ARTHUR TIMOTHY SHAY

TRIALS AND CONFESSIONS OF A HOUSEKEEPER

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Содержание

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INTRODUCTION

UNDER the title of Confessions of a Housekeeper, a portion of the matter in this volume has already appeared. The book is now considerably increased, and the range of subjects made to embrace the grave and instructive, as well as the agreeable and amusing. The author is sure, that no lady reader, familiar with the trials, perplexities, and incidents of housekeeping, can fail to recognize many of her own experiences, for nearly every picture that is here presented, has been drawn from life.

CHAPTER I
MY SPECULATION IN CHINA WARE

THIS happened a very few years after, my marriage, and is one of those feeling incidents in life that we never forget. My husband's income was moderate, and we found it necessary to deny ourselves many little articles of ornament and luxury, to the end that there might be no serious abatement in the comforts of life. In furnishing our house, we had been obliged to content ourselves mainly with things useful. Our parlor could boast of nine cane-seat chairs; one high-backed cane-seat rocking chair; a pair of card tables; a pair of ottomans, the covers for which I had worked in worsted; and a few illustrated books upon the card tables. There were no pictures on the walls, nor ornaments on the mantle pieces.

For a time after my marriage with Mr. Smith, I did not think much about the plainness of our style of living; but after a while, contracts between my own parlors and those of one or two friends, would take place in my mind; and I often found myself wishing that we could afford a set of candelabras, a pair of china vases, or some choice pieces of Bohemian glass. In fact, I set my heart on something of the kind, though I concealed the weakness from my husband.

Time stole on, and one increase after another to our family, kept up the necessity for careful expenditure, and at no time was there money enough in the purse to justify any outlay beyond what the wants of the household required. So my mantel pieces remained bare as at first, notwithstanding the desire for something to put on them still remained active.

One afternoon, as I sat at work renovating an old garment, with the hope of making it look almost "as good as new," my cook entered and said—

"There's a man down stairs, Mrs. Smith, with a basket full of the most beautiful glass dishes and china ornaments that you ever did see; and he says that he will sell them for old clothes."

"For old clothes?" I responded, but half comprehending what the girl meant.

"Yes ma'am. If you have got an old coat, or a pair of pantaloons that ain't good for nothing, he will buy them, and pay you in glass or china."

I paused for a moment to think, and then said—

"Tell him to come up into the dining room, Mary."

The girl went down stairs, and soon came back in company with a dull looking old man, who carried on his arm a large basket, in which were temptingly displayed rich china vases, motto and presentation cups and saucers, glass dishes, and sundry other articles of a like character.

"Any old coats, pantaloons or vests?" said the man, as he placed, carefully, his basket on the floor. "Don't want any money. See here! Beautiful!"

And as he spoke, he took up a pair of vases and held them before my eyes. They were just the thing for my mantle pieces, and I covetted them on the instant.

"What's the price?" I enquired.

"Got an old coat?" was my only answer. "Don't want money."

My husband was the possessor of a coat that had seen pretty good service, and which he had not worn for some time. In fact, it had been voted superannuated, and consigned to a dark corner of the clothes-press. The thought of this garment came very naturally into my mind, and with the thought a pleasant exhilaration of feeling, for I already saw the vases on my mantles.

"Any old clothes?" repeated the vender of china ware.

Without a word I left the dining room, and hurried up to where our large clothes-press stood, in the passage above. From this I soon abstracted the coat, and then descended with quick steps.

The dull face of the old man brightened, the moment his eyes fell upon the garment. He seized it with a nervous movement, and seemed to take in its condition at a single glance. Apparently, the

examination was not very satisfactory, for he let the coat fall, in a careless manner, across a chair, giving his shoulders a shrug, while a slight expression of contempt flitted over his countenance.

"Not much good!" fell from his lips after a pause.

By this time I had turned to his basket, and was examining, more carefully, its contents. Most prominent stood the china vases, upon which my heart was already set; and instinctively I took them in my hands.

"What will you give for the coat?" said I.

The old man gave his head a significant shake, as he replied—

"No very good."

"It's worth something," I returned. "Many a poor person would be glad to buy it for a small sum of money. It's only a little defaced. I'm sure its richly worth four or five dollars."

"Pho! Pho! Five dollar! Pho!" The old man seemed angry at my most unreasonable assumption.

"Well, well," said I, beginning to feel a little impatient, "just tell me what you will give for it."

"What you want?" he enquired, his manner visibly changing.

"I want these vases, at any rate," I answered, holding up the articles I had mentioned.

"Worth four, five dollar!" ejaculated the dealer, in well feigned surprise.

I shook my head. He shrugged his shoulders, and commenced searching his basket, from which, after a while, he took a china cup and saucer, on which I read, in gilt letters, "For my Husband."

"Give you this," said he.

It was now my time to show surprise; I answered—

"Indeed you won't, then. But I'll tell you what I will do; I'll let you have the coat for the vases and this cup and saucer."

To this proposition the man gave an instant and decided negative, and seemed half offended by my offer. He threw the coat, which was in his hands again, upon a chair, and stooping down took his basket on his arm. I was deceived by his manner, and began to think that I had proposed rather a hard bargain; so I said—

"You can have the coat for the vases, if you care to make the exchange; if not, why no harm is done."

For the space of nearly half a minute, the old man stood in apparent irresolution, then he replied, as he set down his basket and took out the pair of vases—

"I don't care; you shall have them."

I took the vases and he took the coat. A moment or two more, and I heard the street door close behind the dealer in china ware, with a very decided jar.

"Ain't they beautiful, aunty?" said I to my old aunt Rachel, who had been a silent witness of the scene I have just described; and I held the pair of vases before her eyes.

"Why yes, they are rather pretty, Jane," replied aunt Rachel, a little coldly, as I thought.

"Rather pretty! They are beautiful," said I warmly. "See there!" And I placed them on the dining room mantle. "How much they will improve our parlors."

"Not half so much as that old coat you as good as gave away would have improved the feelings as well as the looks of poor Mr. Bryan, who lives across the street," was the unexpected and rebuking answer of aunt Rachel.

The words smote on my feelings. Mr. Bryan was a poor, but honest and industrious young man, upon whose daily labor a wife and five children were dependent. He went meanly clad, because he could not earn enough, in addition to what his family required, to buy comfortable clothing for himself. I saw, in an instant, what the true disposition of the coat should have been. The china vases would a little improve the appearance of my parlors; but how many pleasant feelings and hours and days of comfort, would the old coat have given to Mr. Bryan. I said no more. Aunt Rachel went on with her knitting, and I took the vases down into the parlors and placed them on the mantles—one in each room. But they looked small, and seemed quite solitary. So I put one on each end of

a single mantle. This did better; still, I was disappointed in the appearance they made, and a good deal displeased with myself. I felt that I had made a bad bargain—that is, one from which I should obtain no real pleasure.

For a while I sat opposite the mantle-piece, looking at the vases—but, not admiringly; then I left the parlor, and went about my household duties, but, with a pressure on my feelings. I was far, very far from being satisfied with myself.

About an hour afterwards my husband came home. I did not take him into the parlor to show him my little purchase, for, I had no heart to do so. As we sat at the tea table, he said, addressing me—

"You know that old coat of mine that is up in the clothes-press?"

I nodded my head in assent, but did not venture to speak.

"I've been thinking to-day," added my husband, "that it would be just the thing for Mr. Bryan, who lives opposite. It's rather too much worn for me, but will look quite decent on him, compared with the clothes he now wears. Don't you think it is a good thought? We will, of course, make him a present of the garment."

My eyes drooped to the table, and I felt the blood crimsoning my face. For a moment or two I remained silent, and then answered—

"I'm sorry you didn't think of this before; but it's too late now."

"Too late! Why?" enquired my husband.

"I sold the coat this afternoon," was my reply.

"Sold it!"

"Yes. A man came along with some handsome china ornaments, and I sold the coat for a pair of vases to set on our mantle-pieces."

There was an instant change in my husband's face. He disapproved of what I had done; and, though he uttered no condemning words, his countenance gave too clear an index to his feelings.

"The coat would have done poor Mr. Bryan a great deal more good than the vases will ever do Jane," spoke up aunt Rachel, with less regard for my feelings than was manifested by my husband. "I don't think," she continued, "that any body ought to sell old clothes for either money or nicknackeries to put on the mantle-pieces. Let them be given to the poor, and they'll do some good. There isn't a housekeeper in moderate circumstances that couldn't almost clothe some poor family, by giving away the cast off garments that every year accumulate on her hands."

How sharply did I feel the rebuking spirit in these words of aunt Rachel.

"What's done can't be helped now," said my husband kindly, interrupting, as he spoke, some further remarks that aunt Rachel evidently intended to make. "We must do better next time."

"I must do better," was my quick remark, made in penitent tones. "I was very thoughtless."

To relieve my mind, my husband changed the subject of conversation; but, nothing could relieve the pressure upon my feelings, caused by a too acute consciousness of having done what in the eyes of my husband, looked like a want of true humanity. I could not bear that he should think me void of sympathy for others.

The day following was Sunday. Church time came, and Mr. Smith went to the clothes press for his best coat, which had been worn only for a few months.

"Jane!" he called to me suddenly, in a voice that made me start. "Jane! Where is my best coat?"

