ARLO BATES

THE DIARY OF A SAINT

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I
JANUARY

January 1. How beautiful the world is! I might go on to say, and how commonplace this seems written down in a diary; but it is the thing I have been thinking. I have been standing ever so long at the window, and now that the curtains are shut I can see everything still. The moon is shining over the wide white sheets of snow, and the low meadows look far off and enchanted. The outline of the hills is clear against the sky, and the cedars on the lawn are almost green against the whiteness of the ground and the deep, blue-black sky. It is all so lovely that it somehow makes one feel happy and humble both at once.

It is a beautiful world, indeed, and yet last night —

But last night was another year, and the new begins in a better mood. I have shaken off the idiotic mawkishness of last night, and am more like what Father used to tell me to be when I was a mite of a girl: "A cheerful Ruth Privet, as right as a trivet." Though to be sure I do not know what being as right as a trivet is, any more than I did then. Last night, it is true, there were

alleviating circumstances that might have been urged. For a week it had been drizzly, unseasonable weather that took all the snap out of a body's mental fibre; Mother had had one of her bad days, when the pain seemed too dreadful to bear, patient angel that she is; Kathie Thurston had been in one of her most despairing fits; and the Old Year looked so dreary behind, the New Year loomed so hopeless before, that there was some excuse for a girl who was tired to the bone with watching and worry if she did not feel exactly cheerful. I cannot allow, though, that it justified her in crying like a watering-pot, and smudging the pages of her diary until the whole thing was blurred like a composition written with tears in a primary school. I certainly cannot let this sort of thing happen again, and I am thoroughly ashamed that it happened once. I will remember that the last day Father lived he said he could trust me to be brave both for Mother and myself; and that I promised, – I promised.

So last night may go, and be forgotten as soon as I can manage to forget it. To-night things are different. There has been a beautiful snow-fall, and the air is so crisp that when I went for a walk at sunset it seemed impossible ever to be sentimentally weak-kneed again; Mother is wonderfully comfortable; and the New Year began with a letter to say that George will be at home to-morrow. Mother is asleep like a child, the fire is in the best of spirits, and does the purring for itself and for Peter, who is napping with content expressed by every hair to the tip of his fluffy white tail. Even Hannah is singing in the kitchen a hymn

that she thinks is cheerful, about

"Sa-a-a-acred, high, e-ter-er-er-nal noon."

It is evident that there is every opportunity to take a fresh start, and to conduct myself in the coming year with more self-respect.

So much for New Year resolutions. I do not remember that I ever made one before; and very likely I shall never make one again. Now I must decide something about Kathie. I tried to talk with Mother about her, but Mother got so excited that I saw it would not do, and felt I must work the problem out with pen and paper as if it were a sum in arithmetic. It is not my business to attend to the theological education of the minister's daughter, especially as it is the Methodist minister's daughter, and he, with his whole congregation, thinks it rather doubtful whether it is not sinful for Kathie even to know so dangerous an unbeliever. I sometimes doubt whether my good neighbors in Tuskamuck would regard Tom Paine himself, who, Father used to say, lingers as the arch-heretic for all rural New England, with greater theological horror than they do me. It is fortunate that they do not dislike me personally, and they all loved Father in spite of his heresies. In this case I am not clear, on the other hand, that it is my duty to stand passive and see, without at least protesting, a sensitive, imaginative, delicate child driven to despair by the misery and terror of a creed. If Kathie had not come to me it would be different; but she has come. Time after time this poor little, precocious, morbid creature has run to me in such terror of hell-fire that I verily feared she would end by

going frantic. Ten years old, and desperate with conviction of original sin; and this so near the end of the nineteenth century, so-called of grace! Thus far I have contented myself with taking her into my arms, and just loving her into calmness; but she is getting beyond that. She is finding being petted so delightful that she is sure it must be a sin. She is like what I can fancy the most imaginative of the Puritan grandmothers to have been in their passionate childhood, in the days when the only recognized office of the imagination was to picture the terrors of hell. I so long for Father. If he were alive to talk to her, he could say the right word, and settle things. The Bible is very touching in its phrase, "as one whom his mother comforteth," but to me "whom his father comforteth" would have seemed to go even deeper; but then, there is Kathie's father, whose tenderness is killing her. I don't in the least doubt that he suffers as much as she does; but he loves her too much to risk damage to what he calls "her immortal soul." There is always a ring of triumph in his voice when he pronounces the phrase, as if he already were a disembodied spirit dilating in eternal and infinite glory. There is something finely noble in such a superstition.

All this, however, does not bring me nearer to the end of my sum, for the answer of that ought to be what I shall do with Kathie. It would never do to push her into a struggle with the creeds, or to set her to arguing out the impossibility of her theology. She is too young and too morbid, and would end by supposing that in reasoning at all on the matter she had

committed the unpardonable sin. Her father would not let her read stories unless they were Sunday-school books. Perhaps she might be allowed some of the more entertaining volumes of history; but she is too young for most of them. She should be reading about Red Riding-hood, and the White Cat, and the whole company of dear creatures immortal in fairy stories. I will look in the library, and see what there may be that would pass the conscientiously searching ordeal of her father's eye. If she can be given anything which will take her mind off of her spiritual condition for a while, that is all that may be done at present. I'll hunt up my old skates for her, too. A little more exercise in the open air will do a good deal for her humanly, and perhaps blow away some of the theology.

Later. Hannah has been in to make her annual attack on my soul. I had almost forgotten her yearly missionary effort, so that when she appeared I said with the utmost cheerfulness and unconcern, "What is it, Hannah?" supposing that she wanted to know something about breakfast. I could see by the instant change in her expression that she regarded this as deliberate levity. She was so full of what she had come to say that it could not occur to her that I did not perceive it too.

Dear old Hannah! her face has always so droll an expression of mingled shyness and determination when, as she once said, she clears her skirts of blood-guiltiness concerning me. She stands in the doorway twisting her apron, and her formula is always the same: —

"Miss Ruth, I thought I'd take the liberty to say a word to you on this New Year's day."

"Yes, Hannah," I always respond, as if we had rehearsed the dialogue. "What is it?"

"It's another year, Miss Ruth, and your peace not made with God."

To me there is something touching in the fidelity with which she clings to the self-imposed performance of this evidently painful duty. She is distressfully shy about it, – she who is never shy about anything else in the world, so far as I can see. She feels that it is a "cross for her to bear," as she told me once, and I honor her for not shirking it. She thinks I regard it far more than I do. She judges my discomfort by her own, whereas in truth I am only uncomfortable for her. I never could understand why people are generally so afraid to speak of religious things, or why they dislike so to be spoken to about them. I mind Hannah's talking about my soul no more than I should mind her talking about my nose or my fingers; indeed, the little flavor of personality which would make that unpleasant is lacking when it comes to discussion about intangible things like the spirit, and so on the whole I mind the soul-talk less. I suppose really the shyness is part of the general reticence all we New Englanders have that makes it so hard to speak of anything which is deeply felt. Father used to say, I remember, that it was because folk usually have a great deal of sentiment about religion and very few ideas, and thus the difficulty of bringing their expression up to their feelings

necessarily embarrasses them.

I assured Hannah I appreciated all her interest in my welfare, and that I would try to live as good a life during the coming year as I could; and then she withdrew with the audible sigh of relief that the heavy duty was done with for another twelvemonth. She assured me she should still pray for me, and if I do not suppose that there is any great efficacy in her petition, I am at least glad that she should feel like doing her best in my behalf. Mother declares that she is always offended when a person offers to pray for her. She looks at it as dreadfully condescending and patronizing, as if the petitioner had an intimate personal hold upon the Almighty, and was willing to exert his influence in your behalf. But I hardly think she means it. She never fails to see when a thing is kindly meant, even if she has a keen sense of the ludicrous. At any rate, it does us no harm that kindly petitions are offered for us, even if they may go out into an unregarding void; and I am not sure that they do.

January 2. Kathie is delighted with the skates, and she does not think that her father will object to her having them; so there is at least one point gained.

We have had such a lovely sunset! I do not see how there can be a doubter in a world where there are so many beautiful things. The whole west, through the leafless branches of the elms on the south lawn, was one gorgeous mass of splendid color. I hope George saw it. It is almost time for him to be here, and I have caught myself humming over and over his favorite tunes as

I waited. Mother has had a day of uneasiness, so that I could not leave her much, but rubbing her side for an hour or two relieved her. It has cramped my fingers a little, so that I write a funny, stiff hand. Poor Mother! It made me ashamed to be so glad in my heart as I saw how brave and quiet she was, with the lines of pain round her dear mouth.

Later. "How long is it that we have been engaged?"

That is what George asked me, and out of all the long talk we had this evening this is the one thing which I keep hearing over and over. Why should it tease me so? It is certainly a simple question, and when two persons have been engaged six years there need no longer be any false sensitiveness about things of this sort. About what sort? Do I mean that the time has come when George would not mind hurting my feelings? It may as well come out. As Father used to say: "You cannot balance the books until the account is set down in full." Well, then, I mean that there is a frankness about a long engagement which may not be in a short one, so that when George and I meet after a separation it is natural that almost the first question should be, —

"How long is it that we have been engaged?"

The question is certainly an innocent one, – although one would think George might have answered it himself. How much did the fact that he talked afterward so eagerly about the Miss West he met while at his aunt's, and of how pretty she is, have to do with the pain which the question gave me? At my age one might think that I was beyond the jealousies of a school-girl.

We have been engaged six years and four months and five days. It is not half the time that Jacob served for Rachel, although it is almost the time he bowed his neck to the yoke for Leah, and I am afraid lest I am nearer to being like the latter than the former. I always pitied Leah, for she must have understood she had not her husband's love; any woman would perceive that. Six years – and life is so short! Poor George, it has not been easy for him! He has not even been able to wish that the obstacle between us was removed, since that obstacle is Mother. Surely she is my first duty; and since she needs me day and night, I cannot divide my life; but I do pity George. He is wearing out his youth with that old frump of a housekeeper, who makes him uncomfortable with an ingenuity that seems to show intellectual force not to be suspected from anything else. But she is a faithful old soul, and it is not kind to abuse her.

"How long is it that we have been engaged?"

I have a tendency to keep on writing that over and over all down the page as if this were the copy-book of a child at school. How Tom used to admire my writing-books in our school-days! His were always smudged and blotted. He is too big-souled and manly to niggle over little things; and he laughed at the pains I took, turning every corner with absurd care. He was so strong and splendid on the ice when we went skating over on Getchell's Pond; and how often and often he has drawn me all the way home on my sled!

But all that was ages and ages ago, and long before I even knew

George. It never occurred to me until to-night, but I am really growing old. The birthdays that Tom remembered, and on which he sent me little bunches of Mayflowers, have not in the least troubled me or seemed too many. I have not thought much of birthdays of late years, but to-night I realize that I am twenty-nine, and that George has asked me, —

"How long is it that we have been engaged?"

January 7. Sackcloth and ashes have been my portion for days, and if I could by tearing from my diary the last leaves blot out of remembrance the foolish things I have written, it would be quickly done. My New Year's resolutions were even less lasting than are those in the jokes of the comic papers; and I am ashamed all through and through. I have tried to reason myself into something resembling common sense, but I am much afraid I have not yet entirely accomplished it. I have said to myself over and over that it would be the best thing for George if he did fall in love with that girl he saw at Franklin, and go his way without wasting more time waiting for me. He has wasted years enough, and it is time for him to be happy. But then – has he not been happy? Or is it that I have been so happy myself I have not realized how the long engagement was wearying him? He must have wearied, or he could never have asked me —

No, I will not write it!

