said you could. Then we can go coasting on the Heights afterwards. I wanted to ask you in school, but that blamed old teacher made me stay in for algebra.”

“You’ll not have time to go back home now,” said Ephemia, “you’d better come with me. There’ll not be much for lunch, pancakes most likely; but Mother won’t mind if you come.”

“All right,” her friend assented, always willing to forego the necessity of going home; “I like your ma’s pancakes, anyway.”

CHAPTER VII.

"Does your mother know you're going out to-night?" Ephemia questioned with some diffidence and dread, as she and her friend hurried toward the Bergen house that afternoon.

Clare shrugged her shoulders, and with a roguish glance at her chum, replied: "Should say not! D'you think I'm crazy? Willie Nelson has a dandy coaster and he's promised to take us. You bet I'm going, ma or no ma."

Ephemia was irritated. Surely there was something dishonest and cowardly in Clare's method of obtaining her ends. Yet she felt ashamed of her condemnation, for outside her home Clare was always frank enough. Neither could Ephemia escape a sense of guilt, a feeling that she by her silences upon similar past occasions was aiding and abetting her friend in her present insincerity.

"I do wish you had asked your mother; it's so hateful to hear you wrangle, and she must blame me many times. It makes me feel so mean and horrid!"

"Humph!" snorted Clare. "A lot you understand my ma. What d'you care what she thinks? She'd never say anything to you."

Strange philosophy this, thought the sensitive Ephemia; yet she realized in a dim way that Clare was of another plumage and would preen her feathers according to her own code. "Well, anyway, let's do the supper dishes before you ask her."

Clare laughed her amusement. She knew how Ephemia detested dishwashing, and understood, therefore, something of the spirit prompting the suggestion. "You're a funny fish, Phemy; but let me tell you, doing the dishes won't help us any, not with my ma, it won't! So why try to be generous?"

Mrs. Bergen was busy baking potato cakes on the top of her stove when the girls entered the barren kitchen, and gave them a worried look in greeting. "Your pa has hurt his leg, but not so bad he'll come home," she said. Then, turning again to the stove, she slipped a long thin wooden spade under the huge cake and deftly flopped it over.

Evidently Clare thought little of her stepfather's leg, for she merely grunted. Her young brother interested her more where he sat on the floor

cutting up a seed catalogue. She was an orderly soul and inclined to be what Ephemia's mother would have diagnosed as "loose-handed." In passing the little fellow on the way to her bedroom she gave him a cuff on his unsuspecting ear. He howled, more from surprise than from discomfort. The noise wakened the young baby, who had been sleeping in a big oaken rocking-chair nearby. Pandemonium reigned for a moment. Clare shouted at her brother to "stop yelling," and Mrs. Bergen, spade and flatbread in hand, endeavoured to make herself heard above the din, meanwhile rocking the baby vigorously to and fro with her foot.

Ephemia hastened to pick up the offending papers, and after restoring certain of them to the little sobbing fellow, settled herself in a far corner of the room, whence she watched the battle rage and wane. Familiar as she was with these scenes in the Bergen household, they never failed to amaze her. Except for these temperamental storms the place was as dreary in atmosphere as a tomb, cold, dismal, depressing. Sometimes she wondered whether Mrs. Bergen would not turn to a pillar of ice amidst all this chillness were it not for these heated blusterings of her daughter.

For once the storm passed as quickly as it had come; when Clare reappeared from the bedroom whither she had gone with her own and Ephemia's wraps she was serenely smiling. To the utter astonishment of her mother she picked up the whimpering baby, jounced it about alarmingly, and to further announce her amiability, began talking in a steady stream, as though nothing whatever had occurred. Ephemia naturally longed to uphold and increase this good-fellowship, but found herself tongue-tied. Mrs. Bergen, refusing to be so easily diverted, retained a stern silence and flipped her thin cakes angrily.

When, somewhat later, the older boys filed in, noisy, red-cheeked, dusted in snow, and began discarding their mackinaws recklessly, the storm threatened to break out afresh. Clare shouted her commands at stony ears and Ephemia, dreading what lay ahead of them after supper, flew into the breach. She picked up the dropping caps and coats as one catches apples from a shaken tree, and hurriedly hung them on the pegs that lined the kitchen wall. Then she enticed the boys into telling her of the ski-jump they were planning, by which simple ruse she managed to keep them out of Clare's way.

At the conclusion of the simple meal Clare had a notion to evade the dishwashing, but Ephemia was adamant. "No, no," she whispered, "tisn't fair to leave her all these dishes, really, it isn't!" Moreover, she felt

instinctively that, if no more, it were only diplomatic to somewhat appease Mrs. Bergen's eternally outraged authority.

When the boys rushed out again with a scurry and scraping of boots and banging of doors, their mother made no attempt to either reprimand or detain them; in them she already recognized the indisputable rights of men. But when Clare brought out her tam and coat she turned upon her a cold and condemning eye. Ephemia wanted to laugh, she knew so well these signs—the game these two played ever and so tirelessly.

"What d'you want with your coat this time o'day?" demanded the indignant lady in a harsh voice.

"I'm going out!" Clare snapped forth her answer as one snaps off a string.

"Not to-night, *krasi unge*."

"I tell you, I'm going out!"

"And I say you can't go! Haven't you ears, *krasi unge*?"

"Ma, I will! I'm going, I tell you!"

Silence. . . . Mrs. Bergen picked up the baby and actually smiled at it.

"Ma! Ma! Ma!" screamed Clare, "I'm going, I'm going!" This in steadily rising crescendo.

Mrs. Bergen looked at her daughter witheringly. "*Krasi unge! Krasi unge!*"

It was apparent that more pressure was needed. Clare flung herself into a chair, stamped her feet, and howled outrageously. "I got to go, Ma; I promised Phemy. Ma! Ma! I got to go!"

Perhaps it argued power on her part, or Mrs. Bergen may have considered tears a sign of humiliation,—and humiliation is good for the soul, say the preachers—at any rate, through tears alone could her consent be obtained to anything. For a moment more she looked at the weeping Clare crossly, brows knotted in a heavy frown, and then with a groan muttered—

"Go, then, *krasi unge*! Disgrace yourself, run the streets, run wild, *krasi unge*!"

Clare's tears were miraculously stemmed—judging by the effects upon her, her mother's words might have been honeyed. She now hurried into her

wraps, peered into the small wicked mirror hanging over the washstand near the stove, and then, hand on doorknob, smiled back at her gloomy parent.

"Goodbye, Ma."

No response.

"Goodbye, Ma!" shouted Clare.

"Goodbye, *krasi unge*!" Mrs. Bergen snapped at last.

Outside the door Clare turned a beaming face upon her friend. "Well, now we can go. Say, isn't it a nice night? We should have a great time."

Ephemia had no suitable reply. It was an eternal mystery to her that Clare could shake off the effects of these wrangles as readily as a spaniel shakes water from his furry coat. To pass through such an ordeal would have driven all joy from her entire day.

When the girls reached the long western hill, generally known as "The Heights," a considerable crowd was already gathered. Shouts and laughter rent the cloaking silence—that peculiar muffled silence which always follows a heavy snowfall; and groups of hilarious young folk loomed up like as many moving shadow-shapes upon the bosom of the tolerant old hill. Ephemia and Clare joined a number of their classmates, and shortly after they saw Willie and his famous "bob" coming toward them.

"Oh, say, I thought you were never coming," was his genial greeting, to which Clare responded by giving him a friendly cuff. She was very like a young puppy, that paws and gambols delightfully or of a sudden snarls and bites.

"Carl is here, you know, Ephemia," Willie said, with a significant smile and a nudge at Clare.

To Ephemia, whose dignity was ever present, this was unpardonable familiarity. "Why should that interest me particularly? Willie, you grow more stupid each day." Her censure only brought on a burst of amusement. They laughed at her mercilessly, and at this evil moment poor unsuspecting Carl arrived, smiling and as friendly as a fat Newfoundland dog.

"This is what I call luck," he beamed, "all the gang out; what about a spin, Ephemia?"

"No, thank you!" she shrugged, and deliberately left her giggling companions. Some distance off she spied Tom Erskine, purported to be the worst boy in the school, and waved to him in frantic entreaty.

Tom, be it known, had little use for courtesy, and less for the ladies, but he owed Ephemia a debt of gratitude, since he had stuck a pin in her leg and to his relief found her above tattling.

"Take me for a ride, will you, Tom?" she begged, to his frank astonishment; "and don't glare—pretend at least that it's a pleasure."

"But what's the idea?" her gallant demanded, as they trudged up the hill.

"No sudden admiration for you, Tom Erskine, don't worry," she retorted crossly, already regretting her rudeness to her perfectly decorous classmate. What had made her so exasperated with poor Carl?

"Well, come on, then," Tom urged; "hurry, and you had best hang on tight—it won't be my fault if you break your neck."

Ephemia was not particularly addicted to sport. She found the swift downward plunge exhilarating enough, but the best part of the whole experience was that fleeting moment when the sleigh perched on the brow of the hill and she could see far below the streets of the city, like an etching in white and grey, all delicately flame-lighted.

After a couple of dizzy spins she knew instinctively that Tom's hospitality was wearing thin, and in the best of fellowship she bade him "scoot". With obvious relief, but no diminishing of admiration, Tom gladly "scooted".

Clare was nowhere to be found, so Ephemia sought a little corner amid sheltering rocks, wrapped her old coat tightly about her, and sat down to observe the winking town and the capers of the merry-makers.

A sprinkling of older folk had mingled with the youngsters as the evening lengthened—foolish lovers, who brushed past Ephemia's cover and, with heads close and hands clinging, were oblivious to her curiosity. Sometimes she thought them very romantic and wove round them all manner of charming supposition; or again, if the luckless pair were unprepossessing, she dismissed them with a shrug as merely foolish and uninteresting.

But however mild a November night may be, the cold grips if one's blood be not kept rapidly moving. Ephemia began to shiver and decided to make a thorough search for her truant friend. She found her after a while in the shelter of a clump of trees, cuddled close to a tall, gawky lad, apparently contented, and munching caramels with a relish.

Ephemia's customary assurance evaporated before so unexpected a scene. To her unsophisticated mind Clare's behavior was nothing short of terrible. Why, she was flirting! She was circled in the arms of a strange young fellow, and enjoying it at that! However, having grasped this astonishing fact, Ephemia began an impudent appraisal of the male culprit, who blinked back at her with half-defiant, half abashed eyes.

"Most certainly were I going to make a fool of myself I would seek a worthier object," thought she, and then proposed in feigned simplicity: "Clare, we had better be going home, your mother is liable to spank you." This malicious bit of innocence was wisely calculated to arouse indignation; it would cause a pretty war, she knew, but something told her that ridicule was the most beneficial punishment.

"This is Mr. Ritz," Clare informed her, bravely attempting to appear at ease and oblivious to Ephemia's mischevious intent.

"How very interesting!" that trying mortal retorted. "Are you engaged in raising geese, Mr. Ritz?"

But here Mr. Ritz overlooked the dignity due his first long trousers and fled into the shadows.

"Where are those manners you talk so much about?" Clare flamingly demanded. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. Why, I—I—why, I just could. . . ."

Ephemia's anger mounted equally swift. She was cold, and all at once she blamed Clare unreasonably for the shivers that harried her flesh.

"Oh, what do I care for your horrid old Dutchman! I'm about perished waiting around for you; and let me tell you, Clare Bergen, it's you who ought to be ashamed. The idea, sitting round with a boy who looks an Ichabod Crane!"

All the way to the Bergen's home, where Ephemia was to spend the night, they wrangled angrily; but eventually, as was usual, emerged from the fray serenely content in mutual affection.

"He *was* awfully funny," Clare admitted in a giggling whisper, as they tiptoed into the house, "and he thinks he's so smart."

"Yes, and you were just as funny," Ephemia told her mercilessly, "and not at all smart—just silly."

"Well, maybe," Clare replied, yawning frankly; "but I got some candy out of it—that's something."

CHAPTER VIII.

Confirmation is still an event, sacred and solemn—or is supposedly so—to the old-fashioned Scandinavian, and is ingenuously believed by the devout to mark the dividing of the ways between innocent childhood and maturity. It is a kind of spiritual forcing process whereby the virtues are ripened and the devil put to rout, after which the young individual is supposed to be adequately fitted to face the problems of life.

It is naturally an occasion for rejoicing and suitable refreshment. A feast must be planned, new clothes bestowed upon the Christian recruits, and, lastly, gifts must be presented, with ample admonitions and congratulation. Altogether it throws the entire household into feverish excitement, which is perhaps not quite as it ought to be.

Mrs. Strom was worn to a shadow preparing Lily for this momentous affair. What with chasing sales and sitting up at night tucking and frilling and inserting laces, it was not to be wondered at. But for once she was fully determined upon her course of action—Lily was not to be one little frill behind any other girl in honorable prestige!

Ephemia was dumfounded and a little jealous to witness the steadily growing pile of "lacy" petticoats and camisoles. She tried to convince herself of its foolishness and extravagance; yet she could not avoid a little self-pity while fingering her own simple garments.

Mother Freeman, who saw no appreciable merit in lace petticoats in wintertime, feather-stitched Ephemia's sensible flannelette slips and considered this concession enough to vanity. Yet even she, sensible soul that she was, had her own peculiar notions of propriety and fitness upon such an occasion. When the confirmation morning finally arrived she insisted that Ephemia wear her hair unbound and hanging down her back.

"Oh, mother," Ephemia gasped, "they'll laugh at me—they'll say that I'm trying to show off."

"What others say unjustly isn't of the least interest to me," said that unchangeable lady, with a spirited toss of the head. When Ephemia recognized the futility of protest she resigned herself with feeble grace. It may have been the mellowing effects of their pretty clothes, or possibly the beauty of Ephemia's long hair, which made her classmates unusually gracious. Whatever the cause, she discovered to her surprise that no one was

in the least inclined to tease her; and in the long and sombre service that followed she forgot all about her personal appearance.

Pastor Neils was more than usually verbose upon this day of days. With awful solemnity he pictured the pitfalls and the stumbling-blocks lying just ahead. Poor sensitive Ephemia broke out in beady perspiration under the spell of his compelling oratory, and the dead air of the grey old church seemed to whirl and re-echo with melancholy forebodings. The world, which only this morning had seemed so bright, became a fearful place—almost she heard the terrific roaring of that biblical lion whose gastronomic feats were constantly preying upon the good Pastor's mind. Even the badly painted face of the Saviour, which smiled down meekly from the altar-piece, failed to enhearten her. The cracked voice of the lay-brother, singing in determined flatness, recalled her from this hypnotic misery, and for once she beheld the withered old man in the guise of an angel.

Mrs. Freeman's command of Norwegian was meagre, hence she had remained at home to prepare the dinner—a very special dinner in honor of the great occasion. Her husband, however, had ventured to the sombre house of worship out of respect for his child. But long before Pastor Neils pronounced the benediction he had quietly slipped out again.

"I had been told that Norwegians are a patient people—I have seen them under fire and believe it," he remarked humorously to his bustling wife.

"For shame, Stephen! It were kinder to remain away than to ridicule what affects some so profoundly, and I beg of you to make no such remarks to Ephemia."

"Now, now, my dear—don't I smell something burning? And isn't that Caroline striding down the hill? Of course I wouldn't say anything to the child; she will be disillusioned soon enough, my love."

"For once I must agree. Yes, that is Caroline; better see that the cat isn't sleeping in the chair she prefers."

Meanwhile the parting hymn was sung in the church, and eventually Ephemia found herself on the homeward way with Clare clinging tightly to her arm. Mrs. Bergen had sourly done her duty in providing the customary new clothes, but beyond this she would not bestir herself. Hence, Mrs. Freeman had generously invited the girl to spend the festal day at her home.

They were unusually quiet, each occupied with her own thoughts. Ephemia was on fire with virtuous resolutions, but her friend was fighting a new desolation that threatened to involve her in terrible gloom.

“Your ma is awfully good, isn’t she?” she broke out at length.

Ephemia was a little startled at so unusual a display of sentiment, and no less dismayed at Clare’s woeful expression.

“Why, yes . . . I guess all mothers are,” she answered lamely.

“I suppose so, but I don’t see my ma fussing with any party for me.” This with bitterness.

“Oh, Clare, don’t! it makes me miserable. Perhaps it’s because of the new baby. Your mother has a lot to do.”

“Oh, bother! Never mind me, Ephemia, I’m a pig to spoil your day. Still, how about the Stroms? Isn’t Mrs. Strom as busy as my ma?”

Ephemia found it impossible to answer this, so she held her peace. They had come to the end of the sidewalk. Below them lay the path which dipped into the bowl-shaped valley, and silhouetted against the white hill opposite was the ugly old Freeman house. It seemed peculiarly inviting now with its feathery grey smoke curling lazily into the still air and its high windows shining with reflected sunlight.

The girls saw where a tall woman stepped out on the porch and picked up something.

“I expect we’d better hustle,” said Ephemia; “that’s Aunt Caroline taking in her rubbers to warm them. I suppose she’s in a hurry as usual.”

“Perhaps she’s brought you a present,” her friend suggested shamelessly, knowing well that Aunt Caroline was what the dwellers of that valley referred to as “well off”.

Ephemia disagreed modestly, though in the bottom of her heart she had been hoping against hope that Aunt Caroline might surpass herself and perhaps give her a watch.

The table was set and the dinner waiting when the girls entered the house—a house warm now with the atmosphere of friendliness and fragrant with the odors of excellent cookery. In the most comfortable rocker Aunt Caroline sat enthroned, her best black silk billowing about her importantly. Nearby two old gentlemen, whose names Ephemia never could keep straight, were discussing the latest Icelandic verse and lamenting its effeminacy. “Everything is polish these days, idle play upon words; there is no might or marrow in it.” This much Ephemia heard before her elders condescended to take note of her.

“Well, well, Ephemia,” Aunt Caroline began running a critical eye over the girl, “I hope you’ve considered this step with seriousness. H-m-m, you should have worn your skirt longer; you always look so fat, my dear, so stubby, like your dear mother. Well, well, I suppose it can’t be helped; you may outgrow it, but positively you must not eat potatoes, Ephemia, nor cream.”

The girl listened to this counsel in silence, but she was wounded and humiliated almost to the point of tears. Somehow or other, Aunt Caroline always had that effect upon her; but she had been taught to respect this autocratic aunt of hers and bear all her criticism patiently. To the dreamy, unbusinesslike Mr. Freeman this capable sister of his, with her strong character and sound sense, was a power to be recognized and respected. His wife was the only one who ever dreamt of disagreeing with Caroline Bjornson and who sometimes even laughed at her; yet even she had taught Ephemia to humor her aunt’s opinions. So now she attempted a valiant smile, though she was suddenly ashamed of her simple dress, of her luxuriant hanging hair, and of her very self. Aunt Caroline was pleased with this meekness; it gratified her vanity and curiously enough had a mellowing effect upon her. She returned the feeble smile, saying, not ungraciously: “There, there, my dear, don’t look so crestfallen. After all, many an ungainly colt makes a fine horse—ah, yes, quite so. Now, I’m no believer in this religious folderol—though of course, as I said, I would have you consider gravely its—er—significance—” here Aunt Caroline waved a well-kept and shapely hand,—“and so out of, I should perhaps say, in concession to all this fuss, I’ve bought you a little something, my dear. Stephen! Where’d I put that box? Ah, yes, thank you, Stephen,” pleased to mark how deferentially he brought the thing to her . . . “yes, Ephemia, I trust you will grow up a credit to your dear parents. Never forget your grandfather was knighted for distinguished service. Well, here you are,” she finished, thrusting the box into the blushing girl’s hands.

Ephemia tried to appear truly joyful and succeeded but poorly; confusion covered her like a cloud, and a wicked imp of perversity kept prodding her. “Aha,” he snickered, “thought you’d get a watch, you the plain, pudgy child of poverty!” So incredibly foolish is the human heart that Ephemia could have wept when, with trembling hands, she unwound from its tissue-paper wrappings a sleek brown marmot muff.

“Why, Caroline, you are altogether too extravagant in this!” Mrs. Freeman cried.

“My dear, how magnificent!” said Stephen.

“How soft and fine!” interposed Mrs. Halson timidly. She had been sitting this while like a little grey ghost on the lumpy green sofa, her fat little son beside her.

“Quite so,” said one of the old gentlemen, “but how does one use it—or rather one’s hands when they’re in it?”

“Well, say!” whispered Clare, “the old thing sure surpassed herself. Why, marmot’s a terribly expensive fur.”

All this admiration and praise could not fail to soften Ephemia’s disappointment. She began to see the muff in an entirely new light. It ceased to be a thing which merely kept one’s hands from freezing, and became an envied and precious possession. Clare’s remark had done it.

Why, it was lovely! Indeed it was! And Aunt Caroline might have given her a common dogskin muff and still been generous! Following this thought Ephemia’s conscience was down upon her in an avalanche. What a little ingrate she was, what a little beast even to expect anything! No wonder Aunt Caroline found her ordinary. ’Twas a wonder anyone tolerated her at all. With these wild thoughts torturing her young mind, she flung herself upon her Aunt’s bosom in a storm of incoherent thanks. It was hard to know just what Aunt Caroline thought, but plainly she was not ill-pleased.

“There, there, my child, it’s nothing,” she said in no ungentle tones. “It’s been too much excitement for her, all this morning’s affair,” she explained to the others. “Come, child,” she urged, pushing the girl away, “wash your face in cold water, and be quick, I must away. You will feel better when you get something inside your stomach.”

The remainder of the day wore on pleasantly and that evening the girls took their first communion, which act completed their transformation—at least in the eyes of the Scandinavian community—and made of them individuals with indisputable rights to mind and conscience. They were no longer irresponsible children, but must stand accountable to the Most High for each and every future action—a consoling enough idea to Lutheran parents, but rather appalling to poor blind youth if it ever paused to consider. However, Ephemia fell asleep that night with her muff beside her and a little gold cross from her mother clasped tightly in her hand.

CHAPTER IX.

Ephemia felt extremely grown and important when at last she found herself in the High School. But gradually the excitement engendered by her own fertile imagination and the new environment wore away, and she began to miss Clare and Lily. She studied the harder and read the more despite her mother's cryptic admonition that nights were made for sleeping and not for the ruining of one's eyes.

Clare had intended going to work immediately after finishing the Grammar School, but it was decreed otherwise. Her mother had fallen and broken her arm whilst bringing in an armful of wood one cold and sleety morning; and so of necessity it became Clare's lot to care for the disabled woman and the household as best she could. It must have been a sorry trial for all concerned, but some innate nobility in the girl kept her from remarking upon it when occasionally she slipped away of an evening to visit her friends.

Ephemia, blind to the quiet changes in herself, somewhat resented those so apparent in Clare. Each time they met Clare seemed to have grown noticeably older and more cynical, and yet this cynicism was reflected rather than spoken. It caused poor Ephemia many a melancholy speculation.

Mrs. Freeman did not share in this sentimental attitude—to her it was nature, and not an evil fate, which was making of Clare a woman, though perhaps prematurely. She intimated as much one fine winter evening after the girl had paid them a hurried visit.

"I'm glad to see Clare settling down. I did fear for her, Ephemia; but I see now there's more in her character than I've credited."

"She's just fine, mother, I've always said so. But it's no joke doing what she's doing.

"She's only doing her duty—a thing not always pleasant. But you will learn that negligence of this prime virtue may be even less so."

"Oh, well, I'm sorry for Clare. Now, Lily is different. I wouldn't be sorry for Lily under similar conditions."

For all her usual understanding, Mrs. Freeman was plainly puzzled by this.

“You’re too full of sentiment, Ephemia. It makes me afraid . . . . sometimes I think it were better to have the stoicism of our forefathers . . . . to them only the inevitable occurred. Why waste breath in fearful prayer or supplication? As well bemoan the vagaries of the wind. . . . . .”

“Oh, Mother, you positively give me gooseflesh when you begin talking like that.”

Mrs. Freeman sighed as she resumed her eternal mending. She thought, What is the use of elderly wisdom, bought at such a fearful cost, since never to the end of time could it be used to forwarn youth? This gloomy meditation was interrupted by a timid knock, and Lily, wreathed in smiles and decked in her best, came in to tell them the news.

“Mamma and I just came home from Pastor Neils’,” she said in explanation of her finery; and then, “Mind you, I’m going to work next week at Olson’s store. Pastor Neils told us he needed a girl, and he offered to speak for me if I wanted the place, and of course I got it.”

They must in the nature of things rejoice with Lily over this good fortune since she so obviously considered it the luck of the gods. But when she was gone Ephemia sat in silence trying to understand the puzzling things that worried her.

“It is strange being like Lily, don’t you think? Such little things make her happy. Imagine being pleased at working in a candy store!”

Mrs. Freeman laughed. “She is a fortunate girl, Ephemia.”

“Oh, Mother, you don’t mean that!”

Some strong emotion swept the laughter from Mrs. Freeman’s handsome face. “When one is a pauper, my child, it is as well to have few ambitions and not too much intelligence.” Her voice was cold, but very even. “Moreover, one’s inclinations are largely inherited. Lily’s folks have always worked for others. That is quite apparent; hence to her it is the natural and acceptable course.”

“Just what do you mean?” questioned her daughter, though she understood in part what had been said.

Instead of replying directly, Mrs. Freeman turned upon Ephemia a quizzical smile and said: “Why are you ashamed that your father is selling hardware and harness?”

The girl’s face flamed scarlet, as though she had received a blow. “Why —I—, why, Mother!”

“Come, be honest,” snapped Mrs. Freeman.

“Well, then, I’m not ashamed; but I’m sorry, because I know father was accustomed to better things and is not satisfied himself.”

“Good,” said her mother, “you’re coming on.” Then, reaching across the table, she grasped her daughter’s hand. “That’s what I meant, my dear. You’d have given little or no thought to your father’s occupation—at least not yet—had you not heard his regrets. Phemy, my dear, no one is merely the child of his parents or a product of environment only. We have fallen upon evil days, your dear father and I, but that does not deprive us of certain instincts which are our inheritance from noble forbears. To you our present mode of existence is not so very difficult—you have known no better. Yet something urges you to look higher, makes you critical. That urge, my dear, is the voice of your ancestors, say what you will. Respect that voice, Ephemia, and the old fighting spirit of these ancestors may perhaps come to your rescue in some evil hour.”

“Oh, Mother, what a snob you are!” the girl giggled, the seriousness of the moment falling away from her; “indeed, you’re just a hidebound, horrid old snob.”

Mrs. Freeman tossed her head in that brisk way of hers. “So? Well, my dear, you’ll learn how all the world is akin in that respect; though there are, to be sure, many names for the same vanity. We have the intellectual bigot, you know, and the religious bigot, and the monied bigot to whom all excellence is represented in gold, and, as for me, I see no shade of difference in their folly.”

Mr. Freeman had been visiting his sister, and now, returning home, put an end to their theorising. He was cold, and his wife hurried to set the kettle on the big range that loomed satiny black and a-sparkle with nickel in the center of the roomy kitchen.

Ephemia did not sleep well that night. It may have been due to the coffee, but, whatever the cause, her mother’s conversation kept running through her mind. She could not understand it fully, but the tantalizing idea that she was not so much a distinct identity as a mere accumulation of age-old instincts was depressing. It made her feel as though she were, after all, only a puppet whose strings were pulled, she knew neither by whom nor why. Toward morning she fell asleep and dreamed that she was torn to pieces by two red-mantled Viking furies who each in turn tried to force her to a certain road.

CHAPTER X.

The following spring Mr. Freeman contracted a severe form of la grippe, and though he slowly recovered from the malady itself, he was unable to shake the heavy cough which developed. He had never been robust since his coming to America, and the bitterly cold winters had always been a drain on his health. For some years his nephew-in-law, Arni Bjornson, had been living in the far South, and now, weakened by illness, Mr. Freeman began to think lovingly of that land of eternal sunshine which the young man so enthusiastically described in his letters.

When the inclement Northern spring had given way to summer, and the warm sunny days failed to produce their usual salutary effects, Mr. Freeman fell into a despondent frame of mind and began harping rather insistently upon the alleged benefits of the South. This insistence worried his wife much more than his illness, for it was no new thing for him to put in what she called “a few bad months”, and all too often she had suffered from his delusions.

Mr. Freeman had been badly afflicted by wanderlust in his youth, and though the years had effected some curative change, the old symptoms still recurred off and on. To him no call was so clarion clear as the muffled roll of distant drums, no field so gold-enveloped as those which stretched beyond the far horizon! Twice ere this he had sold the roof from over his wife’s head and had gone off rejoicing to follow his elusive guiding star.

Once it was sheep-ranching in the Dakotas—no life was to be compared to it! Mr. Freeman had seen himself the master of houses and lands, and flocks unnumbered—an honorable landholder, such as his fathers had been before him—all this before setting foot on the sun-baked Dakota plains. Another time it was mixed farming in Manitoba which had enamoured him, and for months before the fatal plunge poor Mrs. Freeman was forced to listen to the relative merits of Holsteins and Herefords. Both these ventures had ended disastrously, as she could have foretold.

In summing it up for Ephemia, now that the old restlessness was upon him, Mrs. Freeman blamed it on his blood. She invariably blamed one’s blood for every foible. “After all, Grandpa Freeman was a farmer,” she finished with a sigh. “I’ve heard his sheep were the finest in the entire upland country. But what your father seems to forget is that, instead of building up this homestead, Grandpa Freeman inherited it just as it was, and

expanded his energies only to waste its substance, God rest his improvident old soul!"

It seemed, indeed, that Stephen Freeman was never to know the wisdom of discretion. All the misfortunes of the past due to the chasing of his fabled rainbows were forgotten, or had become dimmed by the vapour of the years between. Sometimes his wife thought a little spitefully that he rather gloried in these confused memories of his, and that he saw them through the haze of his imaginings as glorified martyrdom.

So now Stephen forgot what a price of toil and self-sacrifice his wife had paid for their present comfort. The cosy old grey house with its homely furnishings; the pleasant pastures rolling in and out among the hills; the sleek fat Jerseys, and the fluttering white leghorns, all merged into nothingness before the driving desire to ride, a landed gentleman, up and down the confines of some dilapidated but ancient plantation before the envious eyes of black servitors. Mr. Freeman did not really confess this wild ambition, but his wife knew the habits of his colorful mind.

It came, therefore, without surprise—though causing a flutter of heart—when, one early evening, he announced in nervous defiance his determination to dispose of the house, and that a prospective buyer would arrive in a day or two to look over the place. Mrs. Freeman turned a shade paler, but it was characteristic of her that, now the blow had fallen, she made no complaint.

"Oh, Papa, what about my school?" cried Ephemia, incredulous amazement written large on her face.

Mr. Freeman laughed mirthlessly. "Now, now, my dear, why distress yourself? And is it charitable to give no thought to your poor father? Am I of no account?"

"Oh, Stephen, my dear," cried his wife in exasperation, "be careful lest the child lose faith in you! After all, it would be a misfortune to take her out of school. You must permit me to say, Stephen, that all one hears of distant places is not to be trusted. I am deeply troubled." Then, stepping to Ephemia's side, she patted her shoulder consolingly.

"My dear, I would I might shield you from all and every disappointment, but since it may not be, try to keep in mind that natural inheritance I spoke of not so long ago."

Ephemia was frightened by her mother's intensity, and momentarily terrified by the belief that she was altogether too omniscient, and that the

future was dark indeed. Mr. Freeman lost his patience—and he had a good store of it to lose.

"You astonish me, Vilborg, you do indeed. It would seem your intention to frighten the child; one might suppose I was proposing the wilds of Africa rather than the fairest spot in the United States. As to schools, don't you suppose there are schools everywhere in this great country? And if not, I haven't seen that education does so much for women; they still retain their superstitions and prejudices in spite of it."

This was so unwonted a theory that Ephemia could not help smiling. "Why, Father, how you do talk! Haven't you always contended that a woman's one hope of emancipation is education?"

Stephen squirmed uncomfortably, and then, because he was by nature an amiable soul who disliked above all else disturbances of this kind, he smiled, and patting her arm, muttered sheepishly: "There, there, my love, don't mind your old papa; he's not himself these days, not himself. Of course I hope to see you get all possible advantages . . . still, if you favor your dear mother too strongly, I'm afraid that Socrates himself couldn't teach you."

But Mrs. Freeman had left the room and so missed this little jest at her expense.

CHAPTER XI.

There was no joy at the supper-table that evening. Even Mr. Freeman could not rise to the occasion, though he made some pretence at reading an article on horticulture. Mrs. Freeman kept a discreet but stern silence except when replying to little Harold's childish prattle.

As for Ephemia, her imagination was run riot in gloom—dark, impenetrable gloom! All her little castles were crashing down. Here she was, doing two grades since February,—just one more and she could teach, or better yet, get a position on a paper,—and now her father was going to spoil it all! When the meal was over and the dishes washed and neatly put away in the old glass cabinet with its paper-decked shelves, she slipped away to her old rock.

Very seldom now did Lily or Clare share this hiding-place. Just a year ago they had all seemed mere care-free children; but now, so it seemed to Ephemia, they were already old. Clare and Lily were both working, and how this work had changed them! And here was she threatened by Heaven only knew what!

Until now Ephemia's musings had been unclouded; in her imagination she, like her father, pictured a world all rosy red and sweet. Now she was rudely shaken. Had she not been taught that virtue is its own reward and that nothing is unattainable to the industrious?

Well, she was working faithfully, doing her best, and yet she saw that not only one's own actions may bring disaster, but another's also. The thought was singularly disheartening—terrifying even; and then, with a sudden surge of love, she thought of her mother and all the dull, dead years stretching behind her like a desert trail. The thought quite frightened poor Ephemia. "Oh, Mother, Mother," she sobbed, "is this all life means? Oh, what's the good of it? It's cruel, ugly, senseless!" Then she wept miserably, her face against the dark old stone, her grief quite safe in its keeping.

In time the tears ceased, and in the sweet silence that surrounded her like a warm embrace she heard the familiar sounds of the night—the gentle sighing of the wind in the willows, the occasional silvery trickle of tiny rivulets of loosened sand, a nightbird's sudden cry, and the homely sound of the intermittent tinkling of the bells on her mother's two prize cows

somewhere on the slope behind her. Yet, comforting as these sounds surely were, they only added to her melancholy and loneliness.

Even the well-beloved brook at her feet, being now a little worn from its ecstatic spring fervour, seemed self-absorbed, sadly shrunken in its bed and slow of speech. With this dreary thought in mind, she lifted her tear-laden eyes, and there, just across the ravine, rose the eternal hills. Their shadowed defiles loomed deeply purple and mysterious; while against the grey rim of the sky, where just a faint tinge of lavender and gold flickered, were revealed rows of stunted birch and pine, making a lattice-work of outflung appealing arms upon the fading colors of the evening sky. “They’re like pilgrims marching off into the sunset,” said Ephemia aloud, and in a burst of revealing emotion she plumbed at last the fulness of her love for the stately hills with their crevices, dim as cathedral aisles, and as redolent of piety; their little singing rivulets and homing birds and ever fragrant flowers.

Majestically great, eternal in their patience, were the hills; yet not remote or austere in their majesty, but welcoming and gentle like a ripened prophet living in the dreams of his heart. Ephemia thought of them now as a vigilant guard standing about the city, loving and true, offering the sanctuary of their silent covers to the lonely and the oppressed.

In accord with the thought she made her way hurriedly down from the rocky ledge, over the little brook, scrambled up the opposite embankment, and in an agony of mingled emotions ran to the spot she had in view. A quiet and a goodly place was this, a miniature valley tucked in between the little range and the great. Here in Springtime Ephemia went in search of the big velvety dog-eared violets and the golden cowslips, and later, when the heat of summer had drunk up the winey moisture, she would lie quietly under some friendly sapling on a bed soft with leaves and broken bits of twigs of many seasons, interspersed with tender patches of new moss.

Here she had learned to distinguish the many sounds of a wood. She knew when the almost imperceptible stirring of dead grasses betrayed peering and curious little eyes, and rejoiced how seldom the timid hare sounded his warning tattoo. Her ear had come to find pleasure in the subtle sound of the grass itself, in its silky rustling, its restless stirring; and so intent upon this lowly music had she often been that the startled whirring of a mother bird from its nest struck an equal terror to her heart.

She had come to know a squirrel’s happiness by his impudent chattering, lightning dashes and graceful dips, and never tired of watching him daintily nibble his protracted dinner. The red-headed woodpecker aroused her

everlasting admiration by his diligence and bold drumming—let hear who will, Mr. Woodpecker attended to his duty! All these sounds Ephemia loved, and when the evening wind arose and danced through the birches, the willows and the spruce, stealing something of sweetness from them all and flinging it widespread over the hills, she found these things all mingling in a medley of harmony which drew the tears despite her joy in them.

So now Ephemia flung herself down under a shining white birch—a tender silvery thing, young and beautiful as first love—and it seemed to her sore little heart that the entire valley was full of commiseration and sympathy.

The silent moments fled away one after the other, and with each something of Ephemia's blind misery went also. The blue shadows deepened, lengthened, crept over the hills, like an army of restless spirits, and little by little the silence changed as into it crept the furtive activities of the small night creatures. Still Ephemia lingered, and not until an infant crescent moon showed brilliant and sparkling like a gem on the brow of the eastern hill did she realise how anxious her mother might be. "Poor mother, I must do my best for her," she sighed, as she retraced her steps. Again, before re-crossing the stream, Ephemia glanced back at the hills. "How I shall miss them!" she thought; "they are so calm, so strong, there's something of the power of God in them."

In one of those flashing perceptions that so often illumined her probing young mind Ephemia remembered that somewhere a poet had said "A little spark of God burns in each human heart." "How silly of me to worry," she said to herself; "the God of the hills is my God, too."

CHAPTER XII.

When Aunt Caroline was fully convinced that Stephen's "foolishness," as she called his new scheme, was really about to materialize, she made a dashing trip to the Freemans. Virtually that was the way of it, for she refrained from the healthful exercise of walking and whipped up her old grey mare instead.

"What's all this tommydediddle about selling out, Vilborg?" she demanded, red-faced and hot from the July sun, as she thumped herself with unmistakable determination into the usual rocking-chair.

Mrs. Freeman shrugged, but she was far too irritated and depressed to be politely evasive. "You know Stephen," she answered finally.

" 'You know Stephen'! Well, Vilborg, so do you. And since we must admit him a hopeless fool at times, why do you permit it?"

"What can I do? Doesn't the very law allow a man to sell the roof from over his wife's head, even though she may have raised that roof herself, so to speak? What's the good of argument, Caroline? But let me say for once that in my estimation nothing in the world is more disastrous to others than a blatant optimist. Stephen always propounds that 'sunnyside' jargon when I would remind him of a past mistake to forwarn him. There's such a thing as falling blind from staring at the sun!"

"Quite so, Vilborg. Now, then, suppose we face facts squarely. What's he done so far?"

"He's found a buyer for the house and the twenty acres running this side of the stream. It seems the man doesn't think much of the strip on the hill opposite."

"Nor do I," snapped Caroline; "nothing but rocks and brush—and beauty, no doubt. Well, perhaps it may come in useful some day when you're back again penniless. Now, then, this I'd do, Vilborg, nor be shaken from it—refuse point blank to leave Alueez until Stephen has some place ready for you in this paradise of his. Then if he gets any of his thousand ailments he'll miss you and be amenable to reason—perhaps! If possible I'd arrange with this buyer to stay on until late fall. Sell on that condition, and I do hope you're not going to give in this time to the point of selling your cows."

Mrs. Freeman warmed to her sister-in-law for the first time in years. There had never been much sympathy between them, partly because Caroline, out of pride, had closed her eyes to Stephen's former blunders, and for the same reason had sought to place the blame on his wife. She had hated to admit that a Freeman could be so improvident, though she, as well as her brother, had suffered in youth through the same failing in their happy-go-lucky father. But, now that Stephen was aging, to let go his present possessions was to assure himself of penury in old age; and for once Caroline swallowed her pride, admitted her sympathy for Vilborg, and decided to speak her mind.

Indeed, she had already done so several times to the visionary Stephen, but with no result beyond slightly estranged feeling on both sides. Mrs. Freeman understood Caroline's attitude and appreciated her unexpected sympathy.

"You are right as usual, Caroline, and if possible I'll act upon your advice. At any rate I'll be firm about not selling the cows and my leghorns until I see how this thing is coming out. But I'm a little doubtful about letting Stephen go alone among strangers. After all he's been very ill, and he'd be misunderstood."

"There you are! there you go!" snorted Caroline, "that's the way to make a namby-pamby of a man. Let me tell you, my good woman, the late William Bjornson got no such petting from me. My land sakes! as though you were responsible for his aches and pains! I'm not aiming to criticise you, Vilborg, for you're a sensible, hard-working woman, and, goodness knows, you've had more than your share of trouble; but it's plainly to be seen you've thought too much of these trifling ailments. Good land! don't you know yet what a poet Stephen is? And don't all such afflicted creatures indulge in exaggeration, be it toothache or social uplift?"

Mrs. Freeman had made a pot of coffee during their discourse, and now brought out her two finest china cups, a silver cream pitcher and a plate of little cakes. "Come, Caroline, we may as well enjoy a drop of coffee," she smiled; "there's no use being too abstemious in little pleasures. There's much in what you say," she resumed, as they settled back in their chairs, cups in hand; "I've always known that all that really makes Stephen so restless is his being out of his element. He should never have left the Old Country. Had he remained there he might have taught, or worked on his beloved *Weekly*. But this trade. . . . ."

“Tommydediddle and foolishness! A trade was honorable enough in my youth, and ’tis so yet, to my fancy. A man isn’t necessarily an idiot, nor what’s as bad, an illiterate, just because he can use his hands. And I remember that Stephen’s saddles were the pride of many a grand dame in the old days at home.”

Vilborg’s face softened as old memories thronged upon her. She remembered how high her own heart had beat at such a possession. How splendid it had been, that hand-sewn, flower-embroidered saddle which was Stephen’s first gift to her! how beautiful her little pony had appeared decked out in his glittering accoutrements! Very fine it all had been to her youthful eyes; fine, too, the romantic giver with his poetic speeches and gallant ways.

But not so fine had this wayward Stephen of hers seemed to the stern old Dean, her father. “No daughter of mine shall marry this son of a profligate and drunkard,” had been his harsh reply to her blushing revelation. Well, no daughter of his had, for she was crossed from his Bible and from his heart. Vilborg sighed and poured out a second cup of coffee for her visitor.

“All right, Caroline, for once I’ll forsake my duty. I promise you to remain behind.”

“Now, that’s a sensible soul,—duty, my grandmother! And what’s duty if it’s not good sense? Well, I’ll away, then; that hired girl of mine’s an utter numbskull—she’s liable to ruin the whole house if I’m away too long. Last night she forgot to put the cat out, and, land sakes! it ate me out of a good dinner, all the leftover pork, every scrap and skittle of it!”

Mrs. Freeman was as good as her word. Stephen fumed and stormed, accused her of seeking his death, but she refused to go one step from Alueez until he should first be assured of some occupation and an habitation of sorts in that sunny land of his.

Caroline’s suggestion that she remain on in the old house until fall became a reality. The purchaser proved to be a retiring farmer, who desired to settle his own affairs on the land before moving to town, and he readily agreed to let Mrs. Freeman and the children stay on until he was ready to make the change.

It was a somewhat abused Stephen, therefore, who, shabby valise in hand, bade his stubborn family a sad farewell one terrifically hot day in early August; and it was quite in keeping with former times that in his possession was the entire thousand dollars he obtained in half payment on his property. Stephen never even dreamt of considering his actions in any

analytic way whatever. After all, Vilborg always got on! That was perhaps his subconscious belief. “My dear,” said he, on parting, “be careful of yourself and take good care of the children.”

“Goodbye, Stephen; don’t forget to take your coughdrops and keep your feet dry. I’ve heard it’s very wet down there at times,” said his wife, her fine eyes dimmed and a nagging pain in her heart—he was so helpless, so like a child, for all his fine speeches!

Caroline had driven the family to the depot in her shiny democrat. She thought Vilborg’s face showed signs of moral weakening—she’d be liable to take the train right now if he just played up on her sympathy a little more, she mused, and so thinking flung herself into the breach. “Well, on with you then, Stephen! Better make certain of your seat, and be sure to keep a journal of your trip; let us know all about it. And if this Garden of Eden really proves snakeless, perhaps even I may follow.” She hurled this at her brother in stentorian playfulness.

There was wisdom embodied in it withal. Stephen patted a little red notebook lovingly,—“Ah, yes, yes, Caroline, I intend to make careful note of everything. I’ve no doubt I can write some interesting articles on my journey for the weeklies at home.” Stephen Freeman had contributed to these Icelandic weeklies for years, it being his chief delight and recreation to lock himself up in his stuffy room of a Sunday to write out his theories on books and things in general. Stephen Freeman was so good at theories that it pre-supposed him inadequate in anything else.

“Yes, yes, I’ve no doubt,” shouted his sister, for the engine was now hissing and sputtering like a gigantic angry cat; “no doubt at all, but you’d better get in now.”

Thus hurried, Stephen embraced his wife, now entertaining wild misgivings of never seeing him again, told her to cheer up, to live in anticipation of the fine place he was to find for her; kissed Ephemia on one ear, and with genuine affection picked Harold up in a swift embrace.

“Goodby, Papa,” said the child, “send me a weeny, weeny brack baby to play wif, what talks and blinks like Len’s doll when you pinch her tummy.”

“Yes, yes, my darling, papa’ll send you something fine. Well, goodbye, dear ones,” he cried in final farewell, “goodbye, and may fortune attend you.”

“Humph!” snorted Caroline, as she steered the misty-eyed Vilborg through the customary station throng toward the democrat, “it’s to be hoped

something does! Land sakes! there now, sit tight all of you. Git up, Nancy! Whoa! whoa, you old sinner! not into the gutter! Well, we're off. Hope to heaven that good-for-nothing Katy hasn't burnt the roast. It'll do us good to have something sensible and plain in on our stomachs."

CHAPTER XIII.

After Stephen's departure affairs settled into something like their former groove, with this vital difference, however, that Mrs. Freeman had only her own limited earnings to depend upon for current expenses. In her heart she was hoping that her husband would find his dream shattered before his little capital was entirely squandered, and so from day to day she put off expressing her worry to Ephemia. But that young person was emerging from her dream cocoon. Until this uncertainty of future faced her Ephemia had clung to her illusions. Now, however, she was beginning to use her vision for sterner things. Unknown to her mother, she had gone from store to store in quest of something to do, but times were slack and no one in need of help.

Lily Strom listened to this disappointing confession one evening in genuine concern. She had long since come to realise the value of a dollar. "My goodness! that's too bad, Phemy; but, you see, there's never much doing in summertime. Oh, say, I think the Ringling Brothers' circus is coming to town in a couple of weeks. Mr. Olson always has a booth in the fair grounds when something is going on, and I heard him say he was so busy building an addition to his house that he wasn't sure what to do this time. You could sell the junk just as well as he."

This seemed a capital idea, and after due humming and hawing Mr. Olson decided that the experiment was worth trying, though he disliked paying anyone else for doing what he had always done himself. But his good wife was very plain spoken, and assured him that if he didn't soon get through "messing around the house with his fixins" she'd get an honest-to-goodness carpenter and pay him any price to do the job right. Mr. Olson had long contended that carpenters and plumbers were nothing more nor less than human "bloodsuckers", which belief hastened his decision in favor of Ephemia. Her wages would not amount to much; she was inexperienced and should be made to pay for her education in trade as in other things.

Lily joyfully brought the final decision to Ephemia one sultry evening when she and her mother were "mending" on the weatherbeaten old porch. Mrs. Freeman was entirely taken aback. "Why, Ephemia," she gasped, "a circus is an awful place! What on earth do you know about such a venture? You'd be liable to let yourself be robbed of everything."

