



A VERY WOMAN.

BY PHERE ALLEN.

It was quite clear that something had gone wrong with my Cousin Hephzibah. I saw it at a glance as I entered her morning room, where I always found her day after day in the same straight-backed elbow chair, with the tortoise-shell cat at her feet, and the low claw table beside her, on which lay book and gold-rimmed spectacles, to be taken up in turn, and when the knitting (with which she was always busy) should be laid aside. But this morning the knitting was neglected, and her little black-mitted hands were folded over a letter which lay on her knees, whilst I could see by the heightened color in her unusually pale face, and the peculiar twitching of her mouth, that the contents of that letter had seriously affected my aged relative.

"Good morning, Cousin Hephzibah," I said. "Have you had any news of Maud, to day?"

"Indeed I have," she answered, "and really I begin to think that it is time I went out of the world. There! I can't conceive what the women of the present day are coming to!"

"That sounds as if Maud had written something startling," I said.

"And so she has," was the indignant retort.

"Upon my word, Rose, it seems as if the young women of the period will never know where to stop in their imitation of men and men's ways. There's Maud writes me word that her husband—more shame for him—has bought a revolver for her, and is teaching her how to use it, so that in the event of a burglar alarm she might have the means of defence in her pocket. Defence, indeed! She's much more likely to blow out her own brains or her husband's (if he has any, that's to say, which I take the liberty of doubting) than to find any other use for her revolver. Dear, dear, when I think what my grandmother would have said of such doings!"

"But Maud does live in rather a lonely place, you know," I ventured to observe.

"A lonely place! Fiddlesticks and blue gum!" ejaculated my cousin (I always wonder why she is so fond of invoking that sticky substance). "Why, you should see the lonely places folks used to live in when I was young, miles away from town or village, and cut off from all easy communication with their fellow-creatures. I'm sure, when I remember where my great-Aunt Penelope lived and died, it seems as if it were a different world altogether. That was a lonely spot, if you like, but she never dreamt of handling revolvers. No, and my cousin drew up her long neck and gave a little toss of her head, 'no, she would have thought it beneath her dignity to come to blows with a burglar!'"

"Oh! I suppose so," said I; "she would have fainted away (no, 'swooned' was the right idiom, wasn't it?) at the bare sight of a housebreaker, and would have needed burnt feathers and harts-horn to bring her round, whilst the burglar and all her valuables would have disappeared together. Well, the idea of a revolver may be a very shocking one to you, Cousin Hephzibah, but I'm glad I didn't live in those days when women were content to spend all their lives over wool work and painting on chicken's skins, and writing stilted epistles after the style of 'The Model Letter-writer.'"

"H'm; so that's your notion of all that women could do in the last century," said Cousin Hephzibah grimly. "Well, wait a bit, and I will tell you a story of my Aunt Penelope's courage, a story which you would find it hard to cap in these days."

"It happened towards the end of the last century. In those days people didn't put things into print, and get accounts of themselves and their doings sold for the price of a penny through the length and breadth of the land. And I suspect I am the only person living now who ever heard the story from the lips of an eye-witness, for my Aunt seldom spoke of it, and Nannie, her faithful maid, from whom I heard it in my early childhood, has long since been gathered to her rest."

"Aunt Penelope Decies never married, and at the time of which I speak she lived by herself in a pretty but extremely lonely cottage off from the high road between London and Hastings. Her household consisted of Nannie, her confidential waiting woman, who, like her mistress, was now upwards of sixty; David, her reliable factotum, growing gray-headed also, but some dozen years younger than his fellow-servant; and Jim, the odd boy, who divided his time between the garden and the stable, where he helped David to groom Aunt Penelope's beloved Snowflake, a splendid white horse upon which she rode forth on Sundays and state occasions, pillion fashion, with the trusty David in front."

A high oak paling ran round the whole of my aunt's modest estate, which, with its garden and small paddock and a bit of orchard ground, covered something over three acres, and it was David's business to lock up the garden gate and take a good look round all the outside premises the last thing every night, before withdrawing to his own sleeping apartment, which was over the stable. Aunt Penelope and Nannie took care to see that the inside of the house was duly secured, visiting each lock and bolt carefully, and adjusting inside bells on all the window shutters. Once and again they had been alarmed—chiefly in the hopping season—by the sound of stealthy footsteps on the gravel path, and twice the orchard had been robbed, and once a couple of fattening fowls had been stolen, but no one had ever attempted to break into the house actually, though why they did not (considering, as Aunt Penelope admitted herself, that they might all have been murdered in their beds, and no one would have been a bit the wiser) was a fertile source of wonder to many. Ivy Cottage, as it was called, was absolutely lonely and remote from all other habitations—why, the nearest village was five miles off, so that the pilgrimage to church was indeed a Sabbath day's journey, and one not to be lightly taken in hand if the weather was threatening or the roads likely to be flooded."

