A SOUVENIR.

"Nancy, why don't you show Paulina that?"

"Now, Charlotte, it ain't worth showing."

"Now, do show me what it is; you've got my curiosity all roused up," said Paulina. She cocked up her face at the other two women, who were taller. She was very small and lean; she wore her black hair heavily frizzed, and had on a fine black silk dress, and a lace bonnet with some red flowers. Charlotte, otherwise Mrs. Steadman, was very proud to take her about, she was so airy and well dressed. She was Mrs. Jerome Loomis, an out-of-town lady, a cousin of her late husband's, who was visiting her for a few days. She had taken her over to call on her sister Nancy, Mrs. Weeks, this afternoon. She herself had on nothing better than a plain black and white checked gingham; it was a warm afternoon, but she had realized keenly her reflected grandeur as she walked up the street with her well-dressed guest. She was a tall, spare woman, and usually walked with a nervous stripe, but to-day, all unconsciously, she nipped, and teetered, and swung her limp gingham skirts with just the same air that Paulina swung her black silk one. It was a nervous imitation. Mrs. Steadman was incapable of anything else; she was not a weak woman. Her mind, being impressed, simply produced a reflex action in her body. She would have despised herself if she had known it, because of the very pride which led her into it.

The call had been made, and the three women were standing in Mrs. Weeks' entry taking leave.

Paulina went on coaxingly: "Now do show it to me. What is it? I know it is something beautiful, or your sister wouldn't have said anything about it."

Paulina had a protruding upper jaw, and when she smiled her mouth stretched far back. She smiled a good deal when she talked. She jerked her head too, and moved her eyes. She affected a snappish vivacity of manner, or else she had it naturally. She did not know which it was herself, but she admired it in herself.

Mrs. Weeks, who looked a deal like her sister, except that she was paler, and her hair was grayer, and she wore spectacles, colored up faintly.

"'Tain't worth seein'," said she, deprecatingly; "but as long's Charlotte's spoke of it, I don't mind showin' it to you."

Then she opened the door opposite the sitting-room, and with an air at once solemn and embarrassed, motioned her callers to precede her.

Paulina bobbed her head about engagingly. "Dear me, which is it? There are so many pretty things here I never could tell which you meant."

Mrs. Weeks was innocently proud of her best parlor. She had so much faith in its grandeur that she was almost afraid of it herself. Every time she opened the door its glories smote her freshly, and caused her to thrill with awe and delight. Until the last two years she had been used to the commonest and poorest things in the way of furniture; indeed, this parlor had not been finished and plastered till lately. To have it completed and furnished had been the principal longing of her life; now it was accomplished by dint of the closest work and economy; it was the perfect flower, as it were, of all her wishes and fancies. When she had her parlor she had always meant to have something good, she had said, and now it was superlatively good to her simple eyes. There was a gilded paper on the walls, and a Brussels carpet with an enormous flower pattern on the floor. The furniture was covered with red plush—everybody else in the town had haircloth, plush was magnificent audacity. Every chair had a tidy on its back; there was a very large ruffled lamp-mat for the marble-top table; there were mats for the vases on the shelf, and there was a beautiful rug in front of the fireplace.

Paulina darted towards it, her silk and her stiff white skirt rattling. "Is this it?"

"This," said Mrs. Steadman, pointing impressively at the wall.

"Oh! Why, Mrs. Weeks, where did you get it? who made it?"

"She made it," said her sister; "an' she wa'n't long about it, either."

"Why, you don't mean it! How could you ever have had the patience? All those little fine, beautiful flowers are made of—"

"Hair. Yes, every one of 'em. Jest look close. That's rosebuds, an' lilies, an' pansies, an' poppies, an' acorns, besides the leaves."

"I see. Oh, that dear little rosebud in that corner made out of sandy hair! And that acorn is so natural! and that sprig of ivy! Mrs. Weeks, I don't see how you can do such things."

Even Nancy Weeks' mild nature could not hinder her from straightening herself up a little out of mere self-respect as she gazed at her intricate handiwork with her admiring guests.

