

# A WOLF IN THE FOLD.

A DOMESTIC STORY WITH A MORAL.

CHAPTE XXIII.

BETWEEN THE PAST AND FUTURE.

Human nature, in common with Mother Nature, has its immutable laws. The people who existed before the flood were, in their primal motive, like those of to-day. The conventionalities of highly civilized society does not change the heart, but it puts so much restraint upon it that not a few appear heartless. They march through life and fight its battles like uniformed men, trained in a certain school of tactics. This monotony of character and action is superficial in most cases, rather than real, and he who fathoms the eyes of others, who catches the subtle quality of tones and interprets the flexible mouth that utters them, will discover that the whole gamut of human nature exists in those that appear only like certain musical instruments, made by machinery to play a few well known tunes. Conventional restraint often, no doubt, produces dwarfed and defective human nature. I suppose that if souls could be put under a microscope, the undeveloped rudiments of almost every thing would be discovered. It is more satisfactory to study the things themselves than their suggestions; this we are usually better able to do among people of simple and untrammelled moles of life, who are not practised in disguises. Their peculiar traits and their general and dominant laws and impulses are exhibited with less reserve than by those who have learned to be always on their guard. Of course there are commonplace yeomen as truly as commonplace aristocrats and simple life abounds in simpletons.

When a man in Holcroft's position has decided traits, they are apt to have a somewhat full expression; his rugged nature beside a tamer one outlines itself more vividly, just as a mountain-peak is silhouetted against the horizon better than a rounded hill. It probably has been observed that his character possessed much simplicity and directness. He had neither the force nor ambition to raise him above his circumstances; he was merely decided within the lines of his environment. Perhaps the current of his life was all the stronger for being narrow. His motives were neither complex nor vacillating. He had married to keep his home and to continue in the conditions of life dear from association and the strongest preference, and his heart overflowed with good will and kindness towards Alida because she promised to solve the hard problem of the future satisfactorily. Apart from the sympathy which her misfortune had evoked, he probably could have felt much the same towards any other good, sensible woman had she rendered him a similar service. It is true, now that Alida was in his home, that she was manifesting agreeable traits which gave him pleasant little surprises. He had not expected that he would have had half so much to say to her, yet felt it his duty to be sociable in order to cheer her up and mark the line between even a business marriage and the employment of a domestic. Both his interest and his duty required that he should establish the bonds of strong friendly regard on the basis of perfect equality, and he would have made efforts similar to those he put forth in behalf of any woman, if she had consented to marry him with Alida's understanding. Now, however, that his suddenly adopted project of securing a housekeeper and helper had been consumed, he would find that he was not dealing with a business-partner in the abstract, but a definite woman, who had already begun to exert over him her natural influence. He had expected more or less constraint and that some time must elapse before his wife could cease to be in a sense company whom he, with conscious and deliberate effort, must entertain. On the contrary, she entertained and interested him, although she said so little, and by some subtle power she unloosed his tongue and made it easy for him to talk to her. In the most quiet and unobtrusive way, she was not only making herself at home, but to him also; she was very subservient to his wishes, but not servilely so; she did not assert, but only revealed her superiority, and after even so brief an acquaintance he was ready to indorse Tom Watterly's view, "She's out of the common run."

While all this was true, the farmer's heart was as untouched as that of a child who simply and instinctively likes a person. He is still quietly and unhesitatingly loyal to his former wife. Apart from his involuntary favor, his shrewd, practical reason was definite enough in its grounds of approval. Reason assured him that she promised to do and to be just what he had married her for, but she might have been true of a capable, yet disagreeable woman whom he could not like to save himself.

Both in regard to himself and Alida, Holcroft accepted the actual facts with the gladness and much of the unquestionable simplicity of a child. This rather risky experiment was turning out well, and for a time he daily became more and more absorbed in his farm and its interests. Alida quietly performed her household tasks and proved that she would not need very much instruction to become a good butter-maker. The short spring of the North required that he should be busy early and late to keep pace with the quickly passing seed time. His hopefulness, his freedom from household worries, prompted him to sow and plant increased areas of land. In brief, he entered on just the business-like honeymoon he had hoped for.