"Now, Mother, I'm not so simple as you think. I'll be as watchful as a bulldog, and what's more, I'll out-yell anyone around."

“My, dear, I’m astonished! Now, that puts an end to it right here; we may be somewhat hard pressed, but if you must work surely you can get something less disagreeable than this.”

“But, Mrs. Freeman,” Lily ventured mildly, “she’s been everywhere; and truly this isn’t the time of year to pick up extra work easily. At Christmas and Easter it’s different.”

“Yes, and if it’s bad to sell peanuts it’s worse to wear dresses ten inches too short,” said Ephemia testily, with a rueful glance at her old linen, so hopelessly outclassed by her friend’s shining new organdie.

Mrs. Freeman watched her daughter’s stormy young face in silence for a moment, her mind working very fast. “Very well, then, Phemy, perhaps it’s time you tried your wings. It’s always been my own belief that nothing without can do real injury if the mind is right.”

Ephemia wasn’t worrying about the calibre of her mind just then—what she wanted was a new frock for the ensuing school year. She simply soared as on wings at the mere thought of really doing something at last, and in the midst of this enthusiasm a really brilliant idea presented itself.

“Lily, do you suppose that Mr. Olson would let me sell something of my own—of mother’s, I mean? Oh, Mother, you know what excellent cake you make; we could sell pounds and pounds of it.”

“Nonsense!” retorted Mrs. Freeman; “but mentioning cake reminds me that I’ve a fresh one in the house and I might as well give you girls a bit.” So saying she suited action to the word and went into the house to do as she proposed.

“I think that’s just a grand idea, Ephemia,” said Lily; “I’m sure Mr. Olson won’t mind. Why should he?—he isn’t in the baking business?”

Once again that worthy gentleman proved accommodating and agreeable; and so, after much cajoling, Ephemia persuaded her mother to try out the plan. In the end the venture proved fruitful; indeed so successful was Ephemia as a vendor of sweets, so expert in the art of extracting reluctant pennies from lean purses, that Mr. Olson decided to assume the good Samaritan role, and offered to handle cakes for her mother in his store on a commission basis if she so agreed.

Mrs. Freeman, now completely converted, readily assented, and began diverting her talents into this delectable and moderately remunerative channel.

This unexpected good fortune also helped to quiet the intermittent flurries of anxiety concerning Stephen's progress, for a fortnight had passed without any word from her husband. The last letter had been aglow with luminous sunsets, singing birds and magnolia blossoms, but there had, nevertheless, been a faint little something tucked unconsciously into the fragrant sentences which told her that Stephen was making a valiant and desperate attempt to realise his expectations.

When August had worn itself away in a fever of heat, thunderstorms and occasional cloudburst, and still no word arrived, Mrs. Freeman found it unbearable; yet, lest she should be too hasty, she decided to pay her sister-in-law a visit before telegraphing Stephen anything definite.

Caroline's house was a landmark in the vicinity; it was a substantial yellow frame building, with gables ostentatiously decorated in ginger-bread latticewood. A verandah, covered in a profusion of Virginia creeper, extended round the three sides of the house; and scarlet geraniums, ribbon grass and huge orange nasturtiums rioted in two discarded water-tanks, now converted into gleaming silver painted troughs on either side of the lawn. The house itself stood on a considerable promontory, commanding a noble view of wood and hill and distant water. Caroline was extremely proud of her terraced lawn, supported by sound concrete ledges, and of her rose and lilac shrubs. When Mrs. Freeman arrived on her anxious mission this particular day she was busily engaged spraying her roses.

"You've no idea, Vilborg," she began, without other salutation, "how these poor things suffer from pests. I have always maintained that God is altogether too fond of bugs, judging by appearances. Sit down, you look as red as a salmon. Katy! Katy!" she shrilled, as soon as her visitor had meekly accepted a seat on a nearby garden-bench—"drat the girl, I believe she's fallen deaf as well as lame. Katy! Katy! Katy!"

An anxious face appeared at the side door of the house. "Dja call, Mrs. Bjornson?"

"No, I roared!" snapped her mistress. "Bring out some lemonade and some of that plum-cake if it's not all been fed to the fishes, or wherever else it's fed in this house. . . . . Well, what's on your mind?" she demanded of her sister-in-law, and without waiting for a reply fell upon the parasites with renewed vigor.

"It's about Stephen; I've not heard from him now for a month. You haven't, have you?"

"No, I haven't," said Caroline, "I told Stephen to spare his ink where I was concerned, after receiving the first wild letter of his. I expect he's writing an ode to the nightingale, or something equally distressing."

"Caroline, you are hard. I'm certain that something is wrong, and wished only to assure myself of your not having received recent news before wiring. I think I'd better do it at once."

"Now, sit still, woman. I hear by the banging and bustling that Katy has located the lemons and is on her way at last. A moment more or less won't alter things, and what's more, there's no sense whatever in rushing to the telegraph office when there's a perfectly good telephone in the house, and a most efficient though cranky 'central' on duty about now."

Poor Mrs. Freeman tried to repress her anxiety, but it was difficult. For so many years now she had worried over Stephen as one worries over a good but exasperating child. She drank her lemonade, listened to Caroline's eulogy on roses and their enemies, trailed after her to inspect the back garden, but all in a detached, unheeding way which was plainly offending to Caroline.

"Land sakes, Vilborg, if you are going to be as erratic as Hamlet's ghost I might as well take you into the house and 'phone that fool message at once."

The house properly reflected Caroline's personality. Its rooms were large, airy and innocent of "trumpery": no white curtains fluttered foolishly in and out the windows; and heavy velvet drapes, calculated to keep out the drafts in winter, were pulled wide of the gleaming panes, permitting the sunlight to flood the rooms. The parlor only was an exception to this rash rule; here the blinds were discreetly drawn lest the green plush furniture and the heavy pile carpet should lose some of their emerald beauty.

Over the mantle in the sunny living-room hung a picture of Napoleon in the familiar cocked hat and military attitude; and on the opposite wall was an etching of Martin Luther pinning his ninety-odd theses to the sombre looking door of a still more sombre edifice. Photographs of friends, carefully framed, and an enlargement of a Saint Bernard dog once greatly prized by Caroline, added a touch of homely sentiment to an otherwise harsh arrangement.

However, Caroline's china-cabinet reflected a more gentle taste. Here were odds and ends of Dresden—among them a tiny cat, beloved of the late Mr. Bjornson in childhood, and a dainty pink and white shepherdess.

Graceful, slender-stemmed flower vases and sheer glass goblets were sprinkled amidst old pewter and really splendid pieces of rare Old Country china. Pretty dishes, Caroline would have said, were useful as well as ornamental, while pictures only gathered dust and were seldom equal to their subject. Still she admitted at least one exception. In her bedroom was a painting of a storm at sea, a painting purchased by her husband shortly before his death. It hung there now draped in silk lest the dust and sun ruin it. Night and morning, in faithful reverence, she raised the silken veil to muse upon the artist's skill and the late Mr. Bjornson's unquestionable taste.

To-day Mrs. Freeman sank upon the roomy couch by the living-room window and waited impatiently while Caroline proceeded upstairs to wash off the garden stains. She would rather have faced an army than attempt to convey a message by telephone, the very idea of doing which shattered her nerves. To her further distress, just as Caroline had re-entered the room and was about to telephone the urgent message, she caught sight of Ephemia coming up the walk.

"Oh, Caroline, here comes Ephemia! Something has happened,—something is wrong; oh, I knew it!"

"Fiddledediddle and foolishness! One would think you were a fool to hear you, 'pon my soul—you who are usually sensible in the extreme."

Having so expressed herself, Caroline hurried out upon the porch. "Now, child," she warned the girl, who, flushed and hot, bounded up the steps, "don't upset your mother. What's it all about?"

"It's father, Aunt Caroline," she panted; "oh, poor father!"

Her mother had not obeyed Caroline's injunction to remain in the house, but had followed and overheard Ephemia's excited expression. The color ebbed from her face, every drop of blood having rushed in floods of pain to her anxious heart. "Let me see the telegram," she managed to say, and poor excited Ephemia handed over the yellow paper, now sadly crumpled and sodden with her tears. It was from Arni Bjornson, stating that Stephen was ill with malaria, very ill in fact, yet not so as to occasion despair.

"Well, there you are," said Caroline, "it's really nothing to be dismayed over, to my mind. It's no misfortune, for now, perhaps, Stephen may return before he is absolutely penniless."

Nothing would satisfy his wife, however, except a dispatch pleading that she be called at the first sign of real danger.

“It’s a waste of money,” Caroline demurred, “and you will need what little you possess before so very long,” she prophesied—a prophecy which came true.

Stephen may not have been seriously ill when his nephew sent that telegram, but he endured a long and trying convalescence. So enfeebled, indeed, was he that he was unable to travel; and as the weeks dragged by one after the other his money kept oozing away.

Meanwhile the respite from moving ended and Mrs. Freeman found herself obliged to seek temporary quarters elsewhere. After much weary hunting, she secured a little cottage near Caroline’s property, and settled herself to face the winter and the return of the prodigal. It had been a heart-breaking day for her when she quitted the old home in the valley, and Ephemia realized suddenly that the ugly old house was grown into her affection, and was not to be readily discharged. But when the fresh dimity curtains were bound back from the cottage windows, and the faithful kettle was contentedly steaming in the ridiculously little kitchen, they made a pot of coffee and drank to the success of the new home.

“After all,” said Mother Freeman, “it’s a cosy little place, and much nearer to town for you. If only there had been a barn for the cows! But it’s so good of Aunt Caroline to make room for Daisy and Queen in her stables, and when father returns he can throw up a shelter for our hens.”

But Stephen only threw up his two blue-veined hands when he came back at last, and this in sheer admiration for the cosy little house into which his wife and daughter ushered him so charmingly. They would have spared him every criticism; but not so his stern sister; she had driven them home in her newly painted democrat and was invited to share the waiting feast, but her welcome to Stephen was of mixed quality. When he was nicely settled in the rocker that Caroline preferred, and his wife gone to see about the roast in the oven, she planted herself, arms akimbo, before the poor travel-weary man and scowled down upon him crossly.

“It is to be hoped you have realized your folly, Stephen Freeman. Here you have sacrificed your home, your all, except those few acres in the wilderness where no one will ever build, since the town seems to be dying of its growing pains, and here you are with the winter down upon you and no prospects of work in view.”

“Yes, yes, my dear, you are right; I am a bit of a failure; yet it is food for rejoicing just to reflect upon what Vilborg escaped by remaining up here.

Really, my dear, those hot countries are terrifically trying—not that they lack loveliness!"

"I'm not hankering to live on loveliness!" snapped his tormentor, "I need something more substantial, as do you despite your dreaming. But might I ask what you intend doing about it?"

"About it," he repeated—"about what, my dear? I seem not to be very attentive." And in an aside to his daughter, smiling in upon him from the dining-room doorway, he requested: "Phemy, my love, might I have a cushion? This chair seems rather uncomfortable. Ah, Caroline, isn't it amazing how these young things come on? 'Pon my soul, she is a young lady now, and it seems no time since she was banging her little spoon impatiently on her high chair."

"Fiddledediddle, Stephen, keep your mind on the present—and you, Ephemia, keep right on helping your mother." So saying she caught up the cushion and thrust it behind her brother's back with more energy than grace.

"And yes, what are you going to do about it? I ask again. There is every indication of a depressing year before us; the crops have been bad; trade is at a stand-still—you know what that implies."

"True, true, a sad plight, sister, a sad plight! My heart goes out to the poor farmer toiling from sunrise till sundown and only to meet with such disappointment."

"Stephen, you are hopeless—so utterly hopeless as to be beyond expression," she hurled at him and flounced out into the kitchen, there to chide Vilborg for extravagance in preparing so lavish a meal.

The dinner was a success none the less, and, greatly mollified by its soothing effects, Caroline was inclined to be amused at her brother's colossal blindness. "Well, Vilborg," she said finally in farewell, "if it's any help I'll have a chicken-coop knocked up for you. That good-for-nothing Katy's father is out of work and will be glad of a few dollars, poor wretch; and I have asked Mr. Jacobs, of the Art Emporium, to keep Ephemia in mind for the Christmas season. I thought she might be wanting books, or some of the thousand things girls are always wanting nowadays."

"My, my," Stephen sighed, when the door closed behind his sister's straight back, "she's a good woman at heart, but so short of spiritual grace, poor, dear soul."

CHAPTER XIV.

Stephen Freeman resigned himself gracefully to the new regime and the delicate task of chronicling his travels. He confided to his wife his sincere belief that it was something of a duty to warn men against the malaria-infested regions of the South; and he begged Ephemia to look up reference books on the subject in the Public Library. Something ought to be done about draining the swamps, and if he could stir the public mind to interest in the matter he felt his experience had not been too costly. "Some one," he said courageously, "must be the pioneer in any case."

His wife left him to his worthy project and increased her efforts in the baking line. Mr. Olson had secured her several private customers for her excellent brown bread, and her cakes were always in demand. Nevertheless she found it difficult to make ends meet, though she never admitted any dissatisfaction to Stephen.

Ephemia had looked forward to the Christmas work in Mr. Jacobson's store, but learned to her dismay that times were so slack as to warrant no additional outlay even in the holiday season. She was, however, taken on for two weeks by "Hewlitt's Drug and Stationery," where Clare had been working for several months.

Here she was expected to make herself generally useful, whether selling pills, fountain pens, or shining glasses at Tony's Ice Cream Counter, which was so valuable an asset to Mr. Hewlitt's business. Aunt Caroline remarked upon it as one of the strokes of genius sometimes evinced by business men. "You tempt folks to ruin their digestion with all manner of crazy concoctions, and then dangle an advertisement for some patent poison under their stupid noses; fine psychology!—a '*create your demand*' idea," she said.

Her niece cared not in the least whether the practice was virtuous or not; she found the experience enchanting, as she found all departure from the common grind. Then, too, she looked forward to being with Clare. But Clare, she soon discovered, was strangely distressing; she was so unbelievably familiar with strangers—mostly young chaps, Ephemia noticed—and, like a spoiled pet poodle, evidently enjoyed a pat from any source. She was no longer just girlishly proud of a new dress or hat, Ephemia thought, but displayed an alarming tendency to attract attention; to wear, not

merely what gave her pleasure, but what caused all eyes to turn her way—a terrifying and distasteful situation to Ephemia.

They had little time for intimacies, however, except during the noon hour, when they generally went out to lunch at a small bakery where light meals were served to girls. Here they would chatter away, cementing anew their old fellowship despite their differences and mutual lack of understanding.

One day Ephemia decided to upbraid her friend for an unusually reckless episode. “It may not concern me,” she began over their soup, “but I certainly can’t understand how you can have anything to do with that odious fellow who has been haunting the store these days—much less accept gifts from him, as I saw you do!”

“Oh, he’s all right,” Clare returned in her breezy way; “you are such an innocent that anything out of the cradle seems wicked. He’s no worse than the general run, you can take my word for it.”

“At all events, he hasn’t left the cradle so far as intelligence is concerned,” her friend returned in rising indignation, “and if working hasn’t taught you to discriminate between decency and—oh, well, we’d better not quarrel—you simply can’t be in earnest.”

“You are just a silly sentimentalist, Ephemia; you’ve no idea what life is, none at all. But for heaven’s sake stay green as long as you can. But I’ll not have you picking on my friends, and this one in particular has done a lot for me.”

“Why, Clare!”

“Yes, he has,” Clare snapped vehemently. “Have you any idea of the place I call home? You think so, perhaps, but have you? Ma sits around gloomily like one of those dead things that wiggle to and fro in a toy-shop, doing the same thing in the same way year in and year out. The kids quarrel and fight and strew the house up with junk. I’ve tried to get ma to go out, thinking it might change her. ‘What’s the good?’ she says, ‘what do I want to visit anyone for to make work for them and have them come to make work for me?’ ‘Read, then,’ I said. ‘What for?’ she wanted to know. ‘Silly stories about things that never happened or could happen.’ I wanted her to buy a talking machine. She had a fit. ‘What! a thing like that to make an endless racket when I want a little peace!’ I wanted to fix up my own room. That, too, was wrong. If I could afford to fling away money on nickknacks I could afford to buy clothes for the kids and not waste it all on myself. It’s

just driving me crazy; some day I'm going to clear right out and never come near them again! And this chap you are picking on has taken me around to a lot of places, to the vaudevilles and parks, and at least it has kept me from going clean off my head."

"Oh, I am sorry," said poor, bewildered Ephemia; "perhaps I have misjudged him. But why don't you come over to us oftener. We would be so glad to have you, and why not come with me some Friday to the Library; it's my afternoon there, and I love it, it is so lovely and quiet."

"Oh, my Lord!" said Clare, impiously, stretching her arms above her sandy head, "quiet! Who in the dickens wants quiet after working all day waiting on cranky old men and women with chronic indigestion, and young mothers with colicky babies? And you know, Phemy, I never was much on reading—I'm like ma there, worse luck! Still, I did like 'Dora Dean!' "

Ephemia finished her lunch in discouraged silence. She had been reared in an atmosphere where great books were unquestionably honored and devotedly read. That anyone should be impervious to the world of books was so staggering as to leave her speechless. Clare marked her discouraged expression and became contrite.

"Don't be a goose! I'll run over some night; I'll even wade through a mouldy romance if it will please you, old dear."

"I wish you would come over to-morrow night, Lily will be there; we are going to help mother bake her Christmas ginger cookies. Mr. Olson is going to do them up in little silver-paper cartons to be sold at a quarter. I just know they will be an amazing success."

"All right," promised Clare, "I'll be there with all my war paint."

The following night the Freeman kitchen was redolent of spices and baking odors in general when Lily made her prompt appearance. Mrs. Freeman stood like a rosy queen over the huge stove stirring caramel frosting, and near by Stephen was slicing candied peel in a wooden bowl held between his knees, his feet comfortably raised above the drafty floor and supported on a cracker box.

Ephemia was sitting by a small table on the far side of the stove assorting colored candies destined to be the eyes of the forthcoming ginger animals. Lily looked very charming as she stood a moment smiling round upon her friends while removing her wraps—a slender, willowy wisp of a girl. "My goodness, it smells like a bakery in here! How are you, Mr. Freeman?" she bubbled.

“Oh, better, my dear, better. No doubt I’ll soon be quite myself,” said he, charmed at such thoughtfulness in so pretty a girl.

“What a lovely dress!” Mother Freeman found time to admire despite the tricky business of whipping her syrup. “A pretty, pretty dress; your mother certainly puts a lot of work on your clothes.”

“Yes, doesn’t she! I don’t know what I’d do without Mother—clothes are such a price! And it’s so important to be nicely dressed when one waits upon the public.”

“Especially the young fellows, eh, my dear?” interjected Stephen, as he carefully regarded the edge of his knife. “I think this thing’s getting dull, Ephemia, my dear; get me the soapstone.”

“Oh, my goodness, Mr. Freeman, you are funny,” said Lily, blushing, and asked young Harold if she might sit near him, where he was making a scrap-book out of magazine-covers donated by Aunt Caroline.

“Don’t sit on my dog!—don’t sit on my dog—it’s wet yet!” he cried in honest concern, and just in the nick of time Lily discovered a very unconvincing sort of canine creature fashioned by that young gentleman and left to “rise” on the chair she was about to take.

“Harold,” chided his sister, “I told you not to put dough on the chairs.”

“If you hurt my dog I’ll eat up your eyes, the red and green and yellow ones—I will!” he threatened menacingly.

“Hush, now! let Ephemia wipe off the chair, and take the little pie-plate in the cupboard for your dog,” said his mother.

Not long after this Clare joined them and for a while everything went on merrily, with the exception of Harold’s loud rebellion upon being sent to bed before his dog was cooked.

While the girls adjusted pink sugar eyes in the pudgy brown heads of little rabbits, and inserted juicy currants in the tantalizing heads of fat little elephants, and Mrs. Freeman mixed the fruit for her cake, Stephen beguiled them all by retelling a story which he had just been reading—one of DeMaupassant’s tales, steeped in a melancholy atmosphere. Wonderful he pronounced it, a wonder of brevity and power. His capable wife thought it entirely too sombre—one needed to be encouraged in this life, she said, not depressed, and she decided that it was time for more acceptable refreshment.

“If you girls clear off a corner of the table we can celebrate the success of our first lot of cookies by sampling these ginger cats; they do look

cunning. I won't be a moment making coffee, for the kettle is boiling."

Over the coffee Lily confided to the family that she was planning on presenting her mother with a carpet for Christmas. "Mamma has always wanted a Brussels rug, and it's time she had one," said she. "No one knows about it, of course, but I have paid a deposit on one. Inga will soon be working, and then we might buy a piano and have little Alma take lessons—someone in the house ought to play."

Clare and Ephemia exchanged glances, and both recalled their argument of the previous day. "You are lucky to have a mother who cares for such things as Brussels rugs and pianos," Clare burst out impetuously; "but speaking of kids, that Alma of ours has a voice like a bird and a face like a Christmas doll. How she got it is beyond me, and I'd sure hate to see her go to seed in that joint we call home."

"You must not speak so disrespectfully of your home," Mrs. Freeman admonished mildly; "I appreciate your mother's point of view—there seems so little use in carpeting a place where five boys romp about. A good, sensible linoleum would be better."

"Lord, Mrs. Freeman, Ma would die if she lost the chance to whack the scrubbing-brush about. I almost believe she enjoys the ache it occasions; anyhow she never tires grouching about it."

Ephemia saw that danger lay ahead were the topic not changed; she knew that her mother disapproved of Clare's racy slang and extremes in dress; plainly, they were headed for the shoals. "Oh, girls!" she cried, jumping up vivaciously, "come into my bedroom. I want to show you the cunning things I've made from pine cones done over in ormolu gold. They make the nicest little gifts."

CHAPTER XV.

Ephemia was closeted long with her mother in the bedroom one night several days before Christmas. They were considerably disturbed and gave proof of it in furrowed brows and a general air of concentration. It was not without reason, for they were drawing a plan of campaign, as it were, and needed to have full command of their faculties.

"I very much fear we must sacrifice one of the cows," Mother Freeman sighed; "feed is so alarmingly high, and we have yet to cope with the fuel question."

"But how can we sell Queen? Why, we raised her from a calf, and remember how proud we were when she took the ribbon at the fair. Aunt Caroline might persuade the landlord to reduce our rent for the winter; it's not likely that the house would be rented if we left it now."

"The rent is reasonable enough, my dear; the man must at least get his taxes out of the place. But with nothing coming in and so many expenditures —well, when all is said and done, I've found the tramping back and forth to Caroline's barn tiresome. A little less work won't be objectionable, and Queen should bring a good price. However, now we must put aside our little difficulties and consider Harold's Christmas. Katie's father generally goes to the hills for spruce. We might ask him to keep us in mind for a small tree; and I have been thinking over Clare's remarks regarding her little sister. To me it seems wicked to deprive a child of legitimate joys on our Lord's nativity, so fitly celebrated by childish laughter. We must endeavor to have the little thing come to us; we can certainly fashion some trifle for her. Father could carve her a wooden doll, perhaps, and we dress it; and all babies love a tree."

"There never was anyone like you," her daughter exclaimed, giving the matronly figure a loving hug; "there never, never was!"

"Now, now, don't gush; I've always thought it such lamentable waste of energy. Then that's settled; but before we plan any rash Christmas shopping we had better get in a ton of coal."

Caroline naturally found many objections to the proposed Christmas party. "What on earth do you want with such nonsense, Vilborg?" she snapped when that rash mortal ran in one frosty morning to invite her to the festivities. "What is the sense of a party when one is at one's wits' ends

about current expenses. Fiddlededididdle! woman, you exasperate me. Why not buy yourself a new bonnet instead—heaven knows you need it."

Vilborg laughed; she was beginning to understand her sister-in-law better since intercourse was more frequent between them. "My bonnet does very well. I may say that it's become a subconscious habit, and our Christmas is very much home-made so to speak, but of course you will come."

"Oh, of course I will come," Caroline grunted ungraciously.

Ephemia had been hoping that Clare, too, might join them, but she admitted, somewhat sheepishly, to having other engagements. So she must satisfy her hospitable desires by seeking little Alma. Mrs. Bergen, much to her surprise, found no fault with the proposal and seemed, in fact, rather glad to see Ephemia.

"You've not been here much lately, Ephemia," she remarked on ushering the girl into the familiarly barren dining-room, never used unless some visitor happened along. "It seems a long, long time since you were here."

"Oh, I have the best of excuses, Mrs. Bergen; I've been studying so hard. You see, I want to teach this coming spring."

Looking about her she found everything quite unchanged, and yet there was a difference. Little Alma, a small glowing cherub of three, seemed somehow to light the place up with radiance. So pink and white and golden was she that Ephemia had difficulty in believing her real.

"She's pretty, my little Alma," said the mother, with a perceptible softening of her sombre face, "and she can sing already. Sing for Ephemia, my little Alma, sing the little bird-song."

Alma was inclined to be shy, but upon proper persuasion she lifted up her baby voice in sweetest effort. Singing so seriously from her little heart, her wee hands fluttering in pantomime, she seemed herself like a soft little bird. A little golden bird, Ephemia thought sadly, in a dim prison cage.

But Ephemia must hasten her errand. "We would truly love to have her, Mrs. Bergen. It isn't far, and I have Harold's sleigh with me. Wrapped up snugly she will be as comfortable as can be, and I promise to return her in good time."

"Now, that's kindness!" The words came in a sudden rush, almost as if they had been forced out against inclination, and poor Mrs. Bergen floundered hopelessly in what she wanted to say. "It's past me fixing for

Christmas . . . . what good? The boys rush out on the lake; their pa gave them new skates this winter . . . and Toré . . . .”

Instinctively Ephemia knew what Toré would do on Christmas, and hastily changed the subject. “Would you not come, too, Mrs. Bergen? Indeed you are welcome.”

“No, no, my place is at home, to have supper for the man should he come—to wait up for Toré. It’s good you should think of my little Alma.”

Once the child was properly clothed and they were setting off she managed to express what had been struggling for utterance.

“If it’s just the same I’ll come for her. You see, Toré . . . . you know how ’tis with men on Christmas? My little Alma’s nervous, and Toré is very loud such times; I’ll slip out after her when he’s asleep.”

The Freeman cottage was agleam with light, every window sending out a benevolent welcome. It reminded Ephemia of nothing so much as a jolly rubicund lantern swinging against a glittering white wall.

Inside all was warm and inviting. The living-room walls were festooned in evergreen, and fragrant wreaths hung in the windows. The much worn carpet had been coaxed into holiday brightness by a vigorous ammonia bath, and the same treatment had surprisingly improved the old sofa. The pictures of grandpa and grandma Freeman held the place of honor above the hearth, where, sad to relate, no fire might blaze, owing to a much perverted flue. Between the dormer windows stood the little tree, brave and beautiful in its pop-corn wreaths, shining tinsel and paper flowers, made by hands determined to increase the simple joys of this world.

“What a lovely child!” Mother Freeman cried when the little visitor came shyly forward to receive her greeting. “Come to me, sweetheart, come, pretty dove,” coaxed the captivated Stephen. “Ah, Caroline, isn’t she a Christmas fairy?” “A healthy looking child,” said his undemonstrative sister; “don’t scare her with all this attention. Here, child, come and sit on my knee.” But Alma’s interest was centered in the tree; her blue eyes, like widely opened crocuses, were incredulous with amazement and delight. “Pretty, pretty!” she gurgled and clapped her little hands in high glee.

“It’s my tree,” Harold explained jealously, not overly pleased at all this attention lavished upon a stranger. “It’s my very own tree, and I hanged my dog on it myself. But you can look at it,” he proffered gallantly.

They made a day of it. Mother Freeman was unsparing in the dinner; her fattest fowls had been saved against this occasion, and, steamed as they were

before the final roasting, none could have suspected them of age. Even Caroline admitted as much. Then, Stephen must tell a Christmas story at the table, and what could be found more appropriate than the tender tale of little Tim?

Upon its conclusion, dreadful to relate, Caroline sniffed prodigiously. “I’ve never held with sentiment,” she announced, “nevertheless I maintain that is a grand story.”

Of course they must dance round the tree while the candles were being lighted by Aunt Caroline, who would have suffered torture rather than so deport herself; and then while Father Freeman brought forth, one by one, the homely gifts, they must, in matter of course, sing that sweet old song beloved of Icelandic children, “In Bethlehem a Child is Born.”

When they saw little Alma cuddling the rag doll which had been so ingeniously devised for her, enchanted with its shoe button eyes, red yarn mouth and scarlet Cinderella cape, they all fell silent. She was so entirely blissful, so sweetly maternal and radiantly content. “As ye do it unto the least of these,” murmured Stephen huskily. But Mother Freeman caught the child to her generous heart. “So long as we have our little ones who shall forget the Blessed Christ Child?” she said fervently.

Caroline made a great show of brushing an imaginary stain from her silken lap. She would never have owned to being so touched as she in reality was. “Well, Vilborg,” she said, when the poignance of the moment was passed, “I didn’t see fit to bring you any ‘frumpery’, but knowing you foolishly planned to sell that cow, I had a couple of hundredweight of feed put in my stable.”

It may seem irrelevant, but when Mother Freeman sought her well-earned rest that night the last thing she said was “God bless Caroline,” and, almost in the same breath, “Well, well, dear old Queen,” and for no better reason wept a few shining tears into her pillow.

CHAPTER XVI.

Long before the winter snows began tumbling down the hillside in muddy cataracts, Mrs. Freeman was forced to admit a losing battle. Their meagre savings were dwindled to insignificance and the strain of constant worry was beginning to tell on her.

Stephen was grieved and amazed at his wife's confession. Somehow it had never occurred to him that the last payment received for his old home might of necessity be spent. "But, my love," he faltered, "er—I thought you were selling cakes or something."

The good woman was very close to being impatient with him. "True enough," she said, "but one can't sell enough cake in this part of the city to defray the expense of food, fuel and clothing and feed for the animals; then, though I hate mentioning it, your tonic has been quite an item."

"Don't lose heart, Vilborg, my dear; the warm weather will soon be here, and it never fails to impart new life. I've no doubt we will pull through somehow—something is sure to turn up."

However, this being a remarkably fine day, Stephen bethought himself of visiting his sister, and there referred to the curious improvidence of spending one's nest egg, as it were—"curious in one otherwise thrifty," he added by way of consideration.

Caroline was indignant and made no effort to hide it. She worked herself into a passion of criticism: he was foolish and weak, ungrateful and blind as a bat; never had she heard of so ridiculous a man; and to think he was a Freeman!

Stephen was deeply wounded. "Did I not know the contrary," he remonstrated with dignity, "I would adjudge you a heartless woman, Caroline; but I bear with you, my dear, on account of your temper. It must be a very real cross to be so lacking in self-control."

This struck the good woman as rare high comedy, and she roared her mirth in unrestrained hilarity. "I may as well give up expecting anything like commonsense from you, Stephen, but I will say that this winter has proven to me what a gallant soldier, so to speak, that Vilborg of yours is. How she ever came to . . . . however, I make a point of evading an inexplicable incident, so we'll let it pass; but I may say here and now that I don't intend

sitting by silently and seeing her utterly defeated. I suspected how things were going, for I happen to know that living is an expensive pastime, and I've been doing some plotting on my own responsibility. Now, if you remember anything outside of romantic fiddlededidle, you will recall that the late Mr. Bjornson was interested in timber at one time, and what a good friend he had in the senior member of the Tomlinson, Salisbury Mill & Lumber Company. Well, he paid me a visit last week and I confided in him, told him the entire tale, and what a helpless mess you are in.

"The prevalent unemployment has brought a lot of men from the mines and dockyards to the milling centres at Esk, forty miles to the north. This condition is marked, and Mr. Tomlinson feels justified in taking on an extra watchman—one never knows what a lot of idle fellows may propose to do. Personally, I have my own opinion, which is that Mr. Tomlinson is a gentleman, hence graceful in prevarication.

"But the point is that this opportunity, humble though it be, is a God-send, and may keep your head above water until your old firm finds it convenient to take you on again. At any rate I'm sure you can prove of some service to Mr. Tomlinson."

Stephen listened to this lengthy expostulation in dazed bewilderment. "But, my dear," he evaded, "I have had no experience in matters of this sort. Leather I know, and craftsmanship along that line, but mills. . . . ."

"Fiddlededidle and foolishness! If your intelligence permits your selling leather goods, building saddles, and such like, it certainly may be trusted to pull you through the ordeal of sitting on a chair somewhere to keep an eye open for possible mischief. You talk like an idiot!"

"You forget Vilborg, my love. She seems contented here and is doing some sort of cake business."

"Vilborg hasn't realized one really happy day since you bolted the bars of commonsense and chased off to your mosquito paradise. At any rate, even you must believe that happiness soon evaporates when the larder is empty. Mr. Tomlinson assures me that Esk is quite a town. I've no doubt its citizens will prove quite as accommodating cake eaters as we in Alueez."

"Well, well, this all sounds quite alarming to me, Sister, but of course you must be right. I suggest that you lay the matter before Vilborg."

In approaching Vilborg that evening Caroline found her acquiescent; not that she rejoiced in the thought of leaving Alueez and going off among strangers; not that she liked the thought of being beholden to Mr. Tomlinson,

but she had read the writing on the wall so far as their present life was concerned.

They agreed to make the move when the school year was ended, and all their plans seemed promisingly fine until Vilborg thought of the cows.

"And can't the creatures be shipped?" Caroline demanded shortly.

"But we could never afford the expense," her sister-in-law returned quietly but firmly, "and I absolutely refuse to impose upon you further; you have done altogether too much as it is."

"Ah! but what's to hinder my driving them?" suggested Stephen brilliantly.

"You to walk forty miles!" Vilborg would have been no more amazed at proposed murder.

"Why not? It will be a rare holiday. I shall loiter along, view the landscape, and find occasion, no doubt, to put my woodlore to use. Why, I haven't had so pleasant a thing in mind for months. Think of the birds this time of year and how one may observe them at their courting."

"Rot!" thundered his sister. "You'd be laid up with rheumatism the remainder of the year, an excessive price for the privilege of mooning over a woodpecker's lovemaking, 'pon my soul!"

But Stephen had again heard the tantalizing call of his will-o'-the-wisp. He must adventure forth, following the long lanes, through forest and field by day, and sleeping by night under the smiling stars. The cows were mere incidentals; if they proved difficult one might remember Cæsar's "impedimenta", and recall to mind the arduousness of all adventuring, whether in peace or war. Yes, Stephen was determined, and once determined he generally had his way. Hence, when the time arrived, he set off gallantly, canvas pack and blanket on his unaccustomed back, birch rod in hand, and the two yellow cows joggling on before him.

All the difficulties thus surmounted, fortune seemed inclined to smile. Ephemia had secured the school at Neely, a little backwoods settlement seventeen miles from Esk. This meant that at least occasionally she might spend the week-end with her parents, which enheartenening knowledge helped to quell the little fears she experienced at the thought of entering so new and responsible a life.

But Mother Freeman had taken on a new lease of life, certain now that the proverbial long road had made its turning, and when, the day prior to

their departure, Mrs. Strom with several other women from the old valley burst in upon her in a farewell surprise, she divined the world to be a pleasant place and human hearts most kind.

Mrs. Strom was her customary fluttering self, her faded hair patted meekly above the pale brows, her eyes puckered a little from the continual following of a needle's capricious course; and, as might be expected, her new alpaca drooped considerably at the rear. But Mrs. Freeman saw only the happy smile in her colorless eyes as she proudly trooped in ahead of her associates.

"We thought as how you'd be all upset a few days and that a mess of cooking wouldn't come amiss, so we just made out to take you a few things," she explained.

They had indeed cooked her up a "mess of things." Chickens, neatly wrapped in oiled paper; golden loaves of bread; cakes and pies—"the kind that packs easy"—and a huge pot of beans, were in turn revealed to Mrs. Freeman's astonished gaze.

Then, for the social end of it, out came a package of coffee, a three-layer cream-cake—Mrs. Strom's masterpiece, made with one egg—and a spicy fruit loaf. One thoughtful matron had tucked a tablecloth into her basket, and this was draped upon the kitchen table, which, fortunately, had not been knocked down, and here Mrs. Freeman, her substantial person enveloped in a blue overall apron, presided over her farewell party.

The room was filled with packing-cases, bristling bundles, and piles of odds and ends; but the lovely spring sunshine entered unhindered at the bare windows to fall in golden benediction upon their friendly joys.

Without, the hills rolled softly green to the eye, and in the one tree of the garden a rapturous robin was singing. Cherrie, cherrie, cherrup! The dreariest must hear him and rejoice—so must the red-breasted chorister have known—and to that end he poured out ecstatically his wine of happiness.

Happiness Ephemia found, at any rate, when she entered the topsy-turvy house a moment later, laughter and homely repartee, smiles and tender reminiscences; and when the good neighbors had taken their leave mother and daughter fell upon each other's bosom.

"Everything is going to work out beautifully—I just know it," said Ephemia.

Mother Freeman wiped her moist eyes and smiled upon her daughter's enthusiasm. "You are right, dear one; so long as God gives us friends things

cannot go very far wrong.”

BOOK II.

FLIGHT

SEE NOW THE FAR GREEN HILL!

CHAPTER I.

Ephemia found she had time to help settle the new home before assuming her own rather terrifying duties. She was delighted with everything about Esk. It slumbered, this little town, on the banks of the river, lulled, as it were, into tranquil repose by the endless droning of the giant mills which had given it birth.

But Esk was withal not lacking in civic energy; it boasted up-to-date stores and good schools; and that it in nowise lacked patriotism and culture, the activities of the Daughters of the Revolution and the shining new Public Library attested.

So much for the town. The house which Mr. Tomlinson had so kindly secured for the Freemans was assuredly no master-stroke of architecture. It was a dingy, blue, two-story house, but it contained seven good-sized rooms and was most happily situated, having a very decent garden facing the banks of the Esk, and being far enough removed from the town itself to give one the peace and privacy of the country.

To know her parents were so pleasantly placed permitted Ephemia to take leave of them with better grace, and to face the future with a high heart. The seventeen miles to Neely were made in two laps, as it were, ten of these by rail, which brought her to Flannigan, and the remainder with the "mail man", in an obsolete gig drawn by the most contented of horses, if one might judge by his unhurried jogging up dale and down. His master was no less philosophic. After telling Ephemia to "hop up and set easy" he sank into so perfect a peace that the very thought of disturbing him for anything less than the Day of Judgment seemed a sacrilege.

But when the first of Neely's whitewashed cabins were discernible through the tender leafage of spring-clad trees, the mail man roused himself with apparent effort, and, waving his hand to left and right, said: "Yon's your post; nice place, Neely; nice folks, these here Norwegians."

The ancient horse, obviously wakened to thoughts of coming pleasures, picked up his ears, and his heavy feet as well, and actually cantered into the clearing which did honors for the town. But, much to his disgust, his indulgent master failed to draw up before the general store and pos-office according to established precedent, but insisted upon proceeding toward a

lonely looking house perched like some solitary cormorant upon the hill, a quarter of a mile or more behind the newly painted schoolhouse.

"Yon's your place," said the mail man, while yet several yards off, and a few moments later, drawing rein before the house, bellowed loudly: "Mis' Swanson! hi, ray! Mis' Swanson, here's yer teacher!" and again, as a tall angular woman came hurrying from the house: "Here she be, right on time. You bet, old Jim never misses a beat of time the whole way." At this Jim picked up his flattened ears hopefully, strained round in the harness to look inquiringly at Ephemia when she "hopped" down, and snorted with relief when his master turned him down trail again.

"Well, I'm right glad you've come," said Mrs. Swanson, and, possessing herself of the girl's suitcase, led her smilingly into the house; a house immaculately clean, but pathetically bare of comfort.

"I guess it's time for coffee," was her next remark, whereupon the tears started to poor sentimental Ephemia's eyes. The homely phrase was so familiar—familiar, too, the softening of consonants, harsh to Scandinavian ears and impossible to Scandinavian tongues—all familiar and immeasurably dear in this first moment of nervous loneliness.

"Well, poor thing," purred the good woman, "poor little thing—I shouldn't think it so young to be a teacher."

Sympathy was here and understanding, so even before the coffee had steeped Ephemia found herself chatting gaily, surprisingly at home with this angular, plain-featured woman, who strode about the house like a man and slapped her long thighs resoundingly when amused. But this same masculine lady had a childish eagerness and interest about her none the less, and her honest grey eyes were kindness itself.

Every little thing was of vital interest. How the Freemans had moved to Esk, what the principal stores at Alueez were like, why Aunt Caroline lived alone in so great a house, and what kind of cakes the ladies had brought to the surprise party. All these and other enquiries must Ephemia answer, as well as give an account of her nearest relatives, whether dead or alive—if alive, what they did, if dead, what the cause. Happily Ephemia understood that this was no vulgar curiosity, but an accepted practice in isolated spots, where every chance traveller brings something of the outside world with him and hence is treated to respectful interrogation.

But, animated or not, the conversation did in nowise hinder Mrs. Swanson's hospitable preparations. Out of a huge box, painted a brilliant

red, she drew a snowy tablecloth. The fabric was only bleached flour sacking, but the hand-work was a marvel of Norwegian needlecraft. Spreading it carefully over the rough pine boards of the home-made table she proceeded to arrange her nondescript china.

The table, large and ponderous, had its permanent place under a small-paned window to the right of the stove. Opposite stood the bed, rounded high in feather-ticks and covered with spotless sheeting. By the bed was a small stand, displaying a green plush album, a wellworn family Bible, and a much-prized glass lamp with a pink shade, and in its bowl a strip of red wool rag to color the oil artistically.

Of other furniture little can be said—a few chairs, two stout benches, a set of shelves edged in scalloped newspapers—these comprised the list.

When the refreshments were all temptingly set out, Mrs. Swanson stepped to the foot of a ladder which pointed straight skyward, as it were, from behind the stove and called imperatively aloft: “Lena! Emma! Come down now and meet the teacher.”

After some hesitation two round red legs swung into view, found place on the breakneck stairs, and were followed by a blue cotton frock, two little arms and a yellow pig-tailed head. This was Lena, bashful, blushing and “twelve come July”. Faithful as a shadow came a second figure—“Emma, just ten this Christmas past,” according to the maternal announcement.

The children came forward dutifully, offering roughened little palms in shyest greeting, and in absolute silence sought their customary bench by the table—a silence which they retained throughout the meal and throughout the entire evening.

But that night, when Ephemia had scrambled up the alarming stairs and was comfortably sunk in the folds of the huge feather bedtick—which threatened to overflow the narrow cot assigned to her—young Lena called out in trembling friendliness: “We’re awful glad you’ve come, and the new school is very nice.”

“I, too, am glad to have come,” said Ephemia, “and I’m sure the school will prove very nice indeed.”

CHAPTER II.

It would have been difficult to ascertain just who were the more diffident, teacher or pupils, at the opening of that country school. Ephemia was determined to appear efficient and prepared, but succeeded only in being nervously pleasant and fussy.

However, her sixteen pupils had for the most part no experience in judging the capability of an instructor, there never having been a school at Neely until the previous winter; so on the whole everyone was moderately satisfied.

Ephemia was on fire with patriotic zeal. Here were people, next of kin so far as race was concerned, waiting to embrace American ideals. She was determined to start them off in proper fashion. She had purchased two flags, preparing against the deplorable possibility of omission in this respect, but she found that this had been an unnecessary forethought. The good trustees had provided an entirely satisfactory banner, now artistically draped above the picture of George Washington, whose honorable countenance looked down in sombre dignity upon the coming Americans.

These future citizens of her beloved country proved tractable in the extreme, thereby quieting a fear fostered by sundry tales of abused school-teachers. She had expected at least one terrifying bully, and found as decorous a band of tow-heads as sensible Norwegian motherhood might produce.

Thus enheartened, Ephemia tackled the first essentials, so to speak. How many of them could pledge allegiance to the tricolored flag before them, she wanted to know, and how many knew the National Anthem?

No one, she discovered, had the slightest idea of how a good American should salute his flag; five of the sixteen knew the National Anthem, and, strange to relate, a good half of them vociferously claimed a command of "The Star-spangled Banner," and, what was more, offered to sing it at once!

So much so good, thought the enthusiastic teacher; but much was yet to be desired—and what more desirable than patriotism? Forthwith she proceeded to instruct them in the formula of citizenship, with the commendable result that long before the happy hour of lunch the older pupils, at any rate, could with proper grace raise calloused young hands to the National Emblem and repeat in faultless seriousness their "I pledge

allegiance to my flag and the country for which it stands; one nation indivisible, with freedom and justice for all."

Never had Ephemia been so elated; altogether she could have wept for very joy at this first of victories, and in her young enthusiasm saw herself already old, reflecting back with thankful joy upon the noble Americans she had ably assisted upon their way.

In time, however, this enthusiasm suffered sorely, dwindling down into a dogged determination to make blind eyes see and deaf ears hear; and whereas her first thought had been to imbue her little charges with proper national sentiment, her final thought was to seek some means whereby a measure of real joy might be theirs.

They led such lonely lives, these backwoods children, were so early wedded to the toils of existence, that she found in them a peculiar mixture of adult fatalism and childish hope. They were at once resigned to drudgery and passionately devoted to fairy tales; the one they accepted for themselves; the second they insisted on retaining for others.

She found in each and all a love of nature, and perceived that field and forest were their enchanted kingdom. Having so discerned, she wrote home requesting the loan of her father's volumes on North American Birds and Flowers. For it seemed to Ephemia that in making the language of nature plain to their starved young lives something of benefit and lasting comfort would be theirs.

Nor was she disappointed in her attempt. All she found to tell them, whether legendary or scientific, of the great outdoors, was received with hungry eagerness. Indeed, had it not been for her father's apt quotations and carefully jotted notes forwarded along with his books she would often enough have found herself inadequate to their curiosity. All in all, however, Ephemia was happy in her work and devoted to the children, a devotion which was agreeably returned.

Then, too, in very short order, the history of the entire hamlet was hers to command. Mrs. Swanson was a faithful informant, and loved to retell the fortunes and misfortunes of her neighbors. Mr. Swanson, she learned first of all, was at this time working for a brother on a prosperous Dakota farm. This brother, she must believe, was fabulously rich—rich beyond the wildest imaginings of these backwoods people, subsisting, as they were, from year to year on the products of their rocky garden patches and their seasonal occupation in the camps.

Next in importance were the Hansons, who kept the post-office and general store; after them the Petersons of the hardware and implement shop. Mr. Peterson, Ephemia learned, walked with a limp ever since his accident in the bush; and his wife, twenty years younger, had two pairs of twins to her credit in four years' time—"It's just to make you wonder at that woman," said Mrs. Swanson, slapping her lean thighs appreciatively.

Then one's sympathy must, as a matter of course, be aroused for poor widow Simonson, living God only knew how, "her with only one boy, sickly like and never much hope of him being different," and certainly no hope of getting him into the bush, poor soul! "It's to make your heart burn, and not but one cow neither!" said the conscientious narrator.

One household alone escaped analysis—was, indeed, so scrupulously passed by whenever the talk veered its way that Ephemia must at last give rein to her tantalizing curiosity.

"What is all this mystery about the house at the crossroads?" she made bold to demand one late afternoon.

Mrs. Swanson was frying "rosettes", a delicate but pressing duty, since these crinkly edibles were her stock in social trade, and to be found unfailingly in a special tin box on the top of the kitchen shelves.

For a moment the good woman kept spinning the little iron with its adhering rim of batter round and round in the boiling fat, then: "It's Ole Jergen's place, as you've likely heard. Mrs. Jergen's that curly-headed creature you've seen at the post-office wearing a pink sunbonnet and looking sort of flighty."

"Yes," Ephemia admitted, "I have noticed her and how she hurries in and out like some one constantly in fear; and I've noticed, too, that, no matter what chattering is going on, everyone falls silent when she appears."

