

THE RETURN OF RHODA

Seems a little lonely at times, mother.

"Now, pa, you know it's all for the best."

"I ain't arguing it ain't all for the best. I was saying it was a little lonely—that's all."

Mrs. Free pulled the big wooden rocking-chair up nearer the stove, which was sending a warm glow through the old-fashioned sitting-room and took up the soft white wool which she was to transform into "out of those shoulder things" for Rhoda—Rhoda would need such things now that she was in the city.

But instead of beginning her work she turned a little in her chair and looked out at the broad expanse of white. The hills were all cold and shining, and more snow was even now flying in the air. Winter had come in earnest.

"Of course, mother," said the old farmer, with a quiet, kindly sort of humor in his voice, "you ain't ever lonesome."

"When I do get lonesome, pa," she said, picking up her work, "I just keep thinking how it's all for the best—and that's consoling."

John Free walked over to the window. "If Rhoda was home now and was teaching the school, I'd just about be putting Nellie to the cutter. Rhoda never did much walking over had roads when I was round."

"And Rhoda appreciated it, pa," said Mrs. Free, after a pause in which she had been silently counting the stitches.

"Rhoda was the best teacher they ever had round here." And then, as his wife was still counting stitches, half aggressively, "Everybody says that."

"Fourteen—fifteen—sixteen. You never heard me say, pa, Rhoda wasn't a good teacher. All I said was, a girl who could sing like Rhoda had no business teaching the Hickory Grove school—or any other, for that matter."

"More than one has said that," remarked Mrs. Free, complacently. "I never saw anything to beat the way this whole community leaned on Rhoda! 'Twas Rhoda this and Rhoda that! Nothing from a barn-raising to a funeral could go on without her. They can't ever say our Rhoda was stingy with her singing, mother."

"I guess our Rhoda wouldn't be her pa's daughter if she was stingy with anything," said Mrs. Free, quietly. She had a way of saying those things when least expected, and they never failed to be disconcerting to that now I wasn't counting on that."

"Mother," he went on, after listening patiently to "thirteen—fourteen—fifteen—sixteen," "shall you ever forget how she sang, 'Lead, Kindly Light, at Tim Powers' funeral? Seems like of all the times I ever heard her, that was the most moving."

The soft wool fell to Mrs. Free's lap. "Rhoda's so sympathetic," she said, softly.

John Free chuckled. "Pears to me she wouldn't be her mother's daughter if she wasn't so sympathetic."

"Fourteen—fifteen—sixteen—turn," was the only response.

"S'pose I might as well be about the chores. Dibs seem like those winter was going to be mighty long."

"Now, pa, don't be so restless—fourteen—fifteen—sixteen—there—that's wrong."

He stood by the window, putting on his heavy coat. "Looks like Fred Barrett's cutter coming," he remarked.

"If Rhoda was home it wouldn't be hard to guess where he was making for," remarked Mrs. Free.

"Coming long pretty brisk. Cold out, I reckon. He's got some one in with him—and 'tain't a man. Mother," he cried, excitedly, after a moment.

"Fred Barrett's opening the gate! Mother," he added in a choked voice, "come here."

She stood beside him at the window and he pointed down to the gate.

"What do you think?" he gasped. "The woman's face grew strangely white. 'It's—it's—it can't be—tis—Rhoda!'"

They stood there in a daze, and then two pairs of hands were fumbling at the knob.

How Rhoda got out of the sleigh, who carried in the valise, how Fred Barrett got away without being so much as asked in, they never quite knew. It was all a strange whirl and then the door was shut, the sleigh-wells away, and Rhoda, after one strange, frightened look around the old room, threw herself into her mother's arms—that snowy coat and all; and there burst from her the wild, uncontrollable sobs which follow a long, bitter strain.

The mother stood holding her in utter silence—she was a mother, and she knew that was best. But when John Free could bear it no longer, he put a hand on the girl's shoulder, and said brokenly, his own rugged face wet with tears, "Rhoda, girl, you're home now. No matter what's happened, it's all right now."

She raised her head then and gaped for her father's hands. "It was a mistake," she moaned, piteously, "a mistake!"

"Now what's a mistake?" said John Free. "I just want to know."

"Mother," cried the girl, her voice still thick with sobs, "it's gone! Our dream's gone, mother! I—I—Oh, I—can't—sing!" She sank to a chair, her head fell to the table, and sobs such as the old room had never heard before crowded upon one another in hot, passionate succession.

