

The Little Hills

the front porch like a weary firefly. He saw it vanish through the shed-room door, and then the brighter light of a solitary candle shone through the climbing roses that wreathed the little white window.

XIX

THE RAIN ON THE ROOF

PLACING the candlestick on the chair she looked around with a long sigh. There was balm in the cool peace of the poor place. It was sweet too with the scent of the wet roses clustering around the open window. She took a deep breath of the fragrance as she sat down on the side of the little white bed, and leaning over it put out her hand toward the nearest rose. The touch was as soft as the sighing of the breeze, but it sent a startled flutter through all the dripping leaves. She drew back quickly and her sad face brightened with a smile. It was pleasant to know that the birds were there so close by, sleeping within reach of her arms. She felt less lonely at once, almost as if she had real company. Then fearing that the feathered sleepers might be disturbed by the light, she set the candle on the floor and shaded it till only

The Little Hills

a silvery glimmer lingered on the low white walls.

And now — still sitting on the bedside afraid to move lest she startle the birds — she began to undress very slowly and softly. But she had hardly taken off her black bodice and let down her brown hair before she forgot what she was doing, and allowed her hands to fall on her lap. And so she sat for a while dreaming rather than thinking. But with rest her mind cleared and she wondered why she was not miserable. She knew that she ought to be, that the revelation of the old man's weakness was more than enough to make her so. She fully realized what it meant and her heart was filled with pity for him and for his wife. The future looked dark indeed, her own no less than theirs. But she could not keep her thoughts on these sad facts though she tried to do so. For certainly the situation needed thinking about in order to decide upon some plan. She was utterly at a loss how to begin the next day, and there would be many other days, each harder than the other to meet and deal with. This she said to herself very sternly, yet even as she spoke her thoughts quickly turned to her

The Rain on the Roof

own happiness, to the wonderful words that she had heard on the hilltop. Every word that her lover had spoken came back again and again, sweet and clear as the soft chiming of golden bells. The witching music lulled her sternest self-reproaches. She could only listen and wonder how she could be so happy. There was no mystery. It was merely love claiming his own first right. But she did not know much about love's selfish ways which she was only learning. She had not yet learned that when a truly loving woman loves with her whole heart and is loved to her complete content, she can never be made really unhappy by anything in this world outside her love.

And so she felt guilty because she could not help being happy — poor little thing — sitting there alone in the scented gloom, so lonely that she was wistful for the company of the birds. It was a pity that only their sleepy eyes could see her. For she was lovely to look at, with her long hair rippling down over her bare shoulders and round arms. There was a new radiance too in her soft eyes and her sweet face. For she was gazing into the framed darkness wreathed by the wet roses and saw only her

The Little Hills

new happiness. It seemed to her like some exquisite winged thing that would fly away, if she did not clasp it quickly and hold it close. And that was what she did instantly, crossing her arms over her breast and pressing them very, very close. Then smiling at the fancy that — held thus — love could not use his wings, she nestled down among the pillows. Her shining eyes were wide open and seeing radiant visions through the white dimness.

“Oh — no — no, indeed,” she said to herself speaking aloud as the lonely often do under stress of feeling: “I mustn’t go to sleep — though I am so tired. If I were to fall asleep even for a moment — I never could tell whether this is really true — or only a beautiful dream.”

For a while she lay quite still and as perfectly happy as few of us are ever permitted to be even for so short a space. Then she stirred uneasily. It seemed to her that the exquisite winged thing fluttered a little — as if trying to get away — and she did not smile at this fancy. Instead she pressed her soft arms closer to her breast, still closer to her heart which began to ache again. Before very long she would have to let love go, even though he might not wish

The Rain on the Roof

to get away. She had already told her lover so. His eager offer to lift the burden that kept them apart came back to her now, bringing a sudden glow like a draught of spiced wine. But in another moment she grew cold as she always did in thinking of her husband. Then all the old bewildered pain — for what she hardly understood and could not help — was tugging at her heart once more.

