

BARBARA LOVELL'S EASTER.

BY ANNETTE L. NOBLE.

From the old town of Ryde a side street turned countryward, dwindled into a lane, and lost itself in meadows bright with butter-cups or desolate with ice-pools, according to the season. Near the lane was a small house of the archaic type seen in ancient story-books, but being without climbing vines, flower-pot, or gay curtain, and only bare with clean poverty, it escaped notice like a way-side boulder. Barbara Lovell, its owner, was a tall, pale woman who for years had worn the same neat garb and sat in the same church pew, silent, civil, not erratic, and there being no mystery about her, she was forgotten by those in whose sight she lived. Barbara had cared for feeble grandparents from her childhood. When they died, twenty years before our story, she found employment in writing for an old lawyer who was getting blind.

One dark afternoon in March, Barbara stood in old Randall's dingy office gazing at his greasy leather chair, at the empty pigeon-holes over his desk, and asking herself, "What next?" For Randall was dead. "I suppose he must have had a soul," she murmured, "but where did he keep it all these years?" She glanced unconsciously at a deep refuse-box, but the old ink bottles, the bits of tape, the envelopes and tobacco, were as ever.

"I must give up work of this kind. I could not stay in a noisy room with men, and the younger lawyers are employed there, anyway."

"I am sorry that, after spending twenty years here in the cobwebs with him, I can't be more sorry he has gone. I wonder if they buried him in the red wig. Twenty years and never a word but business except to forbid my cleaning up! Well, as I had nothing to say myself it did not matter."

Turning then to her own desk, Barbara put it in order, thrust a quantity of valueless papers into the rusty stove, lit it with a match, and when they were ashes she started homeward, reflecting, "Yes, it is twenty years since I have really lived; now I will begin. I have provided for my future, if I am economical, and at forty a woman ought to take some comfort."

As she hurried through the twilight her pale blue eyes brightened and a faint color tinged her cheeks in consequence of a new interest in life after long indifference to anything outside "the office."

She unlocked the house-door and lighted her kerosene lamp, which made plain the bare walls, faded carpet, all the colorless cleanliness of the place.

"No, it does not look cosy or like a home, but it can, easily enough. I might cover the lounge with bright chintz and black the stove and put up soft curtains instead of those green paper things. I declare twenty-five dollars would make a mighty sight of difference here, and I'll spend it to-morrow!"

Her excitement increased as she went about making her tea, and all the time that she was eating her supper she planned changes. "See those old stone-china cups and that tin teapot! Why, a few dollars will buy decorated china and a majolica teapot, and two lunch cloths with red borders."

That night the dust of twenty years seemed to be effaced from Barbara's dormant housewifeliness, and throughout the sleepless hours she—in imagination at least—renovated every square inch of her domain, from the lonesome pantry to the chilly "spare bedroom," through the prim parlor out to the windy woodshed. She did not stop there. Barbara felt that she was emerging from a chrysalis. The next day before her cracked mirror she learned that the soft hair screwed back into a tight knob could be loosened to advantage and that her office dress of gray flannel was as ugly as old Randall's snuff-powdered broadcloth. She rummaged about in a tall brass-handled "locker" for an ancient blue sash, tried it against her face, and saw with innocent surprise that she had a certain quaint attractiveness. She laughed outright, thinking, "I am like that apple-tree in the garden that blossomed out one October because it had no chance in the cold spring. Well, I had rather a cold spring."

Under the sash was a packet of letters. Continual contact with legal papers of the

driest sort had made Barbara weigh words and had not promoted in her the growth of sentiment. She re-read one of those letters, commencing, "Any court would decide that they were love letters, and very sincerely written as far as the evidence goes. Queer! I must get granny's andirons out and rub them up; an open fire is pleasant. My income would never support me if old Randall had not persuaded me to take that stock. I'll draw out the fifty I left in the bank and buy the new things. Maybe it will take every penny, if I get a nice dress besides, but who has a better right? I earned it hard enough;" and again she glanced at the letters, then tossed them into the drawer.

Twenty-one years previous a quiet, pleasant young fellow came to Ryde to teach a district school. He met Barbara at a picnic and later boarded a month with her grand-parents. He spent his evenings then on the doorstep with Barbara or walking by starlight in the lane. Of course they talked at first very instructively of the heavenly bodies removed from them by in-

up. Who is his next of kin? This man who is coming here to take his office?"

"I have not heard about that; it may be. He used to say he had a nephew who was a lawyer, but he never mentioned his will."

"Same one, no doubt. By the way, Barbara, you drew considerable money out of the bank some time ago. Any objections to telling what you invested in?"

"Wingate mining stock."
"You didn't!" exclaimed the old man, protesting against the hearing of his ears.

"Yes, I did. Why?" she asked with sudden anxiety.

"Don't you see the papers? They—well—the stock is down, way down."

"Yes, but it will come up."
"I hope so, certainly. You might go and talk to Jeffreys about it; he must know. He and Randall got you into buying, I believe."

