

Family Circle.

A CHECK FOR A CARPET.

By LOUISE CHANDLER MOULTON.

"And how about the new carpet?"

Pretty little Mrs. Lane spoke coaxingly, with her hands clasped on her husband's arm. He looked down at her a moment before he answered. She had been his wife for five years, but her face was as sunny and as girlish as when he first wooed her. Her blue eyes had scarcely shed a tear in all those years, except the lazy, luxurious tears of happy little souls weep over the ideal woes of story-book heroines. Her monthly rose in the French window was not pinker than her cheeks—her scarlet geranium was not brighter or redder than her lips—and the pet canary chirping above the blossoms was no gayer or merrier than the little birdlike woman who waited for John Lane's answer. He smiled as he looked at her, and brushed back her soft, brown hair with an unconscious tenderness.

"Yes, about the carpet. If I thought we needed it I would get it, of course. But we use the drawing-room so little. The carpet that is on it now is almost as bright as it was the day we chose it, and you know how pretty we both thought it, then."

The girlish young wife pouted her dainty lip—"Well, John, but it's been down five years, and it's only so nice because I've taken such nice care of it. If I'd been careless and let it get spoiled, you'd have bought me another without grumbling, you know you would. It's too bad if I've got to see things round forever, just because I'm careful of them. Don't you get tired of seeing the same things always, John?"

"Not easily, so long as they are the same, fresh and bright as ever. I'm not tired of you, yet!"

She laughed, and her pink cheeks flushed a little.

"But I'm not a carpet. Ours is only a Brussels, you know, and I did so want a Wilton, like Mrs. Mayne's."

"So Mrs. Mayne is the serpent in our Eden?"

Well, Annie, give me till night to think about it, and he bent toward her for his good-bye.

After he had gone she went into the drawing-room, and took a survey of her possessions. The carpet was that soft, many-shaded, mosslike green, on which every thing looked so well. She confessed to herself that it had a more refined air than Mrs. Mayne's large-figured Wilton, which held her gaze like the eye of the ancient mariner from the moment you entered the room. But then, she thought, she needn't buy a great, gaudy thing; and a Wilton was really so much more elegant, so much more in keeping with her rosewood and bric-a-brac. Then she began dusting some of her books and ornaments.

While she stood there she heard the bell tinging, and a short party at the door—a child's voice, apparently asking for food, and the cook's answer that to-day there was nothing to spare. A sound in the young, sad voice, a sort of uncomplaining hopelessness, struck her, and she stepped down stairs just as Bridget was about to shut the door.

"Come back a moment, little girl," she said in those gentle tones that John Lane liked so well to hear. The child turned, an eager light coming into her face for a moment and then going out.

Mrs. Lane was acting on impulse. She almost always did—it was a good thing, therefore, that most of her impulses were sweet, and gentle, and true.

"Are you hungry?" she asked pityingly.

"It doesn't matter so much about me, ma'am. I could bear to be hungry, but I don't know what to do for my mother. I have tried to get a place to work, but no one will take me. They say a child ten years old is more plague than profit. Mother had to work so hard to keep us, and now she's been sick awhile, and she can't work, and we've eaten up every thing. So I came out to see if anybody would give me something for mother, and I've asked at every house in the street, and everywhere they said just the same, that they had nothing to-day."

"Where do you live—is it far?" Mrs. Lane asked.

"Only a few steps, ma'am—three streets off."

"Well, then, I'll go home with you, and see your mother. Come into the house, while I put on my bonnet, and Bridget shall give some bread and butter and cold meat."

Mrs. Lane's sweet young face was full of pity, as she hurriedly packed a basket with bread, tea, and sugar, and a glass of jelly for the sick mother. Then she ran up stairs and tied on her pretty summer hat, and down again while the hungry girl was just finishing her breakfast.

"Come, little girl," she said. "What is your name?"

"Ellen Stanton, ma'am, but my father always called me Nelly, and so does mother."

"And is your father dead?"

"O yes, that's the way our trouble began. Father died, and mother wasn't used to hard work, and she had to work so hard to keep baby and me."

Mrs. Lane asked no more questions, just then. She was thinking more seriously than she had ever thought in her life, remembering how she had been born to ease and luxury, shielded all her days from care—how her deepest discontent had been when some other person's carpet was handsomer, or their Indian shawl had a deeper border. And now she was going where hunger and sorrow were tenants. Had she been living all this time for herself? She questioned, with a sudden pang of terror and self-reproach, whether ever in her life she had done one really unselfish act—whether if the great harvest day were come, she would have one sheaf to show to the Master. She had given of her abundance now and then, of course, when charitable subscriptions had been presented to her; but she had thought it a duty and a burden, not a privilege. Of her own accord what good had she ever done—what man, woman or child was there to rise up and call her blessed?

"Here we are, ma'am," said the child, breaking the silence.

It was a two-story, wooden house before which they had stopped. They went up stairs, and the little girl opened a door.

"Mother," she said, "a lady has come home with me to see you—a kind lady, who has given me my breakfast and brought you yours."

Mrs. Lane stood a moment on the threshold of the room, and took in such a picture as in her young, happy life she had never seen before. The apartment was almost bare of furniture—no carpet was on the floor, there was only the bed, three chairs and a table. But every thing was as neat as hands could make it, and against the wall at the foot of the bed hung a framed photograph, the portrait of a man with kind, honest eyes, and features of which the child Ellen's were almost a copy.