"I made the whole wreath," said she, "out of my folks' hair—out of the Wilsons'—Charlotte an' me was Wilsons, you know. I had a good many locks of 'em 'way back. I had some of my great-grandmother's hair, an' my grandmother's. That little forget-me-not in the corner's made out of my great-grandmother's—I didn't hev much of that—an' that lily's grandmother's. She was a light-favored woman, an' her hair turned a queer kind of a yeller-grey. I had a great piece of it mother cut off after she died. It worked in real pretty. Then I had a lot of my mother's, an' some of my sister's that died, an' a child's that mother lost when he was a baby, and a little of my uncle Solomon White's mother's brother's, an' some of my father's. Then thar's some of the little boy's that Charlotte lost."

"They're all dead whose hair is in it?" said Paulina, with awed and admiring interest.

Nancy looked at her sister.

"Well, there's one in it that ain't dead," said Charlotte, hesitatingly, returning her sister's look. "Nancy wanted some hair that color dreadfully. None of the Wilsons' was sandy. That reddish rosebud you spoke of was made out of it."

"Whose was it?" asked Paulina curiously.

"Oh, well—somebody's."

"Well," said Paulina, with a sigh, "it's beautiful, and it must have been a sight of work. I don't see how you ever had the patience to do it. You're a wonderful woman."

"Oh, no! It wan't so very much to do after you got at it."

"It's such an ornament, and apart from that it must be such a comfort to you to have it."

"That's what I tell Nancy. Of course it makes a handsome picture to hang on the wall. But I should think full as much of keepin' the hair so; it's such a nice way."

"That oval frame is elegant, too."

After her callers had gone, Nancy, with simple pleasure and self-gratulation, thought over what they had said. This innocent, narrow-minded, middle-aged woman felt as much throbbing wonder and delight ever her hair wreath as any genius over one of his creations. As far as happiness of that kind went she was just as well off as a Michael Angelo or a Turner; and as far as anything else, she was just as good a woman for believing in hair wreaths.

She had toiled hard over this one; seemingly nothing but true artistic instinct, and delight in work, could have urged her on. It was exceedingly slow, nervous work, and she was a very delicate woman. Many a night she had lain awake with her tired brain weaving the hair roses and lilies which her fingers had laid down.

Paulina spoke to Charlotte on their way home about her sister's looking so frail.

"I know it," said Charlotte. "Nancy never had any backbone, an' she worked awful hard. I s'pose it's more'n she ought to do, makin' all those fancy fixin's; but she's crazy to do 'em, can't seem to let 'em alone; an' she does have a real knack at it."

"That hair wreath was beautiful, assented the other; "but I should have been afraid it would have worn on her."

When they got home, Mrs. Steadman's daughter Emmeline had tea ready. She was a capable young woman; she took in dressmaking, and supported herself and mother; and had all she could do. She was rather pretty; tall and slender like her mother, with a round face, and a mouth with an odd, firm pucker to it when she talked, that strangers took for smile; she had very rosy cheeks.

There was a prayer-meeting in the church vestry that evening, and after tea Mrs. Steadman proposed going, with her company and her daughter. Emmeline demurred a little. "She guessed she wouldn't go," she said.

"Why not?" asked her mother, sharply. She still kept a tight reign over this steady, dutiful daughter of hers. "You don't expect anybody to-night?"

Her mother said "anybody" with a regard for secrecy; she meant Andrew Stoddard.

Emmeline colored very red. "No, I don't," she said quickly; "I'll go." She was not engaged to the young man, and felt sensitive. It seemed to her if she should stay at home for him and he should not come, and her mother and her cousin should suspect her of it, she could not bear it; besides, she did not really expect him; there was nothing but the chance he might come to keep her. So she put on her hat, and went to the meeting with her mother and Mrs. Loomis.

She wondered when she got home if he had been there, but there was no way of finding out. He had to drive from a town six miles further up the river to see her. He was the son of the country storekeeper there, and acted himself as head clerk. He was a steady, fine-looking young man, though he had the name of being rather fiery-tempered. People thought he was a great catch for Emmeline. He had been to see her some six weeks now. She hoped he would ask her to marry him; she could not help it; for she had grown fond of him.

