

FAMILY CIRCLE.

THE STORY.

The Last of the Peplows.

Miss Maria Peplow stood on the stone doorstep in order mournfully to watch the carpenter's assistant unscrew the brass plate which had braved the storms of some five-and-twenty winters, and replace it by a new one bearing a slightly modified legend. Peplow House was still what the humorous local grave digger, when under the influence of beer, was facetiously accustomed to describe as "a cemetery for young ladies"; but beneath that ghoully statement the words "The Misses Peplow" no longer appeared. Miss Jane Peplow, the elder sister, had basely deserted the flowery paths of scholastic tuition, and would shortly be known as Mrs. Barton, the spouse of a benevolent provision merchant in the town. Miss Maria grieved that the ancient family of Peplow should be disgraced by what, in her prim, old-fashioned "French of Stratford-at-Bowe," she was wont to term a "missalliance."

Miss Jane had indeed made a false step, and, what was worse, had not even evinced a proper shame in doing it. When the new doorplate was screwed on—every twist of the screws hurt Miss Maria—she entered the passage, went up to Jane's bedroom, and sternly opened the door. Jane, a fair-haired, handsome woman of forty-eight—Miss Maria was dark, three years younger, and more aristocratic in appearance, with a not altogether unpleasing suggestion of lavender-like primness—had just emerged from the hands of her bridesmaid and was radiant in black silk and orange blossoms. "Enter, Maria," she said, pleasantly. "I trust you have reconsidered your decision, and will honor my nuptials with your presence." But she quailed visibly.

Miss Maria sat down. She spoke with an effort. "If dear papa were alive," she said frostily, "as an officer and a gentleman he could not have approved of such a match—such an incongruous mingling with the plebeian throng; it would have broken his heart. We have never before descended to—to combine with butler. Correct me if I err in this statement, Jane."

Jane dared not. She had often heard the same remark before, but affected to treat it as wholly novel. "You must be aware that by such a marriage you forfeit all claim to social recognition. Already, the hateful effect of such a descent has made itself felt. Two of the parlor boarders are about to leave. The—the ostensible pretext was Australian tinned meat supplied by Mr. Barton. In reality, it was the fact of your entering into a matrimonial alliance with butler, perhaps oleomargarine. Under the circumstances, you cannot expect me to—to extend the hand of cordiality to that—doubleless worthy person. The Peplows were always whole-sale, for the few brief years they dabbled in commerce."

"You are very proud, Maria," said Jane sadly. "Sometimes, I think that there are finer things to do in this world than to devote one's life to the exaction of deference based upon mere family considerations."

Miss Maria declined to discuss the question. "Has the hymeneal chariot arrived?" she asked. Miss Jane hastened to a window and peered out. The old flyman from the Red Lion over the way had just affixed a white ribbon to his whip, and was rheumatically climbing up the box. Then he flicked his Roman-nosed roan as it lumbered over to Peplow House. The flyman had put on his best coat for the ceremony, and had hidden his crooked, unliveried legs in a chastely striped rug, as a tacit concession to the sentiment proper to such an abnormally solemn occasion.

"The—the chariot waits, sister," she said. Miss Maria would have fainted had Miss Jane called the ancient vehicle a fly. "Very well," said Miss Maria. "Do not think I reproach you, Jane. Better the intellectual refinement of a solitary crust and celibacy than the parvenu plenty of tinned tongue and a husband beneath one in the social scale. I am still left to watch over the family honor."

Miss Jane hesitated nervously. "Some day you may be glad of a husband's sheltering love," she said gently. "The struggle has been a hard one, Maria. John—"

"I am not socially conscious of the existence of any individual of that name," said Miss Maria, primly tying her bonnet strings. "Officially I am compelled to recognize Mr. Barton's existence as your husband, but as 'John,' never!"

"Mr. Barton," blushed Jane. "Mr. Barton wishes to know if you will honor him by living with us and giving up the school academy?"

