

STOLEN PLEASURES.

PART I.

John Webber passed a group of his fellow workmen who loitered on the sidewalk outside the gate of the Zenith Machine company's works one Thursday evening, with a quick, business like step. It had been a very hot day; the sun had not yet set, and was pouring its level rays along the street, making the dust look gold colored and dazzling the eyes of everybody who faced it. The air seemed closer and warmer than ever, and the men scolded about it and wiped their grimy faces with an impatient, half indignation gesture, as if they felt a sense of personal injustice after such an August day.

"Where are you racin' to now, Webber?" somebody asked our hero, and several of his friends in the complaining group turned to look at him.

"Goin' home," responded Webber, cheerfully, as he paused for a minute; and when somebody said, "Give our love to the baby!" in a tone that was meant to be provoking, he only shook his head with mock resentment.

"Hold on!" called the first speaker. "We're gettin' together to see how many of us want to hire Jones' barge for Sunday and go down to the beach. Start late Saturday, quick's we're out of the shop, and get back some time Sunday night. Jones'll take us for a dollar ten apiece, if we can get 24 to say they'll go."

"Well, I ain't one," answered Webber, moving off. "The only time I ever tried such a spree I came home worse off than I went. Ride all night and scorch all day; that ain't my idea of fun," and he disappeared round the corner, smiling with all his might, as if he knew of something a great deal better than any such colish plans.

He was a delicate-looking, boyish young man. Everybody liked Johnny Webber, for with his quick temper and satisfaction with his own way of doing things, he was friendly and generous and always ready to do anybody a good turn. His acquaintances had laughed at him and taxed him over and over again for his habit of telling long stories about his own affairs. He seemed to think that everybody was as much interested as he when something pleasant happened to him—it was not brag on his part and he had no idea of outshining anybody else, but to use the oft repeated saying, "Johnny Webber thinks he must go halves with everybody." It was deplored among the wisest of his comrades that he should have fallen in love with a selfish, complaining sort of a girl, a pretty girl enough, but vain, and not of the sort that John Webber deserved.

But he was apparently satisfied, and never seemed to be troubled when things went wrong; he was always ready to make excuses for everybody else, and when his wife fretted he blamed the weather or her ill health or the housework which she did not like, or the care of the baby, which, to be sure, he always tried to take upon himself at night.

As he walked along this evening he whistled and felt an unusual pride in his success and well being; then he hummed a tune, and occasionally slipped his hand into his side pocket to feel his purse. This was the second Thursday in the month and accordingly pay day. For the last four weeks he had been doing double work, and there was the pay for it folded away safe and sound, and in his heart was a secret joy ready to be told. He was as tired as a hard workman could be, but he forgot his aching back and hurried as fast as he could towards home along the dusty, half-built streets that made the outskirts of the town.

The evening grew hotter and hotter, but he did not mind it, and he felt as if he could not wait another minute before he turned into the new bit of street where there was a row of eight small houses, all alike, and looking as if they were set in there in the sand to be sold and carried away elsewhere and established among trees and made houses of—only one had a bit of garden already in this temporary-looking spot, and it was toward that door that John Webber went. With all the sand, and no fence for shelter except a row of stakes made from a split dry-goods box, he had managed to make some flowers grow like those his mother had in her little front yard when he was a boy. There was an invisible yard about this plain, dull, little dwelling, which separated it from the rest of the world. As he glanced at the rest of the houses as he passed them they all looked inferior to his own, which really belonged to him and his wife and baby. He had chosen it because there was a tree in the small back yard, a silver poplar, that had persisted in growing in spite of many discouragements. John Webber had felt very much disappointed because his wife had complained that it cut off her view of another road, which was a thoroughfare from the kitchen window.

The master of this little house looked eagerly up at that window as he came along, because, when Hattie was good-natured and felt like it, she used to stand there and watch for him, and hold the baby up for him to see. Anybody else must have been forced to recognize the fact that the baby was not a beauty; but there was nothing in the world so lovely, the young father thought, and he mistook the round, fat, pinkish face and imperceptible whitish hair and faded blue eyes for the best good looks that any baby in the world could have. His own eyes were beaming full of love and pride, and changed sadly at the moment when he made sure that nobody was looking out for him that evening. Somehow a foreboding sense of disappointment filled his heart as he mounted the steps to the back door and found it—locked!