Barbara made no reply, only counted her two tens and six fives with a sudden faintness at her heart. She was a little paler when she said "Good morning," and

pletely had she—in imagination—refurnished it before going out that it was almost as if the warmth and cosiness of rosy curtains, soft chairs, and bright pictures had disappeared in her absence. The old was doubly old and faded and desolate now; but what mattered it after all? Was she not a part of the age and desolation? There was really nothing left for her but to die. The only good which she had brought out of the dull years spent with Randall's dust-box and cobwebs had been a provision for her later life. That gone, all was gone. There remained no other blind lawyer needing her services and she could not do varieties of work.

She took out her purse and calculated how long fifty dollars would last when a few debts were paid. When it was spent she was a pauper. No, there was the little old house; but nobody wanted to buy it. If only she could lie down in the chilly bedroom under the ancient patchwork coverlet and just die! The town would sell the house and bury her. Now we grant you that all this was morbid for a well woman of forty, but remember how apart from every human sympathy was Barbara, how wearisome her past, how grim her outlook! With truth the poet says,

"How dull and drear
Is life without an atmosphere;"

and such a life was this, with no soft glow of daily dawning hopes, no mellow noons of placid enjoyment, no gloaming spent in restful companionship, no more fancies even of a new carpet or a better dress. Barbara was not an unbeliever in spiritual things, but they had not meant over much in that office where seals and attested signatures were for ever uppermost. She did not now pray or read her Bible. She did not even bestir herself to go out and seek new work. It was easiest to sit day after day and brood until her melancholy grew fearfully like insanity. She neglected to take needed food, went no more to church, slept too little, and by-and-by began to ponder on that fatally insidious suggestion of suicide. Time and again she would go to a closet where were some of the old people's clothes and medicines, taking down a vial of laudanum to wonder if age had destroyed its potency.

One day as she was turning it around to the light her sleeve caught a lapet of her grandfather's moth-eaten coat. In freeing herself she discovered three dusty, yellow letters that had slipped between the lining and the broadcloth. Their seals were unbroken, yet it was with strange indifference that Barbara perceived that they were like the rest in the "locker," from John Marvin. Apathetically opening, she understood at once how the feeble old man had received and unwittingly lost them, for before her brief girlhood ended he was almost demented. Each was a protest against her silence, and in the last was a statement that John was going "far West," so that if she refused to answer this letter he must conclude she was weary of him.

With the papers in her lap Barbara sat motionless in the noiseless house, brooding, brooding again on one more thing that had worked for evil in her monotonously hard life.

"What is the use of prolonging it, of waiting to be old, to die by inches, when I am already poor, friendless, hopeless?" she muttered.

A darkest hour comes to every human soul. This was Barbara Lovell's. By-and-by she rose up with a feverish light in her eyes and began ominous preparations. Everything was put in order, the fireless hearth swept clean, and her bed respread with fine old linen. When she had destroyed all letters and family papers, one half-crazy notion occurred to her: she would insert the date of her own death in the great Bible on the parlor table. To have all quite accurate she must needs find the day of the month, for in the last five weeks she had taken no note of time. An almanac always hung on the closet-door, the closet from whose shelf she would presently take down the poison.

March? No, it must be April. Barbara vaguely remembered hearing the birds of late twittering mornings in that October-blossoming apple-tree. Yes, there was now green grass around the well and the odor of spring violets was in the outer air. Other years she had welcomed these last, even carried a bunch down to thrust into



"SEALING THE STONE AND SETTING THE WATCH."—MATT. 27, 63, 66.

finite spaces, then of matters nearer, until John Marvin looked for stars in Barbara's eyes and she fancied heaven came down to earth. John was penniless. Barbara could not leave the old people, but for a year after he left Ryde they exchanged epistles. Barbara's last letter was never answered. Her grandfather died and then she went to write for the old lawyer.

No girl of eighteen ever set out for a shopping expedition with more enthusiasm than Barbara when she took her first holiday. It rained, but that was well; the stores would not be crowded, and weather was of no account. She hastened first to the bank where, until the year before, she had kept all her savings. The teller was a garrulous old fellow who knew her well, and, not being busy, he said, "Barbara, didn't Randall leave you a legacy?"

"Not a penny, Mr. Hewitt."
"Well, he ought to have done it. He must have had eight or ten thousand laid

Mr. Hewitt thought to himself, "It will be very hard if she has dropped the savings of her life into that bottomless concern, for she'll never get another penny out."

Barbara sought the broker's office. He admitted that the stock was "down," but he looked into futurity with rosy glasses, and nine out of ten women would have gone away persuaded that their vanished hoard would rise hereafter like a phoenix from its ashes and mount higher than their wildest hopes. Barbara had not served an apprenticeship to old Randall without catching something of a lawyer's insight. She asked a few keen questions and then said bitterly, "We need not palaver over plain facts; my money is gone for ever!"

Turning quickly she let herself out into the sleet and rain, hurried past the shops where she had meant to stop, heading no one, seeing nothing. When she opened again the door into her own house she stared about half bewildered, for so com-