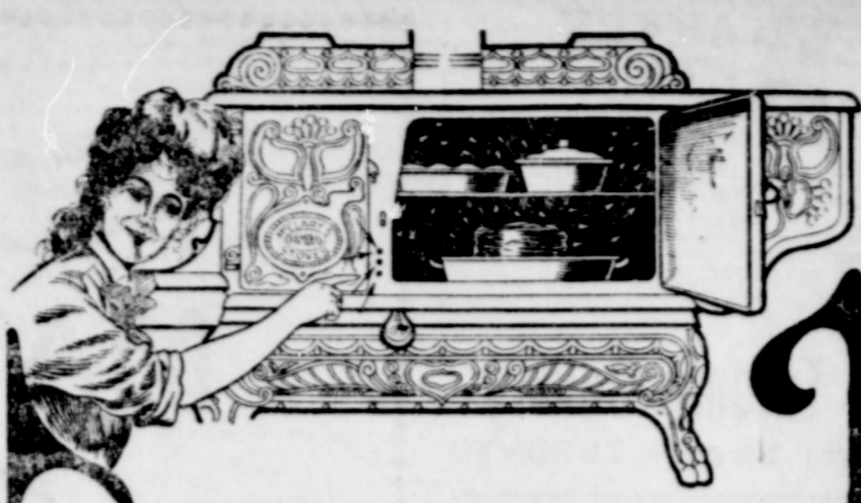
"Something's happened to your voice, Rhoda?" asked the old farmer, timidly.

"She grew more quiet then. 'Oh, no, pa,' she said, 'nothing's happened to it. It never was there. I never could sing.'"

"Well, I guess we know better than that! And whoever said—"

"Now, pa," broke in Mrs. Free, "this is no time for arguing. Come right up to the fire. Dibs, and we'll get off those wet things and get a good, hot drink. You'll take your death of cold—sitting there as though no one cared whether you were wet or dry!"

After her feet were warm and she had taken the hot tea her mother had made for her, and the old surroundings had taken a little of the sting from her wound, the girl began casting about in her mind for words which would not distress her parents. They were sitting on each side of her, eager to know, and yet reluctant to



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ask questions which would bring pain, their sorrow, after all, tempered with gladness because she was at home.

"You see, pa," she began, quietly, "there are no really great singers round here. I am the best there is, and so, because I can sing a little, Miss Parsons, all of us, made a mistake and thought I had a great voice, when I haven't."

"But I can't see—" began the old farmer.

"Now, pa," protested his wife, "just let Rhoda tell it."

"The city is full of good singers, mother. They come from all over the country. There are thousands of them who can sing better than I can."

"Now I don't believe that!" cried her father, slapping his knee hard.

The girl smiled at him fondly.

"You'll have to believe it, pa, for my teacher, one of the best in the whole city, said so."

"He did, did he? Well, what had you done to make him mad? There's something behind it!"

"Oh, no, pa. And you mustn't resent it. It was very kind of him. He might have gone on taking our money for a long time, but he didn't, you see. He was very good."

"Hum!" grunted John Free, dubiously.

"And he was so very kind about it. It was after my lesson and I was standing there, putting on my gloves, when he looked over at me in a strange kind of way and asked me just what I hoped to make of my voice. I didn't quite know what to say, and then he asked me point-blank if I expected to make money out of it, to make back the money I was putting into it. I told him I did, and then—he asked me something about our circumstances here at home—"

"—and when I told him we weren't rich, that—that it had been an effort, you know, he looked at me very queerly, and then he sat down and told me the truth." She hesitated and then went on with a little catch in her voice: "And in spite of all I've suffered, I thank him from the bottom of my heart."

Her mother reached over and took one of her hands. "Just what did he say, Dodie?"

"Merely that it wasn't great, mother; that it wasn't worth the money we would have to put into it. He says voices can be made now without much to start on, but it takes a long time and a great expenditure, and when there are so many who have—have something good to begin with, my voice would bring us nothing but—disappointment. And I can see that he's right."

"He says it's a nice little home voice," she went on, trying to smile, "but that is all it ever will be, you know, and I can't afford to pay five dollars a lesson for—don't you see, mother?"

Mrs. Free only pressed her child's hand tighter, fighting the lump which kept rising in her own throat.

