

A WOLF IN THE FOLD.

A DOMESTIC STORY WITH A MORAL.

CHAPTER XXI.—(CONTINUED.)

"I hope you'll soon be good and hungry three times a day," he said laughing pleasantly.

"You'll at least let me clear the table?" she asked. "I feel so much better."

"Yes, if you are sure you're strong enough. But drop every thing till to-morrow, when tired. I must go out and do my night work, and it's night work now, sure enough."

"It's too bad!" she said, sympathetically. "What I go out and feed my stock this clear, bright night? and after a hearty supper, too? Such farming is fun. I feel, too, as if I wanted to go and pat the cows all around in my gladness that I'm not going to sell them. Now remember, let everything go till morning as soon as you feel tired."

She nodded smilingly and set to work. Standing in the shadow of a hemlock, he watched her for a few moments. Her movements were slow, as would be natural to one who had been so reduced by illness, but this very evidence of feebleness touched his feelings. "She is eager to begin—too eager. No nonsense there about 'menial tasks.' Well, it does give me hope to see such a woman as that in the old kitchen," and then the hungry little welcomed him.

The traveller feels safe after the fierce Arab of the desert has broken bread with him. It would seem that a deep principle of human nature is involved in this act. More than the restoring power of the nourishment itself was the moral effect for Alida of that first meal in her husband's home. It was another step in what he had said was essential,—the forming of his acquaintance. She had seen from the first that he was plain and unpolished—that he had not the veneer of gentility of the man she had so mistakenly married, yet in his simple truth he was inspiring a respect which she had never felt for any man before. "What element of real courtesy had been wanting?" she asked herself. "If this is an earnest of the future, thank God for the real. I've found to my cost what a clever imitation of a man means."

It was as sweet as it was strange to think that she, who had trembled at the necessity of becoming almost a slave to unfeeling strangers, had been compelled to rest while a husband performed tasks naturally hers. It was all very homely, yet the significance of the act was chivalrous consideration for weakness; the place, the nature of the ministry could not degrade the meaning of his action. Then, too, during the meal he had spoken natural, kindly words which gave to the breaking of bread together the true interpretation. Although so feeble and weary, she found a deep satisfaction in beginning her household work. "It does make me feel more at home," she said. "Strange that he should have thought of it." She had finished her task and sat down again when he entered with a pail of milk. Taking a dipper with a strainer on one side of it, he poured out a tumblerful. "Now take this," he said. "I've always heard that milk fresh from the cow was very strengthening. Then go and sleep till you are thoroughly rested, and don't think of coming down in the morning till you feel like it. I'll make the fire and get breakfast. You have seen how easily I can do it. I have several more cows to milk and so will say 'good-night.'"

"Good-night, and may God always bless you for your kindness to me to-day." For the first time since chaos had come into her life, Alida slept soundly and refreshingly, unpursued by the fears which had haunted even her dreams. When she awoke, she expected to see the gray looks and repulsive features of the woman who had occupied the apartment with her at the almshouse, but she was alone in a small, strange room. Then memory gathered up to the threads of the past; but so strange, so blessed did the truth seem that she hastened to dress and go down to the old kitchen and assure herself that her mind had not become shattered by her troubles and was mocking her with unreal fancies. The scene she looked upon would have smoothed and reassured her even had her mind been as disordered as she, for the moment, had been tempted to believe. There was the same homely room which had pictured itself so deeply on her memory the evening before. Now it was more attractive, for the morning sun was shining into it, lighting up its homely details with a wholesome, cheerful reality which made it difficult to believe that there were tragic experiences in the world. The wood-fire in the stove crackled merrily, and the lid of the kettle was already bubbling up and down from internal commotion.

As she opened the door, a burst of song entered, securing her attention. She had heard the birds before without recognizing consciousness, as is so often true of our own condition in regard to the familiar sounds of nature. It was now almost as if she had received another sense, so strong, sweet and cheering was the symphony. Robins, song-sparrows, black-birds, seemed to have gathered in the trees near by, to give her a jubilant welcome; but she soon found that the music shaded off to distant, dream-like notes and remembered that it was a morning chorus of a hemisphere. This universality did not render the melody less personally grateful. We can appreciate all that is lovely in Nature, yet leave all for others. As she stood listening, and inhaling the soft air, full of the delicious perfume of the grass and expanding buds and looking through the misty sunshine on the half-veiled landscape, she heard Holcroft's voice, chiding some unruly animal in the barn-yard.