"But if any one suggested to Aunt Penelope the advisability of a change to Jim (who was as deaf as a post, by the way), they were all getting on in years, the old lady became so indignant that the same person never made the same suggestion twice. 'Lonely, indeed! and in want of protection, forsooth! What better protection could she have than her devoted Nannie and her good faithful David, and Jock, the house dog, who barked so furiously at the slightest sound that David declared he was better far than the alarm-bell, which was suspended outside the house and furnished with two pulls, one of which hung immediately over my aunt's bed, and the other over Nannie's.'"

"One night, in the late autumn, the little household had withdrawn to bed as usual. It was wild, blustering weather, the wind rising and falling in loud sobbing fits, driving heavy seeds of rain before it and rattling windows mercilessly. 'It was indeed a blessed thing to have a roof over one's head,' Aunt Penelope had said to herself as she lay down in her heavily curtained four-post bed, and with this very suitable reflection her eyes closed and she wandered into dreamland. She must have been asleep for two hours, when she was suddenly startled by an unusual sound outside her door, as though some one were moving about in the passage. 'Could it be Nannie? She sat up in bed and listened. No; those footsteps—if footsteps they were—were certainly not Nannie's, for in the

stillness of the night she could hear that worthy old serving-maid snoring loudly in the room adjoining her own."

"It must have been fancy," she said at length; "if any stranger were about Jock would certainly have deafened them with his barking." Therewith she laid down again. A minute later, however, there came a low grating sound as if of some one trying to force back the lock of the door, and Aunt Penelope sat upright again. There was no mistake about it this time, something was moving and at work somewhere. Yet still slow to take alarm, she was persuading herself that it was probably a mouse in the wainscot, when the door opened very gradually, admitting first a slender thread of light as from some carefully-shaded lantern, and then a tall, dark figure, treading warily in stocking feet. In a moment the old lady's hand was on the alarm-bell rope, but at the first touch it fell from the wall on to the bed beside her. The cord had evidently been cut through."

"Who are you, and what do you want?" Aunt Penelope then asked, in a firm, loud voice. As she told Nannie later, she was so indignant at any man daring to enter her bedroom that her wrath at the intrusion quite swallowed up her fears as to its consequences."

"Very slowly the figure turned round, and then a stouter heart than Aunt Penelope's might have quailed at the sight of the crape-covered face which met her view, and which proved that that nightly visitant was on evil deeds intent. I have often thought since what a thrilling picture might be made of the little old lady sitting bolt upright in that ancient four-post bed in her frilled nightcap and nightdress, summoning the closely masked housebreaker to give an account of himself."

"Who are you?" she asked again, "and what have you come for?"

"Your keys," said a low voice. At the sound of it Aunt Penelope's heart stood still. "Give up your keys quietly or it will be the worse for you."

"For a moment the old lady hesitated; finally, however, she drew the keys from under her pillow and handed them silently to this mysterious person."

"Then, as rigid and motionless as though she had been modelled in marble, Aunt Penelope still sat upright, watching how her jewel-case was opened and emptied, how her private drawers were turned over and ransacked, and lastly how her cash was seized upon. That was probably the last act of this unpleasant drama, thought Aunt Penelope, for now surely the thief must know that he had cleared that room at any rate of all he could lay hands on."

"And so he had, but before leaving he deposited his lantern and stolen goods, and, coming up to the bed, caught Aunt Penelope by the wrists, holding them tightly, as if they were in a vise."

"Swear," he said, "swear that you have never seen me before to your knowledge."

"I swear that I have never known you till to-night," my aunt answered promptly, and as promptly her hands were released, and the deeply-veiled figure, picking up his lantern and booty, vanished from the room."

"In the morning, when Nannie went to call her mistress, she would never have guessed from her calm, collected manner that anything unusual had occurred in the night. Everything was in its proper place; the drawers were all locked up again; there was nothing disarranged in the room. Punctually at eight o'clock Aunt Penelope went downstairs as usual, and read prayers to her small household. It was only afterwards that Nannie remembered how her voice quivered a little when she gave thanks for having been safely brought through the perils of the night."

"But when prayers were over and all had risen from their knees, Aunt Penelope detained her servants for a minute."

"Has anyone disturbed last night by any unusual sound?" she asked.

"No, madam, I heard nothing," Nannie hastened to answer. David, wholly intent upon rubbing some blemish from the silver buttons on his sleeve, looked down and muttered something quite unintelligible."