Miss Maria was touched, but called up the family pride to maintain her faltering resolution. "Jane," she said in the tones of a female Casabianca—"Jane, do not add to your other indiscretions by seeking to lure me from the path of duty. I do not blame you, Jane. Your confiding nature was no match for the wiles of one versed in the sophistries of the retail provision trade, the questionable morality which covers with an eleemosynary candlestick the doubtful quality of his dubious foreign wines; your innocence of plebeian usages is the best excuse for what you are about to do; but, Jane, much as it pains me to tell you so, Mrs. Barton cannot be received within the walls of this academy. You—You understand?"

"I understand," faltered Jane. "Of course, Maria, with your stern sense of family duty, it could not be otherwise." "No," said Miss Maria, with Spartan fortitude, "it could not be otherwise, Jane." But she crossed over to Jane and kissed her.

"But the—the bills?" timidly suggested Jane. "When your name was removed from the prospectus and the dooplate of this academy," said Miss Maria, "you naturally ceased to have any connection with the business details of such an establishment. The chariot waits. I believe it is customary for the bride to lead the way. As my elder sister you are doubly entitled to precedence."

"Oh, sister, I'm so nervous," faltered Miss Jane, with tears in her china-blue eyes. "I ought to be so happy, and yet I'm thoroughly miserable."

Miss Maria shook her iron-gray locks with grim determination, and led the way; but Jane drew back—this is the first quarrel we have ever had, sister," she faltered. "Sister, dear sister, bless me before I go to my new home"; and she flung her arms round Miss Maria's neck and burst into tears. Miss Maria lost her stony composure for a moment, and blessed the somewhat mature bride. "I—er—hope you may be happy, Jane. I shall miss you, although you never could maintain discipline in the dormitories. Now, let us descend. The populace awaits us."

The vicar was waiting to receive the party at the church, but even at such an eventful moment his first thoughts were for Miss Maria. Miss Maria motioned him aside with, "I commit Miss Peplow to your care, Mr. Kesterton"; and Mr. Kesterton received Miss Jane and led her up to the altar. Miss Maria following behind, and turning off at her own pew, sternly unconscious of the fourteen pupils, who giggled and wept alternately, or dropped surreptitious bags of rice all over the seats.

Mr. Barton, a middle-aged gentlemanly man, hastened to meet the bride. He was supported by a tall, grave individual named Farmer Stebbins, a mighty producer of mangolds and manures. Miss Maria had played with him in the fields and sung with him in the choir until she learned from her father that Stebbins was beneath her socially. How could she possibly be on terms of intimacy with a man who supplied milk for her young ladies? Miss Maria recognized him frigidly and bowed her head in uncompromising prayer. Ordinarily, she patronized Farmer Stebbins with a stately dignity, occasionally so far unbending as to drive out to the farm and pay his accounts. On these occasions Farmer Stebbins had exhibited a quiet pleasure that so majestic a little lady should honor his poor house by her presence. But he had never before met Miss Maria on terms of social, though temporary, equality like the present.

After the completion of the ceremony, Miss Maria went into the vestry, signed certain documents, and drove home alone under the vigilant protection of her red-nosed charioteer. Nothing but a stern sense of duty enabled her to bear up under

Jane's departure. That night, for the first time in her life, she was unable to sleep. Jane had shared the same couch with her for thirty years, and Miss Maria had always slept with one hand thrown protectively over Jane's head. Presently, she bethought her of a soft hair brush, with the bristles upwards, and placed it on Jane's pillow, and carefully removed it every morning, lest Dorcas, the housemaid, should discover her weakness.

And Jane and her husband waxed happier every day, although the school grew smaller and smaller, until even the romantic yet elderly assistant governess was dismissed and Miss Maria reigned alone—reigned alone, with a haggard, careworn look which nearly moved Jane to tears as she sat opposite her sister in church every Sunday. And then one day the crash came. Perkins, the butcher, obtained judgment by default, put a greasy-looking sheriff's officer "in possession," and Miss Maria gave up the struggle as she sat, with folded hands and slightly twitching lips, watching her household gods—her dearest relics—being labeled and ticketed and catalogued, and announced for public sale "without reserve."

Miss Maria sternly refused all assistance from "trade," and sat waiting among the ruins of her home. A few small worldly possessions still remained to her, but they were of little value. On the last afternoon which remained to the last of the Peplows in her old home, she wandered about the desolate house, and took a final farewell of all the precious possessions which were henceforth to be scattered among the inhabitants of High Drayton. Then she came back to her own sitting-room and was rather startled when some one knocked at the door and the vicar entered.

