

Family Circle.

HETTY.

A STORY.

I wish the hoarse dog at Number Nine were a better sleeper.

He always seems to have something on his mind. He is not content to keep it there either, but must forever be taking the moon—when there is one—into his confidence.

He is a dog who has a keen sense of his own responsibilities, too, and feels called upon to bark at every boy who whistles as he passes, and at every dog who peeps in through the various gaps in the wooden palings of his home.

So he does a good deal of barking, take it altogether, and is looked upon by the inhabitants of Paradise-place in general as a safe and sure protection against burglars and all evil-doers.

Still, when working hard at "copy," for which I know the printer's devil will be howling at my gates in the morning, I am sorry the hoarse dog is of such a conscientious disposition.

When I say "howling at my gates," I speak metaphorically. As a matter of fact, I have no gates. As a matter of fact, I have only a share in a front door. You knock three times, and that means the little, plain-looking, shabby woman in the second floor front.

I am only a lodger, you see, in Number Eight, Paradise-place, and ours is not an aristocratic neighborhood. Yet we have an odd sight or sound that is pleasant in its way, for all that.

I really don't think I ever saw finer mignonette than grows in the window of Number Twenty, over the way; and dear me! how sweetly the perfume steels across the narrow street when the weather is still and warm.

Then there is the lark fastened outside the attic window of Number Ten. Did ever one hear such melody as he makes when they put him out first thing of a morning? He squats on the square of turf in the bottom of his cage, presses his speckled breast to the bars—and I shut my eyes, and am back in my old country home. The furrows of the freshly turned fields have a fresh, pungent smell.

I hear my young brother (long since laid to rest in a far-off land) whistling as he comes home from his work, with our blue-eyed baby sister toddling along by his side, holding bravely on to one finger of his strong, sunburned hand.

The farm door stands open; the passage inside is pied with gently stirring leaf shadows from the ivy that clusters all over the old porch; and—yes—there is the mother I shall never see again, knitting in hand, peeping from the doorway at those two approaching figures—the tall, stalwart lad and the blue-eyed bit of a lassie.

These are the visions I see as I listen to the lark, and hope he doesn't mind very much being doomed to live in a small wire house and cheer us poor toilers with his song.

Yes; even Paradise-place has its pleasures. As to the stories I write—why, they are full of lords and ladies, and everything is on the most genteel scale imaginable. I take in a fashion paper to study the dress of the upper circles; though on this point I am forced to admit that the artist who "does" the illustrations is a trial to me, and often astonishes me with the look of my own creations—on paper.

I am strangely, marvelously alone in the world. The old homestead, father, mother, big brother, blue-eyed sister—all gone.

But that is not the story I am going to tell you now. Suffice for you to know that I am a lonely woman, grey-haired, sad-eyed; almost penniless, save for what a busy pen can earn; inclined to be querulous with the hoarse dog at Number Nine, but yet ready to bask in a ray of sunshine; thankful for the lark's song and the scent of the mignonette; thankful that there is work to be done, and money to be earned thereby, sufficient for my simple wants.

It seems a very small story I have to tell, but yet it had a keen interest for me at the time it happened, and I often look back upon it. I have often wondered I had the courage to do as I did, but I have never repented of what I did.

Well, just as the Spring was passing into Summer; just as the fresh green leaves of the trees in the People's Park, that lay within a stone's throw of Paradise-place, were beginning to get a bit dusty, and the primroses and violets were going out of season, a pretty sight caught my eye one morning and kept me from my work longer than it ought to have done.

It was a woman's face, framed in an open window—the very one were the mignonette box stood, and whence came the whiff of the many blossomed flowers in summer.

Just now nothing was visible in this long green box except a vast crowd of tiny two-leaved plants, that might have been baby cabbages, or cress, or anything—if one hadn't known they were mignonette.

The upper half of the window was shaded by a shabby sort of green blind; the lower, open, framing, as I have said before, a woman's face.

The profile was toward me first. Rather large and massive in outline, but wonderfully Madonna-like, with sleek brown hair drawn simply back and folded round a comb.

We had a pretty face or two in Paradise-place, but daintiness and neatness were not qualities among us. But this woman was exquisitely neat, and I could see the little snow-white collar round her throat.

Presently, still loitering at my window, she turned, and I saw her full face.

A broad, noble brow, disguised by no disfiguring fringe or tangle of hair of any kind; lambent eyes, clear and steadfast; and the very sweetest smile I had ever seen before, or have ever seen since.

How did I know this? Why, because she looked across, as I did, smiling at me. That moment, out burst the lark at Number Ten into a madness of trills and roulades, and somehow the sound

seemed a sort of excuse for that silent greeting. Of course I returned the smile—nay, I am not sure I did not give the least bit in the world of a nod as well. Then I sat down to my desk, giving all my energies to the task of extricating a young and beautiful Countess out of a tangle of most trying circumstances into which I had carefully led her the previous evening.