This recalled her and with the elasticity of returning health and hope, she set about getting breakfast.

"It seems to me that I never heard birds sing before," she thought, "and their songs this morning are almost like the music of heaven. They seem as happy and unconscious of fear and trouble as if they were angels. Mother and I used to talk about the Garden of Eden, but could the air have been sweeter, or the sunshine more tempered to just the right degree of warmth and brightness than here about my home? Oh, thank God again, again and forever, for a home like this," and for a few moments something of the ecstasy of one delivered from the black thralldom of evil filled her

soul. She paused now and then to listen to the birds, for only their songs seemed capable of expressing her emotion. It was but another proof that heavenly thoughts and homely work may go on together.

CHAPTER XXII. GETTING ACQUAINTED.

It was still early, and Holcroft was under the impression that Alida would sleep late after the severe fatigues of the preceding day. He therefore continued his work at the barn sufficiently long to give his wife time for her little surprise. She was not long in finding and laying her hands on the simple materials for breakfast. A ham hung in the pantry, and beneath it was a great basket of eggs, while the flour barrel stood in the corner. Biscuits were soon in the oven, eggs conjured into an omelet, and the ham cut into delicate slices, instead of great coarse steaks. Remembering Mrs. Mumpson's failure with the coffee, she made it a trifle strong and boiled the milk that should temper without cooling it. The biscuits rose like her own spirits, the omelet speedily began to take on color like her own flushed face as she busied herself about the stove.

Everything was nearly ready when she saw Holcroft coming towards the house with two pails of milk. He took them to a large dairy room under the parlor and then came briskly to the kitchen. She stood, screened by the door as he entered, then stopped and stared at the table all set, and at the inviting breakfast on the stove.

Seeing Alida's half-smiling, half-questioning face, seeking his approval, he exclaimed, "Well you have stolen a march on me. I supposed you were asleep yet."

"I felt so much stronger and better when I awoke that I thought you wouldn't mind if I came down and made a beginning."

"You call this a beginning, do you? such a breakfast as this before seven in the morning? I hope you haven't overtaxed yourself."

"No, only a little of just the right kind of tired feeling."

"Haven't you left anything for me to do?"

"Perhaps. You will know when I've put all on the table. What I've prepared is ready."

"Well, this is famous. I'll go and wash and fix up a little and be right down."

When Holcroft returned, he looked at her curiously, for he felt that he, too, was getting acquainted. Her thin face was more youthful by color; a pleased look was in her blue eyes and a certain neatness and trimness about her dress, to which he had not been accustomed. He scanned the table wondering, for things were not put upon it at hap-hazard; the light biscuits turned their brown cheeks invitingly towards him, she had arranged that they should do that,—the ham was crisp, not sodden, and the omelet as russet as a November leaf. "This is a new dish," he said, looking at it closely. "What do you call it?"

"Omelet. Perhaps you wouldn't like it, but mother used to be very fond of it."

"No matter. We'll have it if you like it and it brings you pleasant thoughts of your mother." Then he took a good sip of his coffee and set the cup down again as he had before under the Mumpson *regime*, but with a very different expression. She looked anxiously at him, but so quickly reassured. "I thought I knew how to make coffee, but I find I don't. I never tasted anything so good as that. How do you make it?"

"Just as mother taught me."

"Well, well! and you call this making a beginning? I just wish I could give Tom Watterly a cup of this coffee. It would set his mind at rest. 'By jocks!' he would say, 'isn't this better than going it alone?'"

She looked positively happy under this sweet incense to a housewife's heart. She was being paid in the coin that women love best, and it was all the more precious to her because she had never expected to receive it again.