Miss Maria, with a stately curtsy, motioned to him to be seated. The vicar seated himself on a cane-bottomed chair as if it had been a throne, and proceeded to acquaint himself of some delicate mission. "You will pardon me for intruding upon you at such a time, Miss Peplow," he said deferentially, "but the fact is I have come to ask of you a favor."

Miss Maria smiled. It was the one ray of sunshine in the crash which had shattered her fortunes. She bowed to the vicar and motioned him to proceed.

"The truth is," said the vicar, "we are in a difficulty. Miss Maria. The matron in charge of Hollibone's Trust has somewhat suddenly gone away and there is no one to fill her place. It has been pointed out to me that you are accustomed to command, and I have lost not a moment, as I was unaware of your plans, in hastening to place the post at your disposal."

Miss Maria almost wept, but she was not going to sacrifice the family pride so easily. "Of course, you must consider my position," she said, graciously. "As a Peplow, I should lose caste by accepting such a post."

"I have thought of that," said the vicar, "but perhaps you will recall the fact that the matron before the last was Lady Castlemaine's niece."

The precedent of that sort enables me to accept the post you are good enough to bring to my notice," said Miss Maria amiably, and feeling that she must break down if the vicar stayed much longer. Here was a way out of her difficulties without relying on the loathsome succor of trade. She was not aware that trade, in the person of Mr. Barton, had bought out the matron and hastily disposed of her in order that Miss Maria might be spared the pain of becoming homeless. But the trade is seldom credited with refinement of this kind, and so Miss Maria never knew who it was that had stepped in to shelter her; which was just as well, or she would have gone out into the rain and have refused to be sheltered.

Trade had pointed out to the vicar that the post was vacant, whereupon that worthy gentleman had at once suggested Miss Maria, if she could be persuaded to stoop to such all her wicked pride. Mr. Barton, who was breaking Jane's heart, vicar. I think a little misfortune would do her good, but she's lived a blameless, honorable, hard-working life, and I don't see how she's to strike root elsewhere. If you'll coax her into it, Jane will come and thank you; but we daren't be seen with you, or she'd suspect something."

The little Queen Anne cottage, had erected six beautiful little Queen Anne cottages, and an arched dwelling in the centre with a spire on the top. The central dwelling was allotted to the Lady Matron, the six cottages to diverse elderly widows and spinsters of the town whom misfortune had overtaken. In return for a small weekly dole, they were expected to attend church twice on Sundays and once on saints' days, to pray for Hollibone as well as their own souls. When the vicar performed this duty, they were allowed to do as they pleased, but were required to be back in their cottages by 8 o'clock every night. The Lady Matron, of course, could stay out as long as she liked.

That particularly handy man, Farmer Stebbins, happened to be passing at the time in a very roomy vehicle, and was pleased to place it at Miss Maria's disposal. While Miss Maria's scanty goods and chattels were being removed to the Lady Matron's cottage, the vicar took her back to see his wife, and kept her there until it was dark.

Miss Maria, as the vicar handed her into a cozy brougham and told his coachman to drive to the lodge, felt that she wanted to cry. She had upheld the family honor under exceptionally trying circumstances. Providence had come to her assistance, or she would have had nowhere to lay her head. She drew the black fur carriage round her and shivered, for the autumn night was chill.

When the carriage stopped Miss Maria got out. "This way, if you please, Ma'am," said a well-known voice. "Dorcas!" cried Miss Maria, in surprised tones. "You here?"

"Yes, if you please, Ma'am," said Dorcas. "You didn't think I was going to leave you all by yourself, now Miss Jane has gone."

"But, Dorcas," said Miss Maria gently, as she sank into a chair before the fire, and Dorcas brought out her fur slippers as usual, "you must be aware that I have met with pecuniary reverses, and am unable to keep a servant."

Miss Maria had once nursed Dorcas through an illness, and Dorcas—a very pretty, affectionate girl—was ill-bred enough to remember the fact. "I'm going to be married in a few months, Ma'am, to Farmer Stebbins' head man," she said; "and the vicar has offered me the lodge keeper's post here."

