

Bankrupt

A short story by Alice Brown

Miss Dorcas True stood in her square front entry, saying good-by to Phoebe Marsh. The entry would have been quite dark from its time-stained woodwork and green paper, except for the twilight glimmer swaying and creeping through the door leading into the garden. Out there were the yellow of coreopsis, and the blue of larkspur, melted into a dim magnificence of color, suffusing all the air; to one who knew what common glory was a-blowing and a-growing there without, the bare seclusion of the house might well seem invaded by it, like a heavenly flood. Phoebe, too, in her pink calico, appeared to spread abroad the richness of her youth and bloom, and radiate a certain light about her where she stood. She was tall, her proportions were ample, and her waist very trim. She had the shoulders and arms of the women of an elder time, whom we classify vaguely now as goddesses. The Tiverton voices argued that she would have been "real handsome if she'd had any sense about doin' her hair;" which was brought down loosely over her ears, in the fashion of her Aunt Phoebe's miniature. Miss Dorcas beside her looked like one of autumn's brown, quiescent stems left standing by the way. She was firmly built, yet all her lines subdued themselves to that meagreness which ever dwells afar from beauty. The deep marks of hard experience had been graven on her forehead, and her dark eyes burned inwardly; the tense, concentrated spark of pain and the glowing of happy fervor seemed as foreign to them as she herself to all the lighter joys and hopes. Her only possibility of beauty lay in an abundance of soft dark hair; but even that had been restricted and coiled into a compact, utilitarian compass. She had laid one nervous hand on Phoebe's arm, and she grasped the arm absently, from time to time, in talking, with unconscious joy in its rounded warmth. She spoke cautiously, so that her voice might not be heard within.

"Then you come over to-morrow, after the close of service, if it's convenient. You can slip right into the kitchen, just as usual. Any news?"

Phoebe, too, lowered her voice, but the full sweetness of its quality thrilled out.

"Mary Frances Giles is going to be married next week. I've been down to see her things. She's real pleased."

"You don't suppose they'll ask father to marry 'em?" Miss Dorcas spoke quite eagerly.

"Oh, no, they can't! It's a real wedding, you know. It's got to be at the house."

"Yes, of course it's got to! I knew that myself, but I couldn't help hoping. Well, goodnight. You come Sunday."

Phoebe lifted her pink skirts about her, and stepped, rustling and stately, down the garden walk. Miss Dorcas drew one deep breath of the outer fragrance, and turned back into the house. A thin voice, enfeebled and husky from old age, rose in the front room, as she entered:

"Dorcas! Dorcas! you had a caller?"

Her father, old Parson True, lay in the great bed opposite the window. A thin little twig of a man, he was still animated, at times, by the power of a strenuous and dauntless spirit. His hair, brushed straight back from the overtopping forehead, had grown snowy white, and the eager, delicate face beneath wore a strange pathos from the very fineness of its nervously netted lines. Not many years after his wife's death, the parson had shown some wandering of the wits; yet his disability, like his loss, had been mercifully veiled from him. He took calmly to his bed, perhaps through sheer lack of interest in life, and it became his happy invention that he was "not feeling well," from one day to another, but that, on the next Sunday, he should rise and preach. He seemed like an unfortunate and uncomplaining child, and the village folk took pride in him as something all their own; a pride enhanced by his habit, in this weak estate, of falling back into the homely ways of speech he had used long ago when he was a boy "on the farm." In his wife's day, he had stood in the pulpit above them, and expounded scriptural lore in academic English;

now he lapsed into their own rude phrasing, and seemed to rest content in a tranquil certainty that nothing could be better than Tiverton ways and Tiverton's homely speech.

"Dorcas," he repeated, with all a child's delight in his own cleverness, "you've had somebody here. I heard ye!"

Dorcas folded the sheet back over the quilt, and laid her hand on his hair, with all the tenderness of the strong when they let themselves brood over the weak.

"Only Phoebe, on her way home," she answered, gently. "The doctor visited her school to-day. She thinks he may drop in to see you to-night. I guess he give her to understand so."

The minister chuckled.