Her mother was sure that he would—in fact, she hardly knew but he had. Emmeline herself was not so sure; she had never a very exalted opinion of herself, and was more certain of her own loving than she was of anybody else's.

When Sunday night came she stayed at home from meeting, without any comment from her mother, who put on her best bonnet and shawl, and went alone. Paulina Loomis had gone home the day before.

Emmeline had put the little front room, which served alike as dressmaker's shop and parlor, in the nicest order. It was a poor little place anyway. There was a worn rag-carpet, some cane-seated chairs, and one black wooden rocker covered with chintz. An old-fashioned bureau stood against the wall; and of a week-day a mahogany card-table, made square by having its two leaves up, was in the center of the room. Emmeline used this last for cutting.

To-day she had put down the leaves, and moved it back against the wall, between the two front windows. Then she had got the best lamp out of the closet and set it on the table. It was a new lamp, with a pretty figured globe, one she had bought since Andrew began coming to see her. She had picked a bunch of flowers out in her garden, too, and arranged them in a gilt-and-white china vase, and set it beside the lamp. There were balsams, and phlox, and lark-spur, and pinks, and some asparagus for green. She had tucked all her work and her patterns out of sight in the bureau drawers, swept and dusted, and got out a tidy to pin on the rocking-chair. Then she had put on her best dress, and sat down to wait. She thought, perhaps, that he would come before her mother went to church; but he did not. So she sat there alone in the fading light, waiting. Every time she heard a team coming, she thought it was his; but it would roll past, and her heart would sink. At last the people began to flock home from meeting, and her mother's tall, stooping, black figure came in through the gate. She thought Andrew was there, so she went straight through the long narrow entry to the kitchen; Emmeline knew why she did. After a while she opened the door from the kitchen cautiously, and peered into the dark room; she had a lamp out there.

"There's nobody in here, mother," said Emmeline; "you needn't be afraid."

"Didn't he come? I thought I didn't hear any talkin'."

"No; nobody's been here."

"Why, I wonder what's the reason?"

"I s'spose there's some good one," replied Emmeline, puckering up her lips firmly.

"I'm tired; I guess I'll go to bed."

If she felt badly she did not show it, except by her silence at her mother's wondering remarks; but she had always been very reticient about Andrew, not often speaking his name. She did not cry any after she went to bed—indeed, she could not, for her mother slept with her; her father was dead.

The weeks went on, and Emmeline got ready for Andrew a good many times, half-surreptitiously. She would put sundry little ornamental touches to the room, or herself, hoping her mother would not observe them; but he never came. The neighbors began to notice it, and to throw out various hints and insinuations to Mrs. Steadman. They never said anything to Emmeline. She was so still they did not dare to. Her mother met them frostily. Emmeline didn't care if Andrew Stoddard didn't come. She guessed she would laugh to see her fretting over him. She even hinted in her rampant loyalty, that p'raps there was some reason folks didn't dream of why he didn't come. Mebbe he'd been given to understand he wasn't wanted.

One afternoon she came home from one of the neighbor's with some news. She had seen a woman who lived next to the Stoddards, and Andrew had gone west.

"Has he?" said Emmeline, and went on sewing.

"You're a queer girl," said her mother. She liked Emmeline to be dignified and reticient about it to other people, but she felt aggrieved that she did not unbend and talk it over with her.

About this time her sister Nancy was taken sick with a slow fever. She lingered along a few weeks; the fever left her, but she had no strength to rally; then she died. It was a hard blow to Charlotte. She had been very fond of her sister, and had an admiration for her which was somewhat singular, since she herself was much the stronger character of the two. She had seemed to feel almost as much satisfaction in Nancy's fine parlor and fancy work as if they had been her own. Perhaps she consoled herself in that way for not having any of her own, and maintained to herself her dignity among her neighbors.

After her sister's death she began to think that some of these fine things ought by right to belong to her.

"Nancy earned 'em jest as much by savin' as Thomas did by workin'," she told Emmeline. "It wouldn't be nothin' more'n fair for her sister to have 'em." But Thomas Weeks had in him capabilities of action of which people generally did not suspect him.

