

A Domestic Treasure!

(Christian Burke, in 'Dawn of Day.')

'One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.'

'It's no use expecting too much of a "general!" If I were a "house-and-parlor" where another is kept, it might be different; but how I'm to have clean hands a-black-leading of the grates, and a afternoon apron on, a-scrubbing of the kitchen bricks, is more than I can understand! So we'll say this day month, if you please, miss, and I hope as you'll be able to suit yourself better!'

The speaker broke off abruptly at the end of this lucid explanation, and stood breathless and defiant in the tiny suburban drawing-room, much perplexed and annoyed at the smile which her sharp glance detected crossing her new mistress's face.

Katherine Halifax was indeed a very new mistress, for she had been but a fortnight at the head of affairs at the Sycamores. Her brother had lost his wife nine months previously, but it was not until now that she had been able to come to the rescue of the disorganized household, where her eldest niece, Madge, who was even now barely sixteen, had fallen a victim to her own inexperience and that of her domestic coadjutors. At first, indeed, the middle-aged servant, who had been with Mrs. Halifax for years, kept the wheels running smoothly enough. It was not until she was unexpectedly called home that what the boys called the 'Reign of Terror' began. Judith's successors came and went with startling celerity, until Rhoda Brown, the present inmate of the kitchen, appeared upon the scene. She was a pretty, intelligent, untrained girl of nineteen, with the prevalent taste for cheap finery and cheaper novelettes, and a well developed sense of her own importance. At the same time she had her good points. Was cheerful, kind-hearted, and good-tempered in the main, and got through a fair amount of work in her own careless fashion.

With some misgivings and anxiety Miss Halifax had entered upon her new duties, but the enthusiastic welcome she received soon set her mind at rest as regards her brother and his family; Rhoda Brown, however, disapproved from the first, and at the earliest hint of a hand upon the reins she declared war!

She had chosen the moment of bringing in the afternoon tea to make her declaration of independence, and now she stood crumpling up the hem of a not too clean white apron in one hand, with her head thrown back so as to take a surreptitious peep at herself in the glass. It was a pleasant young face, and not even the disfiguring mass of light curly hair, fringed down to her eyebrows, and done up into an elaborate 'bun,' could make it other than a very pretty one. The clear, pink and white complexion, fair locks, and bright, blue eyes gave her a sort of fresh trimness, in spite of the bit of tawdry gold embroidery which did duty for a collar, the tumbled apron and a cap whose fly-away streamers were by no means spotless. She had given notice on the spur of the moment with no idea of being taken at her word. Very much discomposed was she, therefore, when her mistress remarked quite calmly:

'Very well, Rhoda. I am sorry. I think we might have found a way to get on together, but I certainly should not wish to keep you against your will.'

Voluble as she was, Rhoda was quite quenched by this matter-of-factness. She had only spirit enough left to 'founce' out of the room, and clatter noisily away to her own domains.

'Oh, Aunt Katie!' exclaimed Madge, as the

door closed not too gently behind her, 'I am so sorry. You've had nothing but worry ever since you came. And now Rhoda's leaving. What a nuisance it is!' and her forehead puckered itself up in a terrible frown.

Miss Halifax only laughed. 'I am sorry, too, Madge,' she said, 'I rather took to Rhoda, in spite of that dreadful fringe. Now I fear she must go. It is rarely wise to ask a girl to stay.'

'I'm afraid not. I did speak to her about her hair, I felt certain you would be shocked—but she said it was her own, and she did not see that she was called to make herself look ugly "to please her places;" in fact, she seemed to think she owed it to herself not to give in.'

'Poor Rhoda! Three months did you say you have had her here?'

'Yes, and she was five at her last situation, and two the one before. I suppose I ought not to have engaged her, but there is something nice about her.'

'Yes, there is, but I fear she is a rolling stone, and girls who get into the way of leaving their situations at the least word, never give even themselves or their employers a fair chance.'

Meanwhile the rolling stone had bounced into the kitchen, where Mrs. Norris, a respectable widow who had come to do a day's mending, was patiently waiting for her tea. Rhoda clattered about impatiently as she set the table, as though she were not in the best of tempers.

'There, Mrs. Norris,' she exclaimed at last, 'tea's all ready, do come. I'm sure one wants something to refresh one in a worrying world like this!'

'I don't see that you've much call to worry,' said her companion with a smile, as she looked round the cheerful kitchen, bright with firelight.

