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I wonder why.  
The white cloud stay up in the sky!  
The birds light low that fly so fast;  
The downy thistle falls at last;  
But the clouds are always high.

I wonder why?  
The little bird clings to its bough!  
Sometimes at night when I awake  
And hear the tree-tops moan and shake,  
I think, "How sleep the birdies now?"

I wonder why?  
We leave the fair earth, for the sky!  
I wish that we might always stay;  
That the dear Lord might come some day,  
And make it heaven! Yet we must die.

I wonder why?  
—Mary A. Lathbury.

## THE STEPMOTHER.

### A Story of a Wife's Devotion.

Since his wife died, Mr. March's home had not been a model one. It was left with the additional care of two young children to the eldest daughter, Maria, and Maria had not faithfully performed her duty, therefore Mr. March felt she had no right to surprise when he told her he was about to bring into the house a second wife, who would be a kind mother to his children.

Miss Maria went out of the door with a bang, and was found in hysterics on the best bed. But Mr. March, giving the servants the same intelligence, kissed the children, and was off to the home of Miss Bell, which had made him tremble, remembering the domain where Maria was mistress.

Miss Melicent Bell, the new stepmother, was a sweet-faced woman, not yet forty, and so winsome as to attract those tired of beauty, her expression of good will, patience, and purpose having grown with practice of her virtues.

The new Mrs. March had not stepped inside her home and received the stiff touch of Miss Maria's hand before she saw the lion in her way. She did not blame the young girl; she rather liked her chivalrous constancy. She drew her to herself and kissed her; and Miss Maria, resenting it as an intrusive impertinence, ran to Mrs. Lee to complain of it.

If ever a woman had her trials, Mrs. March did. Maria was stubborn and was determined not to like her new stepmother, and many were the trials through which the good woman, who tried to do her best, had to pass. But Mrs. March had ample satisfaction in her husband's love and veneration, in his happiness, and the comparative order and comfort to which she had reduced his home. She had made the house beautiful. The table shone with her wedding silver; the dishes were faultlessly served; the children, bright and clean, received smiling encouragement to join the cheerful talk; and if when they were in bed Maria chose to sulk in her room, she lost a great deal of pleasure.

Still Mrs. March's gentle heart was sore over Maria. She would have been glad to win the girl, glad to provide pleasure for her. She understood her emotions, and seldom had any but tender feelings toward her. It hurt her as sorely to think that the noble traits of the boys she was unlikely to be able to train to noble ends.

Occasion, coming to everybody, came at last to Mrs. March, when every child of the house was smitten with the dreadful epidemic at that time raging in the vicinity. Miss Maria, frightened out of her senses, betook herself to Mrs. Lee's. But Mrs. March, though miserable herself, dreamed no fear. She had the children moved into connecting rooms, and although there was a professional nurse with them, vibrated between those rooms as we think only mothers can. Not a night did she sleep till the crisis was over; and in their convalescence it seemed to the children that it was only an angel moving about in her long white robe, bathing their foreheads, singing them to sleep, bringing them tempting messes, telling them entrancing stories, winning their hearts at last completely. On the whole, though tired out in the effort, Mrs. March did not know that in all her life she had had a happier time than during that month of convalescence. And then Maria came home.

"Mamma and I have a secret that she says I may tell you, Maria," cried Julia, after the greeting.

"An open secret," said Maria, insinuating, "that all the world knows."

"All the world, mamma!" cries Julia.

"Mamma!" says Maria, with a sneer.

"Only a small fraction of it, dear," answers Mrs. March. "I have told no one but you."

"Yes, Miss Maria March," cries Julia, "mamma! and the dearest, sweetest, best mamma, who took care of me when she could hardly take care of herself, and when you ran away!"

"Oh, no, no, Julia," exclaims her mother. "Don't say so. Think that if Maria had staid and taken the illness, it would have occasioned us so much more trouble that it was a kindness in her to go."

"Oh my!" said little Julia, laughing.

"Well, I don't care. Look here, Maria—whisper. Mamma says I may name it. She told me when I was getting better, so that I might have something pleasant to think about."

"Pleasant!"

"On, yes, so very! And we have had such beautiful talks about how it will look, and what we will do with it. And I am going to wheel it out in Charlie's old carriage—and—and—See here, Maria;" and she drew from under the sofa-pillow an absurd little sock she was knitting, and contemplated it as if it were Penelope's web.

"You must have been mighty sick!" cried Maria. "And as for your mamma, as you call her, you wicked little girl, it is shameless in her to talk so to a child like you!"

Mrs. March took her work and left the room quietly; and then Miss Maria, feeling the welcome of this little new comer was the last outrage, broke into a flood of angry crying, and scolded herself into hysterics, till Julia exclaimed at intervals: "Oh, I'll tell my father of you! You see if I don't, Maria March!"

Miss Maria presently knew just how sick Julia had been. For it was not a week before the contagion, from which she had run when it was at home, assailed her in some of her outdoor jaunts, and she went down as suddenly as the rest. Her first act was to send for Mrs. Lee, who returned regrets that duty to her own family made it impossible for her to come. Her next was to summon her father and demand a nurse. He assured her that the nurse still in the house should remain.

