

The Little Hills

driver's seat and put the letter in her hand, saying that he had brought it to her himself, because he knew there was no telling when she would get it if he did not bring it. For nobody but Arabella went regularly to the post-office every time the stage came in. And — as Hillery said — she was always too intent on her own letter from the captain to notice whether anybody else got one or not.

XXI

THE RELEASE OF PHŒBE

THIS letter was addressed to Father Rowan and that made Phœbe wonder still more. She would not have been quite so much surprised had it been intended for Mother Rowan. Then it bore the postmark of the remote place which they had come from and this also made her uneasy. We always expect more trouble when already troubled.

With vague dread she ran up the steps and along the passage to deliver the letter. At the closed door of the bedroom she paused and hesitated. She had not seen Father Rowan since that sad sight of him on the night before. Perhaps he was still asleep. Then it had seemed kinder to leave him alone until he should be once more himself. Yet she was afraid to delay giving him such a long, large letter as this and now knocked timidly. The door opened instantly, but only wide enough for Mother Rowan's bony, strong hand to take the letter, then Phœbe was shut out again.

The Little Hills

She could not help feeling disappointed, but said nothing and went back to her seat on the porch. And indeed there was hardly time to speak before the squire came in sight. To see him out of the usual hour was so startling as to make her forget everything else. She stood up fearing she knew not what, and her alarm grew as she saw him driving straight toward her gate. She also noticed that he was in his old buggy. It was the new one that had been wrecked. For a moment a thrill of fear made her feel faint. Then she felt ashamed of having thought that he could be coming about that. And as he came nearer and drew up she saw that his kind face was fairly beaming. It was easy now to see that he brought pleasant and rather exciting news. Indeed the whole air seemed all of a sudden full of agreeable excitement, though she did not catch even the drift of what he said at first. For a while her curly head seemed to whirl, but after a little she began to understand. He too had just received a letter, one written by Mother Rowan's daughter. It directed him to act as her own legal adviser and requested that he would see her mother at once, before any action could

The Release of Phœbe

be taken in a most important matter which would be offered for urgent consideration by that same mail. Phœbe was nearly lost again in bewilderment as the squire's words lengthened into legal phrases. But she made out that somebody wanted to buy the land on Rennox Creek. Then she gathered that a company had been formed for the purpose of buying the whole tract. It gradually appeared that the oil flowing from it into the creek was very valuable for medicinal uses.

"These men seem to have tested it," the squire laughed as he spoke. "They appear to have helped themselves to as much of it as they wanted for making a thorough test. The oil has already been sold widely in the eastern cities and even in London, for external use in rheumatism and several other complaints. The demand for it has now grown until they want to buy the land in order to get the oil in large quantities."

"So they say here," said Mother Rowan from the doorway where she stood holding the open letter in her hand.

"Then you have received their offer, Madam," the squire bowed with an uneasy

The Little Hills

recollection of the parting on the night before.

"*He* has," said Mother Rowan with a backward jerk of her small head. "But he's got nothing to do with it. It's my land—not his."

"Your daughter has written me to that effect," said the squire taking out his letter and opening it. "She has also written me to see you as soon as possible so that you might not be led into any hasty agreement. She says that the land has turned out to be valuable. As for what its value actually is—"

"Will they give enough for it to buy a strip off that field of yours—the one up yonder on the hilltop next the graveyard?" asked Mother Rowan with a sudden fierce eagerness.

There was a momentary silence of blank amazement. Only Phœbe understood and she could not speak, much less explain. But the new minister saw her quick shrinking and the unconscious turning of her clouded eyes, toward the distant hilltop where gleams of white marble shone through the living green. He could not express the tenderness that he

The Release of Phœbe

felt, but he drew nearer her side, hoping and believing that she knew what he felt.

"My field is not for sale, Madam," said the squire puzzled yet smiling in spite of himself at the oddity of her manner. "But if I understand this matter rightly you will be able—should you like—to buy a good many fields larger and finer than mine."

"I've got no use for any fields," declared Mother Rowan more eagerly and more fiercely if possible than before. "The only thing that I want is a strip off that one field of yours. Can't you give a plain answer yes—or no?"

"Of course—presently—" protested the squire. "But that is a small and irrelevant matter. Your daughter urges my trying to induce you to consider immediately—before the stage goes—"

"She shan't come between me and my duty to poor William!" that curious look of exaltation was in the strange small face now. "I never allowed her to do it while he was alive, and I'm not going to allow her to do it now when he's dead, and this is the very last thing that I ever can do for him—to prove to

The Little Hills

everybody how different I am and always was — from the whole tribe of stepmothers.”

“Oh—I see,” the squire began as a dim light broke.

“No, she shan’t!” cried Mother Rowan with growing violence: “And you’d just as well save your breath too. For neither you nor anybody living can make me move one peg, till I know whether I can get room enough to set up poor William’s tombstone—if I can sell my land for enough money to pay for a place to put it—and be beholding to nobody. There now! You’ve got the word with the bark on it. Do what I want, then maybe I’ll listen to what you’ve got to say.”

