

“A Modern Cinderella, or The Little Old Shoe”

—by LOUISA MAY ALCOTT

HOW IT WAS LOST

Among green New England hills stood an ancient house, many-gabled, mossy-roofed, and quaintly built, but picturesque and pleasant to the eye; for a brook ran babbling through the orchard that encompassed it about, a garden-plat stretched upward to the whispering birches on the slope, and patriarchal elms stood sentinel upon the lawn, as they had stood almost a century ago, when the Revolution rolled that way and found them young.

One summer morning, when the air was full of country sounds, of mowers in the meadow, black-birds by the brook, and the low of kine upon the hill-side, the old house wore its cheeriest aspect, and a certain humble history began.

“Nan!”

“Yes, Di.”

And a head, brown-locked, blue-eyed, soft-featured, looked in at the open door in answer to the call.

Just bring me the third volume of ‘Wilhelm Meister,’ there’s a dear. It’s hardly worth while to rouse such a restless ghost as I, when I’m once fairly laid.”

As she spoke, Di PULLED up her black braids, thumped the pillow of the couch where she was lying, and with eager eyes went down the last page of her book.

“Nan!”

“Yes, Laura,” replied the girl, coming back with the third volume for the literary cormorant, who took it with a nod, still too content upon the “Confessions of a Fair Saint” to remember the failings of a certain plain sinner.

“Don’t forget the Italian cream for dinner. I depend upon it; for it’s the only thing fit for me this hot weather.”

And Laura, the cool blonde, disposed the folds of her white gown more gracefully about her, and touched up the eyebrow of the Minerva she was drawing.

“Little daughter!”

“Yes, father.”

“Let me have plenty of clean collars in my bag, for I must go at once; and some of you bring me a glass of cider in about an hour;--I shall be in the lower garden.”

The old man went away into his imaginary paradise, and Nan into that domestic purgatory on a summer day, -- the kitchen. There were vines about the windows, sunshine on the floor, and order everywhere; but it was haunted by a cooking-stove, that family altar whence such varied incense rises to appease the appetite of household gods, before which such dire incantations are pronounced to ease the wrath and woe of the priestess of the fire, and about which often linger saddest memories of wasted temper, time, and toil.

Nan was tired, having risen with the birds,-- hurried, having many cares those happy little housewives never know,--and disappointed in a hope that hourly “dwindled, peaked, and pined.” She was too young to make the anxious lines upon her forehead seem at home there, too patient to be burdened with the labor others should have shared, too light of heart to be pent up when earth and sky were keeping a blithe holiday. But she was one of that meek sisterhood who, thinking humbly of themselves, believe they are honored by being spent in the service of less conscientious souls, whose careless thanks seem quite reward enough.

To and fro she went, silent and diligent, giving the grace of willingness to every humble or distasteful task the day had brought her; but some malignant sprite seemed to have taken possession of her kingdom, for rebellion broke out everywhere. The kettles would boil over most obstreperously,-- the mutton refused to cook with the meek alacrity to be expected from the nature of a sheep,--the stove, with unnecessary warmth of temper, would glow like a fiery furnace,--the irons would scorch,--the linens would dry,--and spirits would fail, though patience never.

Nan tugged on, growing hotter and wearier, more hurried and more hopeless, till at last the crisis came; for in one fell moment she tore her gown, burnt her hand, and smutched the collar she was preparing to finish in the most unexceptionable style. Then, if she had been a nervous woman, she would have scolded; being a gentle girl, she only “lifted up her voice and wept.”

“Behold, she watereth her linen with salt tears, and bewaileth herself because of much tribulation. But, lo! Help cometh from afar: a strong man bringeth lettuce wherewith to stay her, plucketh berries to comfort her withal, and clasheth cymbals that she may dance for joy.”

The voice came from the porch, and, with her hope fulfilled, Nan looked up to greet John Lord, the house-friend, who stood there with a basket on his arm; and as she saw his honest eyes, kind lips, and helpful hands, the girl thought this plain young man the comeliest, most welcome sight she had beheld that day.

“How good of you, to come through all this heat, and not to laugh at my despair!” she said, looking up like a grateful child, as she led him in.

“I only obeyed orders, Nan; for a certain dear old lady had a motherly presentiment that you had got into a domestic whirlpool, and sent me as a sort of life-preserver. So I took the basket of consolation, and came to fold my feet upon the carpet of contentment in the tent of friendship.”

As he spoke, John gave his own gift in his mother’s name, and bestowed himself in the wide window-seat, where morning-glories nodded at him, and the old butternut sent pleasant shadows dancing to and fro.

His advent, like that of Orpheus in hades, seemed to soothe all unpropitious powers with a sudden spell. The Fire began to slacken. the kettles began to lull, the meat began to cook, the irons began to cool, the clothes began to behave, the spirits began to rise, and the collar was finished off with most triumphant success. John watched the change, and, though a lord of creation, abased himself to take compassion on the weaker vessel, and was seized with a great desire to lighten the homely tasks that tried her strength of body and soul. He took a comprehensive glance about the room; then, extracting a dish from the closet, proceeded to imbrue his hands in the strawberries’ blood.

“Oh, John, you needn’t do that; I shall have time when I’ve turned the meat, made the pudding and done these things. See, I’m getting on finely now:--you’re a judge of such matters; isn’t that nice?”

As she spole, Nan offered the polished absurdity for inspection with innocent pride.

“Oh that I were a collar, to sit upon that hand!” sighed John,--adding, argumentatively,

“As to the berry question, I might answer it with a gem from Dr. Watts, relative to ‘Satan’ and idle hands,’ but will merely say, that, as a matter of public safety, you’d better leave me alone; for such is the destructiveness of my nature, that I shall certainly eat something hurtful, break something valuable, or sit upon something crushable, unless you let me concentrate my energies by knocking on these young fellows’ hats, and preparing them for their doom.”

Looking at the matter in a charitable light, Nan consented, and went cheerfully on with her work, wondering how she could have thought ironing an infliction, and been so ungrateful for the blessings of her lot.

“Where’s Sally?” asked John, looking vainly for the functionary who usually pervaded that region like a domestic police-woman, a terror to cats, dogs, and men.

“She has gone to her cousin’s funeral, and won’t be back till Monday. There seems to be a great fatality among her relations; for one dies, or comes to grief in some way, about once a month. But I don’t blame poor Sally for wanting to get away from this place now and then. I think I could find it in my heart to murder an imaginary friend or two, if I had to stay here long.”