He was a little, spare, iron-gray, inoffensive-looking man, but he had been a small tyrant over his mild-visaged, spectacled wife. Now she was dead he had definite plans of his own, which matured as soon as decency would permit, and which did not include his giving his deceased wife's sister his fine red-plush furniture. She visited him often and hinted, but he smiled knowingly and talked of something else.

Nancy had been dead about six months, when, one afternoon, Mrs. Steadman saw him drive past in a shiny buggy with a lady. Her suspicions were aroused, and she talked, and worried, and watched. She found out he had a new hat and coat, and was having the house painted, and the sitting-room and kitchen papered. Everybody said he was going to get married, but nobody seemed to know to whom. At last it came out. He came to church one Sunday with his bride—a short, stout, sallow, woman in middle-aged bridal finery, no more like poor Nancy than a huckleberry bush is like a willow sapling. She was a widow from a neighboring town, and reputed to have quite a snug little property—$4,000 or $5,000.

Emmeline and her mother sat just across the aisle from the newly-wedded couple. Mrs. Steadman had given one startled, comprehensive glance at them when they turned into the pew. After that she did not look at them again, but sat straight and rigid, holding her chin so stiffly against her long neck that it looked like a double one, pursing up her lips as if to keep back a rushing crowd of words which were clamoring behind them.

She told Emmeline, when they got home, that it was all she could do not to speak right out in meeting and tell Thomas Weeks just what she thought of him.

"I'd like to get right up," said she, "an' ask him 'f he remembered it was hardly six months since my poor sister was laid away, an' 'f he'd ever heerd of such a thing as common decency an' respect for folks' memory, an' 'f he didn't think it was treatin' some folks pretty hard to bring another woman in to use their dead sister's things, when he'd never given them a penny's worth of 'em."

As far as the results went, Charlotte might just as well have spoken out in meeting, and accused her recreant brother-in-law openly. She had always been a woman who talked a great deal, and could not help making funerals of all her woes, and now there was not a woman in the town with whom she did not discuss Thomas' second marriage, and her own grievances in connection therewith. They all sympathized with her; women always do it in such cases.

She warmed up on the subject to everybody who came into the shop. Emmeline kept quietly sewing, giving her opinions on work when asked for them, but not saying much besides. Her mother did not understand her; privately she thought her unfeeling. Emmeline had not heard a word from Andrew Stoddard all this time. For a while she had had a forlorn hope of a letter, but it had died away now. Outwardly she was living just the same as she had always done before he had come; but the old homely ways, whose crooks she had thought she knew by heart, were constantly giving her a feeling of pain and strangeness. She was not imaginative nor self-conscious; she never really knew how unhappy she was, or she would have been unhappier. She kept steadily at work, and ate and slept and went about as usual; she never dreamed of its being possible for her to do anything else, but the difference was all the time goading her terribly.

Her mother's fretting over the affair had disturbed her actively more than anything else; she was almost glad now to have it turned into another channel. And this new one threatened to be well worn indeed before Mrs. Steadman should leave it. She scolded and cried in it. She was divided between grief and indignation.

Poor Nancy's few articles of finery rankled more and more in her mind. She journeyed up to Thomas' house evening after evening to see if there was a light in the best parlor; report said that they used it common now. She came home trembling; there was one.

"To think of their usin' poor Nancy's best plush furniture like that!" she said; "settin' in them stuffed chairs every evenin' just as if they was wooden ones; they won't last no time at all. An' to think how hard she worked and saved to get 'em, an' how choice she was of 'em. Then thar's all them tidies an' mats an' rugs, an' that beautiful hair wreath made out of my folk's hair!"

One Friday evening Mrs. Steadman started for meeting. Emmeline did not go. She had some work she was hurrying on, and her mother, contrary to her usual habit, did not urge her to; indeed she rather advocated her staying at home.

About half an hour after her mother left Emmeline laid down her work—it had grown too dark for her to see without lighting a lamp. As she sat at the window, a moment in the dusk, she saw a figure hurrying up which she did not think could be her mother's, it came so fast and flurriedly; besides, it was not time for the meeting to be out.

