

ALICE KIRBY.

Slip softly, Nashwaak water, Where thrushes sing and soar. Glad brooks come hurrying to thee, But brown-eyed Alice Kirby Shall come to thee no more.

GROVER'S WHITE WARE.

Mrs. Thompson stood by the kitchen table paring potatoes for dinner. Something was evidently wrong with the little lady, for there was an unmistakable air of "spite" in the way she tossed the potatoes in the pan of cool spring water, waiting there to receive them.

To begin at the beginning, Jane Lawrence had been an unusually romantic girl, and had gone for two years to a boarding-school. She had always fancied she would marry some famous artist or scholar, who would take her to Rome or Venice, where she might live in a perpetual dream of beauty.

But, contrary to all her preconceived notions, she married Robert Thompson, a plain, practical farmer; and instead of touring it in Italy, she went to live at the old homestead, which had been the home of the Thompsons for generations.

Robert Thompson was a working farmer as well as a practical man, and all his people worked. His mother had worked in her day, his sisters had worked, he expected his wife to work. She took to it gleefully; she had not been brought up with high notions by any means; and at first the work did not seem so much.

With things a little different, she'd not have minded the work so much; could she have had nice carpets and tasteful furniture, and books, and a picture or two, and flowers. The home was so very practical, and its surroundings were getting so shabby. At first she had not noticed this or cared for it, but every year, as the years rolled on, it made matters look dingier.

All through the long forenoon Mrs. Thompson nursed her wrath. Robert was selfish and unreasonable, and she did not care who knew it. She would not have the sewing club at the farm, come what might.

"Why isn't dinner ready?" demanded Mr. Thompson, not seeing it actually on the table when he entered. "I told you we had no time to waste today," he added angrily, in his anger and hunger. "If I hadn't anything to do all the forenoon but to get dinner, I'd have it ready in time, I know."

A bitter retort was springing to her lips, but ere it could be spoken Charlie clamorously interposed, pushing his new copy-book before her eyes. "Look, mother! I am going into sentences now, like Frank. It's my first copy. The master wrote it; and he said I was to get it by heart, too, and always remember it. Do read it, mother."

Mrs. Thompson, with her arms full of the cracked mulberry plates, paused a moment to let her eyes fall on the new copy. "A soft answer turneth away wrath," was what she read. It was not that the proverb was new; she had read it scores of times; but there was something in its appropriateness to the present moment that fell like a cool, sweet wind on her heated pulses.

"I will have it ready in a moment, Robert," she said quietly. Mr. Robert Thompson looked up. Evidently he had not expected so pleasant a reply. If the truth must be told, he had thought a good bit that morning about the white ware. Not in the way of granting it, but that she would probably be sulky over it when they got in to dinner.

"It doesn't feel here as it does in that blazin' meadow," he remarked to his friends, as they went into the cool north room to dinner. "Folks that can keep in doors this weather have an easy time of it; they don't know what heat is."

"But there's not half enough. We have as good as none left." "Mother had some best china. Where is it?" "That's nearly all gone. We couldn't put the two on the table together."

"Why not?" "Oh, Robert! Look at this. It is the shabbiest old lot ever seen." "Twas good enough for mother." Mrs. Robert Thompson disdained to make comment. "You'd not have thought of this but for the sewing circle having to come here. If they can't come and eat from such dishes as we've got, they are welcome to stay away."

There were tears in Mrs. Thompson's eyes, but she crowded them bravely back. He took his hat to go out mowing. "We really want the things, Robert. Those at Grover's are very cheap. I can get all I want for a trifle. Do give me the money."

"Grover! I have to keep 'em for us; I've got no money to waste on fine china," returned the farmer. "By the way," looking back from the door, "Jones and Lee are coming to give me a helping hand. I want to get the south meadow down today if I can; it's a famous crop; so I shall bring them in to dinner. Oh, and the Hubbards want six pounds of butter tonight; don't forget to have it ready."

With these words Mr. Robert Thompson had marched off, leaving his wife to her long weary day's work, darkened and made distasteful by her disappointment. She was both grieved and angry. It was a little thing, perhaps, but it is the little things of life that delight or annoy.

Existence seemed very bare and homely to Jane Thompson that summer day. With her love of ease and beauty and symmetry, how rude and coarse and hard looked all her surroundings. It was only one long monotonous round of homely toil, unrelieved by any of the little sweetnesses and graces that might make even toil pleasant. She did not often think of it, but she remembered that day with the faintest little air of regret, that she might have been differently situated, and as she looked up to the pretty French cottage on the hill, embowered in a perfect forest of blossoming vines, caught the cool gleam of urn and fountain, something like a sigh trembled on her lips.

"Squire Burnham's wife does not have to beg for a paltry bit of money to set out her table decently," she thought, rebelliously. What business had she to marry Robert Thompson, she asked herself, her slender wrist beating away at the butter for the Hubbards. For in the green and gloomy light in which Mrs. Thompson looked at things today, she quite forgot the fact that she had fallen in love with the honest, steady and good-looking young farmer, choosing him in preference to Joe Burnham, whom she might have had. Joe had a patrimony of his own—200 a year at least—and a good bit of land, which he rented, and was called "Squire," as was his father before him. He wanted to marry Jane Lawrence, and she would not; likes and dislikes cannot be controlled, and she cared more for Robert Thompson's little finger than the whole of poor, undersized Joe.