"But where's the lodge?" demanded Miss Maria. "Here, Ma'am," replied Dorcas. "My duty is to look after my mistress. But it's time you had your negus."

She came back in a few minutes with the negus and a slice of toast cut into strips. Miss Maria, her gown turned back, as was her custom, sat with her feet on the fender thoughtfully warming both hands at the cheerful fire. At 8.30 Dorcas brought in Miss Maria's Bible and respectfully sat down near the door.

Miss Maria looked around with somewhat blurred eyes. "Let us thank God for all His mercies," she said. "And Dorcas—"

"Yes, Ma'am," quietly returned Dorcas. "Don't sit over there in the cold, but draw your chair up to the fire."

Dorcas made her bed in the little dressing-room next to Miss Maria's chamber. She tucked up Miss Maria very tenderly, and then went back to her own room. Miss Maria was so tired that she fell asleep without thinking of the hair brush. Then Dorcas stole quietly down stairs and admitted those shivering, half-frozen conspirators, Mr. and Mrs. Barton.

"How does she take it?" sobbed Jane. "Like a lamb, Ma'am," replied Dorcas. "Would you care to have just a peep at her?"

"She would think it a great liberty," said Jane; but she followed Dorcas softly upstairs, and knelt by Miss Maria's bed. Miss Maria's hand wandering unconsciously about in search of the hair brush, touched Jane's soft hair. She gave a little cry and awoke.

"Jane! Jane!" she cried. "Dear, dear Jane, where are you?" "Did you call, Miss?" asked Dorcas, quietly presenting herself with a light after Jane had crept away.

Miss Maria sat up in bed widely. "Yes, I—I—I must have been dreaming, Dorcas. I thought Jane was here, and that she cried over me."

It's the strange room, Ma'am," replied Dorcas, tucking her up again, and again Miss Maria slept.

As the days went by every one of any importance made a point of calling on Miss Maria. People respected her gallant struggle against overwhelming odds; they wanted to show their respect, and so they called at all hours, from old Lady Castlemaine down to Farmer Stebbins, who had sung in the choir with Miss Maria when they were children. In those days Miss Maria had patronized Stebbins with a gracious condescension which somewhat overwhelmed him, never forgetting to let him feel that they were separated by an immeasurable gulf. And Stebbins had sighed and gone about the accumulation of filthy lucre in the shape of manure as the one object of his life. Many a maid had longed for him and sighed in vain; many a matron had lured him into afternoon tea on Sunday and thrown out mysterious hints that so warm a man ought to marry and settle down. Farmer Stebbins had never married. And now that his idol had seemed to fall from her high estate, he developed a more chivalrous courtesy than before. It is needless to say that he had not worried Miss Maria with bills. Every morning he came personally with a tin can of his best cream for her use; every week he brought eggs and butter to Dorcas; and when Miss Maria gently checked him one morning, he replied that he was sorry to disappoint her, but that he must obey orders. Miss Maria, thinking that he alluded to the trustees, made no more objections, but from bowing with gracious condescension, actually invited him into the parlor once a month for five minutes' conversation.

Stebbins was true to her; he had always recognized her social position, and the disparity in their family was so great that Miss Maria felt she could safely meet him on the neutral ground of their childish experiences without losing caste. Jane never had cared for caste, and was happy; Miss Maria had cared for caste all her life, and was unhappy. She fell into the habit of enquiring about Jane from Stebbins. Jane also asked about Miss Maria from the worthy farmer. Thus an indirect method of communication between the sisters was established. Miss Maria also relied upon Stebbins to help in the onerous duties of her post. To her surprise, she found herself gradually glad to leave most of them in his hands. Her long struggle with the world had tired her mentally and physically. The ruddy-checked Stebbins, with his enormous muscular strength and gentle, clumsy ways, exercised a soothing effect upon her nerves. She even discovered from the County Guide that his family had once been the De Stevens, then Destevis, then plain Stebbins. He came of more honorable and ancient stock than the Peplows themselves, although his father had never served Her Most Gracious Majesty. Hence, when Stebbins, with many blushes, asked her to take tea at the farm in order to meet Mrs. Barton on neutral territory, Miss Maria, after a faint show of resistance, actually consented to do so. For some three or four months—it was now January—she had lived her solitary life, haunted by the fear that Dorcas would marry and leave her. "You must not waste your life on me, Dorcas," she said, as she dressed in her best lavender silk for the tea party. "I have been selfish in accepting your devotion. When do you intend to be married?"

