

AN ONLY OFFER.

"Aunt Phoebe, were you ever pretty?"
 "When I was sixteen I was considered so. I was very like you then, Julia. I am forty-three now, remember."

"Did you ever have an offer—an offer of marriage, I mean, aunt?"

"No. Well, that is not true; I did have one offer."

"And you refused it?"

"No."

"Then he died, or went away?"

"No."

"Or deserted you?"

"No."

"Then you deceived him, I suppose?"

"I did not."

"What ever happened, then? Was he poor, or crippled, or something dreadful?"

"He was rich and handsome."

"Suppose you tell me about him."

"I never talk about him to any one."

"Did it happen at the old place?"

"Yes, Julia. I never left Ryelands until I was thirty. This happened when I was sixteen."

"Was he a farmer's son in the neighbourhood?"

"He was a fine city gentleman."

"Oh, aunt, how interesting! Put down your embroidery and tell me about it; you can not see to work longer."

Perhaps after so many years of silence a sudden longing for sympathy and confidence seized the elder lady, for she let her work fall from her hands, and smiling sadly, said:

"Twenty-seven years ago I was standing one afternoon by the gate at Ryelands. All the work had been finished early, and my mother and two elder sisters had gone to the village to see a friend. I had watched them a little way down the hill-side, and was turning to go into the house, when I saw a stranger on horse-back coming up the road. He stopped and spoke to mother, and this roused my curiosity; so I lingered at the gate. He stopped when he reached it, fastened his horse, and asked, 'Is Mr. Wakefield in?'"

"I said 'father was in the barn, and I could fetch him,' which I immediately did."

"He was a dark, unpleasant-looking man, and had a masterful way with him, even to father, that I disliked; but after a short, business-like talk, apparently satisfactory to both, he went away without entering the house. Father put his hands in his pockets and watched him out of sight; then, looking at me, he said, 'Put the spare rooms in order, Phoebe.'"

"'They are in order, father; but is that man to occupy them?'"

"'Yes, he and his patient, a young gentleman of fine family, who is in bad health.'"

"'Do you know the young gentleman, father?'"

"'I know it is young Alfred Compton—that is enough for me.'"

"'And the dark man who has just left? I don't like his looks, father.'"

"'Nobody wants to like his looks. He is Mr. Alfred's physician—a Dr. Orman, of Boston. Neither of them are any of thy business, so ask no more questions; and with that he went back to the barn.'"

"Mother was not at all astonished. She said there had been letters on the subject already, and that she had been rather expecting the company. 'But,' she added, 'they will pay well, and as Melissa is to be married at Christmas, ready money will be very useful.'"

"About dark a carriage arrived. It contained two gentlemen and several large trunks. I had been watching for it behind the lilac-trees, and I saw that our afternoon visitor was now accompanied by a slight, very fair man, dressed with extreme care in the very highest fashion. I saw also that he was handsome, and I was quite sure he must be rich, or no doctor would wait upon him so subserviently."

"This doctor I had disliked at first sight, and I soon began to imagine that I had good cause to hate him. His conduct to his patient I believed to be tyrannical and unkind. Some days he insisted that Mr. Compton was too ill to go out, though the poor gentleman begged for a walk, and again, mother said, he would take from him all his books, though he pleaded urgently for them."

"One afternoon the postman brought Dr. Orman a letter, which seemed to be important, for he asked father to drive him to the next town, and requested mother to see that Mr. Compton did not leave the house. I suppose it was not a right thing to do, but this handsome sick stranger, so hardly used, and so surrounded with mystery, had roused in me a sincere sympathy for his loneliness and suffering, and I walked through that part of the garden into which his windows looked. We had been politely requested to avoid it, 'because the sight of strangers increased Mr. Compton's nervous condition.' I did not believe this, and I determined to try the experiment."

"He was leaning out of the window, and a sad face I never saw. I smiled and courtesied, and he immediately leaped the low sill, and came toward me. I stooped and began to tie up some fallen carnations; he stooped and helped me, saying all the while I know not what, only that it seemed to me the most beautiful language I ever heard. Then we walked up and down the long peach walk until I heard the rattle of father's wagon."

"After this we became quietly, almost secretly as far as Dr. Orman was concerned, very great friends. Mother so thoroughly pitied Alfred

that she not only pretended oblivion of our friendship, but even promoted it in many ways; and in the course of time Dr. Orman began to recognize its value. I was requested to walk past Mr. Compton's windows and say 'Good-morning,' or offer him a flower or some ripe peaches, and finally to accompany the gentlemen in their short rambles in the neighbourhood."