"I wasn't very philosophical about it at first," continued the girl, her voice shaking as if it might give way with any word. "Of course I didn't cry or make any fuss before him. I could see that it was kind of him, and told him so, and that I wouldn't take any more lessons. Oh—he was so good about it! He told me that we couldn't all have great voices in this world; that it wasn't our fault if we didn't have them, and that if we did there was nothing to be ashamed of. He shook hands with me, and said he had liked me so much, and that it was just because he liked me he had told me."

"I knew that what he said was true—about our only being expected to do our best with what we had, and yet—O mother! I mother! you know how foolish I've been! You know I've dreamed—you know how I've gone to sleep at night dreaming I was taking great armfuls of flowers, while people clapped and clapped to hear me sing again! Mother, you know!"

She raised her head, and her voice, while the hot tears ran down her tired, white face.

"When was all this?" demanded her father, his voice gruff with the effort to keep back the tears.

"Pho-da hesitated. "Ten days ago," she said, at last.

"And where have you been ever since?"

"She pushed back her hair wearily. "I've been trying to work in a store—and I was almost as dismal a failure at that as I was as a prima donna."

"Now, Rhoda—how could you?" cried her mother.

"Oh, you don't know the feeling I had! I wanted to come home, and yet I just couldn't. It seemed like coming home defeated. It seemed I just must do something in the city, and so one of the girls got me a place in a store."

"She paused and then laughed—the nearest to a natural laugh they had

heard since her return. "I was an awful clerk! I hated it! The air was so bad, and some of the people were so snippy and horrid. And then, father, one night I came home with my head and feet both aching, and all tired and sick, and I found your letter about Mr. Childs wishing I was at home to take the school, and about you and mother being so lonesome, and—and that letter brought me home."

John Free cleared his throat and looked over at his wife with an air which defied contradiction or rebuke.

"It's a curious thing," he said, "that I was telling your mother this very afternoon that I had nine-tenths a notion to go and telegraph Rhoda to come home. I—I ain't feeling any too well this winter."

"Aren't you, pa?" she asked, in quick concern—"what seems?"

"Oh, I'll be all right now," he hastened to say, and looked boldly over at his wife.

He went out to see about the chores then, and the girl sat and talked her heart out to her mother. When it came time to get supper she went about some of her old duties naturally, almost gaily, and she more than once brought joy to her mother's heart by letting her laugh ring gladly out through the old kitchen.

"Mother," she called from the window, where she was standing beating an egg "where under sun is father going this time of night? He's got Nellie hitched up and he's going off!"

"Now I do say!" cried Mrs. Free, and hurried to the door to enter protest, but only in time to see her husband wave his hand in provoking fashion and drive away.

"Well, if that isn't funny!" laughed the girl, and went on beating the egg.

When he came back, about half an hour later, he sat by the fire and watched Rhoda eat the table. "Joe Childs was mighty tickled," he chuckled, at last.

She put down the sugar-bowl with a thump. "Now, father, where have you been?"

"Hum! Guess I've got a right to go about my own business. I had an errand up to Joe Childs', and while there—while there," he repeated, eyeing her defiantly. "I happened to mention that you were home—and say, he jumped right out of his chair, and waved his arms and shouted at me, 'Look here, John Free, will Rhoda teach our school?' and I replied that I might consider it."

"Now—father!"

She laid the knives and forks round, and then stood there, looking at him with eyes a little misty. "But it is nice to feel you're back where some one wants you, where—where you're a success," she said, tremulously.

"Never was a teacher round here like you," said John Free, son her husband and the dishes were finished supper and washed, and Rhoda was sitting by the table reading, while her mother sat close at hand knitting upon the soft wool thing, that the old farmer whiffed in his chair and began, a trifle nervously:

"If it makes you feel bad, Rhoda, don't think about it; but many a night I've sat here before I went to bed and tried to think how it would seem to hear your voice in my ears again, and—"

"Now, pa," broke in his wife, "how can you?"

"I'm sorry, father," said Rhoda, tremulously.

"All right—just as you say," and the old man turned back to the fire. For a long time Rhoda sat there, pretending to read, but not seeing a word. She was thinking of what the teacher had told her of doing the best she could with what she had, thinking how kind they had been to her in her home-coming—how they had made it almost happy, instead of sad. She was thinking that to them her voice would always be beautiful—that the world's cold shoulder could not thrust away a faith born of love.

She rose then and walked over to the little organ which stood in one corner. "I'll sing you a little, pa," she said, "if you want me to."

They drew their chairs round where they could see her and waited for her to begin. Her mother's face was wet with tears, and the old farmer put his hand to his mouth and coughed.

