The Family Circle.

"COMMON THINGS."

BY MARY F. STEPHENS.

A young girl's room; lace curtained windows, a bureau with a long mirror, a floor softly carpeted, pictures, a cheval glass, bric-a-brac on mantel and stands; a bed, a cretonne covered lounge—and a lounger.

The lounge is placed at an angle from whence the lounger can look at a grate fire under the mantel without turning her head. The fire burns warmly, brightly. Without it is snowing. The girl on the lounge draws the soft, white afghan with which she is covered closer around her and nestles down luxuriantly among her pillows. She is lying *en dishabille*, her dressing sacque of soft blue showing prettily against the white of the afghan. With one hand she holds a long braid of her fair hair, thrown lightly across her shoulder, the other rests carelessly on the afghan. The white fingers are ringless, yet the hands show care. Down town, in a busy office, attired in a suit of severest brown, she is known as "Miss Palmer," and the lawyer for whom she writes short-hand considers her quick and experienced. The formality and the work only serve to quicken her taste for home, she has said more than once in answer to her mother's protest that "Helen need not work."

Privately, Helen knows that if she does not work there would be no pretty dressing-sacque and afghan, perhaps not even a cheval-glass, and so she makes answers gaily enough;

"I know it is not a case of necessity, only one of luxury;" and enjoys wages spent in making home more beautiful, or giving gifts to "mother," and friends with a kindly light in her blue eyes or a gracious speech that heightens their value.

She has been lying so for perhaps five minutes, when a rap comes to the door. When one has settled down for an evening of rest after a busy day, it must be a very old or dear friend who may hope to be received with a smile. Yet from the moment she enters it is quite apparent that the knocker has not a doubt of her welcome. With one quick movement she draws a chair to the open fireplace.

"Well, this is nice;" she says brightly. Stooping to take off her rubbers, she gives them a little toss that takes them to the foot of the lounge, then throwing herself into the chair she leans back, puts her feet on the fender and surveys Helen with an air of calm content.

She is a "nut brown maide;" brown hair and eyes and skin; brown plush in jacket, cap and muff. Under the jacket her skirts show,—green plaid, dark and rich.

Helen, meanwhile, has not moved; now she just lifts her eyes.

"Well," she says, inquiringly, "do you like it?"

"Oh!" answers her friend, "it's easy enough." As she says this, an expression of scorn curves her mouth. She has a sweet mouth, and when she speaks the words come very quickly, yet clearly withal, rising and falling musically with the sound of a rill making its way to the river over a bed of stones. Then she continues in a tone of impatience: "It's routine! routine! all routine."

But Helen happens to believe in routine, and, indeed, is dependent on it in a way that the bright, vivacious little maiden before her could hardly understand, and so when she responds it is rather slowly. "Why," she says, in her thoughtful way, "it seems to me that every one's life is a routine, and that the more you perfect your routine the more beautiful you make your life."

"That is all very well in theory and where you enjoy your routine," Jean McMurray interrupted with increased impatience; "but when it's a routine that some one else has planned for you and you go through it because you are compelled to, dragging along as though some one was behind you with a long pole and you could not move unless they gave you a poke."

Helen laughs a little. "Now, Jean," she says, "don't get enthusiastic."

But the girl persists: "What would you do?"

"Try to find out what my routine was and begin to enjoy it, I suppose," Helen replies, slowly. Somehow her friend's bright, quick movements give to Helen's slower grace the appearance of languor. The languor irritates Jean.

"I don't believe you would do anything of the kind," she rejoins, warmly, "especially if you were a little child and nobody told you how. People are always taking credit to themselves for doing what others have helped them to do, just as some men walk straight because their fathers have put them in easy positions that require no muscular exertion."

"Well," Helen says, "I supposed, when you told me it was an orphanage, that you would be down some evening with a well-laid plan for reforming that benevolent institution, but I didn't suppose you were going to philosophize about it. Won't you take off your things?" as Jean moved away from the fire.

But no; she has only come for a moment. She has been thinking of giving the children a little lecture in place of some of their recitations, and she wants Helen to come and hear it. The friends are going to a reception in the afternoon, and Helen expects to take a half holiday. Jean wishes her to make it a whole one and come to her in the morning. Jean is young, has just graduated, and it is plain to be seen is immensely proud of her first school. Helen took short-hand when Jean began her college course, and has the advantage of three years of practical work. Helen promises to come the next day, and Jean proceeds to explain her plans.