"I need not tell you how all this restricted intercourse ended. We were soon deeply in love with each other, and love ever finds out the way to make himself understood. We had many a five minutes' meeting no one knew of, and when these were impossible, a rose-bush near his window hid for me the tenderest little love-letters. In fact, Julia, I found him irresistible; he was so handsome and gentle, and though he must have been thirty-five years old, yet, to my thinking, he looked handsomer than any younger man could have done."

"As the weeks passed on, the doctor seemed to have more confidence in us, or else his patient was more completely under control. They had much fewer quarrels, and Alfred and I walked in the garden, and even a little way up the hill, without opposition or remark. I do not know how I received the idea, but I certainly did believe that Dr. Orman was keeping Alfred sick for some purpose of his own, and I determined to take the first opportunity of arousing Alfred's suspicions. So one evening, when we were walking alone, I asked him if he did not wish to see his relatives."

"He trembled violently, and seemed in the greatest distress, and only by the tenderest words could I soothe him, as, half sobbing, he declared that they were his bitterest enemies, and that Dr. Orman was the only friend he had in the world. Any further efforts I made to get at the secret of his life were equally fruitless, and only threw him into paroxysms of distress. During the month of August he was very ill, or at least Dr. Orman said so. I scarcely saw him, there were no letters in the rose-bush, and frequently the disputes between the two men rose to a pitch which father seriously disliked."

"One hot day in September every one was in the fields or orchard; only the doctor and Alfred and I were in the house. Early in the afternoon a boy came from the village with a letter to Dr. Orman, and he seemed very much perplexed, and at a loss how to act. At length he said, 'Miss Phoebe, I must go to the village for a couple of hours; I think Mr. Alfred will sleep until my return, but if not, will you try and amuse him?'"

"I promised gladly, and Dr. Orman went back to the village with the messenger. No sooner was he out of sight than Alfred appeared, and we rambled about the garden, as happy as two lovers could be. But the day was extremely hot, and as the afternoon advanced, the heat increased. I proposed then that we should walk up the hill, where there was generally a breeze, and Alfred was delighted at the larger freedom it promised us."

"But in another hour the sky grew dark and lurid, and I noticed that Alfred grew strangely restless. His cheeks flushed, his eyes had a wild look of terror in them, he trembled and started, and in spite of all my efforts to soothe him, grew irritable and gloomy. Yet he had just asked me to marry him, and I had promised I would. He had called me 'his wife,' and I had told him again my suspicions about Dr. Orman, and vowed to nurse him myself back to perfect health. We had talked, too, of going to Europe, and in the eagerness and delight of our new plans, had wandered quite up to the little pine forest at the top of the hill."

"Then I noticed Alfred's excited condition, and saw also that we were going to have a thunder-storm. There was an empty leg-house not far away, and I urged Alfred to try and reach it before the storm broke. But he became suddenly like a child in his terror, and it was only with the greatest difficulty I got him within its shelter."

"As peal after peal of thunder crashed above us, Alfred seemed to lose all control of himself, and, seriously offended, I left him, nearly sobbing, in a corner, and went and stood by myself in the open door. In the very height of the storm I saw my father, Dr. Orman, and three of the workmen coming through the wood. They evidently suspected our sheltering place, for they came directly toward it."

"Alfred," shouted Dr. Orman, in the tone of an angry master, 'where are you, sir? Come here instantly.'"

"My timidity instantly vanished, and I said: 'Doctor, you have no right to speak to Alfred in that way. He is going to be my husband, and I shall not permit it any more.'"

"Miss Wakefield," he answered, 'this is sheer folly. Look there!'"

"I turned, and saw Alfred crouching in a corner, completely paralyzed with terror; and yet, when Dr. Orman spoke to him, he rose mechanically, as a dog might follow his master's call."

"I am sorry, Miss Wakefield, to destroy your fine romance. Mr. Alfred Compton is, as you perceive, not fit to marry any lady. In fact, I am his—keeper."

"Oh, Aunt Phoebe! Surely he was not a lunatic!"

"So they said, Julia. His frantic terror was the only sign I saw of it; but Dr. Orman told my father that he was at times really dangerous, and that he was annually paid a large sum to take charge of him, as he became uncontrollable in an asylum."

"Did you see him again?"

"No. I found a little note in the rose-bush, saying that he was not mad; that he remember-

ed my promise to be his wife, and he would surely come some day and claim me. But they left in three days, and Melissa, whose wedding outfit was curtailed in consequence, twitted me very unkindly about my fine crazy lover. It was a little hard on me, for he was the only lover I ever had. Melissa and Jane both married, and went west with their husbands; I lived on at Ryelands, a faded little old maid, until my uncle Joshua sent for me to come to New York and keep his fine house for him. You know that he left me all he had when he died, nearly two years ago. Then I sent for you. I remembered my own lonely youth, and thought I would give you a fairer chance, dear."

"Did you ever hear of him again, aunt?"

