

### III

#### PHŒBE'S PLIGHT

HER heart sprang up at once as it always did with the removal of any weight. There was nothing more to dread—only ways and means to think of. And the greatest difficulty was already overcome. She had found a way to give the old people the only bedroom she had. At first it had seemed as if she would have to put them in the parlor to sleep, or set her own cot behind the screen as she had done for a long time during her uncle's illness. She would gladly have given them the parlor, had it been as comfortable as the bedroom, and she would willingly have slept there herself. But in either case there must have been risk of their noticing the makeshift and so being made to feel that the house was too full. That would have grieved her and it was a great relief to have this most important point well

#### Phœbe's Plight

settled. It was pretty to see how her clouded face brightened at the thought. Yes, they could have the best room in the house—the only bedroom—without a sign of crowding, since she had been able to squeeze her own little bed into the small shed-room on the end of the porch. She would never have believed it could be done, if she had not happened to think of measuring the space with a ribbon just the length of the bed, and so found it exactly long enough. She fairly beamed thinking of it now. Then how lucky that the house-wrens had reared their brood and flown away! They had built in a deserted wasp's nest which she had found and hung up inside the shed-room window because she thought it pretty, without knowing that it was like an old ivory carving. And Jenny Wren had not minded her coming as often as two or three times a day on tiptoe to take a smiling peep. She had never ruffled a brown feather—merely holding her pretty brown head on one side, and looking down with her bright brown eyes—very much as Phœbe held hers looking up with her soft brown ones. But visiting and living together are entirely different things—

### The Little Hills

as some of us learn too late,—and Phœbe thought it just as well that Jenny had no further use for the shed-room.

It was really a nice little room as she said to herself happily planning this and that. The walls had been whitewashed till they were like the driven snow. There was space for a little table and a chair. She forgot that the chair would have to be set out on the porch whenever the door was open. What matter—what more could any one want! The muslin curtains were nearly as white as the narrow bed—all so fresh and sweet. Then roses were blooming around the window so close that they might perhaps awaken her—when the wind of the dawn swayed them—by sprinkling dew-drops in her face. She was full of innocent fancies as the gentle lonely are apt to be. And she loved her flowers as a nature so loving as hers must love insensate things when it has nothing of its very own—not one human creature—better worthy of love. She was especially fond of the spice-pinks and it was pleasant to know that they need not be taken up till they were quite done blooming. After their first fullness it would

### Phœbe's Plight

then be early enough to plant late vegetables. Yet she sighed almost in the same breath, knowing that she must give them up sooner or later, because there would be need of more room for vegetables now that her family was larger. She could only hope that the old gentleman and the old lady did like vegetables. Suppose they did not! What if they should require things—many things—that she could not get for them. For a moment her heart which had grown tranquil throbbed again with fresh alarm. If only she knew something about them and had ever so slight an acquaintance with their likes and dislikes! Then she put the fear behind her, turning quickly back to her serene trust that all would be well. Calmly she went on thinking and planning. But it is hard to think steadily, to hold our thoughts in one direction when the mind is weary and the heart heavy. Her thoughts would wander backward in spite of all she could do. She still tried to send them forward but instead they again turned back, straying farther and farther till they wandered lost in the past.

The memories that thronged first were not

### The Little Hills

very sad and she could scarcely have told why her eyes slowly filled with painless tears. Maybe it was the wailing cry of the whip-poor-will — uneasy wraith of music — coming from the dim willows that murmured with the little brook through the shadowed meadow. Maybe it was the wistful gleam of the fireflies — uncertain as life's bright gleams — glimmering amid the gray mists that drifted over the darkened fields. Or maybe it was some simple home sound that the soft wind brought from the drowsy households. For nothing can ever be sadder or sweeter than these home sounds heard at nightfall by the homeless and the lonely.

But Phœbe was neither of these. This small house which had been her uncle's home had been hers also, far longer than she could remember. On his death more than a year before it had become her own with all its roses and honeysuckles and its sweet old garden. As for being lonely, she was used to that, and was not more so now than she had been ever since she could recollect. Living alone with her uncle who had been an invalid for years, she had never had time to think of loneliness

### Phœbe's Plight

nor, indeed, of herself at all. She knew nothing about hiring a stranger to do what she did for him or any part of it. The very thought of such a thing would have shocked and distressed her as heartless neglect of a natural duty. And so it seems to a good many old-fashioned people living to-day where she lived more than a half century ago. Beginning as a child she had gone on doing her best till she had reached girlhood and passed into womanhood, giving her whole life to the care of her uncle so that she had not known at first what to do when he died. For the heaviest burden may grow so gradually and be borne so long, that the bearer hardly knows how to live without it. Those of us who have faithfully bent our shoulders should know how Phœbe felt — how utterly at a loss and how restlessly unhappy she had been — when hers was lifted at last. If we have been faithful and loving in bearing our own burdens we must know how hard it was at first for her to sit idle for an instant without feeling that she was neglecting something that should be done. If truly faithful and loving in long service we know that many sad nights must have gone by before Phœbe

### The Little Hills

could sleep one night through without starting up again and again, fearful that she had slept too long leaving urgent duties undone. Ah! that half-awakened springing to the tired feet: that hurried, remorseful beating of the burdened heart! Yes, the most faithful and loving among us can well believe that poor little Phœbe, alone in that desolate house, awoke more than once to find herself bending over the empty bed, so white in the moonlight, so smooth and so cold.