January 8. George came over last night, and was so loving and tender that I was thoroughly ashamed of all the wicked suspicions I have had. After all, what was there to suspect? I

almost confessed to him what a miserable little doubter I had been; but I knew that confession would only be relieving my soul at the expense of making him uncomfortable. I hated to have him think me better than I am; but this, I suppose, is part of the penalty I ought to pay for having been so weak.

Besides, – probably it was only my weakness in another form, the petty jealousy of a small soul and a morbid fancy, – he seemed somehow more remote than I have ever known him, and I could not have told him if I would. We did not seem to be entirely frank with each other, but as if each were trying to make the other feel at ease when it was not really possible. Of course I was only attributing my own feelings to him, for he was dearly good.

He told me more about his visit to Franklin, and he seems to have seen Miss West a good deal. She is a sort of cousin of the Watsons, he says, and so they had a common ground. When she found that he lived so near to the Watsons she asked him all kinds of questions. She has never seen them, having lived in the West most of her life, and was naturally much interested in hearing about her relatives. I found myself leading him on to talk of her. I cannot see why I should care about this stranger. Generally I deal very little in gossip. Father trained me to be interested in real things, and meaningless details about people never attracted me. Yet this girl sticks in my mind, and I am tormented to know all about her. It cannot be anything he said; though he did say that she is very pretty. Perhaps it was the way in which he said it. He seemed to my sick fancy to like to talk of her. She must

be a charming creature.

January 9. Why should he not like to talk of a pretty girl? I hope I am not of the women who cannot bear to have a man use his eyes except to see their graces. It is pitiful to be so small and mean. I certainly want George to admire goodness and beauty, and to be by his very affection for me the more sensitive to whatever is admirable in others. If I am to be worthy of being his wife, I must be noble enough to be glad at whatever there is for him to rejoice in because of its loveliness: and yet as I write down all these fine sentiments I feel my heart like lead! Oh, I am so ashamed of myself!

January 10. Miss Charlotte came in this afternoon, looking so thin, and cold, and tall, that I have been rather sober ever since.

"I wish I had on shoes with higher heels," I said to her as we shook hands; "then perhaps I shouldn't feel so insignificant down here."

She looked down at me, laughing that rich, throaty laugh of hers.

"Mother always used to say she knew the Kendalls couldn't have been drowned in the Flood," she answered, "for they must all have been tall enough to wade to Mt. Ararat."

"You know the genealogy so far back that you must be able to tell whether she was right."

"I don't go quite so far as that," she said, sitting down by the fire, "but I know that my great-great-grandfather married a Privet, so that I always considered Judge Privet a cousin."

"If Father was a cousin, I must be one too," said I.

"You are the same relation to me on one side," Miss Charlotte went on, "that Deacon Webbe is on the other. It's about fortieth cousin, you see, so that I can count it or not, as I please."

"I am flattered that you choose to count us in," I told her, smiling; "and I am sure also you must be willing to count in anybody so good as Deacon Webbe."

"Yes, Deacon Webbe is worth holding on to, though he's so weak that he'd let the shadow of a mosquito bully him. The answer to the question in the New England Primer, 'Who is the meekest man?' ought to be 'Deacon Webbe.' He used up all the meekness there was in the whole family, though."

"I confess that I never heard Mrs. Webbe called meek," I assented.

"Meek!" sniffed Miss Charlotte; "I should think not. A wasp is a Sunday-school picnic beside her. While as for Tom" —

She pursed up her lips with an expression of disapproval so very marked I was afraid at once that Tom Webbe must have been doing something dreadful again, and my heart sank for his father.

"But Tom has been doing better," I said. "This winter he" —

"This winter!" she exclaimed. "Why, just now he is worse than ever."

"Oh, dear," I asked, "what is it now? His father has been so unhappy about him."

"If he'd made Tom unhappy it would have been more to the

purpose. Tom's making himself the town talk with that Brownrig girl."

"What Brownrig girl?"

"Don't you know about the Brownrigs that live in that little red house on the Rim Road?"

"I know the red house, and now that you say the name, I remember I have heard that such a family have moved in there. Where did they come from?"

"Oh, where do such trash come from ever?" demanded Miss Charlotte. "I'm afraid nobody but the Old Nick could tell you. They're a set of drunken, disreputable vagabonds, that turned up here last year. They were probably driven out of some town or other. Tom's been" —

But I did not wish to hear of Tom's misdeeds, and I said so. Miss Charlotte laughed, as usual.

"You never take any interest in wickedness, Ruth," she said good-naturedly. "That's about the only fault I have to find with you."

Poor Deacon Webbe! Tom has made him miserable indeed in these years since he came from college. The bitterness of seeing one we love go wrong must be unbearable, and when we believe that the consequences of wrong are to be eternal – I should go mad if I believed in such a creed. I would try to train myself to hate instead of to love; or, if I could not do this – But I could not believe anything so horrible, so that I need not speculate. Deacon Daniel is a saint, though of course he does not dream

of such a thing. A saint would not be a saint, I suppose, who was aware of his beatitude, and the deacon's meekness is one of his most marked attributes of sanctity. I wonder whether, in the development of the race, saintliness will ever come to be compatible with a sense of humor. A saint with that persuasively human quality would be a wonderfully compelling power for good. Deacon Daniel is a fine influence by his goodness, but he somehow enhances the desirability of virtue in the abstract rather than brings home personally the idea that his example is to be followed; and all because he is so hopelessly without a perception of the humorous side of existence. But why do I go on writing this, when the thought uppermost in my mind is the grief he will have if Tom has started again on one of his wild times. I do hope that Miss Charlotte is mistaken! So small a thing will sometimes set folk to talking, especially about Tom, who is at heart so good, though he has been wild enough to get a bad name.

January 11. Things work out strangely in this world; so that it is no wonder all sorts of fanciful beliefs are made out of them. There could hardly be a web more closely woven than human life. To-day, when I had not seen Tom for months, and when the gossip of last night made me want to talk with him, chance brought us face to face.

Mother was so comfortable that I went out for an hour. The day was delightful, cold enough so that the walking was dry and the snow firm, but the air not sharp to the cheek. The sun was warm and cheery, and the shadows on the white fields had a

lovely softness. I went on in a sort of dream, it was so good to be alive and out of doors in such wonderful weather. I turned to go down the Rim Road, and it was not until I came in sight of the red house that I remembered what Miss Charlotte said last night. Then I began to think about Tom. Tom and I have always been such good friends. I used to understand Tom better in the old school-days than the others did, and he was always ready to tell me what he thought and felt. Nowadays I hardly ever see him. Since I became engaged he has almost never come to the house, though he used to be here so much. I meet him only once or twice a year, and then I think he tries to avoid me. I am so sorry to have an old friendship broken off like that. The red house made me think of Tom with a sore heart, of all the talk his wild ways have caused, the sorrow of his father, and the good that is being lost when a fellow with a heart so big as Tom's goes wrong.

Suddenly Tom himself appeared before my very eyes, as if my thought had conjured him up. He came so unexpectedly that at first I could hardly realize how he came. Then it flashed across me that he must have walked round the red house. I suppose he must have come out of a back door somewhere, like one of the family; such folk never use their front doors. He walked along the road toward me, at first so preoccupied that he did not recognize me. When he saw my face, he half hesitated, as if he had almost a mind to turn back, and his whole face turned red. He came on, however, and was going past me with a scant salutation, when I stopped him. I stood still and put out my hand, so that he could

not go by without speaking.

"Good-afternoon, Tom," I said. "Isn't it a glorious day?"

He looked about him with a strange air as if he had not noticed, and I saw how heavy and weary his eyes were.

"Yes," he answered, "it is a fine day."

"Where do you keep yourself, Tom?" I went on, hardly knowing what I said, but trying to think what it was best to say. "I never see you, and we used to be such good friends."

He looked away, and moved his lips as if he muttered something; but when I asked what he said, he turned to me defiantly.

"Look here, Ruth, what's the good of pretending? You know I don't go to see you because you're engaged to George Weston. You chose between us, and there's the end of that. What's more, you know that nowadays I'm not fit to go to see anybody that's decent."

"Then it is time that you were," was my answer. "Let me walk along with you. I want to say something."

I turned, and we walked together toward the village. I could see that his face hardened.

"It's no sort of use to preach to me, Ruth," he said, "though your preaching powers are pretty good. I've had so much preaching in my life that I'm not to be rounded up by piety."

I smiled as well as I could, though it made me want to cry to hear the hard bravado of his tone.

"I'm not generally credited with overmuch piety, Tom. The

whole town thinks all the Privets heathen, you know."

"Humph! It's a pity there weren't a few more of 'em."

I laughed, and thanked him for the compliment, and then we went on in silence for a little way. I had to ignore what he said about George, but it did not make it easier to begin. I was puzzled what to say, but the time was short that we should be walking together, and I had to do something.

"Tom," I began, "you may not be very sensitive about old friendships, but I am loyal; and it hurts me that those I care for should be talked against."

"Oh, in a place like Tuskamuck," he returned, at once, I could see, on the defensive, "they'll talk about anybody."

"Will they? Then I suppose they talk about me. I'm sorry, Tom, for it must make you uncomfortable to hear it; unless, that is, you don't count me for a friend any longer."

He threw back his head in the way he has always had. I used to tell him it was like a colt's shaking back its mane.

"What nonsense! Of course they don't talk about you. You don't give folks any chance."

"And you do," I added as quietly as I could.

He looked angry for just the briefest instant, and then he burst into a hard laugh.

"Caught, by Jupiter! Ruth, you were always too clever for me to deal with. Well, then, I do give the gossips plenty to talk about. They would talk just the same if I didn't, so I may as well have the game as the name."

"Does that mean that your life is regulated by the gossips? I supposed that you had more independence, Tom."

He flushed, and stooped down to pick up a stick. With this he began viciously to strike the bushes by the roadside and the dry stalks of yarrow sticking up through the snow. He set his lips together with a grim determination which brought out in his face the look I like least, the resemblance to his mother when she means to carry a point.

"Look here, Ruth," he said after a moment; "I'm not going to talk to you about myself or my doings. I'm a blackguard fast enough; but there's no good talking about it. If you'd cared enough about me to keep me straight, you could have done it; but now I'm on my way to the Devil, and no great way to travel before I get there either."

We had come to the turn of the Rim Road where the trees shut off the view of the houses of the village. I stopped and put my hand on his arm.

"Tom," I begged him, "don't talk like that. You don't know how it hurts. You don't mean it; you can't mean it. Nobody but yourself can send you on the wrong road; and I know you're too plucky to hide behind any such excuse. For the sake of your father, Tom, do stop and think what you are doing."

"Oh, father'll console himself very well with prayers; and anyway he'll thank God for sending me to perdition, because if God does it, it must be all right."

"Don't, Tom! You know how he suffers at the way you go on.

It must be terrible to have an only son, and to see him flinging his life away."

"It isn't my fault that I'm his son, is it?" he demanded. "I've been dragged into this infernal life without being asked whether I wanted to come or not; and now I'm here, I can't have what I want, and I'm promised eternal damnation hereafter. Well, then, I'll show God or the Devil, or whoever bosses things, that I can't be bullied into a molly-coddle!"