"Of him, never. His elder brother died more than a year ago. I suppose Alfred died many years since; he was very frail and delicate. I thought it was refinement and beauty then; I know now it was ill health."

"Poor aunt!"

"Nay, child, I was very happy while my dream lasted; and I never will believe but that Alfred in his love for me was quite sane, and perhaps, more sincere than many wise men."

After this confidence Miss Phoebe seemed to take a great pleasure in speaking of the little romance of her youth. Often the old and the young maidens sat in the twilight discussing the probabilities of poor Alfred Compton's life and death, and every discussion left them more and more positive that he had been the victim of some cruel plot. The subject never tired Miss Phoebe, and Julia, in the absence of a lover of her own, found in it a charm quite in keeping with her own youthful dreams."

One cold night in the middle of January they had talked over the old subject until both felt it to be exhausted—at least for that night. Julia drew aside the heavy satin curtains, and looking out, said, "It is snowing heavily, aunt; to-morrow we can have a sleigh-ride. Why, there is a sleigh at our door? Who can it be? A gentleman, aunt, and he is coming here."

"Close the curtains, child. It is my lawyer, Mr. Howard. He promised to call to-night."

"Oh dear! I was hoping it was some nice strange person."

Miss Phoebe did not answer; her thoughts were far away. In fact, she had talked about her old lover until there had sprung anew in her heart a very strong sentimental affection for his memory; and when the servant announced a visitor on business, she rose with a sigh from her reflections, and went into the reception room."

In a few minutes Julia heard her voice, in rapid, excited tones, and ere she could decide whether to go to her or not, Aunt Phoebe entered the room, holding by the hand a gentleman whom she announced as Mr. Alfred Compton. Julia was disappointed, to say the least, but she met him with enthusiasm. Perhaps Aunt Phoebe had quite unconsciously magnified the beauty of the youthful Alfred; certainly this one was not handsome. He was sixty at least, his fair curling locks had vanished, and his fine figure was slightly bent. But the clear sensitive face remained, and he was still dressed with scrupulous care."

The two women made much of him. In half an hour Delmonico had furnished a delicious little banquet, and Alfred drank his first glass of wine with an old-fashioned grace "to his promised wife, Miss Phoebe Wakefield, best and loveliest of women."

Miss Phoebe laughed, but she dearly liked it; and hand in hand the two old lovers sat, while Alfred told his sad little story of life-long wrong and suffering; of an intensely nervous, self-conscious nature driven to extremity by cruel usage and many wrongs. At the mention of Dr. Orman, Miss Phoebe expressed herself a little bitterly."

"Nay, Phoebe," said Alfred; "whatever he was when my brother put me in his care, he became my true friend. To his skill and patience I owe my restoration to perfect health; and to his firm advocacy of my right and ability to manage my own estate I owe the position I now hold, and my ability to come and ask Phoebe to redeem her never-forgotten promise."

Perhaps Julia got a little tired of these old-fashioned lovers, but they never tired of each other. Miss Phoebe was not the least abashed by any contrast between her ideal and her real Alfred, and Alfred was never weary of assuring her that he found her infinitely more delightful and womanly than in the days of their first courtship."

"She can not even call them a 'silly' or 'foolish' couple, or use any other relieving phrase of that order, for Miss Phoebe—or rather Mrs. Compton—resents any word as applied to Mr. Alfred Compton that would imply less than supernatural wisdom and intelligence. 'No one but those who have known him as long as I have,' she continually avers, 'can possibly estimate the superior information and infallible judgment of my husband.'"

MR. ROBERT BROWNING, referring to the obscurity of his style, writes to a friend, "I can have little doubt that my writing has been in the main too hard for many I should have been pleased to communicate with; but I never designedly tried to puzzle people, as some of my critics have supposed. On the other hand, I never pretended to offer such literature as should be a substitute for a cigar or game at dominoes to an idle man. So, perhaps, on the whole I get my deserts and something over—a crowd, but a few I value more."

EATING CROW.

