

CHOICE LITERATURE.

NEHEMIAH'S PLAN.

"Better take this umbrella, hadn't ye?" suggested a voice from the shadows of the dingy doorway.

Miss Dean looked doubtfully at the combination of faded cloth and uncertain bones, then still more doubtfully at the lowering, dripping sky, and accepted the former as the least of two evils. It was a rheumatic, dispirited umbrella, worn out by long battling against the storms of the world. It protested sullenly and creakingly against every effort to raise it, and when protests did not avail, it yielded suddenly, and shot up with a vicious velocity, pinching the fingers and endangering the eyes of its holder. After that one flash of spirit, however, it dropped again, and one side flopped dejectedly.

"One-sided and out of joint, like most other things that fall to my lot," murmured Miss Dean; and then, with a philosophy she did not always display concerning the "other things," she whirled it round to the back, where it was at least out of her sight.

"Ah, Miss Dean!" Professor Grosbeck joined her. "Disagreeable afternoon, isn't it?"

The professor was not as cheering a sight as he might have been had she not already seen him a dozen times that day passing in and out of her room, and bestowing sharp glances through his green spectacles upon her unruly pupils. But he was just as gallant. He took her umbrella, and holding it over her head at precisely the right angle to let the rain drip from that depressed point on her neck, discoursed eloquently of a new writer on geology. It is difficult to grow very enthusiastic over geological strata with a stream of cold water trickling down one's back, but Miss Dean made the effort, even though she reflected that whatever the action of water on the formation of coal, its action on her new gray wrap would probably be to ruin it. Did she not know the scorn with which Professor Grosbeck would contemplate the shallow feminine mind that could be distracted from weighty scientific subjects by the trivialities of dress?

Once inside her own home, however, the marvellous things "under the earth" received but slight consideration. She studied the surface, and found it dreary enough. The dull school-room, the prosy professor, the rainy day, and disagreeable walk were no new grievances. All were common and familiar, only her weariness of them seemed to have culminated this afternoon. She stood at her window and looked across the wet street to the row of buildings opposite. Beyond them were the sleepy river and the old gray hills, veiled now by the mist and the smoke from the tall mill chimneys which the heavy air beat back to earth again. She had a fancy that the atmosphere of the old town beat back everything that tried to rise; she felt impatient of it, fettered by it, though it was her native air. Her girlhood had slipped away through sweet days when she was to happy to notice, through busy days too full of care for her to think how they sped, and she was twentieth-nine now. Was her life settling down like one of these gray afternoons that only grew grayer and drearier until the night blotted them out? she wondered.

Was there nothing for her but this dull, tiresome round? Out in the great busy world were grand men and women living beautiful lives and doing noble work. If she could come in contact with them! If she could escape from this dwarfed, commonplace existence, and find for herself the golden opportunity somewhere! She turned from the window with a sudden determination.

"Why should I always stay here, and be prudent and economical, simply because I have been taught to do so? Meggins," she said, when the door opened, "I am going away when vacation comes."

"Sakes!" commented Meggins, lucidly. "Where?"

"I do not know yet."

Tom would help her to decide that, she reflected. Dear old Tom! She did not expect he would understand her vague unrest. He was content with his place as overzeer in the mills; with looking after the work-people, settling accounts, and keeping all the humdrum wheels moving. But whether he understood or not, he would help her as he had always done. He had never failed her in all the years since they were children together. His watchful glance sought her window daily as he passed to and fro, and his hand was constantly leaving some token of remembrance in the shape of choice fruit or a cluster of flowers on her sill. And Tom did not care for flowers either, or she supposed he did not because he never attempted to analyze or classify them—though, indeed he was not in the habit of picking any of his pleasures to pieces to see what they were made of. It was enough that she liked them. She smiled as she remembered what authority her likes and dislikes bore for Tom. He had even ceased to trouble her with his earnest wish that her cousinly relationship might change to a tenderer one since he found how distasteful his plea was to her. Of course such a thing could not be. He was loyal, true-hearted, "good as gold, but only cousin Tom, after all," she assured herself, a part of the old life she was eager to escape from.

He looked round the pretty room that evening while she told him her purpose, and only his eyes said how pleasant and cozy he found it, or expressed a wonder at her restless wish to be away; but she read the look, and answered it half-impatiently:

"It isn't just a question of a home and pretty furniture, or even of hard work and small wages, Tom; it is something quite different. I can't explain; you would not understand if I could."

"If you could explain"—with a slight emphasis on the word which she might have resented had she noticed it—"I might understand more than you think. However, I am not saying you are not right, Margie; it will be a change, and rest."

She softened at the name; there was no one else who called her Margie now.

"You see I am growing old so fast," she said, in a quieter

tone, "that if I am ever to do any good true work in the world—anything worth doing, I mean—it is time I found it."