Somehow the face at the window opposite seemed a sort of inspiration. Never had my thoughts flowed in a clearer stream; never had the agony of a suffering heroine piled up more thrillingly; never had the inevitable "happy ending" foreshadowed itself so delightfully.

I began to weave a romance in my own mind round that Madonna-faced woman. The Countess was safely landed on the matrimonial shore after her struggle through the waters of affliction, so I could afford to be idle a bit.

If kept waiting for "copy," the printer's devil was apt to scandalize the neighborhood (which, though poor, was eminently respectable) by singing low songs and whistling in an impudent and distracting manner, hanging himself on to the area rails in impossible attitudes the while; but to-day his bundle of manuscripts was ready long before he appeared—a state of affairs that I am perfectly sure disappointed him extremely as curtailing his opportunities of harrying the little world of Paradise-place.

There was no more "copy" due for nearly a week. I would be idle for a while; I would stroll into that park of which we were all so proud, sit on a seat under a tree and watch the shabby children turning somersaults and standing on their heads in the grass; take a glance at the rhododendrons beginning to break out into a blaze of color; watch the laburnum shaking its golden locks out in the soft, warm wind; meditate on future difficulties into which to lead aristocratic feet, future depths of unspeakable bliss upon which to let the curtain drop.

A single chop and a rice-pudding in a breakfast saucer for your dinner are simple fare, but they do not preclude the needy author from telling of magnificent banquets and festivities in dazzling halls of light. In the same way the homely and occasionally sordid details of my daily life in no way clipped the wings of my imaginings, and these flights of fancy always seemed to have fuller scope in the open air, when green boughs waved in slow and stately fashion between me and the blue sky beyond.

Yes, I would go commune with nature, first ordering the chop and pudding to be ready an hour hence. I would weave an intricate and exciting plot—a plot that would hold my reader breathless, and cause my editor to greet me, on my next visit to the editorial sanctum, with his blandest smile; and my heroine should be limned after the pattern of that sweet-faced, calm-eyed woman, my new neighbor.

I had chosen a delightful seat, quiet and retired, yet within earshot of children's voices and the quacking of many ducks, (for we had a pond—quite a large pond, too—in our park), when, moving slowly, and in strange timid fashion, my new neighbor came along one of the side walks.

I confess to experiencing a shock. I confess that Pegasus, just about to soar aloft, floundered pitifully. The Madonna-faced woman was what is called, in homely parlance, a crook-back.

A simple brown bonnet was tied over her brown hair, the two nearly matching each other. Her blue eyes, wonderful eyes they were in very truth—full of a sort of pathetic pleading, as if asking all the world to be tolerant of her deformed shape and awkward, shambling gait—looked at me as she passed. I almost fancy she would have stopped and taken a place upon the bench beside me but for the fact that she was on her way to keep an appointment. I came to this conclusion unhesitatingly, because I have learned to read people's errands from the way they go about them, and know the look of a person on the way to a business interview off by heart.

Poor people do not wait for introductions to make each other's acquaintance. It is one of the advantages of poverty that it is untrammelled by conventionality.

A week later I knew Hetty Deacon to speak to as we passed each other in the street; to nod to as we looked at each other from opposite windows. A month later I seemed to have known her all my life. I wondered how I had ever managed to get on without her sweet companionship—her ready sympathy.

For you never saw any one so interested in the beautiful young Countesses and wicked young Dukes as Hetty was! She would laugh right merrily over the funny bits of my stories, and I'm sure I have seen her eyes quite bright and tearful over my death-bed scenes. You know people always die at great length, and very much more picturesquely, on paper than they do in real life, and I was a great hand at this sort of thing. I am a very old woman now, and an unexpected legacy has made it quite unnecessary for me to write "fiction for the million," as we called our weekly paper, so I may say that much without laying myself open to the charge of being vain-glorious.

Yes, I was a good hand at the pathetic parts. I often brought the tears to my own eyes, and my voice quite faltered as I read aloud to Hetty about pale faces on white pillows, and wan hands that clasped those that fain would never let them go.

"How clever you are!" she would say; "I should never have thought of that." Success I had had in a certain small way of my own; success that meant a due and regular supply of chops and pudding, and a cheap trip to the sea once every autumn; but this, I felt, was fame—this was incense—this was a sip out of the intoxicating cup of glory!

It was such a help to me having some one near at hand to take an interest in the webs I spun with my busy brain.

Some while back I had tried the landlady's daughter; but the attempt was a failure. She ate surreptitious sweets while I read to her, and made nasty sucking noises over them. I caught her once, in the most thrilling part of a most thrilling story, making vulgar signs with her fingers to her younger brother through the

chink of the room door. Then I gave the thing up, convinced that the higher education of the masses was a hopeless affair. But it was different, quite different, with Hetty.

