

HOME CIRCLE.

THE LITTLE PEACE-MAKERS.

BY SUSAN COOLIDGE.

It was a cool afternoon in late September, when Miss Marcia Dennett, closing behind her the heavy door of her old-fashioned house, locked it with trembling fingers, pocketed the key, and wound slowly down the path toward the gate, leaving silence and emptiness behind her.

The spectacle of Miss Marcia going out for a walk was so unusual as to attract attention from the neighbours. Miss Usher, the dressmaker, who lived opposite, was so startled thereby that she called her two assistants from their work to look at it.

"Ain't it peculiar," she said, "that she should be goin' out so? She ain't been outside that gate, to my knowledge, for these six months back, except just to the funeral the other day, and then it was in a close back with all the blinds down. She was afraid of seein' some of the Hazards there, I suppose, but she needn't have been, for they didn't even know about Priscilla's being dead till after the buryin', Miss Allen says, down to the Point. Miss Dennett kept it close on purpose, I guess. There wa'n't even a notice in the paper; and I don't call that payin' proper respect, when folks have lived with you as long as Priscilla did with her. Well—it's all curious. Where'do you suppose that old creetur has gone?"

It was toward the cemetery that the "old creetur" was going. It was quite fifteen years since Miss Dennett had taken so long a walk, and the variation upon her habit of close home-keeping affected her strongly. The sunshine in her face, the movement of the wind made her giddy, the passers-by, in the by no means crowded street, seemed to be staring at her. She was thankful to find herself at the grave-yard gate, though, sooth to say, the enclosure which it guarded was a bare, unlovely spot enough. Many New England villages and towns can show such an one; a huddle of time-stained headstones, rising without order or regularity from long, ragged grasses, and the seed-pods of innumerable weeds, with here and there a pretentious monument of marble, dazzlingly white, and now and again one carefully tended plot, an oasis in the general desolation, to mark the contrast between the love that remembers and the carelessness which shuns.

The aspect of the place struck painfully upon Miss Dennett, as she made her way along the irregular foot-path to the remote corner where her old servant—her only friend—had recently been laid. It was a sentiment of late remorse and genuine regret which brought her there. Priscilla was the one creature who for years past had stood constant to her through good and through evil. Miss Marcia had hectored, brow-beaten, contradicted her, not infrequently, but all the time she had counted on Priscilla's absolute faithfulness, and had never counted in vain. Her death was the removal of a prop. Miss Dennett realized it, and felt shaken and weakened as she looked at the forlorn mound of barely sodded earth under the shadow of a tall grey fence, which covered all that remained of that long and loyal service. She sat down on a shabby little bench near by, for her limbs shook with fatigue, and fell to thinking.

Priscilla should have a head-stone. That look of neglect was too dreadful. A large, handsome head-stone she should have, and a fence, and something must be planted. Miss Marcia grew puzzled. She did not know how people did such things nowadays. Then her thoughts swept into a gentler channel as a tide of recollection welled up in memory. How hard-working Priscilla had been, and how patient; patient always, even when things were at their hardest. She recalled those last few moments, when Priscilla, her face already gray with the shadow of coming death, had faltered out one last plea: "You'll be so lonesome," the faint voice had said; "Oh, forgive Miss Alice, if it's only for my sake. It'll be hard, I know, but you'll be glad, once it's over."

"Hard!" Priscilla might well call it so. For fifteen years Miss Dennett had not looked on the face of the niece who had once been to her as her own child. They had parted finally and forever on the day when Alice had married Wallace Hazard against her aunt's express prohibition. Much pleading, many tearful arguments had been tried before

the girl decided on the step which led to this severance.

"If you would only give a reason. If you would only tell me why you object to Wallace," she urged. "How can you expect me to give him up when you won't explain?"

"Take your own way if you must," was all the reply. "Take it; but the day you marry Wallace Hazard you bid good-bye to me." Was Miss Marcia likely to explain that her opposition to her niece's lover arose from the fact that he was son to the man who in her own youth had done her the irreparable wrong of first gaining her affections and then preferring and wedding another woman? The pride of the Dennetts had sealed her lips at the time and forever after; but none the less fiery keen was her resentment, and years had but added to it. No, she could not explain, but neither could she tolerate or forgive.

Alice waited, Alice wept; then she married her lover. For a long time the hope of reconciliation sustained her. She wrote letters, she came to the house; but the letters were not answered, and the door, which till then had always opened to her so gladly, was closed in her face by the weeping Priscilla, who must perforce obey the orders of her implacable mistress. "Don't come again, Miss Alice," she whispered, on the last of these occasions. "It's no use yet!—she's as hard as hard."

So Alice ceased to come, but none the less did Priscilla plead her cause whenever she dared. When a little girl was born, to whom was given the name of Marcia, Priscilla bore the tidings to her mistress in hopes of a softening. But Miss Dennett only closed her lips tightly, and not a word escaped her when, a few months later, Priscilla, weeping, told her of the child's death.

When relations who are at variance live in the same place, there is a constant painfulness. Though they may not meet, there is always the risk of meeting; each day deepens the irritating apprehension. It was to avoid Alice that Miss Dennett formed the habit of home-keeping which had become the rule of her life. But now, as she sat looking at poor Priscilla's shabby mound, a sense of petulant and illogical injury swept over her.

"Forgive Alice," she muttered to herself. "Pray, how did she expect me to set about it, even if I had the mind, which I haven't? It is years since she came near the house. Priscilla was always unreasonable!"