"A creature of Mrs. March's," murmured the sick girl.

"The sickness is so general that there is not another to be had. Your mother and I will be with you!"

"Don't let her! don't let her!" moaned Maria.

"I am glad to see such consideration on your part, my dear," said her father. "But I am afraid she will insist."

She did insist. When both the doctor and her husband urged Mrs. March to keep away from that sick-room, she replied that it was impossible. "It is the only chance I have to win her love," she exclaimed, with tears. "Heaven sends it—you must not prevent me from using it." And the others, fearing too much opposition, let her have her way.

It was a hard way, with nothing but thorns for the treading. With all Maria's behavior, Mrs. March had never realized till the girl's delirium how violent had been her exertion of herself. It was a sad strain upon the poor lady's nerves, to bear this torture of reviling, without the suffering which sympathy with sickness gives in itself, or the unconscious effort made by her hourly acts of forgiveness. But though fierce, the fever had a short run; the fatigue of unceasing attendance was great, but the delirium was soon over. Mrs. March trusted that the last act of that illness was delirium and not nature. Left alone with the patient, and obliged to do something that was resisted, she held the aching head on her shoulder, saying, though hardly knowing that she said it: "Dear child, why won't you let me love you?" and the next moment received a slap in the face.

If it was delirium, Maria had afterward an uncommonly clear recollection of her wanderings. It was not a strong blow, of course; but in the amazement and recoil Mrs. March staggered back and fell against the corner of the table that held the lamp; and table, lamp, and bottle had gone over, and a tongue of fire was licking up the canopy.

Mrs. March never knew how she got the sick girl out of that bed or upon the lounge, or how she tore the burning hangings down and trampled out the fire on the empty hearth. She only remembered having thought that even if Maria died of the exposure, she would rather be supposed guilty herself of carelessness than let the girl's father know of the vicious act. And Maria, whether stunned or overcome, sank into a long slumber, from which, when she awoke, she was out of danger.

"Ow you my life, doctor," said Maria, feebly, some days after.

"No, indeed, child," he replied.

"You owe it to your mother. I should never have pulled you through but for her care. You owe it to her, too, that you were not buried in your bed."

"Oh, doctor! Did she tell you, then?"

"Tell me what?"

"That I—I—" whispered Maria, hoarsely—"I slapped her then!"

"You did!"

"It seems to me I did," said Maria, who knew perfectly well she did.

"No," said the doctor. "She has kept that secret."

"Miss Maria," said the nurse, as the doctor left, "I saw it all. And it is a miracle that the shock did not kill Mrs. March. You should thank Heaven not only that it is well with you, but with her!" The doctor came back and found the tears trickling through the girl's fingers.

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nights of pity and sympathy, and felt all at once that her stepmother was superhuman in her goodness. What if trouble should come! what if this late happiness of her father's should be robbed from him, and by her! what if this gentle life, with the beauty of it that now she saw too late, should go out! She was fast working herself into another fever. She sent for Julia. "I want you to sit down," she said, "and tell me all manner said to you about—about your secret, you know." And as Julia prattled on, the secret became of vital interest. "Oh, how blind, how blind and wicked I have been!" she cried. "How happy the little thing will make us! how we will all love it together!" And Maria felt as though her own life and death hung upon the fate of that little unborn child.

When Mrs. March came into the room, having been compelled to keep her own some days, Maria took the hand she laid on her forehead, and pulled her gently down. "How are you ever going to forgive me, mamma?" she murmured.

The tears burst out of Mrs. March's eyes. "Call me Melicent, dear," she cried. "Oh, I am so happy!" she said to her husband that night. "All the children love me—and it seems now as though I had more than my share!"

And at her prayers there was a sort of ecstasy in the way she repeated that verse: "Thou wilt show me the path of life: In thy presence is fullness of joy; At thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."

It was some weeks after, that Maria, having sent the children out to play, stood grave and solemn by the parlor window, feeling as though the universe itself must hold its breath, when she was summoned by the doctor. "She is sinking," he said, "very fast. No—no hope, no help. She was never strong. Be quiet, dear child; nobody is to blame." Maria did not hear him. She was flying up the staircase, and falling beside Mrs. March's bed. "Oh, it is my fault! I have done it! I!" she sobbed.

"Hush, darling," whispered Melicent. "I have been so happy that I am almost content. Dear," she breathed, "take my place. Make him!"—and her eyes wandered to her husband, who sat utterly overwhelmed—"happy too. I have shown you how. You mustn't mind his grieving for me just at first; he—he was mine, Maria, more than twenty years ago. And, dear," she began again presently, "I am going to give you my little daughter for your own. You must be to her what I would have been so glad to be to you. Will you take her?" And she laid Maria's hand on the little velvet cheek. "Will you love her?"

"Oh," whispered Maria, aching like a murderer, "if I have killed her mother, I will die for her!" And she gathered the little creature in her arms, and hid her ashened face upon it. There was a long, silent silence in the room. Then Mrs. March turned her sweet, dim eyes once more upon her husband. And when at last he lifted his face from hers, the gentle soul of this stepmother had passed away.