But when the gate opened she saw it was. Her mother scuttled up the steps into the entry, and opened the shop door cautiously.

"Emmeline, anybody here?"

"No."

She came in then. She had something under her arm. "Light the lamp, Emmeline—quick! See what I've got!"

Emmeline got up and lighted the lamp. "Why, mother!" said she, aghast. Her mother was holding the hair wreath, in its oval gilt frame, with an expression of mingled triumph and terror. "Why, mother, how did you get it?"

"Get it? I walked into the house an' took it," said Charlotte, defiantly. "I don't care; I meant to have it. Nancy made it, an' worked herself 'most to death over it, an' it's made out of my folks' hair, an' I had a right to it."

"Why, mother, how did you ever dare?"

"I peeked into the vestry, an' saw 'em both in thar on one of the back seats. Then I run right up to the house. I knew unless they did different from what they used to, I could git in through the shed. An' I did. I went right through the kitchen an' sittin'-room into the parlor. It made me feel bad enough. That plush furniture's gettin' real worn, usin' it so common; the nap's all rubbed off on the edges, an' the tidies are dirty. I saw a great spot on that Brussels carpet, too, where somebody'd tracked in. It don't look much as it used to. I could have sat right down an' cried. But I was afraid to stop long, so I jest took this picture down an' come off. I didn't see a soul. I s'pose you think I've done an awful thing, Emmeline?"

"I'm afraid you'll have some trouble about it mother."

"I ain't afraid."

In spite of her bravado she was afraid. She tucked away the wreath out of sight upstairs, and when Thomas Weeks came to the door the next day, she answered his ring with an inward trepidation. She had an inclination to run out of the back door, and leave Emmeline to encounter him, but she resisted it.

She came off victorious, however. Even Thomas Weeks succumbed before the crushing arguments and the withering sarcasms, tumbling pell-mell over each other, which she brought to bear upon him.

"He says I may keep it," she told Emmeline when she went in. "He guesses Mis' Weeks don't set no great store by it, an' he don't care. He was awful toppin' at first, but he began to look kind o' 'shamed, an' wilted right down after I'd talked to him awhile. I told him jest what I thought of the whole business from beginnin' to end."

After that the hair wreath was hung up in state in the front room, and openly displayed. Everybody upheld Charlotte in taking it, and she felt herself quite a heroine. Nothing delighted her more than to have people speak about it and admire it.

One day she was descanting on its beauties to one of the neighbors, when a question arose which attracted Emmeline's attention.

"Whose hair is that reddish rosebud made out of?" asked the woman.

Mrs. Steadman gave a warning "Hush!" and a scared glance at her daughter. Emmeline saw it. After the woman had gone she went up to the wreath and looked at it closely. "Mother," said she, "whose hair is in that rosebud?"

Mrs. Steadman shrank before her daughter's look.

"Mother, you didn't go to my drawer and take that out! I missed it! How did you know I had it?"

"Now, Emmeline, thar ain't no reason for you to get so mad. I went to your drawer one day for something, an' happened to see it. An' poor Nancy wanted some hair that color dreadfully, an' she didn't really want to go out of the family, an' we all thought—"

"Mother, did he know it?"

"Now, Emmeline, it's ridiculous for you to fire up so. I s'pose he did. You remember that last Friday night when Paulina was here last summer, an' we all went to meetin'? He came that night, an' we warn't to home, and Nancy was settin' on her door-step when he drove by, an' she had to call him in an' show him the wreath. An' I s'pose she let on 'bout his hair bein' in it. I told her she was awful silly; but she said he kinder cornered her up, an' she couldn't help it. I scolded her for it. She said he seemed kinder upset."

"Mother, that was the reason."

"Reason for what?"

"The reason he stopped coming, and—everything."

"Emmeline Steadman, I don't believe it. 'Tain't likely a fellar'd got so mad as that jest 'cause somebody'd made a rosebud out of his hair to put in a wreath; 'taint reasonable. I should think he'd been rather pleased than anything else."

"Oh, mother, don't you see? He—gave it to me, and he thought that was all I cared for it, to give it to Aunt Nancy to put in a hair wreath. And he is awful sensitive and quick tempered."

