



THE LITTLE HILLS

I

PHOEBE

THE air was the breath of spice pinks. Wide borders of them wound around all the low beds, and the old garden lay just on the other side of the whitewashed fence. For this was a long time ago, near the middle of the last century. Then it was far down in a remote corner of the green earth; where some of the sweet old things and many of the simple old ways lasted longer than almost anywhere else; where a few of them linger yet, even as late as this very day.

It was in June, too — on sunniest of June days — with a soft wind blowing over the borders and every border in fullest bloom. That spicy sweetness had been Phœbe's delight ever since she could remember. As a lonely, fanciful child she had learned to watch for the gray buds — these glittering points — which always sprang up almost as early as the first bluebird's

The Little Hills

song awoke the spring. As a more lonely and fanciful girl she sometimes left her uncle for a moment, and ran into the garden to see how fast the little steel spears were marching summerward, how soon they would unfurl their scented pennants. As a most lonely and fanciful woman the scent of the spice pinks had gradually become to her the very fragrance of all that she had missed in life. But she did not know it. Of a contented, cheerful spirit she was not conscious of missing anything and hardly knew that she was lonely.

Indeed she was not thinking of the pinks at all just then, nor of the roses and honeysuckles either, though they were blooming too in an exquisite tangle overhead, quite covering the porch on which she sat alone. She had given them only one hasty, anxious glance on coming out, uncertain whether they really were thick enough to keep her from being seen. With all her troubled heart she hoped so. She would not have ventured to come out had it not been so warm indoors that she could not think — and there was great need that she should think long and hard. After all that she had gone through during that dragging summer day, she

Phœbe

felt that she could not bear to have another neighbor come at this late hour, and try to turn her from doing what she held herself bound to do. She was not in the least afraid of being turned, but she was very much afraid of being scolded. Then the worst of it was that she had not one single word to say in her own defence. It had been hard to make a silent, passive, yet unyielding resistance to quicker minds and readier tongues, throughout that endless day. And it was all the harder because she knew how kind the neighbors were and how good their motives; knew that they all loved her and felt a sort of tender responsibility for her welfare. They had always felt that because she was an orphan and they had grown used to telling her what to do, and what to leave undone when a child. For she was a gentle, reliant little thing, the nature that everybody naturally undertakes to guide. Moreover, these true friends never had realized that she was no longer a child — nor even a girl — but a woman full grown. She had hardly realized the fact herself till now when everything was suddenly changed and could never again be as it had been.

The Little Hills

Mercifully it was nearly over. The sun was slowly sinking behind the hills at last. And then most of the good people had already come and gone—for a moment she could not think of any one who had not. Even Arabella, the Argonaut's lady, who rarely paid attention to anything except her own affairs which were always urgent and important, had tripped airily in on her high heels with her pink ribbons flying to make a gay protest. She had smilingly declared that if this absurd plan were carried out, Phœbe would never have a penny to buy herself anything pretty to wear. And, to Arabella's mind, there could be no more convincing argument than that. Phœbe could not help smiling in spite of her distress. Yes, even old Mrs. Crabtree, her aunt, had strolled lazily up the big road under the shade of the trees, to laugh at instead of scolding her, since she herself never took anything seriously, and this situation and the excitement over it seemed to her rather more amusing than most things. The drawl with which she spoke was comical enough and Phœbe laughed a little with her soft brown eyes full of tears, but without giving way one hair's breadth.

Phœbe

"Well," old Mrs. Crabtree had drawled, looking over her spectacles as she always did when she wanted to see better; "there seems to be nothing more to say. You haven't said one blessed thing. You haven't given any reason for tying this millstone around your own foolish little neck. You won't even get mad—or talk back—and all the time I can no more move you than a rock. Yes, I suppose I'd just as well be going home."

Saying this she had arisen with her usual air of indifference and sauntered off down the big road, keeping in the shade of the trees and taking time a-plenty to stop whenever she liked and lean on the fences, and look in through the open windows and doors.