He did like the omelet; he liked every thing, and, after helping her liberally, cleared the table, then said he felt equal to doing two men's work. Before going out to his work, he lighted a fire on the parlor hearth and left a good supply of fuel beside it. "Now, Alida," he remarked, humorously, "I've already found out that you have one fault that you and I will have to watch against. You are too willing. I fear you've gone beyond your strength this morning. I don't want you to do a thing to-day except to get the meals, and remember, I can help in this if you don't feel well. There is a fire in the parlor, and I've wheeled the lounge up by it. Take it quietly to-day, and perhaps to-morrow I can begin to show you about butter-making."

"I will do as you wish," she replied, "but please show me a little more where things are before you go out."

This he did and added, "You'll find the beef and some other things on a swing-shelf in the cellar. The potato bins are down there, too. But don't try to get up much dinner. What comes quickest and easiest will suit me. I'm a little backward with my work and must plough all day for oats. It's time they were in. After such a breakfast, I feel as if I had eaten a bushel myself."

A few moments later, she saw him going up the lane, that continued on past the house, with his stout team and the plough, and she smiled as he heard him whistling "Coronation" with levity, as some good people would have thought.

Ploughing and planting time had come and under happier auspices, apparently, than he had ever imagined possible again. With the lines about his neck, he began with a side-hill plough at the bottom of a large, sloping field which had been in corn the previous year, and the long, straight furrows increased from a narrow strip to a wide, oblong area. "Ah," said he, in tones of strong satisfaction, "the ground crumbles freely; it's just in the right condition. I'll quit ploughing this afternoon in time to harrow and sow all the ground that's ready. Then, so much'll be all done and well done. It's curious how seed, if it goes into the ground at the right time and in the right way, comes right along and never gets discouraged. I ain't much on scientific farming, but I've always observed that when I sow or plant as soon as the ground is ready, I have better luck."

The horses seemed infected by his own brisk spirit, stepping along without urging, and the farmer was swept speedily into the full, strong current of his habitual interests.

One might have supposed the recent events would have the uppermost place in his thoughts, but this was not true. He rather dwelt upon them as the unexpectedly fortunate means to the end now attained. This was his life, and he was happy in the thought that his marriage promised to make this life not merely possible, but prosperous and full of quiet content.

The calling of the born agriculturist, like that of the fisherman, has in it the element of chance and is therefore full of moderate yet lasting excitement. Holcroft knew that, although he did his best, much would depend on the weather and other causes. He had met with disappointments in his crops, and had also achieved what he regarded as fine successes, although they would have seemed meagre on a Western prairie. Every spring kindled anew his hopefulness and anticipation. He watched the weather with the interested and careful scrutiny of a sailor, and it must be admitted that his labor and its results depended more on natural causes than upon his skill and the careful use of fertilizers. He was a farmer of the old school, the traditions received from his father controlled him in the main. Still, his good common sense and long experience stood him fairly well in the place of science and knowledge of improved methods, and he was better equipped than the man who has in his brain all that the books can teach, yet is without experience. Best of all, he had inherited and acquired an abiding love of the soil; he never could have been content except in its cultivation; he was therefore in the right condition to assimilate fuller knowledge and make the most of it.

He knew well enough when it was about noon. From long habit, he would have known had the sky been overcast, but now his glance at the sun was like looking at a watch. Dusty and begrimed, he followed his team to the barn, slipped from them their headstalls and left them to amuse themselves with a little hay while they cooled sufficiently for heartier food. "Well now," he mused, "I wonder what that little woman has for dinner? another new dish, like enough. Hanged if I'm fit to go in the house, and she looking so trim and neat. I think I'll first take a souse in the brook," and he went up behind the house where an unfailing stream gurgled swiftly down from the hills. At the nearest point, a small basin had been hollowed out, and as he approached he saw two or three speckled trout darting away through the limpid water.

"Ah," he muttered, "glad you reminded me. When *she's* stronger, she may enjoy catching our supper some afternoon. I must think of all the little things I can to live her up, so she won't get dull. It's curious how interested I am to know how she's got along and what she has for dinner. And to think that less than a week ago, I used to hate to go near the house!"

