

Choice Literature.

A PRESSING EMERGENCY.

The time had been—it was so long ago that apparently everybody but Miss Priscilla herself had lost all recollection of it—when young Dr. John Brownson and pretty Prissy Maxwell had been something more than friends. The girl's mother was a captious invalid who utterly failed to understand that her youngest child should think of any existence apart from her own aches and ailments; the elder members of the family who had all left home and were absorbed in their own hopes and occupations, were horrified that the meek sister, who had been at everybody's service, should presume to desire a happiness apart from the family. Each one felt particularly called upon to interfere. Prissy was necessary to her mother's comfort; John Brownson had his way to make—the Maxwells did not especially care for some of his connections; they really could not understand what Prissy could care for in that great rough fellow. John and his prospects were very freely discussed, and to the young girl's dismay her dream of happiness changed into a gray fog that saddened her life. After a while Mrs. Maxwell began to lament that her youngest daughter had never married.

"I really don't know why of all my flock Prissy is the only one who has never settled. We were always considered a marrying family," she would insist, complainingly.

When the old lady died, and Prissy was left alone, the whole Maxwell connection agreed that it would have been much more convenient if Priscilla had made ties for herself; and even in her single-mindedness Miss Maxwell writhed under the scathing conviction that she was disapproved of by her relatives.

Miss Prissy thought a good deal about the doctor. Her heart was very tender over the lonely man, solitary in his great house, where, since the death of his old mother, he had lived alone. There were many who would gladly have shared his prosperity. The sweet-natured woman never blamed any one; but when she heard it whispered that he was inattentive to this young woman or that, a meek wonder would intrude upon her as to whether there was not something wrong somewhere in the government of the world. When she met him walking in the village with May Ryland, and May in the flush of her youthful beauty wore a pink dress, she could not help speculating as to whether John remembered that picnic, when she had herself worn pink, and as they two walked together he had whispered, looking down into her eyes, that he should love the colour forever, and for two young hearts the kingdom of heaven had come down to earth. Miss Prissy was horribly ashamed of her own thoughts; she repented in sackcloth and ashes, and afflicted herself to the best of her ability. She was impatient of her own fancies, and flung them from her as something intrusive, with indignant astonishment that such ideas should have power to occupy her at all. She was sweeter than ever to May when she met her next, and more patient, if possible, to her sick nephew, who had come home to be nursed, and who was the crosslest and most unmanageable of invalids. She certainly strove to maintain her womanly dignity by a stately reserve of manner toward her old friend, who had an idea that he must have offended her, and cudgled his brain in vain to find a satisfactory reason for her altered demeanour. Miss Prissy decided that when once May was his wife, and no danger of misconception could exist, the old cordial relations should be resumed; but somehow the idea seemed not capable of yielding her all the consolation it should have done.

Miss Maxwell's home was a tiny cottage, delightful with a dainty, exquisite neatness, quite the last place in the world that one would consider likely to become the chosen abode of unquiet spirits. Sitting alone, of stormy winter nights, the solitary occupant of those pretty rooms began to be disagreeably conscious of a decided feeling of loneliness and oppression. This sensation was intensified by a strange, weird sound that occasionally echoed on the stillness. Sometimes long-drawn, plaintive cries would startle the listener, or quick, impatient sobs, in sharp repetition, would rend the air. Shrieks and cries, sometimes gusty and impetuous, sometimes piercingly sad, swelling into a sustained, melancholy wail, resounded through the house. For a time Miss Maxwell concealed her terrors in her own breast; but she acquired a nervous, frightened way of glancing over her shoulder, as though she continually expected to see some one behind her.

One Jay Mely, a domestic despot whose sway the meek little lady made no effort to limit, exclaimed:—

"Miss Prissy, this place is haunted, sure! For all the world them's like the banshee sounds I hear tell of in old Ireland. They bode misfortune, that I am sure of, and what we'll do I can't tell."