"Ain't he a smart one?" he rejoined. "Smart as a trap! Dorcas, I 'ain't finished my sermon. I guess I shall have to preach an old one. You lay me out the one on the salt losin' its savor, an' I'll look it over."

"Yes, father."

The same demand and the same answer, varied but slightly, had been exchanged between them every Saturday night for years. Dorcas replied now without thinking. Her mind had spread its wings and flown out into the sweet stillness of the garden and the world beyond; it even hastened on into the unknown ways of guesswork, seeking for one who should be coming. She strained her ears to hear the beating of hoofs and the rattle of wheels across the little, bridge. The dusk sifted in about the house, faster and faster; a whippoorwill cried from the woods. So she sat until the twilight had vanished, and another of the invisible genii was at hand, saying, "I am Night."

"Dorcas!" called the parson again. He had been asleep, and seemed now to be holding himself back from a broken dream. "Dorcas, has your mother come in yet?"

"No, father."

"Well, you wake me up when you see her down the road; and then you go an' carry her a shawl. I dunno what to make o' that cough!" His voice trailed sleepily off, and Dorcas rose and tiptoed out of the room. She felt the blood in her face; her ears thrilled noisily. The doctor's, wagon, had crossed the bridge; now it was whirling swiftly up the road. She stationed herself in the entry, to lose no step in his familiar progress. The horse came lightly along, beating out a pleasant tune of easy haste. He was drawn up at the gate, and the doctor threw out his weight, and jumped buoyantly to the ground. There was the brief pause of reaching for his medicine-case, and then, with that firm step whose rhythm she knew so well, he was walking up the path. Involuntarily, as Dorcas awaited him, she put her hand to her heart with one of those gestures that seem so melodramatic and are so real; she owned to herself, with a throb of appreciative delight, how the sick must warm at his coming. This new doctor of Tiverton was no younger than Dorcas herself, yet with his erect carriage and merry blue eye she seemed to be not only of another temperament, but another time. It had never struck him that they were contemporaries. Once he had told Phoebe, in a burst of affection and pitying praise, that he should have liked Miss Dorcas for a maiden aunt.

"Good evening," he said, heartily, one foot on the sill. "How's the patient?"

At actual sight of him, her tremor vanished, and she answered very quietly,--

"Father's asleep. I thought you wouldn't want he should be disturbed; so I came out."

The doctor took off his hat, and pushed back his thick, unruly hair.

"Yes, that was right," he said absently, and pinched a spray of southernwood that grew beside the door. "How has he seemed?"

"About as usual."

"You've kept on with the tonic?"

"Yes."

"That's good! Miss Dorcas, look up there. See that moon! See that wisp of an old blanket dragging over her face! Do you mind coming out and walking up and down the road while we talk? I may think of one or two directions to give about your father."

Dorcas stepped forward with the light obedience given to happy tasking. She paused as! quickly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "I can't. Father might wake up. I never leave him alone."

"Never mind, then! let's sit right down here on the steps. After all, perhaps it's pleasanter. What a garden! It's like my mother's. I could pick out every leaf in the dark, by the smell. But you're alone, aren't you? I'm not keeping you from any one?"

"Oh, no! I'm all alone, except father."

"Yes. The fact is, I went into your school to-day, and the teacher said she was coming here to-night. She offered to bring you a message, but I said I should come myself. I'm abominably late. I couldn't get here any earlier."

"Oh, yes! Phoebe! She was here over an hour ago. Phoebe's a real comfort to me." She was seated on the step above him, and it seemed very pleasant to her to hear his voice, without encountering also the challenge of his eyes.

"No, is she though?" The doctor suddenly faced round upon her. "Tell me about it!"

Then, quite to her surprise, Dorcas found herself talking under the spell of an interest so eager that it bore her on, entirely without her own guidance.

"Well, you see there's a good many things I keep from father. He never's been himself since mother died. She was the mainstay here. But he thinks the church prospers just the same, and I never've told him the attendance dropped off when they put up that 'Piscopal building over to Sudleigh. You 'ain't lived here long enough to hear much about that, but it's been a real trial to him. The summer boarders built it, and some rich body keeps it up; and our folks think it's complete to go over there and worship, and get up and down, and say their prayers out loud."