And Nan laughed so blithely, it was a pleasure to hear her.

“Where’s Di?” asked John, seized with a most unmasculine curiosity all at once.

“She is in Germany with ‘Wilhelm Meister’; but, though ‘lost to sight, to memory clear’; for I was just thinking, as I did her things, how clever she is to like all kinds of books that I don’t understand at all, and to write things that make me cry with pride and delight. Yes, she’s a talented dear, though she hardly knows a needle from a crowbar, and will make herself one great blot some of these days, when the ‘divine afflatus’ descends upon her, I’m afraid.”

And Nan rubbed away with sisterly zeal at Di’s forlorn hose and inky pocket-handkerchiefs.

“Where is Laura?” proceeded the inquisitor.

“Well, I might say that she was in Italy; for she is copying some fine thing of Raphael’s or Michael Angelo’s, or some great creatures or other; and she looks so picturesque in her pretty gown, sitting before her easel, that it’s really a sight to behold, and I’ve peeped two or three times to see how she gets on.”

And Nan bestirred herself to prepare the dish Wherewith her picturesque sister desired to prolong her artistic existence.

“Where is your father?” John asked again, checking off each answer with a nod and a little frown.

“He is down in the garden, deep in some plan about melons, the beginning of which seems to consist in stamping the first proposition in Euclid all over the bed, and then poking a few seeds into the middle of each. Why, bless the dear man! I forgot it

was time for the cider. Wouldn't you like to take it to him, John? He'd love to consult you; and the lane is so cool, it does one's heart good to look at it."

John glanced from the steamy kitchen to the shadowy path, and answered with a sudden assumption of immense industry,--

"I couldn't possibly go, Nan,--I've so much on my hands. You'll have to do it yourself. 'Mr. Robert of Lincoln' has something for your private ear; and the lane is so cool, it will do one's heart good to see you in it. Give my regards to your father, and, in the words of 'Little Mabel's' mother, with slight variation,--

'Tell the dear old body
This day I cannot run,
For the pots are boiling over
And the mutton isn't done.'"

"I will; but please, John, go in to the girls and be comfortable; for I don't like to leave you here," said Nan.

"You insinuate that I should pick at the pudding or invade the cream, do you? Ungrateful girl, leave me!" And, with melodramatic sternness, John extinguished her in his broad-brimmed hat, and offered the glass like a poisoned goblet.

Nan took it, and went smiling away. But the lane might have been the Desert of Sahara, for all she knew of it; and she would have passed her father as unconcernedly as if he had been an apple-tree, had he not called out,--

"Stand and deliver, little woman!"

She obeyed the venerable highwayman, and followed him to and fro, listening to his plans and directions with a mute attention that quite won his heart.

"That hop-pole is really an ornament now, Nan; this sage-bed needs weeding,--that's good work for you girls; and, now I think of it, you'd better water the lettuce in the cool of the evening, after I'm gone."

To all of which remarks Nan gave her assent; the hop-pole took the likeness of a tall figure she had seen in the porch, the sage-bed, curiously enough, suggested a strawberry ditto, the lettuce vividly reminded her of certain vegetable productions a basket had brought, and the bobolink only sung in his cheeriest voice, "Go home, go home! he is there!"

She found John—he having made a free-mason of himself, by assuming her little apron—meditating over the partially spread table, lost in amaze at its desolate appearance; one half its proper paraphernalia having been forgotten, and the other half put on awry. Nan laughed till the tears ran over her cheeks, and John was gratified at the efficacy of his treatment; for her face had brought a whole harvest of sunshine from the garden, and all her cares seemed to have been lost in the windings of the lane.

"Nan, are you in hysterics?" cried Di, appearing, book in hand. "John, you absurd man, what are you doing?"

"I'm helpin' the maid of all work, please marm." And John dropped a curtsy with his limited apron.

Di looked ruffled, for the merry words were a covert reproach; and with her usual energy of manner and freedom of speech she tossed "Wilhelm" out of the window, exclaiming, irefully.—

"That's always the way; I'm never where I ought to be, and never think of anything till it's too late; but it's all Goethe's fault. What does he write books full of

smart ‘Phillinas’ and interesting ‘Meisters’ for? How can I be expected to remember that Sally’s away, and people must eat, when I’m hearing the ‘Harper’ and little ‘Mignon?’ John, how dare you come here and do my work, instead of shaking me and telling me to do it myself? Take that toasted child away, and fan her like a Chinese mandarin, while I dish up this dreadful dinner.”

John and Nan fled like chaff before the wind, while Di, full of remorseful zeal, charged at the kettles, and wrenched off the potatoes’ jackets, as if she were revengefully pulling her own hair. Laura had a vague intention of going to assist; but, getting lost among the lights and shadows of Minerva’s helmet, forgot to appear till dinner had been evoked from chaos and peace was restored.

At three o’clock, Di performed the coronation ceremony with her father’s best hat; Laura retied his old-fashioned neckcloth, and arranged his white locks with an eye to saintly effect; Nan appeared with a beautifully written sermon, and suspicious ink-stains on the fingers that slipped it into his pocket; John attached himself to the bag; and the patriarch was escorted to the door of his tent with the triumphal procession which usually attended his out-goings and in-comings. Having kissed the female portion of his tribe, he ascended the venerable chariot, which received him with audible lamentation, as its rheumatic joints swayed to and fro.

“Good-bye, my dears! I shall be back early on Monday morning; so take care of yourselves, and be sure you all go and hear Mr. Emerboy preach to-morrow. My regards to your mother. John. Come, Solon!”

But Solon merely cocked one ear, and remained a fixed fact; for long experience had induced the philosophic beast to take for his motto the Yankee maxim, “Be sure you’re right, then go ahead! He knew things were not right; therefore he did not go ahead.

“Oh, by the way, girls, don’t forget to pay Tommy Mullein for bringing up the cow: he expects it to-night. And Di, don’t sit up till daylight, nor let Laura stay out in the dew. Now, I believe I’m off. Come, Solon!”

But Solon only cocked the other ear, gently agitated his mortified tail, as premonitory symptoms of departure, and never stirred a hoof, being well aware that it always took three “comes” to make a “go.”

“Bless me! I’ve forgotten my spectacles. They are probably shut up in that volume of Herbert on my table. Very awkward to find myself without them ten miles away. Thank you, John. Don’t neglect to water the lettuce, Nan, and don’t overwork yourself, my little ‘Martha.’ Come—“

At this juncture Solon suddenly went off, like “Mrs. Gamp,” in a sort of walking swoon, apparently deaf and blind to all mundane matters, except the refreshments awaiting him ten miles away; and the benign old pastor disappeared, humming “Hebron” to the creaking accompaniment of the bulgy chaise.