Miss Maxwell fairly gasped. The spectacle of the automatic Mely reduced to a state of helpless terror was a truly disconcerting phenomenon, but then it was a distinct relief to have some one to share her own fears. With propitiating precipitation she hastened to unburden her heart of its load of care.

"Mely, indeed, I don't know what to do or what to think. I don't believe in Spiritualism—I am sure it's wicked."

"What is it, then?" with scornful, sibilant emphasis. "Them sounds are not made by nothing. If it was boys, now, I'd scalp them when I'd caught them. They're just unearthly, them screams."

A secret shared by Mely was not likely long to remain a secret. Wierdale was a country village; a novel sensation was acknowledged to be a public benefit, a piquant variation of the monotony; striking developments were likely to ensue. Tongues wagged briskly about the cottage and the affairs of its mistress. Any voices syllabled disrespectful words, men and women thought and said with a hearty relish in the thinking and saying that the sweet little maiden lady was a credulous old fool; yet none the less their persistent curiosity rendered life a burden. People strolled slowly up and down the front of the house, with eyes riveted upon the windows. They attempted to bribe Mely for surreptitious information. Adventurous spirits made bold endeavours to penetrate within the premises. Friends whispered iniquitous little treasons, agreeing with unanimity that poor Priscilla was suffering from incipient insanity, while others, in dark and fateful utterances, insisted that spirits were not restless without a cause. Could the woman whose pure and kindly existence had been

familiar to them all have some mystery attached to her life? All the world, by the mouth of its prophets, loudly proclaimed the fact, and had no hesitation in making her understand it, that Miss Prissy was an object of derision to gods and men. Miss Maxwell's relatives were scandalized by the notoriety which the cottage and its inmates had so unwillingly attracted; they were disposed to comment profusely upon the subject, and when paragraphs appeared in the local papers headed "Unearthly Visitants," "Surprising Spiritualistic Manifestations," "The Effects of Human Credulity," their wrath culminated in torrents of angry reproach.

It was only occasionally that this lugubrious performance took place; for days at a time the quiet of the house remained undisturbed; then a whole night might be rendered ghastly by weird commotion. It constituted a form of torture without an explained cause or a proposed remedy. Peace departed from the precincts of the cottage, and Miss Prissy, haunted by a persistent, insatiate terror, began to find her life intolerably hard and dreary.

Notwithstanding the wide dissemination of these rumours, Dr. Brownson was one of the last persons in Wierdale to hear them. A country doctor, whose practice covers an area of twenty miles, enjoys excellent chances of becoming acquainted with the prevailing gossip of the moment; but in this case it happened that the physician had been away from home attending a medical convention.

"Doctor, what do you think about Miss Prissy's ghost?" was the very first question that greeted him on his return.

"Ghost, what ghost?" repeated the doctor in amazement, regarding the bright girlish faces with anxious interrogation.

"Miss Prissy has set up a ghost, all to herself," laughed Amy Ryland; and it must be admitted that the gentle maiden lady suffered at the tongues of the merry party of girls.

The doctor listened and even laughed hilariously at their sportive witticisms, and then drove away with a dull ache of compunction in his heart for his own disloyalty. How sweet and tender the love of his youth had been in her grace and guilelessness. None of these girls could in the least compare with her. How well he remembered the shy look of startled happiness that at the sight of him had once sprung into her eyes, though now she had become so prim and formal and would scarcely even acknowledge him as a friend. The Maxwells had always been a hard-hearted, stiff-necked lot, and no doubt now they left the forlorn, confiding soul alone in her trouble. Priscilla Maxwell had given him no right to protect her—quite the contrary, indeed—still he could scarcely hold aloof knowing that she was in a strait, and the heart of the gruff, sarcastic doctor swelled as he remembered the pretty, pink-robed girl who had walked with him under the apple trees. Then he was immediately seized by a firm determination to convert thought into action.