She was still sitting on the bench in the shadow of a large hemlock, lingering, she scarce knew why, but in reality, I think, because the thought of the locked and empty house to which she must return was dreadful to her, when a sound of children's voices, fell upon her ear, and presently two little girls came in sight. They were sturdy, fair-haired creatures, one apparently about ten years old, the other perhaps eight. They had long masses of rippling hair tied with black ribbons; their frocks were black, too—Miss Marcia noted that—and they carried between them a basketful of late garden flowers. They did not notice the figure in the shadow of the hemlock, but Miss Marcia could hear every word they said.

"Do you suppose little Oliver knows when we make him look so pretty?" asked the younger.

"Mamma says perhaps he does," replied the older. "She says angels can see everything."

"Then I think mamma oughtn't to cry so when she talks to us about him," pursued the little one. "It would make him feel dreadfully if he were alive."

"Oh, hush, Prilla, mamma can't help it. You mustn't say that."

The children were close to Miss Marcia now. They paused in their walk.

"Oh, Prilla—see that," said the older girl. "That poor, poor grave over there under the fence, without any stone or fence or anything. Isn't it dreadful. It makes me feel badly just to look at it."

"Yes, because it looks so lonesome," said the other; "why don't somebody come and make it pretty like Oliver's? Didn't anyone care, Lilly?"

"I don't know," replied Lilly, keeping her eyes on the grave, as if fascinated by its very bareness. "Prill, I am thinking about something; we've got a good many flowers to-day, you know. Let's save some of them, and pick a good many wild ones to put with them, and come back here after we've done Oliver's

and try to make this poor grave look better. Don't you think it would be nice?"

"Very nice. Oliver wouldn't care a bit if we did give away some of his flowers; and mamma will be glad, too. We'll tell her when we get back."

The childish voices died away. Miss Marcia, bending a branch aside, could see them at a distance, busy in one of the few carefully enclosed and tended plots, where several small head-stones showed above neatly cut turf. Later, they became visible, questing too and fro, in search of flowers, apparently. And she had relapsed into her dreary musings, broken only with curiosity as to whether they would really carry out their scheme, when she saw them coming back, still bearing the basket, heaped now with purple and white asters, and plumes of golden-rod. They went straight to Priscilla's grave.

"Let's make it like a bed—all flowers," said little Prill. "That would be nicest, don't you think so?"

"Yes—and hide all this yellow grass."

Touched almost to tears, moved and affected as she had seldom been in her life before, Miss Marcia watched as the fair little hands arranged one flower after another on the bare mound, clothing its uncomeliness with grace and bloom, ordering and smoothing all with tender and reverent touches. The wild flowers were heaped in a thick garland round the edges, little Prill running off now and then for another branch of asters or a little more golden rod, or reaching up to the boughs of a low tree for sprays of crimson leaves. With a delicate perception of taste, the choicest blossoms were reserved for the middle of the grave, white honeysuckle, mignonette, a few clusters of heliotrope, one or two late roses.

"There," said the elder, as the last flower was placed, "that looks a great, great deal better. It doesn't make me feel badly at all now."

"No, it's pretty now," declared her sister. "If anybody comes to look at it, as we come to Oliver, they'll be pleased, I think, don't you?"

"Now, Prilly, we ought to go, for it's getting near tea-time, and I want to tell mamma what we've done, awfully."

"So do I," and the little one gave a happy skip as she went off with the empty basket. Moved by an impulse which she could neither define nor contradict, Miss Marcia arose and followed.

"If I could just see their mother a moment, and tell her what they've done, and how pleased I am," she said to herself, hardly realizing that the sudden emotion awakened within her was leading her to the unaccustomed act of seeking out the home of a stranger. Step by step she followed, keeping the children in sight. The walk was a long one, but the idea of turning back never occurred to her mind.

The part of the town to which the little ones led was new to Miss Dennett. It had grown up within a few years, and her rare walks had never lain in that direction. They entered a small house, standing in a neat garden trimmed with flowers, and a minute later Miss Dennett rang at the same door.

The fair-haired Lilly opened it. She still wore her hat, and, while Miss Dennett hesitated, at a loss how to explain her errand, little Prilla dashed downstairs, crying, in a disappointed voice: "Mamma is not in her room. Do you suppose she's gone out, Lilly?"

At the sound of her call, a door in the farther end of the hall opened hastily, and a lady appeared. "Here I am, children," she said; then, realizing the presence of a stranger, she advanced, blinking at the sudden light from the open door.

"What is it, Lilly?" she asked.

"It's a lady, mamma," began Lilly, then stopped amazed, for her mother, looking pale and strangely excited, had rushed forward. There was a cry: "Aunt, aunt, have you come to me at last?" Miss Marcia, pale as her niece, stood speechless for a moment, then, as if urged by an irresistible impulse, she slowly opened her arms, and, with a deep sob, closed them round Alice, who, with a burst of wild weeping, stroked the stern face, kissed it, and poured forth a torrent of rapid words.

"Oh, Aunt, that you should come to me now! Did you hear about it, aunt? About my boy, my darling little boy, my little Oliver? It is six months since he died, but it does not seem a week. Did you only just hear of it, Aunt? Was it that brought you?"

"No, it wasn't that. I didn't know that you had a boy, Alice, or that you had lost him. It was Pris-