Mrs. Swanson glanced through the open door, saw that her little girls were piling kindling as they ought, and, satisfied that she might speak with safety, replied: "It's best you don't think of her; she ain't a good woman—she's bad."

"Bad!" echoed Ephemia, "that pretty little woman, with the face of a baby!"

"Well, seeing how you're set on it, I might as well say, though I'd as leave you didn't know, that her man up and left her—there's them that say with good reason; but, howsomever, so far as I know, poor Anna Jergen always behaved herself. Still there's them in this world so sly the eye can't

follow what the hand finds to do." Mrs. Swanson shook her head sadly as she selected a golden rosette and offered it to her indignant listener.

"It's no use taking on," she continued, "for it's plain as plain that a Frenchman, one of the logging foremen, is scandalous fond of her."

Ephemia thought a good deal of Anna Jergen after that, and often took the highroad leading to her little house, hoping to meet the lonely little woman in more approachable environment than the gossip-ridden post-office.

But though she found opportunity in plenty to admire the neat little house, calcimined a light blue, perhaps in defiance of the gleaming white adopted by the other villagers; and though she once had caught sight of the Jergen cat napping on the minute sun-bathed stoop, she came no nearer to the mystery of Anna's isolation or to her reason for remaining on in this unappealing hamlet in the face of such entire ostracism.

CHAPTER III.

Ephemia's plan of spending the coming week-end with her parents was made impossible by heavy midweek rains. Never had she looked out upon a more sodden, misty-grey world than on that very Friday when she should have been taking the mail man's "gig" to Flannigan. Yet on the following Sunday she was to find a land as freshly beautiful as a goddess rising from some fountain of perennial youth. Every rain-washed leaf glittered in the spongy soil as though by magic; and, like a joyous song, the wind, laden with piney fragrance, blew in from the distant forest. But, beautiful or not, Ephemia was extremely peeved at a Providence who, with all this wealth of sun and wind at His behest, deliberately withheld them until too late.

Good Mrs. Swanson's chatter filled her with restlessness; she wasn't in the least interested in the latest mishap of the Peterson twins, or in the possible explanation of the precocity of the younger pair as against the elder. Neither was the invitation to tea at the Hanson's appealing, despite the fact that Mrs. Hanson "never used a bit of lard for frying, but only butter." In such a mood the one sensible thing was to take to the woods, as she half sheepishly said to the sympathetic Mrs. Swanson.

"That's a good idea," the latter agreed, "but don't you be for sitting round on no wet spots; it's terrible that for the lungs. That's how widow Simonson's man was took, him that was two hundred if an ounce—just like a flash he went with pneumonia." Ephemia promised faithfully to guard against any such calamity, and neither to go too far nor remain away too long.

Neely lay in a belt of rocky hills just on the edge of the great timber which extended northward in an interminable sweep. As soon as the last little hill was ascended there lay before her a mighty forest of death—bristling, black, intolerable testimony of man's vandalism; and this charred and lonely stretch of ruined wood was the more melancholy because of the slender winding valley running like a carpet, bordered by the silvery Esk, between its blackened flanks and the rolling hills.

Ephemia had often found her way to this little valley, for here were to be found the fairest wildflowers, rioting in rank profusion—harebells, wild roses, great orange tiger-lilies and the coveted sweet grass. Here in the mellow days of June were found incredibly luscious strawberries, and here, too, in lazy August the delectable raspberries.

To-day she looked with new commiseration upon the forest, so cut off as it seemed from every graciousness; a skeleton of one-time loveliness standing like an eternal reminder of the mutability of all living things; a grim shadow above the cradle of the little laughing valley. Yet even amidst that desolation little birds had builded their nests and sung their happy litanies from thankful hearts. The fireweed had sprung up profusely, and later in the season would lend its purple beauty to lighten the lonely landscape.

Ephemia dwelt upon the scene leisurely, weaving her fantasies as usual, while she threaded her way down to the river. She located a reasonably dry spot in the shelter of young willows and settled herself down to write. The first page, mostly lamentations, came off in record time; but then a butterfly, as softly yellow as a ripple of light on deep water, its wings dipped in shadowy purple, arrested her attention as it fluttered round her head, and the zeal to write flagged. Perhaps she should wait until a more cheerful mood possessed her; thus she reasoned. After that all manner of vagaries claimed her. Flowers she had not sighted on coming winked up at her from their emerald bed, birds flashed by like colored jewels, crying and calling, enamored of life and this beautiful day. And, a few paces off, the Esk purled along in dreary contentment, little caring that a few miles off its crystal waters would be converted into a bedlam by churning logs tumbling down the Little Esk, its northern tributary.

The spirit of this reckless day had indubitably crept into Ephemia's heart. She began to think longingly of the little brook at Alueez and the happy hours spent paddling in its icy waters. Not a soul was in sight, nor likely to be, all Neely being faithfully assembled in the little church by this time to receive word of grace from an itinerant preacher, whose visits were ever welcome since they were so few. Such being the case, Ephemia decided she might with safety indulge the childish notion to dangle her feet in the tempting coolness of the adjacent water.

No doubt this innocent plan would have proceeded with moderate decorum had not a miserable little gartersnake gone slithering past her feet while she was picking her way down the wet and slippery banks. One piercing shriek tore from poor Ephemia, and away she flew to the promising shelter of a huge boulder nearby. But no sooner was she perched upon its burning surface than her startled senses realized that another human cry was hurtling through the soft air—a decidedly masculine cry, following hard on the heels of her frantic shriek.

"Hello! Hello!" it rang, this virile voice.

A howling Berserk would scarcely have increased Ephemia's present alarm, so inordinately did she fear any crawling creature. The stranger, hastening forward from a fringe of wood, was not particularly attractive, but was, nevertheless, infinitely preferable to the odious snake. She saw that he was tall, despite the stoop occasioned by his knapsack, that his corduroy suit was badly faded, and his heavy boots covered with mud. His face she could not see, for he wore on his head an atrocious felt hat, from which folds of grimy mosquito-netting fell to the shoulders.

He in turn beheld a wild young woman poised like a sandpiper on a grey rock, her irreproachable nether limbs astonishingly exposed in all their vernal whiteness; and, being an observant young man, he discerned that all in all she was alluringly made—a small, gently-curved bit of living statuary, boasting as fine a head of rich brown hair as ever sun turned to burnished copper. That her eyes were somewhat frenzied, and an otherwise charming brow corrugated in anxious wrinkles, he generously attributed to some peculiar misfortune.

Apprehensively he glanced about, but discovered nothing to justify such obvious trepidation. Was it possible, he wondered, in rising amusement, that she was thus alarmed at his presence. With this absurd possibility in mind he hastened to remove his clumsy head-dress, trusting, no doubt, that his winsome smile would dispel such causeless fear.

Ephemia, meanwhile, was gaining command of herself, and as the horror of the innocent little snake subsided the smiling gentleman before her began to acquire a proper importance. She was dismayed to find him so young, and the laughing black eyes in his strong, lean face so irresistibly friendly. But, then, he was enjoying her predicament, which was most unpardonable, and altogether he had no business to be here at all. Why on earth didn't he go away? What did he mean standing there staring at her, she thought in rising anger. What if she had shrieked? Good gracious, there was no law against shrieking if one so felt inclined! Most certainly she would put this bold intruder in his place. He must in any case be made to know that when she shrieked it was with legitimate reason.

"You seem to be puzzled as to the cause of my alarm," she began frigidly. "It was a reptile, a loathsome, dangerous reptile."

"A what?" he asked incredulously.

"I said it was a reptile," she retorted sharply, having seen the fleeting smile which covered his shapely mouth.

He decided wisely that this was no time for argument. “That is unfortunate; I had no idea we had them around this country.”

“Well, you know it now,” she told him decisively; “they are everywhere. But, if you have no objection, you might see whether it is safe for me to come down.”

With well-feigned gravity he thrashed through the surrounding weeds. “I think it is entirely safe now,” he attested.

“Thank you,” she returned in equal gravity, as she sprang down from the blistering rock. “If by any chance you are going to Neely, there’s a trail over the hills which is much shorter than the highway; and now, if you don’t mind, I’ll run for my shoes.”

“I shall wait with the greatest of pleasure,” he assured her, “so long as you promise not to run too far.”

Ephemia felt greatly fortified when she rejoined the stranger, but was, nevertheless, not entirely mollified. It was humiliating to reflect upon her behavior and the absurdity of meeting the first young man in weeks under such ridiculous circumstances.

“We have had a lot of rain lately,” said she.

“Yes, haven’t we? It’s made the woods beastly.”

“It has made everything very fresh and beautiful,” she contradicted him in her best instructress manner, “and it has come most opportunely for the crops. I suppose we might as well introduce ourselves,” she added. “I am Ephemia Freeman, and I teach at Neely! I am white, as you see; sane, except when snakes are about, and not yet forty.”

“Oh, as to that, I’ve known chaps to jump a mile at the sight of a snake,” he consoled her. “Allison Brett is my name, timber cruiser at present for the Tomlinson-Salisbury outfit.”

“Where does one stop in Neely?” he wanted to know when they breasted the hill and saw the little huddle of houses which comprised the town.

“There is no hotel, of course. I believe the mail man stops with the Hansons; they are the general store and post-office people, as we say around here. The minister usually puts up at the Petersons, Mrs. Peterson being very religious; but I’ve not been told where other travellers stay, there having been no invasion upon our rustic pleasures since my coming.”

“And where do you stop, may I ask?”

“Oh, I am with the Swansons; they are nearest the school.”

“Well, then, I’ll try the Swansons; I’ve no predilection towards religion, and I loathe general stores and am very partial to education,” he humorously told her.

“Of course you may try, but to my mind there is no possible corner where good Mrs. Swanson could put you.”

Ephemia was to learn that she had been sadly lacking in perception where Mrs. Swanson was concerned, for that most amiable lady welcomed the young man as though he were a long-lost son. Evidently her resources were in nowise exhausted.

“Well, poor man,” said she, “the woods is awful, I guess, with wetness and flies; I think it’s time for some good coffee. Emma! Lena! fetch some soap and a towel for the gentleman, and hang up the curtain we had for the cruisers last year.”

Out of the magic red box came a pink and green cretonne curtain, which the obedient girls strung on a wire around the bedstead, and, presto! a private bedroom awaited the lodger. Ephemia wondered where the good woman would retire for her own well-earned rest, but decided that, after all, it need not concern her and that it were wiser to enjoy without questioning the favors of fortune; besides, she felt almost sure that he was laughing at her again, triumphantly enjoying her amazement. His sense of humor, she concluded, had certainly never suffered restraint.

CHAPTER IV.

Back in Alueez, Clare was wrestling with her own absorbing problem—the all-important problem of how to win happiness; surely a most normal and presumably possible condition. But the more she thought about it the more hopeless seemed its attainment. Her working hours were long and wearying; five days out of the seven she worked the first and third shift—that is, from eight in the morning until noon, and from six until eleven thirty. On her days off, so called, she must still work in the afternoon. Sometimes, when the intolerable aching of her feet made her whole body cry out for relief, she would promise herself a good quiet rest on the much-prized evenings which were at her disposal.

But seldom was her resolution adequate to the occasion. Once home the atmosphere irritated and oppressed her. The evening meal passed either in gloomy silence or in endless altercation; the boys were sure to have omitted some trifling duty, such as the filling of the woodbox or the water buckets, or else they had scuffed a hole in the toe of an otherwise good boot, lost a mitten, or broken some one of the thousand commandments imposed upon short-memoried youth.

Now that Clare knew the deadening weight of physical weariness, she tried to be patient with her mother's cheerless temperament, but could, nevertheless, not hold out against hours of nagging and predictions of dire tragedy; from such harangues she would fly in a storm of rage to the chilly comfort of her own unattractive room, which somehow or other always smelled of laundry soap. In the end she generally drifted out to walk the streets, aimlessly, her whole mind one fog of bewildered despair or seething with hot rebellion, urging her to any action that might liberate her from such an existence.

At times she dropped in for a moment's chat with Lily, who at such an hour was generally found embroidering some bit of lines in the bright sanctuary of Olson's candy shop. How Lily derived pleasure from poking little round holes in a piece of cloth and sewing them round and round was an everlasting mystery to Clare.

One charming evening she burst in upon her contented friend just when that happy individual was preparing to leave for home and a warm supper.

"I've got it at last!" she cried, waving aloft a long cardboard box.

“Oh, what? Not that dress you were talking about, surely?”

Clare thought best to make the contents of the box speak for itself.

“My goodness, isn’t it perfectly grand?” Lily gushed, upon viewing the satiny pink folds of the coveted garment. “Oh, Clare, are you going to be bridesmaid or something?”

“Not I! Brides and bridesmaids regalia don’t appeal to me, old dear, it’s too much like donning prison stripes. But I’m going to the Engineers’ Ball with a friend of mine.”

Poor Lily blushed to receive such dreadful confidences. What would Pastor Neils think? “But they’re such a terrible rough crowd; I’ve heard they drink and smoke and carry on. Clare, you shouldn’t dance!”

“I’d rather dance to a fiddler’s tune than suffer that everlasting wrangling at home, and that’s all I’ve got to say!”

Lily was plainly shocked at the depths of such depravity; nevertheless, she evinced real enough interest in the proceedings.

“Is he handsome?” she next demanded.

“Handsome? Oh, say, that’s rich! If you mean his face, I’d say a monkey was about as handsome, but he isn’t stingy with his money, and that’s more to the point.”

“How dreadfully you can talk,” Lily sighed. “But I think we had better hurry; mamma doesn’t like waiting supper, and the Guild is meeting at our house this evening.”

They chattered merrily enough of unessentials on the way to Folk’s Corner—the one-time site of an ancient homestead—where their course separated; but once alone, Clare’s feet lagged and her apprehensions mounted rapidly. How was she to face her mother, how explain that this dress did not so much represent unpardonable extravagance as persistent self-denials? How many car-fares and lunches that pretty silken thing expressed, and how many hours of patient longing!

Comparative peace reigned in the Bergen household, as she gratefully noted upon entrance; and, what was more remarkable, Mrs. Bergen smiled as she dished out the bean soup.

“Your pa has had a raise,” she said, “and sent me ten dollars for myself. Guess maybe I’ll take out one of them policies for little Alma. A man came

and told me about it—how you get a nurse when you're sick—and maybe I'll get me some brilliantine for a skirt."

"That's splendid, Ma; you sure need something new all right," Clare responded eagerly, hoping that this unexpected windfall would prove of benefit to her as well. A little later, over the table where nourishing if not elegant food was vanishing recklessly, she said: "I'm going to a kind of dance party to-night. It's a nice stunt, Ma. A friend of mine is taking me."

"What did you say?" Mrs. Bergen barked sharply, disapproval stamped on every feature of her heavy face.

Clare instantly bristled; they were like flint and steel, these two, each striking to life in the other the most destructive forces.

"I'm going to a dance with a gentleman friend, and, what's more, I've bought a dress just on purpose to go."

"Herra Gud! hear her! Have you no shame, *krasi unge*?"

Clare bolted. In her room she paced back and forth in one of those frenzies which all through her life had been characteristic of her stormy nature. Now that she no longer howled and stamped as in childhood these rages were the more devastating. It seemed as though the hot fires of her pent-up passions must not only shrivel each worthy desire, but dry the very fountain of her blood. Over and over, like a green billow breaking in icy sprays upon the affrighted shore, there pounded in upon her consciousness a sense of utter defeat. Whatever the alternative, she could no longer endure this life of constant misunderstanding, censure and unhappiness.

Frank, her eldest brother—a generous-hearted lad—was already beginning to share her rebellion against a regime where every youthful impulse was frowned upon severely. Now, in childish effort to be consoling, he opened the door of her room with extreme caution, and thrusting in a tousled head, whispered, "If you want something I'll go get it for you."

Immediately Clare's heart went out to him in gratitude. "Good kid," she thought swiftly; "she'll drive him out one day sure. I must remember to get him that stamp-book he's after." Enboldened by her smile, tragic though it was, he grinned and added in vehement sympathy: "It's sure the devil!" "You're right," said Clare, not seeing wherein contradiction would be effective; but she felt better for this little show of friendliness. A glance at her clock told her that time did not permit of more dallying; another revealed that, as usual, the pitcher on the old washstand was empty.

“Get me some water, there’s a good fellow; and, Frank, if you’ll just keep watch and tell me when you see my friend I’ll give you a quarter Saturday.”

“Ah, that’s all right,” said the boy, as he caught up the water-pitcher; “I’ll watch, all right, and whistle when I see him.”

For all her defiance Clare was tempted to escape by way of the window rather than face her indignant mother, when at last she was dressed in her new and rather alarming finery.

Mrs. Bergen gasped and sat down heavily upon catching sight of her daughter. “Herra Gud! You ain’t going out in that? It’s like a circus thing!”

“Well, if you’ve been raised in a menagerie it ought to be very proper,” Clare retorted hotly.

“*Krasi unge*, take it off! Such a sinful thing to throw your money away on, and the boys always in holes. Not under this roof will I have such goings on.”

Frank’s shrill whistle interrupted the tirade. Mother and daughter faced each other in an angry test of will.

“You go now, my girl, and you’ll come back no more than to get what’s yours. *Krasi unge!* what’s to come I don’t know!”

Clare caught up her summer cloak, laughing hysterically. “Neither do I, old dear,” she said, “and I don’t give a darn.”

CHAPTER V.

Ephemia wakened the next morning to the enviable conviction that life was, after all, very sweet, and the world a glorious place wherein to dwell. Not that she analysed the belief in just so many common words, no indeed; but no sooner were her eyes opened than they perceived the dainty loveliness of an elusive sunbeam which whisked about the counterpane; and she assured herself that only the most ungracious of hearts could be long discontented in a world where so glorious a thing as the sun never failed to rise on just and unjust equally.

Then she lay quite still, bathed in that beautiful sense of complete oneness with a goodly universe which floods the heart occasionally, while from without came innumerable twitterings and intermittent bursts of ecstatic song. Ephemia wondered how in the past she could ever have taken so much for granted.

This happy humility of mind had persisted for a moment or two when into the romantic twittering and warbling broke an entirely prosaic sound—the very ordinary sound of a woodman's axe.

Ephemia shot up in bed and, leaning on one small elbow, listened with rapt attention. This was not the labored, spasmodic whacking which might be associated with good Mrs. Swanson's efforts in this particular art. No, it was the rythmic, swift and certain business of a practised hand.

All the singing of birds and the shining of sunlight simply faded into insignificance before the entrancing and wonderful discovery that Allison Brett must be out in the backyard chopping wood! Incredulous though it might seem, such must be the case, for like the steady hissing of a teakettle came the sound of Mrs. Swanson's honest breathing, not more than six feet away.

Ephemia pulled out her watch from under her pillow and discovered that it was exactly half-past four. This seemed another rare surprise when she reflected that good Mrs. Swanson had promised herself the treat of sleeping in and had set the alarm for six. "Monday or no Monday," she had told the girl, "I mean to sleep in, I'm that tuckered out."

In feverish haste Ephemia made her morning toilet, taking care to slip on as pretty a frock as was compatible with youth and a teacher's honorable

calling, and, feeling something like a thief, tiptoed past the sleeping Swansons and crept down that Jacob's ladder which veritably led to dreams.

When she stepped out of the silent house it was to enter a world as rosy red and glowing as any whereof she had dreamed. Not the least attractive part of the landscape was the hale young man just dealing a determined blow to a tough and twisted pine log. He seemed, in his supple young grace, a very Knight of the Woods, and yet withal a wholesome, very human sort of individual—a black-haired, bronzed young man, in whom the love of life and the irresistible spirit of boyhood were inseparably commingled.

She had been very cautious, yet almost at once he caught sight of her, and smiled entrancingly.

"Oh, I say, this is something like a sunrise now," he greeted her.

"It is," she agreed, "a marvellous morning, and it's awfully decent of you to do this. Poor Mrs. Swanson just slaves at it."

"You know," he began, while searching for another mean-grained log on which to display his real craftsmanship, "I've been in the bush so much of late that I've gotten the habit of rising with the birds; and as for this"—here he struck a master blow—"I just thought I would straighten out a few kinks with a little exercise."

It must be owned that the new boarder gave a very fair exhibition of this kink-straightening exercise for another breath-taking moment, but then, sad to relate, the good work abated and they sat down upon an accommodating log to regard each other and the surroundings with appreciative and frank young eyes.

"I've never seen so perfect a morning—the sun is like a great god's eye, burning and tender: and just hear the birds! One would think their little hearts must burst with so much rapture. It's just wonderful—trees, birds, everything!" said Ephemia, bright-eyed and smiling, caught up into the spirit of the hour.

He was not a contentious soul. "It certainly is," he quickly assented, "especially the 'everything'."

Ephemia ought not to have blushed at this absurdity, but, unfortunately, she chanced to encounter that perennially humorous glance of his, and found in the depths of his really fine dark eyes a singularly tantalizing gleam of mischief.

“How silly!” she chided him, “you know what I mean. One doesn’t always rise feeling in tune with everything. But I have it! I’ll tell you what let’s do. You go back to your wood and I’ll slip into the house and have breakfast all waiting when the Swansons wriggle out of their cramped sleep. I don’t suppose Mrs. Swanson has come down to a cooked meal for ages.”

“There’s absolutely nothing wrong with your inspiration, but I’d much rather you stayed right here; she might not approve of our messing around, anyway.”

“Young man, let me tell you there will be no messing around, because you’ll stay right here, and I am a capital cook.”

“Ah, cruel of heart!” He laughed at her and planted himself right in her way. “Let me also explain that I can shape up a meal as fast as the next chap —why for a week, at least, on my first cruise, I faithfully cooked bacon and flapjacks. However, I must confess that for the most part the culinary art consisted in opening a can of corn beef and drawing water from any old source. In other words, my dear young lady, I am an expert in cooking from the can; try me and see.”

Not the least of wonders was the curious fact that Mrs. Swanson should have slept through their peals of merriment.

“You are ridiculous,” Ephemia told him merrily; “do you suppose we indulge in corn beef at breakfast? And then you really should be more careful about water, and I’ve heard that one gets scurvy from eating canned meat continually week on end.”

“Great Heavens! Out of the mouths of babes!” he teased her; “Scurvy and swamp fever! these are hot on my trail, I suppose.”

“For all that it’s true,” she retorted, indignant at his laughter; “such things have occurred, you know; even the hair and the teeth drop out,” she added belligerently.

“So long as my eyes don’t drop out while you are around I’ll say things aren’t so bad,” was the shameless rejoinder.

“Stuff and nonsense!” she snapped. “You get right to work this instant, and don’t dare come until you are called,” with which heartless command, emphatically delivered, she dodged past him and fled to the house.

Here all was still silent, with the exception of occasional snores from aloft. Ephemia flew about, her feet as light as her heart. Into the stove she flung various and sundry things calculated to produce heat—paper, chips,

lengths of wood—and applied a match. On went the great kettle over the little leaping flame. “There, now,” thought the impromptu cook triumphantly, “while the kettle boils I’ll cut the bread for toast, scramble the eggs and grind the coffee.”

But alas for well meaning efficiency! When these lesser rites were performed she discovered to her bewilderment, not to say chagrin, that whereas her fire ought to be blazing hotly it had died a premature death!

“The beastly old thing,” she gasped, “to be so perverted in a time like this!” There really seemed no alternative but to ask assistance where assistance would be forthcoming; so, swallowing her pride, she stepped to the door.

“Mr. Brett,” she called, “something’s wrong with this stove; the fire won’t burn at all.”

“You don’t really mean it?” said he, coming to her rescue on the jump; “well, if there is one thing I can do better than chop wood it’s to burn it.”

“This is no laughing matter,” Ephemia told him with rueful humor, “just look at the time. Oh, I do detest having my plans miscarry. Why ever couldn’t this miserable stuff burn?”

Off came the stove-lid again, out flew the neatly piled wood, the charred chips, most everything in fact but the match, only to be hastily jumbled back again in quite a crazy fashion, or so it seemed to Ephemia; but the fire burned.

“Thank goodness, we can at least have the coffee ready. It’s the funniest thing,” she confessed, “I always was a failure at building fires, and it looks so simple.”

Allison Brett intimated that it was one of the rare accomplishments of life, and naturally called for expert instruction. He intimated a good many other foolish things, which, if not exactly elevating, were decidedly mirth-provoking. But, at any rate, the breakfast progressed rapidly, and when the old alarm clock recalled Mrs. Swanson from her resonant slumber by its asthmatic wheeze, it was to a delightful world where the aroma of coffee drifted to one on the wings of youthful laughter.

As for appreciation, never had there been a more delectable meal. Mrs. Swanson assured the happy cooks that Ephemia’s coffee had a flavor all its own, and the eggs were simply perfect! As for Allison’s toast, words failed her; she simply hadn’t supposed a mere man capable of such golden excellence.

But even a morning begun at half after four wings away swiftly to the ninth hour. For the first time Ephemia now found herself reluctant to leave for the little schoolhouse, which she had come to look upon with such tender pride.

Allison, fortunately, discovered in time that he had urgent business to transact at the general store, and found it, therefore, quite natural to swing along beside the bashful little Swansons and their now entirely sedate teacher.

At the schoolhouse door he declined the honor of entering to inspect the initial ceremonies, or even the fine picture of the “Father of his Country”. “However,” he promised gaily, “I’ll be most happy to assist you in locking up this rare treasure—shall we say at four-thirty?”

Ephemia thought he might have been less flippant before the pupils, and yet during the singing, usually of such interest to her, she somehow distinguished very little of excellence or discord; for Allison’s laughter seemed to be resounding in her ears, and that mischievous gleam which lighted up his eyes kept inescapably haunting and close.

CHAPTER VI.

In some respects the house under the hill was vastly changed. The parlor not only flaunted the new Brussels rug, but also three denim-covered chairs, a phonograph perched on a wiggly table, and two pictures depicting Cupil awake and asleep. True, most of these changes were occasioned by the coming of the carpet, for, as Papa Strom explained, one couldn't have chairs with the stuffing disagreeably evident standing about on such an elegant rug. Then, as naturally as day follows night, the new curtains made their appearance, ecru scrims all hemstitched by Mamma Strom, and with the most ingenious corner-pieces, copied from curtains adorning the Parsonage windows.

With so much improvement in the front of the house it became rather noticeable that something ought to be done about the rear. Papa Strom admitted to a lack of enthusiasm for "tinkering about", but duty was duty, and so the dining-room was re-papered and the various loose-legged chairs made reasonably secure and then varnished. The big square table, he reasoned, needed only to have the legs touched up slightly, since they would very likely come to immediate grief; and as for the top, it might as well be left with its many honorable scars, since it was always covered by a cloth when company was expected.

Apropos of changes, it might be added here that Inga was by this time working as a cash-girl in White's departmental store, and faithfully handing over her five dollars each week-end. Half of this sum went into the safekeeping of a little china dog, perched on a corner shelf beside the clock, and was destined to become the initial payment on the coveted piano.

Even in less halcyon days the Stroms had been hospitable. Small wonder then that improved fortune induced them to further sociability; nevertheless, Mrs. Strom acknowledged a certain amount of anxiety when at Lily's behest she had offered to entertain the Ladies Aid and the Girls Guild at one and the same time.

Papa Strom, as usual, came to his Tina's assistance when the fateful day arrived by whipping frosting, stirring cake, and cutting sandwiches. The little Stroms he sent to bed after an early supper off the crusts cut from the sandwiches, burnt portions of cake, and waffles lacking in symmetric appeal, and followed, one might add, by promises of liberal "leavings" in the morning.

So ably did he encourage and support his fluttering Tina that when the girls arrived home everything was in perfect readiness; the table was set out in all available china, owned and borrowed, and Papa and Mamma Strom, arrayed in their pompous best, were indulging in a much deeded moment of rest and quiet reflection.

“My goodness, isn’t everything lovely?” Lily beamed, as she sniffed at the big spice-cake sitting like a fat, good-natured harem beauty in the centre of the table.

“Gosh, yes, it’s grand,” her hungry-eyed sister supplied aggressively, “but what do we eat?”

“Inga, you shouldn’t say such words! My, my, it’s rough!” sighed poor weary Tina.

“There’s plenty in the kitchen,” said her husband, “but cover over the sardine sandwiches so the cat don’t get them.”

What a night that was in the calendar of Strom festivities! All the ladies arrived in good time, each with her little work-bag and bit of news. The Guild was not so well represented, and the pastor’s wife was forced to confess a wounded surprise at the way girls were forsaking the womanly arts of the needle.

“Why, to think,” she told her sympathetic friends, “when I was in boarding-school needlecraft was an important part of the curriculum! But then, we’ve as good a Guild as the South congregation.”

By prearrangement the ladies held sway in the parlor until refreshments were served, whereupon they laid aside their doilies, towels, pillowcases, and such like articles, all destined to be sold for the benefit of the heathen, and trooped into the dining-room, where Mrs. Strom and one or two close friends waited to serve them.

Now in turn the Guild possessed themselves of the parlor and the phonograph, and flung aside without regret the grey flannelette shirts they were making for the African Mission. However, not until Lily was passing the paper napkins and the coffee cups were tongues and spirits loosened in real earnest.

“I’ve just bought the grandest voile for a dress,” began a tall, sharp-featured girl, whose father was a flourishing butcher and a deacon in the church.

“Oh, Josephine, you’re forever getting something new! We aren’t in it at all,” cried her friend Rosa, who was plump and comely and the solo singer in the choir.

“Did you know that Jenny’s getting married this fall?” chimed another. “Who’d ever have thought it! Why, she’s been singing alto for fifteen years, if a day; I distinctly remember hearing her when I was a mere child.”

“But see what she’s captured by waiting,” said Rosa archly; “it’s said that he’s worth all kinds of money.”

“Some folks would do anything for money,” Josephine returned with asperity; “it’s too ridiculous for words the way she decks herself out, and at her age!”

“Well, she can afford it,” broke in a sharp-nosed, forceful individual; “Jenny’s made good money with her music; but what astonishes me is the way some ordinary clerks manage to dress.”

“Isabella’s right,” Rosa vouched stoutly; “but have any of you seen Clare lately?” There was a scraping of chairs and a closing in of the tremulous circle. No, they had not seen this vagrant from their fold.

“Of course, I haven’t a thing to do with her, but one can’t avoid chance meetings. We happened to board the same car the day I was buying the muslin for the Sunday-school room windows,” Rosa told them. “Well, honestly, girls, you’d scarcely believe it, but she was actually wearing a pan velvet suit and an ermine neck-piece—or at least it was a good imitation!”

“Oh, do have some more cake,” poor Lily urged, flushed and uncomfortable with conflicting emotions; “do, please, have some more cake,” she implored, flitting from one curious girl to another, very much like a nervous gray sparrow hopping about a kitchen doorway in hopes of stray favors.

But though they absentmindedly accepted her delectable offering, her guests paid no further attention to her. They were hot on the spoor of the enemy; they were society in miniature, these self-satisfied, unimaginative girls; and society is forever banded to destroy the rebels who in anyway whatever upset the even tenor of accepted convention and mouldy ideas. That there was something of justice on their side in this case scarcely influenced their opinions; they were simply the pack in cry, and the pack always yelps.

Lily was distressed; she would have liked to say something in Clare’s behalf, for she could not escape the memory, old now, of a bitter experience

when Clare had come to her aid with two hard, red fists. Someone had taunted her for the round shoulders she then had displayed to a callous world in proof of the many babies she had nursed in her young arms. But such retribution as Clare meted out was not approved of by decorous teachers; she had received a sound strapping for fighting on the school grounds.

"You should have told her," Lily had whispered later; "she'd never have strapped you."

"Oh, that's all right," Clare's honest voice had responded; "you're not to fight in the schoolyard. She had a right to hit me. What's a little thrashing for a friend?"

Lily avoided distress of mind whenever it was possible; problems were not to her liking, whosesoever they might be. She could not stem the tide of censorious gossip by apt retort, as Ephemia might, but she had a sudden inspiration.

"Oh, girls!" she cried, jumping up and running to the phonograph, "Rosa brought her new record, 'In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree'; so let's try to sing it along with the machine."

CHAPTER VII.

Fate was kind to Allison; not only was his present territory such that he could work out from Neely for perhaps three weeks or more, but by Wednesday, when he was all packed to depart on his conscientious way, another of those heavy driving rains, characteristic of the lake regions, was down upon the land like a deluge.

Mrs. Swanson thrust out her head for a glimpse of the sky. “Jt! Jt!” said she, “it must have looked like this in Noah’s day. Mind you, Miss Freeman, it ain’t sense at all to go out; not a dog would we turn loose here in Neely, let alone the children, on such a day; if I was you I’d just set to home.”

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly do that.” Ephemia was very sure of her duty, and resolutely began to bundle up against the elements.

“In case no one should be there, or you’d be marooned in mud, I had better go along,” Allison suggested brightly, rejoicing with all his heart in the contrariness of the weather.

“Heavens, no!” Ephemia had become cautious since overhearing stray gossip at the post-office. It would never do to give the Hansons an opportunity to misjudge her sense of propriety.

Mrs. Swanson nodded approval. “If it gets worse you might fetch her long of noon, but I don’t know as I’d advise you to set in the school,” she told him sagely.

Even a summer rain can be most disagreeable in this part of the world: it blew in from the northwest on a biting-wind, and the leaden, angry clouds seemed barely to hover over the tree-tops. Inured as Mrs. Swanson was to evil weather, she complained when she came in from the milking. “It’s a foolishness to have gone to school,” she said; “such a day not a cat would go out, even if the mice squeaked by the doorstep. You might as well fetch the poor thing, Mr. Brett, since I could swear on my grandmother’s soul—God rest her!—not a child has she got. Learning’s all right in its place, but it’s not the like of being worth getting pneumonia for, and it’s not as if all the poor young ones had shoes even, let alone rubbers to go along of them.”

Mrs. Swanson’s prediction was well substantiated. Allison found Ephemia seriously perusing a teacher’s manual, diligent and sober, but decidedly lonely.

“Isn’t it a perfect deluge?” she greeted him, gladness magically wiping out all else.

“I must agree, much as it pains me; but where are all the future senators and senatoreens—or is that too much like a soup tureen?”

She ignored his nonsense. “Poor little things, I suppose they’ve really been kept home to do odd jobs; I have found it so—every one is so busy that any seemingly legitimate excuse to keep the children home suffices, and yet every mother seems to have the same ambition—there must be a minister, or at least a teacher, in the family.”

“I appreciate the latter ambition readily enough, but draw the line there as regards partiality.”

“Silly!” said she, and began to lock up her tidy desk. “I’ve no such prejudice. Why, I recall being enamored of a brown-eyed Baptist minister at fourteen.”

“You alarm me, but I suppose there actually is no going by appearances. Now, I should have sworn you had better judgment than that; still, come to think of it, I once pined grievously over the charms of a peddler lady with beautiful locks and tremendously large round brass earrings.”

In the midst of their mirth Ephemia remembered that she wanted a half-yard of oilcloth at the store and concluded they might as well get it now as later.

“I haven’t the slightest objection to visiting that village museum misnamed a store, but why should such utterly prosaic stuff as oilcloth prey upon the mind of one so young and fair?” he quizzed her.

“Your imagination needs to be rounded out; at present it runs to the ridiculous only. Now, had you been the least intuitive you would have known at once that my intention is to make of that ordinary commodity a thing of beauty and a joy forever. But to be serious, it’s little Lena’s birthday Saturday, and I’d like to make her a schoolbag, if it’s possible to obtain something besides red and blue checkered stuff. I have rather planned on stencilling a rose design for her; poor little soul, she just loves pretty things, and her only prized possessions are a pink seashell and a Chinese handkerchief.”

“Poor duffer!” said Allison sympathetically, “I’ll have to add some other monstrosity to that collection once I’ve returned to Alueez.”

Ephemia's heart almost missed a beat—or so she would have interpreted the sensation this simple revelation produced.

"You know Alueez, then?" she asked, trying to appear indifferent and entirely absorbed in locking the schoolhouse door behind them. Ahead lay the muddy lane, and overhead the angry skies lowered; but neither the one nor the other affected Ephemia, so marvelous seemed the thought that he should know her Alueez.

"I expect I do, somewhat," he acknowledged, as they began picking their soggy way, "for when I'm not staggering the University faculty I'm generally to be found laboring in some lowly but eminently respectable capacity around Alueez. I may as well confess that this is my first year at surveying, and just of late I'm beginning to think rather well of my choice. In fact, I might add modestly that in the past few days, at any rate, my enthusiasm has been unbounded."

"Dear me, I wish you would be sensible once in a while; the experiment is worth trying."

"Sense is a much questioned property. Indeed, one might say that its possession leads to endless altercation. Why desire so arduous a thing? And fools, you will remember, were prized even by the king."

"Evidently you are beyond help," she firmly defined him, and wished she might question him further regarding Alueez. Would he be there in the fall? Were they likely to meet when she went back to the Normal? But such inquisitiveness she judged an impertinence.

When within a few yards of the store they saw where a desolate little figure stepped out hastily, and, evidently seeing them, wavered in her course, hesitant to re-enter and afraid to proceed. She stood there in her uncertainty, a truly pathetic figure, with the wind whipping her shapeless ulster in angry folds about her.

"Poor Mrs. Jergen," thought Ephemia, "she is even afraid of us." Indeed such seemed the case, for in her nervous haste to slip by them the woman stumbled on a well-intentioned plank spanning an especially boggy spot, and though she succeeded in keeping her balance, away flew the parcel she was carrying.

Allison was too quick for even her bird-like plunge, and, smiling his winsome, boyish smile, handed her the muddy package.

"I trust it's none the worse for its wetting," he said.

Mrs. Jergen's hood had fallen back, and even their care-free eyes discerned the extreme pallor and weariness of her face. The blue eyes which flashed up at them from under heavy, fringed lids were the eyes of a fawn captive in some pit it neither understood nor could escape.

"Thanks, thanks," she murmured in her soft Scandinavian voice, "thanks so much. It is all right," and fled down the road.

"Who the deuce is she?" Allison asked as he gazed in astonishment at the flying figure.

"They call her widow Jergen, though I understand her husband to be alive—a state of affairs which has made her the butt of tongues—and one is warned against her by the good villagers. Now you know quite as much as I."

They said no more of the unfortunate widow until the required oilcloth was safe in Allison's capacious pocket and their steps were turned homeward.

"You know," he began, in strange seriousness, "I can't get that poor woman's face out of my thoughts! she looks starved for a little human attention. I've a good mind to make some excuse for calling on her."

"I imagine it would only make matters worse," Ephemia returned quickly, having in mind Mrs. Swanson's injunction and her reference to the widow's alleged fondness for the sterner sex. "I've often wished father were here," she went on. "You may not believe me, but he is the most wonderful person to discover what is detrimental to other people's fortunes, and absolutely helpless when it comes to untangling his own material difficulties."

"And I suppose you have a very capable mother who does all that as a matter of course," Allison smilingly took her up.

"You astonish me with such a sudden display of intelligence. . . . Oh! look at that poor crow! Did you ever in this world behold a more desolate creature?"

"Such were impossible, my dear young lady, until fate forces me to gaze upon my own image—somewhere in some mirroring pool—say about next week, if this heavenly rain is unkind enough to stop."

"I am partial to crows," said she, "they are the most sensible and matter-of-fact birds."

“Matter of fact and sensible,” he mocked her; “oh, magic words! I shall write them down and wear them next my heart; the result may prove efficacious.”

Mrs. Swanson had steaming pea soup and daintily rolled potato cakes waiting their arrival, and never had a meal tasted quite so fine.

“There ain’t nothing like soup on a cold day, and ‘potatis kaker’ are always nice with good butter,” said the complacent landlady.

The remainder of the day was unforgettably pleasant to Ephemia. While the rain pattered down the roof and beat upon the windows, the little girls, together with their mother, sat and sewed diligently. Allison instituted himself as keeper of the fire, for the wind penetrated the poor plastered cabin, and the cheerful glow from the faithful stove was gratifying. But this was not all; he must read to them from a little book that generally accompanied him on every cruise.

Mrs. Swanson agreed that the “Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow” were very idle. “It sounds all nice and tidy the way he puts it—‘the snow decking the fields and trees with white as if for a fairy wedding’—but it’s plain to be seen the man didn’t live in the country and fetch water for the critters long of January across them frozen white fields. Not, leastwise, in poor boots, he didn’t.”

“Mrs. Swanson,” Allison lamented, “how can you doubt him? Now, just judge for yourself of our absolute contentment despite the beastly rain. I dare say some clever writer could make our lot seem enviable.”

“Envy comes light,” said she, “and that reminds me of the cows—and it’s in another mind I’ll be when I’ve milked them.”

“Who wins?” he inquired, when the door banged behind Mrs. Swanson and her milk-pails.

“I should say she does; I can’t be philosophic in wet boots myself, and the cold penetrates deeper than my skin.”

“Had I but known you were so hopelessly materialistic I should have read you ‘Where and How to Gain Wealth’, or some such sensible pleasantry,” he told her.

“A subject I should have appreciated, being at present much more in need of material reinforcement than poetic increase. But, to prove my unbiased mind, I propose that you read us the essay on ‘Vanity’ while the

girls and I get supper. Moreover, the topic must, as a matter of course, have some influence upon you."

"Oh, well," he groaned, "mine's not to reason why."

"It certainly is not," she flashed at him merrily; "reason must forever be dissociated from the thought of you. Unless you prefer bread and water to Mrs. Swanson's excellent crullers, you had better refrain from further impertinence and do as you are told."

"All is vanity, and everybody is vain," he began in a meditative tone; "women are terribly vain. . . ." Even the little girls giggled hysterically at this, and Ephemia acknowledged herself beaten.

"For goodness sake, stop!" she implored; "here, come and slice up these potatoes."

"I thought you would realize my usefulness eventually," said he, taking the dish of cold potatoes from her hands. "There is nothing like an apt quotation to bring the wayward mind to reason."

CHAPTER VIII.

"It's dull like with Mr. Brett gone," said Mrs. Swanson one evening, shortly after Allison had gone his smiling way.

Ephemia saw the little girls glance her way expectantly, and found it annoying. "Well, perhaps; but I've really been so busy with my nature class that I've scarcely taken note of the time," she compromised discreetly.

Mrs. Swanson's shrug plainly bespoke her opinion of such half-heartedness. "He's a nice young man. There ain't many would have troubled with my wood. He's a good son to his mother, I'm bound. It's a comfort to have a son, even being he ain't quite perfect."

"So the minister is coming to confirm the Hugdahl girls on Sunday? I suppose all the neighborhood will be turning out for such an event."

Mrs. Swanson would not be shaken. "Yes and no. But as I was saying, there's them as would welcome the friendship of such a nice young man. I oughtn't to say it, maybe, but it seems as how teaching school ain't worth getting strong-minded about; it ain't particular happy to be a lone old maid."

Ephemia found this irresistibly humorous despite the sure knowledge that the good woman was obviously "speaking her mind," as was her bounden duty.

"I don't in the least disagree with you, dear Mrs. Swanson," she laughed, and added mischievously, "but the thought of becoming an old married woman is unattractive as well.

"The nose only we see when young," came the pertinent maxim. "Now there's me—a ugly old woman, you say; but no, here's my Emma and Lena, young and pert—that's me all over again. An old maid, now, what can she look at and think: 'That's me at ten, or fifteen, or twenty?' A husband ain't so much at times, and worse, maybe, so be he drinks, but at heart he's mostly good, and you get used to it."

"Oh, Mrs. Swanson, don't let me believe that you consider matrimony desirable at any price! You dear old humbug, I quite see through your designs."

"Well, maybe I do and maybe I don't. But there's my 'Brindle', now, I pay for her good money and she gets a crossness in her and knocks me

down; but next year she is a sensible, quiet cow, and to make you marvel such a butter she gives. Seems to me as how critters and men is all the same. But girls nowadays ain't for having patience and waiting for the cream. There was Anna Jergen, making such a to-do seeing as how her Ole banged about on pay-day, and him that never said a word when she sent to Sears-Roebuck's for a silk dress."

Often; enough after Ephemia wondered what more might have developed had not a neighbor boy come dashing up, breathless and perspiring, to say that his "ma was took sick and would Mrs. Swanson please come right away."

"Ja, sure," she responded at once, and hurrying to her cupboard, found a good-sized cruller to thrust into his eager hands. "There, now, you go back and tell grandma to set on lots of water, I'll be for coming right along." Having so commanded, she pounded up the stairs so vigorously that each rung trembled and groaned in protest.

"It's Mathias's Hilda," she explained, upon reappearance with a small brown satchel in hand; "it's her sixth, and her young yet! . . . . Lena, you better feed the hens before you go to bed; and Emma, don't forget to fix the hem on your white petticoat, being as how there's church on Sunday."

These instructions with several amendments concluded, the good woman hurried down the trail winding over the south hill, beyond which huddled the dilapidated log house of Mathias Kroken, lumberman and blacksmith.

"People seem to call on your mother for a good many things," Ephemia addressed the little girls, who stood in the doorway gazing after their departing parent.

"Ma's took most of the babies here about, leastwise that I can remember," said Emma, with her usual gravity. The child was so everlastingly serious that Ephemia longed, all at once, to shake her into some semblance of lively emotion.

"We can dispense with the babies for the time being. Come, Emma, tell me what would you prefer above all else in this world?"

"I'd like to be a swell," said Emma without a moment's hesitation, "and to have silk underwear like there's in the catalogue, and a little dog and a husband, and I don't want the banging kind."

Ephemia gasped at the suddenness of it, and began to perceive that a calm exterior need not necessarily be a true criterion of what lies within. She

also saw that Lena was drawing close, her expression eloquent and expectant.

"Very well, Lena, it's your turn," she smiled.

"I don't care about the husband, or the dog, or the underwear," Lena began slowly and firmly; "I want to live where there's no poor folks or cows, and where there's a river and trees, and maybe a frog pond. I like the way they snore. But I want never to see any ladies with twins and a man with a limp! and oh, I think it's awful to live in Neely!"

It was all very vague and childish, but Ephemia's sympathies were aroused and she drew the timid little figure into her arms. She recalled her own wonderful dreams, how hotly they had burned within her and how impossible of expression. Words can never depict what shines so brightly in a child's heart.

"I really don't think Neely terrible, dear Lena, but no doubt you will go to the city some day and will find all manner of things to please you."

Lena sighed, and a thousand doubts were cradled in the sigh. "I don't know," she said; "Ericson's Bertha went to Alueez last year and got her finger cut off in a laundry, and now she's married to a lumber-jack down at Flanagan."

Ephemia realized that a change of subject was imperative.

"Suppose we feed the hens," she suggested brightly, "then while Emma mends her petticoat I will read you a story."

"Read us one from the 'Tales of the North'," Emma begged eagerly, "one with a Troll and a King in it."

"And with a 'Saetter girl' and a Prince," added Lena.

"Very well, you shall have the story of 'Asa the Good'. Now run and get the cracked corn."

Emma's housewifely soul had a sudden inspiration. "We better set out a bite for Mamma before we go upstairs, so as when she's brung the baby and got back again she needn't to fix for herself. Mamma gets awful tuckered out bringing babies."

CHAPTER IX.

Allison returned on Thursday, just at dusk. It was a most delightful evening and the entire Swanson menage was out in the yard taking the air. Lena from her precarious perch on the woodpile was the first to spy him, and so great was her excitement that she lost her balance and came rolling down in an avalanche of newly piled wood. “I see him! I see him!” she shrieked, “just back of the bluff.”

“Jt! Jt!” Mrs. Swanson clicked her tongue sharply, “you’ve tumbled your wood; who do you mean’s coming, foolish jente?”

“Him, the funny, nice young man. It is! it is!”

It was him indeed, and the Swansons made no secret of their joy at seeing him again. Ephemia, however, found it necessary to pretend otherwise, and became deeply engrossed in the old fairy tales she had been reading to the insistent children. But no one could withstand his contagious good-nature for long. He had them all in gales of laughter before his belated supper was set out by eager Mrs. Swanson.