The sound of wheels interrupted us, and we instinctively began to walk onward in the most commonplace fashion. A farmer's wagon came along, and by the time it had passed we had come to the head of the Rim Road, in full sight of the houses. Tom waited until I turned to the right, toward home, and then he said, —

"I'm going the other way. It's no use, Ruth, to talk to me; but I'm obliged to you for caring."

I cannot see that I did any good, and very likely I have simply made him more on his guard to avoid giving me a chance; but then, even if I had all the chance in the world, what could I say to him? And yet, Tom is so noble a fellow underneath it all. He is honest and kind, and strong in his way; only between his father's meekness and his mother's sharpness – for she is sharp – he has somehow come to grief. They have tried to make him religious so that he would be good; and he is of the sort that must be good or he will not be religious. He cannot be pressed into a mould of orthodoxy, and so in the end – But it cannot be the end. Tom must somehow come out of it.

January 13. When George came in to-night I was struck at once with the look of pleasant excitement in his face.

"What pleases you?" I asked him.

"Pleases me?" he echoed, evidently surprised. "Isn't it a pleasure to see you?"

"But that's not the whole of it," I said. "You've something pleasant to tell me. Oh, I can read you like a book, my dear; so it is quite idle trying to keep a secret from me."

He seemed confused, and I was puzzled to know what was the matter.

"You are too wise entirely," was his reply. "I really hadn't anything to tell."

"Then something good has happened," I persisted; "or you have heard good news."

"What a fanciful girl you are, Ruth," George returned. "Nothing has happened."

He walked away from me, and went to the fire. He was strangely embarrassed, and I could only wonder what I had said to confuse him. I reflected that perhaps he was planning some sort of a surprise, and felt I ought not to pry into his thoughts in this fashion whatever the matter was that interested him. I sat down on the other side of the hearth, and took up some sewing.

"George," I asked, entirely at random, "didn't you say that the Miss West you met at Franklin is a cousin of the Watsons?"

I flushed as soon as I had spoken, for I thought how it betrayed me that in my desire to hit on a new subject I had found

the thought of her so near the surface of my mind. I had not consciously been thinking of her at all, and certainly I did not connect her with George's strangeness of manner. There was something almost weird, it seems to me now, in my putting such a question just then. Perhaps it was telepathy, for she must have been vividly in his thoughts at that moment. He started, flushed as I have never seen him, and turned quickly toward me.

"What makes you think that it was Miss West?"

"Think what was Miss West?" I cried.

I was completely astonished; then I saw how it was.

"Never mind, George," I went on, laughing and putting out my hand to him. "I didn't mean to read your thoughts, and I didn't realize that I was doing it."

"But what made you" —

"I'm sure I don't know," I broke in; and I managed to laugh again. "Only I see now that you know something pleasant about Miss West, and you may as well tell it."

He looked doubtful a minute, studying my face. The hesitation he had in speaking hurt me.

"It's only that she's coming to visit the Watsons," he said, rather unwillingly. "Olivia Watson told me just now."

"Why, that will be pleasant," I answered, as brightly as if I were really delighted. "Now I shall see if she is really as pretty as you say."

I felt so humiliated to be playing a part, – so insincere. Somebody has said the real test of love is to be unwilling to

deceive the loved one, even in the smallest thing. That may be the test of a man's love, but a woman will bear the pain of that very deception to save the man she cares for from disquiet. I am sure it has hurt me as much not to be entirely frank with George as it could have hurt a man; but I could not make him uncomfortable by letting him see that I was disturbed. Yet that he should have been afraid or unwilling to tell me did trouble me. He knows that I am not jealous or apt to take offense. He is always saying that I am too cold to be really in love. It made me feel that the coming of this girl must mean much to him when he feared to speak of it. If he had not thought it a matter of consequence, he would have realized that I should take it lightly.

I am not taking it lightly; but what troubles me is not that she is coming, but that he hesitated to tell me. Something is wrong when George fears to trust me.

January 17. I have seen her. I went to church this morning for that especial reason. Mother was a little astonished at me when I said that I was going.

"Well, Ruth," she said, "you don't have much dissipation, but I didn't suppose that you were so dull you would take to church-going."

"You can never tell," I answered, making a jest of a thing which to me was far from funny. "Mr. Saychase will be sure to conclude I'm under conviction of sin, and come in to finish the conversion."

She looked at me keenly.

"What is the matter, Ruth?" she asked in that soft voice of hers which goes straight to my heart.

"It isn't anything very serious, Mother," I said. "Since you will have the truth, I am going to church to see that Miss West who's visiting the Watsons. George thinks her so pretty that my curiosity is roused to a perfect bonfire."

She did not say more, but I saw the sudden light in her eye. Mother has never felt about George as I have wished. She has never done him justice, and she thinks I idealize him. That is her favorite way of putting it; but this is because she is my mother, and doesn't see how much idealizing there must have been on his side before he could fall in love with me.

Miss West is very pretty. All the time I watched in church I tried to persuade myself that she was not. I meanly and contemptibly sat there finding fault with her face, saying to myself that her nose was too long, her eyes too small, her mouth too big; inventing flaws as if my invention would change the fact. It was humiliating business; and utterly and odiously idiotic. Miss West is pretty; she is more than this, she is wonderfully pretty. There is an appealing, baby look about her big blue eyes which goes straight to one's heart. She looks like a darling child one would want to kiss and shelter from all the hard things of life. I own it all; I realize all that it means; and if in my inmost soul I am afraid, I will not deny what is a fact or try to shut my eyes to the littleness of my feeling about her. Of course George found her adorable. She is. The young men in the congregation all watched

her, and even grim Deacon Richards could not keep his eyes off of her.

She does not have the look of a girl of any especial mind. Her prettiness is after all that of a doll. Her large eyes are of the sort to please a man because of their appealing helplessness; not because they inspire him with new meanings. Her little rosebud lips will never speak wisdom, I am afraid; but in my jealousy I wonder whether most men do not care more for lips which invite kisses than for lips which speak wisdom. I am frankly and weakly miserable. George walked home with me, but he had not two words to say.

I must try to meet this. If George should come to care for her more than for me! If he should, – if by a pretty face he forgets all the years that we have belonged to each other, what is there to do? I cannot yet believe that it is best for him; but if it will make him happy, even if he thinks that it will, what is there for me but to make it as easy for him as I may? He certainly would not be happy to marry me and love somebody else. He cannot leave me without pain; that I am sure. I shall show my love for him more truly if I spare him the knowledge of what it must cost me.

But what mawkish nonsense all this is! A man may admire a pretty face, and yet not be ready for it to leave behind all that has been dear to him. Oh, if he had not asked me that question when he came back from Franklin! I cannot get it out of my mind that even if he was not conscious of it, it meant he still was secretly tired of his long engagement; that he was at least

dreaming of what he would do if he were free. He shall not be bound by any will of mine; and if his heart has gone out to this beautiful creature, I must bear it as nobly as I can. Father used to say, – and every day I go back more and more to what he said to me, – "What you cannot at need sacrifice nobly you are not worthy to possess."

January 18. I have had a note which puzzles me completely. Tom Webbe writes to say that he is going away; that I am to forgive him for the shame of having known him, and that his address is inclosed in a sealed envelope. I am not to open it unless there is real need. Why should he give his address to me?

January 19. The disconcerting way Aunt Naomi has of coming in without knocking, stealing in on feet made noiseless by rubbers, brought her into the sitting-room last night while I was mooning in the twilight, and meditating on nothing in particular. I knew her slow fashion of opening the door, "like a burglar at a cupboard," as Hannah says, – so that I was able to compose my face into an appropriate smile of welcome before she was fairly in.

"Sitting here alone?" was her greeting.

"Mother is asleep," I answered, "and I was waiting for her to wake."

Aunt Naomi seated herself in the stiffest chair in the room, and began to swing her foot as usual.

"Deacon Daniel's at it again," she observed dispassionately.

I smiled a little. It always amuses me that the troubles of the

church should be so often brought to me who am an outsider. Aunt Naomi arrives about once a month on the average, with complaints about something. They are seldom of any especial weight, but it seems to relieve her to tell her grievances.

"Which Deacon Daniel?" I asked, to tease her a little.

"Deacon Richards, of course. You know that well enough."

"What is it now?"

"He won't have any fire in the vestry," she answered.

"Why not let somebody else take care of the vestry then, if you want a fire?"

"You don't suppose," was her response, with a chuckle, "that he'd give up the key to anybody else, do you?"

"I should think he'd be glad to."

"He'll hold on to that key till he dies," retorted Aunt Naomi with a sniff; "and I shouldn't be surprised if he had it buried with him. He wouldn't lose the chance of making folks uncomfortable."

"Oh, come, Aunt Naomi, you are always so hard on Deacon Richards," I protested. "He is always good-natured with me."

"I wish you'd join the church, then, and see if you can't keep him in order. Last night it was so cold at prayer-meeting that we were all half frozen, and Mr. Saychase had to dismiss the meeting. Old lady Andrews spoke up in the coldest part of it, when we were all so chilled that we couldn't speak, and she said in that little, high voice of hers: 'The vestry is very cold to-night, but I trust that our hearts are warm with the love of Christ.'"

I laughed at the picture of the half-frozen prayer-meeting, and dear old lady Andrews coming to the rescue with a pious jest; it was so characteristic.

"But has anybody spoken to Deacon Richards?" I asked.

"You can't speak to him," she responded, wagging her foot with a violence that seemed to speak celestial anger within. "I try to after every prayer-meeting; but he has the lights out before I can say two words. I can't stay there in the dark with him; and the minute he gets me outside he locks the door, and posts off like a streak."

"Why not go down to his mill in broad daylight?" I suggested.

"Oh, he'd stick close to the grinding-thing just so he couldn't hear, and I'm afraid of being pitched into the hopper," she said, laughing. "You must speak to him. He pays some attention to what you say."

"But it's none of my business. I don't go to prayer-meeting."

"But it's your duty to go," she answered, with a shrewd smile that showed that she appreciated her response; "and if you neglect one duty it's no excuse for neglecting another. Besides, you can't be willing to have the whole congregation die of cold."

So in the end it was somehow fixed that I am to remonstrate with Deacon Daniel because the faithful are cold at their devotions. It would seem much simpler for them to stay at home and be warm. They do not, as far as I can see, enjoy going; but they are miserable if they do not go. Their consciences trouble them worse than the cold, poor things. I suppose that I can never

be half thankful enough to Father for bringing me up without a theological conscience. Prayer-meetings seem to be a good deal like salt in the boy's definition of something that makes food taste bad if you don't put it on; prayer-meetings make church-goers uneasy if they do not go. If they will go, however, and if they are better for going, or believe they are better, or if they are only worse for staying away, or suppose they are worse, they should not be expected to sit in a cold vestry in January. Why Deacon Daniel will not have a fire is not at all clear. It may be economy, or it may be a lack of sensitiveness; it may be for some recondite reason too deep to be discovered. I refuse to accept Aunt Naomi's theory that it is sheer obstinacy; and I will beard the deacon in his mill, regardless of the danger of the hopper. At least he generally listens to me.

January 20. Hannah came up for me this evening while I was reading to Mother.

"Deacon Webbe's down in the parlor," she announced. "Says he wants to see you if you're not busy. 'Ll come again if you ain't able to see him."

"Go down, Ruth dear," Mother said at once. "It may be another church quarrel, and I wouldn't hinder you from settling it for worlds."