Alida was more than content with the conditions of her life. She said that Holcroft was not only satisfied, but also pleased with her, and that is all she expected and indeed all that thus far she had wished or hoped. She had many sad hours; wounds like hers cannot heal readily in a true sensitive woman's heart. While she gained in cheerfulness and confidence, the terrible and unexpected disaster which had overtaken her rendered impossible the serenity of those with whom all has gone well. Dread of something, she knew not what, haunted her painfully, and memory at times seemed malignantly perverse in calling to her what she prayed to forget.

Next to her faith and Holcroft's kindness her work was her best solace, and she thanked God for the strength to keep busy. On the first Sunday morning after their marriage the farmer overstepped and breakfast had been ready sometime when he came down. He looked with a little dismay at the clock over the kitchen mantle and asked, "Aren't you going to scold a little?" She shook her head, nor did she look the

chiding which often might as well be spoken.

"How long have I kept breakfast waiting, or you rather?"

"What difference does it make? You needed the rest. The breakfast may not be so nice," was her smiling answer.

"No matter. You are nice to let a man off in that way." Observing the book in her lap he continued, "So you were reading the old family bible to learn lessons of patience and forbearance?"

Again she shook her head. She often oddly reminded him of Jane in her employment of signs instead of speech, but in her case there was a grace, a suggestiveness and even a piquancy about them which made them like a new language. He understood and interpreted her frankly. "I know, Alida," he said, kindly, "you are a good woman. You believe in the Bible and love it."

"I was taught to read and love it," she replied, simply. Then her eyes dropped and she faltered, "I've reproached myself bitterly that I rushed away so hastily that I forgot the Bible my mother gave me."

"No, no," he said, heartily, "don't reproach yourself for that. It was the Bible in your heart that made you act as you did."

She shot him a swift, grateful glance through her tears, but no other response.

Having returned the Bible to the parlor, she put the breakfast on the table and said, quietly, "It looks as if we would have a rainy day."

"Well," said he, laughing, "I'm as bad as the old woman—it seems that women can run farms alone if men can't. Well, this old dame had a big farm and employed several men, and she was always wishing it would rain nights and Sundays. I'm inclined to chuckle over the good this rain will do my oats, instead of being sorry to think how many sinners it'll keep from church. Except in protracted-meeting times most people of this town would a great deal rather risk their souls than be caught in the rain on Sunday. We don't mind it much week-days, but Sunday rain is very dangerous to health."

"I'm afraid I'm as bad as the rest," she said, smiling. "Mother and I usually stayed home when it rained hard."

"Oh, we don't need a hard storm in the country. People say, 'It looks threatening,' and that settles it; but we often drive to town rainy days to save time."

"Do you usually go to church at the meeting-house I see off in the valley?" she asked.

"I don't go anywhere," and he watched keenly to see how she would take this blunt statement of his practical heathenism.

She only looked at him kindly and accepted the fact.

"Why don't you pitch into me?" he asked.

"That wouldn't do any good."

"You'd like to go, I suppose?"

"No, not under the circumstances, unless you wished to. I'm cowardly enough to dread being stared at."

He gave a deep sigh of relief. "This thing has been troubling me," he said. "I feared you would want to go, and if you did, I should feel that you ought to go."

"I fear I'm very weak about it, but I shrink so from meeting strangers, that I do thank God for his goodness many times a day and ask for help. I'm not brave enough to do any more, yet."

His rugged features became very sombre as he said, "I wish I had as much courage as you have."

"You don't understand me," she began, gently.

"No, I suppose not. It's all become a muddle to me. I mean this church and religious business."

She looked at him wistfully, as if she wished to say something, but did not venture to do so. He promptly gave a different turn to the conversation by quoting Mrs. Mumpson's tirade on church going the first Sunday after her arrival. Alida laughed, but not in a wholly mirthful and satisfied way. "There," he concluded, "I'm touching on things a little too sacred for you. I respect your feeling and beliefs, for they are honest and I wish I shared in 'em." Then he suddenly laughed again as he added, "Mrs. Mumpson said there was too much milking done on Sunday, and it's time I was breaking the Fourth Commandment, after her notion."

Alida now laughed outright, without reservation.