Dr. Brownson was always a furious driver. He dashed up to the cottage as though pursued by a thousand furies, and rushed in like a whirlwind, sustained by a considerable sense of virtue, and persuading himself that he was undertaking a monumental act of self-abnegation. He made his appearance as though he were making a fiery onslaught upon an enemy, turning upon all the feminine daintiness surrounding him, a fiercely interrogative eye. The fire was perfection, reflecting itself in the polished brass and steel and tiles of the fire-place, crackling, as now and then, bright little jets of flame burst out, the clock on the mantel-piece chiming sweetly, the room softly lighted, the atmosphere just touched with the scent of flowers, Miss Prissy knitting, with a mass of delicately-tinted wools in her lap.

"Well, Miss Maxwell, I hear that you have been cultivating relations with the spirit world. I always have believed in the general doctrine that there is no wisdom in the grave based upon the reported utterance of spirits; but I own I am surprised that that peculiar form of human imbecility should be the one selected by you."

The doctor had resolved that though a stern sense of duty had brought him to Miss Prissy's rescue, he would allow her to see very plainly that he was able to maintain his dignity, and he should comport himself in a congruous manner.

Miss Maxwell had passed through the changes and casualties of a day of turmoil; she was shaken, without power to anticipate, much less decide what was to come next. At intervals all day long the unearthly cries had thrilled her nerves and produced a stifling sense of catastrophe. Her sister Kate, with a large, judicial utterance, that completely awed the spinster, had spent two hours convincing her that she was ruining the prospects and reputation of her family. Three reporters, with the genuine and unadulterated enthusiasm of their class, had penetrated the seclusion of the cottage, examined the premises with abnormal interest, and subjected its mistress to ingenuities of cross-examination that had nearly driven her frantic. Worst of all, the grim and imperious Mely had entirely broken down, had become doleful and creaky; had finally subsided into hysterical lamentations, recording her determination no longer to abide in a haunted house. The doctor's caustic severity was quite lost upon Miss Prissy, who forgot to be prim or distant, and only remembered that this man's presence meant hope and comfort and deliverance from hopeless terror. His very masterfulness was a solace.

In her comely middle age she blushed and trembled, as she raised eyes bright with a soft moisture that made them glow, and turned to him with a smile that had a shine of tears in it.

"Oh, John!" she exclaimed with a little cry, almost under her breath, "Oh, John," stretching out pretty, delicate, shaking hands.

The doctor's burly masculine presence seemed to occupy all the space in the cosy, luxurious room. Really, the helpless dependence of these feminine creatures was a valid source of satisfaction. He concluded that such weakness belonged to them by immortal usage.

"What is the meaning of this?" he enquired. He had fully intended to indulge in conversation of a stimulating kind; but his manner was much less assured, and in his voice was a half choke and half chuckle that arose out of a mixed impulse to sob and laugh, to catch some one in his strong arms and hold her tight against his heart, contending with a perfect consciousness of the absurdity of the situation.

Sensation was demonstrated by disdainful snorts on the part of Mely, who immediately let loose a flood of particulars, describing with admirable dramatic effect and a marvellous

eminence capacity for distorting every detail of the story, the torments to which the household had been subjected. Directly in the midst of the recital came a series of shrill shrieks. Mely paused; was the doctor mistaken, or did Miss Prissy make a quick, impulsive movement, as though seeking his protection?

"We're a lot of wicked sinners, and purgatory's too good for us," howled Mely, piously crossing herself. And, indeed, with her cap perched awry on her head, and her ruddy complexion changed to chalk colour, the servant looked like a very bizarre and formidable personage.

"If it's any restless spirit, and would only let us know what it wants, I would do my best to satisfy it," quivered Miss Prissy tremulously.