"But don't you want me to finish the chapter?" I asked. "Church quarrels will generally keep."

"No, dear. I'm tired, and we'll stop where we are. I'll try to go to sleep, if you'll turn the light down."

As I bent over to kiss her, she put up her feeble thin fingers, and touched my cheek lovingly.

"You're a dear girl," she said. "Be gentle with the deacon."

There was a twinkle in her eye, for the idea of anybody's being anything but gentle with Deacon Daniel Webbe is certainly droll enough. Miss Charlotte said the other night that a baby could twist him round its finger and never even know there was anything there; and certainly he must call out the gentle feelings of anybody. Only Tom seemed always somehow to get exasperated with his father's meekness. Poor Tom, I do wonder why he went away!

The deacon dries up by way of growing old. I have not seen him this winter except the other day at church, and then I did not look at him. To-night he seemed worn and sad, and somehow his face was like ashes, it was so lifeless. The flesh has dried to the bones of his face till he looks like a pathetic skull. His voice is not changed, though. It has the same strange note in it that used to affect me as a child; a weird, reedy quality which suggests some vague melancholy flavor not in the least fretful or whining, – a quality that I have never been able to define. I never hear him speak without a sense of mysterious suggestiveness; and I remember confiding to Father once, when I was about a dozen years old, that Deacon Webbe had the right voice to read fairy stories with. Father, I remember, laughed, and said he doubted much if Deacon Daniel knew what a fairy story was, unless he thought it was something wickedly false. Tom's voice

has something of the same quality, but only enough to give a little thrill to his tone when he is really in earnest. There is an amusing incongruity between that odd wind-harp strain in Deacon Webbe's voice and his gaunt New England figure.

"Ruth," the deacon asked, almost before we had shaken hands, "did you know Tom had gone away?"

I was impressed and rather startled by the intensity of his manner, and surprised by the question.

"Yes," I said. "He sent me word he was going."

"Do you know where he has gone?"

"No."

I wondered whether I ought to tell him about the sealed address, but it seemed like a breach of confidence to say anything yet.

"Did he say why he was going?" the deacon asked.

"No," I said again.

The deacon turned his hat over and over helplessly in his knotted hands in silence for a moment. He was so pathetic that I wanted to cry.

"Then you don't know," he said after a moment.

"I only know he has gone."

There was another silence, as if the deacon were pondering on what he could possibly do or say next. Peter, who was pleased for the moment to be condescendingly kind to the visitor, came and rubbed persuasively against his legs, waving a great white plume of tail. Deacon Daniel bent down absently and stroked the

cat, but the troubled look in his face showed how completely his mind was occupied.

"I'm afraid there's something wrong," he broke out at length, with an energy unusual with him; an energy which was suffering rather than power. "I don't know what it is, but I'm afraid it's worse than ever. Oh, Miss Ruth, if you could only have cared for Tom, you'd have kept him straight."

I could only murmur that I had always liked Tom, and that we had been friends all our lives; but the deacon was too much moved to pay attention.

"Of course," he went on, "I hadn't any right to suppose Judge Privet's daughter would marry into our family; but if you had cared for him, Miss Ruth" —

"Deacon Webbe," I broke in, for I could not hear any more, "please don't say such things! You know you mustn't say such things!"

As I think of it, I am afraid I was a little more hysterical than would have been allowed by Cousin Mehitable, but I could not help it. At least I stopped him from going on. He apologized so much that I set to work to convince him I was not offended, which I found was not very easy. Poor Deacon Daniel, he is really heart-broken about Tom, but he has never known how to manage him, or even to make the boy understand how much he loves him. Meekness may be a Christian virtue; but over-meekness is a poor quality for one who has the bringing up of a real, wide-awake, head-strong boy. A little less virtue and a little more common

sense would have made Deacon Webbe a good deal more useful in this world if it did lessen his value to heaven. He is the very salt of the earth, yet he has so let himself be trampled upon that to Tom his humility has seemed weakness. I know, too, Tom has never appreciated his father, and has failed to understand that goodness need not always be in arms to be manly. And so here in a couple of sentences I have come round to the side of the deacon after all. Perhaps in the long run the effect of his goodness, with all its seeming lack of strength, may effect more than sterner qualities.

January 21. I was interrupted last night in my writing to go to Mother; but I have had Deacon Webbe and Tom in my mind ever since. I could not help remembering the gossip about Tom, and the fact that I saw him coming from the red house. I wonder if he has not gone to break away from temptation. In new surroundings he may turn over a new leaf. Oh, I would so like to write to him, and to tell him how much I hope for this fresh start, but I hardly like to open the envelope.

I have been this afternoon to call on Miss West. The Watsons are not exactly of my world, but it seemed kind to go. If you were really honest, Ruth Privet, you would add that you wanted to see what Miss West is like. It is all very well to put on airs of disinterested virtue; but if George had not spoken of this girl it is rather doubtful whether you would have taken the trouble to go to her in your very best bib and tucker, – and you did put on your very best, and wondered while you were doing it whether she

would appreciate the lace scarf you bought at Malta. I understand you wanted to impress her a little, though you did try to make yourself believe that you were only wearing your finest clothes to do honor to her. What a humbug you are!

Olivia Watson came to the door, and asked me into the parlor, where I was left to wait some time before Miss West appeared. I confessed then to myself how I had really half hoped that she would not be in; but now the call is over I am glad to have seen her. I am a little confused, but I know what she is.

She is the most beautiful creature I ever saw. She has a clear color, when she flushes, like a red clover in September, the last and the richest of all the clovers of the year. Then her hair curls about her forehead in such dear little ringlets that it is enough to make one want to kiss her. She speaks with a funny little Western burr to her r's which might not please me in another, but is charming from her lips, the mouth that speaks is so pretty. Yes, George was right.

Of her mind one cannot say quite as much. She is not entirely well bred, it seemed to me; but then we are a little old-fashioned in Tuskamuck. She did notice the scarf, and asked me where I got it.

"Oh," she said, when I had told her, "then you have been abroad."

"Yes," I said, "I went with my father."

"Judge Privet took you abroad several times, didn't he?" Olivia put in.

"Yes; I went with him three times."

"Oh, my!" commented Miss West. "How set up you must feel!"

"I don't think I do," I answered, laughing. "Do you feel set up because you have seen the West that so few of us have visited?"

"Why, I never thought of that," she responded. "You haven't any of you traveled in the West, have you?"

"I haven't, at least."

"But that ain't anything to compare with going abroad," she continued, her face falling; "and going abroad three times, too. I should put on airs all the rest of my life if I'd done that."

It is not fair to go on putting down in black and white things that she said without thinking. I am ashamed of the satisfaction I found myself taking in her commonness. I was even so unfair to her that I could not help thinking that she somehow did not ring true. I wonder if a woman can ever be entirely just to another woman who has been praised by the man she cares for? If not I will be an exception to my sex! I will not be small and mean, just because Miss West is so lovely that no man could see her without – well, without admiring her greatly.

January 22. I went down to the grist-mill this afternoon to see Deacon Daniel, and to represent to him the sufferings of the faithful at frozen prayer-meetings. He was standing in the door of the mill, which was open to the brisk air, and his mealy frock gave a picturesque air to his great figure. He greeted me pleasantly, as he always does.

"I've come on business," I said.

"Your own or somebody's else?" he asked, with a grin.

"Not exactly mine," I admitted.

"What has Aunt Naomi sent you for now?" he demanded.

I laughed at his penetration.

"You are too sharp to be deceived," I said. "Aunt Naomi did send me. They tell me you are trying to destroy the church by freezing them all to death at the prayer-meetings."

"Aunt Naomi can't be frozen. She's too dry."

"That isn't at all a nice thing to say, Deacon Richards," I said, smiling. "You can't cover your iniquities by abusing her."

He showed his teeth, and settled himself against the door-post more comfortably.

"Why didn't she come herself?" he inquired.

"She said that she was afraid you'd pop her into the hopper. You see what a monster you are considered."

"I wouldn't be willing to spoil my meal."

Deacon Daniel likes to play at badinage, and if he had ever had a chance, might have some skill at it. As it is, I like to see how he enjoys it, if I am not always impressed by the wit of what he says.

"Deacon Richards," I said, "why do you freeze the people so in the vestry?"

"I haven't known of anybody's being frozen."

"But why don't you have a fire?" I persisted. "If you don't want to build it, there are boys enough that can be hired."

"How is your mother to-day?" was the only answer the deacon vouchsafed.

"She's very comfortable, thank you. Why don't you have a fire?"

"Makes folks sleepy," he declared; and once more switched off abruptly to another subject. "Did you know Tom Webbe's gone off?"

"Yes."

"Where's he gone?"

"I don't know. Why should I?"

"If you don't know," Deacon Daniel commented, "I suppose nobody does."

"Why don't you have a fire in the vestry?" I demanded, determined to tire him out.

"You asked me that before," he responded, with a grin of delight.

I gave it up then, for I saw that there was nothing to be got out of him in that mood. I looked up at the sky, and saw how the afternoon was waning.

"I must go home," I said. "Mother may want me; but I do wish you would be reasonable about the vestry. I'll give you a load of wood if you'll use it."

"Send the wood, and we'll see," was all the promise I could extract from the dear old tease.

Deacon Daniel was evidently not to be cornered, and I came away without any assurance of amendment on his part. The

faithful will have still to endure the cold, I suppose; but I have made an effort.

What I said to Deacon Richards and what Deacon Richards said to me is not what I sat down to write. I have been lingering over it because I hated to put down what happened to me after I left the mill. Why should I write it? This diary is not a confessional, and nothing forces me to set these things down. I really write it as a penance for the uncharitable mood I have been in ever since. I may as well have my thoughts on paper as to keep turning them over and over in my mind.

I crossed the foot-bridge and turned up Water Street. I went on, pleased by the brown water showing through the broken ice in the mill-flume, and the fantastic bunches of snow in the willows beyond, like queer, white birds. I smiled to myself at the remembrance of Deacon Daniel, and somehow felt warmed toward him, as I always do, despite all his crotchety ways. He radiates kindness of heart through all his gruffness.

Suddenly I saw George coming toward me with Miss West. They did not notice me at first, they were so engaged in talking and laughing together. My mood sobered instantly, but I said to myself that I certainly ought to be glad to see George enjoying himself; and, in any case, a lady does not show her foolish feelings. So I went toward them, trying to look as I had before I caught sight of them. They saw me in a moment, and instantly their laughter stopped. If they had come forward simply and at ease, I should have thought no more about it, I think; but no one

could see their confusion without feeling that they expected me to disapprove. And if they expected me to disapprove, it seems to me they must have been saying things – But probably this is all my imagination and mean jealousy.

"You see I've captured him," Miss West called out in rather a high voice, as we came near each other.

"I have no doubt he was a very willing captive," I answered, smiling, and holding out my hand.

I realize now how I hated to give her my hand, and most certainly her manner was not entirely that of a lady.

"We've been for a long walk," she went on, "and now I suppose I ought to let you have him."

"I couldn't think of taking him. I am only going home."

"But it seems real mean to keep him, after I've had him all the afternoon. I must give him to you."

"I hope he wouldn't be so ungallant as to be given, and leave you to go home alone," I said. "That is not the way we treat strangers in Tuskamuck."

"Oh, you mustn't call me a stranger," Miss West responded, twisting her head to look up into George's face. "I'm really in love with the place, and I should admire to live here all the rest of my life."

