Back to Life and Love;

OR, WAITING THROUGH WEARY YEARS.

CHAPTER IX.—(Cont'd)

The Berger people were not very intelligent, not very much given to thinking or speaking of any other subject than such as related to money-making or money-saving; but even they, in the course of time, had come to the conclusion that the whole of Marie Serafinne's life, before she arrived among them—a life of which she never spoke—was a secret that she did not care to tell.

Nor did they care to inquire. She was too useful, indeed, too necessary to them, to make it politic to question too closely into her past.

If there were any secrets in her life that rendered her more helpless and timid, more patient in labor and humble in demands, why, so much the better for them. She would work all the harder, and for less money.

And so, as years passed, they put more and more work upon her, and paid her less and less for it.

For long years she bore her increasing burdens bravely. She arose at four o'clock every morning, two hours before any other member of the family stirred, and she worked incessantly until ten o'clock at night, and sometimes even until twelve midnight. She never got more than six hours' sleep, and often not more than four; but so great was her fatigue at the end of every day's hard work, that, as soon as she dropped upon her bed each night, she fell instantly into a profound and dreamless sleep, that, in its depth, was like a temporary death. Each morning she awoke from this state with a start and shudder, and a great dread of the day's burden to be instantly taken up and borne through eighteen or twenty hours of painful, profitless, thankless labor, and she would rather have closed her eyes, and fallen into the sleep of death, than have roused and goaded her weary, aching body to the agony of new exertion, for which she was growing more and more unfit and incapable. But the law of necessity was upon her, and each day, with a greater effort, she conquered her weakness and pain,

"And took up her burden of life again."

Did her mistress notice her failing health and strength?

Be sure she did; but only with anxiety on the subject of her own interests, and not at all on that of the girl's sufferings. And whenever she would observe Marie looking unusually pale and weary, and moving with unusual languor and slowness, she would say, hardly:

"I'm afraid you ain't strong enough to do my work."

This acted upon the failing and fainting woman as it was meant to act, as a sharp lash to a jaded mare, stinging her to fresh exertions.

It continued a covert threat, understood, and meant to be understood, by Marie—a threat of dismissal, to her old life of homeless solitary wandering about the country. Sooner than brave this fate again, poor Marie would work until she should drop and die at her work.

CHAPTER X.

The end drew near. When Marie Serafinne had been working out this worse than penal servitude for more than ten weary years. It happened that during the eleventh winter, an extremely severe one, she took a deep cold that fell upon her lungs.

Though very ill, she did not dare keep her bed. She knew full well that her hard task-mistress would neither tolerate an idle woman, nor be burdened with a sick one.

So every morning, after a night of coughing, fever and restlessness, followed by a heavy perspiration, she would rise, weakened and dripping wet, and dress in her cold and fireless attic, and go shivering down stairs to light the kitchen fire and cook the breakfast. And she would keep at work through her prostration in the morning and her fever in the afternoon and evening.

Of course she grew worse and worse. And notwithstanding her best efforts, her work went behind.

It was now late in December, and the Christmas Holidays were at hand, when the married daughters, the sons-in-law and the grandchildren of the family were coming home for a visit.

And there was so much extra cleansing and cooking to be done that the work was almost doubled.

It was during this trying week preceding Christmas, that Marie very nearly succumbed to her weakness.

One afternoon when the last batch of pies was put into the oven, Marie dropped exhausted into her chair, and nearly fainted.

Her hard task-mistress applied the moral spur immediately.

"I'll tell you what, Marie, if you can't do better than this, you must find another place, and I must find another servant!"

Marie's thin cheek, an instant before flushed deeply with the fire of hectic fever, now grew pale as ashes, as she faltered:

"I will try—indeed I will try."

And she staggered to her feet and went to work again.

"Now mind you, Marie! I will give you till New Years. If you don't do better between this and then, you go," said her mistress.

"I will do my very best, ma'am, indeed I—" began the poor girl, but a violent fit of coughing stopped her words and nearly choked her breath.

And she kept her promise so well that it was nearly twelve o'clock at night when she stopped work, and crept up to her hard bed in the cold attic.

Exhausted as she was, she could not sleep. She was too anxious, feverish and restless, and the season was too full of heart-breaking associations.

It was now only two days till Christmas. And on this night twelve weary years before, her child had been born and strangled in Cliff Cottage!

That memory alone without fever, cough and care, was enough to have kept her awake all night.

She rolled and tossed from side to side, and called on the Lord to pity and forgive and help her.