"I have come," Mrs. Lane said, with the sweet grace which had made her a welcome guest in far different scenes, "to see if I could arrange something for your comfort; but first of all you must have some toast and tea, and giving her little guide some money, she sent her out to procure fuel, and sat down herself, in the meantime, beside the bed where the sick woman lay, with her baby asleep upon her arm. That was, pale face could not be sentimental or romantic about this woman—could by no means idealize her into a heroine. Yet there was something good and true in her expression, and when she turned to place the baby more comfortably, a light and glow of mother-love illumined her features till they were better than pretty. Mrs. Lane was not long in learning her history.

She had been used all her days to self-dependence. Before she was married she had worked on a sewing-machine in a shop, and she understood that business thoroughly. But when James Stanton married her she had given it up. He was a good mechanic, a carpenter, and his wages kept them comfortably. They had not laid up much, however, for during the eleven years of their marriage three children, besides the two she had left now, had come and gone—poor, feeble little things that cost a great deal for doctors and medicine. Then, just before this last baby came, a scaffolding had fallen where her husband was at work—he had fallen from the fourth story of a house, and been brought home to her dead. She had sold almost all her furniture, and got along by that means until she was able to be about, and then she had left baby with Ellen, and gone out to days' work of washing and cleaning. It was labor for which she was not strong enough, but it had been all the occupation she could get, and after a while she had taken a severe cold, and had grown so ill that she could not go out at all. They had eaten up everything they had; and this morning, for the first time, she had sent Ellen out to try and get something, somewhere, to keep them alive till she could get work again. "And it must have been God, ma'am that sent her to you," she concluded.

Mrs. Lane, helpless, pretty little thing, scarcely knew what to say. Her heart beat with tumultuous throbs of pity—her eyes were full of tears; in all her sunny life she had never before been brought in contact with actual, gaunt misery and destitution. At last a thought occurred to her, and she uttered it eagerly:

"If you only had a sewing-machine, now, you could take work home when you get better, couldn't you, and support yourself and the children nicely?"

The woman sighed—a deep, unconscious sigh of hopeless longing.

"Yes, ma'am, I could; but you know that's an impossible if. I never can get a machine. I'll be only too thankful if I can get well enough to go out again by the day. If I can't, I don't know what will become of the children."

"But God knows," whispered Mrs. Lane, softly. "He pities us, you know, as a father pities his children."

Then came Ellen with coal and kindlings, and the subject was not alluded to again.

When their five-o'clock dinner was over, that afternoon, John Lane went gayly into the sitting-room with his wife. He had a pleasant surprise for her, and laid it in her lap, in the shape of a check for two hundred dollars.

"There, humming-bird," he said lightly, "that is for your carpet. Business has prospered this year, and what is it good for but to make home bright and wife happy?"

She turned her face and touched her lips silently to the kind hand resting on her shoulder. Perhaps John was disappointed that she expressed her pleasure so quietly. He had anticipated her gay laugh of merry exultation, her delighted chat about colors and patterns. Her new mood surprised him. He sat down beside her gravely, and waited for her to speak.

She told him, then, the story of her day, leaving out nothing. He could see how deeply she had been moved, by the color which came and went on her cheeks, the tears which gathered unheeded in her eyes. When she was all through, she said, hesitatingly—

"John, we are very happy, aren't we?"

"Yes, dear."

"And we owe something, don't we, to those who are less so? Think, John, if I had lost you just now, but had, afterwards, no way to live!"

She paused, as if for some encouragement, but she received none. John Lane was beginning to get a glimpse of a new phase in his little wife's character, and he meant she should bring out her own ideas unaided. She began to fear that she could not interest him. She went on, timidly enough, but very earnestly.

A part of two hundred dollars, John, would buy that woman the necessities which would make her comfortable, and she would soon be well again, for her disease is only the result of overwork and exposure. Then the rest of it would buy her a sewing-machine, and she could get along nicely with that. She wouldn't need any more help."

Still Mrs. Lane was silent, and she drew a little nearer to him, and began smoothing his big fingers with her own little ones.

"I know, John dear," she said coaxingly, "that two hundred dollars would be too much to ask you for, in most cases, for any one charity, but I have so set my heart on really and substantially helping this poor, bereft woman. Our drawing-room carpet really looks very nicely—you know you thought it would do this morning. And if just this once, I might have the two hundred dollars to do this good deed with, and keep the old carpet down, it would make me so happy. Just think, John, that poor widow and those little children would say your name every day in their prayers, and they would be made comfortable for life. May I, John?"

John Lane bent down and kissed the eager, tender face. I'm afraid his eyes were too dim just then to see all its brightness.

"Are you sure, dear," he asked gently, "that you would be satisfied with the old carpet?"

"Quite sure, John. It shall last as long as the Wilton would. O, John, I never did any good in my life. Let me do this little now!"

"Annie, you shall."

That great, manly heart was too full, just then, for many words, but by the firm clasp which held her so tenderly Annie Lane knew that her husband was not displeased.

She carried out all her plans. By August Mrs. Stanton was well again, and the sewing-machine stood at the window of her comfortably furnished room. To her the face of Annie Lane seemed like the face of an angel—God's messenger she has indeed been to the widow and the fatherless. I think there is one woman whose heart will never again be moved to envy by Wilton carpets, or wide-bordered shawls, since she has tasted the luxury of doing good. John Lane loved her well when she was his gay, laughing child-wife; but he loves her now with a holier, deeper tenderness, that reaches through time, and takes hold on eternity.

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aug 17.

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nov 17—19

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aug 10

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