Laura retired to take her siesta; Nan made a small carbonaro of herself by sharpening her sister’s crayons, and Di, as a sort of penance for past sins, tried her patience over a piece of knitting, in which she soon originated a somewhat remarkable pattern, by dropping every third stitch, and seaming ad libitum. If John had been a gentlemanly creature, with refined tastes, he would have elevated his feet and made a nuisance of himself by indulging in a “weed;” but being only an uncultivated youth, with

a rustic regard for pure air and womankind in general, he kept his head uppermost, and talked like a man, instead of smoking like a chimney.

“It will probably be six months before I sit here again, tangling your threads and maltreating your needles, Nan. How glad you must feel to hear it!” he said, looking up from a thoughtful examination of the hard-working little citizens of the Industrial Community settled in Nan’s work-basket.

“No, I’m very sorry; for I like to see you coming and going as you used to, years ago, and I miss you very much when you are gone, John,” answered truthful Nan, whittling away in a sadly wasteful manner, as her thoughts flew back to the happy times when a little lad rode a little lass in a big wheelbarrow, and never spilt his load,—when two brown heads bobbed daily side by side to school, and the favorite play was “Babes in the Wood,” with Di for a somewhat peckish robin to cover the small martyrs with any vegetable substance that lay at hand. Nan sighed, as she thought of these things, and John regarded the battered thimble on his finger-tip with increased benignity of aspect as he heard the sound.

“When are you going to make your fortune, John, and get out of that disagreeable hardware concern?” demanded Di, pausing after an exciting “round,” and looking almost as much exhausted as if it had been a veritable pugilistic encounter.

“I intend to make it by plunging still deeper into ‘that disagreeable hardware concern;’ for, next year, if the world keeps rolling, and John Lord is alive, he will become a partner, and then --and then—“

The color sprang up into the young man’s cheek, his eyes looked out with a sudden shine, and his hand seemed involuntarily to close, as if he saw and seized some invisible delight.

“What will happen then, John?” asked Nan, with a wondering glance.

“I’ll tell you in a year, Nan, wait till then.” and John’s strong hand unclosed, as if the desired good were not to be his yet.

Di looked at him, with a knitting-needle stuck into her hair, saying, like a sarcastic unicorn,—

“I really thought you had a soul above pots and kettles, but I see you haven’t; and I beg your pardon for the injustice I have done you.”

Not a whit disturbed, John smiled, as if at some mighty pleasant fancy of his own, as he replied,—

“Thank you, Di; and as a further proof of the utter depravity of my nature, let me tell you that I have the greatest possible respect for those articles of ironmongery. Some of the happiest hours of my life have been spent in their society; some of my pleasantest associations are connected with them; some of my best lessons have come to me among them; and when my fortune is made, I intend to show my gratitude by taking three flat-irons rampant for my coat of arms.

Nan laughed merrily, as she looked at the burns on her hand; but Di elevated the most prominent feature of her brown countenance, and sighed despondingly,—

“Dear, dear, what a disappointing world this is! I no sooner build a nice castle in Spain, and settle a smart young knight therein, than down it comes about my ears; and the ungrateful youth, who might fight dragons, if he chose, insists on quenching his energies in a saucepan, and making a Saint Lawrence of himself by wasting his life on a series of gridirons. Ah, if I were only a man, I would do something better than that, and prove that

heroes are not all dead yet. But, instead of that, I'm only a woman, and must sit rasping my temper with absurdities like this." And Di wrestled with her knitting as if it were Fate, and she were paying off the grudge she owed it.

John leaned toward her, saying, with a look that made his plain face handsome,--
"Di, my father began the world as I begin it, and left it the richer for the useful years he spent here,--as I hope I may leave it some half-century hence. His memory makes that dingy shop a pleasant place to me; for there he made an honest name, led an honest life and bequeathed to me his reverence for honest work. That is a sort of hardware, Di, that no rust can corrupt, and which will always prove a better fortune than any your knights can achieve with sword and shield. I think I am not quite a clod, or quite without some aspirations above money-getting; for I sincerely desire that courage that makes daily life heroic by self-denial and cheerfulness of heart;

I am eager to conquer my own rebellious nature, and earn the confidence of innocent and upright souls; I have a great ambition to become as good a man and leave as good a memory behind me as old John Lord."

Di winked violently, and seamed five times in perfect silence; but quiet Nan had the gift of knowing when to speak, and by a timely word saved her sister from a thunder-shower and her stocking from destruction.

"John, have you seen Philip since you wrote about your last meeting with him?
The question was for John, but the soothing tone was for Di, who gratefully accepted it, and perked up again with speed.

"Yes; and I meant to have told you about it," answered John, plunging into the subject at once.

"I saw him a few days before I came home, and found him more disconsolate than ever,--'just ready to go to the Devil,' as he forcibly expressed himself. I consoled the poor lad as well as I could, telling him his wisest plan was to defer his proposed expedition, and go on as steadily as he had begun,--thereby proving the injustice of your father's prediction concerning his want of perseverance, and the sincerity of his affection. I told him the change in Laura's health and spirits was silently working in his favor, and that a few more months of persistent endeavor would conquer your father's prejudice against him, and make him a stronger man for the trial and the pain. I read him bits about Laura from your own and Di's letters, and he went away at last as patient as Jacob ready to serve another 'seven years' for his beloved Rachel."

"God bless you for it, John!" cried a fervent voice; and, looking up, they saw the cold, listless Laura transformed into a tender girl, all aglow with love and longing, as she dropped her mask, and showed a living countenance eloquent with the first passion and softened by the first grief of her life.

John rose involuntarily in the presence of an innocent nature whose sorrow needed no interpreter to him. The girl read sympathy in his brotherly regard, and found comfort in the friendly voice that asked, half playfully, half seriously,--

"Shall I tell him that he is not forgotten, even for an Apollo? that Laura the artist has not conquered Laura the woman? and predict that the good daughter will yet prove the happy wife?"

With a gesture full of energy, Laura tore her Minerva from top to bottom, while two great tears rolled down the cheeks grown wan with hope deferred.

"Tell him I believe all things, hope all things, and that I never can forget."