An Ingenious Device.

A capillary correspondence was recently attempted between a notorious Parisian thief in durance vile and his comrades outside. The prisoner was sent a letter from his *fiancee*, containing merely a lock of hair wrapped in the leaf of a book. The jailer did not consider the *souvenir* important enough to be delivered, but in a few days came a similar inclosure, and yet another. This aroused suspicion, and the governor took the man in hand. He examined the leaf of the book; it was that of a common novel, twenty six lines on a page. Then he studied the hair, and noticed the small quantity of the gift. Counting the hairs, he found them of unequal length, and twenty-six in number; the same as the lines of the page. Struck with the coincidence, he laid the hairs along the line of the page which they respectively reached, beginning at the top with the smallest hair. After some trouble, he found that the end of each hair pointed to a different letter, and that these letters, combined, formed a slang sentence, which informed the prisoner that his friends were on the watch, and the next time he left the prison, to be examined, an attempt would be made to rescue him. The governor laid his plans accordingly; the attempt was made, but the resolute soul of the stepmother had passed away.

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## Questions and Answers.

After how many years does a prominent note become outlawed? Answer—Seven.

Is a husband liable for the debts of a wife doing business with her own funds and in her own maiden name? Answer—A husband is liable for the debts of his wife, contracted as such, especially for necessities. In the case mentioned, however, this responsibility would depend upon the circumstances of the case, outside of the facts of doing business with her own funds and in her maiden name.

Can a man with sedentary employment live well on bread, milk, tea and fruit, and nothing at all else? Answer—There are many persons who adhere to and thrive upon a diet which excludes animal food—particularly dyspeptics and those whose pursuits are sedentary. A hearty, robust person, who labors, requires meat in addition to other food.

Is there any kind of paper that a man signing as a witness only, incurs responsibility thereby? Answer—We know of no pecuniary responsibility or liability which can be incurred by signing any paper or document as a witness only to its execution. There are very grave responsibilities which may attach to the signature of a witness, such as proving the execution of the document, attesting the circumstances of the transaction involved, proving the contents of lost instruments, etc.

Is a husband by law required to support his wife when she, without any real cause, refuses to live with him? Answer—That depends upon circumstances—the question of cause being subject to different interpretations as between the construction of individuals and the requirements of law. If a wife abandons her husband, so that the *onus* is thoroughly upon her, her husband is not bound to support her in illness and crime.

## Science and Farming.

One of the principal requirements of the practical farmer is to know the causes as well as the means whereby useful nutritive substances present in the soil, but not in a form available for nutrition, may be rendered diffusible and capable of doing their work. The presence of moisture, certain degrees of heat and free access of air are the proximate conditions of those changes by which the nutritive substances in chemical combination are made available for the roots. As the smallest portions of food cannot of themselves leave the spot which they are firmly fixed by the soil, we can understand what immense influence must be exerted on the fertility by its careful mechanical division and thorough admixture. This is the greatest of all the difficulties the agriculturist has to overcome. If the field is to produce a crop corresponding to the full amount of food present in it, the first and most important condition for its accomplishment is that its physical state be such as to permit even the finest rootlets to reach the spots where the food is to be found. The extension of the roots in every direction must not be obstructed by the cohesion of the soil. Plants with their delicate roots cannot grow on a tenacious, heavy soil, even with abundance of mineral food. None of these three important constituents of food (potash, phosphate of lime and ammonia) exists by itself in a soluble form in the ground, and none of the means employed by the agriculturist to make them available to his plants deprives the soil of its power of retaining them, or, if dissolved, of withdrawing them from the solution. The principal and gained by the means he employs is only a uniform distribution of the food throughout the soil so as to put it within the reach of the roots of his plants.

## The Difference.

A desperate villain eight years of age, named Robert Gordon, has recently been sentenced by an English clergyman and magistrate to one month in prison and five years in a reformatory, for the offense of placing a few pebbles on the track of the Midland railway, with the hellish purpose, to quote his own blood-curdling language, of hearing them "go smudge" when the train passed over them. Taken in connection with the sentence on Col. Valentine Baker, this example of clerical justice! justice will go far to reassure the average public mind of England which has been gravely disturbed by the spread of immorality and ruffianism. To be sure Col. Baker gets only one year in prison, while Robert Gordon gets five; but then Gordon is not an officer and a gentleman, and besides, being so much younger than the other railway malefactor, he has the possibility of a longer career of crime before him.

## Blighted Hopes.

A precocious five-year-old received, with his sister, a slice of wedding cake, to dream upon. For three nights in succession it was placed under her pillow, with three slips of paper bearing the names of three little boys. Golden hair had an auspicious dream concerning her next-door neighbor, a lad of seven years. It was exultingly related to the family circle, and on the following day, when the children were at play, the little dreamer took aside the boy on whom her fate depended and said, archly:

"Willie, will you be my husband?"

"There are other Willies in the world," was the reply.

"Yes; but it was you," she said.

Willie retreated a step or two, and answ-

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