

The Family Circle.

"Home, Sweet Home."

Prince Goldenheart.

The girls who set type in the office of Grinby & Son had very little time for sentiment, and very few hours to sit and dream; but to-day was Christmas, and Edna had had all day to herself to rest her aching shoulders, to mend her black dress for Sunday, to read over her few old letters, and to sit by the fire and think.

It was the first holiday, except the fourth of July and two days she had been sick, that she had had in nearly a year; but long before the dusk fell, she wished all the days were work-days, and that she had no time to get her troubles out and look them over.

She had sung to herself half the forenoon, glad to be free from the office. The children below had shouted "Merry Christmas" at her door early in the morning, and the brakeman's wife who lived across the hall had sent her in a pie.

She had learned in her sad life to be thankful for anything, to be pleased with everything, and to be made happy by next to nothing. She did think she would entice herself by paying a visit to the brakeman's wife; but when she tapped at their door, she found the man of the house at home for a holiday, with the children climbing over his knees, his broad face shining with delight. His good wife was busy with the dinner, and his big daughter, with a new pink ribbon in her hair, was looking over the album, in the corner with her lover.

Edna thought it was no place for her, and drew back shyly. She returned to her room, set some bread, some little cakes, and the pie upon the table; then the Demon of Jealousy that besets us all whispered to her that it was not a merry Christmas, and she sat down and cried. It was not often she had time to cry; since she had been to work for herself life had been no play-day.

Her mother died early; her father, very tender of his orphan girl, educated her in every way, and petted her in every whim; and while he wrote his sermons in his study let her vegetate among her geraniums, embroidery, and Tennyson, in any way she liked.

She grew up a mild, useless girl, hating all kinds of work, and was industrious only in gathering wild flowers, watching the birds and the sunsets at night, and in idly imagining out-of-the-way dreams; and one would think then, by the dreamy look in her eyes, that she had lived by the shores of that fairy lake where Tennyson's Lotus-eaters dreamed life delightfully away.

Now, these were splendid air-castles that Edna erected; no care or sorrow ever intruded in them; idealities resembling one of Moore's glowing tales of the East, visions of gorgeous sunsets such as Claude Lorraine might have conceived. Shady rivers on which water-lilies floated, an atmosphere surrounding these in which voices as sweet as the Lurlei maids were singing. To be sure these visions were fleeting, but as fast as one castle tumbled down, another suddenly sprang up, like mushrooms over night.

When she was seventeen a circumstance happened that waked her up—her father married a widow with two small children. These last in themselves would have waked the dead, if their mother had not been thoroughly competent for that office.

Edna's life took a sudden, healthy, practical turn. She put her paints in a top drawer, she put a story she was writing into the fire; she locked her piano, after Master Harry had pounded the ivory off of most of the keys with a hammer; she set the cherub she was modeling out of plaster-of-Paris on the very top of the escritoire, but he managed to throw his book at it and knock off its nose, which spoiled its angelic expression.

Her stepmother said it was very foolish in Edna to shed tears over the little dears amusing themselves.

So it was; and Edna grew stoical. She gave up expecting to be petted, now there were other children to climb the father's knee, and, when the next baby came, did her short hair up in a waterfall, never kissed her father any more, seldom asked for new clothes, for if she did the children always wanted new shoes, or her stepmother a new wrapper, so she gave that up quietly.

A minister with a large house to keep, and a good many mouths to feed, cannot always dress his daughters in the height of style.

Edna, with a keen taste for the beautiful, was often a dowdy-looking girl. Her plain face often looked plainer in a bonnet fixed up out of old things she had found in the house.

A faded garnet merino, with velvet sewed on to hide the worn places, was not the most becoming party dress in the world for a girl of nineteen. Then, Edna was not beautiful, only so far as her eyes went. She had bright, brown hair, a good-natured nose, a mouth that begged silently for kisses, and a little plump figure, and now, having given up dreaming, she was very sweet and bright and joyous when away from the restraint of her stepmother's watchful eye.

All women—at least all soft-hearted women like Edna—have their romance, and have great visions of a Fairy Prince Goldenheart who is coming to them some day.

Now, Edna had a lover, who found it pleasant and home-like to come and see her, in spite of the children who swarmed about and over her, and the stepmother's ear at the keyhole.

This little intense being, so full of storms and sunshine, amused him, and he loved her well enough to come and see her often, to pet her, to flatter her with all sorts of attentions, to look unutterable things into her wide, honest gray eyes, to say everything else to her but the three words, "I love you!" that she most longed to hear.

He did not wish to break her heart—oh, no, but she did not exactly suit him; he wanted a well-dressed wife, a fashionable wife, and one with a handsome face. But he kept on holding her little hands, looking into her eyes, keeping other lovers, who might have been, at a safe distance, till that dreadful day, when, with only a few hours' warning, her father died.

Just before, he said to his wife in confidence—

"I am so glad things are so well with Edna. Fred is not the man to come here unless he were engaged to her; and now, if I die, she will not suffer—she was always a delicate girl, my Edna, always—and you and the children can manage to live on what is left."