Of course Phœbe had gone with her to the gate and as she stood looking after her with a troubled gaze, she thought that there was a sudden movement of Mrs. Pottle's window curtains. That lady who was usually more than ready to meet anybody had, nevertheless, been known to avoid old Mrs. Crabtree, when that might be done with dignity—that is to say without any public display of the white feather. Remembering this Phœbe had thought it likely

The Little Hills

that the squire's worthy wife was now peeping to see the enemy go by; that she was only waiting to make sure that the way was clear before coming herself. With this poor little Phœbe had turned and fled to the house in a panic. The first instinct of her helpless alarm had been to close the door and lock it. For meeting Mrs. Pottle was the ordeal most to be feared in all that she would have to face and stand against. But she had known that shutting the front door and even locking it would do no good, since that faithful friend would certainly come round the back way. Then she was almost breathless from fatigue and worry and the weather was warm; so that the door was left open and after a while she forgot all about it and about the ordeal as well. Then later — still forgetting — the faint wandering breeze had drawn her out to sit on the porch under the cool vines.

She was too deeply absorbed now in thought to notice that the sunbeams were still on the wing. They had faded from gold into silver and were slowly waning to mere shadows. Yet they still flew through the flowers and leaves at the faintest touch of the breeze. Fluttering

Phœbe

down to the porch floor like shadowy flocks of spirit butterflies, they hovered over her little slippers with the narrow black ribbons crossed over the white stockings; trembled up her mourning skirt to alight on her tightly clasped hands and quiver about her sad, sweet face. But she did notice how slowly the twilight was falling and wistfully looked across the big road where the parsonage stood; lifting her clouded eyes to the tall chimney hoping that the swallows were beginning to circle above it. Then she sighed, knowing that it was only with the other mysterious shadows of evening that these mysterious shadow-birds circled with slanting wings, circling in ever narrowing circles, till they dropped silently down into their dark resting-place with other mysteries of night.

But in truth the risk that somebody could see her seemed rather slight after all. For the house itself could barely have been seen at a short distance down the big road. A giant elm stretched its mighty arms clear over the roof, high above the many other trees. Then the moss-grown roof was small as well as low and the wooden wall quite overrun by a tangle of

The Little Hills

green. The creepers had wrought beauty with patience through many tranquil years. They had ranged one row of shining leaves above another till the crumbling boards were covered with living green, and shone and rippled in emerald waves whenever the sun was bright and the wind blew. Thus borne slowly upward on the steadily rising tide of verdure the tireless climbers had made the mossy roof greener with every spring, till they reached the broken chimney-top. But there the strongest and boldest had long, long ago been compelled to turn back, since it could neither advance nor linger. For that is one of the Laws of Life. Nothing alive shall ever stand still or even pause for an instant. Everything that lives must always go on or go back. Be it material or mental or spiritual, while living it must always go forward or backward—always either upward or downward. That is an appalling thing for us human creatures to know, seeing how little we achieve. And these groping tendrils so bent down had blindly laid hold on the poor little pillars of the poor old porch—as we in our turn lay hold on what we can reach—and after wreathing them with new

Phœbe

strength and beauty had gone on weaving as the years went by, till they had finally woven this wonderful curtain of foliage and flowers which Phœbe was now hiding behind.

In a sudden fright she started up hastily, glancing round and thinking that she heard voices. In another moment she knew that the sound came from the parsonage and then she saw the flutter of something white. It was merely the snowy napkin which covered a small earthenware jar, slightly moved by the breeze. As her clouded eyes fell upon it a quick smile lit her sad face. She was naturally light-hearted and fond of fun and there had been a comical dispute over that little yeast-jar—such a small matter to raise such a large commotion. There were dimples in her smooth cheeks as she recalled the solemn indignation with which Mrs. Pottle had regarded the placing of that yeast-jar on the post of the parsonage front gate, as a deliberate personal affront to herself and a premeditated insult to the whole congregation. The new minister had to be sure said that his aunt, who kept house for him as he was unmarried, set the yeast-jar on the gate-post, simply and solely because it was the only sunny

The Little Hills

spot about the parsonage. But he had laughed like a boy in saying it, and so had made the matter still worse in Mrs. Pottle's opinion. Phœbe's soft brown eyes were dancing and her pretty dimples were playing by this time. But her face grew sober soon enough. She could not think of the new minister yet without a pang. And then thinking of Mrs. Pottle again reminded her that this good friend who was almost like a mother and the hardest of all to resist, had not yet come and certainly would do so before the sinking sun went down.