"Did you, David?" asked my aunt, bending her eyes steadily on him."

"Yes, madam; no—no, madam," he answered; "that is, I did fancy I heard a strange sort of sound some time in the night, but nothing worth mentioning."

"Good," said Aunt Penelope. "Though no one else seems to have been disturbed, I was, and that in a way which I consider 'worth mentioning,' and mentioning to Justice Baldwin, too [he was the nearest magistrate, so you may put the pillion saddle upon Snowflake at once, David, and as soon as I have partaken of my breakfast we will start forth.]"

"As you please, madam," said David, leaving the room to obey orders, whilst my aunt proceeded to eat her breakfast as usual, giving various directions to Nannie about the day's arrangements with the utmost composure of voice and manner. Precisely at nine o'clock David brought the horse to the door, where my aunt stood ready to start on her seventeen miles' ride, for Justice Baldwin lived at that distance off."

"The weather is fearful threatening, madam," said faithful Nannie; "and be sure, David, if the rain comes on, to remember that the mistress' overcoat is folded up in yonder strap."

"But David mounted to his place in front of my aunt and said never a word."

"Ah!" broke off Cousin Hephzibah, "talk of lonely roads nowadays. You should have seen the seventeen miles that Aunt Penelope rode that morning, through long, winding lanes, so narrow and cramped at certain spots that wayfarers were bound to blow a horn to give notice of their approach, because in some places it was quite impossible for two vehicles to pass each other—not that there was often any necessity for doing so. Folks frequently rode and walked for miles in that country without meeting a soul, and this was the case with Aunt Penelope on that cloudy November day of which I tell you. Save for one itinerant with a basket of crockery on his head, and a handful of children rifling the hedges for polated blackberries, not a living creature crossed her path from the time she left her own house till the moment she drew up at Justice Baldwin's door."

"The sight of Snowflake and his mistress always commanded immediate attention in the neighborhood, and in a minute the gray-headed butler hastened out to learn Miss Decies' business."

"Be good enough to ask your master to step here," said Aunt Penelope, still seated on her pillion, whilst David, having dismounted, stood at the horse's head. "Mr. Justice Baldwin," she continued, as that gentleman appeared in the doorway, bowing low, "I have come to acquaint you, as magistrate of the law, that last night my house was broken into, my sleeping room forcibly entered, and my cash box with other valuables carried off."

"Indeed, indeed, my dear madam," cried Mr. Baldwin, much perturbed. "Were the offenders suffered to escape unchecked, or have you obtained some clue to them? Could you say with certainty how many there were?"

"There was but one," said my aunt, speaking very firmly and distinctly, "and that one," she continued, with outstretched hand, "stands there. David! upon, I here and now discharge you from my service, and—"

"I arrest you in the name of the law," said Justice Baldwin, stepping forward. "John and Nicholas," he added, turning to two of his men, "lead this fellow off to the justice-room, and let Adam keep a strict eye on him."

"Then, whilst the unhappy David was led away, Mr. Baldwin turned to my aunt. 'My dear madam,' he said, 'is it conceivable that you could have ridden all those lonely miles in sole company with that villain?'"

"Some one had to bring him within reach of the arm of the law, sir," she answered, "and for that purpose I engaged myself the fittest person. Having accomplished my task, I will now, with your leave, bid you good-morning, and already she had turned her horse's head homewards."

"But, good heavens, my dear lady, you don't propose to travel back alone!" said Mr. Baldwin.

"But my aunt laughed a little scornful laugh. 'Pray, sir,' she said, 'do you imagine that the Providence who brought me

here in safety in company with you poor villain will take less care of me now I am rid of him? I throw not."

"Therewith she rode slowly homewards, heavy at heart, no doubt, and pondering sadly on the possible solution of David's defection."

"Why ever he should have been tempted to do it," old Nannie would often say, "I've never been able to guess from that day to this; neither, as far as I know, has my mistress; though after that November morning she never spoke of David again, 'twas as if she couldn't bring his name over her lips for any sake."

"But from that day forward Aunt Penelope never rode out on Snowflake again, her riding-pelisse hung unworn on her wardrobe peg, and the moths made sad havoc of her pillion saddle."

"And what became of David?" asked I.

"Died in prison, as far as I know, for in those days women did not take the law into their own hands, either to blow out burglars' brains or to molest the administrators of justice with importunities to remit justly-earned sentences. When it was once suggested to Aunt Penelope that she should intercede for David's release, her answer was brief and characteristic. 'No, having escaped with my own life from his clutches, I see no reason for affording him the opportunity for endangering somebody else.'"

"Well, certainly, she was a strong-minded woman," I said.