"The children are orphans," she says, "and when they are fourteen or fifteen years old will take places as servants. Now, I thought if I could show them how to do one or two common things well; things they would not be likely to find out for themselves, and help them to notice others, it might be a good thing." She looks to Helen for encouragement.

"For instance?" Helen suggests.

"Well, I thought to-morrow I would show them how to walk and sit well."

"Apt to make them self-conscious," Helen observes, beginning to look interested.

"Perhaps so, but I think girls begin to grow self-conscious at that age in any case." She pauses and with a sudden movement reaches for her rubbers and puts them on.

"You'll come, won't you?" she says, giving Helen a little parting nod.

Helen assents. "You'll excuse my getting up?"

"Oh! I might as well," and the small whirlwind departs, only to come back after a second.

"See here, Helen," she says coaxingly, "Don't wear that old brown dress to-morrow? Wear your 'Russian blue.' It won't be very much more trouble to dress in the morning, and you know I told you it was dull for the children. I wear my terra cotta every day, because I've noticed they like to see me in something pretty."

Perhaps Helen has not moved once during the whole evening. She does not stand on ceremony with this friend of hers. But now! I am trying to think of the best way to express this move of hers; I want to say, "With one vehement gesture," but the fact is, the "vehement gesture" is a kick, and it sends the afghan several feet into space; then Helen rises with a movement quite as quick of that of Jean's, and walking across the room to where her friend stands at the door, lays her hands on the girl's shoulders so heavily that her white fingers sink deep into the soft, dark plush.

"Jean," she says, and her voice is a trifle husky, "you are a nice girl," and stooping, she kisses her.

Jean slips on a pair of eyeglasses and gazes at her in mock dismay.

"I suppose you are not feeling well," she began, "but"—

"Oh, go home!" Helen says, pushing her through the half-opened door and shutting it after her. She opens it after a second, and going into the hall leans over the balustrade, while Jean goes laughing down the stairs.

When she reaches the foot, the clock in the hall strikes the half hour.

"Half past nine," she calls up. She opens the front door and lets in a gust of wind and snow, then leaning back to where she can see Helen at the top of the stairs, she kisses her finger tips, calls "Good night," and with a little preliminary shiver disappears into the darkness.

One can never be a revelation to one's self, the very fact of having to dress one's self every morning being enough to prevent it, and so it happens that Helen Palmer, sitting next day in the long sunny school room, with its white sanded floor, and watching the little orphans file in before her, has no idea of the way she impresses them. She knows quite well that she is pretty, but understands all the details of beauty, and when one begins to understand the details of beauty, or anything else, the glamor, the witchery of it is gone. A little beggar from the street being, perhaps, able to enjoy the whole effect of a beautiful room in a way that would be impossible for the man who has had the delicate edge of his enjoyment taken away by long familiarity with beautiful rooms.

She has studied her costume, too, though she is not thinking of it now, for Helen, after the manner of perfectly-dressed women, rarely thinks of her dress after she has left her dressing-room.

"The city is gay this year," she had said to herself in excuse for the brightness of the Russian blue, with its power of drawing only the blue lights from eyes which also hold gray. Her soft draperies fall away from the tight-fitting jacket of plush; we all know how pretty plush is in Russian blue. Her muff is of lynx; white lynx, held in gray-gloved hands, and around her neck, setting off the whiteness of her skin, a long boa of the shining fur is wound twice and caught. A blue plush toque covers her fair hair, wound in a loose coil at the back of her neck and peeping out in clustering curls around her brow, and her feet are shod quietly.

To the children, who see a lady so seldom that a vision of their teacher in a pretty dress is a treat, she is a dream; something to be remembered and thought of for weeks, just as Helen herself would remember and think of a lovely picture.

In their ignorance of the outer world they try to form conjectures as to who the beautiful lady is. "She cannot be a king's daughter," for they have studied that the country is a republic; "nor yet the president's, for he has no daughter." "Well, at any rate, she is a very rich lady," and with childhood's indefiniteness they invest her with all manner of powers and gifts, while she sits and looks at them in the unabashed way we all have for strangers before they touch us. To her, as to Jean, they are a number of little orphans; not very interesting now, perhaps; dressed exactly alike in what to Helen appears very faded blue gingham aprons,—but, from her point of view, capable of becoming at least as good as herself, and perhaps better, for the young lady stenographer knows enough to be aware that she is not a leader in society.