When Edna stood by her father's coffin, and thought that the world was all turned round—that henceforth there was no home, no protector, no helper for her, now that his cold fingers had dropped their work forever—the dear father who had soiled so hard to keep home warm for his little daughter—there was one thought that softened her great pain. She said to herself that Fred would love her now—would surely say he loved her, now she was all alone—and she might be happy yet, even with her father's tired head where it would ache no more, under the "grasses and the green things growing."

Edna made a slight mistake here.

Fred came to the funeral, and though he pitied her from the bottom of his heart, he had no notion of taking this old-fashioned girl for his wife.

He came to see her as usual after the funeral, and Edna crept up close to him and cried, and he took the forlorn creature in his arms, and patted her hair softly; and Edna, comforted, hid her drenched face, breaking out into smiles upon his breast, and thought that God was very good to her to leave her so strong, and withal so elegant a breast to lean on, now that she thought her last hope was gone.

A few days after, her stepmother delicately suggested "that she had never been brought up to live on other folks;" so Edna began to look about her for another home, but could only think of one uncle in a distant Western city, where work, of course, must be plentiful, and she concluded to go there and teach, or do something to support herself; but it was a hard experience to go among strangers, ungenial though her home had been, it grew suddenly dear to her at the hour of parting.

She had grown used to her stepmother's bluster, and was even attached to little Harry, though the fine arts were pursued with such difficulty when he was present.

She had learned not to be astonished at potato pop-guns, and blows from fire-shovels and hammers at all unexpected minutes.

Then, she loved the baby dearly, and the time she spent before her father married in improvising tender little melodies on the piano she had spent since in rocking this baby, hugging it close to her heart, and singing to it softly.

Then, she must leave her father's home, with the memories of him in every corner, his chair, his books, his picture on the wall. Then there was Fred, and—this was the culminating point—her heart stood still.

The evening before she went, he came to bid her good-bye for ever.

She met him at the door with a white face and quivering lips, and drew him into the parlor, as if she were afraid the night and darkness would swallow him up outside.

Poor child, she was very young to be so miserable, and that evening was one of the most miserable she had ever spent.

To say that she was as simple as a child would be an insult to the children.

She clung to him and cried one minute, and then stood stiff and straight like a lay-figure the next.

Fred was always tender and deferential to Edna, and to-night there was a double sympathy in his eyes, and he was as much astonished as a man could be to see her, after he had bidden her good-bye, burst into such an uncontrollable agony of grief, and hide her head in the sofa-cushions in such a despairing manner.

There were tears in his own eyes when he said:—

"I did not know you cared so much for me, Edna."

"I—I hate to part with all my friends," said Edna, brokenly; and in a moment she was a lay-figure again, saying good-bye gaily, and turning to put on an air of total indifference; and the young man went away, wholly stupefied, and wondering if he had done quite right in toying with that trusting child-heart.

He soon forgot it, however, in his active business life, in the rush of the great world.

But, poor Edna! The March skies seemed to be lowering, leaden and dim, as if to crush her; the big logs, coming down from the pincies, seemed to her like spectres; the bitter Wisconsin weather chilled her with a chill that she had never felt before, when she thought of the crocuses budding in her old home, and her father's grave getting green.

Other folks' stairs are very hard to climb, and other folks' bread is very salt.

Her uncle never said, never looked, "You are unwelcome," but she knew well enough she was not needed in his plain home, overrun with noisy children.

Having no rich father to vote for the superintendent, she could get no school; having no friends and no influence, there was but one avenue open to her—the printing-office. She learned fast, and could soon set up as many ems in a week as any girl in the office, though the head-printer swore, and Grinby made a sort of an office-boy of her; and she kept books, read proof, tended office, ran errands, all for the sum of four dollars a week.

Yet, breathing antimony for eleven hours a day was better than dependence; and when she put her shelterless head in that corner room in the tenement-house on Ninth street, she considered it quite a paradise—an Eden, at the low rate of fifty cents a week!

The rats had taken away part of the window-sill; and she dressed herself every morning in a ray of prismatic lights, which came through a round hole they had eaten in the blinds.

She had a little stove with which she got up rare meals when there was firewood in plenty. She had made her a rag-mat in the evenings that covered most of the floor. She had a cot-bed in one corner with all sorts of articles spread on it—from her gray shawl to the table-cover—into which she crept very early on winter evenings, rolling into a ball like a kitten, and slept as soundly as any young girl with a clear conscience, who earned her right to live in the world, ought.

She had a picture that she had painted when in school at Troy, and one that Fred had given her, of a meek Madonna, whose dumb anguish, tearless, inexpressible grief, gloomed away on a little bracket in the corner.

Was it a foreshadowing of the days to come—of the long, dreary months without him—which made him give her that purely patient face?

Edna did not think much about this, and tried to think seldom of the giver; but she dusted it tenderly often, kept

it free from the spiders and mildew that invaded her paradise, and once she kissed the pale face suddenly, then as suddenly wiped it off, thinking that the touch of her red, passionate mouth would mar its purity.