Nan went to her and held her fast, leaving the prints of two loving but grimy hands upon her shoulders; Di looked on approvingly, for, though stony-hearted regarding the cause, she fully appreciated the effect; and John, turning to the window, received the commendations of a robin swaying on an elm-bough with sunshine on its ruddy breast.

The clock struck five, and John declared that he must go; for, being an old-fashioned soul, he fancied that his mother had a better right to his last hour than any younger woman in the land,-- always remembering that "she was a widow, and he her only son."

Nan ran away to wash her hands, and came back with the appearance of one who had washed her face also: and so she had; but there was a difference in the water.

"Play I'm your father, girls, and remember that it will be six months before 'that John' will trouble you again."

With which preface the young man kissed his former playfellows as heartily as the boy had been wont to do, when stern parents banished him to distant schools, and three little maids bemoaned his fate. But times were changed now; for Di grew alarmingly rigid during the ceremony; Laura received the salute like a graceful queen; and Nan returned it with heart and eyes and tender lips, making such an improvement on the childish fashion of the thing that John was moved to support his paternal character by softly echoing her father's words,--"Take care of yourself, my little 'Martha.'"

Then they all streamed after him along the garden-path, with the endless messages and warnings girls are so prone to give; and the young man, with a great softness at his heart, went away, as many another John has gone, feeling better for the companionship of innocent maidenhood, and stronger to wrestle with temptation, to wait and hope and work.

"Let's throw a shoe after him for luck, as dear old 'Mrs. Gummage' did after 'David' and the 'willin' Barkis!' Quick, Nan! you always have old shoes on; toss one, and shout, 'Good luck!'" cried Di, with one of her eccentric inspirations.

Nan tore off her shoe, and threw it far along the dusty road, with a sudden longing to become that auspicious article of apparel, that the omen might not fail.

Looking backward from the hill-top, John answered the meek shout cheerily, and took in the group with a lingering glance: Laura in the shadow of the elms, Di perched on the fence, and Nan leaning far over the gate with her hand above her eyes and the sunshine touching her brown hair with gold. He waved his hat and turned away; but the music seemed to die out of the blackbird's song, and in all the summer landscape his eyes saw nothing but the little figure at the gate.

"Bless and save us! here's a flock of people coming; my hair is in a toss, and Nan's without her shoe; run! fly, girls! or the Philistines will be upon us!" cried Di, tumbling off her perch in sudden alarm.

Three agitated young ladies, with flying draperies and countenances of mingled mirth and dismay, might have been seen precipitating themselves into a respectable mansion with unbecoming haste; but the squirrels were the only witnesses of this "vision of sudden flight," and, being used to ground-and-lofty tumbling, didn't mind it.

When the pedestrians passed, the door was decorously closed, and no one visible but a young man, who snatched something out of the road, and marched away again, whistling with more vigor of tone than accuracy of tune, "Only that, and nothing more."

HOW IT WAS FOUND.

Summer ripened into autumn, and something fairer than

“Sweet-peas and mignonette
In Annie’s garden grew.”

Her nature was the counterpart of the hill-side grove, where as a child she had read her fairy tales, and now as a woman turned the first pages of a more wondrous legend still. Lifted above the many-gabled roof, yet not cut off from the echo of human speech, the little grove seemed a green sanctuary, fringed about with violets, and full of summer melody and bloom. Gentle creatures haunted it, and there was none to make afraid; wood-pigeons cooed and crickets chirped their shrill roundelays, anemones and lady-ferns looked up from the moss that kissed the wanderer’s feet. Warm airs were all afloat, full of vernal odors for the grateful sense, silvery birches shimmered like spirits of the wood, larches gave their green tassels to the wind, and pines made airy music sweet and solemn, as they stood looking heavenward through veils of summer sunshine or shrouds of wintry snow.

Nan never felt alone now in this charmed wood; for when she came into its precincts, once so full of solitude, all things seemed to wear one shape, familiar eyes looked at her from the violets in the grass, familiar words sounded in the whisper of the leaves, grew conscious that an unseen influence filled the air with new delights, and touched earth and sky with a beauty never seen before. Slowly these Mayflowers budded in her maiden heart, rosily they bloomed and silently they waited till some lover of such lowly herbs should catch their fresh aroma, should brush away the fallen leaves, and lift them to the sun.

Though the eldest of the three, she had long been overtopped by the more aspiring maids. But though she meekly yielded the reins of government, whenever they chose to drive, they were soon restored to her again; for Di fell into literature, and Laura into love. Thus engrossed, these two forgot many duties which even bluestockings and inamoratos are expected to perform, and slowly all the homely humdrum cares that housewives know became Nan’s daily life, and she accepted it without a thought of discontent. Noiseless and cheerful as the sunshine, she went to and fro, doing the tasks that mothers do, but without a mother’s sweet reward, holding fast the numberless slight threads that bind a household tenderly together, and making each day a beautiful success.

Di, being tired of running, riding, climbing, and boating, decided at last to let her body rest and put her equally active mind through what classical collegians term “a course of sprouts.” Having undertaken to read and know everything, she devoted herself to the task with great energy, going from Sue to Swedenborg with perfect impartiality, and having different authors as children have sundry distempers, being fractious while they lasted, but all the better for them when once over. Carlyle appeared like scarlet-fever, and raged violently for a time; for, being anything but a “passive bucket,” Di became prophetic with Mahomet, belligerent with Cromwell, and made the French Revolution a veritable Reign of Terror to her family. Goethe and Schiller alternated like fever and ague; Mephistopheles became her hero, Joan of Arc her model, and she turned her black eyes red over Egmont and Wallenstein. A mild attack of Emerson followed,

during which she was lost in a fog, and her sisters rejoiced inwardly when she merged informing them that

“The Sphinx was drowsy,
Her wings were furled.”

Poor Di was floundering slowly to her proper place; but she splashed up a good deal of foam by getting out of her depth, and rather exhausted herself by trying to drink the ocean dry.

Laura, after the “midsummer night’s dream “ that often comes to girls of seventeen, woke up to find that youth and love were no match for age and common sense. Philip had been flying about the world like a thistle-down for five-and-twenty years, generous-hearted, frank, and kind, but with never an idea of the serious side of life in his handsome head. Great, therefore, were the wrath and dismay of the enamored thistle-down, when the father of his love mildly objected to seeing her begin the world in a balloon with a very tender but very inexperienced aeronaut for a guide.

“Laura is too young to ‘play house’ yet, and you are too unstable to assume the part of lord and master, Philip. Go and prove that you have prudence, patience, energy, and enterprise, and I will give you my girl,--but not before. I must seem cruel, that I may be truly kind; believe this, and let a little pain lead you to great happiness, or show you where you would have made a bitter blunder.”