"She was a woman of character, my dear," said Cousin Hephzibah, "of that character which shows itself to be free and above circumstances. Without for one moment overstepping the bounds of what was womanly, she was a heroine out and out. Pray, how many women of to-day, with their noisy clamor for their rights and revolvers and what not, would have had the solid courage to act as she did; first of all in the moment of actual danger, and then, after such a night, to rise up calmly, go through the regular routine of prayers and breakfast, knowing what was before her, and then, during a lonely ride of seventeen miles, deliberately place herself at the mercy of the man who, but a few hours before, had been ready to take her life if he deemed it needful to his purpose? Only conceive, too, how perfectly mistress of herself she must have been to have aroused no suspicion in the man as to the real object of her expedition. Aye, soot as you will at the women of the last century, here at any rate was one who could put many a man to shame with her cool courage and unaffected heroism, and yet remain withal 'a very woman.'"

Farmer Bradley's Thanksgiving.

The harvest was over, the crops were all in,
The barn overflowing, the crib, and the bin;
The house had been painted and made spic and span
From cellar to garret; and never a man
Felt deeper contentment or broader good will
Than the hard-working farmer on Bennington Hill;
So the finest fat turkey a good wife could raise
Was brought to his table the great day of days.

"Now, then," said the farmer, with carver in hand,
"Before we begin let us all understand
What Thanksgiving means; that each one should tell
What most he gives thanks for, suits my notion well.
For myself, I am thankful the country is safe
In spite of political nonsense and chafe."

He whirled the big carver with patriot zeal,
And as it revolved, a bright circle of steel,
Would have made an oration, right then and there,
But the eyes of his children implored him to spare.

"Now, mother," he said; and mamma blushed and smiled,
And paused, just a moment, to look on each child:
"I am thankful, my dear, the most for my home
Where no want or sorrow ever has come;
For the great love that, crowning my unworthy life,
Of me makes the happiest mother and wife."
A tear, that was scarcely a tear, wet her cheek,
And the farmer coughed huskily ere he could speak.

"Well, George?" said the lad, he with keen, flashing eyes,
Who weighed well his words and gave sober replies,
"I'm glad that I live in a land of free thought,
Where men stand for conscience and will not be bought;
Where a mere farmer boy, if he have pluck and brains,
Can climb to the coach top and handle the reins.
I'm going to climb! and some day, if I thrive,
"The grand coach of state George Bradley will drive!"

"Hurrah for our George!" cried the farmer in glee,
"When he drives the big coach, there may I be to see!
And now, Jack, you rogue, are you thankful, and why?"
"Just as thankful as George is, I guess, sir, am I,
Though I don't put on airs, and don't care a mile
To drive bigger cattle than Brindle and Bright.
I'm glad that the Pilgrims—or Puritans—which
I really don't know, felt so good and so rich
They made a Thanksgiving of everything nice;
Don't talk any more, just give us a slice."

But Elsie, sole daughter and sweet blue-eyed pet,
Held up a small hand with "Oh, no, Jack, not yet.
For I have a pile of big THANKFULS so high
It reaches from here away, way up to the sky,
And makes me so happy—Jack, don't laugh at this—I
Wish some dear angel I might hug and kiss!"
"Kiss me, then," said Jack, bending low his brown head,
And I think the dear Lord had sent Jack in his stead.

Then next came the baby, a small man of five,
A happy-go-lucky, the merriest alive,
Who bowed his short curls, with eyes laughing and coy,
"I'm glad I got borned 'stead of some udder boy!"

"Well done!" cried the farmer, "you've beat all the rest!"
While mamma caught the darling close, close to her breast.
Then the keen carver cut slice after slice
And the fine turkey vanished almost in a thrice.

THE CHILDREN'S CORNER.

The Reason.

Grandma Guff said a curious thing:
"Boys may whistle, but girls must sing;
That's the very thing I heard her say
To Kate, no longer than yesterday."

"Boys may whistle," Of course they may,
If they tucker their lips the proper way;
But for the life of me I can't see
Why Kate can't whistle as well as me.

"Boys may whistle, but girls must sing;"
Now, I call that a curious thing.
If the boys can whistle, why can't girls, too?
It's the easiest thing in the world to do.

So if the boys can whistle and do it well,
Why can't the girls—will somebody tell?
Why can't they do what a boy can do?
That is the thing I should like to know.

I went to father and asked him why
Girls couldn't whistle as well as I.
And he said: "The reason that girls must sing
Is because a girl's a sing-ular thing."

And grandma laughed till I knew she'd ache
When I said I thought it all a mistake.
"Never mind, little man," I heard her say,
"They'll make you whistle enough some day."