The doctor laughed out.

"I've heard about it," said he. "You know what Brad Freeman told Uncle Eli Pike, when they went in to see how the service was managed? Somebody found the places in the prayer-book for them, and Brad was quick-witted, and got on very well; but Eli kept dropping behind. Brad nudged him. 'Read!' he said out loud. 'Read like the devil!' I've heard that story on an average of twice a day since I came to Tiverton. I'm not tired of it yet!"

Miss Dorcas, too, had heard it, and shrunk from its undisguised profanity. Now she laughed responsively.

"I guess they do have queer ways," she owned. "Well, I never let father know any of our folks go over there. He'd be terrible tried. And I've made it my part in our meeting to keep up the young folks' interest as much as I can. I've been careful never to miss my Sunday-school class. They're all girls, nice as new pins, every one of 'em! Phoebe was in it till a little while ago, but now she comes here and sits in the kitchen while I'm gone. I don't want father to know that, for I hope it never'll come into his head he's so helpless; but I should be worried to death to have him left alone. So Phoebe sits there with her book, ready to spring if she should hear anything out o' the way."

The doctor had lapsed into his absent mood, but now he roused himself, with sudden interest.

"That's very good of her, isn't it?" he said "You trust her, don't you?"

"Trust Phoebe! Well, I guess I do! I've known her ever since she went to Number Five, and now she's keeping the school herself. She's a real noble girl!"

"Tell me more!" said the doctor, warmly. "I want to hear it all. You're so new to me here in Tiverton! I want to get acquainted."

Miss Dorcas suddenly felt as if she had been talking a great deal, and an overwhelming shyness fell upon her.

"There isn't much to tell," she hesitated. "I don't know's anything'd happened to me for years, till father had his ill-turn in the spring, and we called you in. He don't seem to realize his sickness was anything much. I've told the neighbors not to dwell on it when they're with him. Phoebe won't; she's got some sense."

"Has she?" said the doctor, still eagerly. "I'm glad of that, for your sake!" He rose to go, but stood a moment near the steps, dallying with a reaching branch of jessamine; it seemed persuading him to stay. He had always a cheery manner, but to-night it was brightened by a dash of something warm and reckless. He had the air of one awaiting good news, in confidence of its coming. Dorcas was alive to the rapt contagion, and her own blood thrilled. She felt young.

"Well!" said he, "well, Miss Dorcas!" He took a step, and then turned back. "Well, Miss Dorcas," he said again, with an embarrassed laugh, "perhaps you'd like to gather in one more church-goer. If I have time tomorrow, I'll drop in to your service, and then I'll come round here, and tell your father I went."

Dorcas rose impulsively. She could have stretched out her hands to him, in the warmth of her gratitude.

"Oh, if you would! Oh, how pleased he'd be!"

"All right!" Now he turned away with decision. "Thank you, Miss Dorcas, for staying out. It's a beautiful evening. I never knew such a June. Good-

night!" He strode down the walk, and gave a quick word to his horse, who responded in whinnying welcome. An instant's delay, another word, and they were gone.

Dorcas stood listening to the scatter of hoofs down the dusty road and over the hollow ledge. She sank back on the sill, and, step by step, tried to retrace the lovely arabesque the hour had made. At last, she had some groping sense of the full beauty of living, when friendship says to its mate, "Tell me about yourself!" and the frozen fountain wells out, every drop cheered and warmed, as it falls, in the sunshine of sympathy. She saw in him that perfection of life lying in strength, which he undoubtedly had, and beauty, of which he had little or much according as one chose to think well of him. To her aching sense, he was a very perfect creature, gifted with, infinite capacities for help and comfort.