The lovers listened, owned the truth of the old man’s words, bewailed their fate, and yielded,--

Laura for love of her father, Philip for love of her. He went away to build a firm foundation for his castle in the air, and Laura retired into an invisible convent, where she cast off the world, and regarded her sympathizing sisters through a grate of superior knowledge and unsharable grief. Like a devout nun, she worshipped “St. Philip,” and firmly believed in his miraculous powers. She fancied that her woes set her apart from common cares, and slowly fell into a dreamy state, professing no interest in any mundane matter, but the art that first attracted Philip. Crayons, bread-crusts, and gray paper became glorified in Laura’s eyes; and her one pleasure was to sit pale and still before her easel, day after day, filling her portfolios with the faces he had once admired. Her sisters observed that every Bacchus, Piping Faun, or Dying Gladiator bore some likeness to a comely countenance that heathen god or hero never owned; and seeing this, they privately rejoiced that she had found such solace for her grief.

Mrs. Lord’s keen eye had read a certain newly written page in her son’s heart,--his first chapter of that romance, begun in paradise, whose interest never flags, whose beauty never fades, whose end can never come till Love lies dead. With womanly skill she divined the secret, with motherly discretion she counselled patience, and her son accepted her advice, feeling that, like many a healthful herb, its worth lay in its bitterness.

“Love like a man, John, not like a boy, and learn to know yourself before you take a woman’s happiness into your keeping. You and Nan have known each other all your lives; yet, till this last visit, you never thought you loved her more than any other childish friend. It is too soon to say the words so often spoken hastily,--so hard to be recalled. Go back to your work, dear, for another year; think of Nan in the light of this new hope: compare her with comelier, gayer girls; and by absence prove the truth of your belief.

Then, if distance only makes her dearer, if time only strengthens your affection, and no doubt of your own worthiness disturbs you, come back and offer her what any woman should be glad to take,-- my boy's true heart."

John smiled at the motherly pride of her words, but answered with a wistful look.

"It seems very long to wait, mother. If I could just ask her for a word of hope, I could be very patient then."

"Ah, my dear, better bear one year of impatience now than a lifetime of regret hereafter. Nan is happy; why disturb her by a word which will bring the tender cares and troubles that come soon enough to such conscientious creatures as herself? If she loves you, time will prove it; therefore, let the new affection spring and ripen as your early friendship has done, and it will be all the stronger for a summer's growth. Philip was rash, and has to bear his trial now, and Laura shares it with him. Be more generous, John; make your trial, bear your doubts alone, and give Nan the happiness without the pain. Promise me this, dear,--promise me to hope and wait."

The young man's eye kindled, and in his heart there rose a better chivalry, a truer valor, than any Di's knights had ever known.

"I'll try, mother," was all he said; but she was satisfied, for John seldom tried in vain.

"Oh, girls, how splendid you are! It does my heart good to see my handsome sisters in their best array," cried Nan, one mild October night, as she put the last touches to certain airy raiment fashioned by her own skilful hands, and then fell back to survey the grand effect.

"Di and Laura were preparing to assist at an event of the season," and Nan, with her own locks fallen on her shoulders, for want of sundry combs promoted to her sisters' heads and her dress in unwonted disorder, for lack of the many pins extracted in exciting crises of the toilet, hovered like an affectionate bee about two very full-blown flowers.

"Laura looks like a cool Undine, with the ivy-wreaths in her shining hair; and Di has illuminated herself to such an extent with those scarlet leaves. that I don't know what great creature she resembles most," said Nan, beaming with sisterly admiration.

"Like Juno, Zenobia, and Cleopatra simmered into one, with a touch of Xantippe by way of spice. But, to my eye, the finest woman of the three is the dishevelled young person embracing the bed-post: for she stays at home herself, and gives her time and taste to making homely people fine,--which is a waste of good material, and an imposition on the public."

As Di spoke, both the fashion-plates looked affectionately at the gray-gowned figure; but, being works of art, they were obliged to nip their feelings in the bud, and reserve their caresses till they returned to common life.

"Put on your bonnet, and we'll leave you at Mrs. Lord's on our way. It will do you good, Nan; and perhaps there may be news from John," added Di, as she bore down upon the door like a man-of-war under full sail.

"Or from Philip," sighed Laura, with a wistful look.

Whereupon Nan persuaded herself that her strong inclination to sit down was owing to want of exercise, and the heaviness of her eyelids a freak of imagination; so, speedily smoothing her ruffled plumage, she ran down to tell her father of the new arrangement.

“Go, my dear, by all means. I shall be writing; and you will be lonely if you stay. But I must see my girls; for I caught glimpses of certain surprising phantoms flitting by the door.”

Nan led the way, and the two pyramids revolved before him with the rapidity of lay-figures, much to the good man’s edification: for with his fatherly pleasure there was mingled much mild wonderment at the amplitude of array.

“Yes, I see my geese are really swans, though there is such a cloud between us that I feel a long way off, and hardly know them. But this little daughter is always available, always my ‘cricket on the hearth.’

As he spoke, her father drew Nan closer, kissed her tranquil face, and smiled content.

“Well, if ever I see picters, I see ‘em now, and I declare to goodness it’s as interestin’ as playactin’, every bit. Miss Di with all them boughs in her head, looks like the Queen of Sheby, when she went a-visitin’ What’s-his-name; and if Miss Laura ain’t as sweet as a lally-barster figger, I should like to know what is.”

In her enthusiasm, Sally gambolled about the girls, flourishing her milk-pan like a modern Miriam about to sound her timbrel for excess of joy.

Laughing merrily, the two Mont Blancs bestowed themselves in the family ark, Nan hopped up beside Patrick, and Solon, roused from his lawful slumbers, morosely trundled them away. But, looking backward with a last “Good-night!” Nan saw her father still standing at the door with smiling countenance, and the moonlight falling like a benediction on his silver hair.

“Betsey shall go up the hill with you, my dear, and here’s a basket of eggs for your father. Give him my love, and be sure you let me know the next time he is poorly,” Mrs. Lord said, when her guest rose to depart, after an hour of pleasant chat.

But Nan never got the gift; for, to her great dismay, her hostess dropped the basket with a crash, and flew across the room to meet a tall shape pausing in the shadow of the door. There was no need to ask who the new-comer was; for, even in his mother’s arms, John looked over her shoulder with an eager nod to Nan, who stood among the ruins with never a sign of weariness in her face, nor the memory of a care at her heart.—for they all went out when John came in.