"Not before you, Ma'am," said Dorcas quietly, and went away.

Miss Maria started. Poor Dorcas! Then a faint flush dyed her cheek. "Dorcas, what did you mean by that remark?" she asked, when Dorcas returned with her best cap.

"What I said, Ma'am," answered Dorcas, carefully putting the cap in the box. "Shall I bring a lantern to light us on the way back?"

It was a clear, frosty afternoon. A robin twitted faint, make-believe music on a bare branch outside the window. Miss Maria listened to the bird for a moment, and then drew on her gloves. When she went down stairs another surprise awaited her in the shape of the Red Lion chariot. "What do you want?" she enquired, somewhat sharply, of the red-nosed Jehu.

Jehu was a man of few words. "You, Mum," he stolidly answered. "What for?" enquired Miss Maria.

"Stebbins," said Jehu woefully. "But, my good man, I didn't order you to come," said Miss Maria.

Jehu flicked an imaginary fly from the venerable ruin in the shafts, but made no answer. "Gohome," said Miss Maria, "I shall walk."

She went down the path, followed by Dorcas and the chariot. When she looked round Jehu still followed at a snail's pace.

"Didn't you hear me?" asked Miss Maria. "Where are you going?"

"Stebbinses," said Jehu. "I think we'd better get in, Ma'am," suggested Dorcas. "He'll go there all the same."

Miss Maria got in, mentally deciding that she had yielded only to force majeure.

Jehu touched his hat when she got out of the chariot. "Nine o'clock, Mum?" he asked.

"Yes," said Miss Maria, taken by surprise; and the chariot crumbled away, each wheel looking as if it wanted to go to a different point of the compass.

Stebbins was at the hall door to receive them. Miss Maria thought that he had never shown so much advantage. All his natural timidity had vanished. He was the quiet, courteous host, full of homely cordiality and good feeling. His housekeeper took Miss Maria upstairs to remove her bonnet. There was a cozy fire in the best bedroom. Suddenly Miss Maria—the housekeeper had gone down—fell on her knees by the side of the bed and began to cry softly, utterly regardless of the fact that she was crushing her best cap beyond redemption.

She moved from one familiar piece of furniture to another—furniture which she had thought never to see again. There it all was—the old familiar mahogany bedstead, the little bookcase by its side, the ancient bureau, the vast clothespress, the faded carpet, the painting of her father on the wall, the needle-work sampler which had hidden contemptuous defiance to all well-known laws of ornithology and botany for so many years; nay, even the paper was the same pattern, although fresher and newer. And the room had been partitioned off to exactly the same size as her old apartment at Peplow House. There was even an old-fashioned pincushion on the dressing table—no one knew how sorely she missed that pincushion—just as it had stood for years at Peplow House.

Before she had recovered from her surprise, the housekeeper again knocked at the door. Miss Maria hastily bussed herself with her cap. "Does any one use this room?" she asked.

"No, Ma'am." "Has any one ever used it?" "No, Ma'am."

Then she went down stairs and was not surprised to find herself back at the Peplow House drawing-room again.

Stebbins came forward to meet Miss Maria with quiet deference, and led her to a chair—her chair—by the fire. She could not speak.

Stebbins gave her time to recover herself. "How can I thank you?" asked Miss Maria.

"If it gives you pleasure," he said, in his simple, honest way—"if it gives you pleasure, Miss Maria, it is the only excuse I have for doing it. I didn't like to think of your missing the things."

"But don't you see," she said, "you—you make it harder for me to go back."

"Don't go back. I'll go away if you care to stay here."

"What, John!" His name slipped from her lips unconsciously. She had not called him "John" for five and twenty years. "Give up your home-forme!"

"Yes," he said simply. "Why not?" Miss Maria's feeble edifice of family pride tottered and crumbled away like a house of cards. "John," she said softly, "I have spent my whole life in pursuit of shadows. You shame me, John."