But the footfalls ceased, and the garden darkened by delicate yet swift degrees; a cloud had gone over the moon, fleecy, silver-edged, but still a cloud. The waning of the light seemed to her significant; she feared lest some bitter change might befall the moment; and went in, bolting the door behind her. Once within her own little bedroom, she loosened her hair, and moved about aimlessly, for a time, careless of sleep, because it seemed so far. Then a sudden resolve nerved her, and she stole back again to the front door, and opened it. The night was blossoming there, glowing now, abundant. It was so rich, so full! The moonlight here, and star upon star above, hidden not by clouds but by the light! Need she waste this one night out of all her unregarded life? She stepped forth among the flower-beds, stooping, in a passionate fervor, to the blossoms she could reach; but, coming back to the southernwood, she took it in her arms. She laid her face upon it, and crushed the soft leaves against her cheeks. It made all the world smell of its own balm and dew. The fragrance and beauty of the time passed into her soul, and awakened corners there all unused to such sweet incense. She was drunken with the wine that is not of grapes. She could not have found words for the passion that possessed her, though she hugged it to her heart like another self; but it was elemental, springing from founts deeper than those of life and death. God made it, and, like all His making, it was divine. She sat there, the southernwood still gathered into her arms, and at last emotion stilled itself, and passed into thought; a wild temptation

rose, and with its first whisper drove a hot flush into her cheeks, and branded it there. Love! she had never named the name in its first natal significance. She had scarcely read it; for romance, even in books, had passed her by. But love! she knew it as the insect knows how to spread his new sun-dried wings in the air for which he was create. Sitting there, in a happy drowse, she thought it all out. She was old, plain, unsought; the man she exalted was the flower of his kind. He would never look on her as if she might touch the hem of wifehood's mantle; so there would be no shame in choosing him. Just to herself, she might name the Great Name. He would not know. Only her own soul would know, and God who gave it, and sent it forth fitted with delicate, reaching tentacles to touch the rock set there to wound them. She began to feel blindly that God was not alone the keeper of eternal Sabbaths, but the germinant heat at the heart of the world. If she were a young girl, like Phoebe, there would be shame. Even a thought of him would be a stretching forth her hand to touch him, saying, "Look at me! I am here!" but for her it was quite different. It would be like a dream, some grandmother dreamed in the sun, of rosy youth and the things that never came to pass. No one would be harmed, and the sleeper would have garnered one hour's joy before she took up her march again on the loneliest road of all,--so lonesome, although it leads us, home! Thus she thought, half sleeping, until the night-dews clung in drops upon her hair; then she went in to bed, still wrapped about with the drapery of her dreams.

Next morning, when Dorcas carried in her father's breakfast, she walked with a springing step, and spoke in a voice so full and fresh it made her newly glad.

"It's a nice day, father! There'll be lots of folks out to meeting."

"That's a good girl!" This was his commendation, from hour to hour; it made up the litany of his gratitude for what she had been to him. "But I dunno's I feel quite up to preachin' to-day, Dorcas!"

"That'll be all right, father. We'll get somebody."

"You bring me out my sermon-box after breakfast, an' I'll pick out one," said he, happily. "Deacon Tolman can read it."

But, alas! Deacon Tolman had been dead this many a year!

A little later, the parson sat up in bed, shuffling his manuscript about with nervous hands, and Dorcas, in the kitchen, stood washing her breakfast dishes. That eager interest in living still possessed her. She began humming, in a timid monotone. Her voice had the clearness of truth, with little sweetness; and she was too conscious of its inadequacy to use it in public, save under the compelling force of conscience. Hitherto, she had only sung in Sunday-school, moved, as in everything, by the pathetic desire of "doing her part;" but this morning seemed to her one for lifting the voice, though not in Sunday phrasing. After a little thought, she began thinly and sweetly,--

"Early one morning, just as the sun was rising,
I heard a maid sing in the valley below:
'O don't deceive me! O never leave me
How could you use a poor maiden so?"

A gruff voice from the doorway broke harshly in upon a measure.

"Yes! yes! Well! well! Tunin' up a larrady, ain't ye?"

Dorcas knew who it was, without turning round,--a dark, squat woman, broad all over; broad in the hips, the waist, the face, and stamped with the race-mark of high cheekbones. Her thick, straight black hair was cut "tin-basin style;" she wore men's boots, and her petticoats were nearly up to her knees.