Rhoda sat at the organ for several minutes in silence, her hands resting on the keys, wondering what to sing, wondering if disappointment had not ruined all the voice she had ever had. And then it seen, that the spirit of that home—that little country home, where there was love and peace—wrapped her round as with a mantle.

She raised her head, and her voice, sweet and tender, carried out into the old room, to the two faithful hearts, the beautiful, never-old words: "Mid pleasures and palaces though we may roam, But it ever so humble, there's no place like home. A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,

Force of Good Habit

The great use knowledge in all its various branches is to free the mind from the prejudices of ignorance and to give it more just and more enlarged conceptions. By reading, we acquire that knowledge which is the result of long study of those, whose work we peruse. In feudal times dexterity with the sword and physical strength chiefly made the difference between man and man, but in these days with laws restraining the power of physical ability and giving almost free scope to the use of all improvements of the mind, it is principally the development of the brain that gives one man a real superiority over another. When tradesmen and laborers were engaged more hours each day in their various occupations they had less reason for mental development because labor stood in the room of education and filled up those vacancies of mind which in a state of idleness would be ingressed by vice. But now when they have more leisure, if they fail to practise mental improvement during those hours they are exempt from the prey, their minds will likely be the prey of vice and more so as they have the means to indulge it. A vacant mind may be likened to a vacant house mentioned in the gospel, which the devil found empty. It has entered; and taking with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, they took possession. It is an undoubted truth that one vice indulged introduces other, and that each succeeding vice becomes more depraved. If then the mind must be employed, what can fill its vacancies more rationally than the acquisition of knowledge? Let us therefore thank God for the opportunities he has afforded us and not turn into a curse so great a blessing. For improvement in knowledge, youth is certainly the fittest season. The mind is then ready to receive any impression. It is free from all that care and attention which, in riper age, the affairs of life bring with them. The memory is stronger and better able to acquire the rudiments of knowledge; and as the mind is then void of ideas, it is more suited to those parts of learning which are conversant in words. Besides, there are in youth a modesty and ductility, which in advanced years, if those years especially have been left a prey to ignorance, become self-sufficiency and prejudice; and these effectually bar up all the inlets to knowledge. Well bred and well educated youth, attention and application are early gained, we shall scarcely acquire them afterwards. The inconsiderate youth seldom reflects upon this; nor knows his loss, till he knows also that it cannot be retrieved. Nor is youth more the season to acquire knowledge, than to form religious habits. It is a great point to get habit on the side of virtue. It will make every thing smooth and easy. The earliest principles are generally the most lasting; and those of a religious cast are seldom wholly lost. Though the temptations of the world may, now and then, draw the well principled youth aside; yet his principles being continually at war with his practice, there is hope, that in the end the better part may overcome the worst, and bring on a reformation; whereas, he who has permitted habits of vice to get possession of his youth, has little chance of being brought back to a sense of religion. In the common course of things it can rarely happen. Some calamity must arouse him. He must be awakened by a storm or sleep forever. How much better is it then to make that easy to us, which we know is best; and to form those habits now, which hereafter we shall wish we had formed. Our youth bears the same proportion to our more advanced life, as this world does to the next. In this life, we must form and cultivate those habits of virtue, which will qualify us for a better state. If we neglect them here, and contract habits of an opposite kind, instead of gaining that exalted state, which is promised to our improvement, we shall of course sink into that state, which is adapted to the habits we have formed. Exactly thus is youth introductory into manhood; to which it is, properly speaking, a state of preparation. During this season we must qualify ourselves for the parts we are to act hereafter. In manhood we bear the fruit, which has in youth been planted.—O. K. Lane in Family Friend.

Death Comes to All.—But it need not come prematurely if proper precautions are taken. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," and to have prevention at hand and allow a disease to work its will is wickedness. Dr. Thomas' Electric Oil not only allays pains when applied externally, but will prevent lung troubles resulting from colds and coughs. Try it and be convinced.

Business is Business

Senators and representatives get all sorts of extraordinary requests from constituents, but Senator Berry, of Arkansas, claims that one he received a few days ago easily beats the record. The letter, which was from a woman, was accompanied by two songs, one entitled, "Why, Oh, Why?" and the other, "Peace, Oh, Peace." The writer said: "Senator, I want you to take these songs, which I have composed after months of hard and composed labor, to President Roosevelt, submit them to him, and get a letter of endorsement from him, and will agree to allow you ten per cent. on the proceeds from the sale. You know, senator, the President's endorsement will be a great advertisement for the songs, and I feel sure they will be a go. You might also sing them to the senators if you have the time."