She turned wearily on the pillow longing for sleep, yet still looking into the darkness framed by the wet roses. At first she could see nothing now but a dark, steep path struggling up a stony hillside. But after a time it seemed to her that a light glimmered — far off and high up — and gradually shone brighter and nearer till it streamed all the way down that long road clear to her weary feet. The fancy was wonderfully heartening. She was smiling and almost at peace.

Without a moment’s warning another alarm smote her like a blow. She sat up in bed gasping for breath and pressing her hands to her heart as if it were trying to escape. The squire’s loss through Father Rowan’s fault! That should be made good at once. The fact

The Little Hills

that the squire himself never would speak of it could make no difference. The neighbors would all know anyway. They knew everything about one another, and Phœbe knew only too well what they would think of the least remissness in this matter—and also what they would say. For while they could, and perhaps would, overlook the old gentleman's misstep, they neither would nor could tolerate even delay in making good such a loss as this. In that country of easy borrowing and free lending this was a debt of honor.

"And they were all just beginning to like him and respect Mother Rowan," said Phœbe to herself and almost with a groan. "Now the old people will be looked down upon. And this is what I've done by bringing them here. This is what I've done to make up."

Then in frightened haste she began to check off the quivering little fingers of one hand with the unsteady forefinger of the other, reckoning her resources. Over and over she counted every penny that she had in the world and not another one could she make out. All must be used to give the old people even scanty comfort. Nothing could be taken away without

The Rain on the Roof

depriving them and they had little enough at most. And yet this debt must be paid, or Father Rowan would be disgraced. Those of us who have known such people and how rigidly they exact what they think is right, can know how real was the cause of her alarm. And we who have anywhere felt the need of a few miserable dollars—to help those who are helpless save for what we can do, will know what she was suffering now. For it is then that the white-hot iron of poverty enters the very soul—and so it was searing hers at this moment.

For the first time in her life she wholly lost heart and courage. Giving way utterly she fell back on the pillows, shivering, gasping and sobbing. A great drowning flood of misery swept over her. It seemed to her anguished, fevered, tossed mind as if those weak but clinging old hands were dragging her down. She felt that she must cast them off and free herself or die. For a moment it was her life against theirs. She could not hold them up. It was no use to try. They would only drag her under. The burden had been beyond her strength from the first. She had known that all along. And now she must let it go. To

The Little Hills

hold on would be madness. She had but to cast off those weak old hands and grasp the strong young ones that were already outstretched to save her. And she had a right to save herself. Every woman has a right to live her own life. Every soul has the right to be happy — if it can. She could, and love had been slow in coming to her. But it had come at last and she could not let it go. No — no — no! And so it raged, this fierce revolt of a soft nature driven too hard; this terrific strife between a strained conscience and a starved heart.

When her strength was spent she lay quiet, sobbing now only at long intervals. But her heavy gaze still wandered about the dim room as if seeking some unseen help, till a faint sound caused her to look toward the dark window. She did not know what the sound was at first and lifted her head to listen. It was the rain falling again; the gentle summer rain that comes without storm. Those were the first raindrops running over the roof like fairy footsteps. They made her think of a beautiful rain-spirit with light little feet, swiftly coming and going. For they fled quite

The Rain on the Roof

out of hearing on this first flight across the low roof. But she knew that they would return before long, and listening more intently, almost ceased sobbing. Yes, there they came — stepping more slowly — tripping rather than running and they did not go quite out of hearing this time. At the edge of the mossy eaves they paused and lingered. Then they turned and came pattering back only to turn again and go on regularly pattering — pattering — pattering to and fro. The throbbing little head sank back on the pillow now, already somewhat soothed. It seemed too as if the pain in her heart were not so sharp, as if the unrest of her soul were not so great. For there is magical healing in the sound of the rain on the roof in the night. It weaves its subtlest charm over the humble dwellers under lowly roof-trees such as this one was. But it brings a measure of peace everywhere and to all. No bodily distress is ever quite so great under that peaceful murmur: no spiritual unrest can wholly resist its relief. The struggle of life seems less hard and its disappointments less bitter — wrongs sting less sharply and good deeds shine anew and afar through the deepest darkness. That