As he entered the hall on his way to his room, that he might make himself more presentable, an appetizing odor greeted him and Alida smiled from the kitchen door as she said, "Dinner's ready."

Apparently she had taken him at his word, as she had prepared little else than an Irish stew, yet when he had partaken of it, he thought he would prefer Irish stews from that time onward indefinitely. "Where did you learn to cook, Alida?" he asked.

"Mother wasn't very strong and her appetite often failed her. Then, too, we hadn't much to spend on our table, so we tried to make simple things taste nice. Do you like my way of preparing that old-fashioned dish?"

"I'm going to show you how I like it," he replied, nodding approvingly. "Well, what have you been doing besides tempting me to eat too much?"

"What you said, resting. You told me not to get up much of a dinner, so I very lazily prepared what you see. I've been lying on the lounge most of the morning."

"Famous; and you feel better?"

"Yes, I think I shall soon get well and strong," she replied, looking at him gratefully.

"Well, well, my luck's turned at last. I once thought it never would, but if this goes on—well, you can't know what a change it is for the better. I can now put my mind on my work."

"You've been ploughing all the morning, haven't you?" she ventured, and there was the pleased look in her eyes that he already liked to see.

"Yes," he replied, "and I must keep at it several days to get in all the oats I mean to sow. If this weather holds I shall be through next week."

"I looked in the milk-room a while ago. Isn't there any thing I could do there this afternoon?"

"No. I'll attend to every thing there. It's too damp for you yet. Keep on resting. Why, bless me! I didn't think you'd be well enough to do any thing for a week."

"Indeed," she admitted, "I'm surprised at myself. It seems as if a crushing weight had been lifted off my mind and that I was coming right up. I'm so glad, for I feared I might be feeble and useless a long time."

"Well, Alida, if you had been, or if you ever are, don't think I'll be impatient. The people I can't stand are those who try to take advantage of me, and I tell you I've had to contend with that disposition so long that I feel as if I could do almost anything for one who is simply honest and tries to keep her part of an agreement. But this won't do. I've enjoyed my own dinner so much that I've half-forgotten that the horses haven't had theirs yet. Now will you scold if I light my pipe before I go out?"

"Oh, no, I don't mind that."

"No good-natured fibs. Isn't smoke disagreeable?"

She shook her head. "I don't mind it at all," she said, but her sudden paleness puzzled him. He could not know that he had involuntarily recalled the many times that she had filled the evening pipe for a man who now haunted her memory like a spectre.

"I guess you don't like it very much," he said, as he passed out. "Well, no matter. It's getting so mild that I can smoke out of doors."

With the exception of the episode of dinner, the day was chiefly passed by Alida in a health-restoring languor, the natural reaction from the distress and strong excitements of the past. The rest that had been enjoined upon her was a blessed privilege, and still more happy was the truth that she could rest. Reclining on the lounge in the parlor, with a wood fire on one side and the April sun on the other, both creating warmth

and good cheer, she felt like those who have just escaped from a wreck and ingulfing waves. Her mind was too weary to question either the past or the future, and sometimes a consciousness of safety is happiness in itself. In the afternoon, the crackling of the fire and the calling and singing of the birds without formed a soothing lullaby and she fell asleep.

At last, in a dream, she heard exquisite music which appeared to grow so loud, strong and triumphant that she started up and looked around bewildered. A moment later, she saw that a robin was singing in a lilac bush by the window and that near the bird was a nest partially constructed. She recalled her hopeless grief when she had last seen the building of one of their little homes; and she fell upon her knees with a gratitude too deep for words, and far more grateful to Heaven than words.

Stepping out on the porch, she saw by the shadows that the sun was low in the west and that Holcroft was coming down the lane with his horses. He nodded pleasantly as he passed on to the barn. Her eyes followed him lingeringly till he disappeared, and then they ranged over the wide valley and the wooded hills in the distance. Not a breath of air was stirring; the lowing of cattle and other rural sounds, softened by distance, came from other farmhouses; the birds were at vesper, and their songs to her fancy, were imbued with a softer, sweeter melody than in the morning. From the adjacent fields came clear, mellow notes that made her nerves tingle, so ethereal yet penetrating were they. She was sure she had never heard such music before. When Holcroft came in to supper she asked, "What birds are those that sing in the field?"