“You say the camp was near to being flooded out? Well, I always said it was built in a hole like, and not where it should. Did you maybe come across an awful dark fellow—belike he was part Indian—with a kind of sleepy walk, but terrible quick-like when he’s riled? Pierre Deschambeau”—she pronounced it Peer Diskenbo and felt proud of such linguistic victory—“ain’t such a bad fellow, even being he’s silly on that Anna Jergen.”

“I saw only one old chap, who could scarcely have been your Pierre; seemed sleepy enough, but there the similarity ends.”

“Well, of course there ain’t nothing doing this time of year, but it’s a hustling place come wintertime. I was all for helping the cook one year, but the draft got me the rumatiz and my old man sent me home. Most as like as not Pierre was going over the logging trails; they needs a lot of fixing, and it ain’t like the Tomlinson outfit to be for leaving it until the busy season.”

The following afternoon Allison met Ephemia at the schoolhouse shortly after closing time, and found her planning to go for the mail.

“Anything is agreeable to me,” said he, “and later we might stroll around the town to see the sights.”

“That would take exactly ten minutes, and when you have seen the new water tanks Mr. Peterson is displaying in his windows, and the equally spectacular pergola of the newly renovated church, I couldn’t suggest another thing unless it’s the Hugdahl’s Manx cat—a tailless cat, you may believe, is a curiosity in this part of the world.”

“Bring on your cat—tailless or otherwise it’s all the same—I like the brilliant creatures. But, hello! is this a holiday or something?”

“Mail-day is always a holiday, but if you’re feeling timid I’ll slip ahead; otherwise, be prepared to tell Widow Simonson that ‘times is awful slack and you don’t know what’s to come’. It is a language she understands, poor soul. And then you must notice the Petersons’ twins, and under no condition forget to remark upon the marvel that Simon of the younger pair is almost as big as Toré of the older. And then . . . .”

“Good Heavens! I know when I’m beaten. By all means leave me to my cowardly musings, and here’s hoping you get back,” said Allison.

The errand completed, Ephemia returned wreathed in smiles and inclined to graciousness; she suggested that they go down the highway a piece and find some suitable shelter from the sun where she might read her mail, if he would pardon such childish eagerness.

Allison contented himself by watching her when, curled like a kitten, she snuggled against an old cedar and prepared to read the news from Esk and Alueez.

Watching the varied play of emotions which made her small oval face so attractive, he soon realized that the author of the letter she was reading had beyond doubt captured her unalloyed interest, if not affection. The knowledge was singularly depressing. To make matters worse, she suddenly encountered his speculative glance, with her young, hazel eyes warm and tender.

“If you only knew how beautifully he writes! His letters are really prose poems; I almost wish you might read this—but of course it’s written in my native language.”

“God forbid!” he returned gloomily; “to tell the truth, I’m generally bored stiff by poetry, and it would scarcely be fair of me to—er, enjoy another chap’s madness.”

“Father wouldn’t in the least mind,” said she absently, having barely heard him through the preoccupation of her thoughts; “his letters aren’t in

the slightest personal; they might, without confusion, be read to an entire community."

Then indeed Allison realized what an ineffably pleasant place the world may be. He wanted to give a rousing cheer for this admirable old gentleman who so wrote like an angel that his daughter smiled upon the world and its young men with soft and shining eyes.

"Oh, I say," he smiled, "you gave me an awful jolt. I was absolutely certain some lovesick Romeo was responsible for that marvelous letter."

"You are a most perverted young creature," she pursued crushingly, "and talk more nonsense than is good for you."

"Set my heart at rest concerning those other suspicious looking documents, and I promise on my honor to be as silent as a dormouse for at least ten minutes."

"To have you silent for even one moment I confess readily that these suspicious looking documents are from my two best friends; your impertinence must be satisfied with that. But one thing worries me; despite all the nice things father found to tell me—how the hollyhocks are coming on, circling round the house like pretty maidens, and how splendid the kitchen garden looks, with its fat cabbages sitting in the sun like buxom Dutch matrons at a fair, and how beautiful the mist appears undulating like a gossamer veil above the river—despite all this, which is quite in father's kingdom, there creeps in a little hint that mother isn't so well."

"Only a cold, very likely," said Allison; "the summer has been so beastly wet."

"But you don't know father. He is so intent upon robins' eggs and sunsets that an ordinary thing like a cold simply doesn't exist for him—it must be rather bad since he noticed it at all."

However, this vague concern was quickly engulfed in the real anxiety which Clare's letter produced.

> Dear Ephemia: Hasn't it been a devil of a summer? Rain, rain, all the time, and a couple of cloud-bursts to boot. The town looked like a drowned rat for a while. Well, to make it short, I've cut loose from the crowd at home. This is how it was: that fellow you didn't like took me to a dance one night, and the old lady kicked me out.

There was a nice row, believe me. First I had gotten me a dress —saved up for it weeks and weeks—and then a DANCE! Oh, well, she might have taken me under her virtuous roof again if it hadn't been for the rotten car service. We missed the last car and came home on the "owl" at three. You can imagine the effect. I was gone to the devil for sure, and Pa was to hear the whole of it, and if I didn't confess at once and change my ways I was to get out and not stay where I would poison the innocent kids. Well, I thought, what's the use, so I told them that since I was already on the way to the bow-wows I might as well keep on going, and that I'd not upset their saintly nunnery no more.

So here I am, rooming with a girl in South Alueez, and find things just about as bad, only different. It's sure beyond me. Sometimes I look at myself and wonder is it all a dream, and wish it were, and that we were just kids again going to school and fighting like cats.

But I'll put the brake on the sob stuff, it must be dull enough for you as it is in that awful country. Deliver me from anything slower than a town. If you still care to write—the others mostly have cut me—let me know all about everything and send my love to your ma. Clare.

P.S.—Saw Lily on the street the other day with a nice-looking fellow; they were awfully sweet on each other. Lily's getting real pretty.—C. B.

Ephemia was deeply distressed. Things must be very bad with Clare when she wrote like this, for she was never one to dwell on unpleasant situations. Perhaps Lily might have something to say; she generally did have some contribution to offer concerning one friend or another; and certainly Clare's new act of defiance would not have passed without occasioning righteous indignation among her old associates. With this thought in mind she turned eagerly to Lily's pink envelope.

But Lily was remarkably reticent concerning others in this letter. It was a paean of joy, more or less full of tucked lawn, swiss muslin, feathered bonnets and pointed reference to her young man, who sold gum and candy "up the line".

"Mamma's not so pleased with me for going around with him; he's not a Norwegian, and besides he's a Catholic, or was!" she explained naively.

Then came a list of festivities, box socials, a piano recital and a "Lutefiske supper", all much appreciated by the Stroms, big and little. And finally in the expected footnote came a hurried mention of Clare—one might have thought that even to write of such conduct frightened poor Lily, let alone the act itself. "They say that Clare is getting dreadfully wild and lives with a flashy girl in South Alueez. Mamma went to see Mrs. Bergen when she learned Clare had run off, and found her crying and carrying on. It's awful of Clare to treat her poor mother like that; she ought to be ashamed of herself. But of course I don't know much about it." This very typical sentence amused Ephemia despite her mounting disgust and indignation. For she was all at once fiercely rebellious against a Providence which permitted the blindness of His creatures to trip and ruin them, and provided, moreover, a ready throng to start a hue and cry—to bawl out shame upon the victim until he must, forsooth, believe it his eternal portion; and she was angrier still at Mrs. Bergen, who should have been Clare's defence and not her destruction. "The hateful old woman," she thought fiercely, "I hope she drowns in her own tears."

Allison had kept his compact. He had been discreetly silent, but now, apparently, something was very much amiss. Where formerly all had been sunshine, clouds threatened; indeed, he would have laughed had he not been the wisest of young men, so aflame with indignation were the eyes she turned upon him when he ventured to hope that no evil news had reached her.

"I've been a patient little dormouse," he resumed, smiling in his whimsical way; "now suppose we take home this parcel of yours and then go for our promenade around this beauteous city."

As Mother Freeman would have said, Ephemia was something of a sky-rocket, she rose to the dizziest heights of ecstasy and sank to the deepest pits of gloom in one and the same hour. So now she jumped up, her eyes unusually bright with the new mood of recklessness which was taking possession of her. Why should one endeavor to pick and choose, she thought; some force exterior to self seemed waiting to push and prod one. It were better to laugh and make merry while one might. She regretted hotly her priggish goodness in the past—why, for all she knew she might one day be a dull toiling creature like Mathias's Hilda!

"Bother the parcel!" she cried, "let's follow the highway into the hills. I want to get away from everything disagreeable, and I am rather sick of the sight of these log houses and, as little Lena would say, men with a limp and women with their arms full of babies."

Allison had the good sense to let her talk on uninterrupted, a little amused, it is true, but quite comprehending that her flippancies were the safety valve of emotion. When they had rambled on for some time the mood passed, and Ephemia found herself appreciating the fragrant silence about them. Up she soared again into the clouds. After all, nothing mattered but the delightful fact that she seemed somehow to belong to this fragrant place; to the pearly blue sky with it's apricot dots of cloud; to the birds that darted like colored flowers through the greenwood and to the endless open highway.

Allison, for all his amusement, became aware of a deeper interest in this many-sided Ephemia he had just seen unfold before his eyes; he had found her a gratifying companion before, principally, he had supposed, because of coming upon her in this "neck of the woods", but now he was a little disturbed at the way she affected him.

Engrossed with their own thoughts they had taken little notice of the way and with something of amazement found themselves at the crossroads, confronted by Anna Jergen's little blue cottage. The effect was magical. Ephemia suddenly remembered that she had not seen the widow since that rainy day when chance had brought them together. And Allison in turn thought of a certain conversation with Pierre—an incident he had not cared to confess even to good Mrs. Swanson.

"Let's take a look at the place," said Allison, "it looks deserted."

CHAPTER X.

"Neat little place," Ephemia began, as they drew nearer the isolated house. In the all-pervading silence, seemingly so native to this lonely habitation, it was not a little startling to be met with such bellowing and bawling as now greeted the curious pair.

"Great Scott! something's wrong all right," cried Allison, running a keen eye over the wretched cows, which, necks extended, bawled uproariously in the yard: "the poor brutes haven't been milked for days, so here's where I get busy," he pursued, and quite as a matter of course opened the little gate for Ephemia to enter.

"But can you do it?" she began foolishly, for somehow this rustic accomplishment seemed so alien to his laughing grace.

"I see you still underrate my ability. So, much as it's against my modest inclinations, I'll confess to a postgraduate course in milking. I'll warrant I can milk anything from a goat to a buffalo." And, seeing the question in her eyes, he added: "I happened to be raised on a Dakota farm, so you see I come quite honestly by the accomplishment. And now I'd suggest that you see what's up with the widow, while I run along with these pails I see in the shed, just as I had expected—milk-pails are always in the same place the world over."

Ephemia was decidedly nervous when, after receiving no response to her knocking, she entered the little kitchen. It was a tidy little room, and no doubt cheerful under different conditions; but now, stale of air and bereft of the homely signs of life, it seemed depressing and tragic, as only a house with drawn blinds and fires extinguished can be. Another door opened off the kitchen to the right; thither Ephemia hurried and again rapped, timidly this time and with beating heart. Her nervous anxiety was not lessened by the feeble wail which reached her through the heavy door; but at least she knew now that intrusion would be welcome.

The room she stepped into was rather large, its two windows facing the highway and its low walls plastered and painted a light blue—Anna was evidently partial to the celestial color. At present the place was in confusion, and the one distinct thing about it was the large oak bed standing ugly and glowering in the corner. Here, smothered in quilts despite the warm weather,

the little widow lay for all the world like another “Goldy Locks” in some grim creature’s lair.

Ephemia flew to the bedside. “Oh, Mrs. Jergen, what can I do for you? It is terrible to find you like this and alone.”

Gratitude leaped into the blue eyes of Mrs. Jergen. “It’s only just grippe, I guess,” she whispered hoarsely, “but my cows . . . .”

“They are already being attended to, so we can forget them at present; but what about yourself? Couldn’t I do something for you? May I not make you a cup of coffee and toast? I don’t suppose that could hurt you?”

“The milk will be plenty,” said Mrs. Jergen, flushing a deeper red than fever and pain had occasioned; “it’s not to bother I’d ask you.”

But such mild remonstrances could not check Ephemia’s rising ardor to serve. With a smile and an encouraging nod she betook herself to the deserted kitchen, flung wide the door and window, and began to survey the place in earnest. The cupboard was her first concern, and before many moments it had become alarmingly so. With the exception of a few handfuls of rice, a possible quarter of a pound of green coffee, and a sprinkling of flour in the bin, no vestige of food could she find.

Allison, returning with the steaming pails, found her wide-eyed with horror before the empty cupboard. She pounced upon him impulsively, almost upsetting his precious burden.

“Allison,” she cried, not in the least aware of such familiarity, “can you believe it, there isn’t a thing to eat in the place. I believe she is starving!”

“Great Scott! Impossible!”

“Well, look, then,” she said, revealing the pathetic poverty of boxes and bins.

“I suppose she managed on the milk and the garden until she fell ill,” he reflected sensibly. “But now I’d better hustle off to friend Hanson for something or other.”

“Oh, you are a dear!” cried Ephemia joyously. “Get butter and bread and coffee—this green stuff has to be roasted and it’s an endless job—and, well, anything else edible you happen to see.”

Just then Allison felt that buying out the entire store would be delightful. “Butter and sugar and coffee and bread,” he repeated, smiling down upon her, “and—and—right you are!” On second thought he turned back from the

doorway. “If you promise to repeat that just opinion of my honorable person, say ten times by moonlight, I might even bring back a jar of preserves,” he said.

“Oh, do hurry, please; I don’t in the least know what I said.”

“On that score I shall take the pleasure to instruct you,” he tormented her, and, laughing, swung down the road.

It was very difficult to meet the widow’s shamed glances a moment later, but Ephemia carried off the situation fairly well. “I’m sorry to be so inefficient,” she confessed, “but I have had to send to the store for coffee; roasting the stuff is quite beyond me.” This explanation made, she busied herself tidying the room, all the while chatting gaily as though this were her usual habitat and nothing out of the ordinary had transpired.

Thus encouraged, Anna Jergen began to show an inclination towards confidence. “I always was fond of the woods,” she at last found voice to say, “and since things got so bad it’s more and more I’ve been there. I like the smell and the things that grow back deep in the timber; but it’s been awful wet this summer. I guess that’s how it come I got sick; usually I’m strong, though I don’t look it.”

Then with another burning wave dyeing her fair skin she added: “It’s only that I hate to go to the store. . . . I get low in things. . . . . ‘To-morrow’ I say to myself, ‘I will go to Hanson’s’; but to-morrow I go to the woods instead, and so when I get sick . . . .”

Like her mother, Ephemia detested insincerity. Anna Jergen was trusting her with much, infinitely more than the words implied; to be less than honest in return seemed impossible. “But with things as they are why do you stay?” she said. The answer came quickly, though scarcely above a whisper! “I like it here; ah, no, no, I couldn’t go away.”

There was nothing more to be said. Ephemia contented herself by making the woman comfortable; and when Allison returned, together with Mrs. Swanson, whom he had thought wise to send for while waiting upon Mr. Hanson’s rather deliberate movements, Anna Jergen, neatly combed and presentable, smiled out from her pile of pillows like a shy little girl.

“Jt! Jt! Anna Jergen, and why wasn’t you for having sense to send for me soon as you was took with this spell?” Mrs. Swanson demanded as she planted herself heavily at the foot of the bed.

“It’s nothing but only grippe,” Anna defended.

“Jt! Jt! well, I’ve brung you some whiskey and mustard, an’ I mean to see as how it’s used proper.”

She was as good as her word. Anna was blistered and boiled inside and out, and when at last her masterful nurse bundled her back into bed it was hard to discern which was the more sweltered of the two.

“Jt! Jt! It’s a business, this grippe,” Mrs. Swanson acknowledged, as she mopped her gaunt, sallow countenance with a bandanna handkerchief. “And now,” she told her youthful aides, “you might as well be getting off; the girls can fry eggs, and there’s plenty of cold pork and biscuits. I’m going to set up with Anna to-night. I aim to see this don’t go into pneumonia. It’s terrible, that, for taking folks off. Now, there was old John down Flanagan way. . . .”

Ephemia was become familiar with the symptoms. Mrs. Swanson’s able best had been done; now she was ready for relaxation and reminiscences.

“Yes, I know,” she answered quickly, “and perhaps we may as well run on. Don’t worry about us or the house—we’ll see to everything.”

“Well, you might just make sure as my young turkeys ain’t strayed, and being some are, lock the rest up in the little coop beside the woodshed.”

CHAPTER XI.

The night was perfect, with a sky deeply blue and with the evening star swung above the horizon like a silver lantern, glittering through the dreaming pine trees. Yet Ephemia was suddenly keenly conscious of fatigue, all the rushing and commotion having drained her of energy. Even Allison paced on silently, wrapped in his own thoughts and grateful for the all-enveloping solitude.

The road, a purple ribbon of mystery, wound on indefinitely, and to Ephemia it seemed good that it should be so. She would have welcomed the magic power to wander on in this charitable silence through an eternity of fragrant wood.

Her companion, however, had a confession to make, and being now somewhat revived, thought best to have it over.

"I saw Deschambeau all right," he said.

"You what?" she asked, startled out of her lazy revery.

"That Frenchman of Mrs. Jergen's."

"I am beginning to smell a story yards off since coming here, and I see that in another few minutes we'll be turning into the village; suppose we sit down by the roadside—a perfectly safe procedure, surely, in this lovely dusk—and you tell me all about it?"

"There's really little to tell," he told her, when they were perched decorously on a mosgrown log. "Of course, I had heard something of this widow business at the camps before coming to Neely. But after seeing her that time at the store I decided to make a point of drawing Deschambeau out, telling him she looked wretched and all that."

"Pierre's not a bad chap, but there seems to be a perverted husband somewhere or other—quite a devil, too—who abused her and ran off. He won't grant a divorce, however, but then a divorce would not mend matters for Pierre—he's a good Catholic."

"Bunk!" Ephemia snapped inelegantly but effectively; "he can't marry her divorced, but he can ruin her reputation. Queer kind of righteousness, queer kind of religious scruple, I must say!"

He laughed at her indignation. Being blessed or cursed, as it may be, with the ability to see both sides of a question, he usually found no lack of mirth-provoking material.

"Speaking of scruples, the father of Protestantism advocated the burning of witches, and incited men to bless the Lord for 'saving the few and damning the many'. And babies fathered by the devil, as he believed, the good old chap condemned to death at once, thus hastening on the good work. Rather comical scruple that, too!"

"Ridiculous!" said she, with the quick vehemence of youth; "a game begun in earnest and exploited by authority to make slaves of people. Religion or no re-religion, imagine not daring to do what one must feel to be right."

"But you are wrong. The trouble arises from our varied conceptions of right and wrong. What's right to me isn't necessarily right to Pierre, and so on."

"Well, there you are, simply proving my point; a thing isn't right just because we've been told so! And anyone with an ounce of intelligence must come to realize that anything which makes misery for another can't possibly be right. How can it be beneficial for Mrs. Jergen to live with a depraved husband, and how can it be right for Pierre to gain her affections only to desert her?"

Allison lit a cigarette, doubtless seeking inspiration from the mellow weed. "Things are so deucedly complicated," he said, seriously enough; "actions so seldom reveal their cause. Yet we accept appearances at face value. It seems to me that our entire civilization must be wrong, since it has not made such marriages as Mrs. Jergen's impossible. But I must confess I rather sympathize with Pierre, though of course he ought to keep out of Neely under the circumstances."

Perhaps it was as well that the deepening dusk hid the fire in Ephemia's eyes when she shot out her emphatic opinion. "I detest the very sound of his name," she said, quite with the forcefulness which had characterized the convictions of her childhood, "he must be a weak sort of creature at any rate."

He found this amusing, but contented himself with smiling discreetly. "Oh, you'd be surprised at Pierre: he's a nice chap really, and at heart gentle as a woman. Why, any sick animal at the camp becomes his care, and at

present his special charge is a three-legged dog he found caught in a bear-trap!"

"He seems partial to trapped creatures," she retorted. "But honestly, if each new day is going to add something of disagreeable moment, what sort of crazy-quilt pattern will life reveal at fifty?"

"I say, look at that jolly crescent drifting up into the sky," was his irrelevant contribution. "What I may think at fifty doesn't impress me as particularly important, no more so than what I thought at seven, when I would have said that just such another crescent was a jolly old boat sailing off to the land of molasses candy, trick monkeys and cursing parrots. I rather think it's all a jolly old joke as we look back, you know."

"Don't! You make me homesick with your parrots and your molasses candy! You make me think of Alueez and all my little silver moons. Oh, I shall not believe that the better part of wisdom is to outgrow one's little silver moons! But, speaking of Alueez, do you by any chance know the little brown brook that tumbles down the western hill?"

"If you mean the one crossed by the M. and N. tracks, I most certainly do; what is more, I collected a grand bump on my chaste young brow doing a fancy dive into that immortal stream. The ill-fated exhibition was launched for the benefit of a cousin I was visiting at the time and who still lives back in those hills."

"Why, can you believe it, you were actually trespassing on our land! But then, most of the boys in that neighborhood did, as poor father's cherry trees so sadly testified."

"Question me no more," said Allison, "I seem to feel guilty recollection creeping upon me."

"It's all very comical, your stealing father's cherries—for of course you did—and your mute confession here in Neely after so many years."

" 'Not' comical," he corrected, "tragic! Consider how much more romantic had you bound up my bleeding brow, or at least been near to proffer the forbidden fruit. I see where I'll have to visit that old pool again, and this time, perhaps, I won't have to steal the cherries."

"It isn't our land now," she confessed bravely, and for the first time found the fact appallingly real. "Father fell ill and thought a change of climate might benefit him."

"And it proved quite the reverse—is that it?"

She tried to pass it off gaily. “One would scarcely call it less—however, we are still intact, for there are as many sunsets and gold-finches and tanagers as formerly, and these, together with the contributions of a few philosophers, constitute fortune in father’s opinion.”

“It’s really rather peculiar how similar a road we have travelled. Now, my good parent had a passion for breaking virgin soil—well, at all events we saw the country, and when there were too many of us he had to settle down. It’s a great life, that migratory existence, if you don’t mind little things like where and how you eat.”

After that Ephemia forgot life was complicated, forgot that her father was a visionary and that Pierre was a wretch. She perceived only that the night was lovely, its very silence a great heart throbbing with unutterable things, and that the little moon cast down over everything a white radiance.

All the way home she marvelled at it in an entranced silence, and when the little girls met her with a fresh lot of troubles—Emma had discovered a hawk flying off with a young turkey, and Lena had scalded her fingers—she saw in them the rarest opportunities.

“Oh, darling,” she cried, drawing the whimpering child close, “I’ll fix your little hand in a jiffy. Emma, find some oil or fat and bring a handful of flour.”

Allison was no less kind. While Ephemia dressed the badly burned members, he charmed the tears away by an amazing store of jingles, and so successful was he that, despite her pain, poor Lena managed a moist little smile.

“Oh, oh, write it, Mr. Brett, please, the one about the moonbeam,” she begged.

“When the Princess commands her knight must obey,” he agreed and got out his notebook. “Well, here goes Little Betty Golden to immortality”:

Good gracious, Betty Golden was a bad little elf,
With a giddy young smile and no clothes on herself;
And she flirted with the Clover, and she flirted with the Bee,
And she danced upon the water for the little Fish to see.
And a Frog of good deportment grieved to see the shameful sight
Of this elfin Betty moonbeam dancing wildly all the night.
But Betty danced the harder as she shook her hair of gold,
And laughed at Mister Froggie, so stupid and so old,
And the Fishes blew her bubbles, and she put them in her hair,
And she laughed: Hey ho! for gladness, call me wicked if you dare!

With this bit of nonsense clutched in her hand the little girl who didn't care about a husband or a dog, but wanted to live where there were no poor folks or cows, fell sound asleep.

Opposite, in her narrow cot, Ephemia lay awake for hours dwelling upon the wonder of Allison Brett. And the little moon, having mounted high, at last came drifting past her window as shining a barge of dreams as ever sailed the sky.

CHAPTER XII.

Mrs. Swanson was grave when she returned the next morning. “She’s terrible sick, poor creature,” she announced with a sad shake of the head; “terrible sick and kind of out of her head. I’ve sent the Peterson boy round the neighborhood to see if there’s any quinine, or the like of that, calculated to stop the fever, and some one’ll have to set by her.”

“Of course I shall stay with her the week-end,” said Ephemia, who already was pinning on her hat.

“It’s a heap to ask, but I’m that tuckered out,” groaned the good woman; “I ain’t what I used to be. Nights and nights I set by old Tobin before he was took—but I’ll be back as soon as ever I can.”

“I suppose it’s quite safe for me to go along, isn’t it?” Allison asked in humorous sobriety.

“Land, yes,” said Mrs. Swanson, now gratefully sipping a steaming cup of coffee, “there ain’t nothing said against sitting up with sick or dead people—good land, no!”

Out in the invigorating morning air both Allison and Ephemia broke into hearty laughter at this illuminating speech.

“It expresses things so absolutely,” Ephemia giggled. “Had we been seen at Mrs. Jergen’s last week our reputations by now would have been badly riddled. But to-day our mission is not only perfectly proper, but pious as well. I dare say Mrs. Peterson will remark, generously, that we are ‘such nice young people.’ ”

“Which is all very just and true—the half of us at least is very nice indeed.”

“I refuse to be cross with you on so lovely a morning, so don’t waste time in trying to be irritating. Besides, the cows will be waiting your fond administrations impatiently. You’ll have to admit, despite your prejudice, that the farm prepared you for an interesting emergency.”

“I had much rather the preparation fitted me to cope with a most unreasonable young woman. You know you really ought to be more respectful toward me and listen with more attention to my choice language.

After all, I'll have to go off on Monday, and the devil of it is I'll not be back this way either."

"Oh, surely you'll be back!" she gasped before she could reflect upon so betraying an apostrophe.

He drew alarmingly close upon that and lifted her little hand to his arm in charming fellowship. She felt his warm young eyes upon her and all at once longed to race away from their searching intensity—somewhere into the familiar solitude, there to quiet this strange awakened upheaval within her.

"That is the rarest thing you've said so far," he began in his irrelevant lightness, and then he, too, was caught up in the hot current of strangely compelling emotions and found his wit forsake him and his ready tongue mute before the things in his heart.

Ephemia was the first to recover, and managed her question with remarkable steadiness, considering the effort it really was.

"When will you be returning to Alueez?"

"Sometime in the fall, if I can make it. This ought to be my last year at the University. But honestly, Ephemia, if it weren't for the hope of meeting you there I'd simply stagnate in these next few months. The thought of the long stretches of isolation ahead of me seems utterly hateful but for the knowledge that they are a sort of royal highway back to Alueez and you!"

Honesty was Ephemia's most marked characteristic. It had been impossible for her just then, in the face of her own sincere hope, to reply other than she did. Her hazel eyes, so curiously flecked with gold-green spots that gave such alluring effects of light and color, shot their quick warm glance upon Allison, a fleeting and shy enough performance, but deadly destructive.

"I shall always be glad of your return, Allison," she said, and immediately stiffened into decorous reserve.

"Ephemia! don't take it all back! Don't try to be such a little Miss Prim or I'll kiss you right here in the open road!"

Ephemia's heart was one wild, fluttering rapture, but, in the way of her sex, she had in some mysterious fashion donned a glittering armor. She tossed her head and laughed merrily. "Gracious, how fierce we are! No, I shall not take it back, which implies that you may restrain your generous impulse." And then, not a little frightened at the flash which, lightning-like,

deepened his dark brown eyes to a black intensity, she added: “But for goodness sakes let’s be done with nonsense. It’s dreadful of us to drag along this way knowing that poor sick woman to be alone and anxiously waiting.”

“Bless Mrs. Jergen!” he exclaimed, “I’ll dedicate my life to the service of widows in distress—providing, of course, that you will not object.”

She laughed at him happily and, like two care-free children, they broke into a run and raced for the cottage. Mrs. Peterson, visiting a neighbor down at the end of the village, did not fail to see the two young creatures flashing by and disappearing round the bend into the Government highway, and made a point of telling Mr. Hanson—who, as a school trustee, ought to be notified of such “carryings on”—that the teacher had been “a-tearing down the road with a young fellow chasing along of her something scandalous—it ain’t right and that’s my opinion if you ask me—her what’s to teach the children nice conduct! I ask you, Mr. Hanson, don’t she put a gold star on a good child? and what’s to put on the likes of her?”

But the two culprits cared nothing for opinion just then, nor of what might be said of them later. When the little blue house was only a few yards away Allison made a sudden dash for the gate, entered and shut it tight. Ephemia, panting and rosy, short bronze-brown tendrils flying about her face, came up to find herself locked out.

“Listen, young lady,” the incorrigible Allison began in shameless enjoyment, “you’ll not pass in on this errand of mercy without proving the natural goodness of your heart. If you pay toll you enter—otherwise you don’t.”

“I certainly won’t! I’ll climb the fence,” and climb the fence she did, but found she had made a most unhappy choice, for he caught her as she jumped. “Oh, Allison,” she cried, “behave, for goodness sake! I’m so ashamed.”

“But I am behaving with admirable judgment,” he retorted; but something of honest childlike distress in her eyes made him let her go. “Oh, well,” said he, “I’ll be generous, but so must you sometimes.”

He soared in Ephemia’s estimation at that like a golden bubble on a summer breeze—an enheartening knowledge, had he but known it. But instead he felt a bit dashed and vaguely cheated. Somewhat later, when Ephemia handed him the milk-pails, she could have laughed at his unaccustomed gloom. “There you are, Lochinvar,” she smiled; “to the wars with you.”

His glance was full of reproach as he took the pails and then marched off in silence. She slipped to the door. “Allison,” she called softly, scarcely knowing what she meant to say. He faced about sharply; then, courage failing her, she stammered foolishly: “Oh,—I—that is, the cows sound kind of thirsty.”

“Drat the cows!” he snapped and stalked on crossly.

Ephemia, mindful of her duty, hurried in to the widow, sweeping down upon her in a flood of commiseration and tenderness. Anna Jergen was less feverish, but looked peaked and worn. “I’m sorry for to trouble you all,” she whispered; “I ought to be all right to-morrow.” Then, turning her face to the wall, she sighed in resigned helplessness, as though this were the limit of endurance and the end of all things so far as she was concerned.

Ephemia stooped and patted the woman’s shoulder where it shone soft and white through the crochet lace of her bedgown. Indeed, Ephemia felt the urge to love someone just then, to shower her swelling tenderness on some receptive individual, and Anna Jergen seemed a happy object to concentrate upon; certainly she stood in need of sympathetic tenderness.

“Of course you’ll be well directly this little weakness passes. Now, I’m to make you a nice piece of milk toast: Mrs. Swanson didn’t want to waken you before she left, you were sleeping so well, she said.”

“Ja,” said the sick woman, “I sleep—and dream. Herre Gud!”

Fortunately Ephemia found that Mrs. Swanson’s banked fire responded nobly to coaxing and soon crackled and leaped in a gay roaring noise up the long pipe to the chimney. So unwonted a fortune was in itself joyous, making her feel competent and self-sufficient, and set her singing over her simple preparations.

Allison undeniably was of the fibre found in conquerors; he returned to the house cheerfully confident and doubly tormenting.

They were deep in a war of wits when the sound of hoofs thundering down the road brought them to attention. Allison hurried to the door. “Great Scott!” he exclaimed, “It’s Pierre. Now there’ll be a buzzing!”

Ephemia stiffened, becoming curiously defensive and alert, yet with no more conscious effort than when a wild deer drops from nimble flight to melt into the vigilant landscape at the first sound or sign of the unfamiliar and possibly dangerous.

“He ought not to come,” she said in an intense whisper, “you must stop him. It will harden the villagers against her anew to find him here—and her illness might have won their sympathy.”

But there was no stopping Pierre. Not that he was at all formidable; even Ephemia had to acknowledge the easy grace of him—a sinuous, savage sort of grace perhaps, but no less captivating for that. A tall, very dark young man was this Pierre, with a singularly open countenance and really good white teeth that flashed into view when he smiled. He smiled now as he leaped from his sweating mount, but despite his amiable and friendly expression, Ephemia’s first impression was one of primitive force. This long, lean-flanked young man, who as a matter of course began at once to undo the saddle girth, talking meanwhile to the dripping horse as to a human comrade, had that about his smoothly flowing muscles that reminded one of the cougar’s lazy grace; and she knew that in her simple way Mrs. Swanson had described him aright—“a kind of slow-seeming fellow, but terrible swift when roused.” Ephemia was not anxious to be an agent in rousing this latent power, yet she attempted a righteously indignant demeanor. Pierre ignored or failed to see her unfriendly attitude. Having turned his horse into Anna’s pasture, he came toward the house smiling his indolent smile—and this smile seemed to spread and deepen before the chilling rebuke in Ephemia’s eyes.

“The little lady, she much sick, eh? Me—I’m a good friend, I come to see her.”

Ephemia felt the walls of convention tremble and herself rudely shaken. Now, if ever, she ought to be firmly defensive, taking a stand for irreproachable conduct, but for the life of her all she could manage was a guilty permission for him to enter. She tried, however, to shut out the sound of joy which broke from the sick woman at sight of Pierre and fell so indecently upon her shocked young ears.

Allison merely shrugged. “We might as well efface ourselves; how about the woodpile?”

“No,” said Ephemia shortly, “I remain right here, but you can go out and saw wood or something, or perhaps we had better all have breakfast together. If anyone should chance to come. . . .”

“That’s not a bad idea,” he agreed, and, striving to be natural and unconcerned, they began toasting bread. But it was impossible not to overhear the murmured endearments, reproaches and what not which came drifting from that inner chamber. Ephemia’s nervous embarrassment

changed to amusement as the sweet deluge swept on. “It’s like a comical play,” she whispered, “it’s too crazy for words, and it’s absolutely killing that we should be here like a two-headed ‘fenris wolf’ defending a questionable estate.”

“It certainly is, and I propose to give immediate warning that our intention is to be kind but firm.”

“Apparently nothing can make you serious,” she chided him, as she poured the hot cream over a platter of golden toast. “Let me warn you this is no joke. You may shrug at village gossip and gossipers, but to live amid it continually, as Mrs. Jergen must, is far from pleasant.”

“And let me inform you, sweet damsel, that all you have to do to make me as solemn as a monk is to frown at me like that. But I’m a self-abasing mortal, and moreover am yours to command. I’ll beard the lion in his den at once if you say so.”

“I don’t care what you do so long as you put a stop to that ridiculous affair. Bring them back to earth long enough to dispose of this toast at any rate.”

Allison knocked unceremoniously at the half-closed door and sang out that refreshments were on the way, and with another of his expressive shrugs he swung in the door as Ephemia approached with the tray.

It is peculiar how sight and sound have each their own reactionary power. Having overheard so much, Ephemia scarcely expected a further shock; yet for all of that something like the sharp revolt of nerves against a physical blow passed through her on beholding the widow’s golden head blissfully cradled against Pierre’s broad chest. All the conventionalism dear to a long line of reserved men and women rushed in a tidal wave over her. The nervous smile on her lips froze and her little brown head lifted unconsciously in that haughty gesture so common to her mother. Just then it was not so much concern for the affairs of those two that oppressed her as rage that the calm and well-ordered channels of her emotions should be so roughly disturbed; it was altogether too much like having one’s dreams subjected to the cold eye of a scientist; and not the least effrontery was the obvious truth that so far as the foolish lovers were concerned she and her shamed conventions did not exist. They smiled with one accord upon her displeasure and saw in it only charity.

“You are so good,” murmured Anna. “She is so good, Pierre.”

But if Ephemia was conscious of virtue it gave her neither pleasure nor grace.

"You seem vastly improved, Mrs. Jergen, perhaps I had better leave," she said mechanically, in an unfamiliarly hard and biting tone. All the pity she had entertained was for the time dead. Peculiarly enough, while Mrs. Jergen lay limp and tearful, moaning her lover's name, sympathy had appeared in place and altogether decent; but the sight of her, radiantly glad, encircled in his arms, induced no such opinion. Yet Ephemia's indignation was not so much the result of any process of reasoning as it was of simple reaction to a given situation according to her breed. For the first time in her life she was face to face with a reality whose presence had been offensive to the men and women of her tribe in ages gone, and she was at once aching to fling the retributive stone.

"No, no!" cried Anna in real dismay, "don't go. Pierre, this is the little teacher. I guess it's died I would have except for her." Ephemia was furious at his proprietary gratitude and lazy smile, and as she set the tray down on a stand beside the bed was aware of a most unchristian regret for the supposed Samaritan act. But she paid no further attention to them beyond the bringing in of a pot of jam and a pitcher of fresh milk, and with a contemptuous air shut the door behind her.

Allison diplomatically had vanished; he had been somewhat awed by this icy young woman who administered to the sinners with her nose high in air and her lips curled scornfully. Like the most of men, he accepted life as he found it. Since he had been informed of this hopeless attachment its confirmation did not particularly disturb him. If one loved one loved—and all the world proved its devotion in much the same way—so Allison reflected. However, instinct warned him to keep such facile notions to himself at present.

Ephemia went out and sat on the back stoop, and after a little Allison left the fence and his vague contemplation of the countryside and came and sat beside her.

"It's going to be hot," he said, "and may come on to rain."

"It can be as hot as it likes for all of me," was the genial reply. "As for rain, I ought to be hardened to it."

"I believe the raspberries are going to be fine this year," he tried again hopefully.

“Do you really?” she said with dangerous sweetness; “how marvelously observant you are.”

“Oh, hang it, Ephemia, why take it out on me?”

“How absurd you are! Why should I be cross at you or at anything for that matter?”

“That’s it,” he replied innocently, “why should you? This sentimental escapade is certainly none of our doing, nor need it concern us particularly.”

“Oh, isn’t it? It’s none of our affair to preserve decency and honor? It doesn’t concern us if we seem to condone such deplorable conduct? Well, don’t include me, please; I happen to think very differently,” she flared to his amazement.

“Great Scott! you deliberately misunderstand me. I’m all for what’s fair and square and all that sort of thing, but what can we do about it? After all we knew of this entanglement why should the reality be so much more alarming than the conviction?”

“Allison Brett! are you intimating that I ever countenanced a thing like this? If you’ll do me the justice to reflect you’ll recall that I wasn’t the one to start this anyway.”

Allison lost his temper, too. “And if you believe it a matter of pride to permit a sick woman to starve to death because your puritan conscience can’t condone her behavior, I’ll beg to differ with you. I am quite ready to admit that I don’t give a tinker’s damn for any such virtue.”

Ephemia sat up very straight, a red danger signal burning in each smooth, white cheek. “We seem to be wasting words,” she retorted with scorching dignity.

Here Pierre, like a big god of the wilds, burst out upon them. He drew a deep rapturous breath. “By gar, she’s hot!” he grinned, and sniffed the air again appreciatively, drinking in the cloying sweetness of moist earth and pungent pine which the hot sun was confiscating so greedily. “Me, I go to the store and the blacksmith,” he explained to their troubled faces; “but I come back all right when the sun she’s down.” And unconscious of, or impervious to, his frozen reception he whistled for his horse, saddled the willing brute and rode off. Ephemia glanced at her companion and found him very sober and black. Humor was beginning to lift it’s sane head and in consequence she felt immensely better. Indeed, she was inclined to laughter and saw herself as ridiculous and his temper as no less comical. Yet she liked him the better and rejoiced at this demonstration of mixed virtues—

impatience with her prejudice and such wide tolerance toward the foolish lovers.

"I suppose there is some kind of garden stuff out in the back we might get ready for dinner," she began by way of opening peaceful relations.

"I'm sure I don't know," he growled, turning his gaze skyward speculatively.

"You might look, however."

Without a word he got up and strode off. Half an hour later he entered the kitchen, where by now Ephemia was serenely stirring junket, and handed her a few green onions, a bunch of young beets and a head of lettuce.

She thanked him ingratiatingly, but he remained as unaffected as the proverbial "marble Jove".

During his short absence she had found opportunity to reflect upon his impending departure, and with a sinking of the heart had realized the rashness of destroying what might yet remain to them of happiness.

"I do wish you would wash the lettuce," she entreated, smiling so that her gold-flecked eyes beamed like twin stars upon him, "and while you're doing that I'll put on the beets; we might as well have something to eat, since we can't very well leave until Mrs. Swanson comes back."

He began to pick over the tender leaves with scrupulous care and in stoic resignation. Ephemia bubbled over.

"Oh, Allison, you are entirely too funny! Now, you know quarrels are only interesting in fiction and are left with ends hanging until the last chapter." He flushed, but in no other way gave sign of having heard her. A horrid fear, like a black cloud creeping up a summer sky, set Ephemia's heart a-flutter, and, without conscious volition, she bridged the space between them as a bird flings itself across a yawning gully.

"Oh, Allison," she whispered, tantalizingly close, "I'm so sorry I was cross!"

Then somehow they forgot the lettuce and the beets and even the entire point of difference.

"You may be as cross as you like," he told her finally, "if you'll always make payment like this."

"Oh, Allison, what an exacting Shylock you are! But goodness! I've a notion the fire must be out."

“The fire and everything else can jolly well stay out as long as it likes for all of me,” said Allison exultantly, and for once Ephemia found it unnecessary to object.

CHAPTER XIII.

Ephemia had grown concerned about the beets and the dinner in general. “Good gracious, Allison, I think we must be more than usually foolish.”

“Divine foolishness! Who wants to be wise? But as I have said before, my entire life shall be dedicated to the service of unfortunate widows—so heaven forbid that I should interfere with the ambrosial meal.”

“Just finish the lettuce, and please don’t make me feel even more ridiculous; honestly, I shiver at the thought of facing Mrs. Jergen.”

She really was extremely self-conscious when a little later she tiptoed to the bedroom door. Mrs. Jergen was sleeping soundly, and never had sleep seemed so peerless a thing before. Ephemia closed the door again with nervous caution and faced her companion in radiant relief.

“She is sleeping as soundly as an infant.”

Allison grinned appreciatively. “Clear case of spotless conscience—the unruffled sleep of innocence.”

Ephemia was sufficiently herself again to frown upon his levity.

“I do wish you were less callous about this, Allison; really I do.”

“Let’s eat,” he suggested, “I’m as hungry as a wolf. What do you call this milky stuff?”

“Junket. But don’t think you can change the topic, Smarty; either you promise an improvement in behavior or off you pack directly.”

“I’ll promise anything. However, I feel honor bound to warn you that my memory is badly trained; I’ve never taken any of these new courses in concentration.”

They found that junket and coffee made a most satisfying feast and left the beets to fate and the future. When there was no longer any apparent reason for their lingering, they slipped out into the yard and chose a seat under the back window.

It had become as hot as Allison had prophesied. The air quivered with the sun’s fervor and the eyes grew weary from so much gold glinting everywhere. Ephemia had brought along a scarf she was hemstitching for her mother, but found the trifling task impossible.

“I’d sure like a dip in the river,” Allison groaned, shaking back his heavy black hair, “and I think I’ll have this darned mop of mine cropped.”

“Oh, Allison!” Ephemia cried out in alarm, “if you do, I shan’t forgive you! Why, it’s your principal beauty,” she pursued mischievously.

“Beauty be hanged on a day like this! But say, isn’t that old Swanson plugging along?”

“Don’t be disrespectful to the poor old soul! My, she does look washed out!”

Mrs. Swanson came on slowly but doggedly. Her cotton blouse clung to her flat bosom in damp folds, her old straw hat was tipped over one ear as if it no longer cared to be respectable. Approaching the fence, she caught sight of the young folks and raised her hands to heaven in token of surprise.

“Herre Gud!” she panted hoarsely, “and are you sitting out in the sun? You’ll be struck, that’s what! Jt! Jt! It ain’t been so hot since Thomas the tinker hung himself—and there’s them as said he went from bad to worse, poor fellow!”

They hurried to open the gate for her, solicitude and merriment commingled on their faces.

“You ought not to have come until after sundown,” said Ephemia; “everything is fine and our patient is sleeping soundly.”

Mrs. Swanson sank down upon the doorstep and began fanning her red mottled face judiciously. “I’ll just set a bit to get my breath like. Um-m, I was thinking to do just that—heat’s terrible upsetting of me—don’t know as it ain’t worse than a blizzard—but didn’t Mrs. Peterson come running for some cream against the minister’s visit to-morrow—as if I’d believe the like o’ that—and she up and said how Pierre had come riding fit to kill his horse, and so far as she could tell ain’t never left yet.”

Allison whistled. “God bless the simple, rustic soul!” said he.

“I ain’t never heard tell of rust on any soul nor tongue neither,” she resumed, “but if he’s here he’d better be gone, and that’s what I’ll tell him myself. Land sakes! I ain’t never seen the like of it—her a widow with a living husband!”

“He was here, but has gone again,” Ephemia explained, somehow finding the fact common enough, like an old-established truth which no longer stirs the pulse.

“He mentioned something about a possible return,” interposed Allison, his dark eyes twinkling irrepressibly.

Mrs. Swanson snorted and got up stiffly. “I’ll just have it out with Anna Jergen, that’s what I will! And you two might as well run along, it ain’t no sense wasting all the day along of me.”

They smilingly agreed to the soundness of her logic, but had no intention of returning to the village. “Let’s go to the river,” Allison coaxed, “it won’t be so devilish hot down there.”

“Oh, yes, let’s!” Ephemia echoed joyously, not giving a thought to the possibility of snakes.

They never knew how the hours sped nor just what it was charmed them each with the other. Words with no intrinsic value became golden and winged their way to the stars, and they, as it were, watched the flight in breathless eagerness, feeling their hearts soar with them. The river crooned along in its olden bed, but its voice had a new meaning, and the birds, weaving their songs in and out the fragrant silence, wove the love of these two along with it—wove it for all time into the fabric of earth and air and sky; and into those laughing eyes of Allison’s something else—radiant no less, and extremely compelling, ineffably tender—had crept, before which the soul of Ephemia trembled in glad thankfulness.

So the afternoon fled on hot gold-dusted wings, and a gentle wind had sprung up in the wake of the burning sunset ere it occurred to the two young dreamers that it was high time they returned to the village.

“We must stop at the cottage to see how Mrs. Swanson has been getting on; and besides, I’m curious about Pierre,” said Ephemia. She could have added truthfully that her heart ached for him now: love had taught her so much in one sun-bathed afternoon.

But Mrs. Swanson had evidently not gotten on very well; she was out on the stoop knitting furiously when they arrived, and Pierre’s horse was contentedly cropping the grass in the pasture. She was so obviously a banished belligerent nursing her indignation in stoic wrath that both Allison and Ephemia burst into laughter at sight of her.

“Oh, hello!” Allison shouted, “you look lost and lonely; how’s everything?”

“Land sakes! I’ve a notion to speak my mind, that’s what!” she exploded. “Wherever have you been? My Emma and Lena’s been traipsing their legs off to find you.”

“Oh, just anywhere explains us,” Allison told her jubilantly.

“Well, you better get to town right soon, that’s what. There’s a man there as wants you, Mr. Brett; he’s setting at the post-office until it’s cooler. He’s on his way to the camp. I can’t make out from Emma if it’s the boss or not, but you ain’t better waste more time.”

“It must be Mr. Tomlinson,” Allison explained to Ephemia, “and, as she says, I had better run along. He’s a good fellow, but short on patience. Has he been in long, Mrs. Swanson?”

“He has that—since a little past noon Emma tells me—and he’s that mad!”

“I hope it’s nothing serious,” Ephemia began, but he was already swinging down the trail. “I’ll see you later,” he called back gaily.

“Nice young fellow,” murmured the admiring Mrs. Swanson. “I hope he’s in time. My Emma said as how it’s very important.”