Yes; and when he rapped the house echoed the sound from its empty corners. There is a difference between the sound of a knock that somebody hears, and that beats against the recognizing ears of some housekeeper, and an unanswered summons like this. What could have become of Hattie and the baby? John Webber stopped to think. She would not have locked the door and shut the windows if she had only gone to see one of the neighbors. Ah! perhaps she had gone to her sisters, two miles farther out in the country, thinking it might be cooler there. They had been meaning to go out and spend a day or two, though John himself had preferred craftily, being conscious of something or plan which he had been keeping secret. It was too far away from his work and he had pleaded that and his tiredness in this dog-day weather. He lived too far away from the works already, but he knew the air here was so much better for Hattie and the baby than it would be in the heart of the town. That very morning Hattie herself had been complaining of various maladies, and said she felt too ill to be out of her bed—perhaps her sister had come in and insisted upon taking her home. John did not like this sister; she was always making Hattie see faults and failings in people and things, and wondered why he had bought a house just here; in fact, she seemed to question everything he did. Hattie had seemed dreadfully dissatisfied lately, but perhaps it was only the hot weather.

He had found the key under the door mat, and gone into the deserted, cheerless hot little house; he put away his dinner pail and sat down in the rocking chair. He was tired and hungry, and he did not know whether to go out to join his wife or not. There was nobody to tell his secret to, and he had been counting for weeks upon the happiness he would have this evening. Well, he must cool off awhile, anyhow, and then he would take the rest of his long walk. How still it seemed without the baby! The little fellow took up more room than anybody in the house already, and John reached to the table for a rubber rattle that lay there and held it in his hand a minute before he began to strike his knee with it and make the bell ring as if the baby were there to hear.

Hallo! there is a folded piece of white paper pinned to the table cloth, which he had not observed before, and he springs for it and takes it over to the window, where the light is better. Hattie writes a faint, cramped little school girl hand that is not easy to read, but John Webber's heart sinks as he spells out the note:

I didn't see any chance of your going to the beach or anywhere else like other folks, and Nell Stince urged me and the baby to start right off with her this morning. She has got part of a house for two weeks down to West Harborside and invited me to make a visit, so I can't expect I can be gone but a few days. Mrs. Stince felt as if the baby needed change very bad. She hopes you will come down for Sunday anyway—Can't you get a week off? I know you would say no if you were here. You are most always so dear, don't be cross, Johnny.

"She knew I would say no," muttered John Webber, his good nature stirred at last like a smooth, deep sea in a great storm. Then he covered his face with his hands and cried. The darkness fell, he sat there still in the rocking chair facing the fact of his wife's thoughtlessness and his own disappointment. She had been so pretty, so merry and trig and neat when he first knew her. She did not wear flouncing colors like many other girls. Hattie looked like a little lady, he had told himself many times, and was proud to notice how many people turned to look at her as she went along the streets. It had been hard work to win her, for she had many other admirers, and John Webber was a plain fellow who had more money in the bank than some young men, but who would not spend any more money than he could help on new cravats or cheap shows and needless nonsense. Nell Stince for one had said he was stingy, and wondered why he did not give his promised wife all sorts of gilt jewelry, and one particular feather fan, which winked its sparkles enticingly from a jeweler's window

Nell Stince sneered at the presents this honest lover did buy; she even railed at his foolishness in buying a house and paying for it before he married. She would rather have paid rent and spent all that money for something worth having. She and her husband were both deep in debt already, but it mattered nothing to them.

"A short life and a merry one," Jim Stince was fond of saying to his admiring audiences on the street corners.

They had one girl, a little monkey of a thing, rigged in greasy silk and dragged feathers. Nell Stince was Hattie's evil genius. They had worked in the same shop together before they were married, and Hattie would be worth twice as much if he could keep her to himself, poor John thought. Hattie had married him because she loved him—he reminded himself of that proudly.

He was not a dandy like the other fellows, but alas, Hattie seemed to be getting tired of him lately and of her small house, which they had put in order so lovingly in the early days of their married life. She was fretful and dissatisfied, and when John set there in the dark and remembered his mother and her dear, old-fashioned, simple, country life—the farm, the honest, friendly neighbors—he grew bitterly ashamed of all the shams and makeahifs of the town—the life that was all for show and made, what other folks would say, its only conscience. The sweetness of the first part of his wife's letter and the cajoling of the end gave him equal pain.

"She ought to know me better than that," he told himself over and over. Go down and spend Sunday with the Stinces—he would do first.