"Good morning, Nancy!" called Dorcas, blithely, wringing out her dishcloth. "Come right in, and sit down."

Nance Pete (in other words, Nancy the wife of Pete, whose surname was unknown) clumped into the room, and took a chair by the hearth. She drew forth a short black pipe, looked into it discontentedly, and then sat putting her thumb in and out of the bowl.

"You 'ain't got a mite o' terbacker about ye? Hey what?" she asked.

Dorcas had many a time been shocked at the same demand. This morning, something humorous about it struck her, and she laughed.

"You know I haven't, Nancy Pete! Did you mend that hole in your skirt, as I told you?"

Nance laboriously drew a back breadth of her coarse plaid skirt round to the front, and displayed it, without a word. A three-cornered tear of the kind known as a barn-door had been treated by tying a white string well outside it, and gathering up the cloth, like a bag. Dorcas's sense of fitness forbade her to see anything humorous in so original a device. She stood before the woman in all the moral excellence of a censor fastidiously clad.

"O Nancy Pete!" she exclaimed. "How could you?"

Nance put her cold pipe in her mouth, and began sucking at the unresponsive stem.

"You 'ain't got a bite of anything t' eat, have ye?" she asked, indifferently.

Dorcas went to the pantry, and brought forth pie, doughnuts and cheese, and a dish of cold beans. The coffee-pot was waiting on the stove. One would have said the visitor had been expected. Nance rose and tramped over to the table. But Dorcas stood firmly in the way.

"No, Nancy, no! You wait a minute! Are you going to meeting to-day?"

"I 'ain't had a meal o' victuals for a week!" remarked Nance, addressing no one in particular.

"Nancy, are you going to meeting?"

"Whose seat be I goin' to set in?" inquired Nance, rebelliously, yet with a certain air of capitulation.

"You can sit in mine. Haven't you sat there for the last five years? Now, Nancy, don't hinder me!"

"Plague take it, then! I'll go!"

At this expected climax, Dorcas stood aside, and allowed her visitor to serve herself with beans. When Nance's first hunger had been satisfied, she began a rambling monologue, of an accustomed sort to which Dorcas never listened.

"I went down to peek into the Poorhouse winders, this mornin'. There they all sut, like rats in a trap. 'Got ye, 'ain't they?' says I. Old Sal Flint she looked up, an' if there'd been a butcher-knife handy, I guess she'd ha' throwed it. 'It's that Injun!' says she to Mis' Giles. 'Don't you take no notice!' 'I dunno's I'm an Injun,' says I, 'I dunno how much Injun I be. I can't look so fur back as that. I dunno's there's any more Injun in me than there is devil in you!' I says. An' then the overseer he come out, an' driv' me off. 'You won't git me in there,' says I to him, 'not so long's I've got my teeth to chaw sassafras, an' my claws to dig me a holler in the ground!' But when I come along, he passed me on the road, an' old Sal Flint sut up by him on the seat, like a bump on a log. I guess he was carryin' her over to that Pope-o'-Rome meetin' they've got over to Sudleigh."

Dorcas turned about, in anxious interest.

"Oh, I wonder if he was! How _can_ folks give up their own meeting for that?"

Nance pushed her chair back from the table.

"Want to see all kinds, I s'pose," she said, slyly. "Guess I'll try it myself, another Sunday!"

"Anybody to home?" came a very high and wheezy voice from the doorway. Dorcas knew that also, and so did Nance Pete.

"It's that old haddock't lives up on the mountain," said the latter, composedly, searching in her pocket, and then pulling out a stray bit of tobacco and pressing it tenderly into her pipe.

An old man, dressed in a suit of very antique butternut clothes, stood at the sill, holding forward a bunch of pennyroyal. He was weazened and dry; his cheeks were parchment color, and he bore the look of an active yet extreme old age. He was totally deaf. Dorcas advanced toward him, taking a bright five-cent piece from her pocket. She held it out to him, and he, in turn, extended the pennyroyal; but before taking it, she went through a solemn pantomime. She made a feint of accepting the herb, and then pointed to him and to the road.

