

A TERRIBLE CHRISTMAS EVE.

I don't mention it to Deborah! I particularly avoid mentioning it today, though I may have done so now and then at other times, when it has struck me how conveniently her nervous headaches visit her. But, though I don't mention it, the fact has never been borne in upon me so strongly as it is this afternoon of Christmas eve. We certainly have had a good deal of trouble—and utterly in vain, so far—in looking over houses for the Soppendells; but then I should have thought Deborah would feel with me that a triumph it would be to find them the right one at last, and have them settled within reach of us. And this advertisement in today's *Times* is so very promising! It offers us exactly the house the Soppendells want, and in search of which we have taken so many fruitless journeys. And how nice it will be to add, as postscript to our Christmas letter, "We have found precisely the house you desire, and it will be ready for you early in the year."

"It will only be another disappointment," Deborah remarks, with an unworthy ingratitude, when I so exultantly tell her we must go at once to see and secure this house. "No advertisement ever tells the truth."

I don't contradict Deborah (though I sometimes do), because we really have been so very often lured to bootless fatigue by advertisements; finding, instead of the very pretty, mellowed, secluded house we want, only interminable rows of brick and mortar, or forgotten tenements redolent of mold and animalcule. But in this advertisement I at once detect the ring of truth, and am determined not to miss such a chance. Besides, there is a comforting sort of sensation in being told to "apply to Mr. Lovely"—names angur much. I think. And Mr. Lovely offers exactly what we (and the Soppendells) want—A picturesque, detached residence, known as Sylvan Villa, charmingly situate in extensive pleasure-grounds and fruit garden in a salubrious suburb. Near church and station.

"Is not that an advantage, the station especially for Mr. Soppendell, and the church for Mrs. Soppendell? They will be delighted, Deborah," I say, putting down the *Times*, as there can be nothing in it of farther interest to either of us. "And, indeed, there is nothing so attractive as individuality in one's dwelling. I don't wonder the Soppendells want a house that is not like everybody else's. Now we will go out and buy our Christmas-boxes, and after an early lunch we can go and see Sylvan Villa."

We have a very amicable arrangement, Deborah and I, about our Christmas-boxes, for we buy each other exactly the same article. And though this might lead a casual observer to suppose the gifts are of no great advantage to us, that would be quite wrong. We buy something which we should not otherwise have, and we consider it an annual luxury, or elegance, which has fallen to our lot in quite an unexpected and promiscuous manner at this festive season. Today we have decided on Honiton fichus for evening wear, and the selection takes us long, because of the ribbons—Deborah's complexion bearing a tint a shade warmer than mine will bear—but we choose at last to our entire satisfaction. Indeed, as we recall the fichus to our mind afterward, and picture them on our new silks, though we say nothing personally flattering to each other of the costumes they will so elegantly complete, we have a general impression of their fitness for very high society.

But who would think of the blow that is to fall upon me in this placidity, when, after enjoying a little warm lunch, with a cup of tea, Deborah suddenly declares one of her nervous headaches, and declares she cannot go to see Sylvan Villa; no, not if I will crown her, which, of course, I have no intention (and, indeed, no power) of doing? I entreat her to make the effort; I appeal to her sense of duty, and then I reproach her like a mother; but nothing avails, and all that remains is for me to go alone. My only comfort is that, in my own person, I shall have earned the Soppendells' undivided gratitude; and I hope some innocent and natural means may be found of making them aware of this.

"I shall not be late, Deborah, and shall certainly bring good news," I say, while I arrange my bonnet at the glass. "But I do wish you were coming."

"You are not thinking of my head," sighs Deborah. And I'm ashamed to own that I am not: at that particular moment I am thinking of my own. We live in Bayswater, Deborah and I, and I have to go to Victoria to take my ticket for the salubrious suburb. There is a train waiting for me when I reach the platform, which proves what a convenient line it is; and the carriage I enter is quite filled, which proves what a favorite direction from town is in which I journey. I have no one to talk to, so I'm conscious now and then of a jerk, as if I were pulled up heartlessly, at about fourteen or fifteen, on the way toward forty winks. But really there is no incentive to me to keep awake, my fellow-travellers being so uninteresting, for it is difficult to me at any time to feel entertained by a row of gentlemen with newspapers before their poor shv faces, and all their care lavished on black bags, as is the manner of London gentlemen. It just a little surprises me to find that all the gentlemen, as well as all the newspapers and all the bags, have left me before I reach the salubrious suburb; but yet the fact soothes me, because it proves they are not hurrying in advance of me to seize on Sylvan Villa.