"Pshaw! That noise comes from the hall stove." With a gesture of impatient repudiation, Dr. Brownson summarily disposed of all visionary fancies. His ready optimism reassured the frightened women. "Let me see. The wind is in the east. Did you hear it yesterday, or the day before? No. Sunday and Monday, east wind again. I begin to understand. It is only since the stove has been burning that you have been troubled. Oh, Priscilla," the name slipped out unawares, "I have succeeded in finding your ghost, it's here in this broken sheet of mica. Bring me a new sheet, and I'll soon put an end to its outcries."

Mely cocked her head on one side and surveyed the doctor meditatively, the preternatural wisdom of her expression intensified by a bewildered smirk.

"Well, I never, and it's that nasty hole in the mica that's been upsetting the whole place. The fools is not all dead yet, sure. I never thought much of the men; but faith I'll never deny again, doctor, but it's a fine thing to have a man with a head on him round."

As the two old lovers were left alone together, the brief exaltation which had uplifted Miss Prissy faded. A chill came over her like a sudden thunder cloud. She sank back abashed and trembling, returning with a pang to the flesh, crushed by a conviction that she had betrayed her folly to the man whose esteem and respect she most desired to retain. What though the mental and moral atmosphere had been saturated by ghostly terrors, what was that in comparison with the qualms of self-abasement that would render existence unendurable.

"You always were silly." The doctor tried to be jocose; but there were odd, strained tones in his voice, there was a twinkle of laughter in his gray eyes as he looked down at her very kindly and tenderly; he spoke awkwardly but anxiously. As their eyes met, the world with its built-up barriers crumbled into fragments beneath their feet, they forgot the lapse of years, the shrivelling, ironic touch of circumstances, their time-marked faces and far-spent lives, they were again young lovers, meeting without hindrance or incongruity, dreaming of an affection that could beautify life and outlive death.

"We have been defrauded of a good deal of our happiness, Priscilla; we had better make the most of the remainder while it lasts.—*Blanche L. Macdonell, in the Independent.*

AN AFTERGLOW.

"At eventide it shall be light," so sang
In strains of tender music, strangely sweet,
That olden prophet, in whose pulses beat
Undying hope and sympathy that sprang
From source divine. So many a bitter pang
Grows painless, and oft weary, aching feet
With: new strength bound, 'neath noon-tide's scorching
heat,

Or in the ominous hush, when clouds o'erhang,
Heavy with pont-up waters, till a light
Swift, sharp, and penetrating rends the cloud,
And the glad earth, refreshed, smiles at the sight
Of western skies, with heaven's glow endowed,
And through the quiet air, peal sweet and strong
From minster towers the chimes of evensong.

—M. E. Henderson, in *The Week.*

THE CREATION STORY.

A double confirmation has, I conceive, now been supplied to the creation story of Genesis; the first by natural and the second by historic science. Perhaps we have been too readily satisfied with assuming, in regard to the narrative, a defensive position; whereas it may be found to contain within its own brief compass, when rightly considered, the guarantee of a divine communication to man strictly corresponding with what in familiar speech is termed revelation. We have here in outline a history of the planet which we inhabit, and of the celestial system to which it belongs. Of the planet, and of the first appearance and early developments of life upon it, anterior to the creation of man, in many of the principal stages which have been ascertained by geology. Of the celestial organization to which our earth belongs, whether in all its vastness or only within the limits of the solar system we can hardly say, but at the least a sketch of the formation of that system from a prior and unadjusted or chaotic state. Upon such a document a sharp issue is at once raised, at least as to the latter or strictly terrestrial part of it, the earth history, for all those who hold it to be in its substance a true account. We accept as demonstrated a series of geological conclusions. We have found the geology of Genesis to stand in such a relation to these conclusions as could not have been exhibited in a record framed by faculties merely human, at any date to which the origin of the creation story can now reasonably be referred. Starting from our premise, we have no means of avoiding or holding back from the conclusion that the materials of the story could not have been had without preterhuman aid, and that preterhuman aid is what we term divine revelation. And if the time shall ever come when astronomy shall be in a condition to apply to the earlier portion of the chapter the demonstrative methods