Those who live with whatsoever things are true, just, gracious, pure and amiable continue to grow in mental and moral power; and the good of life lies in the mental and moral dispositions which a spiritual faith and disinterested conduct create and foster within us.

Which, sought through the world, is never met with elsewhere." Rhoda had never sung so well before, for she was singing out her gratitude and love—singing out her heart's thankfulness for this refuge from the stress and sorrows of the world.—Susan Keating Gaskell in The Yodth's Companion.

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Emerson on Walking

Few men know how to take a walk. The qualifications of a professor are endurance, plain clothes, old shoes, an eye for nature, good silence, and nothing too much. If a man tells me that he has an intense love of nature, I know, of course, that he has none. Good observers have the manners of trees and animals, their patient good sense, and if they add words, 'tis only when words are better than silence. But a loud singer, or a story-teller, or a vain talker profanes the river and the forest, and is nothing like so good company as a dog. When Nero advertised for a new luxury a walk in the woods should have been offered. 'Tis one of the secrets for dodging old age, for Nature makes a like impression on age as on youth. Then I recommend it to people who are growing old against their will. A man in that predicament, if he stands before a mirror, or among young people, is made quite too sensible of the fact, but the forest awakes in him the same feeling it did when he was a boy, and he may draw a moral from the fact that it is the old trees that have all the beauty and grandeur. I admire the taste which makes the avenue to a house, were the house never so small, through a wood, besides the beauty, it has a positive effect on manners, as it disposes the mind of the inhabitant and of his guests to the deference due to each. Some English reformers thought the cattle made all this wide space necessary between house and house, and that, if there were no cows to pasture, less land would suffice. But a cow does not need so much land as the owner's eyes require between him and his neighbor.—The Atlantic.

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Between Husband and Wife

Why is the code of civility so often disregarded between the husband and the wife? "Familiarity breeds contempt," someone says, but that hardly covers the question. The feeling between persons who are grossly uncivil to one another is not seldom one of deep and true affection and respect. If anyone else were to speak of either of them as they do to one another they would resent it exceedingly. But this unrestrained "familiarity" is a mistake, and particularly before onlookers. The latter very often, contrary to the proverb, do not see most of the game. They see only a small portion of it, and are apt to judge the rest accordingly. They see a man rude to his wife, and, knowing nothing of the real underlying affection, take it for granted that they are on bad terms. Besides, one must think of the children. They are naturally little mimics, and if they hear father and mother speaking unpleasantly to one another, they speedily copy them. It therefore behooves us all to take heed of our ways. Good manners in the family circle is the oil that makes the domestic machine run smoothly.

Definition of a Well-Dressed Woman

What is the definition of a well-dressed woman? A magazine recently offered a prize for a solution of the conundrum, and naturally had an immense number of replies, for, as the editor sagaciously remarks, the question of dress occupies a foremost place in the minds of all women. The lady whose paper gained the prize defined a well-dressed woman as one who pleases the eye of the beholder, arranges to do this without extravagance or oddity in her choice of the color, material or designs of her costume. Many points have to be considered in estimating the claim of any woman to be described as well-dressed. One quality should never be overlooked, and that is the suitability of the costume chosen to the wearer's position, her type of face and figure, and its appropriateness to the occasion on which it is worn. Other qualities highly to be desired are simplicity of design, neatness and perfection as to cut and finish. But there is also an art to wearing clothes which should not be overlooked, an art by the aid of which many a woman of an income altogether inconsiderable manages to give an impression of grace and elegance quite out of the reach of many of her more wealthy sisters.—Rupert's Magazine.

Cookin' Things

When my mother's cookin' things You bet I never wait To put away my ball or gun—I drop 'em where they are an' run Fer fear I'll be too late. The most excitin' kind o' game, Er toy, er story book, I let 'em go, an' never mind, The very minute that I find My mother's goin' to cook. When my mother's cookin' things— P'raps it's pies to bake, Er doughnuts bobbin' up an' down In bolin' grease till they are brown, Er p'raps it's Johnny cake— Whatever kind of thing it is I always like to hook The biggest piece of dough I can An' bake it in a patty pan. When me an' mother cook. —Burgess Johnson in Harper's. Some people cannot drive to happiness with four horses, and other can reach the goal on foot.—Thackeray. Temptation rarely comes in working hours. It is in their leisure time that men are made or marred.