

JOSEPHINE'S MOTHER.

(Continued.)

"Jest's as you please. But I ain't goin' to hurt my health and my hull look-out for years by goin' to work while I'm a sick man. We don't hev but one life, an' there ain't no sense in spillin' that. You'd ruther hev a house, I s'pose, than save your husband's life."

"Oh, Charley!"

"You ain't a mite o' feelin' in you, Priscilla. Ef I'd a married Nancy Hall, she wouldn't a' ben sendin' me to work, lame an' sore as I be."

"Oh, Charley!" she exclaimed again, coming round and standing with the baby in her arms, as she put her hand on his arm. "I don't want you to go to work—I'll see what I can do myself."

"Take care! You'd hurt my arm!" he exclaimed. "You'll see what you can do! I should like to know what you can do. The best thing you can do is to go down to the store an' tell 'em to send up what you want, an' they needn't fear no loss 'ith this house to fall back on that's worth a hull stock o' goods!" And then he sauntered down to Barney's.

But on his way he stopped at the store and told them to send up the needed flour and meal, and sugar and tea, a ham, a keg of pigs' feet and a kit of mackerel, a strip of pork, some eggs, and some maple syrup,—a goodly quantity, that he might not have to renew the subject with Priscilla too soon. "I guess you ain't no need to be afraid of losin', so long as folks own their own house," said he, observing Mr. Newman's hesitation; and the things were sent up.

But while he was gone, Priscilla had bethought herself and questioned whether or not she would ever need her little hoard in the savings bank more than she needed it now, and went to get her book. It was nowhere to be found. In a panic she threw on her shawl and hood, and taking the baby in her arms hurried down the road to the savings bank. "The book?" they said. "Her husband had brought it in some weeks since and drawn the balance." "Oh, then, it is all right," she replied with a smiling face. And she went home as if the ground were on fire beneath her feet. What if it were only her name that had been forged, her money that had been stolen—the thing was the same. The whole world was whirling round her; there was no fixed point in heaven or earth; her husband—her Charley—a forger! a thief!

And this was the man of whom she had said that she didn't know what the world would be to her without him in it, to whom she had looked up, on whom she had leaned, whom she had loved with all her heart—Josephine's father! Oh, why was Josephine ever born! And then she bugged her babe till it rebelled; and she held it away from her to see if she traced in the tiny face one feature of the father's face, for which before she had sought so often and so eagerly, and which now she thought would be to her as baleful as any glance of the evil eye. "No, no, no, you're my own baby!" and she clasped her and kissed her, and cried over her till the frightened baby put up a quivering lip and cried in company.

It was not a great many months after this that Mr. Newman surprised her with a call. Perhaps, as a once discarded suitor, it was not unpleasant to him to let her mark the difference between what was, and what might have been. He had come to see about the house.

"Debt? What debt? Let the house go for debt? Oh, never!" she said.

"But you have had the goods," said Mr. Newman.

"I didn't know—I didn't understand," she faltered. "My husband will go to work soon. They offered him the job of driving the stage to Farley, and oh, Mr. Newman," the great brown eyes pathetic as a dumb creature's, "I will go to work myself! You shall be paid the whole! Indeed you shall!" And a great pile of garments to be made on her sewing machine came up from the shop which was the center of the wide rural district, and Priscilla, who had been Charley's slave, became Mr. Newman's from that night.

Charley had taken the job of stage-driving; it was just what he liked; the money he got for it was just what all the Barneys on the road liked. Not a penny came into the house. He had gay companions beside him on the road—sometimes a man as shiftless as himself, sometimes a woman as reckless.

"I declar' for it!" said Miss Elvira, pushing back her spectacles as the coach whirled by. "It does gird me mor'n a little to see Priscilla's husband with that Rodney hussey sitting up beside him. She's put bitter salt in her broth. I think I'll hev to eat my words an' go up an' see the child."

But when Miss Elvira, having been driven over by a neighbor, reached the house, and going round to the side-door glanced in and saw the pile of work beside Priscilla, and heard the low thunder of the sewing-machine, and saw the little Josephine on the floor close to the barricade of a string of tape, across which she understood she was not to go, but reaching her pretty arms imploringly to her mother, the sun gilding all her gold-red curls, and shining in the great tears with which her eyes were wet, and saw Priscilla push back her chair and run to the child and catch her up and kiss her and caress her, and walk with her a moment in her arms, murmuring a broken tune, and put her back in her place and hasten to her work again—then, "I won't go in," said Miss Elvira to herself, "she'll think I'm crowing over her. Yes, I will too!" she said again. "Ef she ever needed anybody on this created 'arth, she needs me now!"