To this I had nothing to say. George had not spoken a word. I could not look at him, but I moved on now. I felt that I must get away from this girl, with her strange Western speech, and her familiar manner.

"Good-by," I said. "Mother will want me, and I mustn't linger any longer."

I managed to smile until I had left them, but the tears would come as I hurried up the hill toward home. Oh, how can I bear it!

January 23. The happiness of George is the thing which should be considered. In any case I am helpless. I can only wait, in woman's fashion. Even if I were convinced he would be happier and better with me, – and how can I tell that? – what is there I could do? My duty is by mother's sick-bed, and even if my pride would let me struggle for the possession of any man, I am not free to try even that degrading conflict. I should know, moreover, that any man saved in spite of himself would be apt to look back with regret to the woman he was saved from. Jean Ingelow's "Letter L" is not often repeated in life, I am afraid. Still, if one could be sure that it is a danger and he were saved, this might be borne. If it were surely for his good to think less of me, I might bear it somehow, hard as it would be. But my hands are tied. There is nothing for me but waiting.

January 24. George met Kathie last night as she was coming here, and sent word that he had to drive over to Canton. I thought it odd for him to send me such a message instead of coming himself, for he had not seen me since I met him in the street with Miss West. To-day Aunt Naomi came in, and the moment I saw her I knew that she had something to say that it would not be pleasant to hear.

"What's George Weston taking that West girl over to Canton

for?" she asked.

It was like a stab in the back, but I tried not to flinch.

"Why shouldn't he take her?" I responded.

Aunt Naomi gave a characteristic sniff, and wagged her foot violently.

"If he wants to, perhaps he should," she answered enigmatically.

The subject dropped there, but I wonder a little why she put it that way.

January 26. Our engagement is broken. George is gone, and the memory of six years, he says, had better be wiped out.

January 27. I could not tell Mother to-day. By the time I got my courage up it was afternoon, and I feared lest she should be too excited to sleep to-night. To-morrow morning she must know.

II
FEBRUARY

February 1. I wonder sometimes if human pride is not stronger than human affection. Certainly it seems sometimes that we feel the wound to vanity more than the blow to love. I suppose that the truth is that the little prick stings where the blow numbs. For the moment it seemed to me to-night as if I felt more the sudden knowledge that the village knows of my broken engagement than I did the suffering of the fact; but I shall have forgotten this to-morrow, and the real grief will be left.

Miss Charlotte, tall and gaunt, came in just at twilight. She brought a lovely moss-rose bud.

"Why, Miss Charlotte," I said, "you have never cut the one bud off your moss-rose! I thought that was as dear to you as the apple of your eye."

"It was," she answered with her gayest air. "That's why I brought it."

"Mother will be delighted," I said; "that is, if she can forgive you for picking it."

"It isn't for your mother," Miss Charlotte said, with a sudden softening of her voice; "it is for you. I'm an old woman, you know, and I've whims. It's my whim for you to have the bud because I've watched it growing, and loved it almost as if it were

my own baby."

Then I knew that she had heard of the broken engagement. The sense of the village gossip, the idea of being talked over at the sewing-circle, came to me so vividly and so dreadfully that for a moment I could hardly get my breath. Then I remembered the sweetness of Miss Charlotte's act, and I went to her and kissed her. The poor old dear had tears in her eyes, but she said nothing. She understood, I am sure, that I could not talk, but that I had seen what she meant me to see, her sympathy and her love. We sat down before the fire in the gathering dusk, and talked of indifferent things. She praised Peter's beauty, although the ungrateful Peter refused to stay in her lap, and would not be gracious under her caresses. She did not remain long, and she was gay after her fashion. Miss Charlotte is apt to cover real feeling with a decent veil of facetiousness.

"Now I must go home and get my party ready," she said, rising with characteristic suddenness.

"Are you going to have a party?" I asked in some surprise.

"I have one every night, my dear," she returned, with her explosive laugh. "All the Kendall ghosts come. It isn't very gay, but it's very select."

She hurried away, and left me more touched than I should have wished her to see.

February 2. It was well for me that Miss Charlotte's visit prepared me last night, for to-day Kathie broke in upon me with the most childish frankness.

"Miss Ruth," she burst out, "ain't you going to marry George Weston?"

"No, my dear," I answered; "but you mustn't say 'ain't.'"

"'Aren't,' then. But I thought you promised years and years ago."

"Kathie, dear," said I, "this isn't a thing that you may talk about. You are too young to understand, and it is vulgar to talk to people about their private affairs unless they begin."

"But it's no wronger than" —

"There's no such word as 'wronger,' Kathie."

"No worse than to break one's word, is it?"

"When two persons make an agreement they have a right to unmake it if they change their minds; and that is not breaking their word. How do the skates work?"

"All right," Kathie answered; "but father said that you and George Weston" —

"Kathie," I said as firmly as I could, "I have told you before that you must not repeat what your father says."

"It isn't wrong," she returned rather defiantly.

I was surprised at her manner, but I suppose that she is always fighting with her conscience about right and wrong, so the mere idea makes her aggressive.

"I am not so sure," I told her, trying to turn the whole matter off with a laugh. "I don't think it's very moral to be ill bred. Do you?"

"Why, Father says manners don't matter if the heart is right."

"This is only another way of saying that if the heart is right the manners will be right. If you in your heart consider whether your father would wish you to tell me what he did not say for my ears, you will not be likely to say it."

That sounds rather priggish now it is written down, but I had to stop the child, and I could not be harsh with her. She evidently wanted much to go on with the subject, but I would not hear another word. How the town must be discussing my affairs!

February 5. Mother is certainly growing weaker, and although Dr. Wentworth will not admit to me that she is failing, I am convinced that he thinks so. She has been telling me this afternoon of things which she wishes given to this and that relative or friend.

"It will not make me any more likely to die, Ruth," she said, "and I shall feel more comfortable if I have these things off my mind. I've thought them out, and if you'll put them on paper, then I shall feel perfectly at liberty to forget them if I find it too much trouble to remember."

I put down the things which she told me, trying hard not to let her see how the tears hindered my writing. When I had finished she lay quiet for some time, and then she said, —

"May I say one thing, Ruth, about George?"

She has said nothing to me before except comforting words to show me that she felt for me, and that she knew I could not bear to talk about it.

"You know you may," I told her, though I confess I shrank at

the thought.

"I know how it hurts you now," she said, "and for that I am grieved to the heart; but Ruth, dear, I can't help feeling that it is best after all. You are too much his superior to be happy with him. You would try to make him what you think he ought to be, and you couldn't do it. The stuff isn't in him. He'd get tired of trying, and you would be so humiliated for him that in the end I'm afraid neither of you would be happy."

She stopped, and rested a little, and then went on.

"I am afraid I don't comfort you much," she said, with a sigh. "I suppose that that must be left to time. But I want you to remember it is much less hard for me to leave you alone than it would have been to go with the feeling that you were to make a mistake that would hamper and sadden your whole life."

The tears came into her eyes, and she put out her dear, shadowy hand so feebly that I could not bear it. I dropped on my knees by the bed, and fell to sobbing in the most childish way. Mother patted my head as if I were the baby I was acting.

"There, there, Ruth," she said; "the Privets, as your father would have said, do not cry over misfortunes; they live them down."

She is right; and I must not break down again.

February 7. There are times when I seem like a stranger visiting myself, and I most inhospitably wish that this guest would go. I must determine not to think about my feelings; or, rather, without bothering to make resolutions, I must stop thinking about

myself. The way to do it, I suppose, is to think about others; and that would be all very well if it were not that the others I inevitably think about are George and Miss West. I cannot help knowing that he is with her a great deal. Somehow it is in the air, and comes to me against my will. If I go out, I cannot avoid seeing them walking or driving together. I am afraid that George's law business must suffer. I should never have let him neglect it so for me. Perhaps I am cold-blooded.

What Mother said to me the other day has been much in my thoughts. I wonder how it was ever possible for me to be engaged to a man of whom neither Father nor Mother entirely approved. To care for him was something I could not help; I am sure of that. But the engagement is another matter. It came about very naturally after his being here so much in Father's last illness. George was so kind and helpful about the business that we were all full of gratitude, and in my blindness I did not perceive how Mother really felt. I realize now it was his kindness to Father, and the relief his help brought to Mother, which made it hard for her to say then that she did not approve of the engagement; and so soon after she became a helpless invalid that things went on naturally in their own course.

I am sure that if Mother could have known George as I have known him, she would have cared for him. She has hardly seen him in all these years. She hopes that I will forget, but I should be poorer if I could. One does not leave off loving just because circumstances alter. He is free to go his way, but that does not

make me any the less his if there is any virtue in my being so.

February 8. I met Mrs. Webbe in the street to-day, her black eyes brighter, more piercing, more snapping than ever. She came up to me in her quick, jerky way, stopped suddenly, tall and strong, and looked at me as if she were trying to read some profound secret, hid in the very bottom of my soul. I could never by any possibility be half so mysterious as Mrs. Webbe's looks seemed to make me.

"Do you write to Tom?" she demanded.

"I don't even know where he is," I answered.

"Then you don't write to him?"

"No."

"That's a pity," Mrs. Webbe went on, her eyes piercing me so that they almost gave me a sensation of physical discomfort. "He ought to know."

I looked at her a moment in silence, thinking she might explain her enigmatic words.

"To know what?" I asked at length.

"About you and George Weston," she responded, nodding her head emphatically; "but if you don't know where he is, that's the whole of it. Good-day."

She was gone before I could gather my wits to tell her that the news could make no difference to Tom. In discussing my separation from George I suppose the village gossips – But I will not be unkind because I am unhappy. I know, and know with sincere pain, that Deacon and Mrs. Webbe believe that I could

have saved Tom if I had been willing to marry him. I have cared for Tom from girlhood, and I am fond of him now, in spite of all that has happened to show how weak he is; but it would be wicked for him to be allowed to suppose the breaking of my engagement makes any difference in our relations. He cannot be written to, however, so I need not trouble.

February 10. Miss West has gone back to Franklin, but I do not see that this makes any especial difference to me. Aunt Naomi told me this afternoon, evidently thinking that I should wish to hear it, and evidently, too, trying not to let me see that she regarded it as more than an ordinary bit of news. I only wonder how long it will be before George will follow her. Oh, I do hope she will make him happy!

February 12. The consequence of my being of no religion seems to be that I am regarded as a sort of neutral ground by persons of all religions, where they may air their theological troubles. Now it is a Catholic who asks advice. Perhaps I had better set up as a consulting something or other. Mediums are the only sort of female consulting things that I think of, and they are so far from respectable that I could not be a medium; but I shall have to invent a name to call myself by, if this goes much further.

This time it is Rosa. Rosa is as devout a little superstitious body as I ever saw. She firmly believes all that her church teaches her, and she believes all sorts of queer things besides. I wonder sometimes that her small mind, which never can remember to lay the table properly, can hold in remembrance all the droll

superstitions she shiveringly accepts. Perhaps the reason why she is so inefficient a servant, and is so constantly under the severe blight of Hannah's awful disapproval, is that her mental faculties are exhausted in remembering signs and omens. I've no right to make fun of her, however, for I don't like to spill salt myself!