"By jocks! 'as Watterly says, what a difference there is in women!' he soliloquized on his way to the barn. "Well, the church question is settled for the present, but if Alida should ask me to go, after her manner this morning, I'd face the whole creation with her."

When at last he came in and threw off his water proof coat, the kitchen was in order, and his wife was sitting by the parlor fire with Thomson's "Land and the Book" in her hand.

"Are you fond of reading?" he asked.

"Yes, very."

"Well, I am, too, sort of; but I've let the years slip by without doing half as much as I ought."

"Light your pipe and I'll read to you if you wish me to."

"Oh, come, now. I at least believe in Sunday as a day of rest and you need it. Reading aloud is about as hard work as I can do."

"But I'm used to it. I read aloud to mother a great deal," and then there passed over her face an expression of deep pain.

"What is it, Alida? Don't you feel well?"

"Yes, oh, yes," she replied, hastily, and her pale face became crimson.

It was another stab of memory recalling the many Sundays she had read to the man who had deceived her. "Shall I read?" she asked.

"Alida," he said, very kindly, "It was not the thought of your mother that brought that look of pain into your face."

She shook her head sadly, with downcast eyes. After a moment or two, she raised them appealingly to him as she said simply, "There is so much that I wish I could forget."

"Poor child! Yes, I think I know. Be patient with yourself, and remember that you were never to blame."

Again came that quick, grateful glance by which some women express more than others

can ever put in words. Her thought was "I didn't think that even he was capable of that. What a way of assuring me that he'll be patient with me!" Then she quietly read for an hour descriptions of the Holy Land that were not too religious for Holcroft's mind and which satisfied her conscience better than much she had read in former days to satisfy a taste more alien to hers than that of her husband.

Holcroft listened to her correct pronunciation and sweet, natural tones with a sort of pleased wonder. At last he said, "You must stop now."

"Are you tired?" she asked.

"No, but you are, or ought to be. Why, Alida, I didn't know you were so well educated. I'm quite a barbarous old fellow compared to you."

"I hadn't thought of that before," she said, with a laugh.

"What a fool I was, then, to put it into your head!"

"You must be more careful. I never have such thoughts if you didn't suggest them."

"How did you come to get such a good education?"

"I wish I had a better one. Well, I did have good advantages up to the time I was seventeen. After I was old enough to go to school quite steadily, but it seems to me that I learned a little of every thing and not much of any thing. When father died and we lost our property, we had to take to our needles. I suppose I might have obtained work in a store, or some such place, but I couldn't bear to leave mother alone and I disliked being in public. I certainly didn't know enough to teach, and besides, I was afraid to try."

"Well, well, you've stumbled into a quiet enough place at last."

"That's what I like most about it, but I don't think I stumbled into it. I think I've been led and helped. That's what I meant when I said you didn't understand me," she added, hesitatingly. "It don't take courage for me to go to God. I get courage by believing that he cares for me like a father, as the Bible says. How could I ever have found so kind a friend and good a home myself?"

"I've been half inclined to believe there's a Providence in it myself—more and more so as I get acquainted with you. Your troubles have made you better, Alida; mine made me worse. I used to be a Christian; I ain't any more."

She looked at him smilingly as she asked, "How do you know?"

"Oh, I know well enough," he replied, gloomily. "Don't let's talk about it any more," and then he led her on to speak simply and naturally about her childhood home and her father and mother.

"Well," he said, heartily, "I wish your mother was living, for nothing would please me better than to have such a good old lady in the house."

She averted her face as she said, huskily, "I think it was better she died before"—but she did not finish the sentence.

By the time dinner was over, the sun was shining brightly, and he asked her if she would not like to go up the lane to his woodland to see the view. Her pleased look was sufficient answer. "But are you sure you are strong enough?" he persisted.

"Yes, it will do me good to go out, and I may find some wild flowers."

"I guess you can, a million or two."

By the time he was through at the barn she was ready and they started up the lane, now green with late April grass and enlivened with dandelions in which bumble-bees were wallowing. The sun had dried the moisture sufficiently for them to pass on dry-shod, but every thing had the fresh, vernal aspect that follows a warm rain. Spring had advanced with a great bound since the day before. The glazed and glutinous cherry buds had expanded with aromatic odors and the white of the blossoms was beginning to show.