"In the clothes press," I replied, coming out from our chamber into the passage, as I spoke.

"No; it's not here," was his reply. "And, I shouldn't wonder if you had sold my good coat for those china vases."

"No such thing!" I quickly answered, though my heart gave a great bound at his words; and then sunk in my bosom with a low tremor of alarm.

"Here's my old coat," said Mr. Smith, holding up that defaced garment—"Where is the new one?"

"The old clothes man has it, as sure as I live!" burst from my lips.

"Well, that is a nice piece of work, I must confess!"

This was all my husband said; but it was enough to smite me almost to the floor. Covering my face with my hands, I dropped into a chair, and sat and sobbed for a while bitterly.

"It can't be helped now, Jane," said Mr. Smith, at length, in a soothing voice. "The coat is gone, and there is no help for it. You will know better next time."

That was all he said to me then, and I was grateful for his kind consideration. He saw that I was punished quite severely enough, and did not add to my pain by rebuke or complaint.

An attempt was made during the week to recover the coat, valued at some twenty dollars; but the china ornament-man was not to be found—he had made too good a bargain to run the risk of having it broken.

About an hour after the discovery of the loss of my husband's coat, I went quietly down into the parlor, and taking from the mantle-piece the china vases, worth, probably, a dollar for the pair, concealed them under my apron, lest any one should see what I had; and, returning up stairs, hid them away in a dark closet, where they have ever since remained.

The reader may be sure that I never forgot this, my first and last speculation in china ware.

CHAPTER II
SOMETHING ABOUT COOKS

WAS there ever a good cook who hadn't some prominent fault that completely overshadowed her professional good qualities? If my experience is to answer the question, the reply will be—*no*.

I had been married several years before I was fortunate enough to obtain a cook that could be trusted to boil a potato, or broil a steak. I felt as if completely made up when Margaret served her first dinner. The roast was just right, and all the vegetables were cooked and flavored as well as if I had done it myself—in fact, a little better. My husband eat with a relish not often exhibited, and praised almost every thing on the table.

For a week, one good meal followed another in daily succession. We had hot cakes, light and fine-flavored, every morning for breakfast, with coffee not to be beaten—and chops or steaks steaming from the gridiron, that would have gladdened the heart of an epicure. Dinner was served, during the time, with a punctuality that was rarely a minute at fault, while every article of food brought upon the table, fairly tempted the appetite. Light rolls, rice cakes, or "Sally Luns," made without suggestion on my part usually met us at tea time. In fact, the very delight of Margaret's life appeared to be in cooking. She was born for a cook.

Moreover, strange to say, Margaret was good-tempered, a most remarkable thing in a good cook; and more remarkable still, was tidy in her person, and cleanly in her work.

"She is a treasure," said I to my husband, one day, as we passed from the dining-room, after having partaken of one of her excellent dinners.

"She's too good," replied Mr. Smith—"too good to last. There must be some bad fault about her—good cooks always have bad faults—and I am looking for its appearance every day."

"Don't talk so, Mr. Smith. There is no reason in the world why a good cook should not be as faultless as any one else."

Even while I said this, certain misgivings intruded themselves. My husband went to his store soon after.

About three o'clock Margaret presented herself, all dressed to go out, and said that she was going to see her sister, but would be back in time to get tea.

She came back, as she promised, but, alas for my good cook! The fault appeared. She was so much intoxicated that, in attempting to lift the kettle from the fire, she let it fall, and came near scalding herself dreadfully. Oh, dear! I shall never forget the sad disappointment of that hour. How the pleasant images of good dinners and comfortable breakfasts and suppers faded from my vision. The old trouble was to come back again, for the faultless cook had manifested a fault that vitiated, for us, all her good qualities.

On the next day, I told Margaret that we must part; but she begged so hard to be kept in her place, and promised good behaviour in future so earnestly, that I was prevailed on to try her again. It was of no use, however—in less than a week she was drunk again, and I had to let her go.

After that, for some months, we had burnt steaks, waxy potatoes, and dried roast beef to our hearts' content; while such luxuries as muffins, hot cakes, and the like were not to be seen on our uninviting table.

My next good cook had such a violent temper, that I was actually afraid to show my face in the kitchen. I bore with her until patience was no longer a virtue, and then she went.

Biddy, who took charge of my "kitchen cabinet," a year or so afterwards, proved herself a culinary artist of no ordinary merit. But, alas! Biddy "kept a room;" and so many strange disappearances of bars of soap, bowls of sugar, prints of butter, etc., took place, that I was forced to the unwilling conclusion that her room was simply a store room for the surplussage of mine. Some

pretty strong evidence on this point coming to my mind, I dismissed Biddy, who was particularly forward in declaring her honesty, although I had never accused her of being wanting in that inestimable virtue.

Some of my experiences in cooks have been musing enough. Or, I should rather say, are musing enough to *think* about: they were rather annoying at the time of their occurrence. One of these experiences I will relate. I had obtained a "treasure" in a new cook, who was not only good tempered and cleanly, but understood her business reasonably well. Kitty was a little different from former incumbents of her office in this, that she took an interest in reading, and generally dipped into the morning paper before it found its way up stairs. To this, of course, I had no objection, but was rather pleased to see it. Time, however, which proves all things, showed my cook to be rather too literary in her inclinations. I often found her reading, when it was but reasonable for me to expect that she would be working; and overdone or burnt dishes occasionally marked the degree in which her mind was absorbed in her literary pleasures, which I discovered in time, were not of the highest order-such books as the "Mysteries of Paris" furnishing the aliment that fed her imagination.

"Jane," said my husband to me one morning, as he was about leaving the house, "I believe I must invite my old friend Green to dine with me to-day. He will leave the city to-morrow, and I may not have the pleasure of a social hour with him again for years. Besides, I want to introduce him to you. We were intimate as young men, and much attached to each other. I would like you to know him."

"Invite him, by all means," was my reply.

"I will send home a turkey from market," said Mr. Smith, as he stood holding on to the open door. "Tell Kitty to cook it just right. Mrs. Green, I am told, is a first-rate housekeeper, and I feel like showing you off to the best advantage."

"Don't look for too much," I replied, smiling, "lest you be disappointed."

Mr. Smith went away, and I walked back to the kitchen door to say a word to Kitty. As I looked in, the sound of my feet on the floor caused her to start. She was standing near a window, and at my appearance she hurriedly concealed something under her apron.

"Kitty," said I, "we are to have company to dine with us to-day. Mr. Smith will send home a turkey, which you must dress and cook in the best manner. I will be down during the morning to make some lemon puddings. Be sure to have a good fire in the range, and see that all the drafts are clear."

Kitty promised that every thing should be right, and I went up stairs. In due time the marketing came home. About eleven o'clock I repaired to the kitchen, and, much to my surprise, found all in disorder.

"What in the world have you been doing all the morning?" said I, feeling a little fretted.

Kitty excused herself good naturedly, and commenced bustling about to put things to rights, while I got flour and other articles necessary for my purpose, and went to work at my lemon puddings, which were, in due time, ready for the oven. Giving all necessary directions as to their baking, and charging Kitty to be sure to have every thing on the table precisely at our usual hour for dining, I went up into the nursery to look after the children, and to see about other matters requiring my attention.

Time passed on until, to my surprise, I heard the clock strike one. I had yet to dress for dinner.

"I wonder how Kitty is coming on?" said I to myself. "I hope she will not let the puddings get all dried up."

But, I felt too much in a hurry to go down and satisfy myself as to the state of affairs in the kitchen; and took it for granted that all was right.

A little while afterwards, I perceived an odor as of something burning.

"What is that?" came instinctively from my lips. "If Kitty has let the puddings burn!"

Quick as thought I turned from my room, and went gliding down stairs. As I neared the kitchen, the smell of burned flour, or pastry, grew stronger. All was silent below; and I approached in silence. On entering Kitty's domain, I perceived that lady seated in front of the range, with a brown covered pamphlet novel held close to her face, in the pages of which she was completely lost. I never saw

any one more entirely absorbed in a book. No sign of dinner was any where to be seen. Upon the range was a kettle of water boiling over into the fire, and from one of the ovens poured forth a dark smoke, that told too plainly the ruin of my lemon puddings. And, to cap all, the turkey, yet guiltless of fire or dripping pan, was upon the floor, in possession of a strange cat, which had come in through the open window. Bending over the still entranced cook, I read the title of her book. It was "THE WANDERING JEW."

"Kitty!" I don't much wonder, now, at the start she gave, for I presume there was not the zephyr's softness in my voice.

"Oh, ma'am!" She caught her breath as her eyes rested upon the cat and the turkey. "Indeed, ma'am!" And then she made a spring towards puss, who, nimbly eluding her, passed out by the way through which she had come in.

By this time I had jerked open the oven door, when there came rushing out a cloud of smoke, which instantly filled the room. My puddings were burned to a crisp!

As for the turkey, the cat had eaten off one side of the breast, and it was no longer fit for the table.

"Well! this is fine work!" said I, in an angry, yet despairing voice. "Fine work, upon my word!"

"Oh, ma'am!" Kitty interrupted me by saying, "I'll run right off and buy another turkey, and have it cooked in time. Indeed I will, ma'am! And I'll pay for it. It's all my fault! oh dear! dear me! Now don't be angry, Mrs. Smith! I'll have dinner all ready in time, and no one will be any the wiser for this."