The conundrum which Rosa brings to me is not one which it is easy to handle. She believes that her church has the power of eternal life and death over her, and she wishes, in defiance of her church's prohibition, to marry a divorced man. She declares that unless she can marry Ran Gargan her heart will be broken into the most numerous fragments, and she implores me to devise a method by which she can accomplish the difficult feat of getting the better of the church.

"Sure, Miss Privet," she said in the most naïve way in the world, "you're that clever that ye could invint a way what would get round Father O'Rafferty; he's no that quick at seein' things."

I suspect, from something the child let fall, that Hannah, with genuine righteous hatred of the Scarlet Woman, had urged Rosa to fly in the face of her church, and marry Ran. Hannah would regard it as a signal triumph of grace if Rosa could be so far persuaded to disobey the tenets of Catholicism. I can understand perfectly Hannah's way of looking at the matter; but I have no more against Rosa's church than I have against Hannah's, so this view does not appeal to me.

"Rosa," I said, "don't you believe in your church?"

She broke into voluble protestations of her entire faithfulness,

and seemed inclined to feel that harm might come to her from some unseen malevolence if such charges were made so as to be heard by spying spirits.

"Then I don't see why you come to me," I said. "If you are a good Catholic, I should think that that settled the matter."

"But I thought you'd think of some way of gettin' round it," she responded, beginning to cry. "Me heart is broke for Ran, an' it is himsilf that'll go to the bad if I don't have him."

Poor little ignorant soul! How could one reason with her, or what was there to say? I could only try to show her that she could not be happy if she did the thing that she knew to be wrong.

"But what for is ye tellin' me that, when ye don't belave it's wrong?" she demanded, evidently aggrieved.

"I do think it is wrong to act against a church in which you believe," I said.

I am afraid I did not in the least comfort her, for she went away with an air in which indignation was mingled with disappointment.

February 15. Rosa is all right. She told me to-day, fingering her apron and blushing very prettily, that she saw Dennis Maloney last night, and was engaged to him already. He has, it seems, personal attractions superior to those of Ran, and Rosa added that on the whole she prefers a first-hand husband.

"So I'm obliged to ye for yer advisin' me to give Ran the go-by," she concluded. "I thought yer would."

I do not know whether the swiftness of the change of

sweethearts or the amazing conclusion of her remarks moved me more.

February 16. Father used to say that Peggy Cole was the proudest thing on the face of the earth, and he would certainly be amused if he could know how her pride has increased. I could not leave Mother this afternoon, and so I sent Rosa down with a pail of soup to the poor old goody. Peggy refused to have it because I did not bring it myself. She wasn't a pauper to have me send her soup, she informed Rosa. I am afraid that Rosa was indiscreet enough to make some remark upon the fact that I carry her food pretty often, for old Peggy said, – I can see her wrinkled old nose turned up in supreme scorn as she brought it out, – "That's different. When Miss Ruth brings me a little thing now and then, – and it ain't often she'll take that trouble, either! – that's just a friend dropping in with something to make her sure of her welcome!" I shall have to leave everything to-morrow to go and make my peace with Peggy, for the old goose would starve to death before she would take anything from the Overseers of the Poor, and I do not see how she keeps alive, anyway.

February 17. I had a note from George this morning about the Burgess mortgage, and in it he said that he is to be away for a week or two. That means —

But I have no longer any right to speculate about him. It is not my business what it means. Henceforth he must come and go, and I must not even wonder about it.

February 19. I must face the fact that Mother will not be with

me much longer. I can see how she grows weaker, and I can only be thankful that she does not suffer. She speaks of death now and then as calmly as if it were a matter of every-day routine.

"Mrs. Privet," Dr. Wentworth said this morning, "you seem to be no more afraid of death than you are of a sunrise."

"I'm not orthodox enough to be afraid," she answered, with her little quizzical smile.

Dear little Mother, she is so serene, so sweet, so quiet; nothing could be more dignified, and yet nothing more entirely simple. She is dying like a gentlewoman. She lies there as gracious as if she had invited death as a dear friend, and awaited him with the kindliest welcome. The naturalness of it all is what impresses me most. When I am with her it is impossible for me to feel that anything terrible is at hand. She might be going away to pass a pleasant summer visit somewhere; but there is no suspicion of anything dreadful or painful.

It is not that she is indifferent, either, – she has always found life a thing to be glad of.

"I should have liked well enough to stay a while longer to bother you, Ruth," she said, after Dr. Wentworth had gone, "but we must take things as they come. It's better, perhaps; you need a rest."

Dear Mother! She is always so lovely and so wonderful!

February 21. Mother has been brighter to-day, and really seems better. If it will only last! I asked her last night if she expected to see Father. She lay quiet a moment, and then she

turned her face to smile on me before she answered.

"I don't know, Ruth," she said. "I have wondered about that a good deal, and I cannot be sure. If he is alive and knows, then I shall see him. I am sure of that. It is only life that has been keeping us apart. If he is not any more, why, then I shall not be either, and so of course I can't be unhappy. I feel just as he used to when he had you read that translation from something to him the week before he died; the thing that said death could not be an evil, for if we kept on existing we would be no longer bothered by the body, and that if we didn't, it was no matter, for we shouldn't know."

She was still a moment, looking into some great distance with her patient, sunken eyes. Then she smiled again, and said as if to herself, "But I think I shall see him."

February 25. George is married. Aunt Naomi has been in to tell me. She mentioned it as if it were a thing in which I should have no more interest than in any bit of village news. She did not watch me, I remember now, or ask my opinion as she generally does. She was wonderfully tactful and kind; only I can see she thought I ought to know about it, and that the best way was to put the matter bluntly and simply, as if it had no possible sentiment connected with it. When she had done her errand, she went on to make remarks about Deacon Richards and the vestry fires; just what, I do not know, for I could not listen. Then she mercifully went away.

I did not expect it so soon! I knew that it must come, but I

was not prepared for this suddenness. I supposed that I should hear of the engagement, and get used to it; and then come to know the wedding was to be, and so come gradually to the thing itself that shuts George forever out of my life. It is better, it is a thousand times better to have it all over at once. I might have brooded morbidly through the days as they brought nearer and nearer the time when George was to be her husband instead of mine. Now it is done without my knowing. For three days he has been married; and I have only to think of him as the husband of another woman, and try to take it as a matter of course. Whether George has done this because he cares so much for her or not, he has done what is kindest for me. It is like waking from the ether to find that the tooth is out. We may be sick and sore, but the worst is past, and we may begin, slowly perhaps, but really, to recover.

Yet it is so soon! How completely he must be carried away to be so forgetful of all that is past! We were engaged six years; and he marries Miss West after an acquaintance of hardly as many weeks. I wonder if all men are like this. It seems sometimes as if they were not capable of the long, brooding devotion of women. But it is better so, and I would not have him thinking about me. He must be wrapped up in her. I do care most for his happiness, and his happiness now lies in his thinking of her and forgetting all the six years when he was – when I thought he was mine.

I will not moon, and I will not fret. That George has changed does not, of course, alter my feeling. I am sore and hurt; I see life

now restricted in its uses. He has cut me off from the happiness of serving him and helping him as a wife; but as a friend there is still much that I may do. Very likely I can help his wife, – she seems so far short of what his wife should be. For service in all loyalty I belong to him still; and that is the thought which must help me.

February 28. I have already had a chance to do something for George. I hope that I have not been unfair to my friends; but I do not see how I could decide any other way.

Old lady Andrews came in this afternoon, with her snowy curls and cheeks pink from the wind. Almost as soon as she was seated she began with characteristic directness.

"I know you won't mind my coming straight to the point, my dear," she said. "I came to ask you about George Weston's new wife. Do you think we had better call on her?"

The question had come to me before, but I confess I had selfishly thought of it only as a personal matter.

"Mr. Weston's people were hardly of our sort, you know," she continued in her gentle voice, "though of course after your father took him into his office as a student we all felt like receiving him. I never knew him until after that."

"I have seen a good deal of him," I said, wondering if my voice sounded queer; "you know he helped settle the estate."

"It did seem providential," Mrs. Andrews went on, "that his mother did not live, for of course we could hardly have known her. She was a Hardy, you know, from Canton. But I have always

found Mr. Weston a very presentable young man, especially for one of his class. He is really very intelligent."

"As we have received him," I said, "I don't see how we can refuse to receive his wife."

"That's the way I thought you would feel about it," old lady Andrews answered; "but I wished to be sure. As he has been received entirely on account of his connection with your family, I told Aunt Naomi that it ought to be for you to say whether the favor should be extended to his wife. I am informed that she is very pretty, but she is not, I believe, exactly one of our sort."

"She is exceedingly pretty," I assured her. "I have seen her. She is not – Well, I am afraid that she is rather Western, but I shall call."

"Then that settles it. Of course we shall do whatever you decide. I suppose he will bring her to our church. I say 'our,' Ruth, because you really belong to it. You are just a lamb that has found a place with a picket off, and got outside the fold. We shall have you back some time."

"I am afraid," I said laughing, "that I should only disgrace you and injure the fold by pulling a fresh picket off somewhere to get out again."

She laughed in turn, and fluttered her small hands in her delightful, birdlike way.

"I am not afraid of that," she responded. "When the Lord leads you in, He is able to make you want to stay. I hope your mother is comfortable."

So that is settled, and Miss West – Why am I such a coward about writing it? – Mrs. Weston is to be one of us. George will be glad that she is not left out of society.

III
MARCH

March 2. Mother's calmness keeps me ashamed of the hot ache in my heart and the restlessness which makes it so hard for me to keep an outward composure. Hannah is rather shocked that she should be so entirely unmoved in the face of death, and the dear, foolish old soul, steeped in theological asperities from her cradle, must needs believe that Mother is somehow endangering her future welfare by this very serenity.

"Don't you think, Miss Ruth," she said to me yesterday, "that you could persuade your mother to see Mr. Saychase? She'd do it to oblige you."

"But it wouldn't oblige me, Hannah."

"Oh, Miss Ruth, think of her immortal soul!"

"Hannah," I said as gently as I could, she was so distressed, "you know how Mother always felt about those things. It certainly couldn't do any good now to try to alter her opinions, and it would only tire her."

I left Hannah as quickly as I could without hurting her feelings, but I might have known that her conscience would force her to speak to Mother.

"Bless me, Hannah," Mother said to her, "I'm no more wicked because I'm going to die than if I were going to live. I can't help

dying, you know, so I don't feel responsible."

When Hannah tried to go on, and broke down with tears, Mother put out her thin hand, like a sweet shadow.

"Hannah," she said, "I know how you feel, and I thank you for speaking; but don't be troubled. Where there are 'many mansions,' don't you think there may be one even for those who did not see the truth, if they were honest in their blindness?"

March 4. How far away everything else seems when the foot of death is almost at the door! As I sit by the bedside in the long nights, wondering whether he will come before morning, I think of the nights in which I may sometime be waiting for death myself. I wonder whether I shall be as serene and absolutely unterrified as Mother is. It is after all only the terror of the unknown. Why should we be more ready to think of the unknown as dreadful than as delightful? We certainly hail the thought of new experiences in the body; why not out of it? Novelty in itself must give a wonderful charm to that new life, at least for a long time. Think of the pleasure of having youth all over again, for we shall at least be young to any new existence into which we go, just as babies are young to this.

Death is terrible, it seems to me, only when we think of ourselves who are left behind, not when we think of those who go. Life is a thing so beautiful that it may be sad to think of them as deprived of it; but the more beautiful it is, the more I am assured that whatever power made the earth must be able to make something better. If life is good, a higher step in evolution

must be nobler; and however we mourn, none of us would dare to say that our grief is caused by the belief that our friends have through death gone on to sorrow.

