

Choice Literature.

A MODERN JACOB.

BY HESTER STUART.

CHAPTER VII.—(Continued.)

Mrs. Nathan Roper to Joel Balcome.

EAST WILTON, Dec. 1, 18—

FRIEND JOEL:

I aint any hand to write letters; I rather do a week's churning any day; but there are some things you ought to know, and as they don't seem to be anybody else to tell you I guess it will fall to me. I don't know whether you've heard of it, but Jacob got married, the October after you went away, to a Martha Gilbert, from the Falls. Janet knew her a little, but I mistrust she didn't like her very well. I've seen her two or three times, when I've been over to your house, and she seemed a sort of tidy body, but one of the kind that never gets warmed up, either to be lively or to get mad; and I could see your ma wasn't real comfortable with her, though she didn't say a word. I never want to make trouble betwixt relatives, but to make myself clear, I shall have to say some things about Jacob. It seemed to me, whenever I was over there, that Jacob and his wife were a-planning to shove your pa and ma one side, and get the managing of things themselves. I couldn't see but your pa and ma looked as well as ever, but if they started to do anything, it was, "Now, Mother Balcome, you ain't strong enough to do that," or, "Let me tend to that, father, you're getting old." I could see that it kind of worried them, and they couldn't seem to rightly make out whether they were failing or not. The idea of it! There ain't a woman round here that could hold a candle to your ma for smartness; and your pa worked right along with Jacob and Jim Gordon all the spring after you went away, and last summer, through haying, they had to fly around to keep up with him. But Jacob and his wife kept pecking away at him, and after he hurt himself, he seemed to give right up. I don't know whether you knew he got hurt, but he slipped off the door stone about the first frosty night we had last fall, and hurt his hip, so he didn't walk any for a spell. I guess Jacob and his wife made the most of his being laid up, for the last time I was over there, they just waited on him by inches, and they kept saying right before him, that he wouldn't probably ever be strong again, and so on.

But the upshot of it is, they've done you a mischief. Almira Dow was here yesterday, and she said that she heard over to the Corners that your pa had given Jacob a deed of the farm, he to take care of your pa and ma as long as they live. It's a burning shame! Nathan says he mistrusted Jacob was up to something of that kind when you went away. And Nathan says when he rode by the upper wood lot the other day, there was a gang of men there just stripping it. But I suppose it's Jacob's now, to do as he's a mind to with. I don't know as anything can be done about it, but we think you ought to know it.

But the meanest of it all is, that now Jacob and his wife have got what they wanted, they're going out West to see her folks; going next week, to be gone till the first of April; and your pa and ma ain't fit to be left alone. I hate to tell you, but Almira says your ma is real poorly—a kind of slow fever—and they're going to have Debby Lane stay with them, a poor, miserable thing, that I wouldn't trust to take care of a sick cat. Almira says that she's kind of hinted to Jacob's wife that it wasn't quite the thing to go off and leave them in such shape; but she said she guessed they'd get along all right, with a boy to do the milking and chores. I could see when I was over there that she was bent on going, and when one of those still, softly spoken women get set on anything, you might as well try to move the meeting house.

Now, I don't know what you'll think of what I'm going to say, but Nathan and me have talked it over, and it seems kind of promising. I mistrust your folks were a little set against your wife, and maybe not quite just to her, and if that could be straightened out, 'twould be a blessing all round. I know you well enough to feel sure you wouldn't have wanted a wife who wasn't of the right sort; and what I'm proposing is, that as soon as Jacob and his wife are gone, your wife should come and stay with your folks. They needn't know who she is, for she can come right to our house, and Adoniram will carry her over, and say I sent her. Your ma is too sort of ailing to make much objection, and they might get real fond of each other. I should have gone over myself this week, but we've been pretty busy at home; for there's the cunningest little girl you ever saw over to Adoniram's not quite a week old. She's named Sophia, after Janet's Grandmother Reed. I was really glad they called it Sophia, on account of its being your ma's name. Adoniram said, right along, that if it was a boy he wanted it called Joel. Now, you needn't worry about your ma, for I'm going over there to-morrow, and I'll let you know just when Jacob and his wife are going. There is considerable sickness over to the Corners, and round, and your minister spends most all his time going amongst his people, both sick and well. He was at your house the last time I was there, and I do think he's a most heavenly-minded man; and I don't wonder his people just worship the ground he walks on. He inquired very especially about you. If I didn't think his views on baptism were wrong I should try to get Nathan to go to his church. But, bless me! I haven't written such a long letter since Nathan went out to York State the summer before we were married. With my best respects to your wife, and hoping you will think well of the plan I propose, I am your true friend and well wisher.

URSULA ROPER.

CHAPTER VIII.—BETTER THAN MEDICINE.

Mrs. Balcome opened her weary eyes one afternoon on a very different scene from that upon which they had last closed. So different that she passed her thin fingers over them several times to make sure that she was not dreaming. From her bed she could see a part of the kitchen, and the

last picture she remembered was of a stove littered with ashes, over which bent a gaunt, untidy woman trying to cook something over a smouldering fire, and beside which sat an old man with his gray head bowed upon his cane.