"In time!" and I raised my finger towards the kitchen clock, the hands of which marked the period of half past one. Two o'clock was our regular dinner hour.

"Mercy!" ejaculated the frightened cook, as she sank back upon a chair; "I thought it was only a little past eleven. I am sure it was only eleven when I sat down just to read a page or two while the puddings were in the oven!"

The truth was, the "Wandering Jew," in the most exciting portion of which she happened to be, proved too much for her imagination. Her mind had taken no note of time, and two hours passed with the rapidity of a few minutes.

"I don't exactly comprehend this," said my husband, as he sat down with his old friend, to dine off of broiled steak and potatoes, at half-past two o'clock.

"It's all the fault of the 'Wandering Jew!'" I replied, making an effort to drive away, with a smile, the red signs of mortification that were in my face.

"The Wandering Jew!" returned my husband, looking mystified.

"Yes, the fault lies with that imaginary personage," said I, "strange as it may seem." And then I related the mishaps of the morning. For desert, we had some preserved fruit and cream, and a hearty laugh over the burnt puddings and disfigured turkey.

Poor Kitty couldn't survive the mortification. She never smiled again in my house; and, at the close of the week, removed to another home.

CHAPTER III
LIGHT ON THE SUBJECT

"THE oil's out, mum," said Hannah, the domestic who succeeded Kitty, pushing her head into the room where I sat sewing.

"It can't be," I replied.

"Indade, mum, and it is. There isn't the full of a lamp left," was the positive answer.

"Then, what have you done with it?" said I, in a firm voice. "It isn't four days since a gallon was sent home from the store."

"Four days! It's more nor a week, mum!"

"Don't tell me that, Hannah," I replied, firmly; "for I know better. I was out on last Monday, and told Brown to send us home a gallon."

"Sure, and it's burned, mum, thin! What else could go with it?"

"It never was burned in our lamps," said I, in answer to this. "You've either wasted it, or given it away."

At this Hannah, as in honor bound, became highly indignant, and indulged in certain impertinences which I did not feel inclined to notice.

But, as the oil was all gone, and no mistake; and, as the prospect of sitting in darkness was not, by any means, an agreeable one—the only remedy was to order another gallon.

Something was wrong; that was clear. The oil had never been burned.

That evening, myself and husband talked over the matter, and both of us came to the conclusion, that it would never do. The evil must be remedied. A gallon of oil must not again disappear in four days.

"Why," said my husband, "it ought to last us at least a week and a half."

"Not quite so long," I replied. "We burn a gallon a week."

"Not fairly, I'm inclined to think. But four days is out of all conscience."

I readily assented to this, adding some trite remark about the unconscionable wastefulness of domestics.

On the next morning, as my husband arose from bed, he shivered in the chilly air, saying, as he did so:

"That girl's let the fire go out again in the heater! Isn't it too bad? This thing happens now every little while. I'm sure I've said enough to her about it. There's nothing wanted but a little attention."

"It is too bad, indeed," I added.

"There's that fishy smell again!" exclaimed Mr. Smith. "What can it be?"

"Fishy smell! So there is."

"Did you get any mackerel from the store yesterday?"

"None."

"Perhaps Hannah ordered some?"

"No. I had a ham sent home, and told her to have a slice of that broiled for breakfast."

"I don't know what to make of it. Every now and then that same smell comes up through the register—particularly in the morning. I'll bet a sixpence there's some old fish tub in the cellar of which she's made kindling."

"That may be it," said I.

And, for want of a better reason, we agreed, for the time being, upon that hypothesis.

At the end of another four days, word came up that our best sperm oil, for which we paid a dollar and forty cents a gallon, was out again.

"Impossible!" I ejaculated.

"But it is mum," said Hannah. "There's not a scrimption left—not so much as the full of a thimble."

"You must be mistaken. A gallon of oil has never been burned in this house in four days."

"We burned the other gallon in four days," said Hannah, with provoking coolness. "The evenings are very long, and we have a great many lights. There's the parlor light, and the passage light, and the—"

"It's no use for you to talk, Hannah," I replied, interrupting her. "No use in the world. A gallon of oil in four days has never gone by fair means in this house. So don't try to make me believe it—for I won't. I'm too old a housekeeper for that."

Finding that I was not to be convinced, Hannah became angry, and said something about her not being a "thafe." I was unmoved by this, however; and told her, with as much sternness of manner as I could assume, that I should hold her responsible for any future waste of the article; and that if she did not feel inclined to remain on such terms, she had better go.

"Dade, thin, and I'll go to onst," was the girl's spirited answer.

"Very well, Hannah. You are your own mistress in this respect," said I, coolly. "I'm not in the least troubled about filling your place; nor fearful of getting one who will waste a gallon of oil in four days."

Hannah retired from my presence in high indignation, and I fully expected that she would desert my house forthwith. But, no; unlike some others of her class, she knew when she had a good place, and had sense enough to keep it as long as she could stay.

In due time she cooled off, and I heard no more about her getting another place.

"There's that fishy smell again!" exclaimed my husband, as he arose up in bed one morning, a day or two afterwards, and snuffed the air. "And, as I live, the fire in the heater is all out again! I'll have some light on this subject, see if I don't."

And he sprung upon the floor, at the same time hurriedly putting on his dressing gown and a pair of slippers.

"Where are you going?" said I, seeing him moving towards the door.

"To find out where this fishy smell comes from," he replied, disappearing as he spoke.

In about five minutes, Mr. Smith returned.

"Well, if that don't beat all!" he exclaimed, as he re-entered the chamber.

"What?" I very naturally enquired.

"I've found out all about that fishy smell," said he.

"What about it? Where does it come from?"

"You wouldn't guess in a month of Sundays! Well, this is a great world! Live and learn!"

"Explain yourself, Mr. Smith. I'm all impatience."

"I will; and in a few words. The fire was out in the heater."

"Yes."

"And I very naturally took my way down to where I expected to find our lady at work in the re-kindling process."

"Well?"

"Sure enough, there she was, kindling the fire with a vengeance."

"With what?" I asked. "With a vengeance?"

"Yes, with a vengeance to my pocket. She had the oil can in her hands, and was pouring its contents freely into the furnace, in order to quicken combustion. I now understand all about this fishy smell."

"And I all about the remarkable disappearance of a gallon of oil in four days. Kindling the fire with dollar and forty cent oil!"

"Even so!"

"What did you say to her, Mr. Smith?"

"Nothing. But I rather think she'll not want me to look at her again, the huzzy!"

"Kindling fire with my best sperm oil! Well, I can't get over that!"

Something in this wise I continued to ejaculate, now and then, until my astonishment fairly wore itself out.

I didn't consider it worth while to say any thing to Hannah when I went down stairs, thinking it best to let the look my husband spoke of, do its work. By the way, I don't much wonder that she was frightened at his look—for he can—But I forgot—I am speaking of my husband, and he might happen to read this.

Of course, Hannah's days in my house were numbered. No faith was to be placed in a creature who could so shamefully destroy a useful article placed in her hands. If she would burn up the oil, it was but fair to infer that she would as remorselessly make way with other things. So I parted with her. She begged me to let her stay, and made all sorts of promises. But I was immovable.

Whether I bettered myself in the change, is somewhat doubtful.

CHAPTER IV
CHEAP FURNITURE

ONE of the cardinal virtues, at least for housekeepers who are not overburdened in the matter of income, is economy. In the early part of our married life, Mr. Smith and myself were forced to the practice of this virtue, or incur debt, of which both of us had a natural horror. For a few years we lived in the plain style with which we had begun the world. But, when our circumstances improved, we very naturally desired to improve the appearance of things in our household. Our cane seat chairs and ingrain carpet looked less and less attractive every day. And, when we went out to spend an evening, socially, with our friends, the contrast between home and abroad was strikingly apparent to our minds.

"I think," said Mr. Smith to me, one day, "that it is time we re-furnished our parlors."

"If you can afford the outlay," I remarked.

"It won't cost a great deal," he returned.

"Not over three hundred dollars," said I.

Mr. Smith shook his head as he answered: "Half that sum ought to be sufficient. What will we want?"

"A dozen mahogany chairs to begin with," I replied. "There will be sixty dollars."

"You don't expect to pay five dollars a-piece for chairs?" said my husband, in a tone of surprise.

"I don't think you can get good ones for less."

"Indeed we can. I was looking at a very handsome set yesterday; and the man only asked four dollars for them. I don't in the least doubt that I could get them for three and a half."

"And a dear bargain you would make of that, I do not in the least doubt. It is poor economy, Mr. Smith, to buy cheap furniture. It costs a great deal more in the end, than good furniture, and never gives you any satisfaction."

"But these were good chairs, Jane. As good as I would wish to look at. The man said they were from one of the best shops in the city, and of superior workmanship and finish."

As I make it a point never to prolong an argument with my husband, when I see his mind bent in one direction, I did not urge my view of the case any farther. It was settled, however, that we could afford to re-furnish our parlors in a better style, and that in the course of the coming week, we should go out together and select a Brussels carpet, a sofa, a dozen mahogany chairs, a centre table, &c.