“Now tell us how and why and when you came. Take off your coat, my dear! And here are the old slippers. Why didn’t you let us know you were coming so soon? How have you been? and what makes you so late to-night? Betsey, you needn’t put on your bonnet. And—oh, my dear boy, have you been to supper yet?”

Mrs. Lord was a quiet soul, and her flood of questions was purred softly in her son’s ear; for, being a woman, she must talk, and, being a mother, must pet the one delight of her life, and make a little festival when the lord of the manor came home. A whole drove of fatted calves were metaphorically killed, and a banquet appeared with speed.

John was not one of those romantic heroes who can go through three volumes of hair-breadth escapes without the faintest hint of that blessed institution, dinner; therefore, like “Lady Letherbridge,” he partook, copiously of everything.” while the two women beamed over each mouthful with an interest that enhanced its flavor, and urged upon him cold meat and cheese, pickles and pie, as if dyspepsia and nightmare were among the lost arts.

Then he opened his budget of news and fed them.

“I was coming next month, according to custom; but Philip fell upon and so tempted me, that I was driven to sacrifice myself to the cause of friendship, and up we came to-night. He would not let me come here till we had seen your father, Nan; for the poor lad was pining for Laura, and hoped his good behavior for the past year would satisfy his judge and secure his recall. We had a fine talk with your father; and, upon my life, Philip seemed to have received the gift of tongues, for he made a most eloquent plea, which I’ve stored away for future use, I assure you. The dear old gentleman was very kind, told Phil he was satisfied with the success of his probation, that he should see Laura when he liked, and, if all went well, should receive his reward in the spring. It must be a delightful sensation to know you have made a fellow-creature as happy as those words made Phil to-night.”

John paused, and looked musingly at the matronly tea-pot, as if he saw a wondrous future in its shine.

Nan twinkled off the drops that rose at the thought of Laura’s joy, and said, with grateful warmth,--

“You say nothing of your own share in the making of that happiness, John; but we know it, for Philip has told Laura in his letters all that you have been to him, and I am sure there was other eloquence beside his own before father granted all you say he has. Oh, John, I thank you very much for this!

Mrs. Lord beamed a whole midsummer of delight upon her son, as she saw the pleasure these words gave him, though he answered simply,--

“I only tried to be a brother to him, Nan; for he has been most kind to me. Yes, I said my little say to-night, and gave my testimony in behalf of the prisoner at the bar; a most merciful judge pronounced his sentence, and he rushed straight to Mrs. Leigh’s to tell Laura the blissful news. Just imagine the scene when he appears, and how Di will open her wicked eyes and enjoy the spectacle of the dishevelled lover, the bride-elect’s tears, the stir, and the romance of the thing. She’ll cry over it to-night, and caricature it to-morrow.

And John led the laugh at the picture he had conjured up, to turn the thoughts of Di’s dangerous sister from himself.

At ten Nan retired into the depths of her old bonnet with a far different face from the one she brought out of it, and John, resuming his hat, mounted guard.

“Don’t stay late, remember, John!” And in Mrs. Lord’s voice there was a warning tone that her son interpreted aright.

“I’ll not forget, mother.”

And he kept his word; for though Philip’s happiness floated temptingly before him, and the little figure at his side had never seemed so dear, he ignored the bland winds, the tender night, and set a seal upon his lips, thinking manfully within himself. “I see many signs of promise in her happy face; but I will wait and hope a little longer for her sake.”

“Where is father, Sally?” asked Nan, as that functionary appeared, blinking owlishly, but utterly repudiating the idea of sleep.

“He went down the garding, miss, when the gentlemen cleared, bein’ a little flustered by the goin’ s on. Shall I fetch him in?” asked Sally, as irreverently as if her master were a bag of meal.

“No, we will go ourselves.” And slowly the two paced down the leaf-strewn walk. Fields of yellow grain were waving on the hill-side, and sere corn blades rustled in the wind, from the orchard came the scent of ripening fruit, and all the garden-plots lay ready to yield up their humble offerings to their master’s hand. But in the silence of the night a greater Reaper had passed by, gathering in the harvest of a righteous life, and leaving only tender memories for the gleaners who had come so late.

The old man sat in the shadow of the tree his own hands planted; its fruit boughs shone ruddily, and its leaves still whispered the low lullaby that hushed him to his rest.

“How fast he sleeps! Poor father! I should have come before and made it pleasant for him.”

As she spoke, Nan lifted up the head bent down upon his breast, and kissed his pallid cheek.

“Oh, John, this is not sleep.”

“Yes, dear, the happiest he will ever know.”

For a moment the shadows flickered over three white faces and the silence deepened solemnly. Then John reverently bore the pale shape in, and Nan dropped down beside it, saying, with a rain of grateful tears,--

“He kissed me when I went, and said a last good-night!”

For an hour steps went to and fro about her, many voices whispered near her, and skilful hands touched the beloved clay she held so fast; but one by one the busy feet passed out, one by one the voices died away, and human skill proved vain.

Then Mrs. Lord drew the orphan to the shelter of her arms, soothing her with the mute solace of that motherly embrace.

“Nan, Nan! here’s Philip! come and see!” The happy call re-echoed through the house, and Nan sprang up as if her time for grief were past.

“I must tell them. Oh, my poor girls, how will they bear it?--they have known so little sorrow!”

But there was no need for her to speak; other lips had spared her the hard task. For, as she stirred to meet them, a sharp cry rent the air, steps rang upon the stairs, and two wild-eyed creatures came into the hush of that familiar room, for the first time meeting with no welcome from their father’s voice.

With one impulse, Di and Laura fled to Nan. and the sisters clung together in a silent embrace, more eloquent than words. John took his mother by the hand, and led her from the room, closing the door upon the sacredness of grief.

“Yes, we are poorer than we thought; but when everything is settled, we shall get on very well. We can let a part of this great house, and live quietly together until spring; then Laura will be married, and Di can go on their travels with them, as Philip wishes her to do. We shall be cared for; so never fear for us, John.”

Nan said this, as her friend parted from her a week later, after the saddest holiday he had ever known.

“And what becomes of you, Nan?” he asked, watching the patient eyes that smiled when others would have wept.

“I shall stay in the dear old house; for no other place would seem like home to me. I shall find some little child to love and care for, and be quite happy till the girls come back and want me.”