March 8. This morning —

March 11. Mother was buried to-day. I have taken out this book to try to set down – to set down what? Not what I have felt since the end came. That is not possible, and if it were, I have not the courage. I suppose the mournful truth is that in the dreadful loneliness which death has left in the house, I got out my diary as a companion. One's own thoughts are forlorn company when they are so sad, but if they are written out they may come to have more reality, and the journal to seem more like another personality. How strange and shameful the weakness is which makes it hard for us to be alone; the feeling that we cannot endure the brooding universe about us unless we have hold of some human hand! Yet we are so small, – the poor, naked, timorous soul, a single fleck of thistle-down tossed about by all the winds which fill the immensities of an infinite universe. Why should we not be afraid? Father would say, "Why should we?" He believed that the universe took care of everything in it, because everything is part of itself. "You've only to think of our own human instinct of self-preservation on a scale as great as you can conceive," he told me the day before he died, "and you get some idea of the way in which the universal must protect the particular." I am afraid that I am not able to grasp the idea as he did. I have thought of it many times, and of how calm and dignified he was in those last

days. I am a woman, and the universe is so great that it turns me cold to think of it. I am able to get comfort out of Father's idea only by remembering how sure he was of it, and how completely real it was to him. Yet Mother was as sure as he. She told me once that not to be entirely at ease would be to dishonor Father's belief, and she was no less serene in the face of death than he was. Yes; it would be to dishonor them both to doubt, and I do not in my heart of hearts; but it is lonely, lonely.

March 12. It is touching to see how human kindness, the great sympathy with what is real and lasting in the human heart, overcomes the narrowness of creeds in the face of the great tragedy of death. Hannah would be horrified at any hint that she wavered in her belief, yet she said to me to-day: —

"Don't you worry about your mother, Miss Ruth. She was a good woman, if her eyes were not opened to the truth as it is in Jesus. Her Heavenly Father'll look after her. I guess she sees things some different now she's face to face with Him; and I believe she had the root of the matter in her somehow, though she hadn't grace given her to let her light shine among men."

Dear old Hannah! She is too loving in her heart not to be obliged to widen her theology when she is brought to the actual application of the awful belief she professes, and she is too human not to feel that a life so patient and so upright as Mother's must lead to eternal peace, no matter what the creed teaches.

March 13. The gray kitten is chasing its tail before the fire, and I have been looking at it and the blazing wood through my tears

until I could bear it no longer. The moonlight is on the snow in the graveyard, and must show that great black patch where the grave is. She cannot be there; she cannot be conscious of the bleak chill of the earth; and the question whether she is anywhere and is conscious at all is in my mind constantly. She must be; she cannot have gone out like a candle-flame. She said to Mr. Saychase, that day Hannah brought him and Mother was too gentle to refuse to see him, that she had always believed God must have far too much self-respect not to take care of creatures He had made, and that she was not in the least troubled, because she did not feel any responsibility about what was to happen after death. She was right, of course; but he was horrified. He began to stammer out something, but Mother stopped him.

"I didn't mean to shock you," she said gently; "but don't you think, Mr. Saychase, I am near enough to the end to have the privilege of saying what I really believe?"

He wouldn't have been human if he could have resisted the voice that said it or the smile that enforced the words. Now she knows. She has found the heart of truth somewhere out there in the sky, which to us looks so wide, so thick with stars which might be abiding-places. She may have met Father. How much he, at least, must have to tell her! Whether he would know about us or not, I cannot decide. In any case I think he would like her to tell him. She is learning wonderful things. Yes; she knows, and I am sure she is glad.

March 14. George has been to see me. In the absorption and

grief of the last fortnight I have hardly remembered him, and he has brought his wife home without my giving the matter a thought. It is wonderful that anything could so hold me that I have not been moved, but they came back the day after the funeral, and I did not hear of it until a couple of days later. It gave me a great shock when I saw him coming up the walk, but by the time he was in the house, I had collected myself, and I had, I think, my usual manner.

He was most kind and sympathetic, and yet he could not help showing how ill at ease he was. Perhaps he could not help reflecting that my duty to Mother had been the thing which kept us apart, and that it was strange for this to end just as there was no longer the possibility of our coming together.

I do not remember what George and I said to each other to-night, any more than I can recall what we said on that last time when he was here. I might bring back that other talk out of the dull blur of pain, but where would be the good? Nothing could come of it but new suffering. We were both outwardly calm and self-possessed, I know, and talked less like lovers than like men of business. So a merchant might sell the remnants of a bankrupt fortune, I fancy; and when he was gone I went to prepare Mother's night drink as calmly as if nothing had happened. I did not dare not to be calm.

To-night we met like the friends we promised to be. He was uncomfortable at first, but I managed to make him seem at ease, or at least not show that he felt strange. He looked at me

rather curiously now and then. I think he was astonished that I showed no more feeling about our past. I cannot have him unhappy through me, and he must feel that at least I accept my fate serenely, or he will be troubled. I must not give myself the gratification of proving that I am constant. He may believe I am cold and perhaps heartless, but that is better than for him to feel responsible for my being miserable.

What did he tell me that night? It was in effect – though I think he hardly realized what he said or implied – how our long engagement had worn out the passion of a lover, and he felt only the friendship of a brother; the coming of a new, real love had shown him the difference. Does this mean that married love goes through such a change? Will he by and by have lived through his first love for his wife, and if so what will be left? That is not my concern; but would this same thing have come if I had been his wife, and should I now find myself, if we had been married when we hoped to be, only a friend who could not so fill his heart as to shut out a new love? Better a hundredfold that it should be as it is. At least he was not tied to me when the discovery came. But it is not always so. Certainly Father and Mother loved each other more after long years of living together. – But this is not a train of thought which it is well to follow. What is must be met and lived with; but I will not weaken my heart by dwelling on what might have been.

George was most kind to come, and it must have been hard for him; but I am afraid it was not a happy half-hour for either of

us. I suppose that any woman brought face to face with a man she still loves when he has done with loving her must feel as if she were shamed. That is nonsense, however, and I fought against the feeling. Now I am happy in the thought that at least I have done one thing. I have made it possible for George to come to me if hereafter he need me. If he were in trouble and I could help, I know he would appeal to me as simply as ever. If I can help him, I am yet free to do it. I thank God for this!

March 16. I have asked Charlotte Kendall to stay with me for a while. Dear old Miss Charlotte, she is so poor and so proud and so plucky! I know that she is half starving in that great, gaunt Kendall house, that looms up so among its Balm of Gilead trees, as if it were an asylum for the ghosts of all the bygone generations of the family. Somehow it seems to me that in America the "decayed gentlewomen," as they are unpleasantly called in England, have a harder time than anywhere else in the world. Miss Charlotte has to live up to her instincts and her traditions or be bitterly humiliated and miserable. People generally assume that the family pride behind this is weak if it is not wicked; but surely the ideal of an honorable race, cultivated and right-minded for generations, is a thing to be cherished. The growth of civilization must depend a good deal upon having these ideas of family preserved somehow. Father used to say the great weakness of modern times is that nowadays the best of the race, instead of saying to those below, "Climb up to us," say, "We will come down to you." I suppose this is hardly a fair summing

up of modern views of social conditions, though of course I know very little about them; but I am sure that the way in which class distinctions are laughed at is a mistake. I hope I hate false pride as much as anybody could; yet dear Miss Charlotte, trying hard not to disgrace her ancestors, and being true to her idea of what a gentlewoman should do, is to me pathetic and fine. She cares more for the traditions of her race than she does for her own situation; and anybody who did not admire this strong and unselfish spirit must look at life from a point of view that I cannot understand. I can have her here now on an excuse that she will not suspect, and she shall be fed and rested as she has not been for years.

March 17. I forgot Miss Charlotte's plants when I asked her to come here. I went over this morning to invite her, and I found her trimming her great oleander tree with tender little snips and with loving glances which were like those a mother gives her pet child in dressing it for a party. The sun came in at the bay window, and the geraniums which are the pride of Miss Charlotte's heart were coming finely into blossom. If the poor old soul is ever really happy it is in the midst of her plants, and things grow for her as for nobody else.

"Do look, Ruth," she said with the greatest eagerness; "that slip of heather that came from the wreath is really sprouting. I do think it will live."

She brought me a vial full of greenish water into which was stuck a bit of heather from the wreath that Cousin Mehitable sent

for Mother. Miss Charlotte had asked me if she might go to the graveyard for the slip. She was so pathetic when she spoke of it!

"It isn't just to have a new plant," she said. "It is partly that it would always remind me of your mother, and I should love it for that."

To-day she was wonderful. Her eyes shone as she looked at the twig, and showed me the tiny white point, like a little mouse's tooth, that had begun to come through the bark under the green water. It was as if she had herself somehow accomplished the miracle of creation. I could have taken her into my arms and cried over her as she stood there so happy with just this slip and her plants for family and riches.

I told her my errand, and she began to look troubled. Unconsciously, I am sure, she glanced around at the flowers, and in an instant I understood.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," I said before she had time to speak, "I forgot that you cannot leave the plants."

"I was thinking how I could manage," she answered, evidently troubled between the wish to oblige me and the thought that her precious plants could not be left.

"You need not manage," I said. "I was foolish enough not to think of them. Of course you can't leave them."

"I might come over in the daytime," she proposed hesitatingly. "I could make up the fire in the morning, and at this time of the year the room would be warm enough for them till I came back at night. I know you must be most lonely at night, and I would

stay as late as I could."

"You are a dear thing," I said, and her tone brought tears to my eyes. "If you will come over after breakfast and stay until after supper that will do nicely, – if you think you can spare the time."

"There's nothing I can spare better," she said, laughing. "I'm like the man that was on his way to jail and was met by a beggar. 'I've nothing to give you but time,' he said, 'and that his Honor just gave me, so I don't like to give it away.' That's one of your father's stories, Ruth."

I stayed talking with her for an hour, and it was touching to see how she was trying to be entertaining and to make me cheerful. I did come away with my thoughts entirely taken off of myself and my affairs, and that is something.

March 20. It has done me good to have Miss Charlotte here. She makes her forlorn little jests and tells her stories in her big voice, and somehow all the time is thinking, I can see, of brightening the days for me. Peter was completely scornful for two days, but now he passes most of his time in her lap, condescending, of course, but gracious.

Miss Charlotte has been as dear and kindly as possible, and to-night in the twilight she told me the romance of her life. I do not know how it came about. I suppose that she was thinking of Mother and wanted me to know what Mother had been to her. Perhaps, too, she may have had a feeling that it would comfort me to know that she understood out of her own suffering the pain that had come to me through George's marriage.

I do not remember her father and mother. They both died when I was very young. I have heard that Mr. Kendall was a very handsome man, who scandalized the village greatly by his love of horses and wine, but Father used to tell me he was a scholar and a cultivated man. I am afraid he did not care very much for the comfort of others; and Aunt Naomi always speaks of him as a rake who broke his wife's heart. Charlotte took care of him after Mrs. Kendall died, and was devoted to him, they say. She was a middle-aged woman before she was left alone with that big house, and she sold the Kendall silver to pay his debts. To-night she spoke of him with a sort of pitiful pride, yet with an air as if she had to defend him, perhaps even to herself.