The station belonging to the salubrious suburb is a very clean and pleasant one, and I look round it approvingly before I leave it with brisk and hopeful step. Mr. Lovely's office, too, is particularly neat, and papered entirely, as it seems to me, with repetitions of his own attractive name, printed on sale bills, in a manner to inspire confidence in his connection. I find Mr. Lovely himself quite an engaging man—or it may be his clerk; I don't feel in a position to assert until after dealings shall impress it upon me. He speaks feelingly about Sylvan Villa, and adds, with candor, that though several parties wish for the house, he will see that I have my chance. He apologizes for not being able to send some one with me, but he assures me I shall have no difficulty in finding the villa, or in opening the door, as he will give me the latch-key. And if his office should be

closed when I return (as it may be, because being Christmas-eve, they hope to leave business early this afternoon), I can drop the key into the letter-box, he says. I am grateful that all the other parties have brought back the key in time for me to have it, and I put it at once safely into my pocket, then stand at the office-door with Mr. Lovely for his directions, which are given, thoughtfully and patiently.

Then I start off along a very pretty and quite countrified road, and walk for a long time undisturbed and comfortable. At last, just to make assurance doubly sure, I call in at a modest house on the way, to ask if I am going right for Sylvan Villa. The master of the house has to be extracted from a shed far down a garden before this question can be answered for me; and, indeed, he has to be released and returned to his shed, still before the question is answered. They never heard of Sylvan Villa; but when I mention the road, a light breaks in upon them. They think if I go straight on—straight on past the church—A light breaks in upon me too at that word. Did not the advertisement say, "close to church and station?" I may find it. I thank the collected household, and go smiling on my way.

The road grows wider and quieter. How pretty it will be in spring and summer! I am conscious of walking far, as well as fast, but after my return I need do nothing more this evening. I shall enjoy a chop or something comfortable with my tea, and then my own easy chair and the new annuals to read. If there is anything to be done needing exertion Deborah can do it. Has she not had all the afternoon to rest? Here is the church. I pass it and go on, knowing I cannot go wrong now; yet I look out for a friendly passer-by, that I may ask how near I am to Sylvan Villa. I only see a few young men at a tavern door, and my heart fails me in opening a conversation with them. The road is still a pretty one, but it slopes downhill now, so that the walk is not so inspiring as it is uphill—at least, it never is so to me. But soon I forget all this, for before I have walked above a mile beyond the church I reach a gate, on which I can read the longed-for words, "Sylvan Villa."

Ah! was I not right, and will not Deborah have to apologize to me? Can anything, in any London suburb, be more likely to please the Soppendells than this picturesque, ivy-covered house, shaded (as it will be in summer) by these old trees which stand so thickly in the damp winter garden all around me? Certainly the inhabitants of this house will not be what the Soppendells so dread—overlooked by neighbors. Certainly here they will find the very refinement of privacy.

With real delight I hurry to the door, taking the latch-key from my pocket as I go. It is a good front entrance, and when I have entered and taken the key out of the lock I am pleased to hear how securely and unmistakably the latch catches. The lower premises are all good, though not in the best repair, for I notice a broken pane in one of the kitchen windows, and two or three loose boards. But I am not surprised, for the house has evidently been long untenanted.

Upstairs the rooms satisfy me as they do below, but it is such a new sensation to me to be alone in an empty house, that I hurry a little, hating the echoing sound of my own steps on the bare boards. There seems an open and extensive view from every window, and even the attics are pleasant rooms, though for my own part, if I were the Soppendells' maids, I should prefer the front one, because the back one has that senseless trap-door in the ceiling. Of course the agent will have the measure correct, but I would like to be quite sure, and I've brought my yard-ribbon to take the size of the chief rooms. I need not measure the attics, so I go down, and into one of the back rooms on the second floor.

"What a capital house it is!" I say to myself, as I draw out my measure. "If the owner will undertake the few necessary repairs it will be just the desire of the heart of the Soppendells. Suppose I had not seen the advertisement? Ah! but suppose—this is the one cloud on the Christmas horizon—"all those other parties step in before me?"

My furs, and my long, rapid walk make me warm in this unheated house, even on Christmas eve; and as the air feels close I cross the room to open the window. What a beautiful position the house occupies! The Soppendells can live here as thoroughly to themselves as if in a dark of the own, and cannot even see a neighbor's house, or have the faintest fear of being overlooked. I am astonished to feel the wind blowing in upon me so lately when I open the window (for as I walked I had scarcely noticed it), and before I take my hands from the frame a sudden gust, passing me, blows to the door behind me.