"Here!" said Miss Elvira, presently, walking in very exactly, but throwing off her cloak at once. "You let me take that machine awhile, an' you take that child—the little lamb. It's a dear, that's what it is; a pretty dear. Don't its father tend it none? I shouldn't think he could keep his

arms off'n it. Priscilla! what does all this mean! Has it come to your supporting Charley Dane? Ain't you hed about enough of it? Because ef you hev you can bring the baby right down to my house the moment you want to leave him. I'd like nothing better. I allus did wish somebody'd tie a baby in a basket on my door-handle, ef it hadn't a'ben for the speech of people. An' tho' I ain't much, what I do hev you're welcome to."

"Leave my husband!" lifting her weary eyes, amazed.

"Husband! What's husband mean? I've hear'n the minister tell,—an' how much of a husband is Charley Dane? It'll be the best day's work you ever done w'en you do leave him!"

"Oh no, no," cried Priscilla. "Josephine's father! Oh no, no, no!"

"That for Josephine's father!" cried Miss Elvira, snapping her finger and thumb. "I seen him with that Rodney girl beside him on the box, an' there ain't a soul round here that don't know just the way he's carryin' on!"

"Oh, Aunt Elvira, hush! You musn't!"

"I will, then, an' more too. Now I'm going to give you a rest,—you look all tuckered out. But I shan't do it agin, for I ain't goin' ter help support Charley Dane—doin' nothin', though I do no' any harder work there is. But the moment you come down to me with Josephine, for good, then all I've got is yours. An' thank goodness, my house is across the line, an' he can't fetch you back from another state."

Miss Elvira might as well have tried to move the rock-ribbed and ancient earth. Yet although she went home defeated, it was with a sense of only temporary defeat. "Time ain't ripe; that's all," she said.

But when Charley came sauntering in at sunset, and took down his fiddle, Priscilla pushed her machine into a corner and took Josephine in her arms. "Charley," she said, in the first pause of the melody, "that's a pretty tune. Did the Rodney girl learn it to you?"

He looked at her a moment, all the devil in him laughing out of his eyes. "There ain't no Rodney girl," he said.

"Do you suppose I'm blind and deaf, too, that I don't know that Rodney girl goes ridin' with you on the stage to Farley?"

"There ain' no Rodney girl," he maintained, and with his ear bent down to his fiddle. And not another word did her vouchsafe.

But by and by he put the fiddle down, and with his legs stretched a full length, sat looking at the floor. "I'd leave that stage-drivin'," said he, "ef I had a hundred dollars to go to Busted with. There's lots of my sort of work afoot there, they say. But I'd want all that ter git started."

To go to Busted! Away from the low companions, away from the Rodney girl—hope flushed her once again, as if it had not betrayed her scores of times before. "And should you take Josephine and me?" she asked, her voice like a wild, glad cry.

"Wal, I might send for ye," he said. "But what's the use? I ain't got no hundred dollars, and I might as well hanker for a bank."

How could she have had an evil thought of him she asked herself. She was full of humanity, and repentance, and love, as she gazed on his handsome, downcast face.

"Charley!" she cried radiantly in a minute, with a new thought. "I can get you a hundred dollars."

"You!"

"Yes. A pedler was here this morning while I was combing out my hair, and he said he'd give me a hundred dollars for it any day I'd take it."

"Your hair?"

She fancied there was love for her hair in his tone. If he loved it, if it cost him a pang, it was easy for her to part with it, in spite of her indignant refusal in the morning. "He's coming back to-morrow," she said. "I'll git the shears and you cut it now while your here, Charley. Tain't as ef it wouldn't grow again, you know." And she loosened the long braids in a cloud of gold and sat down in the chair before him, directly in the path of the last red sunset rays, and as every one of the long locks fell, flashing out a red splendor, the child in her arms caught at them with exclamations of joy, and was presently half hidden in a fleece of gold.

"Oh, how queer it is!" laughed Priscilla, when it was over. "And how small my head feels!"

"Put something round it quick!" said Charley. "For you're a sight to see." And she tied a handkerchief on, and the next day gave him the money that the pedler eagerly paid her.

When Charley came back a fortnight afterword and told her it was all lies and there was no work at all at Busted, he did not tell her who went with him and shared his riotous living with the hundred dollars while it lasted.

But Priscilla only redoubled her efforts, growing paler and thinner every day over her tasks, and kept her sorrow to herself, adding a fresh sorrow to all the rest in feeling that Josephine suffered from her preoccupation—Josephine, the darling, the only joy she had, the laughing, carolling, little tripping child, for whom all the village people had a word of wonder and love. The only pleasure left the mother now was in making Josephine happy; she stole the time from her work to make the little clothes that dressed Josephine out like a picture, and she caressed them in making them as if they were a part of Josephine. And the child had such enticing ways, dancing tip-toe like a butterfly, taking her father's fiddle and holding it under her ear as he did, and listening as if she already heard there the strains she should some day call forth, loving every one and everything she saw, from the lean cat to Mr. Newman himself. "Dear wainbow!" she said. "Dear flower! Dear marmar!"

At last, one midnight, while Priscilla was still bending over her machine, Charley came in whistling. "Come, get me a bit of supper!" he said.

Priscilla put away her work slowly. "There ain't any supper to 'git'