Poor boy, he had waited so patiently for his own holiday; he had never worked harder in his life than through this last month, and it was to make sure of a good time with his wife and baby at the end. He had found the wife's expense a hard pull anyway; the doctor's bill had been very heavy, but this extra work would make everything square. The extras of every month always counted about the same, and he tried to save a little as he went along—he had always been used to saving.

This very night, when he asked the boss if he could take his vacation, he had been given a hearty permission. "Take two weeks while you are about it, Johnny," said one of the owners who stood by. "I guess we can get along; you deserve it, and I wish we could scare up more fellows like you."

Two whole weeks! What couldn't he do in that time? The baby should go up to the old farm and see his grandmother, who had never taken him into her arms yet—he should roll in the grass where his father used to roll and get solid and strong—poor little beggar! His round, weak face didn't have the look that John Webber believed that a baby's ought to have, though he didn't know much about babies.

"Mother'll know how to cosset him," said John more than once; "and she'll set Hattie on her feet, too, and make some of those old herb teas for her that she used to set so much by. Wormwood; that'll make her hungry!" and Hattie should go down to Harborside and they would find a snug place to board, the first few days, and go out to sail once or twice, and dear me! how good it would all be! Hattie should not know a word about it until they were ready to start the next day—it should be a surprise.

"You always want your own way," she had accused him more than once of late; now he would joke her well and see if his way wasn't a good one sometimes. Oh, poor Hattie! How could she have gone away?

That was a long, sad evening for kind-hearted Johnny Webber to spend alone. It was not only his wife's going away on a stolen holiday that troubled him, he had lost his trust faith in the woman he had given his best love. The woman and her trappings seemed so pitiful and trivial as he went through the rooms with a light that night. The life had gone out of everything, and it was untidy and uncared for.

"I learned my trade, and I know how to do the things I have to do. It ain't so with women. If I kept a school for 'em, hang me if I wouldn't turn 'em out to be good for something."

And then he caught sight of a little freak which the baby had worn that very day while he crept about the floor. Poor baby, poor Hattie!—they must both be taken care of; one was as much a child as the other.

The best people in the world are sure to have enemies, and so was our hero, hindered and worried by that worthless member of society, Nell Stince. She cared very little for the poor little wife whom she teased into more or less willing acquiescence to her own foolish ideas. Johnny Webber was such a pattern of propriety, was he? then nothing would content her but letting the world see that he was no better than anybody else—and any way she knew of mocking and shaming him must be tried. Hattie was well enough, but as weak as a straw, and so by flattery and challenge of a foolish pride the well being and prosperity of this new household were brought into danger. And the young wife's eyes were blinded more and more.

The journey to the seashore had been hot and tiresome; the baby had cried pitifully, and even the Stince child had forgotten the satisfaction of her best clothes and was fretful and provoking. The dust blew after the hard springing wagon in white, stifling clouds, the country roads were unshaded, and the fourteen mile drive seemed likely to never come to an end. Nell Stince's brother, a saucy, half-grown boy, frightened poor little Mrs. Webber by his reckless driving and his beating of the thin horse stumbled every little while and was hardly equal to such a load. When they reached the beach there was no cool breeze—in fact, the glare made it seem hotter than it did at home. Even the despised poplar tree in the yard was remembered with affection, and later, when the depressed little company sat down to their evening meal—an uncomfortable, fly-beset lunch—the repentant wife said that she would have given anything if she had thought to get John's supper ready for him. Nell Stince gave a sneaking laugh which somehow grated on the listener's nerves.

Toward night there was a delightful breath of sea wind, and the baby stopped his crying and grew drowsy at last and went to sleep. Nell Stince was triumphant, and wondered how they should have lived through another hot night at home, but her guest thought of John Webber all the time and wondered what he said when he came home, and if he were angry, and wished ever and over again that he were there with her at Harborside in the rough house which seemed very shelterless and uncomfortable. And John Webber's silly little wife cried herself to sleep. Running away did not seem like a joke at all from this point of view, though her hostess was merry enough downstairs with some new and old acquaintances whom she had picked up during the evening.

When John Webber walked up next day from an uneasy sleep, he felt as if some enchantment had worked a miserable change in him. No words could say how lonely and wretched angry he was, for, like most good-humored, equable people, his temper was very sudden and hard to manage when it was once roused.