There was the sudden sound of a door thrown open with a crash and a deep growl rumbled down the passage.

“And what’s it to *you*?” demanded Mother Rowan whirling round and throwing the words like stones. “What have you ever done for him to give you a right to interfere between William and me?”

The violent slamming of a door partly drowned the rest that she said.

“Certainly, certainly,” conceded the squire

The Release of Phœbe

hastily. “It will give me great pleasure to have the fence moved at once. However that’s a small matter—”

“Not to me!” cried Mother Rowan grimly, yet slightly appeased.

It did not take long after this to settle the business. She readily agreed to start with her husband for Rennox Creek early on the next morning. Her daughter was already there and waiting with the greatest impatience for them to come. Phœbe shyly begged that Father Rowan might stay with her until he felt more able to travel or Mother Rowan came back. But the squire said that the daughter insisted upon his coming, in order that there should be no delay or difficulty in signing the deed. Then she had also made arrangements for taking her mother and stepfather to her own home when the sale had been made. It was not right — so she had written — that they should be so far from her and living among strangers.

On the whole it was a memorable day, the most memorable that this far-off corner of the green earth ever knew. The events making it so were too marvellous for belief had not

The Little Hills

the squire given his word that they were actually taking place. After that there could be no more doubt that these two old people, who had been without a penny on the rising of the sun would be rich—as this country held riches—before the lingering sun went down. As it sank out of sight at last behind the misty hills, the neighbors came from their houses to roam excitedly up and down the big road, marvelling in half-hushed tones. Now and then they paused, but only for a moment to lean over a gate being too much wrought up to stand still. Even old Mrs. Crabtree who rarely left her seat by the window came as far as her own gate and stood there hailing everybody that went by. She told over and over again the wonderful story that she had heard from Mother Rowan, about the burning oil which flowed on with the river for such an incredible distance, and the awed listeners never once breathed a doubt.

Some of the more thoughtful neighbors went up to Phœbe's house and offered to help in getting the travellers ready. But Mother Rowan made short work of all interference, and Phœbe gently declined, saying that they

The Release of Phœbe

did not need any assistance. Nevertheless it was with the greatest difficulty that the hair-covered trunk was finally packed. There was the most unaccountable mystery in the way Father Rowan's things disappeared as he hobbled about the room, pretending to help in the packing. It really seemed as if he were doing his best to hinder rather than to help. Indeed Mother Rowan finally taxed him with hiding his clothes. Thereupon he made no denial whatever, but hobbled back to his armchair and sat down with a growl of defiance.

Mother Rowan kneeling by the trunk looked up sharply, snapping her eyes at Phœbe: "Anybody that didn't know his ways as well as I do, would think he might be a bit more lively about going to see my daughter—considering how I've done by his son," she said.

Phœbe's little hand fell on the broad old shoulder and stilled another rumbling defiance. She bent down and looked wistfully into his overcast face. "It comforts me to know that you are not glad to go," she whispered so that Mother Rowan could not hear. Yet in another moment moved by her invincible yearning for affection, she sank down on

The Little Hills

her knees beside Mother Rowan thus bringing her sweet face very close to the bitter one: "And you too, dear Mother Rowan—I beg you to believe that I have tried hard to make you happy."

The small head which was bent over the trunk came up with startling quickness: "Well, I dare anybody to hint before me that you *haven't!*" Mother Rowan said.

And that was Phœbe's sole reward. After one more appealing look she stood up and went quietly on with the many things yet to do. The candles burned late in her old house that night. Indeed they glimmered later than ever known before through the low boughs that overhung the mossy roof-trees all along the big road. And the beams from the new minister's lamp lay across it in broad bands of light—binding his study to the shed-room—throughout the short, still, sweet summer night.

The sun was barely peeping over the green hills when the neighbors were up and busily astir. Everybody wanted to do something for the travellers, because it was always a pleasure to do anything for Phœbe and also because the

The Release of Phœbe

occasion was so interesting that nobody wished to be left out. Even Arabella fluttered in, bringing an absurd pin-cushion with many frivolous ends of pink ribbon and the pins set in the shape of a heart, thinking it might be useful in Mother Rowan's travelling basket. Phœbe thanked her most warmly yet could not help feeling relieved that Mother Rowan's back was turned, and that the present could be put hastily out of sight. The new minister came next looking as serious as he could—being so happy—and brought a most kind message from his aunt offering Mother Rowan the great privilege of choosing a gift from her entire collection. And Mother Rowan's scornful sniff did not lessen Miss Dale's generosity in the least. None of us can do more than to offer to give that which we prize most. The widow Wall in turn tried her best to think of something to make a present of. She had only a handful of new potatoes but she cheerfully dug those with her own hands, and carried them on her thin arm—all the way up to Phœbe's, only to have Mother Rowan express a very candid opinion of cold potatoes. But the contribution most resented by that spirited