"By to-morrow," said Holcroft, "the trees will look as if covered with snow. Let me help you," and he put his hand under her arm, supporting and aiding her steps up the steep places.

Her lips were parted, the pleased look was in her eyes as they rested on trees and shrubs which lined the half ruinous stone walls on either side. "Everything seems so alive and glad this afternoon," she remarked.

"Yes," replied the matter-of-fact farmer. "A rain such as we had this morning is like turning the water on a big mill-wheel. It starts all the machinery right up. Now the sun's out, and that's the greatest motor power of all. Sun and moisture make the farm go."

"Mustn't the ground be enriched, too?"

"Yes, yes indeed; I suppose that's where we all fail. But it's no easy matter to keep a farm in good heart. That's another reason why I'm so glad I won't have to sell my stock. A farm run without stock is sure to grow poor; and if the farm grows poor, the owner does as a matter of course. But what put enriching the ground into your head? Do you know any thing about farming?"

"No, but I want to learn. When I was girl, father had a garden. He used to take papers about it, and I often read them aloud to him evenings. Now I remember there used to be much in them about enriching the ground. Do you take any such paper?"

"No. I haven't much faith in book-farming."

"I don't know," she ventured. "Seems to me you might get some good ideas out of papers, and your experience would teach you whether they were useful ideas or not. If you'll take one, I'll read it to you."

"I will, then, for the pleasure of hearing you read, if nothing else. That's something I hadn't bargained for," he added, laughing.

She answered in the same spirit by saying, "I'll throw that in and not call it square yet."

"I think I've got the best of you," he chuckled; "and you know nothing makes a Yankee farmer happier than to get the best of a bargain."

"I hope you'll continue to think so. Can I sit down a few moments?"

"Why certainly. How forgetful I am! Your talk is too interesting for me to think of any thing else," and he placed her on a flat rock by the side of the lane, while he leaned against the wall.

Bees and other insects were humming around them; a butterfly fluttered over the fence and alighted on a dandelion almost at her feet; meadow larks were whistling their limp notes in the adjoining fields, while from the trees about the house beneath them came the songs of many birds, blending with the babble of the brook which ran not far away.

"Oh, how beautiful, how strangely beautiful it all is."

"Yes, when you come to think of it, it is

real pretty," he replied. "It's a pity we get so used to such things that we don't notice 'em much. I should feel miserable enough, though, if I couldn't live in just such a place. I shouldn't wonder if I was a good deal like that robin yonder. I like to be free and enjoy the spring weather, but I suppose neither he nor I think or know how fine it all is."

"Well, both you and the robin seem a part of it," she said, laughing.

"Oh, no, no," he replied with a guffaw which sent the robin off in alarm. "I ain't beautiful and never was."

She joined his laugh, but said with a positive little nod, "I'm right, though. The robin isn't a pretty bird, yet everybody likes him."

"Except in cherry time. Then he has an appetite equal to mine. But everybody don't like me. In fact, I think I'm generally disliked in this town."

"If you went among them more they wouldn't dislike you."

"I don't want to go among them."

"They know it, and that's the reason they dislike you."

"Would you like to go out to tea-drinkings, and all that?"

"No indeed; and I don't suppose I'd be received," she added, sadly.

"So much the worse for them, then, blast 'em," said Holcroft, wrathfully.

"Oh no, I don't feel that way and you shouldn't. When they can people ought to be sociable and kind."

"Of course I'd do any of my neighbors, except Lemuel Weeks, a good turn if it came in my way, but the less I have to do with them the better I'm satisfied."

"I'm rested enough to go on now," said Alida, quietly.

They were not long in reaching the edge of the woodland, from which there was an extended prospect. For some little time they looked at the wide landscape in silence. Alida gave it only partial attention, for her mind was very busy with thoughts suggested by her husband's alienation from his neighbors. It would make it easier for her, but the troubled query would arise, "Is it right or best for him? His marrying me will separate him still more."

Holcroft's face grew sad rather than troubled as he looked at the old meeting-house and not at the landscape. He was sitting near the spot where he spent that long forenoon a few Sundays before, and the train of thought came back again. In his deep distraction he almost forgot the woman near him in memories of the past. His old love and lost faith were inseparable from that little white spire in the distance.

