



The Half-Way House.

I have entered the door of the half-way house,
That stands betwixt life and death,
And its walls are black with the terrible blight
Of pain's corroding breath.

Its halls are narrow, and low, and long,
And ghostly phantoms fly,
At the sound of many a shuddering sob,
And many a quivering sigh.

There is never a window to let in light,
And never a gleam of sun,
For when we enter its low, sad door,
The days and the nights are one.

The days go by in a frenzied stream,
The nights in a wild despair,
And the only angel that enters here,
Is the pitiful one of prayer.

On the wings of prayer my feeble hands,
Will batter the thick walls down,
'Till often above the weight of the cross
I catch the gleam of a crown.

But again with a rush the fiends of pain
Will drag me back to earth.
While a helpless prisoner I am bound,
In the thralls of their heartless mirth.

As they torture, and scourge, and burn me o'er,
'Till I cry in a sad unrest
For the blessed calm of the welcome day,
When they fold my hands on my breast.

I know not how I shall leave this house,
By the door that I entered in,
Or the lower door that swings without,
From a world of sorrow and sin.

But howe'er it be, oh, lift me up,
Thou angel of peace and prayer,
And teach me anew the way to endure
The sorrows I have to bear!

—Birch Arnold.

"Blessed Old Maid."

HERE is no other way, Clara. I am the only relative she has left, and we must invite her here for the winter, anyhow. She and John stayed with father and mother while I was roaming here and there. Now they are all gone, Martha's alone, and it's no more than right for me to look out for her awhile. I'll write immediately."

"Yes, Nathan; that is right I know, but I can't help dreading it. I always had a horror of 'old maids';" and Mrs. Tracy looked nervously around the plain kitchen of the little farmhouse.

"You needn't be afraid of Martha; she isn't very old, and I venture to say none of the prying, disagreeable old maids we have read of."

In spite of his reassuring words, Mrs. Tracy dreaded the arrival of her husband's maiden sister, whom he had not seen since the day he left his New England home to try his fortune in the new west.

But as Clara soon discovered, there was nothing to fear from the quiet, sad-faced woman who came to them, whose life had been so full of devotion to others, and of noble self-sacrifice, that there had been no time for growing hard and bitter, because some of life's sweetest blessings had been denied her.

The children—Bert, Mabel and baby Ray—with the unerring instinct of childhood, felt the depth of her quiet kindness, and took her at once into their loving little hearts.

Miss Tracy, although wholly unobtrusive was naturally very observant. This, together with the interest she felt in her brother's family, led her, before she had been many weeks an inmate of his house, to make a discovery.

Nathan, in his desire to get on in the world, was missing much that would have made life pleasant. In thinking so constantly of the future, he was losing all the sweetness of the present. That this was affecting the whole family was only too apparent. It was seen in Clara's anxious, weary face, and repeated in a less degree upon the countenances of their children.

There seemed to be no rest for any of them. No relaxation in the struggle for existence. Nothing to vary the weary monotony of everyday labor, which, like some huge Juggernaut,

was crushing beneath its wheels all that might have made life sweet and pleasant.

Martha shrank from interfering with the habits of her brother's family; but, looking ahead, she saw nothing but sorrow and disappointment, and felt that something must be done to save them.

Watching for an opportunity to talk alone with Nathan, she gladly accepted his invitation, one morning, to ride with him to town.

They were rolling rapidly over the level prairie road, when Martha broke the silence.

"It is truly exhilarating to ride in this bracing air, over these fine roads, especially with so nice a 'rig,' as you call it. The buggy is easy and the horses really fine animals. You must be doing well now, Nathan."

"I suppose I am, Martha; but it has been a hard pull, with losing crops, sickness, etc. We're in debt yet, but with hard work and economy I guess we can make it up in another year."

"Then what will come next?"

"I intend to have a nice large barn and some choice cattle; then I shall build a good house and prepare to take comfort. There isn't a better farm than mine for miles around, and I must make the best improvements possible. Then, some day, we'll have the best of everything."

"But who will share it with you?"

"Why, my family, of course!" opening his eyes wide with astonishment.

"All except Clara, you mean," she replied solemnly.

"Why, Martha, how you talk! It is for her I'm working—who else, I'd like to know?"

"Now, Nathan, just take a few plain words from your sister, who means only kindness. I've had experience, and in my judgment Clara hasn't vitality enough to take her through another year of hard work. I have your interests at heart, and would not needlessly arouse your fears; but I am convinced that your wife is wearing out. She must rest from this constant labor or your children will soon be motherless."

"Don't, Martha, talk in that way! Clara is as well as usual. She was always slender and delicate. I'd gladly have kept her in ease, but she knew she married a poor man, and was willing to work up." He was a little annoyed.

"I doubt not you have been kind and good to her, and now that she has helped 'work up' so far, I know you will be glad to give her a vacation. You do not realize what it is to care for three children and do all the work that must be done in a farmhouse. She might have been slender when a girl, but not careworn. To-night if you will look at one of her old pictures, you will be convinced that I am right."

"Suppose you are; what then?"

"How much would it cost to send her back to Ohio for the winter? I can keep house."

"Simply out of the question. She wouldn't go, anyhow, Martha."