"Meadow larks. Do you like them?"

"I never heard a hymn sung that did me more good."

"Well, I own up, I'd rather hear 'em than much of the singing we used to have down at the meeting-house."

"It seems to me," she remarked, as she sat down at the table, "that I've never heard birds sing as they have to-day."

"Now I think of it, they have been tuning up wonderfully. Perhaps they've an idea of my good luck," he added, smilingly.

"I had thought of that about myself," she ventured. "I took a nap this afternoon, and a robin sang so near the wino that he woke me up. It was a pleasant way to be waked."

"Took a nap, did you? That's famous. Well, well, this day's gone just to suit me, and I haven't had many such in a good while, I can tell you. I've got in a big strip of oats, and now, when I come in tired, here's a good supper. I certainly shall have to be on the watch to do Tom Watterly good turns for talking me into this business. That taking a nap was a first rate idea. You ought to keep it up for a month."

"No, indeed. There's no reason why you should work hard and I be idle. I've rested to-day, as you wished, and I feel better than I ever expected to again; but to-morrow I must begin in earnest. What use is there of your keeping your cows, if good butter is not made? Then I must be busy with my needle."

"Yes, that's true enough. See how thoughtless I am. I forgot you hadn't any clothes to speak of. I ought to take you to town to a dressmaker."

"I think you had better get your oats in," she replied, smiling shyly. "Besides, I have a dressmaker that just suits me—one that's made my dresses a good many years."

"If she don't suit you, you're here to be suited," said he, laughing. "Well, some day, after you are fixed up, I shall have to let you know how dilapidated I am."

"Won't you do me a little favor?"

"Oh, yes, a dozen of 'em, big or little."

"Please bring down this evening something that needs mending. I am so much better."

"No, no, I wasn't hinting for you to do any thing to-night."

"But you've promised me," she urged. "Remember, I've been resting nearly all day. I'm used to sewing, and earned my living at it. Somehow, it don't seem natural for me to sit with idle hands."

"If I hadn't promised!"

"But you have."

"I suppose I'm fairly caught," and he brought down a little of the most pressing of the mending.

"Now I'll reward you," she said, handing him his pipe, well filled. "You go in the parlor and have a quiet smoke. I won't be long in clearing up the kitchen."

"What! smoke in the parlor?"

"Yes, why not? I assure you I don't mind it."

"H! ha! Why didn't I think of it before? I might have kept the parlor and smoked Mrs. Mumpson out."

"It won't be smoke that will keep me out."

"I should hope not, or anything else. I must tell you how I *did* have to smoke Mrs. Mumpson out at last," and he did so with so much drolery that she again yielded to irrepresible laughter.

"Poor thing! I'm sorry for her."

"I'm sorry for Jane—poor little stray cat of a child! I hope we can do something for her some day," and having lighted his pipe, he took up the county paper, left weekly in a hollow tree by the stage-driver, and went into the parlor.

After freshening up the fire, he sat down to read, but by the time she joined him, the tired man was nodding. He tried to brighten up, but his eyes were heavy.

"You've worked hard to-day," she said, sympathetically.

"Well, I have," he answered, "I've not done such a good day's work in a year."

"Then why don't you go to sleep at once?"

"It don't seem polite—"

"Please don't talk that way," she interrupted. "I don't mind being alone at all. I shall feel a great deal more at home if you forget all about ceremony."

"Well, Alida, I guess we had both better begin on that basis. If I give up when I'm tired, you must. You mustn't think I'm always such a sleepyhead. The fact is I've been more tired out with worry of late than with work. I can laugh about it now, but I've been so desperate over it that I've felt more like swearing. You'll find out I've become a good deal of a heathen."

"Very well, I'll wait till I find out."

"I think we are getting acquainted famously, don't you?"

"Yes," she nodded, with a smile that meant more than a long speech. "Good-night."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

That was wholesome advice given by Mr. Martin Wynn to his daughter Christie, "Laugh with everybody, but at no one."

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