Ephemia sank down beside the old woman, conscious of a sudden weariness. The evening had gone dull as speedily as if the lamp of happiness were utterly shattered, and she resented Mrs. Swanson’s pertinent remarks.

Her mood communicated itself to the good woman, and in sudden anxiety she appraised the girl. “Land sakes! you look tuckered out! You hadn’t ought to gad about on a day like this; you might be took with a stroke. Jt! Jt! and you ain’t ate anything, have you?”

“I’m not in the least hungry,” the girl responded quickly; “how’s the patient?”

“Jt! Jt! such carrying on! She’s better, mind you. It ain’t nothing but a bad cold, that’s plain; but it’s crazy she is about this fellow.”

“She ought to go away.” Ephemia felt extremely irritable and impatient. “She’s making trouble for everyone and acting like a fool!”

“Some’s born that way. I mind how Anna ran away with Ole, and him fifteen years older, if a day. She was tired of minding house for her papa, she said, and the kids were a handful. Of course no good come of it, for she hadn’t been married no time before this Pierre comes to work in the camp and they falls in love.”

“No married woman has a right to fall in love,” said Ephemia sweepingly.

Her friend gave a ponderous sigh. “I’ve always held to that myself; seems as how a married woman, if any, ought to know better. Jt! Jt! But now, seeing them two a looking and a laughing at each other like as how there was never anything so wonderful before, I sort of got a new idea. Seems as if something whispered to me, plain as plain, marriage ain’t always just living with a man, Martha Swanson. My land! I was plum scared, and me a good Lutheran!”

“What are they going to do?” Ephemia demanded shortly.

“That’s what I was trying to get out of Anna all afternoon. ‘Why don’t you go to Alueez, Anna,’ I says; ‘you’re a good cook and can get an easy job in a private house?’ But seems as how she’s setting here so as all can prove she’s deserted. ‘If I can prove Ole’s left me three years I can get separation,’ she says. ‘But ain’t you separated already?’ says I, cross like. ‘Oh, no’, says she, ‘he could come back.’ ‘Land sakes, but Pierre can’t marry you anyhow,’ says I, and then she just up and cries and cries. ‘Ole’s got to die sometime; he drinks a lot—Pierre heard from a friend north of Flanagan how he’s carrying on!’ says she. Jt! Jt! I ain’t ever heard tell of the likes of it; it sort of makes me sad like as well as cross.”

Ephemia lost all interest, somehow, in Anna Jergen’s affairs. Bereft of mystery the whole thing appeared petty and undeserving of sympathy. In other words, her young heart, untouched by real pain, rebelled against further lending its pity to the disagreeable, even as a sound body quite unconsciously revolts against contact with the diseased. “I think I’ll go home unless there is something I can do for you, Mrs. Swanson.”

“You might tell Emma to put Lena’s hair in rags and to count the young turkeys before she locks them up.”

Fortunately the conscientious little girls had attended to all their customary duties before Ephemia arrived, for, once there, she learned that Mr. Tomlinson had commanded Allison’s company, and after that she could think of nothing else. He had gone and he had said that he would not pass this way again!

The thought of the long weeks lying ahead became unbearably hateful, and the curious, gossipy folk loomed up in this loneliness like heartless grinning ghouls, creatures who would make a toothsome morsel of her sudden loneliness did she betray it. Ephemia was seized with overwhelming homesickness and childish longing to hear her mother’s hearty laughter and reassuring counsels. How straight she hewed to the line, this mother of hers, and how readily she would whisk her back into cheerful confidence. And her

father, sitting somewhere in the soft summer night watching the mist rising from the river, or perhaps following the flying course of a tumbling star—how good it would be to hear him expound the wisdom of his favorite saga!

Once safely cuddled in her narrow bed Ephemia closed her eyes and tried to visualize the garden with its hollyhocks circled round the house. "Dear father," she thought, "how he loves to dream!" Thereat an uncomfortable notion made itself felt. Poor Mrs. Jergen, so foolish and so weak, she too was toying with a dream—that dearest of womanly dreams—the dream of being greatly loved and greatly loving. "But she is so ridiculous," Ephemia's scruples argued, "and father's dreams are always so beautiful."

Then like a flash of blinding light came the memory of Allison's quick disparagement of certain virtues, so called, and she smiled into the darkness. He was so gay, so clean and honest, yet so charmingly perverse. How he teased her! To think he had once been splashing about in her beloved brook while she, as likely as not, at the same moment was watching the babbling brown waters dancing by her rocky retreat. The thought made him feel close and dear, like something which had always been hers, and how simple-hearted he was despite his soaring ambitions; not at all remote and unapproachable. Oh, what if he had not loved her! So on and on she thought, now rapturous, now filled with apprehensions. Something might happen to him—she didn't even know where he was gone! "Dear God," she prayed sleepily, "keep him safe and keep him good—and don't let him forget me."

CHAPTER XIV.

Something over a fortnight after Allison's departure Ephemia received news which wiped all thought of self from her mind and demanded immediate action. Her mother was critically ill, and her father confessed that unless Ephemia could find a substitute and come home they scarcely knew what to do.

Such was her relief on finding the trustees approachable that she never gave a thought to Mr. Peterson's palpable eagerness—if he wanted to be rid of her she as sincerely wanted to be gone, and there the matter rested so far as she was concerned.

The Swansons, at least, were genuinely concerned, and kissed and cried over her when, some days later, she once again hopped into the mail man's gig.

"You'll be letting us know at once how she is," Mrs. Swanson managed, in spite of her tearful sniffs; "and if you'll just keep that hen under the seat in the dark and watch as the paper don't come off it'll be nice and fresh for your ma."

"I'll write, dear Mrs. Swanson," Ephemia promised, "and I won't forget the ribbons for Lena, nor the crochet thread for Emma. Goodbye, girls, be nice to the new teacher, and don't forget me."

Two little red hands fluttered in farewell, and two faint little voices cried weepily that they would be good, and suddenly Ephemia, too, was sobbing into her handkerchief as the old horse jogged away. "Good Mrs. Swanson," she reflected fondly, and dear little girls slipping about like gentle administering shadows. She wondered if they were destined for an eternity of subjective service—whether they belonged irrevocably to a sort of subjunctive mode of life.

The Hansons and the Petersons were all assembled before the post-office to see the young school-mistress off, Mrs. Hanson had baked a shoe-box full of her famous carraway-seed cookies, and this she now handed up to Ephemia with a broken-toothed smile and a hope that "her ma was better."

Mr. Peterson, resting on his cane to ease his "bad leg", warned her against riding behind such a fiery horse, laughed heartily at his own wit, and spat over the hitching-post with the dexterity born of long practice.

Once more Ephemia was off amid a chorus of farewells, and soon the little blue cottage loomed in sight. Would Mrs. Jergen see them, she wondered, and would she have anything to say?

Anna Jergen had evidently been awaiting this moment, and at the first sound of rolling wheels came running out, a pale wisp of a woman, as appealing in her frailty and the golden halo of her sunny hair as some wayside image, and stood there in the hot, dusty road, her arms filled with flowers. These flowers, redolent of field and wood, of the very places enshrined for all time in Ephemia's heart, she offered up in timid friendliness.

"How kind of you, Mrs. Jergen! You've gone such a long way to get them, the beauties!"

The woman was as pleased as a child. "Ja, they are nice; I love so much flowers from the big woods. Goodbye, Miss Freeman, God give your ma's much better." That was all. The mail man cracked his whip fiercely to show all the world, and Jim in particular, his undisputed mastership, and in a few moments more Neely might not have existed at all, so isolated and separate from human life they seemed. Just the open road again and the steady jog, jog, jog of the old horse's feet.

The journey was exasperating enough, however, the much-lauded solitudes granting little peace or grace. The weather was intolerably hot, so hot that when a gust of air stirred it only increased the general discomfort, like a touch upon a raw burn; and to make matters worse, as the day ebbed the mosquitoes' torment grew so bad that Ephemia wondered agonizingly why mankind did not wage deadly combat against such a relentless and common enemy rather than engage in quarrels among themselves.

But at last Lanagan was reached, and a little later Ephemia boarded the train for Esk. Never had the marvel of rail and steam been so clear to her before, or had the debt of one generation to another made itself so felt. Before Ephemia had recovered from this sense of gratitude, and while still comparing the comforts of this whirling, softly upholstered, electrically cooled coach to the wooden-backed gig and the thousand torments of the wide out-of-doors, she heard the brakeman call her destination. Compared with Neely, Esk seemed an enchanting city, and she revelled in its little twinkling lights and its modest hubbub. She had not advised her father as to the exact date of her possible arrival, thinking that some unforeseen event might crop up to detain her, an occurrence which she knew would cause him very real worry.

On first acquaintance Ephemia had taken pleasure in the winding road leading to the old house by the river. Now she thought it doubly charming, with its trees so heavy in leaf and the grateful shade like purple haze about it. As she drew near the house she scanned the road eagerly—Harold might be somewhere about. But no one was in sight. She opened the gate softly and threaded her way through her father's flowers. Yes, there were the hollyhocks, with their lovely satiny rosettes, nodding against the grey wall, and the night-scented stocks were already flinging out their fragrance, making the little garden a shrine of sweet odors.

Before the door Ephemia hesitated a moment. Someone was reading within, the sound drifting out to her like the contented droning of bees. Down in her heart she gave thanks to the God of her little world; things were not in too bad a state since her father read on in this serene fashion.

She opened the door ever so cautiously, having in mind to surprise her parents. Once in she was aware of change; everything was at sixes and sevens; clothes were strewn about the chairs, dust lay undisturbed upon furniture and floors, and a glance into the dining-room revealed a badly littered table. "Good gracious," she gasped, "it's about time I got here!"

But her father's calm voice trailed on. This struck her humorously and she tiptoed up the stairs. In the front chamber her mother lay propped up in bed, her face white and haggard; yet Ephemia could have sworn that laughter lurked in the hazel eyes watching the patient reader.

Stephen's voice droned on: "Reflect upon those who have made the most glorious figure or have met with the greatest misfortunes. Where are they all now? They are vanished like a little smoke. The prize is insignificant, and the play not worth the candle. It is much more becoming to a philosopher to stand clear of affectation, to be honest and moderate upon all occasions, and to follow cheerfully wherever the gods may lead."

"Marcus Aurelius," smiled Ephemia, "and the house in such a state!" Then she swooped upon her adorable parents.

"Phemy, Phemy!" her mother cried in delight, "how lovely to see you!" But she winced at the girl's embrace, welcome though it was. "Darling, be a little careful, that's my sore arm."

"Ephemia, my love," said her father, "how you have matured! Don't you find her different, Mother? I keep thinking of my little girl—you were such a charming, woolly-headed little thing, my love—and now, 'pon my soul! But turn around and let me look at you!"

She spun round and faced him smilingly. “Am I fatter, do you think? I’ve been fed such quantities of cream. Oh, please say I’m not.”

“My love, how absurd, of course not; I rejoice to see you so rounded out and charming. Angles are well enough in architecture, but not in woman.”

“You comforting flatterer,” she laughed, “what must you have been in your dazzling youth! But where’s Harold?”

“Harold is down the road apiece with a little friend, building a rabbit hatch. You’ll be surprised how he’s coming on.”

“I’m really distressed that you should come home to such a jumbled place,” her mother began, coming down to practicalities.

“Why, I’ll just slip into my old gingham and whisk things into place before you know what’s happened. I’m simply spoiling for some real work to do,” said Ephemia emphatically.

Stephen had already settled his spectacles into place and had taken up his book. “I was reading in the twelfth book of Marcus Aurelius for your dear mother. To my mind there is no one to compare with him in comfort. I believe I could be at peace in the midst of universal chaos if only I had this old volume for company.”

“Yes, Father, I believe you.” Ephemia met her mother’s smiling eyes and deliberately winked at her. Then simultaneously both sniffed the air. “Isn’t something burning, Stephen?” his wife asked anxiously.

“Burning? No, I think not, my love. Do you recall how pertinently Marcus gets at the heart of things in book four?” Stephen had evidently come across something fascinating. “ ‘Be always doing something serviceable to mankind; and let this constant generosity be your only pleasure, not forgetting due regard to God.’ Beautiful, beautiful!” he exclaimed triumphantly, “to my mind. . . .”

“Stephen, something is burning! Don’t you smell it?” He obediently sniffed the air. “It does seem so, my dear.”

“Are you cooking anything?” Vilborg demanded.

“Cooking? Why, to be sure; I’ve got the potatoes on.”

His wife shook her head helplessly, but Ephemia shouted with laughter. “Oh, Father, you poor baby, that’s what is burning,” and she gave him a little shake as she fled past him to the stairs.

“But Phemy!” he called, “Phemy!”

“Yes?”

“If they’re burnt they’re burnt. I’d like you to hear the rest of this passage; I may not have occasion to read it later.”

“Think of the pot, Stephen. It’s not as enduring as your Marcus,” urged his amused wife.

“The pot? Why the pot??”

“Oh, Stephen! Well, never mind: on with Aurelius. What was that about serving mankind?”

“Magnificent, my dear, simply magnificent! We need no other creed. ‘Let that be your constant and only pleasure,’ he says. But to go on: ‘The world is either an aggregation of atoms, or it is a unity ruled by law and providence . . . .’ ”

Stephen, all oblivious to his wife’s amused chuckle, read on gravely until Ephemia recalled him to things mundane by saying that she had coffee waiting and that it was time he was getting to his work.

CHAPTER XV.

Inflammatory rheumatism is a tenacious misery, and Mrs. Freeman's recovery from the disease was hardly worth mentioning. True, she was somewhat less tormented, but the least sudden movement still occasioned excruciating pain, and Ephemia realized that the burden of the house must be hers for some time to come.

But, now that she was there, her father was cheerfulness itself and refused to remember past despair. Her brother was an independent little mortal who managed to look after himself fairly well. If she objected to the wrinkling of his socks or the high-water mark behind his ears he curled up his impudent little nose and reminded her that they were his socks and his ears.

Soon enough Ephemia had sufficient real worry to eclipse entirely the small disturbance Harold might create. Her mother's illness had been an expensive misery, and as the doctor still put in an occasional appearance, his bill was mounting steadily. Then Mr. Freeman confessed that he had had a few things charged at the grocer's while he was attempting the unfamiliar duties of cook and housekeeper. The amount, in itself modest enough, struck his womenfolk as terrific, and the first day the invalid was able to creep down stairs she insisted upon being given the entire details.

So they thrashed the thing out, and after a good many pros and cons Mrs. Freeman determined that now indeed must old "Queen" come to their rescue. "I simply can't face the winter with a load like that. In the sale of 'Queen' lies our only hope of wiping the slate clean," she stated with something of her old firmness. So one fine day the "Blue Ribboner" ambled up the dusty road ahead of her new owner, and Mrs. Freeman, watching from her open casement, chided herself for the tears that slid rebelliously down her white cheeks.

For the greater part everyone in that ancient house was cheerful, or affected cheerfulness, and indeed, where so much was to be done to safeguard their common welfare, personal worries were dwarfed. Ephemia was so tired by night that the luxury of regretting the now inaccessible fall term at the Normal was magically eclipsed by dreamless sleep, and she finally acknowledged to herself that what she really desired above all else was the sight of Allison rather than the stately halls of the brown stone school.

There was a good deal of fighting blood in Ephemia, and after several weeks of battling with the unruly household budget, which somehow never would balance, she flung down the gauntlet to fate, as it were, one morning over the washtub. She would not be beaten; she would find a solution. This she repeated fiercely, and in consequence almost wore a hole in the towel she was rubbing. Sure enough, the simplest of solutions flashed upon her, and so amazing did it seem that she dashed upstairs in breathless haste and with sparkling eyes announced to her mother that all their difficulties were as good as ended.

"My dear," sighed her mother, "how I hate to see you washing. If only we could spare you that."

"Now, you humbug, it's the clothes you are worried about, I'll bet, and, to tell the truth, they do look as though they had passed through a siege of jaundice. I simply don't possess an ounce of washwoman genius, but you must admit that my idea of renting the upstairs bespeaks talent along another line."

Mrs. Freeman had passed through many vicissitudes, yet she shrank from the thought of living so intimately with strangers. "I admire your pluck, my child," she said, "but it does seem as though one ought to be entitled to a little privacy in life, if no more—and, besides, your dear father must have his own room."

"Pooh!" cried Ephemia, "I've got that all settled. Father can have that cubby-hole—designed goodness knows for what—opening off the dining-room. You and Harold can take the guest-room downstairs, while I promise to sleep soundly on the couch in the parlor."

Mrs. Freeman could not bring herself to approve of the plan, but her husband considered the idea excellent in every way and felt quite certain he could get suitable tenants at once.

"Very well, then," she agreed half-heartedly, "but I do hope you will find some elderly couple, someone not always dashing about; even so, I'm afraid you'll find your sleep badly broken."

"My love, what if I do lose a little sleep? I will the more enjoy my quiet hours on watch, and as it is I've come to love the silence and mystery of the night; and it seems so much easier to think clearly when the whole world lies wrapt in slumber."

A few days later Stephen announced triumphantly that he had rented the rooms to a young couple with a baby.

“Young couple with a baby!” Vilborg repeated in dismay; “have you considered what that means?”

“I’ve no doubt it’s a good child; the father is an extremely nice young man, modest and friendly, brought up on a farm, and has put himself through business college or something, I forget just what. He is timekeeper and sort of general office man at the mills—a nice boy, Mother, you’ll be sure to like him.”

“If the rooms are rented that settles the matter,” she said with a shrug.

Stephen was running through his pockets. “Look, my dear,” he said, “here you have fifteen dollars all to use as you think best, preferably for yourself. I guess the old man isn’t such a bungler at business after all!”

“Three cheers for father!” cried Ephemia, resolved to make the best of it, “and let’s hope the baby is done teething. But did you, by any chance, remember to call at the post-office?”

“I did, and here’s a letter from Aunt Caroline.”

Ephemia’s face fell; each day she had asked the same question, “Might be a letter from the Northern woods.” But there never was one.

“Would you believe it?” her father resumed, opening the letter and scanning its pages, “Caroline says she is going to Canada to visit her late husband’s folks, and she is seriously thinking of going on to the Rockies, and possibly all the way to the Coast. My dear, I’m not ill-conditioned, I hope, but I do envy her. Just think of sitting by the sea once again, seeing the great ships arrive from all parts of the world. Vilborg, I regret never having seriously considered the Coast. You might have escaped this trying rheumatism had you been there in the mellow climate with so much beauty all about you . . . .”

“When is she leaving?” Vilborg interposed, determined to check his galloping imagination.

“Leaving? Oh, she’s leaving—let me see, what did she say?” He consulted the letter. “Why, my dear, she says, I'm scribbling this just before starting. Fancy that! She is most likely drinking in the glories of the Canadian West at this very moment.”

“Father,” his irrepressible daughter announced, “if you’ll just help mother to the table you may proceed to drink in the glories of this coffee I’ve made.”

CHAPTER XVI.

Mrs. Freeman was not altogether satisfied with her tenants, though she did approve Walter Nichols, finding him a serious, silent young man; but he seemed altogether cowed by his very common little wife, a sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued, restless young person, forever patting her back hair or tugging at a flounce on the baby's ridiculous dress.

No sooner had the young couple concluded their respects and gone to their new apartment than she turned to Ephemia with an exasperated shake of the head. "Now, why should a girl like that be entrusted with the care of a human soul? Poor little baby, didn't you see how mauled and stifled it is, like a kitten that is never permitted peace to grow?"

"I'm afraid the baby escaped me, the mother was so fearfully and wonderfully arrayed; I'm already beginning to doubt the wisdom of my scheme."

"Now that they are here I am interested," continued Mrs. Freeman; "somehow I feel that the poor young husband can't have too easy a row to hoe. I didn't like the way she ordered him about as though he were a kind of body-servant and none too prized at that."

The truth of this was proven all too soon. Eveline Nichols was a vain and dissatisfied individual, fretting and complaining at her insignificant duties. She scolded and railed at the baby when it cried, as it nearly always did, or else caught it close in wild embraces and smothered it in kisses and senseless endearments. When reasonably content she sang the latest ragtime in exaggerated cadences, and when her periodic fits of depression and temper got the upper hand, she stamped and banged about as if bent upon the destruction of every stick of furniture in the place.

Stephen admitted vague alarm and very real concern that a young and pretty girl with an entirely devoted husband, and a baby to boot, could so deport herself. This alarm was further increased one sultry afternoon when he was awakened from sleep by the sound of a bulky object hurtling to the floor, followed by terrific screams from the baby. Hastening into his ragged bathrobe, he slipped to the door and peered out at his wife and daughter, both apparently serenely occupied with their work.

"My love, whatever is it?" he asked anxiously as he approached and found a seat.

“Just one of her tantrums, Stephen. But, to tell the truth, I am getting sadly impatient with this sort of thing; and yet to hear her nagging poor Walter every blessed evening is even worse.”

Stephen rumpled his hair, as he invariably did when greatly disturbed. “But my dear, what could she nag a decent chap about? He works faithfully, seems entirely devoted, and is studying some kind of correspondence course to improve himself. Perhaps it is the unfortunate quality of her voice leads you to suspect her of temper. After all, she appears a nice little thing.”

“I only wish you were right, Stephen, but there is no mistaking the dreadful things she lets fly at the poor boy. I am the last person to demand perfection in anyone, but one may surely expect a certain amount of self-control in supposedly civilized persons.”

Another fearful crash aloft made them all literally jump. “My word, this is terrible!” said Stephen. Ephemia was as startled as her parents, but her father’s comical dismay induced laughter.

“Father, get out your Marcus Aurelius,” she giggled. He blinked dazedly, and then a humorous smile swept his face. “Phemy, my dear,” he said, “you are entirely right; the behavior of others ought never to surprise us. As that wise man so aptly said, ‘Whatever wickedness may be it is at least nothing new and so need not astonish us.’ I think I’ll just go and see what all this is about.”

Ephemia knew that her father was as easily wounded as a child. Eveline would not in the least understand him, and would likely respond to his innocent solicitations with impertinence. “No, Father,” she hastened to intercept him, “I’ll go myself. We’ve never interfered before, but this is too much.”

The room she timidly entered, after receiving no response to her knocking, was in the wildest confusion, and several over-turned chairs explained the alarming crashes. The baby, howling at the top of its lungs, sprawled and kicked on the couch, which was littered with a motley pile of napkins and other small garments, while Eveline herself was weeping in a crumpled heap by the window.

Ephemia’s first impulse was to turn and run, but she managed to stammer a question concerning the baby’s health as the only safe and presentable topic.

“Sick!” Eveline flung back, and hopped to her feet like a jack-in-the-box. “The darned thing is always sick—I wish it were dead!”

“Perhaps that were best,” was Ephemia’s astonishing reply.

Eveline gasped: never could she have anticipated such a retort. Her red-rimmed eyes turned accusingly upon the heartless visitor, her full lips quivered, and with one of her wild ejaculations she pounced upon the helpless infant.

“Mumsy’s darling! mumsy’s angel! Does it hate it’s bad, bad mumsy? Oh, the mean, mean lady wants it to die, the precious precious!”

Ephemia was more sickened than disgusted; the control of one’s emotions was most certainly the first of moral laws. She thought of Anna Jergen, and again it seemed to her that life was made hideous for all by the lack of restraint in the few.

The foolish mother had succeeded in frightening the child into quiet, and now, her own tears stemmed, she turned upon Ephemia sullenly. “You want us to get out, I suppose?”

“No, but we would like to make things more pleasant for you if we can. Suppose you leave the baby with us occasionally and run out of an evening with your husband.”

Eveline had the grace to blush. “I expect I am a devil, and it’s mighty decent of you to offer this. Honestly, I get so fed up on this nursemaid’s job. Why, I’d been married no time when along comes this kid; after that it has been just one howl after the other from dawn to dark. Sure I’d love to go out of a night, but Walter’s as old as my pa already. He just wants to stick around smoking a pipe and muddling over a bunch of papers, and of course he thinks it’s up to me to stay with the kid.”

Ephemia had scarcely listened to any of this. She was watching the baby, blinking up at her with dull wet eyes, and she saw that its little body was all covered with a heat rash. She held out her arms. “Give him to me, please. A little rest will do you good.” Eveline’s gratitude broke from her vehemently, but Ephemia missed the most of it.

As soon as Mrs. Freeman laid eyes on the child she commanded a pan of warm water and soda, and with her daughter’s assistance she bathed the hot little creature, dressed it in one small petticoat, and put it to sleep on a pillow in her clothes-basket.

When its mother came for it at supper-time she was amazed. “Did you ever! You must be a magician, Mrs. Freeman.”

“On the contrary, just an ordinary old woman with a little commonsense,” said that lady tartly. “In weather like this nothing alive wants to be smothered in clothes, and starched laces aren’t exactly comfortable. If I were you I’d leave the child be; Walter won’t object to seeing you alone for a change.”

At nine o’clock Ephemia interrupted a very different scene when she returned the now cooing baby. Walter bounced out of his chair to meet her, his eyes grateful and aglow with happiness, and, judging from the disarray of his papers, Eveline had been effectively interrupting his studies. But for this once they were satisfied, and Eveline caught the baby to her silly young breast in an agony of rapture.

As Ephemia escaped she heard the foolish mother exclaim: “Oh, mumsy’s darling, where is its pretty little dress? Mumsy will have to make it pretty for its dear old papa . . . .”

“Good gracious,” thought Ephemia, “I wonder if it is possible not to be astonished at the stupidities of life?”

CHAPTER XVII.

As the weeks sped by Mrs. Freeman began to see that Ephemia's usual spontaneous gaiety was lacking, though she made no complaint and affected a cheerful attitude. There was little enough in her daily life to foster a light heart, her mother reflected, for even the conviviality of friendly neighbors was denied her. Young Harold might take pleasure in the Jacksons, who lived down the trail, for, though an elderly couple, they had their grandson Billie living with them; but Grandma Jackson, addicted to tea and afflicted with deafness, contributed little to the sum total of Ephemia's happiness. Mrs. Freeman began to suspect that a more genuine distress caused her daughter's abstracted moments and fits of discontent.

"Phemy, dear," she said one day as they sat mending in the garden, Eveline's baby asleep in the clothes-basket nearby, "you look frayed round the edges, it's high time you enjoyed a bit of a fling."

Ephemia had been dreaming of that memorable day by the river when Allison was so whimsically gay and communicative, and she winced a little at her mother's words.

"Oh, I'm really well enough, Mother, but I sometimes do long for a sight of the girls. Why, for weeks now I haven't had a line from either Clare or Lily."

"Is it about their letters you are so anxious?"

Ephemia detested evasion, yet now she was greatly tempted, and to the woman watching her the struggle was written plainly in her sensitive face. However, the habit of honesty won. "Not exactly; there was a friend—I mean I met a young man at Neely, and he said he . . . no, he didn't! But I thought he might write," she finished miserably.

Mother Freeman adjusted with care a patch on a small blue overall. "I've known young men to carry letters about in their pockets for weeks. I shouldn't think uncharitably of him, my dear; long, long ago I learned that happiness mostly depends upon one's own constancy. It refreshes me more to muse upon the friends I have met and admired than to ponder on the strangeness of their having forgotten me and all my graces." This last she brought out so drolly that Ephemia was forced to laugh.

“You win, Mother. I’m ridiculous to consider myself unforgettable, if that’s what you are hinting at.”

“Not entirely; I only mean that the measure of blessedness is one’s own integrity and honor. By all means let us love sincerely, without affectation, and let us be faithful to this love as to a sacred trust. I’ve found it to work very well, my dear, and it isn’t in the least difficult once you come to see the foolishness of expecting happiness from others.”

“Just the same, Allison might have written,” said Ephemia.

“So his name is Allison?—a nice sensible name. But come, now, suppose you dye your blue foulard and go with Harold to the Methodist church to get acquainted with a few of the young people.”

“Good gracious, no! I had enough of small town services in Neely.”

“Mrs. Jackson spoke of the Young People’s League when she came for Billie yesterday . . . .”

“You don’t mean to say she converted you,” Ephemia interrupted saucily.

“Who knows? I am a poor churchwoman, but perhaps that is on account of my childish preference for the faith of my fathers.”

“Do you know,” Ephemia broke out, not at all certain of her mother’s seriousness, “I never could make out just which of you was in earnest—father with his contention that churches are a more or less superfluous institution, or you with your assertion that they serve a definite purpose.”

“You have misunderstood your father. Never to my mind has there lived a more religious soul. He is incapable of thinking evil of anyone, and every idealist is an archangel to him, interpreting the graciousness of God. He has never meant to intimate that churches are an idle institution, but rather that intolerant and vindictive persons have all too often been at their head. Law and order are desirable if they justify the name: and churches, I take it, endeavor to uphold some sort of moral order.”

“None of which convinces me that I should go to this church. If only Aunt Caroline were not in Canada I’d be tempted to make a week-end visit to Alueez.”

Here a noisy salutation diverted their thoughts sharply, and they saw where Eveline came tripping along jauntily, her hat in one hand, the hot sun beating down upon her glossy black hair, and at her side a dapper, grey-clad young man swinging a basket of grapes.

They stopped at the gate to gossip. Eveline obviously wished to detain him, for they could hear his self-conscious laughter and murmured objections and her giggling responses. Finally he managed to break away, and Eveline, exuberant with good-nature, came flying toward the women.

"Do you mean to say 'Bumpkins' has slept all this while," she burst out.

"Normal babies generally sleep this time of day," came the dry response. "I see you've been shopping; are you going to make jelly?"

"I see myself stewing over a hot stove making jelly! My talents don't run to jelly, I'm all for the free and simple life. Oh, mumsy's precious! Look at him, isn't he the cutest?" The baby, wakened by the noise, struggled to sit up, and at the sight of his mother began to fret. "See, he can't bear to be out of my arms, the sweet!" she exclaimed, all affection now that her vanity had been appeased.

Mrs. Freeman found it difficult to be patient with Eveline, but all of them had taken a genuine liking to Walter, and for his sake strove to bear with his foolish young wife. He in turn had discovered many simple means whereby he might prove his gratitude; little by little he had assumed the chores, and many an hour had he spent over Stephen's garden.

"I'm glad to see you've met an old acquaintance," Mrs. Freeman now began resolutely.

Eveline flung back her saucy black head and laughed heartily. "You can't fool me that way, Mrs. Freeman—you're curious. Well, I met him at the confectioner's where cousin Ella works; he's a conductor running between Esk and Alueez, and he's going to take me to the next dance, and there you are!"

"I hope you will induce Walter to join you—poor boy, he's getting altogether too much of home."

"You've said it! But don't ever believe I could pry him loose from his nasty papers. Oh, no, we're married now and he doesn't have to exert himself."

"Crazy child, what else is he doing? Does he sit up half the night poring over studies to fit him for a better position just to amuse himself?"

"Well, all I want is a little fun; I'm not worrying about the home for our old age that Walter dreams about. It makes me sick!" she pouted. Then in a sudden reversal of mood she flew to Mrs. Freeman's chair, swooped down like a bird on wing, and pecked her cheek affectionately. "Never mind, old

dear, I'm a little devil; but I appreciate the way you love Bumpkins. Don't we, Bumpkins?" she inquired of the squirming load in her arms. "Oh, yes, I met that old deaf woman down the road and she tormented me into buying a couple of tickets for a church social. I'd like awfully to have Ephemia go along—Walter hates anything of the kind."

Ephemia was about to decline, but her mother intercepted her. "That's very generous of you, Eveline; I am sure Ephemia will be glad to accept."

"That's settled, then," said Eveline, hoisting the baby upon her shoulder and holding out her free hand for his bottle. "Walter's speed is adjusted to a rocking-chair and a game of solitaire; he won't miss me. . . . Oh, well, come on, Bumpkins, we'll go and make poor old papa his supper."

CHAPTER XVIII.

Ephemia made friends at the social and thoroughly enjoyed herself, while to Eveline the whole thing was more or less boring. “But then,” she explained to Mrs. Freeman the following morning, “I didn’t have the minister making eyes at me like someone I know.”

Ephemia turned red and spilled the milk she was pouring into a double boiler. “Nonsense,” she snapped, “don’t listen to her, Mother.”

“Let me tell you, Mrs. Freeman, everybody noticed it; the poor fellow simply followed her about like a shadow.”

“Oh, Eveline, as though it isn’t usual for a minister to be considerate of strangers. He just wanted to know why we had never attended before.”

“I noticed how concerned he was about my immortal soul,” Eveline teased hilariously, “but didn’t I hear him say he was coming to call?”

“Good gracious, isn’t that a professional duty? But so far as I am concerned I sincerely hope he never shows up,” said Ephemia, so angrily that her mother burst into laughter.

“Now, my dear, what an unfriendly wish!”

But of course he came, and Mrs. Freeman was agreeably surprised to find him a decidedly attractive personality. He was young, entirely free from fulsome sanctity, and handsome after a wholesome blonde fashion. He instinctively made one think of open seas and untrammeled fastnesses, and his laughter was as honest and ready as a child’s. Scarcely had he been in the house ten minutes when Harold demanded to know the proper method of trapping a skunk and how to skin a rabbit, and neither question seemed in any way to disturb ecclesiastical dignity. Further, he held a skein of wool for Mother Freeman with remarkable skill and confided that the act put him in mind of his aged mother.

Yet, howsoever charming he might prove to others, Ephemia remained serenely aloof and chillingly polite, and when he took his smiling departure she shut the door with a tremendous sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness,” said she, “I thought he had adopted us.”

“The Reverend Mr. Clarke strikes me as being a gentleman, and a likeable one at that,” said her mother smilingly. “Just what are your

objections?"

"Objections? Heavens, I have no objections to anything, but I certainly trust he never returns."

Stephen now thrust his greying head from a discreetly open doorway. "Is he gone?" he queried. "I've been awake for some time, but didn't dare to come out. My collars seemed to be mislaid."

"No, Father, they are in the usual place in the chiffoniere—right in your collar-bag."

"That accounts for it—I never thought of the bag. But who was the gentleman?"

"The minister, and he knows how to kill a skunk," said Harold affably; "and he said he had lots of rats when he was a boy, and they all died on him, and I guess he wants to marry Phemy."

"Harold, Harold! I am ashamed of you!" his mother exclaimed in humorous alarm.

"Well, I heard Billie's grandma tell his grandpa that Mr. Clarke ought to be looking around for a wife, and I guess he's looking around, ain't he?"

"Isn't he?" corrected his sister crossly, "and don't let me hear you talking such nonsense, a little boy like you!"

"I ain't—isn't—I'm eight next year, and I can't help what I hear, can I? Anyway, I don't mind if he marries you,—he's all right."

Father Freeman listened to this altercation in great perplexity. "Isn't the child a little forward, my dear?" he questioned mildly of his amused wife. "And is this true, Ephemia? It seems very sudden."

"Oh, Father, do wake up! It is all the purest nonsense, and if I hear another word of it I'll scream!"

"My dear, whatever it is don't do that. Without doubt the young man is entirely splendid, and it's only what one might expect. After all, you are a charming girl, my love."

"Stephen," his wife hastened to interrupt, "I really think you ought to dig up a few potatoes before going to work, and it's high time the carrots were gotten in as well."

"As you say, my love, but I beg you do me the kindness to waken me the next time Ephemia's suitor calls."

Poor exasperated Ephemia flung up her hands in despair. “Oh, go out and get the potatoes, Father, I—I—just can’t stand any more!” and away she fled.

Her father looked after her uneasily. “Is something wrong, Mother?”

“Not noticeably,” said his wife drily, “at least nothing I can explain just now.” But later she told him of Ephemia’s meeting with Allison, which he heard in silence, offering no remarks whatsoever.

Nevertheless, here was ground whereon he felt safe; Ephemia was wounded in spirit; such a wound must find its cure from the deep treasure house of that same spirit. He resolved to beguile her thoughts into fruitful channels.

So blind in material things, Stephen was diplomacy itself in this effort, and by degrees he captured her interest as never before. Now it was an old legend unearthed from some ancient book, or some quaint rite of nature worship, which, when interpreted proved the eternal sameness of the human heart, with its conflicting desires, its radiant loves, its bitter hates, its brave hopes, and petty fears. And as the days grew chill, and the house became correspondingly inviting in its humble comfort and cheerful fires, Ephemia spent more of her leisure hours with her father, and little by little became conscious of a deeper kinship than that of mere blood.

Again, they often rambled through the autumn-lighted wood, drifting in silent companionship over the fragrant country; or if the mood so inclined them, they might sit for hours under some calm old tree while the little whispering leaves fluttered down about them in russet and gold.

At such times Ephemia felt herself lifted out of the commonplace into a strangely satisfying world, where time and place and all things temporal seemed shadowy and vague, and the dreams of the heart fashioned them a kingdom in the all-pervading silence. Then, too, she was beginning to see the real Stephen—not the bent, prematurely grey old man, to whom the sordid battle for material comfort was so confusing and distressing, but the beauty-loving, hero-worshipping Stephen, whose eyes followed the glowing course of the stars so faithfully.

Souls are likened to caged birds; but most souls, like the cage-bred canary, are content in bondage. But Stephen was sprung from a different race of men—men who strove valiantly against captivity of soul and reason, against commercialized religion and mental foppery. Something of their spirit still fired him. His periodic fits of restlessness and irritability were no

more than the feeble beating of this winged spirit upon the dull and binding bars of circumstance.

Because of the new understanding between them, Ephemia found it easier to unburden her mind of many things, and one day she confessed her inability to understand Anna Jergen and her special difficulty.

Stephen mused upon the problem in his customary grave fashion. “It seems an unfortunate affair, largely, I imagine, because we know neither its just cause nor its final result. It is a good deal like an unfinished motive, confusing, therefore, and unlovely.”

Distance had again invested the unhappy Anna with a certain charm, and acquaintanceship with Eveline had greatly mellowed Ephemia’s judgment. “After all, loving too much is less ignoble than loving too little. Mrs. Jergen is to be pitied, but Eveline arouses my indignation,” she said.

Stephen patted her arm in fond entreaty. “Poor little Eveline! don’t treat her too harshly. She will learn. There is so much inherent good in all of us, but unfortunately we don’t all respond as readily or to the same treatment. After all, are they not very alike, those two—and all of us? None of us love as we ought—that, I think, is the whole trouble.”

CHAPTER XIX.

The following day Ephemia received a letter from Mrs. Swanson. She had got half way through the painful scrawl when she gave a terrified shriek and glanced from one parent to the other in frightened appeal.

"Father, she's dead! Anna Jergen is dead!"

"Dead? That poor soul we were discussing?"

"Yes, oh, yes! Just listen—it's all so very dreadful!"

"It's terrible things I have to tell you," the letter began. "It's that terrible I'm lost to set it down. Last week Ole Jergen came home, and drunk he was and terrible. 'It's a fine wife I have', he said to Ole Hanson, 'living like a lady on the goodness of other men, and now I mean to make her a visit.' Hanson was that upset he sent for me and the Peterson's and we all went to the store to think what was best to do. 'It's not as though we can interfere,' says Peterson, 'this being her rightful husband'. 'Be he or be he not, he's a beast', says I, and was all for going to the house to once. But no, 'Wait', says Hanson, 'it may blow by,' and so we had coffee.

"Well, it makes my blood cold to write it, but before we were through in comes little Willie—being as we had sent him to spy—and he's that scared his eyes are fair popping. 'He's a-killing her', he yells, 'he is—she screamed and she screamed!' We that scared ourselves we couldn't move leg or limb —we never having had a killing hereabout, but only a hanging, quiet like.

"But off we went, and, would you believe it, there was that poor creature wriggling like a worm on the floor and Ole gone and left her. Herre Gud! It was lye she was a burning up of, and she took it herself. Mrs. Peterson was a great help, she having once saved a poisoned dog. We sort of got her eased a little, but it was plain as plain she was going fast.

"Seems as how after a bit she got sort of paralyzed out of terrible pain and she began to kind of moan and cry for Pierre. That settled it. I up and off as fast as my legs could trot to Mathias's. He was to home and surprised like to see me so wild, but more so later. 'Mathias,' says I, 'I've brung in four of your six and never a word against it, and now it's my time to ask you a favor.' Of course, putting it thiswise he was bound to do as I said, and it was to ride out to once after Pierre.

"Back I run to the cottage, and there was Anna kind of calm and pretty, like an angel on a faded Christmas card, and I thought maybe as how we had saved her after all. 'Did you find what it was about?' I whispered to Sarah Hanson, and at that Anna opens her big eyes and begins to a-calling him again. At that I up and took her in my arms gentle like. 'He's coming, Anna,' says I, 'never you fear, he's coming fast as mortal man can.' Then we got a hint of it. 'But he don't love me no more,' she groaned. And by and by we knew the whole of it.

"Seems as Ole up and tells her she might as well make the most of the husband she's got, for Pierre has found him another girl, a decent one he needn't to be ashamed to own. And then he up and shows her a snapshot—it was lying right on the floor all the time—and sure enough there was Pierre, plain as plain, a-smiling and with his arm round a right pretty girl, dark-like, and small. We were that surprised! 'He ought to be whipped,' says Peterson, forgetting as how he said it before when he thought he loved Anna, and I began to hope she's be taken before he could come.

"But he came late that night, wild and crazy-like, and to once I knew something was wrong and Ole not fit to live. But Anna didn't mind much after that, she just lay up against his breast contented like. My! my! even old Hanson was as near crying as ever I see him.

"We managed to tell Pierre the whole thing, and never do I want to see such anger in a mortal face. Seems as how Ole had been to the camps lately, and while there must have stolen the picture from Pierre's cabin—it being one of him and his sister taken last year when he went home on Christmas. But poor Anna never got the right of it. All she knew was he had come. 'I don't blame you,' she kept whispering, 'I don't, I don't—I'm glad you'll get a good wife, Pierre, I'm glad, glad,' and then she just sort of fell asleep.

"My, we were that sorry for Pierre! He wouldn't believe as how she was really gone, and said how good she was and how they never had no thought of wickedness unless it was wicked to wish Ole dead—which I can't see how it is—and how she wouldn't let him give her money unless she could mend or knit or suchlike, and how he's been used to bring her work from the boys in winter, she having hardly anything to live on. Then crazy-like he wanted to know where was Ole, and we didn't know, nor wish to, and he says as how he's going to hunt him all round the earth and beat him dead for a wicked scoundrel.

"That's the way it is. We are that feared for him, and how it will come out we don't know. 'It's like this,' I says to Peterson, 'here we were all

thinking evil of the poor things, and them like children all the while wishing for Santa Claus. Look what that Ole has done, and him that we call respectable because he married him a wife and never loved nobody. It's a queer world and that's what! Poor Pierre, we don't know where he's gone, but leastwise I hope Ole's smart enough to escape, so he don't get Pierre into any more trouble by getting killed by him.'

"That's about all the news. The other teacher was never much for getting liked. She had false teeth and spoke through her nose. I've heard tell Mr. Brett was sent off to the North woods up to the wilds, and some thinks he's got fever or such like, leastwise I've heard no more of him. Well, it would be better for some to have died young. . . . ."

Ephemia's face had been slowly draining of color as she read. It was all pitiful and distressing, but the last few lines struck her like a blow. She flung the letter away as if its very touch burned her.

"Mother, oh, Mother!" she cried, shaken by the emotion she so bravely sought to control. Mother Freeman understood the fear which rendered all this the more terrifying. "There, there, my sweet," she whispered, her comforting arms about the girl, "rumors are seldom trustworthy; remember that idle rumor brought about this pathetic tragedy. If only people refrained from making facts of mere suppositions!"

As usual her mother's simple statement of obvious truth enheartened Ephemia and forced her to a deeper understanding. Despite her sincere sympathy, her genuine regret that Anna's poor little flickering candle of life had been so rudely extinguished by the freezing breath of suspicion and intolerance, she understood the truth of her mother's oft-repeated assertion that destiny is determined by the faith within. Had Anna's love been sound enough it had not countenanced doubt.

Her father now came to her side and for the first time spoke, his kind old face grave and yet strangely lighted, as if he had just witnessed some mystic transformation. "My child, you may comfort yourself with the thought that after so much painful uncertainty the unhappy soul found herself at last."

Ephemia met the kind grey eyes and loved her father as never before. In a surge of affection she thought how simple were the problems of human happiness if only men strove to see good in all as did her great-hearted father.

Much later, after assisting her mother to bed, she stole to her father's little room, for it happened to be his night off duty. "Father," she began, as

soon as she was comfortably entrenched in an easy chair, “what did you mean by ‘finding herself’?”

Mr. Freeman laid down the book he was reading, pushed his glasses upon his forehead, and regarded her with gentle gravity. “Simply that she never really loved until the very end. Love is the law of our being; to reach its full realization is to find one’s self. . . .”

“But surely, father . . . .”

“Permit me to finish, my dear. Consider, what was her love formerly? Simply a desire for personal gratification and happiness, no more.”

“But wouldn’t her happiness imply his also?”

“Not necessarily, though that is our mistaken assumption. If I remember rightly you said she had run away from home with this husband of hers; yet she could scarcely have done so through affection, since she so readily turned from him. There was another and ulterior motive—the very human desire to escape the difficult, believing that therein lay contentment. I am not sitting in judgment, my dear—it were not becoming in one so poor in affection—but in dwelling upon this sorry thing it strikes me simply as the result of restlessness. Had Anna held her soul in confidence, sure of her ultimate place in life, she would have borne in patience her part in the parental home; and, to put it crudely, Pierre would not have come too late. Or again, had her love of him been selfless enough it would have given her courage to meet any doubt.”

“Father, I think you are the richest man I know!” Ephemia burst out tremulously.

He smiled in pleased surprise. “I am thankful you love me a little, for I am a worthless fellow. But whatever of wit I have I owe to your mother. You may have noticed that delicate flowers cannot grow if subjected to heavy winds. My mind was similarly threatened by the wild squalls of my own making. Your dear mother took me in hand, and, safely sheltered by her sound commonsense, one must acquire some inkling of reason.”

Very foolishly Ephemia burst into tears, thereby quite terrifying her good father, who never before had witnessed such a shower from a clear sky.

“My dear, my dear,” he soothed her awkwardly, “you are tired and distraught . . . . dear child, try to get some rest.”

She kissed him at that, smiling through her tears. “It’s all right now, Father, the typhoon is past and I’m going to get me quickly into the safe

haven of Mother's good sense."

"Dear child," he murmured when she was gone, "she's got her mother's high heart—thanks be!"

CHAPTER XX.

Eveline was at her worst the morning following the dance she had attended with her new friend, and Walter was glad to escape to the drudgery of ledger and desk. When he was gone she wept disconsolately and dwelt with melancholy tenderness upon her youth—as though it were irrevocably lost and only the sad spectacle of the grave confronted her. Indeed she visualized herself as dead and wept the harder at so lamentable a course of nature.

The poor baby, who was the innocent cause of all this, having fussed and fretted the whole night through, fell at last into fitful slumber, and in the ensuing peace Eveline remembered that she hadn't as yet indulged in her morning cup of tea. Such was its bracing effect that she bethought herself of the mirror and consulted it studiously for any possible sign of early decay. No, she really didn't look too wretched considering—if only she might have her hair done in that tempting "Beauty Shop", where all those fancy creams, hair-combs and perfumes were displayed in a velvet draped window! She really ought to have it done for the big dance the Daughters of the Revolution were staging.

Then, as a matter of course, the problem of dress raised its grinning head, and she flew to the closet for a look at her one and only silk frock. She found it altogether unsatisfactory—not to be thought of in connection with so grand an event as the yearly Patriotic Ball. It was her wedding dress, and she shrugged at the memory of her own and her mother's excitement and satisfaction upon ordering it from a catalogue—a wonderful bargain in silk and lace for eighteen dollars! Well, Walter just had to furnish her with one decent dress. He had been saving something toward his life insurance; he could give her that. "It's not as though he were sickly," she reflected hotly, "he's as strong as an ox, and this is the affair of the year."