As I had foreseen from the beginning, my husband's ideas of economy were destined to mar everything. At one of the cabinet ware-rooms was a very neat, well-made set of chairs, for which five dollars and a half were asked, but which the dealer, seeing that he was beyond our mark, offered for five dollars. They were cheap at that price. But Mr. Smith could not see that they were a whit better than the set of chairs just mentioned as offered for four dollars; and which he was satisfied could be bought for three and a half. So I went with him to look at them. They proved to be showy enough, if that were any recommendation, but had a common look in my eyes. They were not to be compared with the set we had just been examining.

"Now, are they not very beautiful, Jane?" said my husband. "To me they are quite as handsome as those we were asked sixty dollars for."

From this I could not but dissent, seeing which, the cunning dealer came quickly to my husband's side of the question with various convincing arguments, among the strongest of which was an abatement in the price of the chairs—he seeing it to be for his interest to offer them for three dollars and three-quarters a-piece.

"I'll give you three and a-half," said Mr. Smith, promptly.

"Too little, that, sir," returned the dealer. "I don't make a cent on them at three and three-quarters. They are fully equal, in every respect, to the chairs you were offered at five dollars. I know the manufacturer, and have had his articles often."

"Say three and a-half, and it's a bargain," was the only reply made to this by my economical husband.

I was greatly in hopes that the man would decline this offer; but, was disappointed. He hesitated for some time, and, at last, said:

"Well, I don't care, take them along; though it is throwing them away. Such a bargain you will never get again, if you live to be as old as Mathuselah. But, now, don't you want something else? I can sell you cheaper and better articles in the furniture line than you can get in the city. Small profits and quick sales—I go in for the nimble sixpence."

My husband was in the sphere of attraction, and I saw that it would take a stronger effort on my part to draw him out than I wished to make. So, I yielded with as good a grace as possible, and aided in the selection of a cheap sofa, a cheap, overgrown centre table, and two or three other article that were almost "thrown away."

Well, our parlor was furnished with its new dress in good time, and made quite a respectable appearance. Mr. Smith was delighted with everything; the more particularly as the cost had been so moderate. I had my own thoughts on the subject; and looked very confidently for some evidences of imperfection in our great bargains. I was not very long kept in suspense. One morning, about two weeks after all had been fitted out so elegantly, while engaged in dusting the chairs, a part of the mahogany ornament in the back of one of them fell off. On the next day, another showed the same evidence of imperfect workmanship. A few evenings afterwards, as we sat at the centre table, one of our children leaned on it rather heavily, when there was a sudden crack, and the side upon which he was bearing his weight, swayed down the distance of half an inch or more. The next untoward event was the dropping of one of its feet by the sofa, and the warping up of a large piece of veneering on the back. While lamenting over this, we discovered a broken spring ready to make its way through the hair cloth covering.

"So much for cheap furniture," said I, in a tone of involuntary triumph.

My husband looked at me half reproachfully, and so I said no more.

It was now needful to send for a cabinet maker, and submit our sofa and chairs to his handy workmanship. He quickly discovered other imperfections, and gave us the consoling information that our fine furniture was little above fourth-rate in quality, and dear at any price. A ten dollar bill was required to pay the damage they had already sustained, even under our careful hands.

A more striking evidence of our folly in buying cheap furniture was, however, yet to come. An intimate friend came in one evening to sit a few hours with us. After conversing for a time, both he and my husband took up books, and commenced reading, while I availed myself of the opportunity to write a brief letter. Our visitor, who was a pretty stout man, had the bad fault of leaning back in his chair, and balancing himself on its hind legs; an experiment most trying to the best mahogany chairs that were ever made.

We were all sitting around the centre table, upon which burned a tall astral lamp, and I was getting absorbed in my letter, when suddenly there was a loud crash, followed by the breaking of the table from its centre, and the pitching over of the astral lamp, which, in falling, just grazed my side, and went down, oil and all, upon our new carpet! An instant more, and we were in total darkness. But, ere the light went out, a glance had revealed a scene that I shall never forget. Our visitor, whose weight, as he tried his usual balancing experiment, had caused the slender legs of his chair to snap off short, had fallen backwards. In trying to save himself, he had caught at the table, and wrenched that from its centre fastening. Startled by this sudden catastrophe, my husband had sprung to his feet, grasping his chair with the intent of drawing it away, when the top of the back came off in his hand. I saw all this at a single glance—and then we were shrouded in darkness.

Of the scene that followed, I will not speak. My lady readers can, without any effort of the mind, imagine something of its unpleasant reality. As for our visitor, when lights were brought in, he was no where to be seen. I have a faint recollection of having heard the street door shut amid the confusion that succeeded the incident just described.

About a week afterwards, the whole of our cheap furniture was sent to auction, where it brought less than half its first cost. It was then replaced with good articles, by good workmen, at a fair price; not one of which has cost us, to this day, a single cent for repairs.

A housekeeping friend of mine, committed, not, long since, a similar error. Her husband could spare her a couple of hundred dollars for re-furnishing purposes; but, as his business absorbed nearly all of his time and thoughts, he left with her the selection of the new articles that were to beautify their parlors and chambers, merely saying to her:

"Let what you get be good. It is cheapest in the end."

Well, my friend had set her heart on a dozen chairs, a new sofa, centre table, and "what-not," for her parlors; and on a dressing-bureau, mahogany bedstead, and wash-stand, for her chamber, besides a new chamber carpet. Her first visit was to the ware-rooms of one of our best cabinet makers; but, his prices completely frightened her—for, at his rate, the articles she wanted would amount to more than all the money she had to spend, and leave nothing for the new chamber carpet.

"I must buy cheaper," said she.

"The cheapest is generally dearest in the end," returned the cabinet maker.

"I don't know about that," remarked the lady, whose thoughts did not take in the meaning of the man's words. "All I know is, that I can get as good articles as I desire at lower prices than you ask."

It did not once occur to my friend, that it would be wisest to lessen the number of articles, and get the remainder of the first quality. No; her heart covered the whole inventory at first made out, and nothing less would answer. So she went to an auction store, and bought inferior articles at lower prices. I visited her soon after. She showed me her bargains, and, with an air of exultation, spoke of the cost.

"What do you think I paid for this?" said she, referring to a showy dressing-bureau; and, as she spoke, she took hold of the suspended looking-glass, and moved the upper portion of it forward. "Only seventeen dollars!"

The words had scarcely passed her lips, ere the looking-glass broke away from one of the screws that held it in the standards, and fell, crashing, at our feet!

It cost just seven dollars to replace the glass. But, that was not all—over thirty dollars were paid during the first year for repairs. And this is only the beginning of troubles.

Cheap furniture is, in most cases, the dearest that housekeepers can buy. It is always breaking, and usually costs more, in a year or two, than the difference between its price and that of first-rate articles; to say nothing of the vexation and want of satisfaction that always attends its possession. Better be content with fewer articles, if the purse be low, and have them good.

While on this subject, I will incorporate in these "Confessions" an "Experience" of my sister and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. John Jones. Mr. Jones is, in some respects, very much like Mr. Smith, and, as will be seen in the story about to be given, my sister's ideas of things and my own, run quite parallel to each other. The story has found its way, elsewhere, into print, for Mr. Jones, like myself, has a natural fondness for types. But its repetition here will do no harm, and bring it before many who would not otherwise see it.

CHAPTER V
IS IT ECONOMY?

THE "Experience" of my relative, Mr. John Jones, referred to in the preceding chapter, is given in what follows. After reading it, we think that few young housekeepers will commit the folly of indulging to any very great extent in cheap furniture.

We had been married five years, and during the time had boarded for economy's sake. But the addition of one after another to our family, admonished us that it was getting time to enlarge our borders; and so we were determined to go to housekeeping. In matters of domestic economy both my wife and myself were a little "green," but I think that I was the greenest of the two.

To get a house was our first concern, and to select furniture was our next. The house was found after two months' diligent search, and at the expense of a good deal of precious shoe leather. Save me from another siege at house-hunting! I would about as soon undertake to build a suitable dwelling with my own hands, as to find one "exactly the thing" already up, and waiting with open doors for a tenant. All the really desirable houses that we found ticketed "to let," were at least two prices above our limit, and most of those within our means we would hardly have lived in rent free.

At last, however, we found a cosey little nest of a house, just built, and clean and neat as a new pin, from top to bottom. It suited us to a T. And now came the next most important business —selecting furniture. My wife's ideas had always been a little in advance of mine. That is, she liked to have every thing of the best quality; and had the weakness, so to speak, of desiring to make an appearance. As my income, at the time, was but moderate, and the prospect of an increase thereof not very flattering, I felt like being exceedingly prudent in all outlays for furniture.

"We must be content with things few and plain," said I, as we sat down one morning to figure up what we must get.

"But let them be good," said my wife.

"Strong and substantial," was my reply. "But we can't afford to pay for much extra polish and filigree work."

"I don't want any thing very extra, Mr. Jones," returned my wife, a little uneasily. "Though what I do have, I would like good. It's no economy, in the end, to buy cheap things."

The emphasis on the word cheap, rather grated on my ear; for I was in favor of getting every thing as cheap as possible.

"What kind of chairs did you think of getting?" asked Mrs. Jones.

"A handsome set of cane-seat," I replied, thinking that in this, at least, I would be even with her ideas on the subject of parlor chairs. But her face did not brighten.

"What would you like?" said I.

