

## Choice Literature.

### A MODERN JACOB.

BY HESTER STUART.

#### CHAPTER VI.—(Continued.)

Mrs. Balcome had hopes that under the benign influence of the teapot her new daughter might thaw a little, but, somehow, the wedding supper was a failure. Jacob's happiness had not affected his appetite, but his wife ate sparingly and only of the plainer dishes, refusing the others with the plea that she was not accustomed to eat rich food, while Mr. Balcome's mind was wholly occupied with the determination to slip into his old clothes the minute supper was over.

When they rose from the table, young Mrs. Balcome went into her room, from which she emerged with a long gingham apron on, and began gathering up the glass and silver, as though she had done it all her life. Mrs. Balcome's remonstrances had about as much effect as though she had brushed back the south wind; she began to have a queer feeling concerning this soft-stepping, silent daughter-in-law, whose eyes seem to inventory the contents of china closet and linen press.

Young Mrs. Balcome answered readily and respectfully any questions put to her, but volunteered no remarks, and the evening wore on very slowly. On separating for the night, she said, "Good-night, Mother Balcome, good-night Father Balcome," accompanying each salutation by a frosty peck at their cheeks, and so the long-looked-for day came to its close.

Farmer Balcome was a long time getting to sleep that night. He turned and tossed and vented his restlessness on bedclothes and pillows.

"What is it, father?" said his wife, as he sat up in bed and directed an impatient thrust at his pillow.

"Oh! nuthin', nuthin'," he answered, flouncing down upon it.

"What do you think of her?" asked Mrs. Balcome, after a little silence.

"I dunno's I've anything against her," said Mr. Balcome, adding, after a minute, "and I dunno's I've any special drawin' toward her. She seems spry and tidy, but somehow she makes me feel as though I'd got caught out in an east wind without my weskit on."

His wife did not seem to have any answer ready, but as she settled herself to sleep, she said, "I guess I won't call her Mattie, after all."

That evening proved the key-note of the days that were to follow. Young Mrs. Balcome proved herself mistress of the science of housekeeping in all its mysterious branches. She swept and dusted and baked and brewed, and made and mended with unflinching industry. Not a dollar was wasted; nothing was neglected. Always unruffled and respectful, it was impossible to lay one's finger on a single short-coming; and yet, as the weeks went by, she seemed no nearer than on the day she came.

Mr. Balcome and his wife, though frugal, liked a liberal table and always used freely of the products of the farm; but after young Mrs. Balcome's advent, this was gradually changed. She made no comments, but her silent avoidance of all dainties spoke louder than words, and after a while Jacob began to question the free use of cream and eggs. Other little changes crept in. There was less company invited, and so less use of the sitting room and parlour, which was a saving in lights and fuel.

One day, some five or six weeks after the wedding, Mrs. Balcome was astonished to find that the curtains and counterpane and the rugs had disappeared from her daughter-in-law's room.

"Why, Martha," she said, "what on earth possessed you to strip your room so? It looks dreadfully bare with that patchwork quilt and those paper curtains."

"The others were much too good for every-day use," answered young Mrs. Balcome calmly, "and I have packed them away."

"Well," said Mrs. Balcome with a slight flush on her cheek, "if you don't want the rugs, I'll put them in the parlour."

"Very well," was the quiet reply; "Jacob will get them out of the chest when he comes in."

But, somehow, Jacob forgot them that day, and though reminded once or twice, could never find a convenient time to get them, and so the matter was dropped.

Young Mrs. Balcome took special care of the poultry, so that it did not seem strange when Jacob suggested that Martha ought to have her egg money, but when, a few months later it was intimated that the butter money, also, should come to her, considering the share she took in its making, the elder woman acquiesced with some reluctance. But, as she reasoned with herself, Martha never wasted any of it, and it was simply forestalling her own disposal of it, only—and this was what hurt—it seemed like taking the reins out of her hands, the reins she held wisely, if a little tightly, for thirty years.

And this tendency showed itself in other ways. Many duties, to which she had been accustomed, her daughter-in-law relieved her of, as being beyond her strength, or unsuited to her years, though she, herself, was not conscious of any failing of her powers.

Jacob, too, showed unwonted thoughtfulness of his father's comfort, taking upon himself, more and more, the oversight and management of the farm. The watchword seemed to be, "Father and mother are growing old and feeble, and we must spare them all we can."

At first gratifying, this soon became irksome, and at last Farmer Balcome and his wife began to have a feeling almost of terror at the inroads on their activities. It seemed to them that they were being slowly, but surely, forced into useless old age. There was nothing definite to be taken hold of, nothing unfail to be resented, only, in a thousand indirect, nameless ways, they were set aside or restricted.