These thoughts were not conducive to a patient frame of mind, and certainly did not prepare her for the trials that lay ahead. As usual she had put off the baby's wash until not a stitch remained, and now, tired though she was, the disagreeable duty must be performed. The child, wakened from its restless sleep, whimpered ceaselessly or caught its breath sharply and screamed, and long before the task was done the room was hideously hot and gray with steam. In this inferno of heat, naphtha vapors and wailing cries her resentment reached its climax. But there was in Eveline, as in most

humans, a fine stubbornness which if rightly directed constitutes power, and so with every nerve jangling and her whole body one complaining bed of fatigue she gritted her teeth and scrubbed away.

In the throes of this determination Eveline permitted herself the luxury of martyrdom, of driving herself from one thing to another when the wash was finally done. With lagging feet she set about putting the room in order, mopped up the floor with red and weary hands, and then, remembering that the baby had not been bathed, put on water to heat for that purpose.

Peculiarly, perhaps, this much-lauded maternal duty seemed the last straw. The baby ceased to be a baby and became a kind of ogre whose existence was merely making her a helpless slave. He ruled her days and made intolerable her nights, and she felt she hated him soundly. When the little creature was dressed again she tossed him into his basket. Now, surely she might rest. But, no, the day had flown mysteriously and Walter would soon be home. She discovered that the tin box beneath the table was empty of bread—she must borrow some from the Freemans.

Mrs. Freeman chided herself for her thoughtlessness when the weary girl confronted her. She ought to have called her down to afternoon tea, but she had been busily writing Caroline and the time slipped by unheeded.

"You've been working too hard, my dear. And I heard you moving about in the night; is the little fellow ill?"

Eveline slumped against the door and beyond a shrug made no sign of having heard the enquiry. Mrs. Freeman glanced at the clock. "Ephemia," she said, "isn't there some cold meat left from dinner? Give it to Eveline, dear, it's too late for her to begin cooking now."

Eveline weakened before this kindness. "No, no, never mind," she faltered, "you're too kind."

They took no notice of this. "Sit down," commanded Mrs. Freeman, "a good cup of coffee will set you up, and it doesn't take a moment to prepare."

Eveline would have preferred to depart immediately, being in a mood to nurse her misery, but she found herself over-ruled; and while she drank the fragrant beverage Ephemia slipped upstairs. When the tired young wife followed she saw that the kettle was singing merrily on the little oil stove and the table set invitingly with its simple lunch.

In consequence Walter found a tired but singularly gentle wife awaiting him when he arrived. But all day he, too, had been entertaining rebellion, recalling with steadily mounting resentment all the unkind things his wife

had said, and he had eaten nothing save the two clumsy sandwiches of his own making. So now, instead of taking her in his arms reassuringly, he settled to his meal with the same air of resigned martyrdom adopted by Eveline throughout the day.

That affronted being blinked her eyes pathetically and consoled herself with the gloomy logic that this, too, was the natural end of marital joys. Yet she acknowledged that, dull as it was to be loved by faithful, plodding Walter, such calm indifference might be even worse. But she poured his tea in patient silence.

Thought he, "This is the way to take her down a peg, to show her I refuse to be a doormat all my life." Then, swollen with a sense of victory, he ordered her to clear the table quickly at the conclusion of the meal, saying he had important work from the office on hand. "And you might see that the baby doesn't bother me with his crying," he added majestically.

Eveline, by now somewhat rested and refreshed, found her humility evaporating. She stiffened up in her chair and glared across the table. "Are you talking to me by any chance?" she demanded shrilly.

"I am," said Walter,

Up she leaped, facing him with fierce, indignant eyes.

"See here, Walter Nichols, I am tired of being a slave; all day I've washed and scrubbed and minded that howling kid of yours."

"And yours," he reminded her.

She stamped her foot. "Do you suppose I got married for a nursemaid's privilege? And if you think I am going to spend my life . . . ."

"For mercy's sake don't shout," he interrupted her, "you act like an idiot half the time."

At this Eveline's temper had its full way with her, and before he could prevent it she had dashed her chair across the floor. "Don't you dare to speak to me!" she screamed at the top of her voice. "I hate and despise you, and, what's more, I won't live with you any longer—I'll go on the street rather than put up with this."

Walter was thoroughly alarmed now, not so much by her words, which he accepted as mere exaggeration, but by the knowledge that every syllable of her words must have been plainly audible to the family downstairs. Swallowing his pride he went to her and sought to draw her into his arms.

She brushed him aside roughly. “Don’t touch me, don’t dare come near me!” she shrieked.

“Eveline, dearest, I’m sorry I was hasty; but, honestly, I was tired and hadn’t had a decent thing to eat all day. A fellow gets on edge that way.”

“Yes,” she retorted with swift vehemence, “all you think of is your stomach. Eat and sleep—eat and sleep!” The child now added his weak cries to the general uproar. Whirling angrily she cried, “Shut up! Shut up! I wish to heaven the kid was dead!”

Walter was accustomed to such meaningless outbursts, yet at this he paled. “Eveline, for God’s sake be reasonable! What do you want, anyway? Don’t I do everything in my power to please you?”

“I’ll tell you what I want. I want a little recreation, and I want something to wear that isn’t the laughing-stock of the town. And I want to spend a dollar now and again without feeling I’m robbing the butcher or baker. And if you can’t keep a woman as she ought to be kept there are others who can!”

Walter was ready for any compromise. In a wave of sickening despair he realized that, howsoever unreasonable this girl might be, he was doomed to love her. As one thinks of sweets for a child, he thought of the few dollars he had in his pocket. He needed a pair of boots, but he needed peace of mind more. Drawing out these crumpled bills, and experiencing all the humiliation of a decent man buying favors, he offered them to Eveline. “Run along and see a show or something.” She shrugged her shoulders disdainfully and refused his peace-offering, but she did fling into her wraps and slam out.

Walter tried to put the whole miserable affair out of his mind and to concentrate upon his work; but to his sensitive nature this was impossible. He was deeply hurt and humiliated, and all he could see was Eveline’s angry face, and all he could think of was her vitriolic and taunting words. Yet she had loved him back in those unforgettable days on the farm. What a sprite of joyous mischief she had seemed at the country dances, and how the boys had envied him! There was Philip Brooks, with the richest farm in the district coming to him at his father’s death—surely had Eveline been courting money in those days she would have favored Philip. No, he must have been a sad disappointment, and since he could not satisfy her she was right in demanding diversion. Yet what could he have done more than he had?

Below stairs Mrs. Freeman suffered in sympathy. She longed to call him down, now that Eveline had banged out, but she dreaded his resentment at what might possibly be constructed as interference. Finally she hit upon a plan. “Ephemia, my dear, would you mind running over to the Jacksons for my preserving kettle?” she said. And as soon as the girl had hurried away, glad to escape for a moment into the cool, crisp evening air, she hobbled into the hall. “Walter,” she called in studied cheerfulness, “how about coming down a moment? I’m all alone and very dull.”

Walter was grown very fond of Mrs. Freeman, and he did not much mind that she should penetrate his unhappiness. He was immensely relieved to hear she was alone, and after a little he came down with the baby slumped against his shoulder like a little bag of meal.

Mrs. Freeman was a mother by nature. At sight of the child every other thought was put to rout. “The child is ill!” she cried, “give it to me. Why, my dear boy, it’s burning with fever!” Anxiously she marked the respiration, labored and jerky. Yes, there was no doubt of it. “Walter, you had better call the doctor, our wee little man has pneumonia.”

“Pneumonia!” The name had a sinister sound to him. “Oh, my poor Eveline! I must find her at once.”

“The doctor first,” said Mother Freeman firmly, “and as for this little man, I shall take charge of him myself.”

CHAPTER XXI.

Eveline, despite her intemperate outbursts, really loved her baby, and during its illness gave little thought to herself, with the consequence that peace, if not contentment, reigned in the house. Moreover, she developed a new concern for the baby's welfare, a strange concern in one so frivolous-minded. It seemed that the child was not christened, and while its little life hung in the balance old fears and superstitions began to prey upon her mind.

"If only I could have him christened," she sighed for the hundredth time one morning when she was watching Mother Freeman bathe the small convalescent with infinite tenderness.

"Why not have young Mr. Clarke do it for you?"

Eveline fidgeted with the little garments she was warming by the fire. "Everything costs money—the doctor isn't paid yet."

"My dear, in this case it's more a matter of form, a free offering."

"But I haven't a cent, and it's no use asking Walter. Just look how Bumpkins is, I—I—"

"Now Eveline, we'll manage it, never fear," said Mrs. Freeman quickly, seeing how close the girl was to tears. In her intuitive way she understood that to Eveline the performance of this sacerdotal act was an acknowledgment of obligation and an acceptance of a trust hitherto neglected. "On second thought, there's really no reason why you should not have your wish," she resumed. "As for the fee, it will give me real pleasure to lend you that trifle."

Eveline was childishly elated and that very day dashed off to secure the minister's services and Cousin Ella's promise to sponsor the child. Two days later Mother Freeman was forced to climb the stairs, for Eveline would insist upon serving tea and cakes in honor of the christening service. Mr. Freeman also must waken earlier than usual to attend the ceremony, and all in all everything proceeded smoothly. The baby behaved like a philosopher; Eveline's cakes were in every way a success; the one drawback to complete enjoyment was the absence of Walter, who could not be there.

Stephen was at his best. He was resplendent in an old Prince Albert coat, grey trousers and gleaming white vest, which obsolete grandeur suited his

dreamy nature admirably, and, feeling very much in his element, his conversation became correspondingly graceful and charming.

Much as Eveline would have preferred to prolong her party, Stephen was forced to remind her that his hours as a gentleman of leisure were all too few and that he must away to make ready for his labors. Naturally his women folk departed with him, for it was hopeless to expect that Stephen could reclaim his mislaid garments in anything like reasonable time. When he had been sent off and his gala attire put away safely Mrs. Freeman remembered that she had forgotten her Paisley shawl upstairs, and since it was something of a treasure, having been her mother's before her, she asked Ephemia to fetch it at once.

At the foot of the stairs the girl came to a sudden stop, arrested by that peculiar faculty which precedes reason much as the lantern's ray precedes the light itself. Something warned her against proceeding, yet, having hesitated, she found herself eavesdropping. Eveline was in the upper hall taking leave of the minister. "I'm awfully ashamed," her voice came drifting down, "but with the doctor's fees and everything. . . ."

"Put it from your mind entirely," was the quick response. "Why, what are we chaps for, do you suppose? Believe me, Mrs. Nichols, it has been a real pleasure."

"You're good to put it that way. After Christmas, perhaps . . . . just now everything is so hard . . . ."

Ephemia shrank back against the wall like a guilty creature, as ashamed to have overheard this apology as though she had been a partner to its insincerity. The past few months, so filled with new experiences, had done much to deepen Ephemia's perceptions; but here was, nevertheless, a new and incomprehensible development. Surely Eveline might be vain and foolish without being dishonest! Yet this was deliberate dishonesty; she had gotten money under false pretences, and from one who offered it through whole-hearted kindness.

There was no time for searching analysis, for Mr. Clarke's laughing farewell re-echoed in the hall and the next moment his step was on the stairs. Ephemia pulled herself together and, hurrying forward, met him at the foot of the stairs.

"You have forgotten something," he guessed; "let me get it for you." "Wrong!" she told him with a gaiety she did not feel; "I wanted to ask you about the boys' club. Is Harold old enough to join?"

"We are taking them on at eight," he replied, happy that she should have sought him on any pretext. Mrs. Freeman, having caught the sound of their voices, now interrupted them. "If you have nothing particular to do, Mr. Clarke, come and take supper with us," she suggested, smiling upon the young man from the dining-room doorway. He was due at a directors' meeting at nine o'clock, he said, but until then would be pleased to accept her hospitality; and having helped Mrs. Freeman back to her chair—for she was still much crippled in her movements—he pronounced himself ready to do his share.

It had been natural, and far from difficult, to order Allison's activities, but to set this handsome black-clad youth to slicing bread and paring apples made Ephemia feel ridiculous and decidedly uncomfortable. In consequence she found difficulty in preserving a semblance of cordiality and took refuge in silence whenever it was possible.

To the young clergyman she was a model of womanly grace; loyal to family ties, capable in household management, and cheerful in a reserved, maidenly fashion. So he judged, never having seen her tremulous with joy or jauntily sure of herself and her dreams. Believing as he did, her silence in nowise astonished him, but, if anything, only served to elevate his opinion of so modest and virtuous a young lady.

At the table Mrs. Freeman expressed her satisfaction with the day's event. "Poor little woman, she's so unsettled, and, with all, such a child; but her heart is good," she mused, speaking of Eveline. "Would you believe it, she fretted for days over the christening—all because she felt so keenly her inability to make a suitable reward."

"Yes, I was . . . ." He got no further, for Ephemia kicked him sharply, meeting his startled eyes with so beseeching a glance that he perceived something to be badly twisted. Fortunately, Mother Freeman's attention was diverted at this particular moment by Harold, who most opportunely upset the salt-cellar. "Be careful, child!" she chided, "there's really no occasion for such haste."

"There is," said the lad stoutly, "Billie and me's writing poetry. We done one on the rabbits and on Billie's grampa's lame leg, and . . ." Here the general laughter shocked him into silence. Big folk, he concluded, always laughed at the wrong time. Gee, he wouldn't be old for anything unless perhaps he could be a pirate.

Mrs. Freeman returned to her subject. "It was nonsense, of course, but the poor child insisted upon raising the fee somehow. I speak of it only

because to my mind it argues an inherent nobility of spirit, and I'm afraid all of us have judged Eveline too lightly."

Light began to dawn upon the young clergyman. He suspected that Ephemia must have overheard the conversation in the upper hall and that she wished her mother kept in ignorance of its import. He smiled at her in fellowship and promise and, in his most entertaining vein, began telling them of his college days and his first hesitant excursions into the mission field.

Mother Freeman laughed until her eyes were wet at the description of his first service, held in an isolated village, where the good people insisted upon his giving the gospel in Greek in order to assure them that he had really read the original "Word". Before they were aware the hour set for the Board meeting was almost upon them and he had to take his reluctant leave. Ephemia accompanied him to the door, a performance so unusual that waves of joy and sudden hope swept the young cleric.

He was dashed down from this soaring hope, however, as soon as she faced him out on the sloping old porch with the door safely closed behind her.

"I want to explain—that is . . . oh, how shall I say it?" faltered poor Ephemia, not wishing to further debar Eveline, and yet desirous of safeguarding her mother's peace of mind. She was very lovely in her perplexity. Her eyes, like dusky stars in the white oval of her face, sought only understanding, yet wakened in the young man the primitive impulse to pick her up forcibly and carry her off.

Presumably she could not have divined this impulse, yet she shrank against the door and for one wild moment lost hold of her errand. She saw him, as for the first time, there on the moonlit old porch, and he was very splendid—she had not known before what fine eyes he had. There was something electrifying and compelling about him, something that drew her despite herself—yet somehow it was not him she saw standing there worshipping her with intense young eyes, but Allison, the debonair and light-hearted.

A gust of wind stirred the barren branches of the maples before the house, and the sound, like a melancholy sigh, shattered her illusion; she shivered and caught at her breast for the very pain that was in her.

The mind travels swiftly down the corridors of memory, and in pleasures and pain neither knows nor marks time. To Ephemia the moment seemed

endless, but to the man watching her it was not more than a flash. But he had observed how she clutched at her thinly clad bosom. “You are cold—how thoughtless of me to keep you standing here!” he said in sincere contrition.

“Indeed, it’s my own fault. Oh, Mr. Clarke, I am so grateful for your silence. I hardly knew how to make you understand. You see, mother was instrumental in getting the money, and deception is a fault she finds hard to forgive. As you see, she isn’t entirely well by any means, and I can’t bear to have her troubled unnecessarily.”

“I suspected something of the sort after you kicked me,” he responded mischievously; “it seems an effective aid to intelligence.”

Ephemia smiled her relief and gratitude. “You are a most satisfactory accomplice,” and, a little frightened at what she read in his eyes, hurried to add: “We are all very grateful for your friendship. We would miss you—that is something for one who lives to do good.”

“There now,” he said quietly, “you must not catch your death of cold; there is no question of gratitude between us—service is the privilege of friendship.”

“He is very splendid,” Ephemia said to herself as she watched him hurry down the walk, but the reflection brought no pleasure. Before she slept that night she stole to the window. There were the stars she loved, fairly a-sparkle, and here was the round moon lazily floating up into the sky, like a careless emperor sure of his domain and irresponsible of habit. The great immensity of sky swept on in an endless jeweled sea. All power was there and all peace.

Through her tears the stars grew blurred and soft, creating about their heads a quivering amber halo; almost might one believe them spirits compassionate and understanding. All this loveliness shone down serenely upon her little troubled world. And these same stars, did they seek him out as well? “Oh, Allison,” she sobbed, “wherever you are, look up to the stars and in their shining serenity read the love of my heart.”

CHAPTER XXII.

For a time all went smoothly with the Nichols, and, since Ephemia guarded her secret jealously, Mrs. Freeman had become convinced that the baby's illness had completely transformed its frivolous young mother.

But Eveline was not subject to reflective analysis, her actions were prompted by sudden impulse and were as quickly forgotten as the caprice of a child. So shallow a mind as hers is incapable of premeditative wickedness. Her intention had been of the best when she accepted that small loan from Mrs. Freeman. But on her way to Ella's to solicit that lady's favor she had been captivated by a display of dress in the "Lubbock and Tullis" windows. And, reading a sign to the effect that any of these choice creations might be held on payment of a small deposit, the ten dollars in her pocket-book had gone for that purpose.

So for a few days the memory of her young graces shining forth from that wonderful gown dazzled her into commendable good-nature. This admirable state could not long continue, however, for with each passing day the Patriotic Ball drew nearer and the problem of redeeming that delectable bit of finery began to loom large. Fifty dollars had not seemed a terrific sum to her while gazing on so much chiffon, silk and lace, but now the amount was disheartening. In these straits she flew to Ella, and that accommodating soul, being a customer of long standing at Lubbock's, was able to make arrangements whereby Eveline might have her dress by paying twenty-five dollars in cash and the balance in monthly instalments.

But, despite this stroke of fortune, the eventful day drew on and still she was no nearer realization of her ambition than before. Then, indeed, good-nature fled, and the more she dwelt upon the humiliating fact that a paltry fifteen dollars stood between her and perfect happiness the more bitter became her opinion of poor unsuspecting Walter; nor was this opinion in the slightest tempered by the knowledge that the doctor's bill had been paid with the money he had been scraping together for his insurance policy. Indeed, this constituted her deepest grudge against him.

In desperation rather than hope she thought of the pathetic little cash-box Walter kept in his trunk. She was gloomily certain of its emptiness—thanks to the baby's illness—but there was no harm in making sure. Having pried the box open with a hairpin, she discovered, to her utter amazement, in addition to the insurance policy, their marriage certificate, and a High

School badge, two unmistakable ten dollar bills. Joy of joys! Eveline skipped about the room like a veritable pipping pan, flew to the baby, kissed it fervently, and, radiant with anticipation, made ready to go to town.

Thus it chanced that when Walter arrived home that night the coveted dress lay in silky folds upon the bed—Eveline having chosen this method to be rid of a much dreaded confession. Very coyly she pointed it out to him. Walter stared at the glittering thing in stupid amazement. "But what . . . . but where . . . .," he stuttered.

"Isn't it perfectly adorable? Oh, Walter, you ought to see me in it! And it's really such a bargain! I just borrowed a few dollars to get it."

Walter had been reared in puritanical strictness. To lie was to him an abomination, to steal an ignominious crime, and to borrow well nigh as bad, yet there stood Eveline babbling something about borrowing money to buy this useless bit of satin! He whirled on her fiercely. "Take it back at once, and don't let me catch you at any such foolishness again."

There was such unwonted vehemence in the command that for a moment Eveline quailed, but fear was quickly cancelled by the recollection that only the previous day her ardent admirer had hinted at the dainty accessories so necessary to a pretty woman. Walter was a stingy, hard-hearted, inartistic brute, and she meant to let him know it.

Down below, Mrs. Freeman and Ephemia shivered in horrified silence as the storm of anger steadily increased. "God help us!" broke from Mother Freeman, who was not given to extreme ejaculation, when a frightful crash of breaking glass quite shattered her control.

Finally Eveline shot down the stairs howling like a spanked infant, threatening, as a parting shot, to fly direct to Alex, and the whole world should know her husband's meanness had driven her to it. In the seemingly endless hour which followed, they listened with taut nerves to the restless pacing of Walter's feet. Back and forth, back and forth, like a beast in a cage, he went, and this measured, nervous tread affected them even more than had the terrific din. It possessed so much of the sinister. What thoughts pursued him? What pain? And what might not so tortured a mind conceive?

After a seeming eternity of time the tramping stopped and in the deathly silence they heard his terrible sobbing. Mother Freeman went white, and had Eveline been anywhere near she would most certainly have learned a few illuminating truths. And then, all at once, with a cry of crazed fear, Walter, too, stumbled down the stairs and out of the house.

“Poor boy, he ought to leave her alone,” said Mrs. Freeman, wearily.

“You think he’s gone for her?”

“Of course, Ephemia, he loves the silly girl. But oh, I am afraid. When a man casts aside his self-respect he is ready to do anything—he is become the bondservant of every passion.”

CHAPTER XXIII.

Walter flung out into the night like a man gone mad. All agonies had dwindled down to the one hideous thought that his severity had driven Eveline to a fate worse than death. She was gone, but she must be brought back, she must be saved from this insidious folly, whatever the cost. But in the midst of agonies young hearts find something sustaining. In and out among Walter's distracted thoughts flashed the consoling recollection of his wife's proneness to exaggerate. She might not have meant the dreadful things she uttered; she must have fled to the safe comforts of Ella's bachelor suite, and thither he made his way.

Had he been less distraught he must have divined the reason for that lady's curtness when Ella opened the door to his frantic appeal.

"Well?" she demanded.

"Eveline . . . Eveline . . .," he faltered, "Is she here?"

"Why should she be here?" Ella shot at him. He was all a-tremble now, and the hot blood mounting to his head in dizzying waves made thought curiously painful. "She's gone," he whispered in horror, more to himself than to Ella, whose sharply cut features were blurred and strange to him. She had been instructed to be punitively firm, and was, moreover, a believer in keeping the sinner on the gridiron. "If she's gone you've no one to blame but yourself," she said tartly and banged the door in his face.

Walter stood helplessly at the door, momentarily paralyzed by the horror which swept over him in its loathsome tide. There was truth, then, in all the dreadful things she had said; she was gone! Love and faithfulness had not been enough for her. The baby evidently meant nothing at all. She had renounced them both quickly enough for this man. For the first time now he really considered Alex; in the midst of so much wondering misery he had not donned a personality before. Now he had become real enough—a modern Bluebeard tempting other men's wives into his damning snares. Such an one, false as Judas, Eveline preferred! Rage, white hot and primitive, succeeded this conjecture. If only he knew where to find them how sweet it would be to make them suffer as he had suffered! How he would delight in choking the treacherous smiles from their smirking faces.

But rage could not long uphold such misery. In an agony of remorse Walter drifted back to the river, back to that desolate trail, winding on

mysteriously, under a sable sky, against which the frozen arms of the shivering trees lay like iron bars. On and on he stumbled, neither knowing nor caring whither, until, rounding a bend, the old mill loomed up before him like some grim grey monster sleeping by the icebound river.

A pale ray of moonlight, lying like a yellow ribbon on the snow, roused in him a sudden desire for peace and quiet. It beckoned and invited, that wavering thread of gold, promising so much of comfort and escape; and now that he gave thought to himself he became acutely aware of the cold wind that bit into his thinly clad figure, and of a dull sense of pain which dizzied and benumbed his faculties. In this dazed condition he stumbled on, the wind howling derisively in his ears, the earth taking on an ever deepening melancholy, until he felt himself a dying creature in an already dead land. Except for that ray of yellow light which so mysteriously drew him he had rather just drop by the wayside and let the wind have its way with him.

Finally, having gained the office door, he searched through his pockets for the keys he always carried, and, quite like an automaton, entered the well-known room, switched on the lights, hung up his coat and hat, and, going directly to his desk, sat down.

But now that he was there, he gazed about him curiously. What had he come for? And what was so strange about the place? The Boss's desk, for instance, though familiar enough, seemed bristling and hostile. And why was the fire so low? He had often asked Stephen to make sure of a good fire on the nights he must return to the office. It was all very strange, he thought, as his eyes wandered from one accustomed object to another. Then he caught sight of the huge black safe, squatting like a sulky savage in a distant corner. That brought a gleam of intelligence. He remembered everything now. There were hundreds of dollars in that iron box, locked in its cold safety that very morning by his own hands! The thing fascinated him—he seemed to see, through its glossy surface, where the yellow gold lay cradled like shining seeds of diverse destinies. Yellow gold!—the only thing of paramount value in this world—for which men toiled and struggled, cheated and died with reddened hands, and for which women bartered their very souls!

"I must be mad," he groaned, trying to escape the devastating whirlwind, "I must be mad." But, like an insidious plague, the possibilities of the shining metal enslaved his fancy. Peace and plenty, happiness and comfort, all these were synonymous with gold! Strange suggestions, from some hidden cell of craftiness, thronged upon him. Why should he not make a

mistake in the payroll of the upper mills? Long before he would be called upon to check his cash the little sum he needed to purchase Eveline's happiness might be replaced. He had never appealed for help from home, but now he would telegraph his father, and in the meantime Eveline must be saved.

Trembling with nervous eagerness Walter drew out his ledger. What he had to do must be done swiftly. But alas! never had he seen a more hopeless page. Figures ordinarily familiar and stable had become a mass of dancing rebels. Up and down the neat columns he pursued their elusive course, but all to no purpose. Again that curious numbness laid hold of him. Assurance ebbed, and with it memory . . . what had he wanted with this book anyway? Away he flung it and began a hasty fumbling in his desk. Something hard and shining, like a finger of steel, focussed his attention. A pistol! And in his desk! Why was it there? But of course it was old Stephen's pistol, which he ought to have about his person, but which he always absentmindedly left in the safety of the office.

Walter picked the weapon up, deriving curious comfort from finding it loaded. After all, he thought dully, one had need to be protected in this isolated spot; there was all that gold to safeguard against the morrow, and the pay envelopes as well. He shivered at the thought of those envelopes and the miserly stipend wherewith a man must purchase everything from salt to saving grace.

Then there were the unemployed, the unfortunate derelicts from the mines—what was to restrain them from seizing where they might not earn? What indeed, thought Walter, amazed at the integrity of men who died like rats in their chilly hovels rather than lay hold of the plenty hoarded in another's field. Poor fools, who lived to no one's pleasure and died to no one's grief? Fools! fools! sang his pain-fogged mind, and strange fears like steel claws fastened upon him.

Like one on watch against a dreaded enemy, Walter tiptoed to the door at the back of the room and peered down the corridor running from the office to the warehouse at the rear. In reality this warehouse was no more than one huge ramshackle room, whose outer door opened under the very nose of the mill itself. There was no sound save the whining of the steadily rising wind, and this, like the bagpipes of Misery, resounding through the yawning chasm of corridor and room, created an eery atmosphere. To the distracted young man a hundred weird memories flocked; recollections of reported violence and bloodshed, dreadful fruits of nights such as this, when the elements raged and roused the savage passions.

Well, he would make sure of the money; he would have the satisfaction of handling the grimy canvas bags that sheathed so much of joy and anguish. But oh, to think of all this wealth within grasp of his needy hands, and of the little necessary to purchase Eveline's happiness. An angry puff of wind tore away a loose board somewhere, hurling it to the frozen earth. Walter jumped at the sound, then, his undefined fears whipped into crazy apprehension, and clutching the revolver in cold and nerveless fingers, he hurried to the safe.

All this while Stephen sat huddled by a rusty box-stove in the "lean-to" at the far side of the mill. Through the single cross-barred window he watched the sky, musing on its angry majesty. The clouds were no mere clouds to him, but the winged steeds of Valkyries riding to Valhalla. "Ah," thought he, "somewhere heroes have died . . . . how fast ye ride, daughters of Odin." He felt a deep sympathy with the boisterous wind, tearing and ripping over the docile earth, and, as always, it reminded him of the Old Country and more favored circumstances.

He remembered the times he had ridden over age-old hills under the summer stars, when the winds of the world had come to him with strange songs on their lips and bearing odors fresh from the sea. Follow me! Follow me! so the wind had sung, and he had tried to obey. But always his will-o'-the-wisp danced on the farther and left him disconsolate. Never had he found the land of his heart's desire, never had his soul been satisfied. "I was born too late," the old man sighed, "I would have been happy as a crusader. Life is good only when spent in some worthy cause." Then he chuckled, "Not that it must of necessity be so wise a cause—the love of it's the thing!"

Glancing at the clock on the rude shelf behind the stove he saw that he must make his rounds again. "Well, well," he sighed, while buttoning up his shabby overcoat, "this is a time to bear in mind the philosophies of Aurelius—so my mischievous Phemy would say, bless her young heart." The wind caught at him fiercely, as though it would whirl him away, as soon as he stepped from the shed. Stephen laughed softly. "No, no, my good fellow, not now; some other day we'll flit away together," said he to the hooting wind, and, enjoying all that elation which the meeting with an old friend gives, he trudged on, peering here and pausing there, ever careful and conscientious. He had circled the mill and was about to turn back when a dim light from one of the warehouse windows caught his eye.

"Who could be in the building at this hour?" he wondered, vaguely apprehensive; "what business could be so pressing as to keep a man this late

on such a night?" Someone was there, sure enough, and it was his duty to see about it. Excitement tugged at his heart as he opened the battered door and cautiously entered. Strange that he should now fall a-trembling, be inclined to bolt, like a child frightened of the dark! For one moment he contended with this humiliating sensation, and then, chuckling at his unwarranted tremors, softly threaded his way through the cluttered room and entered the long corridor.

Peculiar reluctance laid hold of Stephen in this moment of time as, like a thief, he crept up that dim hall; strange fear as well, which set his heart to beating and strung his nerves as tight as fluted strings.

Every Norseman believes in "warnings," yet Stephen's thoughts were not of himself. Some evil was afoot, perhaps made possible through his negligence—this was his dread. But this with every other idle supposition was drowned in a sickening nausea at the sight which greeted him when, after a seemingly endless time, he stood riveted opposite the office door.

Walter, his face curiously gray and contorted, was stooping over the safe, while at his feet lay a motley pile of papers, boxes, books and—alarming sight!—a heap of gold.

"Herre Gud!" thought Stephen, "the boy has lost his mind." As if to verify the conviction Walter broke into mad laughter. "Gold, gold, gold! the blood and tears and souls of men!" he shrilled as he crushed his heel into the gleaming pile spilling from its grimy canvas pocket.

"Herre Gud!" muttered Stephen, and in the horror of the moment discretion vanished. Perhaps some sound escaped him, perhaps he stumbled —they never knew. But Walter's crazed brain was abnormally alert to sounds, and like a sharply released spring he whirled around and fired.

For one sickening moment Stephen wavered there in the doorway, but only for a moment. "Walter, Walter, my boy!" he cried, his two old hands lifted imploringly, and then, with a shuddering moan, pitched forward and fell in a pitiful, grotesque heap.

That horrible shot, reverberating evilly through the night, cleared the madness from Walter's weary mind. He stood for a second or two in paralyzed horror, gazing down at the smoking thing in his hand and at the crumpled figure before him. Then with a wild cry from the depths of agony he flung the sickening object away and ran to the wounded man.

"My God, my God!" he groaned, as he turned the inert body over and with trembling hands began a fumbling search. With inexplicable relief he

found that the heart beat steadily. Perhaps the shot had merely grazed him . . . . perhaps—perhaps—but his hand returned from the old man's breast red and warm. "Oh, God! oh, God!" The cry was a prayer if ever prayer sprang from human agony.

He rushed for the water jar standing in the corner and began bathing Stephen's face and the circular wound, so like a little livid mouth, low under the right breast. After an infinity of tortuous time to Walter, the old man's eyes fluttered open. "Oh, Stephen, Stephen, I thought I'd killed you!" he cried in hysterical relief. "In God's name say you're not going to die! What shall I do? Stephen, Stephen!"

Always so futile in the ordinary affairs of life, Stephen's mind was now quiet and ready for action. This was a situation to his fancy, and despite the pounding waves which threatened to bear him off to some isle of oblivion, Stephen managed to smile up into the fear-distorted face above him.

Walter shuddered with agony at the sight of that smile, and he had thought there was no more to be suffered. But he pulled himself together. "I think the bleeding has stopped," he faltered.

Stephen nodded. "Walter," he managed to murmur feebly at last, "put everything back in the safe . . . get the doctor . . . . say nothing . . . . nothing . . . ." Down dropped the lids over the kindly grey eyes and for a moment Walter thought him dead. But Stephen's mouth twisted into a slow smile when the anxious hands swept over him, and he shook his head feebly.

The doctor! Merciful heavens, what had he been thinking of?—why hadn't he called him at once? Walter flew to the telephone. Doctors are not more easily roused than other folk, so it seemed, and he fumed and fretted before he finally received a rasping promise from Doctor Todd. There remained the safe. "Oh, my God!" he gasped, on beholding with sane eyes the general disarray, "I must have been absolutely crazy!" But ought he to leave Stephen? Was he to let his old friend lie there while he filed away the gold like a crafty miser? Yet it was Stephen's will, he would have it so. With mechanical exactness, then, despite his feverish haste, Walter began restoring order from confusion, and, when the doctor's cutter came to a jangling halt before the office every vestige of his folly had been effaced, every little sign which might betray him entirely removed.

Dr. Todd was a blunt, capable man, and wasted no words on Walter. "H-m-m . . . . nasty little thing, eh?" said he on examining the wound, "Well, well," then with incredible swiftness did all that might be done at the time.

“Now then, young man,” he said at conclusion, “we must get him home. And how, pray, did this occur?”

Stephen had been storing strength for this emergency. “A stupid accident,” he said with remarkable clarity and emphasis. Walter’s face had gone deadly white, a fact which did not escape the shrewd physician. He shrugged and lifted his shaggy eyebrows. “Well, well, all right, man. Get your things, we’d better hustle him to more comfortable quarters,” he gruffly ordered poor stricken Walter.

CHAPTER XXIV.

Ephemia had found sleep difficult after the excitement of the evening. She tossed about, torturing herself with gloomy forebodings, and when she finally fell into restless slumber it was only to dream of conflict and distress. Out of this uneasy sleep she awakened to the curious sensation of approaching evil. Sitting up in bed, she listened with that acuteness which dark hours and terror bring. Yes, she was hearing sleighbells; the sound was singularly disquieting and mysterious, tinkling through the dismal grey of an early dawn. She flung on her dressing-gown and slippers and, hurrying to the window, peered out over the ghostly, mist-hung countryside. Shock, like a sudden blow upon a wound, passed through her on perceiving the Doctor's "grays," a familiar sight at Esk, turning in at the lane.

Her anxiety switched to her mother, worn with nervous strain and patient hours of coaxing the deserted baby; she must not be wakened now. With this thought in mind she slipped to her mother's door, closed it softly, and then, flinging a shawl over her shoulders, stepped out into the cold morning mist.

There was no mistaking the huddled figure the doctor was easing down into Walter's arms. "Oh, mother, mother!" thought the girl in a passion of protective sympathy. Yet the Doctor found her admirably quiet and resolute when the sad procession entered the porch.

"Oh, Dr. Todd," she implored, "don't let mother know just yet if it's at all possible, she's had such a hard night."

"Sensible creature," thought the Doctor, not without surprise to find this quality in one so young, and a woman at that. But despite their stealthy caution while getting the wounded man comfortably to bed, Vilborg awoke and demanded to know what was wrong.

Dr. Todd, seeing that Ephemia quailed at the thought of breaking the news to her mother, assumed the task himself. She heard him in strained silence. "Don't let it upset you too much, Mrs. Freeman," he finished; "there's no good in your getting ill as well. I shouldn't want to find two patients waiting me when I return later in the day."

Her head lifted smartly. "You'll find that I shan't fail Stephen now," she said.

When he was gone and Ephemia had helped her to dress she hobbled to her husband's room. A long brooding moment she stood gazing down upon his drawn, greyish countenance, a wealth of love and tenderness in her eyes. Not until she was seated in the old rocker Ephemia had drawn up to the bedside for her was she aware of the presence of Walter, huddled in abject misery on a little home-made settee in the corner. She was shocked at his appearance and in the midst of her distress turned to him in sympathy.

"Walter, my dear boy, pull yourself together; nothing is ever as bad as it seems," she whispered. Whereat, to her utter bewilderment, he cast himself at her feet. "Forgive me, forgive me! Oh, Mrs. Freeman, God's my witness I didn't know what I was doing! Oh, why didn't I shoot myself?"

Slowly her thoughts took shape. So that was it! Walter had been about to take his life and Stephen had intervened. She stared at the bent head with sudden loathing while she recalled the many kindnesses done him and his wayward wife. "Is misery the one reward of virtue?" she thought indignantly; "must every idealist be trampled under the feet of those whom he would lead?" How many simple hearts were ground in the winepress to produce one cup of joy for the lips of some undeserving fool! But he was sobbing now; she could not escape the cruel sound, it ate into her very soul. Hesitant and trembling, her hand stole out and touched him gently. "There, there, Walter, we will trust in God to make all right again." Down went the tumbled head on her knees, and she feared she would cry out under the intensity of his young arms. Tears welled to her eyes, tears of tender pity for youth which forever must stumble about in a wilderness of disillusionment and pain before it learns to seek the peace of God in the high places of its own soul.

Out of her deep compassion she found words to console him. They must be of high heart for Stephen's sake, she said; he must be humored in all things. Whatever he had commanded Walter must do—that was his reparation—and she had no doubt but what they would live to smile at their present distress.

Then very sensibly she sent Walter upstairs to lie down, an order he obeyed with natural reluctance, for the thought of entering those rooms was hateful; and while he contended with an army of tormenting fears and accusations Vilborg and her daughter watched beside Stephen.

The morning lengthened and Harold, scrambling up from his healthy sleep, rubbed his young eyes in astonishment to learn that his father was

dangerously ill, and tried his clumsy best to be quiet while preparing for school.

Near noon Stephen came out of his stupor long enough to smile at his wife and to whisper something about Walter. “It’s all right,” said she. “I’ll watch the boy.” He nodded, and slipped off again into the peculiar chasm, dark and swirling, which seemed to be drawing him deeper and deeper into its hungry embraces. He tossed about in this fevered helplessness and moaned in his sleep; while from time to time Vilborg felt his hands and forehead and wondered anxiously why the doctor remained away so long.

Into this troubled atmosphere Eveline presently hurled herself, a trifle shamefaced, it is true, but otherwise her usual brazen self. She flounced into the dining-room demanding to know if Bumpkins still slept. Mrs. Freeman hurried from the sickroom and, having closed the door behind her, resolutely faced a grim duty.

“The child is well enough,” she said, “but there are things I must say to you.”

“Now I’m in for it,” thought Eveline, shrugging impertinent young shoulders.

“Sit down,” said Vilborg imperatively, and Eveline sat down.

“Yours is not a subtle character, hence it is best to speak plainly. We have endured your ill-temper and childish tantrums because of Walter, and also because we supposed that, like many another frivolous girl, you would eventually come to your senses.”

“See here . . .” began Eveline indignantly. “Be quiet!” was the stinging retort, “you are done with talking nonsense for some time to come. Stephen is lying in there wounded, we don’t know how seriously,”—here the impassioned voice faltered—“and it was your husband who shot him!”

Eveline’s eyes all but popped from her head. “Good Lord!” she gasped, and was again silenced by the stern woman before her.

“If Stephen dies you know what that implies,” Vilborg went on relentlessly. “Walter was evidently planning to rob the safe.”

“Walter was going to rob the safe!” Eveline repeated in horror.

“No greater crime, perhaps, than robbing a husband’s cash-box.”

“So he’s been tattling! Well, you see now what kind of man I’ve got—what I’ve had to put up with.”

“Eveline!” Now indeed were the floods loosened as Mrs. Freeman faced the girl in flaming justice, pouring out upon her scathing and unmistakable truths—bitter truths Eveline should have heard long ago. Under this lashing storm all her petty excuses, her comforting half-truths, were swept aside and she saw herself as she was—selfish, small-minded, grasping and vain-glorious. She felt very much as Eve must have felt when confronted by the angel of the flaming sword.

“You are the most wretched of women,” Mrs. Freeman concluded; “you have not only killed Walter’s love for you, but his self-respect as well. Though in reality the soul of honor, he will always doubt himself. You put him through an inquisition of torture until he was ready to do anything to satisfy your insatiable greed.”

As if by appointment, Walter came lagging down the stairs. He had dozed off to sleep and was wakened by Mrs. Freeman’s just denouncement. But he had no intention of going to his wife; on the contrary his one desire was to escape her. But Eveline, by now weeping copiously, felt terrified and deserted, and at sight of him rushed into the hall.

“Oh, Walter, Walter!” she cried, and would have flung herself into his arms had he not been too quick for her. He drew back and faced her stiffly, with hard, intolerant eyes. “Don’t come near me, you devil!” he shot at her fiercely. “If Stephen dies I’ll wring your silly neck!” With which threat he slammed out and left her in a sobbing heap on the stairs.

Mrs. Freeman quietly closed the dining-room door. It seemed an ominous sound to Eveline. “Oh, oh,” she wailed, “I’m all alone! They hate me. Oh, my baby! where’s my baby?” Back she flew only to find the unfriendly door bolted within. For the first time Eveline knew heart-rending fear. “Oh, oh, I’ll be good, I’ll be good,” she sobbed, like the chastened and terrified child she was.

But the door remained closed to her tears and implorations. After a little the terrifying thought of Stephen lying so near, perhaps at the point of death, put an end to self-pity. Awed and sorely afraid she slunk away upstairs and in curious docility began setting the chaotic rooms to rights.

CHAPTER XV.

All that dreary afternoon Mrs. Freeman left Eveline to her remorse, but when Walter returned in the evening she managed diplomatically to effect a truce between them. She made it very clear that all differences of opinion must be subjugated to the one idea of serving Stephen.

But the first few days were very trying none the less, so that when the crisis apparently was passed all of his willing and devoted nurses were profoundly relieved and grateful. In this stage, while Stephen was as yet banned from conversation, Ephemia had recourse to Aurelius and whiled away the long hours by reading to her father the mellow philosopher's tolerant maxims.

Meanwhile a great deal of curiosity concerning the accident was rife at the mills. If it was true that the shot had passed through the lower lobe of the lung, how could it be an accidental and self-inflicted wound? It was suspicious on the face of it—so raged the gossip until finally the drift of it penetrated to Mr. Salisbury's sanctuary and began to trouble that august dignitary. Mr. Salisbury prided himself on his business acumen and ability to judge character. He had come through many an altercation with Mr. Tomlinson on account of that careless mortal's haphazard ways. But upon interviewing both the office manager and the foreman of the mills he found them both absolutely certain, not only of Stephen's honesty, but of his sanity as well. Then the fact remained that nothing had been tampered with and there had been no signs of violence or struggle. This inability to explain away the mystery was decidedly annoying to Mr. Salisbury.

Eventually he decided to visit the old watchman and put an end to all the foolish rumor and supposition, which he was sure would have an ill effect upon his "hands" and, as likely as not, would bring on a crime wave by attracting the attention of thieves and highwaymen to the possibilities centered in the isolated mills.

But he found Stephen outrageously silent and singularly stubborn. He had no explanation to offer, he hadn't the slightest idea of how he could have been so clumsy. He admitted with sly amusement that none but a fool would attempt so clumsy a suicide.

Mr. Salisbury quite lost patience and became disagreeably suspicious of this humble patient's respect. It was as good as defiance to evade each and

every question howsoever diplomatically it were done.

“But, my good man, you must realize that in a case like this we can’t hold ourselves responsible for your misfortune. On the other hand, had you suffered in our service, I may say with due humility, you would not have found us wanting in appreciation,” he said.

Vilborg, who was stationed by her husband’s bedside, turned upon the astonished man haughtily. “You must excuse my husband from further speech. He tires very easily as yet,” she said, and handed him his hat, an impertinence he punished by saying that when the month was up he would be forced to replace Stephen at the mills.

“How much of grace is remaining?” asked Stephen, when the pompous individual had been ushered out.

“An eternity,” said Vilborg briskly, smiling into his tired eyes. “And now you are going to sleep, for there is a more pleasant surprise in store for you.”

This surprise was the expected arrival of Caroline, who on being notified of Stephen’s accident decided to leave the Rockies to their grandeur and eternal snows and to hurry home. And a very perturbed and testy Caroline she proved to be upon arrival.

“What’s all this new foolishness of Stephen’s, I’d like to know?” she demanded, as soon as her hat was removed. Caroline never talked freely until her hat was safely out of the way. Vilborg made the usual explanation, to which the fiery lady listened intently, not failing, however, to mark the crowded condition of the house and the ravages of weariness and anxiety so plainly visible on the two women smiling upon her.

“Land sakes! why didn’t you tell me you were so hard pressed?” she thundered irrelevantly.

“But we are well enough, Caroline; indeed we’ve gotten on famously.”

“Fiddledediddle and foolishness! Don’t try to fling dust in my eyes. Why, look at Ephemia; ’pon my word she looks like a withered gherkin—shrunken, all the juice of life gone out of her. Good land! I could have ordered that idiot Katie up here instead of keeping her snoring around the house in Alueez. Ephemia could have been in Normal, as she ought to be. And now to think Stephen goes fooling with firearms! I’m absolutely out of patience with the man!”

But at sight of him all her gruffness and assurance ebbed away.

“Why, Stephen, my dear . . . my dear . . . you . . . you . . . .” With an effort she flung off humiliating weakness. “Land sakes, brother, I could bawl at the sight of you, it’s that pleasant to see you, ridiculous human that you are,” and she fell to stroking his hand in silence.

“Now, Caroline, I’ll soon be myself. I’ve been gloriously spoiled these days.”

But she saw that he was restless and uneasy, and that an indefinable something had crept into his emaciated face—a look one finds on the calm, cold faces of marble images, where memory seems to sit enshrined in eternal peace, forever aloof from the pain and sordidness of life. Caroline did not define what she saw in her brother’s countenance; she wished to be rid of the fear it engendered. He was tired, that was all. With customary good sense she broke away after a little, leaving him to his wife’s quieting influence.

“Shall I read you something, Stephen?” asked Vilborg. “I think not,” he answered wearily, “no, I think not. Come, Vilborg, hold my hand; I’d like that best. Do you know, I’ve been thinking of so many things this day . . . . of the Old Country . . . . of the sea. Do you remember how we sailed up the Fjord amid the ice-capped mountains the summer we were married?”

“Stephen, I think you should rest quietly.” “And you,” he went on, disobeying her, “thought that if we could ascend those mountains we might perhaps see your old home in the distance—the home of your fathers these hundred years past and which you left for worthless me.”

“It’s not very gallant of you to make light of the man I love,” she chided him tenderly. His hand tightened upon hers. “Vilborg, my dear, I must make a confession at last. The past seems very clear now. I always was full of fancies; common things were not for me; I must do valiant things and great. But something was lacking. I could dream my dream, but never could realize it. I could glimpse a mirage of Beauty, but never the thing itself. I have drifted and dreamed, carried along comfortably by your courage, secure in the knowledge of your care. When I consider what you might have been but for me I am sorely chastened. I expect my only excuse is the human one of relying upon a generous God; and the God of my soul was made manifest in you.”

Unconsciously Vilborg’s proud head lifted in that queenly way of hers, and the tears stealing down her cheeks were grateful tears from a full heart.