I hear it slam, and then something fall from it outside, and I look round in amazement; the door is latched tightly, and on this side there is no handle at all! How has it been? The handle must have been off on this inner side, and the handle on the outer side, holding the shaft that turns the latch, must have fallen when the wind slammed to the door. I stand watching it helplessly, vacantly, not able even to believe what is so evident—that I am a prisoner in this room, doomed to spend the Christmas night in this empty, isolated house, in hunger, cold and solitude! No, I cannot believe it, though I say the words over again and again to myself, in my utter stupefaction. My mind cannot yet grasp anything so horrible, though my lips repeat the doom in store for me, and my eyes see the fast-sprung lock.

I go to the window as my only hope, and lean from it, looking every way for help. But there is no human form in sight. I look far and near; then down below, then feebly up into the quiet winter sky; but what can come to my help? The large garden that has delighted me is utterly silent and deserted; the meadows beyond, that seemed so good a boundary to this house, are a picture of wide, bare emptiness. I look down, and there are but bare trees swaying weirdly in the wind. I call, in a shaking, pausing, trembling way, and then listen, almost afraid of hearing any answering sound, yet trembling more when no other call breaks the silence. I call again—my voice growing stronger in my despair—and again. But what answer can I

hope for? Who would be wandering, in such an hour, there beyond this faded, neglected garden? And even if any stray man were there, could my call reach him? Why had I not gone into a front room first? Then possibly my call might have been heard by some isolated passer-by. But here!

I cannot be still yet, in this beginning of my misery. I kneel at the door, and look helplessly into the hole from which the handle has gone. I put my pencil-case in to it, imbecilely supposing it may turn the lock. I try again and again, most insanely, though the futility is apparent to me from the first. Then I rise to my feet again and beat the door, while slow, hot tears fall from my eyes, and I look stupidly down upon them on my dress, fearing even to wonder why they fall, because I so fear meeting the truth face to face. I look around the bare walls vacantly, yet I notice that the paper has three poppies on it, one crimson, one pink, and one white—and I can scarcely see the white ones now.

I lean once more from the open window, for the world seems a little nearer to me so; and when I feel my voice is not muffled by my tears, I shout again for help, waiting—waiting in the silence that follows, and wondering what I can do. I feel nothing of the cold even yet, for my great fear has made me feverish, and I dread shutting out the living world by closing the window. How far away can the nearest neighbor be? I cannot see any white poppies on the walls now. What shall I do? What shall I do? No answer, save the despairing echo of the question in my heart—what shall I do?

Why did I not make Deborah come with me? She ought to have come. She had no right to subject me to this. And the Soppendells had no right to lay such a task as this upon me. They were going to desert me in the critical moment. There she is now in the warmth and light at home, knowing nothing about what utter solitude and fear can mean—I myself never knew it till now—sitting at our snug fire-side, in her comfortable slippers, dozing, probably, over one of those Christmas books. Or perhaps she has the dear old doctor with her, and they are sipping tea, each side the blazing fire, in their convivial way I know so well, while he gossips as usual; just as it were old women like himself! It makes it worse for me to picture them so. And, after all, the doctor may be visiting a very uncomfortable, poor patient; and the fire may be very low at home; and Deborah may be feeling a chillblain; or heard head may be really bad. But if—it they are chatting together as snugly as we sometime do—they little dream of my—my own sob frightens me as it bursts from my shaking form. It sounds so pitiful, and so like somebody else's misery.

Once more utter stillness settles down upon the house, and so unbearable is this to me, and I feel so afraid of my mind going, that I try to repeat lines and verses that may hold my thoughts. I dare say I have never learned anything by heart since I left school, for there seems a sort of mingling and confusion among them. But I go bravely on, stopping only where memory fails:

"Ye mariners of England
That sit at home at ease,
How little do ye reck upon
The wreck upon the seas!"

"My name is Gramplan! On the Norman hills
My father feeds his flock. And keeps his only son,
Myself, at home."

"It was the schooner *Hesperus*,
And he held one of three;
'By thy long gray eye, and thy long gray beard,
Now wherefore hold'st thou me?'"