No wonder then that she had been quick and eager to help when William Rowan, the minister, and her nearest neighbor living in the parsonage just across the big road, needed nursing. He had fallen ill almost immediately after coming to take charge of the church. In truth he had been ill for years before but did not know it, because his illness was the one which—mercifully—the afflicted are always the last to know. And there had been no outward sign of the disease then, at least nobody noticed any. His trial sermon was a good one and there was only one dissenting voice when he was called. Mrs. Pottle alone objected and she did so on another score than his health.

### Phœbe's Plight

She had said quite openly—as indeed she always did everything—that it was tempting providence to call a preacher who had no wife; trouble was sure to come of it sooner or later. And although she had consented at last—that of course since there could have been no calling of any minister without her consent—she had not changed her opinion. Naturally then when William Rowan became ill almost immediately with nobody to take care of him, she spoke of the timely warning that she had given. But she did not let him hear and she was among the first to come to his relief. Indeed the whole community, everybody in the church and out of it, had vied with one another in kindness to the stricken stranger. But Phœbe had done more than all the rest put together. All the ladies, even the squire's wife, had willingly given way to her with kind looks that she did not see, saying out of her hearing that perhaps she would not be so lost without her uncle, now that she had some one else to nurse.

And so it had begun. Not many days had passed before William Rowan could tell her light, swift footsteps from all the others that hastened to serve him. His sunken eyes soon

### The Little Hills

followed her trim little figure as it moved softly about the shadowed room, and sometimes he almost forgot the pain in smiling at the deftness of her noiseless little hands. She saw that he liked her best, that he wanted her beside him constantly. And seeing it made her feel still more sorry that she could not like him better that she could only pity him with all her tender heart. It seemed to her almost wicked not to like your own minister, and yet she knew that she never would have liked William Rowan at all had he been well. Then—remembering that he never could be—her soft heart smote her so that she grew very tender toward him; more tender than she knew or meant. So that one day when they were left alone together, he took her hand which was smoothing his pillow, and told her that he loved her and asked her to marry him just as soon as he should be “well and strong”—poor fellow. Poor, poor fellow!

She had not been able to help shrinking, the shock was too great. But she had made no effort to take away her hand—his was so weak that she had not the heart. It was all so heartrending that she hardly could bear

### Phœbe's Plight

it. At the sound of a coming step he let her go and she turned hastily to the window, thus hiding her tears till there was a chance to slip out of the chamber unseen.

This was in midwinter. Phœbe had not gone to the parsonage on the next morning, staying away for the first time. She sat hidden behind the window curtains sadly looking across the frozen big road, wondering what she should do. It was a gray day with a bitter wind driving the huddled clouds over the bleak fields of the sky like frightened sheep, and tossing their torn fleeces down to the bleaker earth. Life itself seemed grayest and bleakest of all. Her breast was aching with remorse for what she could not help. To think that in trying to relieve his suffering she had added a pang to what he already had to bear. Yet in this she was as helpless as he. Love does not come at will—nor go—even when pity calls and duty drives. She would have loved him if she could and she did try,—tried hard—while she shrank and shivered, looking piteously at his window till she was blinded by tears. For she wanted love as much as he. It was almost a relief to see

### The Little Hills

Mrs. Pottle coming to ask why she was not at her post and she had gone back to it because there was nothing else to do. When she had seen the havoc wrought in his stricken face by the night's misery, she prayed to be forgiven for not coming more quickly.

For a while afterward all had gone on as before except that Phœbe took care — feeling cruel and guilty — never to be left alone with him. But as the days and weeks had dragged by she had gradually ceased to fear. Now and then he had spoken of love and she had listened without fear. His voice was so weak that it was like listening to a spirit and he said nothing more of marriage, nothing more of getting well. He seemed to be at peace except for his anxiety about his father and mother. An accident to his father had prevented their coming with him and still kept them from his bedside.

"It was all arranged," he had said miserably again one morning in early spring. "My mother was to keep house for me here in the parsonage. She has always been so kind that I don't like to call her my stepmother. And I had written her there was plenty of room. She

### Phœbe's Plight

is getting old now — it's my time to take care of her and I felt so glad and proud. Father isn't — he can't — I don't know what they will do —" then he turned his head restlessly more than once before murmuring that the Lord would provide. When he had found breath again after coughing he gasped that he *must* make haste and get well and strong.

"Yes, you must make haste and get well and strong," repeated Phœbe as steadily as she could.

And the widow Wall had turned quickly from the front window, where she sat hemming the fine sheets that old Mrs. Crabtree had sent for his bed, saying that *of course* he would soon be well now with spring almost come. Why, it was fully a month since the first bluebirds had begun warbling, and every sunny spot and all the sheltered nooks were already full of wild flowers.