"I believe it would be more economical in the end to get good stuffed seat, mahogany chairs," replied Mrs. Jones.

"At five dollars a-piece, Ellen?"

"Yes. Even at five dollars a-piece. They would last us our life-time; while cane-seat chairs, if we get them, will have to be renewed two or three times, and cost a great deal more in the end, without being half so comfortable, or looking half-so well."

"Sixty dollars for a dozen chairs, when very good ones can be had for twenty-four dollars! Indeed, Ellen, we mustn't think of such a thing. We can't afford it. Remember, there are a great many other things to buy."

"I know, dear; but I am sure it will be much more economical in the end for us to diminish the number of articles, and add to the quality of what we do have. I am very much like the poor woman

who preferred a cup of clear, strong, fragrant coffee, three times a week, to a decoction of burnt rye every day. What I have, I do like good."

"And so do I, Ellen. But, as I said before, there will be, diminish as we may, a great many things to buy, and we must make the cost of each as small as possible. We must not think of such extravagance as mahogany chairs now. At some other time we may get them."

My wife here gave up the point, and, what I thought a little remarkable, made no more points on the subject of furniture. I had every thing my own way; I bought cheap to my heart's content. It was only necessary for me to express my approval of an article, for her to assent to its purchase.

As to patronizing your fashionable cabinet makers and high-priced upholsterers, we were not guilty of the folly, but bought at reasonable rates from auction stores and at public sales. Our parlor carpets cost but ninety cents a yard, and were handsomer than those for which a lady of our acquaintance paid a dollar and thirty-eight. Our chairs were of a neat, fancy pattern, and had cost thirty dollars a dozen. We had hesitated for some time between a set at twenty-four dollars a dozen and these; but the style being so much more attractive, we let our taste govern in the selection. The price of our sofa was eighteen dollars, and I thought it a really genteel affair, though my wife was not in raptures about it. A pair of card tables for fifteen dollars, and a marble-top centre table for fourteen, gave our parlors quite a handsome appearance.

"I wouldn't ask any thing more comfortable or genteel than this," said, I, when the parlors were all "fixed" right.

Mrs. Jones looked pleased with the appearance of things, but did not express herself extravagantly.

In selecting our chamber furniture, a handsome dressing-bureau and French bedstead that my wife went to look at in the ware-room of a high-priced cabinet maker, tempted her strongly, and it was with some difficulty that I could get her ideas back to a regular maple four-poster, a plain, ten dollar bureau, and a two dollar dressing-glass. Twenty and thirty dollar mattresses, too, were in her mind, but when articles of the kind, just as good to wear, could be had at eight and ten dollars, where was the use of wasting money in going higher?

The ratio of cost set down against the foregoing articles, was maintained from garret to kitchen; and I was agreeably disappointed to find, after the last bill for purchases was paid, that I was within the limit of expenditures I had proposed to make by over a hundred dollars.

The change from a boarding-house to a comfortable home was, indeed, pleasant. We could never get done talking about it. Every thing was so quiet, so new, so clean, and so orderly.

"This is living," would drop from our lips a dozen times a week.

One day, about three months after we had commenced housekeeping, I came home, and, on entering the parlor, the first thing that met my eyes was a large spot of white on the new sofa. A piece of the veneering had been knocked off, completely disfiguring it.

"What did that?" I asked of my wife.

"In setting back a chair that I had dusted," she replied, "one of the feet touched the sofa lightly, when off dropped that veneer like a loose flake. I've been examining the sofa since, and find that it is a very bad piece of work. Just look here."

And she drew me over to the place where my eighteen dollar sofa stood, and pointed out sundry large seams that had gaped open, loose spots in the veneering, and rickety joints. I saw now, what I had not before seen, that the whole article was of exceedingly common material and common workmanship.

"A miserable piece of furniture!" said I.

"It is, indeed," returned Mrs. Jones. "To buy an article like this, is little better than throwing money into the street."

For a month the disfigured sofa remained in the parlor, a perfect eye-sore, when another piece of the veneering sloughed off, and one of the feet became loose. It was then sent to a cabinet maker for repair; and cost for removing and mending just five dollars.

Not long after this, the bureau had to take a like journey, for it had, strangely enough, fallen into sudden dilapidation. All the locks were out of order, half the knobs were off, there was not a drawer that didn't require the most accurate balancing of forces in order to get it shut after it was once open, and it showed premonitory symptoms of shedding its skin like a snake. A five dollar bill was expended in putting this into something like *usable* order and respectable aspect. By this time a new set of castors was needed for the maple four-poster, which was obtained at the expense of two dollars. Moreover, the head-board to said four-poster, which, from its exceeding ugliness, had, from the first, been a terrible eye-sore to Mrs. Jones, as well as to myself, was, about this period, removed, and one of more sightly appearance substituted, at the additional charge of six dollars. No tester frame had accompanied the cheap bedstead at its original purchase, and now my wife wished to have one, and also a light curtain above and valance below. All these, with trimmings, etc., to match, cost the round sum of ten dollars.

"It looks very neat," said Mrs. Jones, after her curtains were up.

"It does, indeed," said I.

"Still," returned Mrs. Jones, "I would much rather have had a handsome mahogany French bedstead."

"So would I," was my answer. "But you know they cost some thirty dollars, and we paid but sixteen for this."

"Sixteen!" said my wife, turning quickly toward me. "It cost more than that."

"Oh, no. I have the bill in my desk," was my confident answer.

"Sixteen was originally paid, I know," said Mrs. Jones. "But then, remember, what it has cost since. Two dollars for castors, six for a new head-board, and ten for tester and curtains. Thirty-four dollars in all; when a very handsome French bedstead, of good workmanship, can be bought for thirty dollars."

I must own that I was taken somewhat aback by this array of figures "that don't lie."

"And for twenty dollars we could have bought a neat, well made dressing-bureau, at Moore and Campion's, that would have lasted for twice as many years, and always looked in credit."

"But ours, you know, only cost ten," said I.

"The bureau, such as it is, cost ten, and the glass two. Add five that we have already paid for repairs, and the four that our maple bedstead has cost above the price of a handsome French, one, and we will have the sum of twenty-one dollars,—enough to purchase as handsome a dressing-bureau as I would ask. So you see. Mr. Jones, that our cheap furniture is not going to turn out so cheap after all. And as for looks, why no one can say there is much to brag of."

This was a new view of the case, and certainly one not very flattering to my economical vanity. I gave in, of course, and, admitted that Mrs. Jones was right.

But the dilapidations and expenses for repairs, to which I have just referred, were but as the "beginning of sorrows." It took, about three years to show the full fruits of my error. By the end of that time, half my parlor chairs had been rendered useless in consequence of the back-breaking and seat-rending ordeals through which they had been called to pass. The sofa was unanimously condemned to the dining room, and the ninety cent carpet had gone on fading and defacing, until my wife said she was ashamed to put it even on her chambers. For repairs, our furniture had cost, up to this period, to say nothing of the perpetual annoyance of having it put out of order, and running for the cabinet maker and upholsterer, not less than a couple of hundred dollars.

Finally, I grew desperate.

"I'll have decent, well made furniture, let it cost what it will," said I, to Mrs. Jones.

"You will find it cheapest in the end," was her quiet reply.

On the next day we went to a cabinet maker, whose reputation for good work stood among the highest in the city; and ordered new parlor and chamber furniture—mahogany chairs, French bedstead, dressing-bureau and all, and as soon as they came home, cleared the house of all the old cheap (dear!) trash with which we had been worried since the day we commenced housekeeping.

A good many years have passed since, and we have not paid the first five dollar bill for repairs. All the drawers run as smoothly as railroad cars; knobs are tight; locks in prime order, and veneers cling as tightly to their places as if they had grown there. All is right and tight, and wears an orderly, genteel appearance; and what is best of all the cost of every thing we have, good as it is, is far below the *real* cost of what is inferior.

"It is better—much better," said I to Mrs. Jones, the other day.

"Better!" was her reply. "Yes, indeed, a thousand times better to have good things at once. Cheap furniture is dearest in the end. Every housekeeper ought to know this in the beginning. If we had known it, see what we would have saved."

"If *I* had known it, you mean," said I.

My wife looked kindly, not triumphantly, into my face, and smiled. When she again spoke, it was on another subject.

CHAPTER VI
LIVING AT A CONVENIENT DISTANCE

THERE are few of us who do not feel, at some time in life, the desire for change. Indeed, change of place corresponding, as it does, in outward nature, to change of state in the mind, it is not at all surprising that we should, now and then, feel a strong desire to remove from the old, and get into new locations, and amid different external associations. Thus, we find, in many families, an ever recurring tendency to removal. Indeed, I have some housekeeping friends who are rarely to be found in the same house, or in the same part of the city, in any two consecutive years. Three moves, Franklin used to say, were equal to a fire. There are some to whom I could point, who have been, if this holds true, as good as burned out, three or four times in the last ten years.

But, I must not write too long a preface to my present story. Mr. Smith and myself cannot boast of larger organs of Inhabitativeness—I believe, that is the word used by phrenologists—than many of our neighbors. Occasionally we have felt dissatisfied with the state of things around us, and become possessed of the demon of change. We have moved quite frequently, sometimes attaining superior comfort, and some times, getting rather the worst of, it for "the change."