A sudden suggestion leaped into Tom's gray eyes, but it did not pass his lips. He only said:

"Jld, with your face Margie! Nonsense!"

She flushed and laughed, woman-like. Of course she liked to seem young to Tom; but in a moment she resumed, gravely:

"What I have said is true, nevertheless. I want to go—somewhere. I want to meet the real, earnest helpful lives of the world—to see what they are doing—and maybe I can find a niche for myself. It is all vague yet, Tom, but you will help me, I know."

Across Tom's prosaic brain flashed the memory of a nursery rhyme they had long ago learned together:

"I went to a place (I don't know where),
To meet somebody (I don't know who),
Who told me something (I don't know what),
And that is the reason I'll never tell you."

He understood her far too well to quote it, or to argue with her. She was one of those not uncommon spirits who wish "to follow the leadings of Providence by going ahead and showing the way."

"Surely, Margie," he answered stifling a sigh. "I shall miss you, though; you must remember that."

The trifling circumstance of her not knowing exactly what she wanted to do made it a difficult and delicate task to aid her in doing it. But Tom did his best, and by the help of railway guides, many discussions, and a few letters, they discovered a lovely little nook, not possessing any notoriety of its own to make it too expensive for Miss Dean's exchequer, yet sufficiently near to notable places to allow of visiting them at will. In short a quiet little bay from whence one might push out into the great ocean at pleasure. It suited her perfectly, Miss Dean declared, and with the first day of vacation she was ready to depart.

Worthy Meggins wiped her eyes with a corner of her immaculate apron, and promises to take good care of the plants. It was significant of her softened feelings that she dignified them by that name instead of calling them "green truck," as usual. Tom looked disconsolate, but Margaret's heart swelled exultantly as she waved her farewell. She watched with dreamy eyes the panorama of hill, hamlet and wood that fitted past her window that day, and filled the long hours with visions. Her opportunity had come at last, and she meant to improve it to the utmost. She was free; she would find the most and best the world held.

The car door opened to admit a rush of wind, a puff of smoke, and an unintelligible statement concerning something that sounded like "moccasins" or "hogheads." Margaret started, reflected, and settled quietly in her seat again. Two minutes later the door banged once more, a pair of eyes under a gilt-banded cap glared full upon her, and a hoarse voice shouted, more distinctly.

"Change cars for Noxton and Meadville."

"Is that the train for Noxton?" asked Margaret, making her way to the platform.

"Yes, 'm. There's your train, right across there. Only stop five minutes."

And she was hurried away in the jostling throng, and found herself breathless on board the other train just as it began to move. It proved a shorter journey than she expected. She had miscalculated the time by an hour or more, she said to herself, when later in the afternoon her destination was announced, and she found herself standing on the platform of an unpretending little station, while the shrieking locomotive rushed away on its course. She was disappointed in her first view of the place. It was extremely quiet and country like, and she seemed to be the only passenger who had stopped there. No sign of anyone awaiting her or of any conveyance rewarded her anxious glances, and she approached a boy who, perched in a window of the rude building, was swinging a pair of muddy boots and comfortably whistling.

"This is Noxton, isn't it?"

"S'pose so."

"Aren't you sure about it?"

"Used to be; but, ye see, brother Jim has been up to town 'tendin' some lectures, an' he's told me about 'em; an' now him an' me's an' egg-nogginism—we don't infirm nor deny nothin'."

The reply though unsatisfactory, might have been regarded as an evidence that she was approaching the great centres of thought and culture, but Margaret was in no mood to appreciate it in that aspect, and she remarked, with the asperity she was wont to assume towards refractory pupils.

"If you ever new the name of the place, you know it now, of course. Can you tell me where Mr. Grey lives?"

The boy twisted his torn straw hat, and wavered between a good-natured desire to gratify an anxious inquirer after truth and his longing to air his recent acquisitions. He compromised.

"Well, I won't say as there is a Mr. Grey, an' I won't say as there ain't; but she lives in that square house up on to the hill."

"Who is 'she'?"

"Miss Grey."

Margaret reflected a moment, looked vainly for her trunk, and considered the smaller articles of baggage in her possession. There appeared no reliable person about the premises to whom she could appeal for aid or information. She turned to the boy again, and proffered a bit of silver.

"I will give you this if you will carry my satchel and shawl-strap up to that house."

The eyes under the straw hat sparkled, and their owner forgot his new mistiness in absolute certainty.

"Golly! I'd do it as quick as wink, marm, if the man that keeps this ranch hadn't left me to take care of it while he went up to the next station. He jumped on to that train you come on, but he'll have to walk back, and he can't do it for more'n half an hour yet, now."

Waiting there for a half-hour was not to be thought of, and with grim determination Miss Dean picked up the articles she had mentioned and marched up the hill. Her dis-

appointment in the place and all its surroundings increased momentarily, and the stiff square house, far up the hill-side, was not at all what her fancy had painted, though, indeed, it scarcely bore a trace of ever having been painted in any way, so gray and weather-stained it was.