And this is the beginning of the lecture, for Jean has, all unconsciously, performed half her work in setting Helen with her beauty and grace before the children; and for the rest, there is a sweet voice rising and falling in musical cadence and a hundred pair of children's eyes changing gradually from dulness to bright interest, for perhaps they have never before heard anything like this.

She begins with the old truth that every one's life is a routine, growing monotonous after a while, unless there is a life, a spirit of interest behind the work to make it pleasant. The doctrine of duty well performed told in childish words to children; for, after all, the young teacher is hardly more than a child herself, only a very bright child, keeping her eyes open to discover the pleasure, the prettiness, that underlies the simplest life, and telling to others who might not be able to find it out for themselves.

"Probably," she says, "most of you will begin life as servants. How many want to be anything else?"

Of course every hand goes up; there is no lack of interest now. This is quite different from spending the morning studying about the natives of Madagascar. The young teacher continues in her plain, easy way:

"I am going to tell you how, and if you will do this way, you will not only get ahead in the world, but all your life while you are working to get ahead will be beautiful. Who can tell me what I mean?"

The bright girl of the school ventures: "Set a high aim before ourselves and try to live up to it."

For a moment a shadow crosses Jean's face. Privately, she considers this doctrine of a high aim is more talked of to children than understood by them; but not by a gesture would she disappoint the little girl who, having bravely answered before the whole school, is waiting in a sort of breathless eagerness to hear whether the answer is right.

And so, while Helen is holding her white muff to her face to hide a smile of languid amusement, Jean looks right down into the little girl's eyes and smiles, too, a smile that I am sure the recording angel jots down in the book of life; a smile that gives an exquisite finish to at least one act of Jean's life; for, after all, are not little kindnesses, so delicate, sometimes, that even the receiver does not appreciate them, the things that give the last touch, the exquisite finish to life?

So she looks down on the little girl and smiles and says: "It is very nice, indeed, to set a high aim before one's self," and when the little girl sits down contentedly she continues: "But in order to reach our high aim we must work. Every one's life comes to them in minutes, the longest life being only the one that contains the greater number of beautiful minutes. So, in order to succeed, we want to make each minute as perfect as we can; to do each minute's work as well as we can."

She goes on to tell them that while no two lives are alike, there are yet certain little actions that everybody, prince and beggar alike, have to perform; the way in which they are performed constituting one of the chief points of difference between prince and beggar. Walking, for instance, and, speaking and touching. "People talk of perfect manners," she says, "but if you think of some persons whose manner you admire, you will find that they have simply formed a habit of doing these things perfectly. The first requisite is gentleness; to touch things gently gives grace; to open or close a door, to move around a house, and above all things, to speak gently, the possessor of a gentle voice, with the power to keep it gentle at all times, having a power that hardly anything else can give. It is nice, too, in speaking, to speak distinctly; to give the finishing sound to a word. If, when you have been walking, you say you have been walkin', it gives people an idea of a shuffle in ill-fitting shoes. And above all things do not shuffle. What I want particularly to show you, is how to walk well, a graceful carriage being one of the chief signs of good breeding." Then she gives them little points about placing the toe of the foot on the ground before the heel. Walking with one straight free movement from the hip, and holding their elbows to their sides. She makes Helen walk for them, to the latter's inward amusement. And then she finishes with a little sparkle in her eyes: "Whatever you do, walk straight. God took as much pains in making you as though you were the greatest ladies in the land, and beside," with a sudden descent to practicalities, "the pavement is free. When any one speaks to you look right into their eyes and answer. Nothing makes people so respected as to respect themselves. To shuffle along with your head down looks as if you had either done wrong or were ashamed of God's handiwork, for your bodies are God's handiwork." She tells them then that she wishes them to take the lecture as the subject of that week's composition; marches them out in double-quick time with bright eyes and pretty, flushed cheeks, to the tune of "Marching through Georgia." Then turns to Helen: "What did you think of it?" she asks, anxiously.

"Didn't you get some of your ideas from Emerson?"

"Well, supposing I did?"

"Oh! nothing; only what a queer mixture; religion, philosophy and good manners.'

But Jean had the courage of her opinions. "I think," she says, "that good manners are only philosophy and religion applied to the little details of life."

In the course of the lecture Helen has laid aside her wraps. She gathers them up now, and the two friends go up to Jean's room to prepare for dinner.—*Christian Intelligencer.*