A few years ago, in the early spring-time, Mr. Smith said to me, one day:

"I noticed, in riding out yesterday, a very pleasant country house on the Frankford Road, to let, and it struck me that it would be a fine thing for us, both as to health and comfort, to rent it for the summer season. What do you think of it?"

"I always, loved the country, you know," was my response.

My heart had leaped at the proposition.

"It is such a convenient distance from the city," said Mr. Smith.

"How far?"

"About four miles."

"Do the stages pass frequently?"

"Every half hour; and the fare is only twelve and a half cents."

"So low! That is certainly an inducement."

"Yes, it is. Suppose we go out and look at the house?"

"Very well," said I. And then we talked over the pleasures and advantage that would result from a residence in the country, at such a convenient distance from the city.

On the next day we went to look at the place, and found much, both in the house and grounds, to attract us. There was a fine shaded lawn, and garden with a stock of small and large fruit.

"What a delightful place for the children," I exclaimed.

"And at such a convenient distance from the city," said my husband. "I can go in and out to business, and scarcely miss the time. But do you think you would like the country?"

"O, yes. I've always loved the country."

"We can move back into the city when the summer closes," said Mr. Smith.

"Why not remain here permanently? It will be too expensive to keep both a city and country house," I returned.

"It will be too dreary through the winter."

"I don't think so. I always feel cheerful in the country. And, then, you know, the house is at such a convenient distance, and the stages pass the door at every half hour. You can get to business as easily as if we resided in the city."

I was in the mood for a change, and so it happened was Mr. Smith. The more we thought and talked about the matters, the more inclined were we to break up in the city, and go permanently to the country. And, finally, we resolved to try the experiment.

So the pleasant country house was taken, and the town house given up, and, in due time, we took our flight to where nature had just carpeted the earth in freshest green, and caused the buds to expand, and the trees of the forest to clothe themselves in verdure.

How pleasant was every thing. A gardener had been employed to put the garden and lawn in order, and soon we were delighted to see the first shoots from seeds that had been planted, making their way through the ground. To me, all was delightful. I felt almost as light-hearted as a child, and never tired of expressing my pleasure at the change.

"Come and see us," said I, to one city friend and another, on meeting them. "We're in a most delightful place, and at such a convenient distance from the city. Just get into the Frankford omnibus, which starts from Hall's, in Second street above Market, every half hour, and you will come to our very door. And I shall be so delighted to have a visit from you."

In moving from the city, I took with me two good domestics, who had lived in my family for over a year. Each had expressed herself as delighted at the prospect of getting into the country, and I was delighted to think they were so well satisfied, for I had feared lest they would be disinclined to accompany us.

About a month after our removal, one of them, who had looked dissatisfied about something, came to me and said:

"I want to go back to the city, Mrs. Smith; I don't like living in the country."

"Very well," I replied. "You must do as you please. But I thought you preferred this to the city?"

"I thought I would like it, but I don't. It's too lonesome."

I did not persuade her to stay. That error I had once or twice, ere this, fallen into, and learned to avoid it in future. So she went back to the city, and I was left with but a single girl. Three days only elapsed before this one announced her intended departure.

"But you will stay," said I, "until I can get some one in your place."

"My week will be up on Saturday," was replied. "Can you get a girl by that time?"

"That leaves me only two days, Mary; I'm afraid not."

Mary looked unamiable enough at this answer. We said no more to each other. In the afternoon I went to the city to find a new domestic, if possible, but returned unsuccessful.

Saturday came, and to my surprise and trouble, Mary persisted in going away. So I was left, with my family of six persons, without any domestic at all.

Sunday proved to me any thing but a day of rest. After washing and dressing the children, preparing breakfast, clearing away the table, making the beds, and putting the house to order, I set about getting dinner. This meal furnished and eaten, and the dishes washed and put away, I found myself not only completely tired out, but suffering from a most dreadful headache. I was lying down, about four o'clock, in a half-waking and sleeping state, with my head a little easier, when my husband, who was sitting by the window, exclaimed:

"If there isn't Mr. and Mrs. Peters and their three children, getting out of the stage!"

"Not coming here!" said I, starting up in bed, while, at the same moment, my headache returned with a throbbing intensity that almost blinded me.

"Yes, coming here," replied Mr. Smith.

"How unfortunate!" came from my lips, as I clasped my hands to my temples.

Now, Mr. and Mrs. Peters were people for whom we had no particular friendship. We visited each other scarcely once a year, and had never reciprocated an evening to tea. True, I had, on the occasion of meeting Mrs. Peters, about a week before, while stopping in the city, said to her, while praising my new country home:

"You must come and see me sometime during the summer."

The invitation was intended as a compliment more than anything else. I didn't particularly care about a visit from her; and certainly had no idea that she would take me at my word. So much for insincerity.

"Go down and ask them into the parlor," said I to Mr. Smith. "I will dress myself and join you in a little while."

In about half an hour I left my room, feeling really quite unwell. I found my visitors walking in the garden, and their children ranging about like wild colts, to the particular detriment of choice shrubbery and garden beds.

"Oh, what a delightful place!" exclaimed Mrs. Peters, on my meeting her. "I really envy you! You see that I have accepted your very kind invitation. I said to my husband to-day, says I, wouldn't it be nice to make the Smiths a visit this afternoon. They live at such a convenient distance; and it will be such a treat to the children. Well, just as you like, said Mr. Peters. And so, as soon as dinner was over, we got ready and came out. Oh, I'm delighted! What a sweet spot you have chosen. I shall come and see you often."

And thus she ran on, while I smiled, and responded with all due politeness, and to a certain extent, hypocritical pretence of pleasure at the visit.

They had come to spend the afternoon, and take tea with us, of course, and, as the last stage went by at seven o'clock, I was soon under the necessity of leaving my guests, in order to engage in certain preliminary acts that looked towards an early supper. Oh, how my head did throb; and with what an effort did I drag my weary feet about!

But, the longest trial—the most painful ordeal has an end; and the end of this came at length. Our visitors, after spending a few hours, and being served with tea, took their departure, assuring us, as they did so, that they had spent a delightful afternoon, and would be certain to come again soon.

In ten minutes after they had left the house, I was in bed.

Two whole weeks elapsed before I succeeded in getting a girl; and six times during that period, we had friends out from the city to take tea with us; and one young lady spent three whole days!

When the season of fruits came, as we had a few apple and pear trees, besides a strawberry bed, and a fine row of raspberry bushes, our city friends, especially those who had children, were even more particular in their attentions. Our own children, we could make understand the propriety of leaving the small fruit to be picked for table use, so that all could share in its enjoyment. But, visitors' children comprehended nothing of this, and rifled our beds and bushes so constantly, that, although they would have given our table a fair supply of berries, in the season, we never once could get enough to be worth using, and so were forced to purchase our fruit in the city.

After a destructive visitation of this nature, during strawberry time, I said to Mr. Smith, as he was leaving for the city one morning—

"I wish you would take a small basket with you, and bring out two or three quarts of strawberries for tea. I've only tasted them once or twice, and it's hopeless to think of getting any from our garden."

Well, when Mr. Smith came home with his two or three quarts of strawberries, we had six women and children, visitors from the city, to partake of them. Of course, our own children, who had been promised strawberries at tea time, and who had been looking for them, did'nt get a taste.

And thus it happened over and over again.

As the weather grew warmer and warmer, particular friends whom we were glad to see, and friends, so called, into whose houses we had rarely, if ever ventured, came out to get a "mouthful of fresh air," and to "see something green." We lived at "such a convenient distance," that it was no trouble at all to run out and look at us.

Twice again during the summer, I was left without a single domestic. Girls didn't like to leave the city, where they had been used to meeting their acquaintances every few days; and, therefore, it was hard to retain them. So it went on.

I had poor help, and was overrun with company, at such a rate, that I was completely worn out. I rarely heard the rumble of the approaching stage that I did not get nervous.

Early in August, Mr. Smith said to me, one evening after returning from the city—on that very morning, a family of four had left me, after staying three days—

"I met Mr. Gray this afternoon, and he told me that they were coming out to see you to-morrow. That he was going away for a while, and his wife thought that it would be such a pleasant time to redeem her promise of making you a visit."

"Oh dear! What next!" I exclaimed in a distressed voice. "Is there to be no end to this?"

"Not before frost, I presume," returned Mr. Smith, meaningly.

"I wish frost would come along quickly, then," was my response. "But how long is Mr. Gray going to be absent from home?"

"He didn't say."

"And we're to have his whole family, I suppose, during his absence."

"Doubtless."

"Well, I call that taxing hospitality and good feeling a little too far. I don't want them here! I've no room for them without inconvenience to ourselves. Besides, my help is poor."

But, all my feelings of repugnance were of no avail. As I was sitting, on the next day, by a window, that overlooked the road, I saw the stage draw up, and issue therefrom Mr. Jones, Mrs. Jones, servant and five children—two of the latter twin-babies. They had boxes, carpet bags, bundles, &c., indicating a prolonged sojourn, and one little boy dragged after him a pet dog, that came also to honor us with a visit.

Down to meet them at the door, with as good a grace as possible, I hurried. Words of welcome and pleasure were on my tongue, though I am not sure that my face did not belie my utterance. But, they were all too pleased to get into our snug country quarters, to perceive any drawback in their reception.