Alida stole a glance at him and thought "He's thinking of her," and she quietly strolled away to look for wild flowers.

"Yes," muttered Holcroft, at last, "I hope Bessie knows. She'd be the first one to say it was right and best for me, and she'd be glad to know that in securing my own home and comfort I had given a home to the homeless and sorrowful—a quiet, good woman, who worships God as she did."

He rose and joined his wife, who held towards him a handful of trailing arbutus, rue anemones, bloodroot and dicentras. "I didn't know they were so pretty before," he said with a smile.

His smile reassured her, for it seemed kinder than any she had yet received, and his tone was very gentle. "His dead wife will never be my enemy," she murmured. "He has made it right with her in his own thoughts."

## CHAPTER XXIV.

GIVEN HER OWN WAY.

On Monday the absorbing work of the farm was renewed, and every day brought to Holcroft long and exhausting hours of labor. While he was often taciturn, he evidently progressed in cheerfulness and hope. Alida confirmed his good impressions. His meals were prompt and inviting; the house was taking on an aspect of neatness and order long absent, and his wardrobe was put in as good condition as its rather meagre character permitted. He had positively refused to permit his wife to do any washing and ironing. "We will see about it next fall," he said. "If then you are perfectly well and strong, perhaps, but not in the warm weather now coming on." Then he added, with a little nod, "I'm finding out how valuable you are, and I'd rather save you than the small sum I have to pay old Mrs. Johnson."

In this and in other ways he showed kindly consideration, but his mind continually reverted to his work and out door plans with the pre-occupation of one who finds that he can again give his thoughts to something from which they had been most reluctantly withdrawn. Thus Alida was left alone most of the time. When the dusk of evening came, he was too tired to say much and he retired early that he might be fresh for work again when the sun appeared. She had no regrets, for although she kept busy, she was resting and her wounds were healing through the long, quiet days. It was the essential calm after the storm. Caring for the dairy and working the butter into firm, sweet, tempting yellow rolls were the only tasks that troubled her a little, but Holcroft assured her that she was learning these important duties faster than he had expected her to. She had several hours a day in which to ply her needle and thus was soon enabled to replenish her scanty wardrobe.

One morning at breakfast, she appeared in another gown, and although its material was calico, she had the appearance to Holcroft of being unusually well dressed. He looked pleased, but made no comment. When the cherry blossoms were fully out, an old cracked flower vase—the only one in the house—was filled with them, and they were placed in the centre of the dinner table. He looked at them and her, then smilingly remarked, "I shouldn't wonder if you enjoyed those cherry blows more than any thing else we have for dinner."

"I want something else, though. My appetite almost frightens me."

"That's famous. I needn't be ashamed of mine, then."

One evening, before the week was over, he saw her busy with a rake scattered about, with twigs and even small boughs wrested by the winds from the trees. He was provoked with himself that he had neglected the usual spring clearing away of litter and a little irritated that she should have tried to do the work herself. He left the horses at the barn and came forward directly.

"Alida," he said, gravely, "there's no need of your doing such work; I don't like to see you do it."

"Well," she replied, "I've heard that women in the country often milk and take care of the chickens."

"Yes, but that's very different from this

work. I wouldn't like people to think I expected such things of you."

"It's very easy work," she said, smilingly, "easier than sweeping a room, though something like it. I used to do it at home when I was a girl. I think it does me good to do something in the open air."

She was persisting, but not in a way that chafed him. Indeed, as he looked into her appealing eyes and face flushed with exercise he felt that it would be churlish to say another word.

"Well," he said, laughing, "it makes you look so young and rosy I guess it does do you good. I suppose you'll have to have your own way."

"You know I wouldn't do this or any thing else if you really didn't want me to."

"You are keen," he replied, with his good nature entirely restored. "You can see that you get me right under your thumb when you talk that way. But we must both be on our guard against your fault, you know, or pretty soon you'll be taking the whole work of the farm off my hands."