"I'm an old woman, Ruth," she said, "and my own life seems to me like an old book that I read so long ago that I only half remember it. It is forty years since I was engaged."

It is strange I had never known of this before; but I suppose it passed out of people's minds before I was old enough to notice.

"I never knew you had been engaged, Miss Charlotte," I said.

"Then your mother never told you what she did for me," she answered, looking into the fire. "That was like her. She was more than a mother to me at the time" – She broke off, and then repeated, "It was like her not to speak of it. There are few women like your mother, Ruth."

We were both silent for a time, and I had to struggle not to break down. Miss Charlotte sat looking into the fire with the tears running unchecked down her wrinkled cheeks. She did not

seem conscious of them, and the thought came to me that there had been so much sadness in her life that she was too accustomed to tears to notice them.

"It is forty years," she said again. "I was called a beauty then, though you'd find that hard to believe now, Ruth, when I'm like an old scarecrow in a cornfield. I suppose no young person ever really believes that an old woman can have been beautiful unless there's a picture to prove it. I'll show you a daguerreotype some time; though, after all, what difference does it make? At least he thought" —

Another silence came here. The embers in the fire dropped softly, and the dull March twilight gathered more and more thickly. I felt as if I were being led into some sacred room, closed many years, but where the dead had once lain. Perhaps it was fanciful, but it seemed almost as if I were seeing the place where poor Miss Charlotte's youth had died.

"It wasn't proper that I should marry him, Ruth. I know now father was right, only sometimes – For myself I suppose I hadn't proper pride, and I shouldn't have minded; but father was right. A Kendall couldn't marry a Sprague, of course. I knew it all along; and I vowed to myself over and over that I wouldn't care for him. When a girl tells herself that she won't love a man, Ruth," she broke in with a bitter laugh, "the thing's done already. It was so with me. I needn't have promised not to love him if I hadn't given him my whole heart already, – what a girl calls her heart. I wouldn't own it; and over and over I told him that I didn't care

for him; and then at last" —

It was terrible to hear the voice in which she spoke. She seemed to be choking, and it was all that I could do to keep control of myself. I could not have spoken, even if there had been anything to say. I wanted to take her in my arms and get her pitiful, tear-stained face hidden; but I only sat quiet.

"Well, we were engaged at last, and I knew father would never consent; but I hoped something would happen. When we are young enough we all hope the wildest things will happen and we shall get what we want. Then father found out; and then – and then – I don't blame father, Ruth. He was right. I see now that he was right. Of course it wouldn't have done; but then it almost killed me. If it hadn't been for your mother, dear, I think I should have died. I wanted to die; but I had to take care of father."

I put out my hand and got hold of hers, but I could not speak. The tears dropped down so that they sparkled in the firelight, but she did not wipe them away. I was crying myself, for her old sorrow and mine seemed all part of the one great pain of the race, somehow. I felt as if to be a woman meant something so sad that I dared not think of it.

"And the hardest was that he thought I was wrong to give him up. He could not see it as I did, Ruth; and of course it was natural that he couldn't understand how father would feel about the family. I could never explain it to him, and I couldn't have borne to hurt his feelings by telling him."

"Is he" —

"He is dead, my dear. He married over at Fremont, and I hope he was happy. I think probably he was. Men are happy sometimes when a woman wouldn't be. I hope he was happy."

That was the whole of it. We sat there silent until Rosa came to call us to supper. When we stood up I put my arms about her, and kissed her. Then she made a joke, and wiped her eyes, and through supper she was so gay that I could hardly keep back the tears. Poor, poor, lonely, brave Miss Charlotte!

March 21. Cousin Mehitable arrived yesterday according to her usual fashion, preceded by a telegram. I tell her that if she followed her real inclinations, she would dispatch her telegram from the station, and then race the messenger; but she is constrained by her breeding to be a little more deliberate, so I have the few hours of her journey in which to expect her. It is all part of her brisk way. She can never move fast enough, talk quickly enough, get through whatever she is doing with rapidity enough. I remember Father's telling her once that she would never have patience to lie and wait for the Day of Judgment, but would get up every century or two to hurry things along. It always seems as if she would wear herself to shreds in a week; yet here she is, more lively at sixty than I am at less than half that age.

She was very kind, and softened wonderfully when she spoke of Mother. I think that she loved her more than she does any creature now alive.

"Aunt Martha," she said last night, "wasn't human. She was far too angelic for that. But she was too sweet and human for

an angel. For my part I think she was something far better than either, and far more sensible."

This was a speech so characteristic that it brought me to tears and smiles together.

To-night Cousin Mehitable came to the point of her errand with customary directness.

"I came down," she said, "to see how soon you expect to arrange to live with me."

"I hadn't expected anything about it," I returned.

"Of course you would keep the house," she went on, entirely disregarding my feeble protest. "You might want to come back summers sometimes. This summer I'm going to take you to Europe."

I am too much accustomed to her habit of planning things to be taken entirely by surprise; but it did rather take my breath away to find my future so completely disposed of. I felt almost as if I were not even to have a chance to protest.

"But I never thought of giving up the house," I managed to say.

"Of course not; why should you?" she returned briskly. "You have money enough to keep up the place and live where you please. Don't I know that for this ten years you and Aunt Martha haven't spent half your income? Keep it, of course; for, as I say, sometimes you may like to come back for old times' sake."

I could only stare at her, and laugh.

"Oh, you laugh, Ruth," Cousin Mehitable remarked, more forcibly than ever, "but you ought to understand that I've taken

charge of you. We are all that are left of the family now, and I'm the head of it. You are a foolish thing anyway, and let everybody impose on your good-nature. You need somebody to look after you. If I'd had you in charge, you'd never have got tangled up in that foolish engagement. I'm glad you had the sense to break it."

I felt as if she had given me a blow in the face, but I could not answer.

"Don't blush like that," Cousin Mehitable commanded. "It's all over, and you know I always said you were a fool to marry a country lawyer."

"Father was a country lawyer," I retorted.

"Fudge! Cousin Horace was a judge and a man whose writings had given him a wide reputation. Don't outrage his memory by calling him a rustic. For my part I never had any patience with him for burying himself in the country like a clodhopper."

"You forget that Mother's health" – I began; but with Cousin Mehitable one is never sure of being allowed to complete a sentence.

"Oh, yes," she interrupted, "of course I forgot. Well, if there could be an excuse, Aunt Martha would serve for excusing anything. I beg your pardon, Ruth. But now all that is past and gone, and fortunately the family is still well enough remembered in Boston for you to take up life there with very little trouble. That's what I had in mind ten years ago, when I insisted on your coming out."

"People who saw me then will hardly remember me."

"The folks that knew your father and mother," she went on serenely, "are of course old people like me; but they will help you to know the younger generation. Besides, those you know will not have forgotten you. A Privet is not so easily forgotten, and you were an uncommonly pretty bud, Ruth. What a fool you were not to marry Hugh Colet! You always were a fool."

Cousin Mehitable generally tempers a compliment in this manner, and it prevents me from being too much elated by her praise.

She was interrupted here by the necessity of going to prepare for supper. Miss Charlotte did not come over to-day, so we were alone together. No sooner were we seated at the supper-table than she returned to the attack.

"When you live in Boston," she said, "I shall" —

"Suppose I should not live in Boston?" I interrupted.

"But you will. What else should you do?"

"I might go on living here."

"Living here!" she cried out explosively. "You don't call this living, do you? How long is it since you heard any music, or saw a picture, or went to the theatre, or had any society?"

I was forced to confess that music and painting and acting were all entirely lacking in Tuskamuck; but I remarked that I had all the books that attracted me, and I protested against her saying I hadn't any society.

"Oh, you see human beings now and then," Cousin Mehitable observed coolly; "and I dare say they are very worthy creatures.

But you know yourself they are not society. You haven't forgotten the year I brought you out."

I have not forgotten it, of course; and I cannot deny that when I think of that winter in Boston, the year I was nineteen, I do feel a little mournful sometimes. It was all so delightful, and it is all so far away now. I hardly heard what Cousin Mehitable said next. I was thinking how enchanting a home in Boston would be, and how completely alone as for family I am. Cousin Mehitable is the only near relative I have in the world, and why should I not be with her? It would be delightful. Perhaps I may manage to get in a week or two in town now and then; but I cannot go away for long. There would be nobody to start the reading-room, or keep up the Shakespeare Club; and what would become of Kathie and Peggy Cole, or of all that dreadful Spearin tribe? I dare say I am too proud of my consequence, and that if I went away somebody would be found to look after things. Still I know I am useful here; and it seems to me I am really needed. Besides, I love the place and the people, and I think my friends love me.

March 23. Cousin Mehitable went home to-day. Easter is at hand, and she has a bonnet from Paris, – "a perfect dream of a bonnet," she said with the enthusiasm of a girl, "dove-colored velvet, and violets, and steel beads, and two or three white ostrich tips; a bonnet an angel couldn't resist, Ruth!" – and this bonnet must form part of the church service on Easter. The connection between Paris bonnets and the proper observance of the day is not clear in my mind; but when I said something of this sort to

Cousin Mehitable she rebuked me with great gravity.

"Ruth, there is nothing in worse form than making jokes about sacred subjects."

"Your bonnet isn't sacred," I retorted, for I cannot resist sometimes the temptation to tease her; "or at least it can't be till it's been to church on Easter."

"You know what I mean," was her answer. "When you live with me I shall insist upon your speaking respectfully of the church."

"I wasn't speaking of the church," I persisted, laughing at the gravity with which she always takes up its defense; "I was speaking of your bonnet, your Paris bonnet, your Easter bonnet, your ecclesiastical, frivolous, giddy, girlish bonnet."

"Oh, you may think it too young for me," she said eagerly, forgetting the church in her excitement, "but it isn't really. It's as modest and appropriate as anything you ever saw; and so becoming and *chic*!"

"Oh, I can always trust your taste, Cousin Mehitable," I told her, "but you know you're a worldly old thing. You'd insist upon having your angelic robes fitted by a fashionable tailor."

Again she looked grave and shocked in a flash.

"How can you, Ruth! You are a worse heathen than ever. But then there is no church in Tuskamuck, so I suppose it is not to be wondered at. That's another reason for taking you away from this wilderness."

"There are two churches, as you know very well," I said.

"Nonsense! They're only meeting-houses, – conventicles. However, when you come to Boston to live, we will see."

"I told you last night that I shouldn't give up Tuskamuck."

"I know you did, but I didn't mind that. You must give it up."

She went away insisting upon this, and refusing to accept any other decision. I did so far yield as to promise provisionally that I would go abroad with her this summer. I need to see the world with a broader view again, and I shall enjoy it. To think of the picture galleries fills me with joy already. I should be willing to cross the Atlantic just to see once more the enchanting tailor of Moroni's in the National Gallery. It is odd, it comes into my mind at this moment that he looks something like Tom Webbe, or Tom looks something like him. Very likely it is all nonsense. Yes; I will go for the summer – to leave here altogether – no, that is not to be thought of.

March 24. The whole town is excited over an accident up at the lake this morning. A man and his son were drowned by breaking through the ice. They had been up to some of the logging camps, and it is said they were not sober. They were Brownrigs, and part of the family in the little red house. The mother and the daughter are left. I hope it is not heartless to hate to think of them. I have no doubt that they suffer like others; only it is not likely folk of this sort are as sensitive as we are. It is a mercy that they are not.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.