When she had been there some months, Fred wrote her saying that he was engaged to a lovely girl, with the *comforting* assurance that she (Edna) had his highest respect always—a very graceful dismissal of herself and her love for ever.

Holding this letter in her hand, the sun and the moon and the stars suddenly went out for Edna, and she, grown worldly wise, made up her mind she would never have another lover, and had no more dreams about any Prince Goldenheart, who was coming for her some time. She thought he had passed by on the other side.

"No one would marry me, anyway, I am so poor and so homely; and they shan't have the chance of disappointing me again," she said; so, though she had lived there nearly a year, not even the shadow of a man had ever set his foot in her little room, and she was rather glad of it.

One pale young man in the printing office, fancying the pleasant girl working near him, sent her a poem, whose wailing cadences "pressed the suit, though they would hardly suit the press."

She hated men that wrote poetry, and kindled her fire with it, avoiding him thereafter assiduously.

She had learned a good lesson—to expect so little that she was nearly always happy under all circumstances; and having little else to believe in, believed in God with all her heart, and with all her soul, and with all her strength.

There was a big handsome house across the street from her—a yellow stone house, with bay-windows and arches, and lawn and fountains, and greenhouse and marble steps; a house with velvet furniture and long lace curtains lying in misty waves over Wilton carpets, and gas-jets and statuary, and books and pictures whose soft tints revealed the gorgeous daubs on her Troy piece, and even her beloved Madonna.

The mistress of this mansion hated the sight of the big, staring tenement-house where Edna lived. Its poverty and bareness irritated her nerves (the rich have so much leisure to consult their nerves). She hoped it would take fire some night, and burn down. (Think of poor Edna stepping out of her paradise, with her household goods destroyed!) Low-lived shop-girls and engineers' families had no right to huddle themselves right opposite to her.

She said as much to her husband, a comfortable, handsome man, reading the paper, with his little girl upon his knee.

He was always too well satisfied with himself and the rest of the world to have the makeshifts of the poor people trouble his nerves; and he only remarked that "it might be worse," and finished the locals, ready for his stroll down town to his bank.

Four times a day he met Edna going to and from work. It was months before he gave the small figure in black clothes a second thought; after a time he thought the girl had a very plain face; then he began to think it was a very sincere one; then he noticed that her eyes were very bright in the morning, and very large and tired at night; then he concluded it would be only friendly to say "Good-morning" to her, though, perhaps, not aristocratic to speak to shop-girls. Still later, he asked her how she did, in a friendly, cheerful way.

As plants grown in a cellar turn to the sunlight, so Edna began to turn to his good-natured smile, and to blossom beneath it, like a frost-bitten flower brought into the sunshine.

She had a great admiration for large, tall men, and she endured him with all the manly traits of King Arthur of the Round Table, though she never ventured upon a timid "Good-morning."

There was a certain air of the world about him that pleased her. He was thirty-five, but being well kept, and an easy-going man of the world, looked much younger. His wife seemed to have out-grown him in years, and might have been taken for his mother.

No doubt she had been a pretty girl, but she had grown thin and sharp, as so many married women do; and he had grown fleshy and careless, liked good dinners, and to have other women admire him.

She was one of those uncomfortable women who always have a headache. She went to all the great Doctor O'Leary's lectures on health, and every disease he lectured about she was sure she had, and revealed her husband with a detailed account of her chronic disarrangements. Having nothing to do but to think of herself, her imagination was very lively. She had a long nose, a fretful droop to her eyelids, and a plaintive whine to her voice, and, the worst of all, she was jealous of her husband—I may as well add, without reason; for he had long grown accustomed to bank stocks and taxes by day, and to be entertained with the state of her liver in the evening. Then there was that child, whose dimpled fingers held him with such a clasp to home.

The little creature played about the lawn all day, with the sun in her hair, in a boisterous, happy way, and smiled at Edna passing in her black clothes; till Edna, seeing that little face like a rose through the fence, thought that God must love some people very much to give them such a child as that.

As I said, it was Christmas Day, and Edna was crying over the stove. The sun, getting low, was lighting up the windows of the big house opposite, and making the sky and snow pink and purple. The banker and his wife were just returning from a Christmas sleigh-ride, and, as the driver checked the fiery horses, she saw him lift his wife out carefully, as he always did, and carry her up the steps.

"She looks for all the world like a codfish with a silk dress on!" growled Edna from her outpost; and then she began bitterly to wonder why some people should have such a good, warm place in the world, and why others should be like lost birds which are hunting for their nests, which some storm of wind has blown away.

New Year's Day dawned chilly and bright, and when Edna woke the sun was shining grandly through the rat-hole in the shutter. She dressed herself slowly, fully determined to have a miserable day of it; glanced up at her Madonna, and, raising the window, began to sing:—

"When the trees began to whisper, and the winds began to roll,

I heard in the wild March morning the angels call my soul;"

but stopped short. There was crape swinging from the door—