Towards morning a feeling of utter exhaustion, a faintness unto death, came over her; yet the hour being so near daylight, she feared to yield herself to sleep, lest she should not wake early enough to rise and get the breakfast ready. But battling with this overpowering drowsiness was like battling with death. There could be but one issue. She soon fell into a deep and dreamless sleep like temporary annihilation.

Some hours later she awoke suddenly, and found the morning sun shining full into her face!

A great terror seized her, exaggerated by her own low nervous condition. She heard the family stirring. She knew that they would all be downstairs soon for their breakfast. And she had done nothing! Not even made the fire to boil the kettle. And she reflected, as she started up, and began to hurry on her scant clothing; on all that she had to do, at this late hour! Bread to make, hot for breakfast, bacon to cut and fry, eggs to beat up into omelettes, potatoes to bake, rice to boil. All, this, that should have been begun two hours sooner, to do now, and the family ready to come down to the breakfast that they supposed to be smoking hot and ready for them.

Shuddering with sickening fear as much as with the bitter cold, she went downstairs.

Passing down through the middle passage, she heard the young men walking about in their rooms, evidently ready to come down. And they were always as hungry and as cross as famished wolves.

Ah! for the poor, sick, friendless woman! She expected no lighter punishment than to be sent angrily away from the house, to her homeless wandering in search of a home, in this bitter winter weather!

So, wishing for death to deliver her from the ills of life, she went into the kitchen.

How great was her astonishment, and how much greater her terror at what she beheld.

There was a fine fire glowing in the great cooking stove and heating all the large kitchen. On the top of the stove a large pot of coffee was boiling and filling the room with it fragrance; two large saucepans, one filled with rice and one with potatoes, were steaming in company; a great pan if fried bacon and eggs was covered over to keep warm, and a huge pan of hot rolls completed the bill of fare ready for breakfast.

Even the table was nearly set in the kitchen, and not a spoon or a fork missing! All was quite ready, and not a soul to be seen!

Marie Serafinne sat down in dismay.

"The mistress has done it all herself," she said, in despair, "she is tired of talking to me and bearing with me, and now she means to act on her threat, and to turn me out of doors. Well, I—I cannot say a word! I have nothing to say! If I could only die!"

Her miserable mourning was interrupted by the entrance of Mrs. Berger and several of the men.

Marie Serafinne looked up timidly to read her fate in her mistress's face.

But Mrs. Berger was looking around the kitchen in smiling approval.

"Well, Marie," she began, "you have got before hand with your work this morning. And you did it by getting up an hour earlier. I heard you bustling about down here before daylight. Now if you would always be so smart I wouldn't want a better girl!—Come! put the breakfast on the table," she added, taking up the steaming coffee-pot and setting it upon the board.

Marie Serafinne looked at her mistress in consternation. Was Mrs. Berger making game of her?

Marie did not know, and she was too much frightened to inquire. She placed the hot dishes on the table, and stood silently waiting while the large family gathered around it and sat down.

"You were up so early, Marie, and you have done so much work this morning that you must want your breakfast too. Sit down now with us and take it. When you really are smart I like to reward you," said Mrs. Berger, still smiling.

This was a very unusual favor, and Marie, wondering more and more what her mistress could possibly mean, sat down, and took the cup of coffee that Mrs. Berger passed out for her.

"Was all this a mockery?" she asked herself. Would Mrs. Berger presently turn on her and send her from the house? Marie did not know. She was thoroughly mystified. But she was very hungry, like all consumptives. And so, notwithstanding her mortification and anxiety, she ate a good substantial breakfast, and felt better and stronger for it.

After breakfast the men dispersed to their field work, and the mistress harnessed her pony to her little wagon, and went off to the village of Peakville to make some purchases, leaving Marie to do all the housework alone.

"I shouldn't wonder if she was going there to get another girl before she sends me away. If she is, I wish she would tell me, so I might know what to depend on," said the poor woman to herself. And, timid as she was, she braced herself to ask the question:

"Mrs. Berger, are you going to send me away?" she faintly inquired, as her mistress was about stepping into the wagon.

"No, Marie; not if you do as well as you have done this morning. I shan't send you away; but if you go lazing about the house, on account of sickness, I shall have to do it because I don't keep a hospital, you know," answered Mrs. Berger, as she took the reins and started her pony.

Marie went back into the kitchen, less frightened but more mystified than ever.

Who had done her work that morning?

That was the question that perplexed her beyond all possibility of settlement.

However, there was a great deal of work yet to do. There was breakfast to clear away, dinner to put on to cook, and the beds to make up.

And strange to say, she felt almost strong enough to do it without fatigue.