John nodded wisely, as he listened, and went away prophesying within himself,--

“She shall find something more than a child to love; and, God willing, shall be very happy till the girls come home and—cannot have her.”

Nan’s plan was carried into effect. Slowly the divided waters closed again, and the three fell back into their old life. But the touch of sorrow drew them closer; and, though invisible, a beloved presence still moved among them, a familiar voice still spoke to them in the silence of their softened hearts. Thus the soil was made ready, and in the depth of winter the good seed was sown, was watered with many tears, and soon sprang up green with a promise of a harvest for their after years.

Di and Laura consoled themselves with their favorite employments, unconscious that Nan was growing paler, thinner, and more silent, as the weeks went by, till one day she dropped quietly before them, and it suddenly became manifest that she was utterly worn out with many cares and the secret suffering of a tender heart bereft of the paternal love which had been its strength and stay.

“I’m only tired, dear girls. Don’t be troubled!, for I shall be up to-morrow,” she said cheerily, as she looked into the anxious faces bending over her.

But the weariness was of many months’ growth, and it was weeks before that “to-morrow” came.

Laura installed herself as nurse, and her devotion was repaid four-fold; for, sitting at her sister’s bedside, she learned a finer art than that she had left. Her eye grew clear to see the beauty of a self-denying life, and in the depths of Nan’s meek nature she found the strong, sweet virtues that made her what she was.

Then remembering that these womanly attributes were a bride’s best dowry, Laura gave herself to their attainment, that she might become to another household the blessing Nan had been to her own; and turning from the worship of the goddess Beauty, she gave her hand to that humbler and more human teacher, Duty,—learning her lessons with a willing heart, for Philip’s sake.

Di corked her inkstand, locked her bookcase, and went at housework as if it were a five-barred gate; of course she missed the leap, but scrambled bravely through, and appeared much sobered by the exercise. Sally had departed to sit under a vine and fig-tree of her own, so Di had undisputed sway; but if dish-pans and dusters had tongues, direful would have been the history of that crusade against frost and fire, indolence and inexperience. But they were dumb, and Di scorned to complain, though her struggles were pathetic to behold, and her sisters went through a series of messes equal to a course of “Prince Benreddin’s” peppery tarts. Reality turned Romance out of doors; for, unlike her favorite heroines in satin and tears, or helmet and shield, Di met her fate in a big checked apron and dust-cap, wonderful to see; yet she wielded her broom as stoutly as “Moll Pitcher” shouldered her gun, and marched to her daily martyrdom in the kitchen with as heroic a heart as the “Maid of Orleans” took to her stake.

Mind won the victory over matter in the end, and Di was better all her days for the tribulations and the triumphs of that time; for she drowned her idle fancies in her wash-tub, made burnt-offerings of selfishness and pride, and learned the worth of self-denial, as she sang with happy voice among the pots and kettles of her conquered realm.

Nan thought of John, and in the stillness of her sleepless nights prayed Heaven to keep him safe, and make her worthy to receive and strong enough to bear the blessedness or pain of love.

Snow fell without, and keen winds howled among the leafless elms, but “herbs of grace” were blooming beautifully in the sunshine of sincere endeavor, and this dreariest season proved the most fruitful of the year; for love taught Laura, labor chastened Di, and patience fitted Nan for the blessing of her life.

Nature, that stillest, yet most diligent of housewives, began at last that “spring cleaning” which she makes so pleasant that none find the heart to grumble as they do when other matrons set their premises a-dust. Her hand-maids, wind and rain and sun, swept, washed, and garnished busily, green carpets were unrolled, apple-boughs were hung with draperies of bloom, and dandelions, pet nurslings of the year, came out to play upon the sward.

From the South returned that opera troupe whose manager is never in despair, whose tenor never sulks, whose prima donna never fails, and in the orchard bona fide matinees were held, to which buttercups and clovers crowded in their prettiest spring hats, and verdant young blades twinkled their dewy lorgnettes, as they bowed and made way for the floral belles.

May was bidding June good-morrow, and the roses were just dreaming that it was almost time to wake, when John came again into the quiet room which now seemed the Eden that contained his Eve. Of course there was a jubilee; but something seemed to have befallen the whole group, for never had they appeared in such odd frames of mind. John was restless, and wore an excited look, most unlike his usual serenity of aspect.

Nan the cheerful had fallen into a well of silence and was not to be extracted by any Hydraulic power, though she smiled like the June sky over her head. Di’s peculiarities were out in full force, and she looked as if she would go off like a torpedo at a touch; but through all her moods there was a half-triumphant, half-remorseful expression in the glance she fixed on John. And Laura, once so silent, now sang like a blackbird, as she flitted to and fro; but her fitful song was always, “Philip, my king.”

John felt that there had come a change upon the three, and silently divined whose unconscious influence had wrought the miracle. The embargo was off his tongue, and he was in a fever to ask that question which brings a flutter to the stoutest heart; but though the “man” had come, the “hour” had not. So, by way of steadying his nerves, he paced the room, pausing often to take notes of his companions, and each pause seemed to increase his wonder and content.

He looked at Nan. She was in her usual place, the rigid little chair she loved, because it once was large enough to hold a curly-headed playmate and herself. The old work-basket was at her side, and the battered thimble busily at work; but her lips wore a smile they had never worn before, the color of the unblown roses touched her cheek, and her downcast eyes were full of light.

He looked at Di. The inevitable book was on her knee, but its leaves were uncut; the strong-minded knob of hair still asserted its supremacy aloft upon her head, and the triangular jacket still adorned her shoulders in defiance of all fashions, past, present, or to come; but the expression of her brown countenance had grown softer, her tongue had found a curb, and in her hand lay a card with “Potts, Kettel & Co.” inscribed thereon, which she regarded with never a scornful word for the Co.”

He looked at Laura. She was before her easel as of old; but the pale nun had given place to a blooming girl, who sang at her work, which was no prim Pallas, but a Clytie turning her human face to meet the sun.

“John, what are you thinking of?”

He stirred as if Di’s voice had disturbed his fancy at some pleasant pastime, but answered with his usual sincerity,--

“I was thinking of a certain dear old fairy tale called ‘Cinderella.’”

“Oh!” said Di; and her “Oh” was a most impressive monosyllable. “I see the meaning of your smile now; and though the application of the story is not very complimentary to all parties concerned, it is very just and very true.”