One lesson which they had thoroughly learned, was the

uniform success of Mrs. Jacob's plans. There was something startling in its inevitableness. Did she make a suggestion, apparently in the most indifferent mood, it was sure to crystallize into a definite result; and the strange part of it was, that when the desired end came to pass, it was always, seemingly, through the wishes of some other member of the family; sometimes Jacob's, sometimes their own, though at first they might have opposed the measure. So, when at the breakfast-table one morning, Mrs. Jacob remarked carelessly that old Mr. Richards had made over his farm to his son, Mrs. Balcome glanced at her husband with a feeling almost of terror. His eyes were fixed on his plate, but that night, after the two gray heads were laid on their pillows, they talked long and sadly.

Hitherto they had kept up the semblance of family unity, even between themselves, but now they cast aside all disguises. They both felt the entering wedge had been driven and the only question was, how long they should be able to withstand the quiet, resistless current of the will which was brought to bear on them.

"O, father! you won't do it, will you?" pleaded Mrs. Balcome. "Promise me you will never do it."

"I am afraid to promise," said her husband. "I'd rather die, almost, than give up this farm while I live, but I'm getting to be an old man, and I can't seem to keep one mind as I used to."

"You are not an old man; you are younger than Nathan Roper, and folks call him in his prime. You can do just as much work now as you have for years. It's only because we have been talked to so much. Oh! if Joel were only here," and Mrs. Balcome wept bitterly.

There was a soft step at the door, and Mrs. Jacob's voice said, "Are you ill, either of you? I thought one of you called."

Being assured of their health, she expressed relief, and stepped noiselessly away. Not until her door closed behind her, did they resume the conversation, and then in whispers. It seemed to them that the very walls had turned spies.

Under this new anxiety, and suffering in health from their enforced idleness, the autumn wore very slowly away, and they entered with dread upon the long winter before them.

But whatever the forebodings of their elders, Jacob and his wife were well content. Never, in all the family history, had the farm paid so well; whatever had happened to other people's crops, theirs were abundant; whoever had lost stock, theirs was sleek and fat. The barns and cellar were filled, and the bank account rolled steadily up.

People often said to each other, that Jacob Balcome's wife was a "manager," which was the highest praise possible in that region, though it was sometimes remarked that Jacob's church subscriptions did not increase with his prosperity, and two or three unfortunates who had fallen into Squire Lovell's clutch, felt that the screws were turned uncommonly tight.

#### CHAPTER VII.—SOMEWHAT OF A REVELATION.

Mrs. Joel Balcome to Miss Margaret Lenox.

COVERLEY, Ct., Christmas, 18—

MY DEAREST COUSIN:

What a perfect lovely letter you did write us! You see I say us, for though we have been married so short a time—scarcely six months—it seems as though we had always belonged to each other.

Our minister said something last Sunday night about the theory that we had existed in some other world before we came to this. It made me just as uneasy; for, if it is true, how do I know but Joel belonged to somebody else in that state of existence, and she may claim him in the next? But what nonsense! when we are both young and strong, and likely to live a good many years in this world. You would think there was nothing very ethereal about Joel if you should see the way he plagues me; stealing the citron and raisins as fast as I can get them ready for my cake; and my cheeks tingle now where he rubbed them with snow this morning. Enticed me out into the yard on the pretence of showing me a good joke, when I was to be the butt of it.

You want to know all about our wedding, and why we are living in Coverley, instead of going to Joel's home, as we talked of at one time. To answer the last question first, we did not go because we were not wanted. Joel smoothed the matter over to me, and doesn't say much about it, but as near as I can find out, he had a dreadful quarrel with his father and brother (I know they were entirely to blame), and it ended in his leaving home, and coming here to help father in the store. I try to be everything to him, for he says I am all he has now, and we are very, very happy.

We had a lovely wedding; perfect June weather, roses and all that, and all my girl-friends were there in the sweetest white dresses. Dear old Mr. Cushing married us, and he was too splendid for anything. He almost made me cry, he said so many kind things to me and about me. Joel and he have taken a great liking to each other, and Joel will unite with the church the first Sunday in January. Won't that be pleasant to begin in our own home to live for our eternal home? (Those were Mr. Cushing's very words.) Our house is so cunning. It is a morsel of a cottage, not far from father's; and it is so little, that if you went into the front door in a hurry, you would pop out of the back door before you could stop. There are a parlour and dining room and kitchen on the first floor, and two chambers above, and Joel says you couldn't swing a cat in any one of them. But we've no occasion to swing a cat, and besides we haven't any. And the paint and paper and curtains and carpets are all as fresh and bright as our hopes. (Isn't that a pretty sentiment? and it's original, too.) We had ever so many presents: table-linen, and silver, and housekeeping things and pretty little knick-knacks; and wasn't it nice? one of the girls gave me a little plush-covered stand just right for the Rogers' group you sent. It stands in one of the parlour windows, and gives quite an air to the house, both inside and out. Rogers' groups are not so common in Coverley but that people sometimes stop going by, to look at it. We have drapery curtains at the parlour win-

dows. They are cheap, but I flatter myself they hang in artistic folds. And would you believe it? in such a speck of a house, we have a genuine open fire-place. Uncle Jack gave me a set of brasses for it, and they shine so that Joel pretends to warn himself by them.