"It looks as if they had buried the baby in the front yard," commented the lady, discontentedly, as, standing on the steps, she noticed a narrow oblong bed, stiffly set with a few flowers, on one side of the walk. Then she discovered its counterpart on the other side, and murmured, "Twins!" as she lifted the brass knocker of the old door.

A middle-aged, faded-haired woman, with a brass thimble on her finger, answered the summons. It occurred to Margaret at the first glance that her face bore a strong resemblance to the ones she and Tom had long ago carved from bickory-nuts.

"I am Miss Dean," she announced.

"Air you?" questioned the woman, calmly.

"You did not send any one to fetch my baggage," Margaret continued, with a tone that suggested remissness in duty.

"I should s'pose not, as it isn't mine—though for that matter I've had to fetch and carry my own this many a year. I don't want to buy anything either," with a suspicious glance at the small satchel.

Margaret looked at her in bewilderment.

"You do not understand. I am Miss Dean—your boarder for the summer. You were expecting me, were you not? Perhaps"—with a happy thought that this was probably only an obtruse rustic servant—"if you should call Mrs. Grey—"

"I'd have to call a long time; she's been dead this five years," answered the portress, without opening the door an inch wider. "I wasn't expectin' you, because I never heard of you before, and I don't want any boarders for the summer."

Dusty, tired, "a stranger in a strange land," and the sun sinking low in the west, a sudden dismay seized Margaret.

"It is very extraordinary," she murmured. "There must be some mistake. I certainly have corresponded with a Mr. Grey of this place, and engaged a room for the summer. A boy at the depot directed me here."

"Well, there's no Mr. Grey here. I'm Susan Grey, neither more nor less." Then, with a closer scrutiny of her visitor's attire, a smile began to glimmer on the hickory-nut face. "Now I shouldn't be surprised if 'twas Noxton where you was aimin' to go?" she remarked.

"Certainly it was. Where am I?"

"In Noxton—altogether a different kind of a place. That one is 'way off in another direction on the other road. You must have made a mistake when you changed cars."

There was comfort in the information that the other was a different kind of a place, nevertheless the situation was embarrassing. Miss Dean sat down upon the door-step.

"Then I must go back. What is the earliest train I can take?"

"Won't be any passenger before two o'clock to-morrow afternoon. You see, this is only a branch road. Come in and rest a spell. You'll have to stay somewhere all night, and you might as well stay here."

The door was thrown wide open at last, and Miss Dean found herself in a room as cool and clean as it was plain and homely. With her entrance the hostess seemed to concede all claims to hospitality. She led the way to an airy chamber, brought fresh water, and suggested the possibility of an earlier supper than usual if desired.

"Do not inconvenience yourself in any way," Margaret urged. "I am very glad to stop here after my stupid blundering, and I beg that you will let me make as little trouble as possible."

"Well, I can't afford to put myself out much, that's honest," was the prompt reply. "I keep the village post-office though that don't amount to no great—do dress makin' and tailorin' besides, and what with the care of the house and garden, I've enough work on my hands."

They looked like it—brown roughened hands that had never lacked hard work. They were a marked contrast to the delicate ones that had fallen in Margaret's lap, and both women noticed it; but the elder only added, a little more curtly, "You're welcome to stay until to-morrow, though."

A little head, with tangled yellow curls and grave dark eyes, appeared for a moment at the half-opened door, and Margaret's quick glance of admiration atoned even for her white hands. There was a curious softening of her hostess's hard face.

"It is the child," she said. "Go away, Billy."

The face disappeared, but a little later, when Margaret was sitting in the wide portico, it looked upon her again through the swaying vines, and presented a small brown hand was pushed through and touched the trimming of her dress with grave curiosity.

"Won't you run around here and talk to me?" she asked, amused.

But there was no running. He came slowly, with the pitiful sound of a little crutch on the walk, and sat down on the steps at her feet, and looked up at her with a mingling of pleasure and wonder.

"Did you come from heaven?" he asked.

"No, indeed!" she laughed, though with a quick thought that the life from which she had come might seem like Paradise compared with this.

"I thought mebbe—it looked like a star on your finger," observed Billy, watching her ring—Tom's one extravagant gift—as it flashed back the last rays of sunlight. Then his eyes wandered over her dress again, and back to his own clean patched little apron.

"Wish—wish we was too," he murmured, more in soliloquy than as if speaking to any one. "Wish Susan 'd wear shiny ribbons and stars, only she can't,—'cause she's Susan. She's good, she is," he added, with a flash of his dark eyes into Margaret's face as if she had questioned the statement. "Do there be boys and girls to play with where you live," he asked.

"Plenty of them. I had a whole roomful."

"Wish I had some," mused Billy, wistfully, resting his