"I thought you didn't know it; but she is as homesick as a child to see her father and mother. She hasn't said so, she never complains, but an unutterable longing fills her eyes with quick tears when she speaks of them. Sure of your consent and my willingness to keep house for her, she would go gladly."

"And you think it would do her good?"

"Undoubtedly, and it would be the cheapest medicine you could give her, and the surest. Think it over a day or so, Nathan."

That evening Martha was not surprised to see a startled, anxious look on her brother's face as he closely regarded his wife, whenever he thought himself unobserved. Husbands are often the blindest of all persons in regard to their wives, but Nathan was convinced.

That night when they were alone, he suddenly exclaimed—

"Clara, how would you like to visit your mother this fall?"

She looked at him a moment in silence, while a wave of crimson swept over her pale face. Then turning away she said, suddenly—

"Don't talk about it, Nat; I know we can't afford it, and I'd rather not speak of it."

"But we can afford it, and Martha is willing to keep house for me. Now, do you want to go, dear?"

There was an unconscious tone of reproach in his voice, and a look of pain in his face which she could not understand.

"Oh, Nathan!" she sobbed, with her face hidden on his shoulder, "don't imagine that I love you any the less, or am tired of our little home; but I do want to go. Just now there is nothing in the world I want so much as to see father and mother."

"Well, then, you shall go, little wife. Don't cry so; I didn't know you cared so much; but that settles it; you shall go."

After Mrs. Tracy and the baby were gone Martha looked around the unornamented rooms and resolved that there should be something new, something bright and pretty, to welcome back the house-keeper. The "front room" had never been

furnished, but after considering her resources, Martha thought she could persuade Nathan into buying a carpet.

"A carpet?—why Martha!" he exclaimed at her proposal, too astonished to say more.

"What was Clara's old home like? You don't want her to notice too sharp a contrast on her return," said the sister, quietly.

"I may get a new carpet," thoughtfully; "but so many things would have to follow."

"Nat, when father and mother died we were going to divide things, but you had no home then, and while John and I stayed everything remained the same. When I came here I sold or packed everything, and there is a big box for you, which is on the way out here. Besides bedding and clothing, there are pictures, vases, curtains, a table spread and some of mother's nice rugs. They will help to furnish the room. I guess you can afford to buy a cane-seat rocker and two chairs, and we'll make the rest."

"I'd like to know how?"

"There are two bottomless chairs in the granary; I will ebonize the frames, cushion seat and back, and with strips of embroidery and heavy fringe they will look handsome. The old rocker which is forever coming to pieces can be mended and treated likewise, minus the rockers, and you'll have an easy chair. A pine table, which you can make, stained and varnished, and covered with the spread, will do nicely."

"Well it sounds practicable. I'll help all I can."

"There will be ottomans to make, a mantle to put up, and the cornice for the curtains. It will take all our spare time all winter; but how pleased Clara will be."

"I intend to have everything nice for her some day."

"Yes, Nat; but a woman must have something to live on in the meantime. There's a love of the beautiful in every woman's heart, and it must be satisfied. If surrounded by grand scenery, the mind can feed on that; but here in this level, monotonous country, I believe the homes should be very bright and attractive."

"There may be some truth in that, but I never thought of it before," replied Nathan.

"It is not common for a man to think about the home as a woman does, for he mingles with the world, while most of her hours are spent inside the four walls. Clara had no time to fix up anything; that baby was a sight of trouble; but if you and the children help we can do wonders."

And they did. When Clara came home four months later she scarcely knew the place.

"Come and look at your wife," whispered Martha, when Nathan had finished the chores and was ready for a happy evening.

There she was in the pretty room, chatting with the children. Joy and gladness shone through her face, which had lost its sharpness and palor, and there was an elasticity in her movements which recalled her girlhood.

"She looks ten years younger, Martha; and if I can help it she shall never work so again. You've taught me a lesson I'll not forget. We'll take all the comfort we can now, if we never get a big house."

"Martha has made this so pretty that we shan't want another," exclaimed Clara, hearing his last remark as they entered the room. "I'm so thankful to you all for this pleasant home-coming."

"Martha deserves the thanks for she planned it all," said Nathan, catching up the baby.

"You are a jewel, Martha; and to think that I was afraid of you and dreaded to have you come!"

"Was that because you know I was an old maid?" asked Martha, laughing.

"Yes, that was just it. I didn't know, you see, that you were such a blessed old maid."—*Hearthstone.*

A BRAVE GIRL.

It was a sorry outlook for the lovers as they parted that night for there seemed no prospect in the future of their ever having enough money to get married. Phillip Crane had lost his position as school teacher, was in poor health, and to crown his misfortunes his Aunt Barbara was coming on from Nova Scotia to make her home with him.

But his sweetheart, Ariadne Brown, was a brave spirit. She said she would wait for him if it was for ten years, or forever, if it came to a pinch. All the way home, after she left him, she was solving in her mind how she could make money.

If there was only a little capital to be got at she might raise small fruits or run a boarding house, but where was the money to come from? That was the question. But here the thread of her eager anticipations was snapped in twain by the unexpected apparition of an old woman in a poke bonnet and a black bombazine cloak.

"I've come from the railroad depot," said this vision, looking around in a bewildered sort of way. "And I'm afraid