I did feel a little scary about the cooking, for you know it is quite different taking charge of things from working under mother's wing. But everything goes off nicely. I watch Joel's face closely, but he doesn't look a bit dyspeptic yet; and besides he hasn't once cast his mother's cooking at me. Shouldn't you consider that convincing proof? I know the poor boy misses his mother, for the other night I went into the parlour at dusk, and he sat with his head in his hands, and when I spoke to him he just took me on his lap and laid his face against mine, and didn't speak for a long, long time. By and by, I couldn't stand it any longer, and I said, "Are you sorry you have me?" and he said—I guess I won't tell what he said, but it satisfied me. When we were married, he sent a paper and a letter home, which were not noticed at all. But last October, on Joel's birthday, his mother wrote him a beautiful letter. She didn't send any direct message to me, but she hoped we would be happy together, and try to be patient with each other's faults, and help each other to grow better and better, and then she wrote something about family worship. She would be glad to know that Joel is going to join the church, but she didn't ask us to answer the letter or to visit her, so she will not, probably, hear of it. By the way, wasn't your minister in Philadelphia a Mr. Berkeley? Joel says the minister at his home, Wilton Corners, is named Berkeley. He says he is a very elegant man, but always looks dreadfully sad. Do you suppose it is the same one?

Did you think my last letter was scrumpy? I thought I wouldn't write a very long one because of the uncertainty of its reaching you while you were traveling about. I am glad you are coming home so soon, for I have ever so many things to say to you, besides I am in a hurry for you to see my home and my husband. I know you'll like him, but if you don't it will not make a bit of difference to me, for I liked—no, loved—him the first time I ever saw him, and I have loved him better every day since. But I must hurry and seal this up before he sees it.

Now do write soon, and one of your splendid long letters.

Yours, lovingly,

RHODA ELIZABETH MILLER BALCOME.

P.S.—How does that sound?

Dr. Roger Grant to the Rev. Arthur Berkeley.

NEW YORK, Feb. 10, 18—

DEAR OLD FELLOW:

I've found her!!! Now don't pretend that you have forgotten all about our talk last winter, for it's a vital matter to me. But, assuming that in your delving among the dry bones of theology you have lost track of everything else, I will stop to say that it is the ideal Mrs. Grant who is found, the woman I described to you; and if she sat for the portrait, it could not have been more like her. It was clearly an inspiration, or, if you prefer, a case of predestination. It's a pretty long story, but I've got to bore somebody, and you are the most patient friend I know of—bless your old heart!

You see this was the way it happened. There was a meeting of the profession at St. Louis, and nothing would do but I must go out there and read a lot of rubbish about an operation I performed in one of the hospitals here. It had some peculiar features, and how the patient lived through it, God knows, I don't. (I mean this reverently.) And by the way, I doubt if there are many deeper joys connected with your work than that which a physician feels in restoring fathers or mothers to their little ones, or husbands and wives to each other. On, yes! I know what you are going to say; that your work is for eternity, and mine only temporal; and that the soul is vastly more precious than the body, and all that; and I'd like right well to fight it out with you if I had the time; but one thing I do know, and that is, since this case turned out well I can scarcely keep from singing on the public streets.

But I am diverging from my theme, as the clergy say. And that reminds me of a neat little story I heard the other day on this point. An old farmer who had absented himself from church the previous Sunday (I've no doubt the old rascal went fishing), asked a neighbour what kind of a sermon they had. "Wal," said the other, "if the text had had the small-pox, the sermon wouldn't have ketched it." How's that for an illustration?

I didn't mean to say anything about that hospital case, but it explains how I happened to be coming East in the worst snowstorm of the season. When we left St. Louis, it was snowing and blowing, and the storm increased through the night, so that by daylight it was under full headway. Crossing some of those long, open spaces, it seemed as though the train would be blown from the track; and every time the car door opened, the snow would come swirling in as though chased by ten thousand demons. (You may have met this simile in some of your yellow-covered reading. I don't claim it as original, but it just expresses the situation.) The passengers in the car with me were a rather uninteresting set, except a man with a wen on his head, which—coming directly from the meeting—I could scarcely keep my hands off of. To get out of the way of temptation, I changed my seat to the other end of the car, and fell into conversation with a little woman "going home to father's" with her first baby. She was an anxious young mother, and explained to me very earnestly that she should never have brought baby out in such weather, but her only sister was going to be married, and she couldn't stay away any longer. I judged from her dress that she was the wife of a working man, but baby had a very fine cloak and hood with a sort of white, fluffy trimming about their edges. I don't suppose a baby would stand any chance with you against a Cruden's Concordance, but I call myself quite a connoisseur