“Thank you, Stephen dear; if I deserve reward this is an ample one. You spoke of the mountains we aspired to in youth. My dear one, have we not reached the summit now? If our old eyes were less dim might we not see as in a mirage all that makes the soul’s home? I would not have gotten here into this high place without your vision, Stephen. I too have been thinking much of late—mostly of the many men who have dreamed the same dream and died for it. Perhaps each in turn knew despair—cried out in the end to be left so utterly alone. But I think the hearts of these departed dreamers beat louder and louder upon the world’s consciousness. Some day there will be enough of these noble dead to fully rouse the world’s sluggish consciousness.”

Stephen smiled at her, and the smile lit up the pallor of his face as the sun lights up a mass of winter cloud.

“I rather think, my dear, that to such as you the Lord entrusted His Comforter. ‘I shall not leave you comfortless’,” he murmured in dreamy weariness . . . “ ‘In my father’s house are many mansions’—for the weak and the strong, for the foolish and the wise—I rather think it must be so.”

“Stephen,” she implored, “you must sleep now. Dr. Todd will soon be here to dress your wound; you must sleep, my beloved. Doubt is but the shadow of Reason stumbling on to Truth.”

CHAPTER XXVI.

In the meantime aunt and niece exchanged news and confidences in the cheerful old kitchen. They talked of many things—of Alueez, of the far Canadian West, of Neely; of everything, in fact, except what lay closest to heart—and all the while they watched the clock, wondering why doctors take their profession so coolly.

At last they caught the welcome sound of the smartly stepping "grays" and their lively accompaniment of tinkling bells. Ephemia sped to the door. Dr. Todd was not alone, the young clergyman was with him, a circumstance not at all unusual, for he had been a regular and helpful visitant. Vilborg hastened to lay this fact before her relative. Caroline listened to these eager explanations and entertained her own doubts.

Dr. Todd had a taste of Caroline's customary gruffness, which, however disturbed him no more than a puff of the wind he was so used to face. "You are late, Doctor," she snapped, "a habit with your profession, I've noticed." He laughed good-naturedly as he flung off his greatcoat and went to the fire to warm himself before visiting the sickroom. "Had a nasty burn to mend—woman upset an oil lamp in the woodshed—burned half the house and most of herself—don't expect we can do much for her," said he cryptically.

"Land sakes!" cried Caroline, "fires seem the order of the day. On my way up here I read of Bronson's store burning at Alueez, and in the same paper of a big fire in the Tomlinson camps. Sort of mess, that; young surveyor—forget his name—got pretty badly battered up saving some drunken wretch or other; silly sort of things to do, say I."

"Yes," said the Doctor, "these things seem to come in epidemics; just now I expect we'd better be seeing about our patient."

Caroline made ready to follow, but Ephemia, who had listened to this desultory conversation with rising apprehension, flew to her side.

"Oh, Aunt Caroline, who was hurt? Tell me, tell me—I—I knew so many . . . ."

Caroline was astonished at the girl's evident anxiety. No abstract sympathy was this, nor idle curiosity. Then she remembered that the Tomlinson camps were comparatively close to Neely, where Ephemia had taught. "That explains it," she thought.

“Fiddlededididdle, my girl, there’s nothing to be so upset about; only, as I said, it seems to me it would have been wiser to leave that drunken Frenchman Pierre to his fate—a chap who’ll go crazy over another man’s woman isn’t worth risking leg and limb for.”

“Pierre?” gasped Ephemia, “but I know Pierre—oh, Aunt Caroline!”

“Well, bless my soul,” said she, a dozen uncomfortable conjectures preying upon her mind; but she must away to Stephen. “You’ll find the paper in my handbag. Don’t destroy it; it’s the first Alueez Post I’ve seen in weeks, and I want to read every line of it,” she instructed her niece, then with an impatient shrug followed the Doctor.

None of this or its significance had escaped Mr. Clarke. Instinctively he knew that Ephemia’s concern was personal. Someone in Neely was very dear. The thought stung him to sudden jealousy, but his natural generosity conquered.

“Would you like me to read it?” he asked, for now that she had found the paper she seemed incapable of further effort and stood, a slender wraith of fear, staring down at the horrible headlines. His voice recalling her, she wavered a moment, made a pitiful gesture toward her heart, met his sympathetic eyes and managed a wry little smile. “No, thank you. If it’s as bad as I think I’d rather read it myself. I couldn’t bear to hear it.”

The young clergyman left her at that and went to the window. It was beginning to snow and a quivering mist hung over everything. His gaze wandered down the winding trail to where a maze of whitened shrubbery hid it from view; but the trail wound on—whither his limited vision might not tell him. “Such is life,” he thought, “a glimpse, as through a needle’s eye, of beauty and rapture; a first faint note of an eternal symphony; then the eye is veiled and the ear stopped.” And musing thus he felt the sadness of the world closing about him. That awful sadness, spun from the puzzled misery of countless millions stumbling about in their sightless and soundless existence, inarticulate of the woe that is in them; a million-headed giant, whimpering in undefined terror or roaring in helpless rage at the feet of a God who heeds this turmoil only as the tuning of a string destined some day to give forth sweeter sound.

As for Ephemia, her heart was sick within her. No need to read these pages; she already knew their import, yet she must force her mind to the details. Tears and terror and relief—all these were in her heart. She had waited so long in uncertainty that, now that it was ended, her relief amounted almost to joy. But then she had doubted him, and this was a

dagger not to be evaded. With dry eyes and in deadly calm she regarded the sensational headlines.

"Mystery of Neely fires now fully explained! Hero of the hour may not survive injuries!" Then followed the particulars. "Popular interest has been much stirred by reports of the Neely fire, not the least of which interest centres around the figure of Allison Brett, surveyor for the Salisbury & Tomlinson Co., whose injuries, it is feared, are greater than at first was suspected. Mr. Brett was struck by a falling beam just as he was emerging from the blazing building with his inert human burden. Peculiarly enough, it is now thought that Pierre Deschambeau, the man Mr. Brett risked his life to save, was responsible for the fire. It is known that he was drinking heavily, and he is supposed to have fallen asleep over his pipe—at all events, the fire spread from the neighborhood of his bunk."

So much Ephemia managed to read in a benumbed and curiously detached state; but there followed swiftly a hundred scorching visions. She saw it all—that hungry pit of smoke and flame, and Allison, in his beautiful, impulsive youth, making the heroic sacrifice. Oh, the reporter knew not the half of it! To him Allison had merely saved a wretched "lumber-jack" half crazed with drink. But she knew he had plunged into that hell of leaping destruction to save that other Pierre, whose tenderness and child-heartedness had been demonstrated by Anna's sickbed. Oh, the pity of it all! What a long chain of suffering sprung from one small folly!

Yet there was rejoicing, too, in her heart. Allison had not been found wanting when life made its great demand. All her Viking ancestry, manifested in her emotional restraint and clear courage, reacted to the thought. She was proud, as her forbears had been proud when their warrior dead were carried home on the shields of respectful retainers.

But, after all, the patient centuries had filed away much of that granite hardness which made her ancient race the scourge and terror of the seas. Her pride could not long sustain her. But of all the stabbing pain the knowledge of her own doubt was the most relentless. She had not been much wiser than poor Anna for all that she had observed of the fruits of doubt. Oh, had she never doubted Allison he would now unattestably and eternally have been hers to enshrine and hold inviolate in her heart.

"Love is not love which alteration knows, or bends with the remover to remove." Now she understood what the great soul of the poet had divined. A little cry escaped her, for it seemed as though she could not bear that life should be so remorselessly just. Surely, if he were dead, she might be

permitted to treasure the memory of their brief happiness without these intrusions of prodding conscience!

The man at the window winced at the sound of the cry and came to her, eager to serve, his heart in his eyes. “My dear, my dear!” he cried, as little master of his utterance as she, “I would that I might help you. Ephemia, my dear one, all I am and can do is yours to command.”

The words were stripped of meaning and scarcely intelligible to the girl, yet something of their tenderness invaded her suffering consciousness and fell like balm on her bruised young spirit. She held out her hands—small delicately made hands, now roughened from faithful labors—in the groping gesture of the blind. “He is dead,” she whispered, “and I don’t know where they have taken him.”

“Oh, my dear,” he pleaded, “don’t credit these papers too much, they traffic in the sensational. We must never lose hope.”

Ephemia prayed then, as never before, for courage; and the conflict of contending emotions was so clearly reflected in her sensitive face that it was almost more than he could bear. She was so young and so valiant, so tenderly alive to the winds of emotion—a slender harp formed to interpret the music of life. But her struggle was the struggle of a little child fighting tears at the breaking of a rainbow-tinted bauble, and he longed beyond all else to cradle her in his arms, close against his warm heart, away from all this pain and weariness. She never knew how great was the victory when, eventually, she managed a wavering little smile that made her face a flower of tenderness; but he never forgot it.

“You are very patient with me; I ought not to think of myself at a time like this.”

“You are all that is noble and brave,” he returned, with an intensity which alarmed her; “and as I said before, whatever I can do to help be sure to command me.”

“I’m afraid there is nothing you can do, my friend, but your sympathy is what one might expect of such as you.”

Grateful little speech, which hurt him none the less. Love speaks not of gratitude, but takes its own. However, he smiled into her serious and troubled little face. “You are not very complimentary; surely something can be done. You spoke of not knowing where he had been taken—I presume you mean the young man who was injured—but of course he must have been taken to Alueez. There is no difficulty about telegraphing the

hospitals." He was rewarded by the look of joy which leaped to Ephemia's eyes. "Oh, how stupid I am, how very, very stupid! Of course you are right, and of course I shall take advantage of your kindness."

Impulsively Ephemia caught his hand and pressed it to her cheek. "You are like one of us, and we never could have managed without your cheerful influence and sympathy in those first terrible days of father's illness. Believe me most humbly grateful."

He laughed at that and accused her of flattery, but there was no laughter in his heart when he went to do her errand.

CHAPTER XXVII.

Dr. Todd made no secret of his anxiety that evening when he returned. Stephen was sinking fast; his wound had broken afresh and was bleeding inwardly, a circumstance the Doctor attributed to undue emotional stress, and, thinking this, glared at poor Caroline, whose iron optimism was for the moment completely shattered. Whereupon Mrs. Freeman quietly reminded them both of Salisbury's impertinent visit, and then, like a general marshalling the remnant of a doomed army, she commanded her broken family that there must be no tears, no excitement, nothing to further distress the sufferer. She portioned out the tasks each loving one might do and the hours wherein they might serve. To judge by her activities and constant vigilance she might never have known a day's discomfort and worry.

But even Mrs. Freeman's fortitude was shaken the memorable evening when Stephen insisted upon taking leave of Walter. "It is scarcely wise just now, my dear," she demurred faintly. He smiled and reached for her hand. "You are not deceiving yourself, Vilborg?" Her answer came with difficulty. "No, Stephen, I am not deceived."

"A good woman is a pilot of souls," he murmured, more to himself than to her, for that relentless weariness which weighed down his old body had hold of him again. But he returned to his object, just as a bit of driftwood returns again and again to the shore on the crest of the waves which shattered its moorings. "Even now I must rely on your strength to finish what I've begun. Walter will be all for retribution; poor boy, as though that were in human power! Oh, my dear, if we who are done with life's weariness might only leave a message for the feverish young heart. . . . Love, love, that is all!"

"Yes, Stephen, that is all; but the drums of life have always drowned the little fluted singing of the soul."

Despite his infirmity he must challenge that. "Ah, but not forever. A child in the shadow of a great cathedral with chiming bells may beat upon a little drum and have ears for this alone; but in the end we shall all hear the greater music, all follow the chiming of the spirit, and not the clanging drum of physical desire. You will humor me about the boy?"

There was no denying him, so Walter was sent for. He was reduced to panic. Until now the grief-shriven couple upstairs had hoped on blindly; but

Ephemia's sad errand shattered their illusions and left them comfortless. Once in the sickroom all energy seemed to ebb from the wretched young man, and he fell to his knees in a shuddering heap beside the bed.

There is something of mystery and much of glory in the tenacity of the human will in its final flashes, in its faithful defence of physical loves when all that is mortal is dropping away.

"My boy, there is nothing to regret; death is not a calamity but a great adventure. If you prize me a little think of me only with pleasure. I would be done with distress and the purgatory of knowing myself the cause of another soul's misery. Promise me not to grieve at that which brings me only liberty and peace, and promise to press on to success."

"Oh, my God, I can't bear it! I can't live with this guilt on my mind; I must give myself up. Punishment has no terror, I'd welcome it; but this awful knowledge hanging over me through the years—I can't, I couldn't endure it! I'd rather die, as I ought."

Each breath caused Stephen pain; every word took its greedy toll of his remaining strength. His shrunken eyes sent an appeal to his faithful wife. White as death and determined as justice, she gripped the boy's shoulder and shook him. "Walter, don't you see your cruelty, your selfishness? What if it is difficult to bear your burden of remorse—which of us is without a similar burden? You speak of punishment, of a life for life retribution; but who is the creditor if not Stephen? Why not permit him to adjudge this punishment? My poor boy, I have seen much of life and its mistaken justice, which adds to rather than detracts from the general misfortunes of life. Stephen is thinking of your little son, who needs you as none other needs you, and I—why, I have in mind your mother, tired and old, as I'm tired and old."

Stephen made one more effort. His feeble hand sought and caressed Walter's tumbled head. "And there's Eveline, with all her little virtues to ripen—they are there. Promise me, lad, don't leave little Eveline to flounder."

"Oh, Stephen," wept the agonized sufferer, "I'll do my best, so help me God. I'll do my best to live as you would have me live."

Over Stephen's face spread a smile warm and glowing, lighting to spiritual beauty the wan and wasted features. "Vilborg," he whispered fervently, "now I can pass without regret. My heart's dearest, you have piloted me past the final rocks . . . now for the open sea. . . ."

She was kneeling beside him now. “Yes, Stephen,” she murmured brokenly, “now you may pass in confidence.” But here the proud head dropped to the pillow beside him. Even the strongest meet their Waterloo.

Some hours later the dying man roused himself from the drowsy coma which had enveloped him. “Mother,” he cried, “where are they—Phemy, Harold, Caroline?” They were all about him, humble, reverent, grateful for his flickering smile, his feeble caresses, knowing at last the ineffable treasure of Love’s gentleness. And he, gazing from one fond face to another, understood—and the knowledge was as glorious as the vision of St. Paul, the truth that whosoever holdeth so much love is one of life’s conquerors. For him there is no death; he lives on in the hearts he leaves behind him.

The dying man longed to explain this splendid truth to the stricken ones about him, but already he seemed removed and a long way off; he doubted whether words of his could reach them. He saw them all through a soft and gentle haze, and the sight was as lovely as a field of marigolds seen through a mist of summer vapour and slanting sunlight. And so his mind wandered, seeing many things, understanding much, finding beauty everywhere. How gloriously the sun sparkled on the inaccessible mountain peaks at home—this he remembered clearly—and love shines brightest where it crowns the cold peaks of what have seemed unconquerable difficulties. Only this glory of love, closing all about him, seemed real; and the brighter it glowed the more familiar it seemed. Oh, now he knew whence it had sprung; it had always burned for him in Vilborg’s eyes; strong and true, it lighted up his darkness now. He must let her know; she must not be left in ignorance of so sweet a truth. One final effort of the fainting will. “Vilborg, Vilborg, my love—my light!”

“Christ receive him,” she petitioned in accordance with her ancient faith.

“Into Thy mercy,” responded Caroline.

BOOK III.

SONG

IN THE DAWNING SPARROWS CHIRP INCESSANTLY.

"Out of the heart a rapture,
Then a pain;
Out of the dead cold ashes
Life again."

—*J. B. Tabb.*

CHAPTER I.

Howsoever grief might affect Caroline Bjornson, it did not for long dull her practical good sense and executive ability. She saw that Vilborg was prostrated; now, if ever, was the time to take command. Stephen's body must be taken to Alueez; it were unthinkable to do otherwise. What was more, she intended to take mother and daughter home with her, for she had learned that the Freeman finances were negligible. Any other course were pure folly, and so she told the widow.

Vilborg agreed, as she now agreed to everything. For the time being she was a broken reed; all the vitality was gone out of her; everything was alike meaningless, and without power to either disturb or bring her comfort. She watched with dim eyes the mournful preparations going on about her as one watches the activities of a neighbor; interested after a fashion, but not deeply concerned.

Poor, foolish Eveline wept inconsolably, and would have embraced with eagerness some such penance as the ancient monks devised for their simple followers. It would have solaced her to creep on tender knees over pebbled ways to some sainted shrine, there to be shriven of her sense of sin. But, aside from a curt reprimand administered now and again by Caroline when her doleful lamentations irritated that sensible lady, no one took much note of her; certainly not her wretched husband, who was quite ill and utterly wrapt in grief. And Caroline, knowing well the healing power of work, decided to leave all the packing of personal goods and the storing of the furniture to the care of the unhappy couple.

Caroline had very definite ideas as to what honors were due the dead man. In life he may have been weak and curiously unfortunate, but in death he had assumed all the dignity, commanded all the respect once so coveted by his race. There must be nothing lacking—Stephen should not pass without those ceremonies synonymous with decency in the conventional mind. So she declared, and immediately notified all the old friends at Alueez that they might be prepared to honor a good neighbor as they saw fit.

Mrs. Freeman voiced only one request; she would have none other than the young minister to officiate. Hence it came about that he made one of the sad little procession which left the old house by the Esk on a brilliant December day, a fortnight before Christmas.

His first opportunity to speak with Ephemia alone since that ill-fated afternoon of Caroline's arrival came in the train. In the dreary days that followed she had been singularly unapproachable in her grief. To him she seemed as a priestess desolated, and brooding upon the ruins of her temple, to remind whom that some broken column of loveliness was yet remaining seemed but added injury.

But he had not forgotten her concern nor his promise. "Ephemia," he began, for they had cast aside formalities in the hours they had suffered together, "I wired the hospitals, and though there is little enough to tell, that little seems hopeful. The matron advised me that Mr. Brett had been taken home, but, unfortunately, had forgotten just where—some little village in Dakota."

"And we are taking father home," said Ephemia with weary finality, and resumed her unseeing scrutiny of the whitened country through which they were passing. He tried to reason with her, to explain that no hospital authorities would permit a patient's removal unless that patient were out of immediate danger. It was all futile; she was so stunned by the chain of tragic events in which she had part that hope seemed a very impertinence.

Realizing something of what was passing in her mind, he left her to her thoughts and watched her covertly, despair and adoration inseparable in his heart. Each moment was greedily devouring even this bitter-sweet intimacy; and how was he to meet those leaden days ahead when the sight of her would forever be denied him? So, while their young hearts suffered the self-same ache, they sat on in cruel silence; close in their misery, yet as widely separated from the consolation each might have given the other as earth and sky.

Soon the contour of the country changed, the flats of the Esk giving way to rolling hills, and Ephemia saw the great ridges of Alueez traced, like a gigantic camel's hump, against the pearl gray of the winter sky. And so they came to Alueez—but how different a coming to that which she had dreamed! She was thankful for the new veil Caroline had insisted upon, for it hid the welling tears and gave her sanctuary.

There were many friends at the station, come to do Stephen honor and to show their sympathy with his widow. Ephemia stood a little aloof and alone, incapable of sound or movement, as she watched the sympathetic neighbors close around her aunt and mother; watched them drifting, laboriously as it were, down the long platform.

“Phemy, Phemy!” came a voice she knew, and then a fury of arms enfolded her. It was Clare, the same fond, whirlwind Clare; and all at once Ephemia found herself crying quite helplessly in that welcoming embrace.

“Poor kid,” soothed Clare in her breezy fashion, “get it off your little chest. If this isn’t the toughest luck!”

“Oh, Clare, it’s so wonderful to see you, and to find everyone so kind,” Ephemia managed at last.

Clare smiled enigmatically. “You’ll discover a lot of things by and by, Phemy, old dear, but now I’ll run along. I see Lily’s over there by your mother; she’s not too fond of my society these days.”

“Why, Clare, what nonsense! Surely you are coming with us?” And then Ephemia found herself confused. This lavishly dressed individual of bleached hair and theatrical beauty was surely not the Clare of other days—the Clare of honest freckles and sandy hair? And all the ugly rumors came flocking back. “No, no,” thought Ephemia, “I won’t believe it,” and at that moment she was drawn to look into the depths of Clare’s wide gray eyes; and she was humbled at what she saw of integrity and courage in the unwavering gaze which met her curiosity with such quizzical tolerance.

But Clare shook herself and laughed. “Some show!” said she ironically. “Well, I’m off. I’ll see you to-night if I may; keep your sails tacking, it’s the easiest way.”

Lily had indeed been waiting impatiently for this little scene to end. Now she swooped upon her friend, sympathy dripping from every little word, like water from a newly sprinkled shrubbery. But even this lightly flowing tenderness was welcome to Ephemia, and she found courage at last to smile upon her Lily—so little changed despite the years and her new pink and white and golden beauty. Then there was Inga to meet—a surprisingly bright and vigorous young person—done with pig-tails and chewing gum and sales slips; who, she learned, was now an efficient stenographer where she had formerly been an errand girl. “We are proud of Inga,” said Lily, fondly and with evident sincerity.

Thus one after another the old friends were all found unchanged in affection, howsoever else they might be changed, and this gratifying knowledge sustained the bereaved family through the sorest trial of all, giving them courage to face the saddest of human ordeals, the relinquishing of their beloved to his final resting-place. Strange it is how reluctant men are to give back to Nature what she so generously has lent. “Dust unto dust”—

forever they fall, these simple words, like a judge's hammer upon the human heart. Great and small react alike to them—this trinity of inevitable and immutable laws.

But Ephemia heard them as if for the first time and found them beautiful. She recalled, in a flash, an odd line from one of her father's old books: 'Thy flesh will be made to enrich the herbage of the fields,' and she remembered it was spoken in judgment on some evil-doer. How strange that men should cherish such peculiar resentments; certainly to him who loves Nature this return to her breast is fitting and beautiful. All during the service she enjoyed the rare sensation of secret intimacy with her father. It was as if they together were watching an interesting rite which, nevertheless, concerned them but little.

But home again in Caroline's large and comfortable dwelling she felt overwhelmed and utterly despondent. With sincere regret she took farewell of Henrick Clarke. He seemed the last link between the life which had claimed her so fully, taught her so much, and this new existence which stretched ahead in bleak uncertainty.

When he was gone she went in search of her mother and found her lying down in the comfortable spare room Caroline had allotted to her. They had always understood one another, and without other preliminary Ephemia dropped beside the bed and sobbed. "It's so cruel, so wretchedly unnecessary! Oh, why can't one have what one loves, or love what one may have?"

Her mother smiled at this. "You are twisted there, my dear; love is a possession we cannot lose."

"Generalities and abstract virtues," stormed Ephemia; "what good are they to me, these high-sounding phrases? All my life I've fed on them, and where's the benefit?"

"Just as though one might ask upon seeing a handful of grain, 'Where's the bread?' But you are tired; and so, why not leave these vexing riddles to themselves? One thing we know; the air about us is never failing, yet we cannot lay hands upon it and greedily hoard it away. Love is rather like that."

Ephemia wiped her eyes, angry with herself and her tears. "It sounds very fine, like the academic arguments professors mull over beside a comfortable hearth, but don't imagine I believe a word of it!"

“Of course not,” came the reply, quite without heat, “I should not expect that as yet.”

CHAPTER II.

The holidays passed, with their poignant sadness, and Ephemia began to chafe at idleness. To waken in the comfort of her aunt's well-ordered home, with no need to remember the fires and a dozen other monotonous morning tasks, was pure delight at first; but very shortly she realized that unemployed hours have a way of hanging on one's hands like an unwanted burden.

Then, too, she found herself alienated in some subtle way from her former friends. It was very puzzling; they seemed little changed, and yet it was as though they moved in another world. Upon occasions she experienced the sensation of being removed to some lofty pinnacle whence she watched the progress of these friends passing in panoramic view before her—Josephine with her vanity; Rosa with her exaggerated archness; and Isabella, the bitter-tongued, they all were unreal, like the characters on a stage, and she watched their antics dispassionately. What they exulted in, discussed, praised, blamed, or cast aside, was all alike trivial to Ephemia.

Even Lily, whom she loved as a mother loves a backward child, bored her. She, too, misplaced her values; her eyes sought no star loftier than an electric street lamp; a ruined ruffle was a greater calamity to her than a ruptured affection. She bewailed a scorched petticoat, but dismissed Ephemia's concern over Clare as of no particular moment.

"She isn't worth your worry, and I certainly advise you to keep away from her," so she had said, whereupon their friendship had been sorely threatened until Ephemia decided that nothing was to be gained for Clare by wounding Lily.

But despite her staunch defence of this much maligned friend, she knew there was some justice in the attack. That first evening at Caroline's, when Clare had visited her, had revealed much. They had talked of happier days; of the gay toboggan parties; of the many clownish episodes on ice and hill; of all the thousand things normal girls talk of. But even while they smiled the brightest they were conscious of each other's vigilance; of that other self standing aloof, speculative, defensive and secretive. Nevertheless, Ephemia decided that Clare was the least disappointing of her friends, rumor to the contrary.

One morning Ephemia exploded a bomb. "Mother," said she, "I've decided to go to work; there's not much use going back to 'Normal' until the

new term; and Clare 'phoned yesterday that Mr. Hewlitt was discharging one of his girls. I'd like to get the place."

"To work with Clare?" repeated Mother Freeman, but reading the storm-signal in her daughter's eyes, hastened to add: "By all means, work if you must; I'm no devotee of idleness. But, as I said to you when you were an impetuous, hot-headed little thing, don't shut your eyes to avoid seeing the disagreeable. Be honest, and after all there's not much credit in defending what needs no defence."

Here Caroline interrupted them, bringing in the morning's mail. "Ephemia, my dear," she began, and something in her unaccustomed hesitance set the girl all a-tremble with nervous expectancy. "Give it to me, please, Aunt Caroline," she begged, and fled with the letter to the sanctuary of her own room.

No need to tell her whose hand had penned this travel-worn letter—every nerve in her body was aware of it—yet she sat clutching it to her heart in a paralysis of hope and fear. Radiant hope, like a soaring eagle, would have borne her up into the azure of happy skies; then came fear in the guise of cold reason. What of the postmark? And that tiny circle of half obliterated figures proved deadlier than all else. The letter had been written before the fire. When at last she recovered courage sufficiently to read this message, which seemed from the dead, it was through a baptism of tears; and every word was like a note of exquisite music, growing in intensity and grace, and absorbing her entirely into itself.

> Ephemia, my dearest:
>
> Once I entertained considerable respect for the King's English, but now I look upon it with scorn; it is so deficient, so willfully elusive, when one would employ it in matters of the heart. Perhaps my little dictator would remind me that it is the language of the head. Have it so; I've sworn to agree with all your opinions, henceforth and forever.
>
> But what must you not have thought of my going off like a sky-rocket with no clue to my destination? Be assured this speculation has given me many a wakeful hour! But Tomlinson must do things on the spur of the moment—act upon his "lightning judgment"—and he had obtained this northern territory out of the very teeth of his competitors; and it was the very chance I had been hoping for—a wide field wherein to win my spurs.

Well, Tomlinson sent me in charge of this survey. Let's hope I've not made a mess of it, for it was something of a beastly game. There were two others along with me: a big Swede, strong as an ox, and about as communicative, but the best fellow, really, and deucedly ingenious; and a Finlander whose gloom was superlative, but who was faithful as a shadow.

But why explain such inconsequential things? It's so incredible to believe that this letter will really reach you in a few days; you have seemed such centuries removed. And it is just as incredible that I should be back in the civilization—mark the word—of Tomlinson's camps. Only this morning the sight of these blackened old log-piles burst upon me, and never was the sight more enheartening.

"Just twenty-odd miles more and I shall see the ridiculous little box where my ridiculously serious Ephemia evokes to patriotism the coming nation," said I joyfully to myself.

Without doubt, you must have accused me of wilful neglect, for it seems past belief that one can be lost in a wilderness of wood and water, away from all civilization, in this country of ours to-day. I did write from Deerwood, a place which can scarcely be called a town, unless one tipsy store and a still more tipsy community hall may be called a town—I am still puzzling as to what comprised that community.

I wrote that letter, though never expecting it to get very far. After that it was just one endless stretch of timber and barren rock, a taste of veritable exile, which my sombre companions in nowise helped to mitigate.

The thing would have been too heroic for me, since, as you've intimated, I'm not particularly fond of making myself miserable, had it not been for you. Often in the silent watches of the night I have imagined the sound of your voice and recalled all your sayings; your quaint little sayings; and even your cruel little sayings. And out of the awesome field of sky above me I have picked some especially twinkling stars to console me for your eyes.

If it astonishes you to find me so rhetorical, let me confide the belief that to produce a poet all one needs to do is to fling some poor simple fellow into an immensity of forest and leave him with

his thoughts. But of course these thoughts must be irremediably confused with dreams of a dear brown-haired little lady.

There is a "jack" going to catch the mail at Neely and waiting for this letter; I hear him grumbling outside. Well, now I am so near the journey's end there's no need to write what were sweeter said. A few more details, my reports to finish, and then off I go to Esk.

But oh, Ephemia, will you believe me sincere? Will you still care to believe me sincere? Unbelievable as it is, I am confident you will! This knowledge has made every commonplace thing beautiful. Why, would you believe it, I've become quite partial to snakes! Whenever the poor despised things have whipped away from my feet I've congratulated myself that Adam may have suffered a scurvy trick because of such a creature, but not I—most certainly not I. Had not that wise reptile frightened you out of all good judgment in Neely I'm satisfied you had never looked upon me with favor. Long life to snakes, say I!

But now my unwilling servant storms at the threshold. My dearest, I kiss each little palm in pledge of unutterable things.

Most faithfully yours,
ALLISON BRETT

So still was Ephemia she might have been a sculptured image reflecting in the calm chastity of marble all rapture and all grief. It was as though some protective spirit restrained her so that she might not stir, might not think, lest this silence, with its poignancy of the sweet and the bitter, be shaken from her as Autumn leaves are tumbled from rapturous flaming trees by each gust of blighting wind. Time and place had ceased for her; she was borne away on the swell of this great emotion, more dream than reality, more pleasure than pain, as a vessel is carried hither and yon on the breast of the ocean.

Slowly, like a winter sunrise, there dawned upon her soul a great truth: love is indestructible, an eternal power; its kingdom is the universe within and all about one. In that moment it seemed to Ephemia that all Allison's dear words woke to life and like little homing birds came winging to her heart.

CHAPTER III.

Lily was scandalized when she heard that Ephemia was working with Clare, and made a point of saying so one evening shortly thereafter. They were sitting before the fireplace in Caroline's big living-room, and alone.

"If you must know, I'm very little with her," said Ephemia impatiently, and, lifting the fire-tongs, jabbed the fire as she would have loved to jab the gossips. "The most evil-minded could hardly accuse us of mischief during working hours."

"Oh, I know; but you do go out to lunch with her. Isabella saw you once, and Josephine another time; you can't imagine how horrid they can be."

"You are wrong there, Lily. It's because I know quite well what gossip can do that I won't be ruled by it. It may be foolish, of course, but I've an idea my believing in Clare may benefit her a little, and it certainly does me no harm."

"Oh, Ephemia, you always were so stubborn; and it's not right, it's sinful . . . ."

"Pastor Neils says so," inserted the mischievous one.

"There you are! Oh, Phemy, it's so cruel of you, and I'm so unhappy."

"Unhappy?" echoed Ephemia incredulously. "Why, what is it now, another ruffle gone astray?"

"There you are! you think I'm without all natural feeling, and it's a tragedy; it's Ber—Ber—Berty," she wailed brokenly.

Ephemia was familiar with Berty's history, present and remote, and upon meeting that gentleman in person had found him so merrily inclined that tragedy and he seemed hardly akin.

"Good gracious, I thought Berty was the essence of jollity, and yet as settled in his devotion as the stars."

"That's it, he's so settled; he's determined I must marry him this summer, or he threatens to go off somewhere. Oh, it's terrible!"

"What is terrible—marrying him, or his going off?"

"Both; I can't marry him very well when mamma up and faints at the mere suggestion, her heart is so bad. And Berty's so handsome; you know

he is; and last month he got a raise; and he's s——so f—fond of m—me." Lily was now dissolved in tender tears, and dabbled at her china-blue eyes with a minute square of embroidered cambric never designed for such heroic service.

"Perhaps I'm very stupid, dear, but all this sounds quite hazy to me. Why should your mother object to your marrying?"

"It's not the marrying; it's his church; Berty's a Catholic."

"Dear me," said Ephemia helplessly, thinking of Pierre and his dilemma; what hurdles could not these creeds put up for poor short-lived, sorrowing humanity to strain at. "But he's an honest young man and loves you; isn't that enough? If he's satisfied with you what does it matter about his religion? I'd say it was a good religion since it fostered such an admirable Berty."

"Now, Phemy, you're at it again; you're poking fun at me. It's queer you should sympathize with Clare and be so cruel with me."

Ephemia laughed; but, laughing, flung her arm around Lily's drooping shoulders. "You're quite wrong, dear; if you were in need of sympathy you'd find it—but I'm so sure all this will blow over once you are safely married."

"It will kill her; she said it would. She said she'd never survive the disgrace of a child of hers marrying into that strange religion. Oh, whatever will I do? Berty's been so good to me, but I can't very well disobey mamma—oh, it's sure to kill him."

"Berty looks fairly husky," Ephemia rejoined drily. "You may at least put the latter fear from your mind, and if you want my honest opinion, why it's readily given. Follow your own heart, and if there's any real love in it you can't go far wrong."

Caroline, followed by her sister-in-law, came down the broad stairs and put an end to a difficult situation. "I hope nothing is wrong," Mrs. Freeman ventured tentatively after a glimpse of Lily's face.

"Mrs. Strom has been ill," her daughter made haste to explain; "her heart is very weak, and naturally it worries Lily more than a little."

"Humph! weak hearts are always to be found in plenty," said Caroline; "it has always been a fashionable ailment. My grandmother complained of it, I remember, and she lived to be eighty."

Lily accepted this in her guileless way, but Ephemia threw an accusing glance at her incorrigible relative. Poor Lily, she mused, she's very like the dolls ventriloquists make sport of, that are made to speak with their voice and move as their desire dictates. She reminded one also of the dainty Spanish moss, parasitic, clinging daintiness, strung to a stout old oak, fluttering gracefully in the wind and shining softly in the moonlight. Yes, Lily was very like that, and to be at her best an oak-like supporter must be found for her.

Lily had always stood in awe of Caroline, and until she left for a committee meeting no further reference was made to her difficulties. But once the door closed upon that lady's forceful figure, she returned to the subject of her own accord.

Mother Freeman made a point of being direct. "Just why are you wishing to marry this particular young man?"

Lily turned scarlet and jiggled uneasily. "Why, I—why, my goodness, Mrs. Freeman, I don't want to work all my life! And there's the dearest little house down on Ramsay Street; it would look so sweet with rose curtains and vines on the wall."

"Quite possibly," said Mrs. Freeman, in a guarded voice, lest her amusement betray her. "Indeed, you may be right; yet after all I don't suppose it will affect the vines whether the walls be Berty's or not."

Lily looked from one non-committal face to the other in uncertainty, not at all sure whether she were receiving sympathy or censure. Ephemia, knowing her so well, hastened to her rescue.

"Don't mind mother in the least: she loves propounding riddles; it's her blood—the old Norse passion for obscurity, you know."

"How peculiar!" sighed poor Lily; "I never could see the good of riddles!"

Mrs. Freeman laughed softly. "Very well, my dear, I'll make amends by confiding a pretty secret. Aunt Caroline learned to-day that Mr. Snell is leaving for Germany in the spring. You remember his little cottage back in the hills, don't you, Ephemia? He has generously offered the charming place to me in return for the care of his garden; especially his dearly loved roses."

The information delighted them all equally, and for the moment it dispelled worry from Lily's sunny mind and recalled to memory other pleasant anticipations.

"Oh, Ephemia, I nearly forgot! The Girls' Guild are having a basket-social Friday, and there's to be a fish-pond for the children, and that fat elocutionist from the South congregation is going to give a reading from 'Les Miserables.' Do come, and do let Harold go with our boys. Mamma's got a new taffeta blouse, and I'm going to wear my new poplin with the pintucks and buttons. Really you must come, Ephemia."

Having won a somewhat reluctant promise, Lily decided that her visit had better end; mamma would be sure to suspect she had been with Berty. When she was gone Mrs. Freeman fell to laughing as she had not laughed for many a week.

"Aren't you a little uncharitable?" Ephemia quizzed her; "poor Lily, she seems to have no will of her own; and poor Berty—you seem to have forgotten him."

"Berty?" repeated her mother in high amusement, "didn't you say he was a hale young man; and do you suppose a heart which loves a Lily is immune to other Lilies? Haven't you discovered that there are a host of Lilies? Believe me, my own, that for every flaming tanager there are a hundred sparrows." This she avowed whimsically, and then her proud face softened; she was recalling Stephen's gentle creed. "But then, if our Lord treasures the humble sparrow, why should not the hale young Bertys of the world?"

Later, while preparing for bed, Ephemia mused upon this; it seemed a comforting thought, yet its comfort did not lessen the ache in her heart. She knew that Caroline had made further inquiries concerning Allison, and fruitlessly. Tomlinson, who might have set their minds at rest, was off on one of his tours in the wilds he loved.

Well, she would go on, made strong by the memory of Allison's devotion; it should keep her above the sordid and commonplace. To be sure, she wept at times into her secret pillow, not so much for herself, but because it was so grievous a thought that loyalty and joyousness such as his should be taken from the world. Then she would fall to recalling their trivial differences; how he had defended Pierre and Anna; how tolerant he had been, and how like the Pharisee's her own deportment. And from this self-abasement sprang the fierce desire to be generous rather than just, since justice may only appeal to reason, but generosity finds the heart.

This was, perhaps, the main reason for Ephemia's loyalty to Clare despite many discouragements. She had found a curious coldness in Clare's attitude of late; an apparent desire to evade each friendly overture. These

signs of seemingly changed affection did not fail to wound her deeply, though she persisted in her efforts to be sociable and kind.

She could not know that Clare had conceived the idea of avoiding a return to former intimacy in order not to lose her friendship entirely. Life had convinced Clare that everything has its price and that all things are subject to change. Decency and truth—this was the price Ephemia demanded for affection. So believing, and accepting the belief dispassionately, as she had learned to accept so much of bitterness, she decided that if she were not to forfeit Ephemia's regard she must build a wall of reserve between them.

But to Ephemia's wounded perception no such subtle reason was plain; she interpreted Clare's attitude as indifference, and more and more began to feel herself isolated from things familiar and dear, and thrust into a world singularly hostile and cold. Invariably such musings whirled her back to thoughts of Allison; and humbly, penitently, she acknowledged her great possession.

Thus she consoled herself this night, and realized at last that the right of possession must come from within. If Lily lost her Berty it was because she had never possessed him, nor ever could possess him, though she shared his company a lifetime.

In that habit of hers, established in childhood, she slipped to the casement for a glimpse of the stars. The little lamps of God—as she then had called the stars—were not so numerous this night in the impalpable canopy above, stretching on in calm immensity, remote and austere. Yet this was a becalming austerity; just to stand adoring its majesty awakened in her a sense of peace and power. That was it, she concluded, this calm immensity seethed in power; those pure white stars of first magnitude and the more humble yellow tapers were only so many manifestations of the same Eternal Power. And love is a like power; in its immensity the soul may aspire to the glory of the chaste white stars or burn with the softer fire of the lesser beacons.

"Great Eternal One," she petitioned, "make me to reflect faithfully the love I possess."

CHAPTER IV.

Winter drew to its close at last, and Spring began her happy inroads upon the ragged barrenness of hill and meadow. Ephemia loved the Spring. She loved to see the dried grass of a dead year give way to rich new verdure when the sun shone down upon the mottled cheek of earth. This rapturous green, flushing up from the roots of death, was reminiscent of the first flame of love's blushes in a virgin cheek. And the little leaves, furling out from their cozy beds like sleepy babies from a warm crib, they, too, delighted her. But more than these, the leaping song of the brook, riotous in its unrestrained freedom, made glad her heart. It sang of renewed hope, of unfulfilled promise glimmering ghostly fair on the far horizon, and it sang of courage to attain the heart's desire. To hear the little brook sing its annual Spring symphony was invigorating and helpful.

At the first signs of Spring the Freemans had installed themselves in Mr. Snell's unbelievable fairy-cottage, and by now were comfortably settled and deep in plans for the garden. Mother Freeman was to nurse the roses, Ephemia to care for the common flowers, and Harold to weed the kitchen garden, for which service he demanded a brace of rabbits and a white rat.

All in all they were content, though Caroline grumbled at Ephemia, whose stubbornness made her refuse all assistance. But howsoever the good woman stormed the girl remained resolute; Mr. Hewlett was retaining her services evenings and holidays—this would assure her of all her small needs.

"Fiddlededdiddle and foolishness! You daren't even look a necessity in the face," her indignant aunt had snapped. "But if you're set upon working yourself into premature old age, there's no use arguing about it. You always were as stubborn as a mule, my dear."

Caroline was not alone in this opinion; Clare had reached the same conclusion long ago, and seeing how powerless were evasions, how rebuffs wounded but could not change Ephemia's friendly interest and concern, she had accepted the inevitable and waited nervously for the dreaded denouement.

That denouement never came. Many ugly truths had been forced upon Ephemia during their months together, but if they shattered her remaining illusions she gave no sign of it. True, she stormed a bit when one day,

shortly after she began working the night-shift, which brought her into closer intimacy with Clare, both Isabella and Josephine cut her in the street. She expressed herself somewhat scathingly to Mother Freeman that night. "Such sanctified Christians!" she exclaimed, "if they believe me bound for perdition why don't they attempt a rescue? Where's the fruits of their listening Sunday after Sunday to their dear Pastor Neils' eulogies on the mercy of the Lord? I'm beginning to suspect that it's a capital thing all of us are not so pious: someone must risk contact with the publicans."

Mrs. Freeman laughed. "Even fools teach wisdom. After all, it's very difficult to discern a neighbor's need while one sits comfortably within a walled garden; and still more difficult to perceive that this wall which protects one so admirably may be deflecting the sun from another's starving hedges. As you surmise, a vagabond now and again becomes a necessity; someone to trudge the unfrequented roads, to reach at length the chaste high pinnacles, thence to cry down shame on our smug sanctuaries, our silly little garden-plots of stunted virtues. On the whole one might pity the prisoner within the walls rather than the ostracized vagabond on the open highway."

Ephemia ventured no reply. When her mother waxed eloquent she invariably combined problem and answer in a manner quite sufficient in itself. But she was enheartened none the less.

But though she resented the attitude of Isabella and Josephine, she was not entirely free herself from moments of condemnation. One might hardly liken Clare to the fabled Circe; for though she had a host of admirers, and possessed undoubted attractions, she did not, like Circe, exercise her magic to make beasts of men—that metamorphosis had already been accomplished. The problem was too involved for Ephemia. Instinct assured her of danger, yet native delicacy deterred her from condemning where she was not sure.

However, she was thoroughly alarmed one busy Saturday when she saw an elderly "dandy," of notorious fame in Alueez, press an envelope into Clare's ready young palm. They were in the habit of taking supper together on Saturdays, and over their salad and tea Ephemia made her plunge.

"Why don't you introduce me to your charming and generous friend? Isn't it about time you included me in some of your pleasures?"

Clare was startled out of her usual flippant self-confidence. "Good heavens!" she gasped, "are you crazy? or are those contemptible girls driving you . . . ."

Ephemia interrupted her. “Surely, my dear Clare, what’s acceptable to one friend should be so to the other!”

But Clare’s nimble wits were recovered from their shock. “Look here, Ephemia, your little game is quite clear to me; but I’d see you dead rather than in that devil’s company. Oh, let’s be honest at last! What can you defend me from? There’s nothing left.”

“There’s always something left; but if you must join that man to-night I’m going with you, explain it how you will.”

Clare suffered a good many contending emotions during the silent seconds she toyed with her food, and permitted Ephemia to speak on in defence of her ridiculous resolution. What if Ephemia were driven by loneliness to this false gaiety she had once coveted? What if she imagined it could satisfy that craving for adventure and excitement which seems part of life? She pictured Ephemia in the midst of the vile hilarity of the road-houses, so familiar to herself, and cringed at the mere thought; it seemed a sacrilege against something beautiful and undefiled. All the while these reflections tormented her she was conscious of Ephemia’s clear eyes smiling kindly upon her. This at length became the all absorbing fact: Ephemia knew and yet she still cared!

“I wouldn’t have believed it possible,” she found voice to say at last. “Oh, Ephemia, if you knew how I’ve dreaded discovery! But now, for the sake of old times, you must promise me never to mention this crazy idea of yours again. Why, the man is absolutely vile.”

“Arguments are vain,” said Ephemia with finality. “Either we both accept this person’s questionable hospitality or else you go home like a sensible soul and leave me to break the sad tidings to that rejuvenated mummy of wickedness.”

“Have your way,” groaned Clare helplessly, adding with a rueful laugh: “I seem so tired most of the time nowadays; a quiet night won’t hurt me, I guess; but quiet in a boarding-house is such a stupid business.”

Nevertheless, Ephemia was jubilant, and felt she had accomplished something definite, when at ten-thirty that night she saw Clare safely aboard her car—a joy and certainty she must at once confide to her mother upon reaching home.

Mrs. Freeman was non-committal. She stepped about the room briskly, setting out a little lunch of toasted waffles and hot chocolate. If Ephemia had

high hopes of rehabilitating her friend why should she dampen so worthy a desire?

"One of the Strom boys ran over this evening to say that Lily wished to see you to-morrow. I suggested her coming here," she advised her shining eyed daughter, by way of diverting a treacherous topic.

"Not Berty again, I hope!" cried the girl in mock dismay.

Mother Freeman chuckled. "I've heard there's a new suitor in the field, a captain on the Lakes. Mrs. Halson spoke of it the other day."

"Why, Mother, it can't be true! I met Captain Ness at the social; he was with the Stroms, and he's old enough to be her father."

"Old enough to train vines patiently, my dear," Mother Freeman hinted mischievously.

"But it's preposterous! I'll not believe it until I hear it from Lily herself; I won't indeed," declared Ephemia emphatically.

She had not long to wait. The next afternoon, returning from her Aunt Caroline's a little later than she had expected, she found Lily awaiting her impatiently.

"I thought you were never coming; I've been here for hours, and dinner's waiting!" was her petulant greeting.

"We went for a drive and forgot the time, it's such a divine day," returned Ephemia in excuse.

"Does Harold use a steel knife, Mrs. Freeman?" Lily inquired gravely, as she moved the salt-cellar to another angle and studied the effect. "It's so impressive to have a table set properly. Don't you think so, Phemy?"

The recollection of many a sorry table at the Stroms flashed upon that long-memoried young person. "I'm afraid I've not thought much about it," she laughed. "But come, what is the wonderful news? I see you're full of it."

Lily blushed becomingly as she conscientiously arranged the water glasses; then with a sudden rush she fell upon Ephemia, a dainty shower of twining arms and scented ruffles.

"Just think, Phemy, dearest, I'm getting married in June! And I'm having a satin dress and a real lace veil, and Captain Ness is taking us all around the Thousand Islands. And, oh, I want you to be my bridesmaid!"

“Dear me!” was all Ephemia found to say, “dear me! but who’s the man?”

Lily pouted. “Why, I’ve told you, of course I’ve told you; it’s Peter Ness, Captain Peter Ness,” she emphasized proudly.

“Good gracious! But I—” began her hard-hearted friend, only to be interrupted by the familiar wail.

“Now, Phemy, don’t be horrid! You’re thinking of Berty; of course I’ve not forgotten poor Berty.”

“You haven’t? And this Captain Ness, you love him the better?”

“My goodness, Ephemia, Mamma says no real nice girl loves a man until she’s married; it’s immodest.”

“I hadn’t thought of that. But the Captain—is it permissible in his case?”

“How absurd you are, Ephemia! Why, of course. Do you suppose I’d marry him otherwise?”