The curtain at the window which came in her range of vision was drawn up one-sided, and the plants under it were dusty and drooping.

She had turned her face to the wall in despairing weakness, and now, while she had slept, what good fairy had been at work?

The curtain was straightened, and the plants had evidently had a bath, and stood up fresh and fair. The bony figure in limp calico had disappeared, and the gray haired man had lifted his head and was listening with pleasant attention to a pleasant voice which came from somebody out of sight. The clean stove shed a cheery glow through its opening and a sauce-pan was rocking itself to and fro with a cheerful bubbling. The bubbling grew vehement, and a trim figure tripped across the floor and lifted the cover. Mrs. Balcome stared in weak amazement. The glow of the setting sun fell full upon the stranger; a tall, straight girl, with plump shoulders and a generous waist. Her face was turned away, just showing the outline of a round cheek and a white forehead over which fell wavy locks of reddish brown hair—hair in which the sunshine brought out little sparkles. She had quick, light motions, and as she stirred the contents of the saucepan she gave her head a toss to throw back an unruly lock from her eyes. It was as good as medicine, the sight of the lithe figure so full of youth and life.

"Debby," called Mrs. Balcome feebly. Instantly the girl stopped stirring and turned a listening face toward the bedroom door. Such a winsome face, with wide-open gray eyes and a dimple in her cheek, and a good square chin which added strength to the girlish beauty. When she saw that the sick woman was awake, she crossed the room lightly and stood beside her bed. What an accomplishment it is to know how to walk in a sick room; to strike the happy medium between the agonizing squeak of the nurse whose intentions are all right, but who hits every piece of furniture in the room on her way to your bedside, and the muffled, stealthy tread which always suggests a spring at the patient when within suitable distance. This girl came as lightly as the morning, and brought the same refreshing in her presence.

"Where's Debby?" asked Mrs. Balcome, looking with wondering eyes on this new vision.

"She is lying down," said the girl in her fresh young voice—a voice that had a little bird-like chirp in it. "What can I do for you?"

"Who are you?" asked Mrs. Balcome, raising herself on her elbow to look at her more closely.

"Mrs. Roper sent me here," she answered, flushing a little under the intent gaze. "You can call me Bessie; and now, wouldn't you like your face and hands washed, and have some broth?"

After this was satisfactorily accomplished, and the bed-clothes straightened and the pillows shaken up, Mrs. Balcome lay at ease, watching her set the table for supper. How deft she was! spreading the cloth so quickly and evenly, and handling the dishes without clatter. Everything seemed to fall into order under her light fingers, and when Farmer Balcome took his accustomed place at the neat table, and asked the simple blessing with a new ring of thankfulness in it, Mrs. Balcome closed her eyes with a deep sense of relief and gratitude.

When she awoke the next morning it all seemed like a dream, but a glance into the kitchen showed the same trim figure tripping around, and there were strong suggestions of breakfast in the air.

The cat, which since young Mrs. Balcome's advent had led a fugitive life between the barn and the back shed, had returned to her old station on the end of the wood-box, and sat with half closed eyes as though admiring the white star on her breast. Mr. Balcome was polishing his face on the roller towel and putting more energy into the operation than he had for months. It looked like old times, and his wife smiled at the sight. Before the smile faded, he came into the bedroom, his gray hair standing straight up round his ruddy face, and the big horn comb in his hand.

"You're better this morning, ain't ye, mother?" he said, sitting down on the side of the bed, and running the comb through his hair. "This new girl has heartened us up wonderfully," he went on. "I'm downright glad she's come, for that mournful critter of a Debby has nigh about been the death of me. Seems as though everything she cooked tasted as though she cried into it. It really does me good to see a pleasant face round the house again. Marthy's civil enough, but she ain't what you'd call chipper, and we've all been kinder sober since"—he hesitated, but he was an honest man and scorned equivocations—"since Joel went away."

Mrs. Balcome's eyes filled with tears.

"There, there, mother," he said, laying his hand awkwardly against her cheek. "I didn't mean to bring up by-gones, but, somehow, this girl makes me think of Joel. She's got a good many ways like him. You know he was always whistlin' round the house, and she says she sings about her work when she's at home."

"Where is her home?" asked his wife.

"I declare for't! I forgot to ask her," said Mr. Balcome, sniffing approvingly the odour of frying ham and coffee.

"Men ain't good for much to find out anything," said Mrs. Balcome. "Just wait till I get about again!?"

But this time was not to come very quickly. After a few days of improvement, the treacherous fever took a turn, and Mrs. Balcome went down to the very brink of the dark river. One night, when her feet seemed slipping into its swift current, a familiar voice called "Mother, mother!" into her dulled ear. Somehow the voice stayed with her in the unconsciousness that followed, and when, after long, weary hours, she opened her eyes with the light of reason in them, it did not seem strange to her that their first glance fell upon the face of Joel, worn with watching and anxiety, but the same dear face still.