"To be serious," she resumed, accompanying him to the barn for the first time, "I think you are working too hard. I'm not. Our meals are so simple that it doesn't take me long to get them. I'm through with the hurry in my sewing, the old dog does the churning and you give me so much help in the dairy that I shall soon have time on my hands. Now, it seems to me that I might soon learn to take entire care of the chickens, big and little, and that would be so much less for you to look after. I'm sure I would enjoy it very much, especially the looking after the little chicken."

"Do you really think you'd like to do that?" he asked, as he turned to her from unharnessing the horses.

"Yes, indeed, if you think I'm competent."

"You are more so than I am. Somehow, little chickens don't thrive under a busy man's care. The mother hens mean well, but they are confoundedly silly. I declare to you that last year I lost half the little chicks that were hatched out."

"Well, then," she replied laughing, "I won't be afraid to try, for I think I can beat you in raising chickens. Now, show me how much you feed them at night and how much I'm to give them in the morning, and let me take the whole care of them for a month, get the eggs, and all. If they don't do so well, then I'll resign. I can't break you in a month."

"It looks more as if you'd make me. You have a good big bump of order, and I haven't any at all in little things. Tom Watterly was right. If I had tried to live here alone, things would have got into an awful mess. I feel ashamed of myself that I didn't clear up the yard before, but my whole mind's been on the main crops."

"As it should be. Don't you worry about the little things. They belong to me. Now show me about the chickens, or they'll go to roost while we're talking."

"But I, as well as the chickens, shall want some supper."

"I won't let either of you starve. You'll see."

"Well, you see this little measure? You fill it from this bin with this mixture of corn and wheat screenings. That's the allowance, morning and evening. Then you go out to the barn-yard there and call 'kip, kip, kip.' That's the way my wife used."

He stopped in a little embarrassment. "I'd be glad if I could do every thing as she did," said Alida, gently. "It has grown clearer every day how hard her loss was to you. If you'll tell me what she did and how she did things"—and she hesitated.

"That's good of you, Alida," he replied, gratefully. Then with his directness of speech he added, "I believe some women are inclined to be jealous even of the dead."

"You need never fear to speak of your wife to me. I respect and honor your feelings—the way you remember her. There's no reason why it should be otherwise. I did not agree to one thing and expect another," and she looked him straight in the eyes.

He dropped them, as he stood leaning against the bin in the shadowy old barn, and said, "I didn't think you or any one would be so sensible. Of course one can't forget quickly."

"You oughtn't to forget," was the firm reply. "Why should you? I should be sorry to think you could forget."

"I fear I'm not like to make you sorry," he replied, sighing. "To tell you the truth," he added, looking at her almost commiseratingly, and then he hesitated.

"Well, the truth is usually best," she said, quietly.

"Well, I'll tell you my thought. We married in haste, we were almost strangers, and your mind was so distracted at the time that I couldn't blame you if you forgot what—I said. I feared—well, you are carrying out our agreement so sensibly that I want to thank you. It's a relief to find that you're not opposed, even in your heart, that I should remember one that I knew as a little child and married when I was young."

"I remember all you said and what I said," she replied, with the same direct, honest gaze. "Don't let such thoughts trouble you any more. You've been kinder and more considerate than I ever expected. You have only to tell me how she did."

"No, Alida," he said, quietly, obeying a subtle impulse. "I'd rather you would do everything your own way—as it's natural for you. There, we've talked so long that it's too late to feed the chickens tonight. You can begin in the morning."

"Oh!" she cried, "and you have all your other work to do. I've hindered rather than helped you by coming out."

"No," he replied, decidedly, "you've helped me. I'll be in before very long."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Furious cyclones and hailstorms swept over a large part of Western and South-Western Missouri, South-Eastern Kansas and Northern Arkansas on Thursday night, causing great loss of life and destruction of property. Several towns were entirely demolished.

The railways will have to look to their laurels. A New York steamship company is about to build a vessel with an estimated speed sufficient to make the voyage from New York to Liverpool in a little more than four days. She will have twenty boilers, and the engines will be of 27,886 horsepower and capable of giving a speed of 22 knots an hour. The Etruria, which has made the fastest record of 6 days five hours and 31 minutes, has a horse-power of 14,000. Her time for the passage is about the same as that of the transcontinental express trains, but the latter, of course, have to make many stops on the road.