“I didn’t know; my education seems so sadly deficient, so undeveloped, one might say.” A confession which appeased the ruffled visitor, whose newly acquired dignity had suffered acutely. Her smile was warm and forgiving. “I know, dear, and I’m not really cross, though you’re so exasperating at times. But only last night Pastor Neils said to Mamma—we were having a chicken dinner and Peter was there—‘Young ladies nowadays are not impressed with the beautiful symbolism of marriage, which should enable a woman to honor and obey so gracefully; and this is responsible for the ungodliness of the modern home.’ ”

Ephemia was saved from disgrace by the timely clatter of Harold, who, tousled and hungry, burst in from the yard. “I saw a woodpecker by the barn!” he announced in shrill exuberance as he flung down his cap and kicked off his rubbers; “and me and Ernie Strom are going to save eggs this summer, and I’m sure that old woodpecker’s going to hatch—”

“Harold, come here at once,” his mother commanded, “and let me explain about this looting of nests.”

“Oh, shucks!” gulped Harold and vanished kitchenward.

“You haven’t even congratulated me yet,” Lily chided prettily, unwilling to end so charming a subject.

“But of course you know I rejoice with you in your happiness. Yet somehow I can’t forget how young and jolly Berty is; and life is so dull

upon occasion."

"Phemy, if only you wouldn't torment me! It's so mean of you! Poor dear Berty, I'll never forget him. But Papa says young men do such outrageous things."

"Another aspect which had escaped me; but, come to think of it, mightn't it be wise to acquire first-hand information on this 'outrageousness' from one's husband as a preparation towards dealing with one's son?"

"How dreadful! Oh, Mrs. Freeman," Lily appealed to the good lady entering from the kitchen, vegetable dish in hand and with Harold in tow, bearing a platter of cold meat, "make her stop saying such dreadful things to torment me."

"What dreadful things?" demanded Ephemia wickedly as they took their places round the table.

"My goodness, as if you didn't know! About a son, and I not even married!"

"Everybody's got a son," said Harold, eyeing the pickles hopefully, "that's nothing; and if that there woodpecker's going to hatch in the barn I'm going to tame him."

"Tame anything you like," said his mother, "and preferably yourself." Then, to avert further controversy, she broached the subject of dress. Never had Mrs. Strom been so happy, Lily assured them; she was simply immersed in rare laces and fine linen, than which no state of being could be more blessed to a devotee of the needle.

"You ought to see the Maltese lace, the India silk and the gorgeous handkerchiefs Peter has given me," she chanted breathlessly; "and you ought to see the queer ivory things and funny little boxes he's picked up on his travels—it's so romantic! And you will wear pink, won't you, Phemy? I want all the bridesmaids in pink."

"What's a bridesmaid?" demanded Harold, holding out his plate for more creamed potatoes. Answers were seldom prompt enough for his impatient young mind. "Ernie bet me three allies I didn't know what that man with the red whiskers and kind of spotted hair was doing at his house, and I bet him six I did. But I didn't, and now I do!" saying which he beamed joyously triumphant.

“Harold! Harold!” his mother checked him sharply, but was herself carried away by Ephemia’s gales of laughter. Fortunately the guest was so enraptured of the prospects ahead that an otherwise apparent slight was entirely missed.

“You funny child,” she bubbled, joining the general mirth, “but you oughtn’t to bet; it’s wicked. I’ll have to tell Mamma about Ernie.”

The remainder of the evening passed merrily. Only for a moment was Lily’s pleasure clouded by the astonishing announcement that Ephemia found it impossible to accept the honor offered her.

“Now, Phemy, it’s not on Berty’s account, is it? Surely you’re not trying to punish me,” she wailed. “Oh, Mrs. Freeman, make her promise. I’ve always imagined Ephemia as my bridesmaid.”

“She’s rather busy these days, Lily dear, with her studies and the work at the store and the help she gives us; I’m afraid you’ll have to excuse her.”

“Oh, I suppose I’ll have to. And now I’ll have to ask Isabella, and she’s getting so stout. But you’ll have to attend the church and the reception or I’ll never forgive you.”

They kissed her softly turned cheek at that, and saw her off to the gate, promising to enjoy the glorious spectacle of their Lily in bridal veil and flowers.

Arm in arm mother and daughter returned to the house, walking slowly along the trim gravel walk, remarking upon the verdure of the young grass, how well the lilac shrubs promised, and the all-important roses; how like a crochet edge the small whitewashed stones appeared, circling the several flower-beds, and how fortunate they were in this happy situation. And neither of them spoke from the heart.

Ephemia was seething with unrest. Back in her beloved hills, under their protecting shadows, the age-old desire for the enduring and beautiful was rekindled in her heart. Life could not be the shallow thing Lily dreamed, nor yet that madness which Clare had grasped.

Quite as though she had divined these thoughts, Mrs. Freeman spoke. “There was a superstition long extant among my people, that fires glowed at night where buried treasures lay. Sometimes I fancy a great deal of the stumbling about in darkness is due to some such modern delusion—a following of a will-o’-the-wisp in search of treasures all safely gathered and ready for the spending.”

They had entered the peaceful little house now. Up in his low-roofed chamber Harold was singing some ditty, contentedly but absurdly out of tune. Everything breathed of homely comfort; the shabby chairs, the scratched bookcase containing Stephen's treasured volumes; even the faded hangings at the window added their special note. Dedicated to service and affection was this little house.

Ephemia flung herself upon the couch. "You are generous, Mother. Frankly speaking, I'd say Lily was no less a trafficker than Clare."

"And who is not?" asked the mother, picking up her knitting undismayed.

"In that case why struggle at all? Why not take the easiest way?"

"Quite possibly there is none other. Circumspect individuals may find it less distressing to be hedged about by multiple commandments than to tread the sinner's measure; and then the fiddler is an exorbitant fellow."

Ephemia studied her mother's serenely beautiful face. How much she had endured, and how strong she was. Toil had not narrowed, nor disappointment soured her. Hers was the eagle's way, confident and free. High above the pettiness of earth, she moved in the clear air of tolerance and charity. "Mother mine," she said impulsively, "it's wonderful to understand as you do."

"My dear," came the quiet reply, "it's not in the least necessary to understand anything except our common weaknesses and love's need in an unhappy friend."

CHAPTER V.

Clare no longer bounded into the store a whirlwind of exuberant vitality and cheerfulness. Her sallies were forced and her laughter strained. Again and again Ephemia implored her to take a vacation; even went so far as to hint of her going home, a suggestion she regretted when she perceived the genuine pain it caused. No, Clare would have nothing to do with vacations. Once she consented to spend a Sunday with the Freemans, and most of the day she sat immersed in apathetic silence out in the garden; but the next night she went to a midnight frolic at a notorious road-house which, a very octopus of sin, flung its tentacle lights in gleaming snares from the dark seclusion of a distant cove of the Great Lake.

Then, one mellow evening, Ephemia became aware of a seedy young man who of late had frequented the store, and how his eyes seemed to follow Clare's every movement with absorbing interest. She might not have marked him out from the endless train of ice-cream habitues patronizing Tony's counter had it not been for his humble appearance, conspicuous in awkward shyness rather than grace.

At first Clare regarded this peculiar attachment with tolerant amusement, but as the weeks wore on and his visits to the fountain—where he invariably drank a lemon phosphate—still continued, and his devotion to herself in nowise abated, she began to entertain for him a singularly maternal interest. She became fiercely protective if Tony leveled some jest at his shabby customer, and denounced that quick-witted individual for an addle-headed fool.

Indeed, Ephemia saw that Clare began to watch the clock of an evening, and that a smile, very different from the glittering sham she offered her more fashionable admirers, lit up her tired eyes at the sight of this humble devotee. Hope leaped high in her heart. If Clare came to love this honest young lad what changes might it not effect! But just when this hope flared the highest, when there was no longer the slightest doubt as to the state of Clare's affection, she shattered all Ephemia's dreams and dashed her with fresh terrors by quietly fainting away one sultry evening right in the midst of packing bismuth powders for a voluble old lady.

Immediately all was wildest confusion. The highly alarmed customer screamed for smelling salts, and demanded a doctor, a priest and an ambulance. Strange men came running with distilled water, grapejuice and

sarsaparilla from the fountain, and hovered like so many solicitous but nonplussed monkeys over the crumpled figure. Ephemia, high on a ladder in the stationery department, and busily stacking wire baskets, almost fell from her treacherous perch when the old woman's shrill cry tore through her preoccupation. In a moment she was beside Clare, had lifted her in tender arms, and at the suggestion of the sympathetic audience began dabbling the poor white face with the eagerly proffered water.

At the same moment Mr. Hewlett came rushing from the prescription room, and, taking in the situation at a glance, had the girl carried to his office at the back of the building while he mixed a strong restorative.

Ephemia trembled in a fever of anxiety until Clare's gray eyes slowly opened; then, very foolishly, she burst into tears. "Phemy, old dear," came the indomitable whisper, "this isn't a funeral, you know. . . . Oh, I say, give the poor old soul her powders. Phemy, Phemy, what the dickens is the matter with my head?"

"Be sensible," said Ephemia, relieved immeasurably at this show of vigor in her friend. "All you are to think of is yourself; you need rest, and Mr. Hewlett has sent for a cab to take you home."

"Home?" echoed the girl bitterly, "home!" and from under heavy lids welled the slow tears, to trace their tragic course down a pallid countenance and increase the pity in Ephemia's tender heart.

"Phemy, if Edward comes don't make much of this . . . . and . . . . don't let him come to the house. It's awful there Saturday nights!"

Ephemia promised to be tactful; promised a good many difficult things to pacify her unhappy friend. But she found the task of informing Edward the most difficult of all. He came, as was his habit, at eight o'clock, expectant and smiling, and on fire with rare news. He had obtained a berth with an established firm of architects and was bent on celebrating his success by taking Clare on an excursion up the Lake on Sunday.

He listened to Ephemia's explanations and hopeful sympathy in silent consternation. "I often said she was working herself to death," he burst out at length. "But can't I do something? Surely I could be of some help. Can't I even go to see her?"

"Perhaps we may be permitted to see her for a while to-morrow," she suggested, pitying him sincerely, and wishing she were wiser in the ways of the heart. Perhaps her sympathy enabled him to leap the barrier of shyness, for he broke of a sudden into impassioned speech.

"You don't know what I owe to Clare!—how she encouraged me, made me go on when everything seemed so useless; made me feel I wasn't just a green country kid in a city where no one cared a tinker's damn about me; and how she helped me select little things for my old mother, just as though it meant the world to her. And here you tell me there's nothing I can do in return!"

Ephemia had been thinking fast. Now she smiled. "Oh, no, you misunderstand me; there is much you can do—you can tell Clare what you have told me; it will be more beneficial than all the medicines of earth."

But even Edward's gratitude and affection failed to restore Clare's depleted energies, and when Ephemia learned that a major operation was deemed necessary her buoyed up courage deserted her. The information came at a particularly trying time, after a day's gruelling over examination papers and the receipt of a doleful letter from the Swansons telling of neighborhood calamities; and, in conclusion, of Pierre's regeneration and eternal gratitude to Allison.

That night she frankly wept in the solitude of her little room, seeing no ray of redeeming hope, finding no whisper of counselling comfort in the whole of her troubled thoughts.

Mother Freeman heard these stifled sobs where she paced nervously to and fro in the tiny living-room. When they had died away she slipped into her daughter's room, affecting a studied cheerfulness. "My dear, I forgot to tell you we had a letter from Walter to-day, and there's something I want to show you," said she, taking care to avoid the tragic eyes levelled upon her.

It was a picture of Walter and his family; the baby, such a sturdy roly-poly by now, standing at his parents' knees like a small stuffed "teddy bear." But it was Eveline who arrested her attention. Contrition had already wrought its miracle; the empty face was waking to life, was become softened and childishly grave.

"One would scarcely know her for the same girl—such a selfish thing she was," said Ephemia, bitterness rather than joy in her voice.

"I imagine she looks very like Father used to see her," the mother returned quietly, and then, smiling brightly, hurried on: "But there is other pleasant news. Aunt Caroline has heard that the city is proposing to build an inclined railway to the 'Heights,' which means, of course, that it will have to cross our strip of land . . . ."

“Oh, how wonderful!” interrupted her daughter, her agile mind already grasping the full significance of such a possibility. “And to think that Father bought it because of the young birches and the way the brook comes leaping of a sudden around the bend! Who would ever have dreamed that such a venture might be profitable?”

“It rather looks as though a gamble in beauty were not so hopeless, after all,” Mother Freeman remarked softly. “And now I’m going to tuck you in bed with threats of all sorts of punishment if you don’t sleep.” But there was more to be said, as Ephemia surmised while the loving hands fussed with pillow and quilt.

“What is it, Mother?”

“There was a line from Mr. Clarke. The Ministerial Association is meeting in Alueez sometime next month; he is hoping to see us then. . . . I was wondering if we ought not—out of gratitude, you know—to ask him to stop with us?”

Ephemia’s hands flew to her eyes in a childish habit she had, as though by barring sight she barred the entire world of intruding thoughts. “Oh, Mother, why ask me?” she cried.

“My dear one, there are so many calls upon a generous heart! But somehow there is always an abundance left, and now, my child, good-night,” and like a gentle shadow she slipped away.

CHAPTER VI.

May, that eager darling of the year, with its passionate gladness and ecstatic bird-notes, gave way to lazy, fragrant June. Lily's wedding was now only a few days off. All was in readiness, the shimmering dress and filmy veil, gloves as soft as a dove's wing, gay little slippers, fit for Cinderella's feet; even the orange blossoms—real orange blossoms, imported by the indulgent groom-to-be.

Of lesser glories there was an amazing array; enough to fill a real "hope chest" to overflowing. Strangely enough, Ephemia found her interest wandering from the billowy contents to the chest itself, for it was a rare object of Norwegian handicraft, old and intricately carved. Lily dismissed the beautiful thing with the hurried explanation that it had been in Captain Ness's family for a hundred years. She had no time to muse upon its history; she was entertaining her friends, giving what she importantly called a "trousseau tea."

It was all very amusing to Ephemia. The conventional refreshments, the cut flowers, the place cards, the new embroidered napkins, and good Mrs. (Pastor) Neils presiding over her own silver coffee pot, all struck her as equally burlesque. Mrs. Strom, sallow and heavy eyed from patient hours of close needlework, slipped in and out among the guests, a mildly smiling hostess, and Ephemia was relieved as much as amused to see that her new gray taffeta dipped familiarly at the rear—the one natural Strom touch in this feverish new game.

To Lily it was a victory of victories and had gone to her little yellow head like strong wine. She was not unlike a hen with a new brood; her dainty Marquisette flounces spread out like wings each time she swooped upon that treasure chest to display some trifle, or flew to meet a new arrival. And it would have surprised Ephemia no more to hear her break into gentle clucking than to observe her proud importance and patronizing kindness. Lily was already the "married dame" speaking from superior heights of wisdom and experience.

But even while the humor of the thing impressed Ephemia, she found herself wondering if anything were ever discerned rightly in a world where human perception is so varied. What was Anna's vision, and Eveline's, and Pierre's? How might one judge of the dim spiritual yearnings when even the simplest commonplaces were so differently esteemed? She mused the more

because of an occasional whisper drifting her way when curious lips spoke of Clare; and it seemed cruel indeed that while so many former classmates were assembled to rejoice in Lily's good fortune, Clare must count the dragging hours in the prison confines of a hospital, almost an outcast from friendship and joy.

In time the shrieking exclamations, the exaggerated praise, and the never-ending hum of gossip became too much for Ephemia's patience. She wanted to escape into the sweet June air, out of the heavy, heated atmosphere, reeking with perfumes and sachet powders, rich foods, and perspiring ladies. But escape was impossible; the good Captain was due shortly, and to forego the honor of meeting him in his new role were an insult to the bride-elect.

That gentleman put in his appearance with commendable promptitude. His arms full of parcels, his ruddy face very hot, he looked more like an amiable Santa Claus than a prospective husband. And yet Ephemia was not long in divining a certain hardness beneath that amiable exterior. This sort of a man, she thought, would be kind to animals and children so long as they evinced no will of their own, but in another age would have encouraged the burning of heretics.

It was comforting to know that Lily's mental flights would never tempt her beyond discretion; she would see eye to eye with her Captain, believe as he believed, hear as he heard. And if the winds of the world brought no more than a whisper of changing seasons, or the stars held no deeper significance than a mission to light an insignificant planet on its unknown way, what mattered that to Lily?

When at last she was free to leave, Ephemia found herself pondering a good many seemingly irrelevant things. Stray thoughts like drifting flower-petals floated into her mind; half revealed truths became clear; long forgotten beauty flung up fresh fragrance. She recalled her father's idealistic sayings, things that had seemed too dreamy for a materialistic world, and she saw them of a sudden as more stable than all else.

It was as though he walked beside her, giving from himself a deeper knowledge, making her see how all things are but dreams—the magnitude or the meanness; the glory or the misery; all subject to the dreamer's art. "Whatsoever ye ask believing"—there was the sum and substance of it. One could not dream what might not be reality; and forever one's kingdom was confined to the dream.

An injustice? Oh, no, she saw it now with her father's eyes. To hold one's soul in confidence, to know one's place in the universal dream—that was happiness; and in their appointed places the little human souls must shine, a glowing rosary upon the loving heart of God. Stray thoughts were these, fanning with soft wings the spirit, quickening sympathy and understanding. She would believe, as her father had believed, that all things have an inherent loveliness, an indestructible loveliness, held in fief to God.

CHAPTER VII.

Ephemia had need of her recaptured faith and calmness of mind; Clare was rapidly growing worse. The operation had not been successful and there was talk of another. As often and as long as hospital-rule permitted she sat with her friend, thankful that no particular duty claimed her now that the "Normal term" was ended.

So it chanced that Ephemia did not attend Lily's pretty wedding, but tried instead to while away the saddest of hours for poor Clare. The stillness in the bare white ward was oppressive; a treacherous calm, hiding so much of agony and despair, of human hope crushed forever. Ephemia defied this malignant silence, sought to make it re-echo with kindliness and cheer. She repeated all the little daily interests: how sure they were of the new railway, which would bring so much good fortune; how the garden flourished, and the roses; how Aunt Caroline was papering her house, and how Harold was now turned poet, having composed a limerick on everything from worms to emperors. But this day Clare's interest was not to be captured, and at length she betrayed the trend of her troubled thoughts.

"So Lily's getting married to-day. Why, Phemy, it must be this very hour! Well, I wish her joy . . . . but it's not quite as we planned once, is it? We with our 'eternal friendship'!"

Ephemia was alarmed. All her efforts had been directed to avert this very subject, and now in desperation she turned to the little book of verse she had brought along to read. "Just listen to this whimsy bit; Father used to chuckle over it," she said with nervous eagerness:

"The blackbird lies when he sings of love,
And the squirrel a rogue is he;
And Maud is an arrant flirt, I trow,
And light as light can be!

O blackbird, die in the hazel dell!
And squirrel, starve on the tree!
And, Maud—you may walk in the merry greenwood,
You are nothing more to me!"

Clare tossed restlessly on her pillow. "I'm not so sure it's humorous—to be a Maud, I mean. Edward is forever quoting something or other—weedy

things that give me gooseflesh." She laughed softly and let her worn young mind drift as it would. "Funny, isn't it, a boy like that spouting poetry to me?"

"There's another little poem by the same poet, a little lyric I came across in an old anthology," and Ephemia quoted:

"Jenny kissed me when we met,
Jumping from the chair she sat in;
Time, you thief, who love to get
Sweets into your list, put that in,
Say I'm weary, say I'm sad,
Say that health and wealth have missed me;
Say I'm growing old, but add
Jenny kissed me."

"Say I'm weary, say I'm sad," repeated Clare sorrowfully, great slow tears rising to her eyes.

Ephemia was terrified at what she had done. Wishing to spare her friend so many cruel memories, she had innocently renewed still deeper distress. She tried to laugh. "It's just a bit of nonsense; poets are always most devoted in their verse and entirely faithless in person."

But Clare would not listen. " 'Say I'm growing old.' I didn't use to think there was much in that . . . . Oh, Phemy, why didn't I know there were things like that—even in books? I seem to have missed everything. . . . But there's Edward." Over the drawn white face flickered a smile, mischievous yet tender. "It's funny, you know, his believing me a reservoir of goodness. Couldn't you find me something astonishingly beautiful—but not too long to learn; something new for him to discover. Poor Edward! But I didn't choose this role; I didn't pose as a saint, now, did I?"

"You have always been honest, Clare."

Something of the former fire flashed into life. "You old dear, what a whopper, as Lily used to say. But it's mighty fine of you."

A gentle Sister, shadow-like and grave, slipped into the room, her patient feet making scarcely a sound upon the polished floor. Silent still, she took Clare's temperature, considered her chart, adjusted a bandage, moved a pillow. "Perhaps you had better leave," she suggested to the visitor in a voice singularly firm in one so meek in appearance.

"No, no," Clare disagreed, "I want her; I'll jump out of bed; I'll do something desperate if you send her away now."

The Sister may have been more compassionate than wise, but she patted her patient soothingly, eased her back among the pillows, and granted Ephemia another hour's grace.

"I'd better be done with what I want to say," the girl began wearily when they were alone again. "You know, Dr. Gunn is operating to-morrow. It's not that I'm afraid, or care so much, but if anything should happen I'd like you to write . . . to Ma. There's a policy I took out last year . . . . a thousand dollars. It's for little Alma—sweetest kid, that Alma; not a bit like the rest of us . . . and this money, it's fixed so she'll have it when she's eighteen . . . . It may help her to be different from me."

Painful moments were these while the weary spirit flogged itself to confess so much of bitterness and regret. Ephemia never forgot them. Swiftly rebellious, her thoughts reverted to Lily, crowned in her orange wreath, surrounded by admiring friends—the same friends who had turned their backs upon Clare—and she wondered if any one of them had desired to serve a fellow-being as this despised girl longed to serve. No doubt her face was eloquent enough, for Clare recalled her whimsically. "Now, Phemy, don't look so moth-eaten. . . . I'm not worth it, you know . . . . never was. But one thing worries me: I'd hate to go out . . . well, sort of an embodied lie; and yet, must Edward be told? He will hate it so?"

"No," said Ephemia promptly, but what could she offer in argument? She knew Clare of old, knew that nothing would stop her from destroying this shining faith of Edward's if she believed his good demanded it.

"But suppose he finds out—afterwards? Oh, if I only knew; things get so twisted—and there seems no proof of anything!"

Ephemia was aching with unshed tears and suppressed emotion; but she was of a sudden as certain of her course as a bird on the wing. "The world is kind afterwards," she said, "and as for proof, why Edward is himself a proof. You have said he worships truth, that his thoughts are filled with beauty . . . ."

"You should hear him," Clare interjected, smiling mistily. " 'Books in the running brooks—beauty in everything.' "

"Well, then, depend upon it, Edward could not recognize loveliness so well and be deceived in you. Father used to say of his favorite poets that they were the children of God because they found so much of goodness to admire; 'love knows its own,' he used to say."

Clare's face was resolutely buried in the pillow, her poor thin hands clutched in desperate resolve to control the threatening tears. She was still a valiant fighter. "Phemy," she managed, "you're something of a poet yourself. . . . Do you remember how we used to sit by the old brook, and you used to say that if you could understand its singing you could write another Arabian Nights?"

"Yes, Clare, I was always full of silly fancies, but you must rest now or Edward won't be permitted to see you."

This reminded Clare of her determination to meet Edward for once on equal ground. She might pretend about the motive, but in her sore young heart was a pathetic longing to leave something enduringly sweet to cling about her memory.

"I'll sure be quiet if you find me some bit of verse for Edward; but make it short—I'm such a dunce, you know."

"Oh, Clare," Ephemia demurred brokenly, "why must you insist? I am sure I ought not to do it."

Clare's transparent, blue-veined hand groped toward her troubled friend. "Phemy, old dear, you've never failed me; don't begin now."

Ephemia suffered at that until she longed to cry out at the endless sorrows, useless, cruel sorrows of the world; yet she must smile, must play this tragic comedy to the close. Oh, what should it be? She seemed as emptied of poetic lore, consoling maxims, all happy sentiment, in fact, as she was of joy itself. But just as a wind suddenly blows one the scent of distant gardens, that inimitable stanza, once so treasured by her father, flashed into mind. Whatever the secret of its inspiration, she knew it had lived, in her mind at least, for this very need.

"Out of the dusk a shadow,
Then a spark;
Out of the cloud a silence,
Then a lark;
Out of the heart a rapture,
Then a pain;
Out of the dead, cold ashes,
Life again."

Ephemia's softly modulated voice, vibrant with sympathy, made of the peerless verse a holy ritual, a revelation of eternal hope, eternal faith, and an assurance of eternal love.

Like a broken blossom Clare lay among her pillows, impatience and fear wiped from her mind. A tired child she seemed, worn with much wandering and ready for sleep.

"I don't suppose I understand it all," she whispered, "but Edward will . . . . and he will remember . . . . the last, the only lovely thing to be found in me."

The wide gray eyes opened, and Ephemia, meeting their fine confidence, their warm affection, knew that never again could she doubt the high destiny of the human soul.

"Phemy, do you remember how we used to wish on the stars?"

"Yes, Clare."

"And your wish was always to do heroic and amazing things?"

"I was very foolish, always."

"And you have done that, Ephemia—an amazing thing; made me see that life is very just; made me remember that promise about a falling sparrow. Oh, Phemy! my heart's so full, but words—"

But here courage failed Ephemia. Stooping swiftly, she gathered the pitifully emaciated figure to her heart. Fiercely they clung, as once before they had clung to vow eternal friendship; and then she fled out of that room of poignant memories and bitter pain, blind to everything but the grief in her heart.

Yet the world without was smilingly serene. The great gold sun flamed low in the west, drawing after him a trail of crimson and orange and quivering amber; the leaves sang in the wind; children romped in the streets; the traffic of business and pleasure went on as usual, the hum of it, like the drone of innumerable bees, reverberating pleasantly; and back in the hills the redbird would be calling and the thrush trilling his magic lay. Nothing was altered; Beauty crowned the hills, and Peace the waters at their feet; so had it been in ages gone, and so would it be in ages to come. Majesty and awe would still brood upon the waters, and song would still echo over the shoulder of the hills. The song would not be changed, but the singer only.

And yet, facing that glorious pageant of sunset, Ephemia grieved, knowing in her heart that Clare might not for long adore this colorful dream flashing and reflashing from the heart of Nature; grieved sincerely that her little sparrow-note must so soon be missing from the song of life.

CHAPTER VIII.

Time hung heavily on Ephemia's hands after Clare's death, which followed within a few hours of the unsuccessful operation. She seemed, for the time, without objective or conscious desire. The little daily tasks were performed mechanically, without interest and without the lively rebellion which was native to her eager young heart. That dread, tyrannic calm which she had learned to associate with cheerless hospital wards seemed to have settled down upon her; and sometimes she yearned to live again the most tragic hours, so wearied was her fervent nature of this monotonous interlude.

Even Mrs. Bergen's ungracious reply to her letter relating to Clare's policy and love of little Alma was a welcome distraction. Mrs. Bergen would have nothing to do with ill-gotten money, so she wrote. Clare had made herself an outcast to decency; an evil woman's money would only cause mischief. "Thou shalt have no traffic with sinners," she inscribed darkly. Then she thanked Ephemia for her good intentions and begged to be troubled no more. If her children were going to turn out wickedly she would accept it as her lot in a sinful world—such misfortunes did occur.

Ephemia was stormily indignant. Such utter blindness—such hardness of heart—never would she have believed it! But what was to be done? Something must be done; she couldn't endure the thought of such resentment being nursed against her Clare!

Mother Freeman read the illiterate scrawl in dispassionate amusement. "My dear," she said at length, "here is a case where the blind must lead the blind. Your pastor Neils might manage her; quite clearly it's her sense of righteousness which is most wounded."

"But why Pastor Neils? Though, after all, he was kindness itself to Clare at the last."

"Sometimes you are very stupid, Ephemia," came the smiling reply. "Haven't you seen how gratifying it is to save sinners? Those of us who know our less fortunate brethren to be victims of heredity and circumstance miss a great deal of sanctified pleasure. Pastor Neils will induce Mrs. Bergen to realize how noble an act is forgiveness—especially when the prodigal is a perverted offspring. Whereas you, my foolish one, wrote as though she had been an unhappy child leaving behind her a legacy of sweetness."

Ephemia acted upon this suggestion, and Pastor Neils, whose intentions were of the best, despite his marked intolerance of what he disapproved, willingly undertook the softening of Mrs. Bergen's heart. It seems he succeeded admirably; and though Ephemia was enraged to learn that Clare's gift had been accepted as atonement for sin rather than a free gift of love, she yet rejoiced in the thought that Alma might realize some of her young ambitions through her unfortunate sister's affection.

Then came happier days, bringing Henrick Clarke on his promised visit; and delightful diversion they found it. It was pleasant to hear him speak of his little affairs; his plans for the schoolroom organ; and the long desired tennis court for the young people; of the new choral society, and of a hundred and one other trifles, interesting because of his part therein. It was gratifying as well to hear him speak of Walter and Eveline; how they were buying a tiny cottage on the banks of the Esk, an investment indulged in since Walter's recent promotion. Every bit of news he recounted for the friendly family, not forgetting little Billie's rabbits, whose fate was still dear to Harold; or his grandmother's new ear trumpet—the best she ever had—nor even old "Queen," who had taken new honors at the Fair.

Apparently all was of the gayest, most care-free fellowship during the few days he spent with them. There were pleasant hours spent in the little garden, when they read, or talked of mutual interests, or let the precious moments pass on fragrant summer wings, contented in the friendly silence. And there were wonderful walks, when Ephemia enticed him off to her favorite nooks. He must see the old rock she had loved in childhood; it looked somewhat grim and lonely now, excluded as it was by a new green fence surrounding the rolling plot which had been her father's turnip patch; and he must see the old house by night, when it looked so forlorn and ghostly until one caught the twinkle of its long windows.

All this was pleasant and enheartening to the lonely girl; yet a subtle instinct warned her that it was, at best, a false and fleeting happiness. When his visit drew to its close she divined how strained were his emotions, how forced his gaiety, and she was tempted to flight. Had it been possible she would have avoided their last interview; but though she hinted at a pressing engagement, Mother Freeman remained deaf to the veiled entreaty and refused to come to her aid.

So she must learn the desire of his heart; hear how immeasurably dear she was become, how never-to-be-forgotten. She, who knew so well the meaning of despair and longing, who had experienced that magic singing of the heart—that fine high rapture, which only fervent natures know—must

deal a blow to all his shining hope, and be forced to look upon his disillusionment.

"I am so unhappy, so grieved," she told him brokenly, "but it seems one may not command affection. . . ."

In the silence, flowing round them like honied wine, she heard the restless stirring of the leaves; and a melancholy sound it seemed, as though the fair, white birches were bemoaning this intrusion of misery into their paradise.

"You must not reproach yourself," he said at last; "it was foolish of me to suppose you might forget . . . . but, somehow, I hoped that in time . . . . we have been such good companions . . . ."

What was she to say, to do, she of a race whose loves were as sudden and fierce as their anger, and as lasting as their own hot hearts? Even while she longed the most to spare him the pain and loneliness she knew so well, she realized that in this she could not change. Once having known the stars one may not worship at a candle.

For one selfish moment Ephemia recalled, jealously, his charming friendship, his serenity of mind, his sound resolve, and saw him desirable enough. She would find life very desolate at times. Ambition did not fill the place of affection, this much she had learned . . . . to hold him, then, against the dead days . . . . Shame, swift and searing, followed the thought. No, come what may, she would not stoop to barter; she would hold her soul in confidence.

"I could never forget, I feel that to be true," she said at length, ending the intolerable silence; "and you must remember me only as a humble and grateful friend, who expects the finest things of you and will rejoice in your every accomplishment."

No need to record his brave rejoinder. They were high-hearted children, these two, playing an age-old game. Sorrowing, she watched him depart, a fine, straight figure of a man, marching back to duty. Slowly she turned to the house; and there to find her mother calmly reading in her favorite rocking-chair shattered sweet sympathy and made her unreasonably cross.

"You might have spared me this," she snapped; "you knew well enough I wanted to get away."

Mrs. Freeman eased the reading glasses on her good patrician nose, and carelessly flipped a page. "Courage is quite as necessary in love as in war,"

she said, in a tone one assumes toward a laggard child. Then, as though this were after all of trifling consequence, she changed the subject.

"I met Caroline at the grocer's this afternoon, and she assures me our railway is now a certainty. She says the surveyors are already at work, and she has begun negotiating for the sale of our land."

"Are you quite sure? But, of course. Aunt Caroline isn't one to see imaginary rainbows. Oh, Mother, I'm going to spend to-morrow in my little valley; it won't ever be the same after the rails are laid."

"I expect not," Mother Freeman agreed, and again settled down to her book.

Judging by appearances, she was entirely absorbed in the tale; but instead of the printed page she was seeing a green plateau that swept in emerald billows to the sea, and, high on a promontory of distant hills, a proud old house—proud with the austere pride of generations; and, higher still, among the hills, two young human creatures removed from the world of reason and care by the white magic of love. From her heart she pitied the man who had just taken so sad a leave; yet it was unimaginable that a daughter of the Leithend Clan should give herself lightly. And in a rush of proud affection she reflected, "After all, the girl is very like our people; she is coming on!" which reflection was very typical of that ancient Clan and would have amused gentle Stephen not a little.

CHAPTER IX.

The succeeding day was one of flawless beauty. The hot sun wooed the earth to responsive ardor, and she flung up such a snare of subtle perfumes as well nigh drugged the senses. On first awakening, Ephemia caught at once the spicy odor of roses and mignonette drifting in at her casement, an inescapable lure. On such a morning one could not but rejoice. The whole world throbbed with a surging tumult of life, and young blood needs must sing responsively.

When the sun rose higher in the heavens its shower of gold fell so hot and dazzling that the very air danced and quivered in shimmering yellow. It was a day to dread in the crowded thoroughfares of a city, a passionate day, straight from the heart of Nature.

All that morning Ephemia ached to get away into the fragrant fields and the secluded woods. She was jealous of the hours spent in sweeping and dusting. What matter though a little dust clung about an ancient chair and a still older cabinet? On a day like this what mattered houses and all their cumbersome stupidities? But Mother Freeman had her own opinions and they were deadly to such vagaries. So Ephemia swept and dusted, consoling herself by singing at the task; and out in the kitchen, busy with her own affairs, Mrs. Freeman smiled, thinking how good it was to hear the girl singing again in that free self-abandon. “I declare,” she murmured, “the girl seems possessed.” And then she remembered that Stephen had known this same madness, this waking on fire with the world’s joy, and piping to her measure.

But at last Ephemia was out upon her way, walking with eager feet through the verdant wood; listening to the ecstatic bubbling of the gliding stream; stopping now and again to pick a wildflower or to watch a gambolling squirrel. When the ravine separating the Snell pasture from her father’s strip of hilly land was crossed, she discovered the first stake driven by Enterprise into this Kingdom of Dreams; and the sight of these innocent bits of wood, embedded like bristling daggers in the green cheek of the hill, reminded her unpleasantly of the changes to come.

She was the more eager to reach her favorite retreat; but she found the climb enervating, and for the first time resented the sun’s ardor. Once at the top of the stubborn ridge, however, she could look down upon the little nook she loved—a soft green semi-circle of loveliness hidden here by jealous

Nature. Round about it, like a band of dancing children, ran the silver birches; and, seen in the dazzling sunlight, it was all one blur of gleaming white and emerald.

Once there, settled beneath the slenderest of the heaven-aspiring birches, she surrendered to idle thoughts. It was a simple matter to lay aside one's wearying identity in this fairy spot, for the hot and pungent fragrance of eagerly growing things induced the mind to dreams, and even the most prosaic of souls might have found it difficult to muse constructively.

As for Ephemia, she was a child again, plotting her conquests, declaiming her ambitions, and somewhere, not far off, was the gentle echo, Lily; and here was Clare, laughing-eyed and fearless, beckoning from a wild thicket where the berries were ripe and red.

But Time is ruthless, even in dreams. There were darker visions—there was that other Clare, so ghostly white and still, smiling bravely from the borderland of All-forgotten Things. And there was the burned forest, desolate and sad; and out of this desolation he came again, the High Priest of her heart.

Now fast followed remote scenes and stray memories; Anna, of the soft gold hair and pleading eye, meeting the cold stare of the world with wondering fear; Eveline, too, and Walter, puzzled, blundering children all, crying for joys they had not earned. And lastly, with subtle sweetness and in gentle rebuke, came the memory of her father's enduring faith.

Where others had seen only tawdry cheapness he had discerned the loveliness beneath; where she had condemned he had pitied; where she had given bitterness he had given love. This was love, she saw, this selfless giving, this faith which knows no dread, this mystic power to imbue another soul with courage. And love, Allison's pure young love, would always sustain her.

It was as though the very wings of this deathless power bore her aloft, and from a lofty promontory permitted her to look down upon the toiling world with its roar of endless activities, its angers, its griefs, and its hysterical laughter mingled in one vital song. And the song was the song the stars sang, and the everlasting hills, and the distant sea. This song seemed but an echo of the busy feet of God treading the winepress of His cosmos, treading out the grapes of wrath into the wine of love, that it might drench the weary worlds and lift them nearer Him.

High and remote, she seemed to drift and dream, like a lone bird sweeping the skies, secure in the strength of its wings. “Ah, but that is it,” she thought, “we are all like little birds, and love impels our wings; and the measure of our soaring and the measure of our singing is the measure of love’s power.”

Suddenly these fervent thoughts were wiped out, she scarcely knew how, even as a curtain dropping on a stage shuts away its imaginary world. She had been startled by no unusual sight or sound, yet found herself taut and listening. Someone was in the wood. Yet why should that disturb her? In all her wandering in these hills she had never known fear. Possibly it was some child in quest of early raspberries, so she reasoned; but still her heart raced on in foolish expectancy. She heard the silvery trickle of sand giving way before trespassing feet, and the crackling of twigs in the underbrush as the intruder crashed down from the hill. Whoever he might be, he was coming from the west, and a wing of the birches would hide him until he was close upon her. She rose to her feet and waited, pressed close to her shining birch as though she were one with it and its graceful fellows. And indeed she might have been another feature of the charming landscape, so lithesome and slender she was, swaying there in her simple white muslin beside the dreaming birches.

Ephemia’s heart leaped madly within her when he stepped from behind the sheltering trees, but the power of speech seemed to have left her. She watched him drawing nearer, walking slowly—worn, no doubt, from she knew not what wandering—nearer and nearer—and still she had no voice for the tumult of joy within her.

And then he caught sight of her and stopped in his tracks like one arrested by a supernatural vision, incredulity and joy and a host of sweet emotions leaping to his face. It was then that words came at last to Ephemia.

“Allison! Allison!” she cried, and, like the winged creature she felt, flew across the soft green carpet of earth separating them and sprang straight into his arms. When she could think again she marvelled that one might survive so much of thankfulness and rapture. Of the world which had entranced her so short a while ago she was no longer conscious, but only of this whirlwind of happiness which had swept her into its bosom. Her cheeks against his rough tweed coat had never known so sweet a rest—the down of a flock of doves could be no softer to her fancy—and the beating of his heart, just beneath her enraptured ear, was music incomparable.

“Oh, Allison, I thought you were dead!” she whispered finally.

But he must laugh at that, his unforgettable laugh, and hold her at arm's length in humorously tender scrutiny; and she was amazed to think she had ever found fault with that charming mischief, so native to his eyes.

"And I, my dearest, was praying to be dead all the while."

"Oh, Allison, how could you? And if you tease me I shall most certainly cry with sheer happiness," which she did very promptly; and he quite consistently laughed at such prodigal emotion, while he wondered foolishly how so much gold had twined itself into her nut-brown hair.

"After all, so long as you weep in this seclusion," he finally must torment her, "I'm not so sure I object."

But these were gentle tears, soft little rainbow-tears; and smiles followed as swiftly as an April sun follows the silvery showers.

"Do you know," she announced solemnly from the safe comfort of his arms, "I never really knew how wonderful you are!"

"Execrable blindness!" he taunted, smiling down upon her with his fine dark eyes. "Do you mean to say you didn't recognize perfection in the human species when it was paraded before you?"

"To think," she beamed in return, "that you're just as impossible as ever —isn't it wonderful?"

"A contestable point," he returned. "But now that we're almost certain this isn't a dream, suppose we take stock of ourselves. For instance, young lady, since when have you taken to living in the woods and adopting the shameless practice of waylaying innocent young men?"

She waved this aside. "Allison, where were you going? Oh, what if I hadn't been here! No, don't interrupt me; and I don't really care where you were going, for you're coming right home with me now! We live in a little house just across the ravine on the far side of this hill."

"Your father—?" Allison began, and cursed himself for a clumsy fool when he saw her wince, rapture for the moment changed to sad regret. "My dear, I understand," he said very simply, and so she learned another truth of love, which has no need of words.

"But now I have you," she whispered, and the miracle of this truth swept sorrow aside as spring sweeps winter from the tired earth. "But what were you doing in this place? Do you know you're trespassing again?"

"I'd trespass on more dangerous ground, and beard a more fearful ogre, for so sweet a surprise. But if you must command so soon I'll have to confess I've been up to my old tricks again, picking a path for that greedy devil, Civilization, into the very heart of this Eden of the hills. In other words, my wilful educatrix—is that a word, or isn't it? And mind, Ephemia, I won't have you adopt that steely teacher-glint of the eyes . . . . But what was I saying when you swamped my poor wits in—oh, of course, I meant to say I had been surveying this charming hillside. Some brilliant mortal has conceived the idea of laying a cable railway over these hills—a promising danger which should greatly enhance the charms of the city."

"After all, one can't expect you to be sensible," she returned cheerfully; "but, none the less, this is Father's land, and you've no business to be here, really, and might as well come away peaceably."

Like care-free children they caught hands and scrambled up hill and down, across the ravine, over the silky stretch of meadow, and into the wooded lane leading to the little house Ephemia had grown to love. Their's was a joy complete, and beyond the need of explanation. As for Allison, what did he care now about that endless silence, that eternal waiting for a message which never came? And what mattered anything to Ephemia but that he was gloriously alive and ineffably dear?

If the memory of his eager young love had swept her high above the dreariness of earth, its sweet reality now crowned her with blessedness. She was sure of the eagle's courage now; no heights, no dizzy plunge or chilling winds, would affright her; secure in the strength of his devotion she would endure all things with equanimity; the dull treadmill of life—even this she would face with confidence. Just to know that she might lift her eyes from a dreary task and find him smiling down upon her; just to know she might stretch out her hand and encounter his as they struggled on together, was an assurance that God is Love.

Mother Freeman was in her little garden, a picture of domestic felicity, her matronly figure reclining in the chair she liked best. The soft folds of the blue scarf she was knitting added a note of happy color; and, half hidden by the shrubbery, Caroline plied the needle at the prosaic business of hemming a tea-towel. All about them were the rose trees, laden with sleepy blooms, red as ancient wine or yellow as ancient ivory.

The happy prodigals were almost at the gate before the women caught sight of them. No need to inform Mother Freeman as to who this smiling

young man might be—Ephemia's face declared it to the whole world. She whispered a request to Caroline and hurried to meet them.

One searching glance she must level at the stranger, and then even her proud progenitors might have been satisfied. No deception was here, no affectation, only a world of humor and loyalty in the eyes that met hers so unfalteringly. She smiled, a rare and understanding smile, and held out her two hands. "Welcome, my son," she said, and so saying enthroned herself in his grateful affection.

Much later, when all the necessary explanations had been made, when Caroline was entirely mollified for the trouble of hunting a lost young man who was not to be found, nor even decently dead, they fell to discussing the railway.

"It's certainly amazing," said Caroline, "that this white elephant of dear Stephen's should turn out profitably; and it's equally amazing that you should be turning out so decently," she told Allison. "Land sakes, I never was so exasperated! Here I went from place to place, like a lovesick housemaid, trying to get some clue to your whereabouts. What was said of me I'd hate to hear, and I a self-supporting widow. What did you mean by rushing off like that?"

"Tomlinson knows all about me—Dad and he were boys together—which explains a good many irregularities. But, remember, I did write when I was sufficiently mended to do anything. Somehow, when one has a very practical stepmother and a broken collar-bone, fervor to dictate love-letters is strangely dampened," he stated in his whimsical way.

"But why speak of it?" Ephemia shuddered, picturing all his distress. "And just to think he imagined I had forgotten him!"

"Stuff and nonsense!" sputtered her Aunt unfeelingly; "why shouldn't he think it, poor soul? Well, it was a mess, I must say. And now, pray what do you mean to do, since I presume you have some sort of plans in your silly heads?"

"Madam," he returned laughingly, "except that I shall not go off without leaving an address, though I must carve it on stone, I dare say I've no plans worth discussing."

"Indeed! and do you realize, my fine young man, that I am this dear child's only aunt, and the man of the family, so to speak, since her father died? At least, that's my view of it," she chuckled, "though, to tell the truth,

they're all rebels, these Freemans. In the face of this do you mean to tell me you've no sensible plans for the future?"

"But Aunt Caroline, you don't in the least know Allison. He never tells one anything in a way savoring the slightest of seriousness. Of course we have no end of plans; you ought to see mine all laid out in a row—a fair highway they'd make, I assure you."

"Humph! let's hope it carries you to success, this highway."

"And Allison," Ephemia resumed, impervious to such sentiment, "is going to be the most wonderful engineer. And if my dream bridges don't take us anywhere with safety his steel ones will," she finished triumphantly.

Meanwhile Mother Freeman had laid out the evening meal. The old table glittered with shining glass and snowy linen; the best china was out in brave array; and the reddest of roses nodded their heavy heads from an ancient vase of Icelandic handicraft. Harold, as usual, came in late, and, awed by the information offered him, hurried of his own accord into a clean blouse and came down to dinner with the meekness of respectability enveloping him like a cloud. However, he was not long in discerning that the strange young man was pleasantly close to the borderland of boyhood. Harold was certain, because of that quick gleam in his eyes, that Allison had been guilty of many pranks, had won many a thrashing, and had gone on smiling. This growing up and having to wash one's ears and trim one's nails and wear a miserable collar couldn't be so terrible when it left one like Allison.

At the table Caroline waxed talkative and was inclined to ruminate, a failing with her race. "It is pleasant to be gathered about this table," she confessed, with unaccustomed sentiment; "it strikes me as a festal occasion. Here we are, assured of a good price for your land, which will enable you to buy this cottage should Mr. Snell decide to remain in Germany, as he now seems inclined to do; and here is our Ephemia sparkling like a fairy princess with this silly love of hers—happiness, not to be denied, my dear Vilborg. If only our dear Stephen might have been here to see his faith in miracles come true; joy and security for his loved ones—wisdom and tranquility for those foolish children at Esk. . . ."

"Stephen was a Norseman," said his wife proudly; "he could have done no other than he did."

"Father was a hero and a gentleman," supplied his daughter staunchly; "he might have won sympathy and commendation in place of ridicule—for he was ridiculed."

“Fiddlededididdle and foolishness!” Caroline broke out in brusque affection. “Saxon, Norman, whatever you will, their virtues, their graces, their vanities and folly are all flung into the melting pot of common brotherhood! But this I will add, Stephen was a Freeman and worthy of the name.”

“Hear, hear!” cried Allison, “well said, my dear Aunt Caroline!” And with that inimitable sparkle lighting up his splendid eyes he turned toward the now blushing Ephemia and, lifting his glass, said: “In this clear water from the heart of our hills I pledge everlasting gratitude to Stephen, gentleman and idealist, and father of the dearest girl I know.”

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

When nested quoting was encountered, nested double quotes were changed to single quotes.

[The end of *When Sparrows Fall* by Laura Goodman Salverson]