I am going on indefinitely, when (without seeming actually to hear anything) I am conscious of the silence being disturbed by a faint creaking. In the first instant my heart gives a delighted bound, feeling it is a distant step outside, and that some one will presently come below the window, that I may throw the key down for him to rescue me, but in the next instant I know this sound is inside the deserted house, and is above me!

How can it be? I stand looking wildly up, just as there comes one heavy thump exactly over my head—the fall of a dead body! Ah! yes; it can be nothing else. I cannot move a limb. I stand as motionless as that dead body above, in my overwhelming panic. This must be the re-acting of an awful tragedy which has been perpetrated in this ghostly house, and, of course, on this very spot where I stand, and where the sound fell—the hollow, ominous sound, repeated, perhaps, in this terrible way on every Christmas-eve. There would be the stains of blood here under my very feet; only have I not read that blood will not sink through carpets? And have not the carpets all been carefully taken up? Even on the walls there would be ghastly splashes under this new paper—ah! the pink poppies now are undistinguishable there.

Is the ghostly tragedy over now, or are there spectral scenes to follow? I can only wait, too terrified to stir for fear of evoking the faintest sound that I myself might make. Was it really I who had valued solitude and retirement once? Shall I ever cease to hate both after this night? Ah! What is that? A stealthy, creeping step, a slinking, lurking sound of foot-steps, that may be one, yet may be many, so softened and subdued, so cunning and so slow—over my head; upon the stairs; now in the lobby, just without my door, and pausing there.

In that moment my hair turns white. Then—all my other fears seem to have been played by this great, tangible horror that has its grip upon me now—I hear a whispering under my door—a low, suppressed whisper, rapid and eager.

I don't know how long it is—how can I ever count those minutes that hold years in their course?—when the voices cease, and the steps pass on, slowly down the stairs, to seek, as I know, a murderous weapon. My fingers grip each other till there is blood upon my hands, as if to fit me for my part in this ghastly scene of robbery and murder. Where they living men or special forms? But, whether men or forms, I know that their return will mark my last hour. In this feeling of certainty with regard to my impending fate the long tension of my attitude give way. My eyes close a moment, in the weariness of their strained gaze, and I walk once more to the window, in that pitiful effort to bring the world around me once again—for the last time now.

I have heard doors opening and closing below, and now a step is passing to and fro under the window. Before this (how

many hours before this?) I had eagerly longed to hear an approaching step in the forbidden garden; yet, now that it is here—so unmistakably passing backward and forward below me—I dare not call, nor make my presence known. It is not a step, so they are men and not forms; and, being men, how have they pursued me here? Certainly no living man could pass that outer door as I secured it: they can only have emerged from that terrible trap-door in the attic ceiling. And now one of them has gone to the front of the house, and one is here at the back, that they may make my escape impossible. But need they fear, when I am so helplessly imprisoned in this room?

I dare not look out now, seeing in fancy the upturned, murderous face which may meet my gaze. Yet it is too dark now to see it, however fierce and fiery the eyes may be; for not even the crimson poppies can be distinguished on the paper; and only the square of bare, unshaded window breaks the darkness.

Time goes on, and the blackness of night is deepening around me, when gradually an awful thought forms itself on my mind—my poor, wandering, unsettled mind. This creeping step that I have followed, and the eager, threatening whisper, belong to an escaped madman! A madman in whose power I am imprisoned, and may have to spend long and horrible days and nights, perhaps, before he chooses to let his cunning violence culminate in my death. Have I not read of the fiendish delight with which a maniac will lengthen out the torture of those who fall into his power? And who, from that outer, fading world, can elude his crafty vigilance, and come to rescue me before it is too late! Even after the terrible deed, who will ever find my body to give it christian burial?

And this is Christmas-time; and Deborah is in ease and safety! Oh, why did I come? We have but each other—Deborah and I—why did I ever come away from her? Don't all sensible single ladies stay at home on Christmas-eve? Why don't all sensible single ladies stay at home forever? It is so much safer. How cold it is now, and how late! It must at least be midnight—only midnight, yet a hundred nights seem to have passed since I had first so cheerfully thrown this window open, to see, with delight, that no human being's eyes could overlook us here. Ah me! have I ever really said that individuality is desirable in a residence? Never again will I enter any house unless it is propped on either side by twenty of its own twin brothers, and has forty of its duplicates opposite. No wonder this isolated dwelling is not taken. If the owner would make it beautiful from roof to basement, and then let it without a rent, would I allow the Soppendells to inhabit it? No. A thousand times, No.