"Squire Burnham found another wife, and Mrs. Thompson this weary day, was furiously envying her. Mrs. Burnham would come amidst the rest of the sewing club, too, and see the miserable shabbiness of the mulberry ware, and the home generally. The unfinished butter got beaten savagely at the thought. Robert Thompson was not an unkind man, only thoughtless. He was a type of a very large class, more especially farmers, who do not feel the need of life's rugged pathway being smoothed with flowers.

Absorbed in his stock, his crops, his money-getting, he did not realize how monotonous was his wife's life at home. He had his recreations; the weekly market; gossip with his brother farmers; politics; shabby home told upon her; that she needed some brightening to come to it as a yearning want of life, and so, as the years had gone on, she grew dissatisfied at heart, hardly understanding what she wished for or what she did not wish; the intensely unlovely, prosy, dull life somewhat souring her spirits. Now and again, when she gave back a short or bitter retort, Robert wondered; she used to be so sweet-tempered.

"What's the matter with the old ones?" he asked. "Look at them," she answered. "They are frightfully old and shabby." "I dare say the food will taste as well off them as off Grover's set of white ware."

"I've tried to have it nice, Robert," she said, trying to choke down a rising sob as well as an angry word. Mr. Thompson, aroused by a quiver in the tone, looked at his wife; his friends looked at one another. She sat down at length, but could not eat. Mr. Thompson finished his meal in silence. He was watching his wife's face; there was something in it that he did not understand—a kind of patient, hopeless look, as if she no longer cared to struggle onward. The old mulberry ware did look dingy on the snowy white table-cloth; almost too bad for these chums of his to sit down to. He wondered he had never thought of that before. Robert Thompson grew thoughtful.

He passed into the kitchen when they were going out again—how hot and stifling it felt with that big fire, as bad as the south meadow. His wife had been in it cooking; that must have made her face scarlet. In doors was not so comfortable a place after all, if you had not work to do, was the idea that flitted through his mind. And perhaps the work was overmuch for his wife, who at best was but a delicate woman. A fresh, cool breeze had sprung up from the south, as he went out, walking slowly, but the sun was burning hot still. Robert Thompson waited to wipe his brows; and in that moment the voices of his comrades came toward him from the other side of the hedge, where they stood in the little shade it cast.

"I never pitied a woman so much in my life," quoth one of them. "She works like a slave, and does not get even a 'thank ye' for it from Thompson. He's a good fellow, but uncommon down upon the work. Strong as a horse himself, he thinks, I suppose, women must be the same."

"Yes, Bob's a sterling good fellow, but Jane Lawrence made a mistake when she said yes to his asking," said the other. "Jones, she wasn't cut out for a farmer's wife, especially one who keeps his folks to it like Thompson does. She's over sensitive—delicate; any lady but she would have turned long ago and bid him give her proper help. He won't make his money out of her many years, if he don't take better care of her; she'll run down fast. Awfully changed she is; she looks as faded as the old house rooms—and they haven't seen a coat of paint since Grandfather Thompson's day."

"Ah, she'd better have took Joe Burnham. The Lawrences used to have things nice in their home, and she'd have got 'em so still if she'd married Joe. His wife's just gone out in her pony shay. I say, Jones, I wonder whether Thompson's wife's ever sorry?"

These were the unconscious comments of these, his warm friends, came crushing down on Robert Thompson's heart and brain like a bolt of fire. That she rejected Burnham for him he knew, when she came home to the old homestead and took care of his invalid mother. Tenderly had she done it, too. Could she be wearing out her life in hard work for him; she, the mother of his boys; she whom he loved well, for all his churlishness? Robert Thompson stole away; he could bear his thoughts no longer, and he felt that he could almost kill himself for his blind heedlessness.

The afternoon wore on toward evening. Mrs. Thompson had finished her indoor work—the washing up of the dinner dishes and the putting of the rooms straight—and was going in with an armful of fine things she had taken from the clothes line, when the sound of wheels made her look round. "I've brought that white ware, Mrs. Thompson," said the brisk voice of Grover, springing from his cart and lifting down carefully a large hamper.

"But I didn't order it, Mr. Grover," she rejoined, in rather a frightened voice. "The master did, though. Mr. Thompson came down this afternoon, and said the things was to come up to you at once. There's the dinner set you admired and a tea set as well. Where shall I put 'em?" "Bring them in, please," she answered, rather faintly. He did as he bid and then drove off.

Mrs. Thompson sat down by the hamper of crockery and cried as if her heart would break. They were magical tears, too, for they washed all the weariness and despair from her face and the shade from her eyes and heart. She forgot that she was tired or that the day was hot; she only thought how kind Robert was, and what a wicked woman she had been for saying to herself in her temper that she'd rather have had "Squire Burnham. Then she unpacked the treasures, pulling them out from amid the hay, and singing softly all the while. Oh, it was beautiful, that ware! with its clear opaque white, and here and there a delicate tracing of fuchsia or convolvulus.

Mr. Thompson came in and found her in the midst. "What is it, Jennie?" he asked—the old fond name he used to call her. "Oh, Robert!" taking a step toward him. He opened his arms and drew her close to his heart, kissing her as fondly and tenderly as he ever had in the days of his courtship. "I have been a brute, little wife," he whispered, huskily. "Can you ever forgive me?" "Forgive you? Oh, Robert! I never was so happy in my life! I have been to blame. I have not been so patient and kind as I might."

"Yes, you have. You've been an angel compared with me; but that is all over now. I did not think, Jennie; I did not, indeed." "But—Robert—" "You shall have more help in the house—another servant. We'll get her in, Jennie, long before the sewing club night comes round."

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