She soon restored the kitchen to order, put on a ham to boil, and a piece of beef to roast, regulated the fire, and then went up-stairs to make up eleven beds, and clean all the rooms.

By the time she had finished the last bed and the last room, she felt very tired.

But she went down into the kitchen and washed the vegetables and put them on, and set the pies on the top of the stove to warm, and then laid the cloth for dinner.

Finally, she sprinkled down some clothes to iron, and then she dropped into a chair to rest while watching the pot boil.

The family all came in to dinner. It was quite ready for them; and Mrs. Berger's good humor continued.

(To be continued.)

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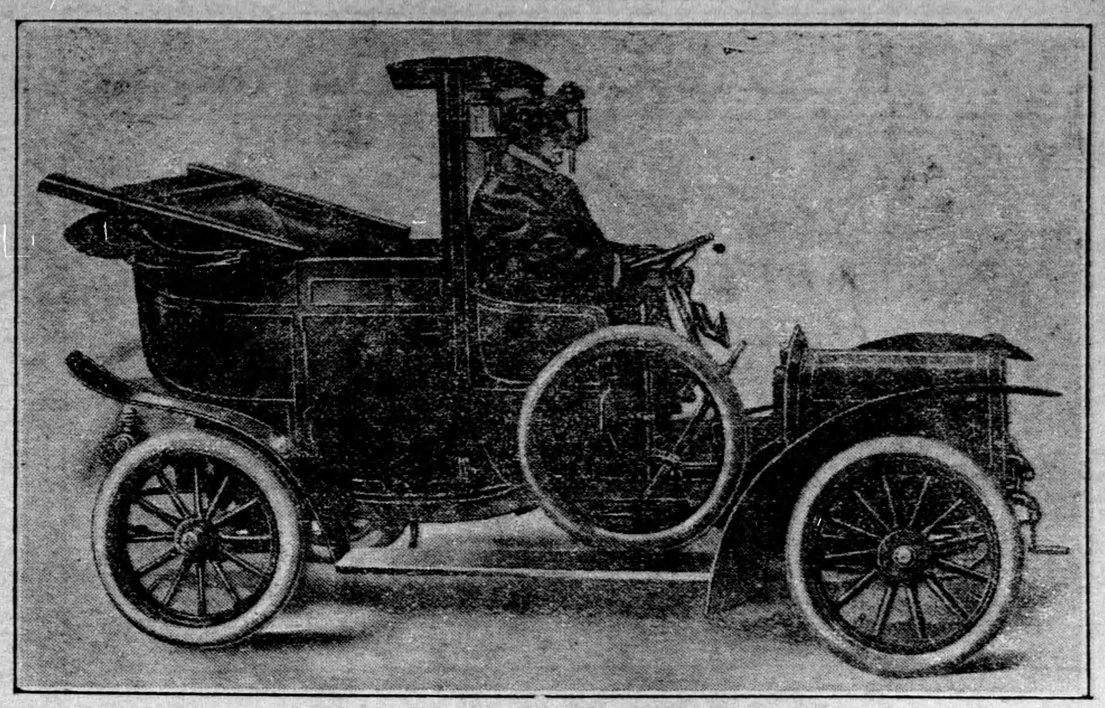

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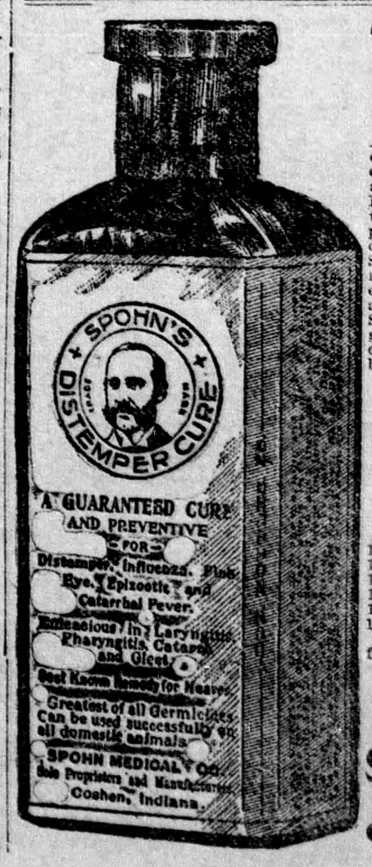

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3rd Year	9,256	" "
4th Year	19,150	" "
5th Year	40,284	" "
6th Year	72,380	" "
7th Year	100,532	" "
8th Year	124,500	" "
9th Year	172,435	" "
10th Year	221,760	" "
11th Year	287,620	" "
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