I will not describe my experience during the next three weeks—for, Mr. Gray took the tour of the Lakes before returning, and was gone full three weeks, leaving his family to our care for the whole time.

"Heaven be praised, that is over!" was my exclamation, when I saw the stage move off that bore them from our door.

Frost at length came, and with it expired the visiting season. We were still at a convenient distance from the city; but, our friends, all at once, seemed to have forgotten us.

"You are not going to move back, now," said a friend in surprise, to whom I mentioned in the following March our intention to return to the city.

"Yes," I replied.

"Just as spring is about opening? Why, surely, after passing the dreary winter in the country, you will not come to the hot and dusty town to spend the summer? You are at such a convenient distance too; and your friends can visit you so easily."

Yes, the distance was convenient; and we had learned to appreciate that advantage. But back to the city we removed; and, when next we venture to the country, will take good care to get beyond a convenient distance.

CHAPTER VII
THE PICKED-UP DINNER

IT was "washing day;" that day of all days in the week most dreaded by housekeepers. We had a poor breakfast, of course. Cook had to help with the washing, and, as washing was the important thing for the day, every thing else was doomed to suffer. The wash kettle was to her of greater moment than the tea kettle or coffee pot; and the boiling of wash water first in consideration, compared with broiling the steak.

The breakfast bell rung nearly half an hour later than usual. As I entered the dining room, I saw that nearly every thing was in disorder, and that the table was little over half set. Scarcely had I taken my seat, ere the bell was in my hand.

"There's no sugar on the table, Kitty."

These were my words, as the girl entered, in obedience to my summons.

"Oh, I forgot!" she ejaculated, and hurriedly supplied the deficiency.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling, went my bell, ere she had reached the kitchen.

"There's no knife and fork for the steak," said I, as Kitty re-appeared.

The knife and fork were furnished, but not with a very amiable grace.

"What's the matter with this coffee?" asked Mr. Smith, after sipping a spoonful or two. "It's got a queer taste."

"I'm sure I don't know."

It was plain that I was going to have another trying day; and I began to feel a little worried. My reply was not, therefore, made in a very composed voice.

Mr. Smith continued to sip his coffee with a spoon, and to taste the liquid doubtingly. At length he pushed his cup from him, saying:

"It's no use; I can't drink that! I wish you would just taste it. I do believe Kitty has dropped a piece of soap into the coffee pot."

By this time I had turned out a cup of the fluid for myself, and proceeded to try its quality. It certainly had a queer taste; but, as to the substance to which it was indebted for its peculiar flavor, I was in total ignorance. My husband insisted that it was soap. I thought differently; but we made no argument on the subject.

The steak was found, on trial, to be burned so badly that it was not fit to be eaten. And my husband had to make his meal of bread and butter and cold water. As for myself, this spoiling of our breakfast for no good reason, completely destroyed both my appetite and my temper.

"You'd better get your dinner at an eating house, Mr. Smith," said I, as he arose from the table. "It's washing day, and we shall have nothing comfortable."

"Things will be no more comfortable for you than for me," was kindly replied by my husband.

"We shall only have a picked-up dinner," said I.

"I like a good picked-up dinner," answered Mr. Smith. "There is something so out of the ordinary routine of ribs, loins, and sirloins—something so comfortable and independent about it. No, you cannot eat your picked-up dinner alone."

"Drop the word *good* from your description, and the picked-up dinner will be altogether another affair," said I. "No, don't come home to-day, if you please; for every thing promises to be most uncomfortable. Get yourself a good dinner at an eating house, and leave me to go through the day as well as I can."

"And you are really in earnest?" said my husband, seriously.

"I certainly am," was my reply. "Entirely in earnest. So, just oblige me by not coming home to dinner."

Mr. Smith promised; and there was so much off of my mind. I could not let him come home without seeing that he had a good dinner. But, almost any thing would do for me and the children.

In some things, I am compelled to say that my husband is a little uncertain. His memory is not always to be depended on. Deeply absorbed in business, as he was at that time, he frequently let things of minor importance pass from his thoughts altogether.

So it happened on the present occasion. He forgot that it was washing day, and that he had promised to dine down town. Punctually at half-past one he left his place of business, as usual, and took his way homeward. As he walked along, he met an old friend who lived in a neighboring town, and who was on a visit to our city.

"Why, Mr. Jones! How glad I am to see you! When did you arrive?"

And my husband grasped the hand of his friend eagerly.

"Came in last evening," replied Mr. Jones. "How well you look, Smith! How is your family?"

"Well—very well. When do you leave?"

"By this afternoon's line."

"So soon? You make no stay at all?"

"I came on business, and must go back again with as little delay as possible."

"Then you must go and dine with me, Jones. I won't take no for an answer. Want to have a long talk with you about old times."

"Thank you, Mr. Smith," replied Jones. "But, as I don't happen to know your good lady, I hardly feel free to accept your invitation."

"Don't hesitate for that. She'll be delighted to see you. Always glad to meet any of my old friends. So come along. I've a dozen things to say to you."

"I'm really afraid of intruding on your wife," said Mr. Jones, still holding back from the invitation.

"Nonsense!" answered my husband. "My friends are hers. She will be delighted to see you. I've talked of you to her a hundred times."

At this Mr. Jones yielded.

"I can't promise you any thing extra," said Mr. Smith, as they walked along. "Nothing more than a good, plain family dinner, and a warm welcome."

"All I could ask or desire," returned Mr. Jones.

It was a few minutes to two o'clock. The bell had rung for dinner; and I was just rising to go to the dining room, when I heard the street door open, and the sound of my husband's voice in the passage. There was a man in company with him, for I distinctly heard the tread of a pair of feet. What could this mean? I remained seated, listening with attention.

My husband entered the parlor with his companion, talking in a cheerful, animated strain; and I heard him pull up the blinds and throw open the shutters. Presently he came tripping lightly up the stairs to my sitting room.

"I've brought a friend home to dinner, Jane," said he, as coolly and as confidently as if it were not washing day; and as if he had not told me on going out, that he would dine at an eating house.

This was a little too much for my patience and forbearance.

"Are you beside yourself, Mr. Smith?" I replied, my face instantly becoming flushed, and my eyes glancing out upon him the sudden indignation I felt at such treatment.

"Why, Jane! Jane! This is not kind in you," said my husband, with regret and displeasure in his voice. "It is rather hard if a man can't ask an old friend home to dine with him once in five years, without asking the special permission of his wife."

"Mr. Smith! Are you not aware that this is washing day?"

There was an instant change in my husband's countenance. He seemed bewildered for a few moments.

"And, moreover," I continued, "are you not aware that I was to have a picked-up dinner at home, and that you were to dine at an eating house?"

"I declare!" Mr. Smith struck his hands together, and turned around once upon his heel.—"I entirely forgot about that."

"What's to be done?" said I, almost crying with vexation. "I've nothing for dinner but fried ham and eggs."

"The best we can do is the best," returned Mr. Smith. "You can give Mr. Jones a hearty welcome, and that will compensate for any defects in the dinner. I forewarned him that we should not entertain him very sumptuously."

"You'd better tell him the whole truth at once," said I, in answer to this; "and then take him to an eating house."

But my good husband would hear to nothing of this. He had invited his old friend to dine with him; and dine he must, if it was only on a piece of dry bread.

"Pick up something. Do the best you can," he returned. "We can wait for half an hour."

"I've nothing in the house, I tell you," was my answer made in no very pleasant tones; for I felt very much irritated and outraged by my husband's thoughtless conduct.

"There, there, Jane. Don't get excited about the matter," said he soothingly. But his words were not like oil to the troubled waters of my spirit.

"I am excited," was my response. "How can I help being so? It is too much! You should have had more consideration."

But, talking was of no use. Mr. Jones was in the parlor, and had come to take a family dinner with us. So, nothing was left but to put a good face on the matter; or, at least, to try and do so.

"Dinner's on the table now," said I. "All is there that we can have to-day. So just invite your friend to the dining room, where you will find me."

So saying, I took a little fellow by the hand, who always eat with us, and led him away, feeling, as my lady readers will very naturally suppose, in not the most amiable humor in the world. I had just got the child, who was pretty hungry, seated in his high chair, when my husband and his guest made their appearance; and I was introduced.

Sorry am I to chronicle the fact—but truth compels me to make a faithful record—that my reception of the stranger was by no means gracious. I tried to smile; but a smile was such a mockery of my real feelings, that every facial muscle refused to play the hypocrite. The man was not welcome, and it was impossible for me to conceal this.

"A plain family dinner, you see," said Mr. Smith, as we took our places at the meagre board. "We are plain people. Shall I help you to some of the ham and eggs?"

He tried to smile pleasantly, and to seem very much at his ease. But, the attempt was far from successful.

"I want some! Don't give him all!" screamed out the hungry child at my side, stretching out his hands towards the poorly supplied dish, from which my husband was about supplying our guest.

My face, which was red enough before, now became like scarlet. A moment longer I remained at the table, and then rising up quickly took the impatient child in my arms, and carried him screaming from the room. I did not return to grace the dinner table with my unattractive presence. Of what passed, particularly, between my husband and his friend Mr. Jones, who had left his luxurious dinner at the hotel to enjoy "a plain family dinner" with his old acquaintance, I never ventured to make enquiry. They did not remain very long at the table; nor very long in the house after finishing their frugal meal.