'That's all you know,' answered the girl, darkly, and she looked so serious that Mrs. Norris was afraid something was really amiss, although she was glad to perceive that it had in no wise affected her companion's appetite.

'Well, I've done it!' the damsel burst out at last, 'I've given notice as I told you I should. I wasn't going to be put upon by Mr. Halifax's fine sister no longer, so this day month I shall be free.'

'I don't think you know when you're well off,' began the elder woman, severely.

'No, I don't, if it's being here,' returned the other, pertly. 'All the work to do, a-slaving from morning to night, and then being forever found fault with. Why, it was only the other day Miss Madge grumbled because my hands was black when I took in the letters, and, Mrs. Norris, I was a-doing of the flues.'

'I'm sure I never can think, Rhoda, why you will clean the flues in the afternoon, and you've a nice pair of housemaid's gloves, you know.'

'Bothering things! as if I'd time for fusses like that! And then such a rout because I let the vicar in, in my coarse apron—which he's that absent he wouldn't have known if it was a blanket! No, if people are faddy like that they must keep two servants; it isn't in the nature of things that a "general" can be always like a new pin.'

'Why, you can't call this a hard place,' exclaimed her friend, 'there's many a girl would think herself in luck to be in your shoes.'

'Oh, well, Mrs. Norris, I'm sure they're welcome to them! I don't say it's bad as places go, but I'm sick of service. I think I shall go into a factory, or take to the dressmaking, and then I shall have my evenings.'

'You're a foolish girl, that's what you are!

Many a dressmaker's hand! is too tired to enjoy her evenings when she gets them, and as for factories, there's good and bad of all sorts, but I say, give me good service. I've been in it myself, and all my girls took to it and done well. But I'm glad you told me you are leaving, for I think I know of someone who would just suit Miss Halifax.'

'Oh, well, I ain't gone yet,' snapped Rhoda, a concrete person to step into her shoes striking her somewhat unpleasantly, however liberal she might be in offering them in the abstract.

'Well, you know your own affairs best, but I don't think Roger Leighton will like your changing, neither.'

'I don't care whether he do or don't. Things isn't gone so far that I need ask his permission,' and Rhoda's eyes flashed ominously.

Mrs. Norris sighed; she knew well enough that the said Roger Leighton was much smitten by wilful Rhoda, but he would expect much of the woman whom he chose for his wife, and the girl, in her thoughtless levity, was fast flinging away her best hope of happiness.

For the next fortnight Rhoda pursued the uneven tenor of her way, it is to be presumed with some satisfaction to herself, but with none at all to those who had the privilege of living with her. She scamped her work, sulked when she was spoken to, grew unpunctual and careless, and generally conducted herself after the regrettable fashion common among girls when, in their own phrase, they 'know they are going.' In the middle of the month she came to Miss Halifax and asked if she could have a day's holiday on the following Monday. She had certainly done nothing to deserve it, but Roger Leighton had offered to take her with his mother for a day in the country, and the prospect was so tempting that she swallowed her pride, though half expecting to have her request refused. To her surprise she received a pleasant consent, and she rushed off at once to her own little room to overhaul her scanty wardrobe.

No young lady considering her toilette for her first ball could have weighed matters more solemnly than did Rhoda, surveying her few effects. A good deal of her money, drifted away in sweets, penny papers and odds and ends of finery, and as she generally chose her dresses of light colors and common materials, she was usually the possessor of two or three garments 'quite in the fashion' and most indescribably shabby. That green had been 'perfectly sweet,' but it spotted in the first shower, and the only think fit to wear was the new black serge, given to her at her last place as a Christmas present. She hated it, but it was neat and fresh, and surely dowdy enough to satisfy even so fastidious a person as Mrs. Leighton. The dress must do, for there was nothing else tidy enough to elude such sharp eyes, and with a brand new hat, she decided she wouldn't be 'nothing to be ashamed of, for all some folks were so mighty particular!'

On the Saturday evening, when Miss Halifax came down to the kitchen to give an order, she found the girl wrestling with an impossible combination of black straw hat, crimson ribbon, and an enormous spray of lilac of a sickly color. The table was strewn with scraps of lace, silk, feathers; an overturned work-box lay on the floor; and the girl, with burning cheeks and shining eyes, was contemplating the ungainly erection her clumsy hands had produced. Do what she would, common and hideous it looked, even to her eyes, and '—this hat only is 11 3-4d,' seemed to positively glare at her from the huge bows and sprawling flowers, which re-