This was a sad beginning to the holiday he had looked forward to with such high hopes; he could not go back to the works and face anybody's jeers and curious questioning, neither would he follow Nell Stince's lead and join the household at Harborside. Yes, this would be the best thing; he would go off by himself, too; he would go to see his dear old mother. She was very feeble this year, and he would not disappoint her of her promised visit. Oh, if he could only have taken his baby! But there was nothing to do but go alone, and so he shut the house and left the key at an neighbor's, and hurried away to the train. As he was rushing across the green inland country and the fresh air blew in the car window his anger faded a little.

"Poor Hattie," he said, once or twice, softly, as if he understood that she had felt the need of getting out of the hot town, and had known no better way to act.

He hardly felt like himself until he was nearing his old home on a high Vermont hillside, and after a long walk from the station there came in view the little red house and barn, which looked as if they had slipped part away down the long, long, lonely hill slope. Then he felt like a boy again, the very boy that had gone years ago from that quiet spot out into the busy world to seek his fortune. Alas! he was bringing back a heavy, disappointed heart; he began to wish that he had gone after his wife and brought her with him. That would have been the square thing, and he grew afraid to look his mother in the face.

There she was, dear soul, at the little side door—coming out to pick up some chips to boil the tea-kettle for supper, but she stopped first and shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked along the horizon, and then as if urged by some instinct of what was going to happen, cast an eager glance down the lane that led to the main road. Could it be his wife? Oh, no, not without his wife and baby. Johnny, after three long years, when she had tried to fancy him, married and living in his own house, and being a father. He had sent her many a \$5 bill and short, dull little letter, and nobody knew how much they loved each other, this mother and her youngest boy.

The troubled young man and anxious tender-hearted woman were soon face to face—they were both undemonstrative after the fashion of their kind. Their eyes were a half startled brightness as they reached out their hands to each other, and then John turned away and took the dull axe and began to split some wood while his mother stood watching him. He knew that she expected an explanation of his coming alone, and felt his face and even the very tips of his ears grow scarlet as he bowed away at the knotty sticks of pine in the gathering twilight. But one cannot split kindling wood all night, and at last John Webber threw down his axe and told his story. It was no use to spare him

self, for the hard-worked, patient woman was as just a soul as ever lived, and she would not excuse him because he himself made excuses.

"Yes, 'twas hard on you," she said at last. "I can see how you felt, but you needn't have done wrong, Johnny. Now you go right back and get her. I'm glad its so that you wont mind the expenses as much as some other times. I'm urgent about it because I don't know's I shall be here another summer and I feel's though I wanted to see you four folks—winters go dreadful hard with me. * * * I've got a good many little things I want to talk over and get you to see about. Austin's folks have much as they carry and the girls, too. I've been kind o' feelin' as if you were the only child I'd get this summer, and I should ha' took it hard if she hadn't come."

So, early in the morning, before day, John Webber went back lighter hearted than he came and found his wife at the Harborside shanty, having anything but a pleasant time. The baby had taken cold in the night and been very sick. The doctor had been sent for and the little patient was out of danger, and even a great deal better, but his mother, unstrung and pathetically remorseful, threw herself into her husband's ready arms. Nell Stince sniffed a little; she had not made trouble between them after all; they loved each other a great deal better than they ever had before. The illusion of freedom and seeing something of the world had lost its charm for the poor little woman, she had had time to think over things—and as for John Webber, he had made up his mind anew and could not forget some wise words that his dear old mother had spoken, "I guess your woman wants a little old-fashioned mothering," she said. "And I never saw no good of secrets between husbands and wives or of their doing things apart. You might have let her have all the month's pleasure of thinking of it beforehand same as you had; and settlin' what she would do. You take right hold o' hands and lock at life!"

PART III.

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together just as 'tis. Don't you think everythings' as you say. She's got rights, an' you've been too good sometimes, and not treated her and her baby just the same way other times. You mean well, Johnny, but we all need experience."

And two or three days later the young people went together to the hillside farm and spent the rest of their fortnight and wished it had been a month. They never had such a good time in their lives, any of them, and the grandmother promised that if everything went well she would come down another year and make them a visit. "I'll treat you like a queen," said Hattie, "and you won't know me, I shall be such a smart housekeeper. Your doughnuts and huckleberry bread won't be worth speakin' of." "Yes, they will, too!" maintained John, stoutly. And they all laughed together, while the baby, not to be outdone, beat his plate with his spoon and shouted some unintelligible remark.

That evening, while John Webber and his wife came strolling up the ankle picking blackberries, after he had shown her the big rut trees he used to climb and the hole where he had killed a big fox when a boy, they both said it seemed like their courting days, only better, and as if they were really going to be married and begin life all over again when they went back to town.

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