Then the soft brown eyes clouded at once with intense thought. There was much to think over, much to consider. For ways and means were yet to be considered, though she had quite decided what she would do. Phœbe was not at all the kind of woman who waits to know *how* she can do what she believes to be right, before making up her mind that she *will* do it. She must have been some other than herself in order to hesitate simply because she could not see her way. And indeed the woman who decides before she considers, whose strength is of the heart and spirit rather than of the mind and body, is hard to daunt and harder to

Phœbe

defeat, for the simple reason that she does not readily see material obstacles and hardly ever knows when she is beaten. Oh no, there was no doubt or hesitation whatever in Phœbe's perplexity. She was only very tired and very much at a loss how to get the neighbors to leave her alone and free to think. There it was again — that murmur of voices — and from the opposite direction surely. Starting forward in her fright she pushed the vines aside rather recklessly. The glow of the sunset fell full on her curly brown head which was almost as brown as her eyes. Nothing could be browner than they were, with those lovely shadows round them and those long, bewitching lashes that threw the shadows on her flushed cheeks which were brown too, most delicately, most exquisitely brown like the deep heart of a tea-rose. Indeed there was about her rounded little figure, her quick way of turning her pretty little head, her quickness and lightness in every movement something very like a wren, a brown little house-wren. She had a good deal of the wren's nature also for she was naturally brisk, cheery, busy and nearly always happy. It was not often that she sat like this, still and idle

The Little Hills

with wistful eyes and saddened face. Even this brief respite was already bringing back some of her bright serenity. And all would be well with her very soon — if only — if only no one else would come just yet; if only everybody would stay away so that she might have quiet and peace to think; time at least to muster some excuse for what she was about to do, for she could not give the only excuse that she had. Oh! oh! if they all only would stay away and leave her alone for a little while! She knew how kind they meant to be, but she could not bear the kindest mention of her trouble. Every word that they had spoken, every question that they had asked, all in the most unselfish kindness had been torture — torture as unbearable as blows on an unhealed wound.

Cautiously leaning forward her troubled gaze searched the big road. This single street of the little town along which the old houses straggled under the older trees, ran by her front gate with but a narrow strip of turf between it and the sunken stone steps of her porch. She could see far down it as her house stood on a hill. Nobody was in sight

Phœbe

and there had been no passing for more than an hour. But she knew that it could not be long before the neighbors would come out, for it was very near the time when they always did. Some of them liked to stroll up and down the big road, stopping now and then to lean over the whitewashed fences, or over the green front gates to chat with one another. Others were content to sit before their own open doors and hail the passers-by with news of the crops and the uneventful happenings that made up the interest of their lives. None of them had any interest beyond the wide circle within the misty hills. Few of them even knew any wider world than this quiet one that all could see, between the daily rising and setting of the sun. Most of them were born there where they lived, and were to die under the same greening roof-trees at the peaceful close of their useful, honored days. Surely, surely, it would seem that here — among people like these and lives like theirs — if anywhere in this strange world, there could be little reserve and no concealment. Yet we all know that under another Law of Life there are moments in the simplest, openest lives when the most open-hearted

The Little Hills

must shrink from the most tender-hearted. Each one of us, simple and subtle alike, has known some crucial moment when the soul must go alone into its own inner temple leaving the most loved and loving outside.

And this moment had come now to poor little Phœbe for the first time in her confiding, trusting life. She did not know what it was but she felt the crisis. It was always her lot to feel many things that she never could comprehend. She knew only that she should not let any one tell her what to do now, that she would have to think and act for herself. That was what she was trying to do, but she was unused to thinking for herself and she was very tired and very, very much frightened. No wonder then that she drew still farther into the green dimness and put down an unsteady little hand to keep her black skirt from moving ever so slightly in the breeze.

Would the sun never go down behind the hills? Would the wan sunbeams never cease fluttering among the leaves and flowers? Would the swallows never begin circling around the parsonage chimney? With a sigh her wistful gaze wandered down and fell on

Phœbe

one of the upper windows of the parsonage. A man was writing beside a table. She did not see his face — nor need to. It was the new minister. She knew his broad shoulders and looked away quickly. But not quite quickly enough to keep her heart from aching with the pain that most of us have felt on seeing a stranger in the place of a friend. Not yet could she calmly see John Wood in the place of William Rowan. In order not to see him again she got up hurriedly and walked to the other end of the porch. As she drew back the vines and looked far down the big road her heart seemed to give a leap and then fall back. For two ladies were coming straight toward her house, and she strained her eyes to see who they were. The road was overhung by the low branches of the trees that lined it and by the tall shrubs that bent over the bordering fences. But presently when they drew nearer and came into a clearer space, she saw that one was Mrs. Pottle and the other the widow Wall. Instantly she knew that they were on their way to see her and shuddered and shrunk back, knowing only too well what they were coming for.

She turned and moved toward the open door