Oh, horror! There is a rustling of the bare branches of the tree outside the window, and a muffled, angry voice cries, "I'm coming! So you thought I shouldn't find you, eh? I'm coming." And then goes muttering on, hoarsely and savagely. I have crept back from the window, and am standing now against the opposite wall, my eyes wild and fixed, my breath coming in gasps; because I know this madman is climbing up to his final deed of bloodshed, and will soon step into the dark room, from that square of gloomy sky on which my glazed, wild eyes are riveted. But no face appears there; and presently I hear a door closed beneath the open window, and two heavy bolts shot. Then I look out with a new wonder. The bare tree has been stirred and rustled by a sudden shower of rain, which makes the night more dreary and more lonely even than it was before, and this heavy rain has driven in again the madman who has been pacing before my prison. So now he will come up to me indeed, and this will be the end.

I hear the slow, sly step up the stair—or many steps—I cannot tell, for there are voices muttering all the while in that same savage, threatening way—and when I hear, too, that something heavy is being dragged up, I know it to be the weapon for my murder.

I cover my eyes and try to remember what I ought to think of in this my dying moment; but I am only wildly wondering how soon that step can reach my door, and how this tale of bloodshed will be broken to poor Deborah.

Suddenly now—over the dreary pattering of the rain outside, and over every weird and muffled sound within—there sweeps a startling peal from some subterranean bell in this terrible house. I hear it distinctly, and feel the shock through all my icy, trembling frame. Then the whole house totters, and I become unconscious.

When my eyes open, the room where I have been so long in darkness is lighted feebly (and a little weirdly) by a lean and poverty-stricken candle stuck in the empty grate. I am sitting on the floor, with my back against the wall, and my feet straight out before me, conscious only of a sensation of dampness in every garment and on every feature, and feebly conscious of being astonished that Deborah, who is kneeling beside me, should be damp too—Deborah being so particular about her dress! I think I slowly and sleepily begin to understand it a little, when I find that she is sprinkling water over me from the drawer of a kitchen dresser, which is held for her by the strangest object on which any eye could light—a stooping, feeble, shaking object, with hollow, wild eyes, looking out from long and shaggy locks of unkempt hair the very color of pale ale.

I think Deborah is crying a little, when I turn my eyes from this strange sight; but I really cannot be sure, because when I see it is really Deborah, and meet her pitiful eyes, and feel her hand, and know she has found me, I faint again.

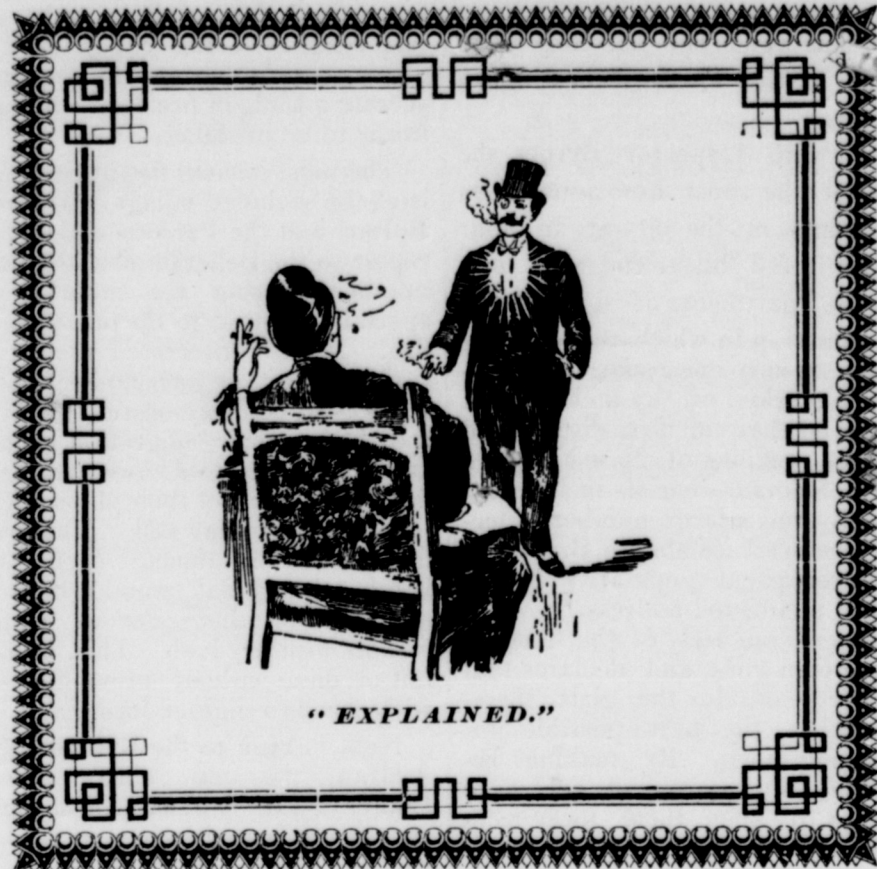
But only for a little time, I think; because there falls upon me such a deluge from the dresser drawer.