"See these earliest ones in this tumbler — these fragile little ladies in their thin white frocks striped with pink — the fairies among the flowers," said Phœbe, trying to make him smile.

But when the shy wild flowers had given

### The Little Hills

place to the first proud roses; when the blue-birds were so many that the blue sky seemed bluer with their wings; when the rosy clover fields were alive with singing larks, William Rowan was still farther from being well and strong. He could not even lift his head to look out at the growing beauty of the green-ing, blossoming earth. The utmost that he could do was to turn his wasted face toward the flowering locust tree which waved long, white banners of fragrance before his open window.

And when it had come to this, Phœbe felt that her heart would surely break with pure compassion. It would have been less hard for her to see him as he was now if she could have loved him, for then she might have served him, as the others did, without self-reproach. A pang smote her whenever her sad eyes met his. If there were but something that she *could* do to ease that remorseful aching in her breast. At last when she could bear it no longer she had broken down and told him how she felt. They were alone and the quiet room was dim with gathering dusk, and sweet with the scent of the locust bloom. Phœbe looking

### Phœbe's Plight

at him through a mist of tears had tried to see if he knew how near the end was.

He had smiled at her: "Dear one! Loving you has been the one bright spot—the only happiness I could have had. It is all better—far better as it is—and I shall not struggle any more. For a long time it has been only for the sake of my father and mother. If I might know that they will not want—" then he waited for breath to go on again.

A sudden thought lit Phœbe's pale face: "Leave them to me," she whispered impetuously. "I haven't anybody of my own in the whole world. If you could think me worthy of the trust—it would take some of this pain out of my heart—and give me something to live for."

He shook his head gently and when he could speak—a word at a time—he said that his mother was very proud, of a most independent spirit. She could never be happy dependent upon any one. Through a hard life she had kept her independence—by the toil of her own hands—owing no one anything. With him it was different, he was like her own son. And there might have been a difference with

### The Little Hills

Phœbe too if—if there had been any real claim—to justify—to reconcile his mother's pride. Something like this he had said very slowly and softly. Phœbe could not recall the faint words quite distinctly. And all that came after was always confused in her memory. She remembered only offering to marry him then—at once—that very moment if that could give her the right to do what would bring him perfect peace. It always seemed to her that he tried to protest, saying that pity must not claim what love had lost. Whenever she strove to bring back that hour—she seemed to hear that. But she was never quite sure remembering only the hasty fetching of the nearest preacher, recalling dimly that some one made some attempt to prevent what was going forward, the startled coming in of the neighbors, their awed, excited whispering. Sometimes it seemed to her that the room had been full of hushed sobbing but she herself had not wept. The only thing that she ever could remember clearly was the sudden strength and clearness of William Rowan's voice making the responses in the marriage service. For better or for worse—so long as

### Phœbe's Plight

they both should live. The ineffable piteousness of it! Yet even as she listened there came a strange new feeling of peace to her own heart. She had done what she could to make up for what she could not help. And after this she had waited calmly, smiling at him whenever he opened his eyes long enough to smile at her. Then the night seemed to go on like a quiet dream. Only a faint wind sighed through the blooming locust. No one spoke—till they told her that he was dead.

Silently she had allowed them to lead her over to her own house. How still it was! All was peace now—perfect and everlasting peace for him—and a measure of peace for her as well. She still had no thought of weeping. There seemed nothing more to weep for. But after a long time the late full moon came up and with its coming a mocking-bird began to sing. Only a few faintest ripples of melody. Yet the unearthly sweetness of that first soft rippling touched her numbed heart, and soon melted her distress into gentle tears. Then with the rising of the moon the melody rose too, swelling at last into a heavenly flood that swept her grief clear away—upward toward heaven.



### The Little Hills

And all the other birds had sung and the sun had shone while his soldier comrades with bared heads, were bearing him to his last resting-place. For he had been a soldier too, one of the first to answer that awful mute appeal from the Alamo. And so those who had fought with him now bore him up the sunny hillside across the rosy meadows and above the fresh tenderly green fields stretching to the misty wooded hills. On every side was beauty and peace as the little procession wound its way up the hill while all the bells were tolling — not only the church bell but the courthouse bell and the schoolhouse bell — and even the humble bell that swung before the tavern — all had been rung in slow, solemn rotation to do him honor. The sunlight had been so warm and bright that the open bosom of Mother Earth had not seemed quite so cold — and Phœbe had looked away toward the wild flowers blooming near. There was just room to lay him beside her father and mother and she had felt that he would not be so lonely there, with the shining branches of the silver-beech coming down to the tender grass. But the sweetest and most peaceful of all was that when the kind neigh-

### Phœbe's Plight

bors had taken up the simple old hymn, the birds overhead had helped them sing.

Oh, no. Phœbe was not at all sad now, sitting there alone in the fragrant darkness. She was merely a little perplexed still, just a bit at a loss yet how to carry out her plans for happiness.