

Birthdays and Miss Amelia.

(Mabel Nelson Thurston, in the 'Wellspring.')

It was the second week in June, and Miss Rivers' roses were in the height of their wonderful blossoming. There were no roses anywhere in the village like those in Miss Rivers' yard. They crowded the garden beds and climbed the fence, and hung delicate festoons of beauty over the old porch; for three long, golden weeks each summer, the little, cheap, commonplace cottage was transformed, transfigured, a place of enchantment.

Jessie Marsh walked slowly by the gate; at the corner of the fence she turned and walked back again.

'She has such bushels of them,' she said, passing the gate a second time. 'The few that I want she'd never miss in the world. And she isn't an ogre—not that I ever heard of (by this time she was facing about at the first corner once more), and I don't care if we don't know each other—I'm going to ask her for a few roses, anyway. We'll know each other after this, if she gives them to me—or if she doesn't, for that matter!'

She pushed the gate open and hurried up the path before her courage should desert her; it was a bit disconcerting to find no doorbell—somehow it seemed so much harder to knock than to ring—but she was not going to be daunted at the last moment. She knocked so imperatively that the sound of it made her cheeks rival the Giant of Battles beside the doorstep.

'I might as well order "Hands up" and be done with it,' she thought, her eyes dancing in spite of her discomfiture. 'What would mother say—poor mother who tried to bring me up to be a lady!'

There was a sound of hurried footsteps within, and then the door opened and Miss Amelia's surprised face was peering up at her. Miss Amelia had thin shoulders, and pale, sandy hair and wistful, near-sighted blue eyes. Jessie, who had often seen her across in the church, never had noticed the expression in her eyes before. To the girl whose thoughts were full of the glowing beauty outside, Miss Amelia looked like some cellar-grown plant which had been denied the grace of blossoming. Suddenly, with a thrill of sympathy, she remembered that Miss Amelia was all alone in the world. No wonder she looked still and shy and shadowy. How could anybody blossom who hadn't anybody to blossom for? Something of the pity of it crept into the girlish voice under the merry words.

'I know you don't know who I am, Miss Rivers, and that makes my asking all the bolder, but I thought it wouldn't do any harm just to ask. I'm Jessie Marsh—we moved here last fall, and we live out Harker's road beyond the mills. To-morrow will be mother's birthday, and we always try to make a special time of it—just with little things that we make, you know, and a cake and candles, the way you do for birthdays. We haven't any flowers because we came too late to get them started, but mother loves them so—and when I was passing and saw yours, I wondered if you'd let me have a few—just half a dozen. I don't know what mother would say to me for asking a stranger, but—I wanted some roses for her so—and yours are so lovely—' She stopped, flushed and incoherent. If only Miss Amelia hadn't looked so bewildered!

'But it isn't the season to start rose cuttings,' Miss Amelia replied. 'I'd be willing to give your mother some, I'm sure, but they wouldn't grow now.'

'Oh, Miss Rivers!' Jessie gasped, struggling

between laughter and dismay, 'I didn't mean cuttings. What can you think of me! I only meant a few of the blossoms, if you could spare them—can you, do you suppose? Just a very few?'

Into Miss Amelia's wistful eyes came an excited light. 'Jest roses! Why, you can have all you want. I take them down to the church, but that's the only place I take them. I didn't suppose anybody else wanted any—everybody has their own round here. Wait a minute and I'll get you some scissors.'

She hurried back into the house, reappearing with garden scissors and a pair of old gloves. 'Some of them are real prickly,' she said. 'You'll find you will need the gloves. Now, you just go ahead and cut all that you want; the bushes will never know the difference. I don't keep them cut half as much as they'd ought to be.'

Jessie pulled on the gloves and then nodded brightly at Miss Amelia. It is queer how many things voices say without words. Miss Amelia's voice, under her shy sentences, was full of eager pleasure, and it was that that Jessie answered.

'I shall have a lovely time!' she said.

Miss Amelia went back into the house, and from the sitting-room window she watched the girl going from bush to bush and 'choosing' her roses. She looked like a rose herself, Miss Amelia thought—one of those pink ones that caught the light so, and were so sweet at nightfall. She wished she dared go out there with her, but she wouldn't know what to say. Miss Amelia, in her shy, solitary life, never had learned what to say to people. And, after all, it was pleasure enough just to sit at the window and watch her. Half dimly she realized that solitude would have a new and keener meaning after this, and with the quiet, uncomplaining patience with which she had met her life, she tried to store up comfort for her empty days. 'I guess I'll not forget how she looks down in that corner, with the sun glinting on her hair that way,' she thought. 'I guess 'twill be real company to me to remember.'