And I grew to love the girl (she was but eighteen) with all my heart. There had been black and terrible troubles in my past life. All I loved had been reft from my hold; worse still, those I trusted in most blindly had proved untrue. Mine was a sad story enough; grief and disappointment had seemed to wither me; I had made no ties, formed no friendships in these latter years. But now, I was like an old tree that suddenly sprouts out into little fresh green branches of leaves all about, as hoary trunk. I let Hetty creep into my heart of hearts and nestle there.

Hetty was an artist's model.

"I only sit for the face and head, of course," she said, a faint flush rising in her cheek, as she alluded to her deformed and twisted frame; "it seems I suit for Saint Cecilia, and that sort of thing."

"So I should fancy," I answered, glancing at the beautifully spiritual face opposite to me.

"Of course, with mother to keep, it has been hard work sometimes, and the sewing for the linen shop is a good thing to have at hand when studio work chances to be slack. I was getting very hopeless just when first we came here, though I said nothing to mother. I never do. Do you remember the morning I passed you sitting under the laburnum tree in the park? Well, I was on my way to see an artist then."

"I knew you were on your way to see somebody; you looked like business all over."

"Yes, I dare say I did. I felt like it. I never made a better bargain than I did that day. I was afraid that I should break out singing as I came along the streets home—my heart was as glad as the lark over there at Number Ten."

"I thought so," I put in here; I heard you singing next morning at your work."

"Patience, I think we always loved each other, even before we ever spoke to each other. I used to peep at you across the street, and then, the milkwoman told mother you were 'the lady who wrote stories,' so I peeped oftener than ever. I think I was a little frightened of you at first."

"But not now?"

"Ah, no!"

Hetty's mother was nearly blind, and yet it was wonderful how much she managed to do in the way of "setting up" their shabby little room. It was the very picture of cleanliness and tidiness. The last tenant had been a musician at one of the minor theatres, a man who devoted himself to two things in life—his violin, and the rearing of mignonette in the box outside the window. The sun of prosperity seemed to be beginning to shine upon him, for when he left, with much pomp and ceremony, he presented the painted box to the landlady, and now, full of sweet-scented greenish and yellow flowers, it flourished exceedingly under Hetty's care.

"Cousin Jack likes the smell of flowers like those," she said to me one Sunday afternoon as she and I stood together by the window. "He's coming, is Jack, this evening, and he and I are going to church together."

I am naturally rather a fluent woman, but there was something in Hetty's face—something in Hetty's voice—that held me silent, as she spoke of this expected visitor of hers.

If you have any intuitive perceptions at all, you can scarcely mistake the look in a woman's eyes, the smile on a woman's lips, as she speaks of the man she loves.

Apparently Hetty was surprised at my silence, for she gave me a quick glance, folded her hands lightly one in the other, let them fall upon her lap, and with a sort of child-like wonder in her great soft eyes, said slowly:

"Why, Patience, you never saw Cousin Jack!"

I read her heart like an open book. She pitted with all her gentle soul that benighted being who had "never seen Cousin Jack." It was difficult to her to form an idea of what the world must seem like to that person whose world did not contain Cousin Jack.

"No, I have never seen him, Hetty. May I see him to-night, dear? Will your mother give me a cup of tea, and then I can sit with her while you and Jack are at church."

So it was settled like that. We carried over my nice fresh bunch of watercresses and my glass bee-hive full of marmalade, and made a sort of joint feast of it.

"He's a bonnie lad is Jack," said Mrs. Deacon before he came. "He's a sailor, you know—getting on well, too—in the merchant service. Never a voyage he comes home from but he brings me some pretty gift or another; nor he don't forget Hetty, neither. Why should he, indeed? He used to carry her about when he was a strong chap of ten years old, and she a bit weakly-like lass of five. He was handy, too, and made a go-cart—aye, that did he. She shall ride in her carriage like a queen!" he'd say, laughing, so as you might hear him a mile off. My poor husband was alive then, and we were well-to-do."

Here Hetty, ever watchful of her mother's moods and fancies, cried out that Jack was coming down the street, and that he had a posy in his coat. So he had; and I hardly know which was brighter and more bonnie, the young fellow's face or the posy of Summer flowers at his breast.

He was a sailor, every inch of him, strongly built, sun-burned, curly-haired, dark-eyed. He had a ringing happy laugh and was fond of watercresses and marmalade; indeed, he complimented me on both articles, Mrs. Deacon having explained that they were my contributions to the entertainment.

But what struck me about him most was his marvelously tender, gentle ways to his cousin Hetty. She, on her part, seemed more silent than usual; but the beautiful Madonna face was all alight with a quiet radiance—a calm and restful joy—a look as if she were forever saying to herself, "he is here, here beside me," like a bird singing a sweet song of content over and over again.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]