"Don't tell me anything about it yet, Hephzibah; nothing till we get home, and have had something warm and nourishing. To think what my nerves have undergone in tracing you, and having to cut out that advertisement for the cabman, and trust myself blindly to him to find the house, and he taking me all round deserts and forests before he brought me here! And to think that that wretched object of a man—you needn't look round, for he went away when he saw you waking—should have come in here through a broken window for his night's rest—rest, indeed, in an empty house, with only bare boards to lie on—



Just Take The Cake

of SURPRISE SOAP and use it on wash day without boiling or scalding the clothes. Mark how white and clean it makes them. How little hard work there is about it. Try it once. Don't get it again if you don't like it—but you will.



"EXPLAINED."

JONES:

Great Scott, Johnson! What a blaze of diamonds! Where did you get the cluster and what did you pay?

JOHNSON:

Why, my dear boy, these are not diamonds you see; it's simply a well done up shirt front. Nothing the matter with it, is there! Ungar does them up for me and that's the way they always look.

JONES:

By-the-by! How does your wife do about her wash. It's getting to be a regular nuisance—she's talking of letting Ungar do it.

JOHNSON:

Well, my wife lets him do it, and has for some time. You'd better try it—it's so simple, and the charge is very reasonable.

BE SURE and send your laundry to UNGAR'S Steam Laundry, St. John (Waterloo street); Telephone 55. Or Halifax: 62 and 64 Grandville street. It'll be done right, it done at

UNCAR'S.

It'll not Bother You
To pick out a Suit of our stock.

We've anything and everything you want. A special lot of very handsome Tweed Suitings; will make up beautifully.

THOS. YOUNGCLAUS,
CHARLOTTE STREET.

and should have heard you, and got into the trap-door till he thought you were gone, and then went to scare the cats—at least, that's what he seems to say; but he talks to himself, and I can't understand; and I'm quite sure he is as mad as a March hare. And my nerves are in that state I don't know what anybody says. I've the cab at the door, and you are all right now, Hephzibah—a little damp, perhaps, that's all; and I do hope this will be a lesson to you not to act in the eccentric way that is your delight, and wears me to a shadow. Tie your bonnet. I seem to hear that poor imbecile coming back, and I'm in that state of nerves that I cannot stand it; though if he hadn't been here to let me in, and hadn't thought of that dresser drawer to bring the water in, I really don't know what I should have done—or, rather, what you should have done, Hephzibah. Where are you going now? For goodness-gracious' sake, do consider the state you have put me into, and don't be so spasmodic!"

But I cannot help it. He looks such a feeble, helpless, harmless creature, shrinking back there in the empty hall! Such a threadbare, sickly shadow of a man; such a dazed, bewildered object—gone astray not knowing how or when—that I cannot help it. It is such a little to do. There is no cab waiting to take him from this bare, desolate house to a cheery fireside. There is no warm, merry Christmas-day to dawn

for him. Ah! it is such a very little thing to do!
"But most unwise," says Deborah—not knowing that I see her surreptitiously put back her purse, pretending she has never touched it—"most unwise." But she says it with unusual haste and jerkiness, and says nothing more until we are warm and safe at home; and—mellowed by a little chicken fricassee, and a glass of negus afterward—I tell this story and she listens.

"And so," Deborah says, when I have finished, and the negus (and other circumstances) have soothed and cheered us both a little, "your hair grew white in a single night, did it, Hephzibah?"

But Deborah has no right to smile; for it certainly would have grown white in that single night, if—well, if it hadn't been quite white before!

You've No Idea.

How nicely Hood's Sarsaparilla hits the needs of people who feel "all tired out" or "run down," from any cause. It seems to oil up the whole mechanism of the body so that all moves smoothly and work becomes a positive delight. Be sure to get Hood's.

Every one who tries the Kerr Evaporated Vegetables for soup sticks to their use because of their economy and fine flavors 10 quarts soup for a trifle. All grocers.