She paused a moment, then went on with softened voice and earnest mien:--

“You think I am a blind and selfish creature. So I am, but not so blind and selfish as I have been; for many tears have cleared my eyes, and much sincere regret has made me humbler than I was. I have found a better book than any father’s library can give me, and I have read it with a love and admiration that grew stronger as I turned the leaves. Henceforth I take it for my guide and gospel, and, looking back upon the selfish and neglectful past, can only say, Heaven bless your dear heart, Nan!”

Laura echoed Di’s last words; for, with eyes as full of tenderness, she looked down upon the sister she had lately learned to know, saying, warmly,--

“Yes, ‘Heaven bless your dear heart, Nan!’ I never can forget all you have been to me; and when I am far away with Philip, there will always be one countenance more beautiful to me than any pictured face I may discover, there will be one place more dear to me than Rome. The face will be yours, Nan, always so patient, always so serene; and the dearer place will be this home of ours, which you have made so pleasant to me all these years by kindnesses as numberless and noiseless as the drops of dew.”

“Dear girls, what have I ever done, that you should love me so?” cried Nan, with happy wonderment, as the tall heads, black and golden, bent to meet the lowly brown one, and her sisters’ mute lips answered her.

Then Laura looked up, saying, playfully,--

“Here are the good and wicked sisters;—where shall we find the Prince? “

“There!” cried Di, pointing to John; and then her secret went off like a rocket; for, with her old impetuosity, she said,--

“I have found you out, John, and am ashamed to look you in the face, remembering the past. Girls, you know when father died, John sent us money, which he said Mr. Owen had long owed us and had paid at last? It was a kind lie, John, and a generous thing to do; for we needed it, but never would have taken it as a gift. I know you meant that we should never find this out; but yesterday I met Mr. Owen returning from the West, and when I thanked him for a piece of justice we had not expected of him, he gruffly told me he had never paid the debt, never meant to pay it, for it was outlawed, and we could not claim a farthing. John, I have laughed at you, thought you stupid, treated you unkindly; but I know you now, and never shall forget the lesson you have taught me. I am proud as Lucifer, but I ask you to forgive me, and I seal my real repentance so— and so.”

With tragic countenance, Di rushed across the room, threw both arms about the astonished young man’s neck and dropped an energetic kiss upon his cheek. There was a momentary silence; for Di finally illustrated her strong-minded theories by crying like the weakest of her sex. Laura, with “the ruling passion strong in death,” still tried to draw, but broke her pet crayon, and endowed her Clytie with a supplementary orb, owing to the

dimness of her own. And Nan sat with drooping eyes, that shone upon her work, thinking with tender pride,--

They know him now, and love him for his generous heart.”

Di spoke first, rallying to her colors, though a little daunted by her loss of self-control.

“Don’t laugh, John,--I couldn’t help it; and don’t think I’m not sincere, for I am,--I am; and I will prove it by growing good enough to be your friend. That debt must all be paid, and I shall do it; for I’ll turn my books and pen to some account, and write stories full of clear old souls like you and Nan; and some one, I know, will like and buy them, though they are not ‘works of Shakespeare.’ I’ve thought of this before, have felt I had the power in me; now I have the motive, and now I’ll do it.”

If Di had Proposed to translate the Koran, or build a new Saint Paul’s, there would have been many chances of success; for, once moved, her will, like a battering-ram, would knock down the obstacles her wits could not surmount. John believed in her most heartily, and showed it, as he answered, looking into her resolute face,--

“I know you will, and yet make us very proud of our ‘Chaos,’ Di. Let the money lie, and when you have a fortune, I’ll claim it with enormous interest; but, believe me, I feel already doubly repaid by the esteem so generously confessed, so cordially bestowed, and can only say, as we used to years ago,--‘Now let’s forgive and so forget.’”

But proud Di would not let him add to her obligation, even by returning her impetuous salute; she slipped away, and, shaking off the last drops, answered with a curious mixture of old freedom and new respect,--

“No more sentiment, please, John. We know each other now; and when I find a friend, I never let him go. We have smoked the pipe of peace; so let us go back to our wigwams and bury the feud. Where were we when I lost my head? and what were we talking about?”

“Cinderella and the Prince.”

As she spoke, John’s eye kindled, and, turning, he looked down at Nan, who sat diligently ornamenting with microscopic stitches a great patch going on, the wrong side out.

“Yes,--so we were; and now taking pussy for the godmother, the characters of the story are well personated,--all but the slipper,” said Di, laughing, as she thought of the many times they had played it together years ago.

A sudden movement stirred John’s frame, a sudden purpose shone in his countenance, and a sudden change befell his voice, as he said, producing from some hiding-place a little wornout shoe,--

“I can supply the slipper;--who will try it first?”

Di’s black eyes opened wide, as they fell on the familiar object; then her romance-loving nature saw the whole plot of that drama which needs but two to act it. A great delight flushed up into her face, as she promptly took her cue, saying—

“No need for us to try it, Laura; for it wouldn’t fit us, if our feet were as small as Chinese dolls; our parts are played out; therefore ‘Exeunt wicked sisters to the music of the wedding-bells.’”

And pouncing upon the dismayed artist, she swept her out and closed the door with a triumphant bang.

John went to Nan, and, dropping on his knee as reverently as the herald of the fairy tale, he asked, still smiling, but with lips grown tremulous,--

“Will Cinderella try the little shoe, and—if it fits—go with the Prince?”

But Nan only covered up her face, weeping happy tears, while all the weary work strayed down upon the floor, as if it knew her holiday had come.

John drew the hidden face still closer, and while she listened to his eager words, Nan heard the beating of the strong man’s heart, and knew it spoke the truth.

“Nan, I promised mother to be silent till I was sure I loved you wholly,--sure that the knowledge would give no pain when I should tell it, as I am trying to tell it now. This little shoe has been my comforter through this long year, and I have kept it as other lovers keep their fairer favors. It has been a talisman more eloquent to me than flower or ring; for, when I saw how worn it was, I always thought of the willing feet that came and went for others’ comfort all day long; when I saw the little bow you tied, I always thought of the hands so diligent in serving any one who knew a want or felt a pain; and when I recalled the gentle creature who had worn it last, I always saw her patient, tender, and devout,--and tried to grow more worthy of her, that I might one day dare to ask if she would walk beside me all my life and be my ‘angel in the house.’ Will you, dear? Believe me, you shall never know a weariness or grief I have the power to shield you from.”

Then Nan, as simple in her love as in her life, laid her arms about his neck, her happy face against his own, and answered softly,--

“Oh, John, I never can be sad or tired any more!”