The chaff about eating crow—a dish which is just now in great demand—springs from a story in the old *Knickerbocker Magazine*, more than a quarter of a century ago. It was the story of a summer boarding-house keeper on the Hudson and of an indignant patron. Whenever the latter ventured to suggest that the spring chicken was rather tough, or that the roast beef must have been cut from the cow's hoofs, he was directly told that he was entirely "too particular," and that the autocrat of the table and the house could eat anything, even a crow. This settled the matter for the time being, but the boarder, convinced against his will, was of the same opinion still, at all events in regard to the quality of the edibles placed before him. So often was the remark, "I kin eat anything, I kin eat crow," brought down on his devoted head that he finally resolved to try the old man. He went out gunning one day, and succeeded in bagging a very fine, fat, old black crow. He went into the kitchen, and by dint of soft words and filthy lucre induced the cook to allow him to prepare that crow for the table. He boiled it nicely, and then it wasn't such a bad-looking dish. His heart misgave him; the "flinty old ones" would eat it after all. The cook was a Scotchwoman, and used snuff. He borrowed all she had, and sprinkled it liberally over the crow, gave it another stunner, and then taking it on a silver, brought it before his host, saying, as he set it down, "Now my dear sir, you have said a thousand times, if you have said it once, that you can eat crow: here is one very carefully cooked." It is said the old man turned pale for a moment, but braced himself against the back of his chair and with "I kin eat crow," he began cutting a good mouthful. He swallowed it, and then preparing for a second onslaught, he looked his boarder straight in the eye, while he ejaculated, "I've eaten crow," and took his second portion. He lifted his hands mechanically, as if for a third onslaught, but dropped them quickly over the region of his stomach, and, rising hurriedly and unsteadily, retreated for the door, muttering as he went, "But dang me if I hanker arter it."

HISTORY OF THE WEEK.

MONDAY, July 26.—Spotted Tail's Indians have petitioned the President to depose that chief.—The Egyptian obelisk for the United States has reached New York.—A strike of Oldham colliers is imminent, on account of a reduction of wages.—News was received in London yesterday of the peaceful union of the Argentine Republic.—A Bucharest despatch says a union of Bulgaria and Roumelia is about to take place.—The Albanian League is giving large sums for the fortification of Metzevo, Prevesa and Arta.—Active preparations are going on throughout Turkey in anticipation of war with Greece.—News from Cabul is favourable to the prospects of a satisfactory settlement with Abdul Rahman Khan.—The French Government has issued orders to prefects for the peremptory enforcement of the anti-Jesuit decrees.

TUESDAY, July 26.—The despatch stating that Lady Burdett-Coutts was to marry Mr. Ashurst Bartlett is contradicted by the London *Globe*.—The Government is awaiting despatches from South Africa before coming to a decision as to Sir Bartle Frere's recall.—Great excitement has been created in Manitoba by the discovery of gold at Swan Lake, in Pembina Mountain district.—The London *Post* says Lord Liswell has resigned on account of the Government's attitude on the Irish Compensation Bill.—Greece is looking forward with confidence to the result should an appeal to arms be necessary to settle disputes with Turkey.

WEDNESDAY, July 21.—Eaton won the Public School veterans' match at Wimbledon.—The German *Kreuzzeitung* declares that reports of intended demonstrations by the Powers against the Porte are mere idle gossip.—A sham fight took place at Andershot yesterday before the Duke of Cambridge, Commander-in-Chief, in which some 1,000 troops participated.—Russia is contemplating the annexation of the Corea, which would be of great importance as affording a base of operations for private wars against England.—General Sabloff's mother was attacked and murdered by armed men while on her way from Constantinople to Tschirpan with money and supplies for the hospital at the latter place.

THURSDAY, July 22.—The greatest anxiety is caused by the symptoms of fever now prevalent in Ireland.—The British team won the Kelapore cup at Wimbledon yesterday, beating the Canadian by 74 points.—Many of the most important supporters of Yakoob Khan have recognized Abdul Rahman, and have gone to join him at Charkar.—It is stated that the Porte proposes to cede to Greece the island of Crete instead of the territory awarded by the Berlin Conference.—One thousand workmen at Rockers Bay Hotel have struck for back wages. The paymaster has offered them 20 cents on the dollar.—The Powers have determined to lend a military force at Antivari if the Porte delays any longer to grant the concessions to Montenegro.—A disastrous cave-in occurred yesterday at the Hudson River tunnel works at Jersey City, causing the death of about twenty of the workmen.—Mr. Parnell has notified Home Rule organizations to appoint delegates for a great Home Rule convention at Newcastle-on-Tyne on the 9th of August.

FRIDAY, July 23.—England won the international ride match by 79 points.—It is stated that the 10th (Canarian) Regiment, now stationed at Bengal, is to return home shortly.—Mr. Spurgeon is to visit Canada at an early day.—The Hamilton Eleven won the cricket match against the Staten Island team by eleven wickets.—Prince Hohenlohe has had a long conference with Bismarck.—Mahomed Jan has resigned the Governorship of Cabul, and been succeeded by Yusuf Khan.

SATURDAY, July 24.—Latest despatches from Cape Town say the Basutos were gathering near the British Residency.—Mormon missionaries have been expelled from Germany.—Naples has been visited by a third earthquake.—Venezuela is in a state of eruption.—Satisfactory harvest prospects in Ireland.—Sothern has retired from the stage for a year on account of his health.—Greece is negotiating a loan in Paris.—Montenegro has notified the Powers of her intention to commence hostilities against Albania forthwith.