From that moment her improvement was rapid and substantial. The happiness of seeing her son about the house again, the comfort of being lifted in his strong arms, the evident good feeling between his father and himself, all this was better than medicine. But after a week or two, a cloud dimmed the horizon; a cloud which rose and spread, and seemed to overshadow everything.

It was only too plain that Joel was growing fond of the new girl. His eyes followed her about the room; he was always on the lookout to help her with her work, and sometimes Mrs. Balcome could hear them whispering together in the kitchen.

This must be stopped. She had by no means forgiven Rhoda Miller, and she felt that the unhappiness of the past two years could, with strict justice, be laid at that young woman's door. At the same time she was Joel's wife, and her rights must be respected.

She turned the subject over and over in her weary brain, but could come to but one conclusion. There was no use in speaking to her husband. He seemed to share Joel's infatuation, and pooh-poohed every approach to the subject.

She must speak directly to Joel. This would be hard, very hard, when she had but just regained him. From where she lay, she could see the girl sitting in a low rocker by the kitchen window, her head laid against its tall back, and her eyes closed.

She looked very tired, and it went to Mrs. Balcome's heart that this bright, innocent girl should be in any danger from one of her own household. While she lay watching her, the door opened, and Joel came into the kitchen.

Bessie opened her eyes at his step and gave him a weary smile. He crossed the room, and standing beside her, brushed back her bonny brown hair, curling over his fingers, the unruly little lock on her forehead. One might easily have imagined that it had been made unruly by just such curlings.

She did not seem startled by these caresses, but leaned her head against him, closing her eyes again with a look of content. This was far beyond Mrs. Balcome's worst fears. She made an exclamation; they both started, and she heard Bessie say something about the door, but it was too late to shut any doors. Mrs. Balcome had seen it all.

Joel obeyed his mother's peremptory call with a singular expression on his face. It was not shame, nor yet contrition, but his features worked strangely, and as he neared the bedside, he put his hand to his face. But when he looked at his mother's face—the poor wasted face—with all the pride and strength gone out of it, and the sunken eyes full of sorrowful reproach, his manner changed, and, taking her hand, he asked very gently,—

"What is it, mother?"

She looked at the handsome face in silence. Was there ever such a lovely sinner? But she had been trained in a school which put justice before love, and her voice sounded very stern as she asked, "Have you forgotten your duty to your wife?"

"Come here dear!" he said, turning his head toward the kitchen door. At this evidence of persistent wrongdoing, his mother tried to withdraw her hand, but he held it more firmly, and as the girl, blushing rosily, came to his side, he put his arm around her and said in a triumphant tone, "My dear mother, allow me to present my wife, Rhoda Miller Balcome."

Mrs. Balcome looked from one to the other in utter bewilderment; looked so long indeed and so intently, that Rhoda burst into tears and hid her face on her husband's shoulder, sure that their plan for reconciliation had failed.

"Does your father know this?" asked Mrs. Balcome at last.

"He does now; but he didn't until the night I came the night we thought you—you were going to leave us."

"Is this any of Ursuly Roper's doings?" she asked, still with that steady scrutiny.

"She proposed it," answered Joel, beginning to feel a little uneasy.

"Well, all I've got to say is, that I thank her for it, and I don't know as we can ever forgive ourselves that we didn't know Rhody long ago. Come here, my dear, if you are willing to let by-gones be by-gones," and the white cheek and the rosy one were pressed closely together.

The next morning, when Farmer Balcome came in from a visit to the barn, he found his wife dressed and sitting by the fire.

"Well, well," he said, "this is a sight for sore eyes. You feel pretty chipper this morning, don't ye, mother?" and he rubbed his hands together in high good-humour.

"I declare for it, if I wasn't a deacon, and had a law hip to boot, I believe I should dance a bit. You'll set to the table with us, won't you, mother?" he said, as Rhoda brought the coffee-pot.

His blessing that morning was more like a psalm of thanksgiving, and at its close he cast a long, happy look around the table.

"I declare for it, Bessie," he said, "these biscuits be all your others. I've been telling her, mother, that I wish she could stay and work for us right along, but she says she has got to go back to her old place before long; and he gave Joel a solemn wink behind his coffee cup.

"I shall be sorry to have Bessie go, but if she goes, perhaps Rhody will stay," answered Mrs. Balcome calmly, enjoying her husband's start of surprise. "You needn't try to deceive me any longer, father," she added, turning on him, and trying to look severe; "I've been a blind woman, but my eyes are opened, and, please God, they stay open. I hope Rhody will stay with us a long time yet," and she looked fondly at her across the table.

I do not know how it would have been if Joel's wife had come to them in the ordinary way; but coming in the midst of sickness and discouragement, and bringing to an end the long months of estrangement, and after the silent reign of Mrs. Jacob, Mrs. Balcome admired her new daughter-in-law exceedingly. She admired the tall, lithe figure, and the wavy brown hair; she admired the quick blush which came and went in her round cheeks; she admired her clothes, which were made after fashions new