The girl was coming back to the house now, her hands full of roses. Miss Amelia met her at the door, and her eyes shadowed with disappointment. 'I thought you'd take more than that,' she said.

'More than this,' Jessie laughed. 'Why, Miss Rivers, I feel like a highway robber! Only they did tempt me so—I kept cutting just one more and one more! I'm afraid now to think what mother will say to me when I tell her how I came by them. Don't you want to know what I'm going to do with them? These pink ones are for mother's own room—she loves pink ones best of all—and the red for the parlor, and the white for the table, and this lovely rosebud of all to be laid on the top of her cake. I would have had pink for the table but that Bob and Betty begged so hard to make daisy chains, and only the white would go with daisies. The chains aren't exactly things of beauty, they're so wobbly and uneven, but mother will love them because the children made them. I think I'll festoon them round the table; they will not be quite so conspicuous then, and the children will be just as happy. And there will be a great jar of nice daisies and grasses in the corner—those are lovely—as lovely as roses, in their way.'

'It sounds real interesting,' Miss Amelia said, wistfully.

Jessie nodded emphatically. 'It is interesting,' she said. 'You have no idea what good times we have at home. I used to wish we were rich, but I don't care much now. for it

seems as if we have nicer times than anybody we know. We celebrate all our birthdays—there are six of them—and then there's Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Year and Easter and Hallowe'en, of course, and we always celebrate Twelfth Night by taking down the Christmas greens and having a particular kind of raisin cake that mother never makes any other time in the year, and the last day of summer, if it's pleasant, we always go off for an all-day picnic, a sort of out-of-door Thanksgiving for the summer, you know, and oh, I can't tell you half! Mother is always thinking of things, and the children get up so many comical "surprises" that we know about all the while. But this time I shall do the surprising. How they will wonder where all these lovely things came from, Miss Rivers! I'll keep them guessing for a while—see if I don't.'

She carefully put back a Bon Silene that was slipping from its fellows and then looked up with a sigh of regret. 'Well, I suppose I mustn't stand here chattering. I can't tell you how much I thank you, Miss Rivers. If there is ever anything I can do to show you, will you please let me know?'

'I guess there isn't anything,' Miss Amelia returned, 'but I'm real glad to have you take the roses.' It sounded stiff, and she knew it, but she couldn't help it. She never could say things. If she had been able to say things, life would have been very different to Miss Amelia; probably people then would not have spoken of her, as they frequently did, as 'poor Miss Rivers.'

She stood watching Jessie down the path; at the gate the girl turned and waved her hand; Miss Amelia awkwardly waved hers in return. It did not occur to her until an hour afterwards that she might have asked her to come back for more roses before they were all gone. The bitter disappointment of her lost opportunity was followed by a ray of hope; perhaps she would come anyway. Hope was so strange a guest in Miss Amelia's life that she became tremulous with excitement. She could not remember when she had had anything to hope for before.

That evening Miss Amelia sat up till an unwonted hour thinking over her afternoon. She wondered what it would be like to live in a family where things were happening all the time. Miss Amelia could not recall when anything had happened to her, even as a child. Her father had been a solitary man, and if her mother had had any social instincts they had soon been crushed out. But Miss Amelia could not remember her mother very well; she had died when her little daughter was only ten years old. From that time, existence had stretched out gray and monotonous, scarcely disturbed even by her silent father's death. It would have been better for Miss Amelia if she had had to earn her living; she might, with her bread and butter, have earned some power of companionship. But this Miss Amelia did not know, and not knowing, she contrived to make her tiny income match her small need, and lived through the gray days that, one like another, passed in endless procession. Looking out into the moonlit garden, that June evening, however, Miss Amelia for the first time fully realized both her poverty and her wealth. She never had had things—no; but something had happened that afternoon, and if one such day had come, might not the future somewhere hold another?

But not to-morrow—no, certainly not so soon as that, Miss Amelia told herself. It was just because the garden window was the pleasantest that she took her sewing to it.