"I should think he was, to get mad at such a thing as that; I can't believe he did!"

"I know he did!"

"Well, there ain't any call for you to feel huffy about it. I'm sorry I did it; I'm sure I wouldn't if I'd dreamed it was goin' to make any trouble. I didn't have any idea that he was such a fire-an'-tow kind of a fellar as that. I guess it's jest as well we didn't have him in the family; that wouldn't have been no livin' with him."

That night Emmeline wrote a letter to Andrew Stoddard. She sat up for the purpose, pretending she had some work to finish, after her mother had gone to bed. She wrote the sort of letter that most New England girls in her standing would have written. She began it "Dear Friend," touched very lightly on the subject of the hair, just enough to explain it, then decorously hoped that if any misunderstanding had interrupted their friendship it might be done away with; she should always value his very highly. Then she signed herself his true friend "Emmeline E. Steadman."

Nobody knew what tortures of suspense Emmeline suffered after she had sent her poor little friendly letter. She sewed on quietly just as usual. Her mother knew nothing about it.

She began to go regularly to the post-office, though not at mail times. She would make an errand to the store where it was, and, after she was through trading, inquire quietly and casually if there were a letter for her.

One morning she came home from one of those errands, dropped down in a chair, and covered her face with her hands. Her mother was frightened; she was mixing bread; they were both in the kitchen.

"Emmeline, what is the matter?"

Emmeline burst into a bitter cry: "He's married. Mrs. Wilson told me just now. Mrs. Adams told her; she lives next to his folks."

"Why, Emmeline, I didn't know you cared so much about that fellar as all that!"

"I didn't!" said Emmeline fiercely; "but I—wrote to him, an' what's he goin' to think? I'd died first, if I'd known. Oh, if you'd only let that lock of hair alone! You brought all this trouble on me!"

"Well, Emmeline Steadman, if you want to talk so to the mother that's done for you what I have, on account of a fellar that's showed pretty plain he didn't care any great about you, you can.

Emmeline said no more, but, with a look of despair, rose to go upstairs.

"I've told you I am sorry I took it."

"I think you'd better be," said Emmeline, as she went through the door.

She did no more work that day; she stayed upstairs and would see nobody; she did not care now what people thought. Mrs. Steadman grew more and more conscience stricken and worried; she went for the night mail herself, with a forlorn hope of something, she did not know what.

When she got back she came directly upstairs into the room where Emmeline was. "Emmeline," said she, in a shaking voice, "here's a letter for you; I guess it's from him."

Emmeline took it and opened it, her face set and unmoved; she had is all settled that the letter was to tell her of his marriage. She read down the first page, her face changing with every word. Her mother watched her breathlessly, as if she too were reading the letter by reflection in her daughter's face.

At last Emmeline looked up at her mother. She was radiant; she was trying to keep from smiling, lest she betray too much; but she could not help it. She looked blissful and shamefaced together.

"Mother—he ain't married after all; and he says it's all right about the hair; and—he's coming home!"

Charlotte's face was as radiant as her daughter's, but she said, "Well, what do you think now? After you've been such an ungrateful girl, blaming your mother, an' talkin' to her as you did this mornin', I should think you' be ashamed. You don't deserve it!"

Emmeline got off to bed; with her letter in her hand she went over to her mother, and kissed her shyly on the soft, old cheek. "I'm really sorry I spoke so, mother."

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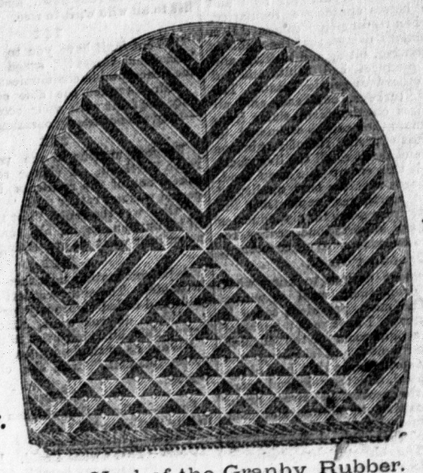

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