I have heard since that Mr. Jones has expressed commiseration for my husband, as the married partner of a real termigant. I don't much wonder at his indifferent opinion; for, I rather think I must have shown in my face something of the indignant fire that was in me.

Mr. Smith, who was too much in the habit of inviting people home to take a "family dinner" with him on the spur of the moment, has never committed that error since. His mortification was too severe to be easily forgotten.

CHAPTER VIII
WHO IS KRISS KRINGLE?

IT was the day before Christmas—always a day of restless, hopeful excitement among the children; and my thoughts were busy, as is usual at this season, with little plans for increasing the gladness of my happy household. The name of the good genius who presides over toys and sugar plums was often on my lips, but oftener on the lips of the children.

"Who is Kriss Kringle, mamma?" asked a pair of rosy lips, close to my ear, as I stood at the kitchen table, rolling out and cutting cakes.

I turned at the question, and met the earnest gaze of a couple of bright eyes, the roguish owner of which had climbed into a chair for the purpose of taking note of my doings.

I kissed the sweet lips, but did not answer.

"Say, mamma? Who is Kriss Kringle?" persevered the little one.

"Why, don't you know?" said I, smiling.

"No, mamma. Who is he?"

"Why, he is—he is—Kriss Kringle."

"Oh, mamma! Say, won't you tell me?"

"Ask papa when he comes home," I returned, evasively.

I never like deceiving children in any thing. And yet, Christmas after Christmas, I have imposed on them the pleasant fiction of Kriss Kringle, without suffering very severe pangs of conscience. Dear little creatures! how fully they believed, at first, the story; how soberly and confidingly they hung their stockings in the chimney corner; with what faith and joy did they receive their many gifts on the never-to-be-forgotten Christmas morning!

Yes, it is a pleasant fiction; and if there be in it a leaven of wrong, it is indeed a small portion.

"But why won't you tell me, mamma?" persisted my little interrogator. "Don't you know Kriss Kringle?"

"I never saw him, dear," said I.

"Has papa seen him?"

"Ask him when he comes home."

"I wish Krissy would bring me, Oh, such an elegant carriage and four horses, with a driver that could get down and go up again."

"If I see him, I'll tell him to bring you just such a nice carriage."

"And will he do it, mamma?" The dear child clapped his hands together with delight.

"I guess so."

"I wish I could see him," he said, more soberly and thoughtfully. And then, as if some new impression had crossed his mind, he hastened down from the chair, and went gliding from the room.

Half an hour afterwards, as I came into the nursery, I saw my three "olive branches," clustered together in a corner, holding grave counsel on some subject of importance; at least to themselves. They became silent at my presence; but soon began to talk aloud. I listened to a few words, but perceived nothing of particular concern; then turned my thoughts away.

"Who is Kriss Kringle, papa?" I heard my cherry-lipped boy asking of Mr. Smith, soon after he came home in the evening.

The answer I did not hear. Enough that the enquirer did not appear satisfied therewith.

At tea-time, the children were not in very good appetite, though in fine spirits.

As soon as the evening meal was over, Mr. Smith went out to buy presents for our little ones, while I took upon myself the task of getting them off early to bed.

A Christmas tree had been obtained during the day, and it stood in one of the parlors, on a table. Into this parlor the good genius was to descend during the night, and hang on the branches of the tree, or leave upon the table, his gifts for the children. This was our arrangement. The little ones expressed some doubts as to whether Kriss Kringle would come to this particular room; and little "cherry lips" couldn't just see how the genius was going to get down the chimney, when the fire-place was closed up.

"Never mind, love; Kriss will find his way here," was my answer to all objections.

"But how do you know, mother? Have you sent him word?"

"Oh, I know."

Thus I put aside their enquiries, and hurried them off to bed.

"Now go to sleep right quickly," said I, after they were snugly under their warm blankets and comforts; "and to-morrow morning be up bright and early."

And so I left them to their peaceful slumbers.

An hour it was, or more, ere Mr. Smith returned, with his pockets well laden. I was in the parlor, where we had placed the Christmas tree, engaged in decorating it with rosettes, sugar toys, and the like. At this work I had been some fifteen or twenty minutes, and had, I will own, become a little nervous. My domestic had gone out, and I was alone in the house. Once or twice, as I sat in the silent room, I imagined that I heard a movement in the one adjoining. And several times I was sure that my ear detected something like the smothered breathing of a man.

"All imagination," said I to myself. But again and again the same sounds stirred upon the silent air.

"Could there be a robber concealed in the next room?"

The thought made me shudder. I was afraid to move from where I sat. What a relief when I heard my husband's key in the door, followed by the sound of his well known tread in the passage! My fears vanished in a moment.

As Mr. Smith stood near me, in the act of unloading his pockets, he bent close to my ear and whispered:

"Will is under the table. I caught a glance of his bright eyes, just now."

"What!"

"It's true. And the other little rogues are in the next room, peeping through the door, at this very moment."

I was silent with surprise.

"They're determined to know who Kriss Kringle is," added my husband; then speaking aloud, he said:

"Come, dear, I want to show you something up in the dining-room."

I understood Mr. Smith, and arose up instantly, not so much as glancing towards the partly opened folding door.

We were hardly in the dining room before we heard the light pattering of feet, and low, smothered tittering on the stairway. Then all was still, and we descended to the parlors again, quite as much pleased with what had occurred as the little rogues were themselves.

"I declare! Really, I thought them all sound asleep an hour ago," said I, on resuming my work of decorating the Christmas tree, "Who could have believed them cunning enough for this? It's all Will's doings. He'll get through the world."

"Aye will he," returned Mr. Smith. "Oh if you could have seen his face as I saw it, just peering from under the table cloth, his eyes as bright as stars, and full of merriment and delight."

"Bless his heart! He's a dear little fellow!"

How could I help saying this?

"And the others! You lost half the pleasure of the whole affair by not seeing them."

"We shall have a frolic with the rogues to-morrow morning. I can see the triumph on Will's face. I understand now what all their whisperings meant this afternoon. They were concocting this plan. I couldn't have believed it of them?"

"Children are curious bodies," said Mr. Smith.

"I thought I heard some one in the next room," I remarked, "while you were out, and became really nervous for a while. I heard the breathing of some one near me, also; but tried to argue myself into the belief that it was only imagination."

Thus we conned over the little incident, while we arranged the children's toys.

"I know who Kriss Kringle is! I know!" was the triumphant affirmation of one and another of the children, as we gathered at the breakfast table next morning.

"Do you, indeed?" said I, trying to look grave.

"Yes; it is papa."

"Papa, Kriss Kringle! How can that be?"

"Oh, we know! We found out!"

"Indeed!"

And we, made, of course, a great wonder of this assertion. The merry elves! What a happy Christmas it was for them. Ever since, they have dated from the time when they found out who Kriss Kringle was. It is all to no purpose that we pleasantly suggest the possibility of their having dreamed of what they allege to have occurred under their actual vision; they have recorded it in their memories, and refer to it as a veritable fact.

Dear children! How little they really ask of us, to make them happy. Did we give them but a twentieth part of the time we devote to business, care, and pleasure, how greatly would we promote their good, and increase the measure of their enjoyment. Not alone at Christmas time, but all the year should we remember and care for their pleasures; for, the state of innocent pleasure, in children, is one in which good affections are implanted, and these take root and grow, and produce fruit in after life.

CHAPTER IX
NOT AT HOME

NEVER but once did I venture upon the utterance of that little white lie, "Not at home," and then I was well punished for my weakness and folly. It occurred at a time when there were in my family two new inmates: a niece from New York, and a raw Irish girl that I had taken a few days before, on trial.

My niece, Agnes, was a young lady in her nineteenth year, the daughter of my brother. I had not seen her before since her school-girl days; and knew little of her character. Her mother I had always esteemed as a right-thinking, true-hearted woman. I was much pleased to have a visit from Agnes, and felt drawn toward her more and more every day. There was something pure and good about her.

"Now, Aggy, dear," said I to her, one morning after breakfast, as we took our work and retired from the dining-room to one of the parlors, where I was occasionally in the habit of sitting,—"we must sew for dear life until dinner time, so as to finish these two frocks for the children to wear this evening. It isn't right, I know, to impose on you in this way. But you sew so quick and neatly; and then it will help me through, and leave me free to visit Girard College with you this afternoon."

"Don't speak of it, aunt," returned Agnes.—"I'm never happier than when employed. And, besides, it's only fair that I should sew for you in the morning, if you are to go pleasuring with me in the afternoon."

Lightly the hours flew by, passed in cheerful conversation. I found that the mind of my niece had been highly cultivated; that her tastes were refined, and her moral sense acute. To say that I was pleased with her, would but half express what I felt.

There was to be a juvenile party at the house of one of our acquaintances that evening, to which the children were invited; and we were at work in preparing dresses and other matters suitable for them to appear in.

Twelve o'clock came very quickly—too quickly for me, in fact; for I had not accomplished near so much as I had hoped to do. It would require the most diligent application, through every moment of time that intervened until the dinner hour, for us to get through with what we were doing, so as to have the afternoon to ourselves for the intended excursion.

As the clock rung out the hour of noon, I exclaimed:

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.