"Yes, yes!" said the old man, irritably. "Bless ye! of course I'm goin' to meetin'. I'll set by myself, though! Yes, I will! Las' Sunday, I set with Jont Marshall, an' every time I sung a note, he dug into me with his elbow, till I thought I should ha' fell out the pew-door. My voice is jest as good as ever 'twas, an' sixty-five year ago come spring, I begun to set in the seats."

The coin and pennyroyal changed ownership, and he tottered away, chattering to himself in his senile fashion.

"Look here, you!" he shouted back, his hand on the gate. "Heerd anything o' that new doctor round here? Well, he's been a-pokin' into my ears, an' I guess he'd ha' cured me, if anybody could. You know I don't hear so well's I used to. He went a-peekin' an' a-pryin' round my ears, as if he'd found a hornet's nest. I dunno what he see there; I know he shook his head. I guess we shouldn't ha' got no such a man to settle down here if he wa'n't so asthmy he couldn't git along where he was. That's the reason he come, they say. He's a bright one!"

Dorcas left her sweeping, and ran out after him. For the moment, she forgot his hopeless durance in fleshly walls.

"Did he look at 'em?" she cried. "Did he? Tell me what he said!"

"Why, of course I don't hear no better yit!" answered old Simeon, testily, turning to stump away, "but that ain't no sign I sha'n't! He's a beauty! I set up now, when he goes by, so's I can hear him when he rides back. I put a quilt down in the fore-yard, an' when the ground trimbles a mite, I git up to see if it's his hoss. Once I laid there till 'leven. He's a beauty, he is!"

He went quavering down the road, and Dorcas ran back to the house, elated afresh. An unregarded old man could give him the poor treasure of his affection, quite unasked. Why should not she?

Nance was just taking her unceremonious leave. Her pockets bulged with doughnuts, and she had wrapped half a pie in the Sudleigh "Star," surreptitiously filched from the woodbox.

"Well, I guess I'll be gittin' along towards meetin'," she said, in a tone of unconcern, calculated to allay suspicion. "I'm in hopes to git a mite o' terbacker out o' Hiram Cole, if he's settin' lookin' at his pigs, where he is 'most every Sunday. I'll have a smoke afore I go in."

"Don't you be late!"

"I'm a-goin' in late, or not at all!" answered Nance, contradictorily. "My bunnit ain't trimmed on the congregation side, an' I want to give 'em a chance to see it all round. I'm a-goin' up the aisle complete!"

Dorcas finished her work, and, having tidied her father's room, sat down by his bedside for the simple rites that made their Sabbath holy. With the first clanging stroke of the old bell, not half a mile away, they fell into silence, waiting reverently through the necessary pause for allowing the congregation to become seated. Then they went through the service together, from hymn and prayer to the sermon. The parson had his manuscript ready, and he began reading it, in the pulpit-voice of his prime. At that moment, some of his old vigor came back to him, and he uttered the conventional phrases of his church with conscious power; though so little a man, he had always a sonorous delivery. After a page or two, his hands began to tremble, and his voice sank.

"You read a spell, Dorcas," he whispered, in pathetic apology. "I'll rest me a minute." So Dorcas read, and he listened. Presently he fell asleep, and she still went on, speaking the words mechanically, and busy with her own tumultuous thoughts. Amazement possessed her that the world could be so full of joy to which she had long been deaf. She could hear the oriole singing in the elm; his song was almost articulate. The trees waved a little, in a friendly fashion, through the open windows; friendly in the unspoken kinship of green things to our thought, yet remote in their own seclusion. One tall, delicate locust, gowned in summer's finest gear, stirred idly at the top, as if through an inward motion, untroubled by the wind. Dorcas's mind sought out the doctor, listening to the sermon in her bare little church, and she felt quite content. She had entered the first court of love, where a spiritual possession is enough, and asks no alms of bodily nearness. When she came to the end of the sermon, her hands fell in her lap, and she gave herself up without reserve to the idle delight of satisfied dreaming. The silence pressed upon her father, and he opened his eyes wide with the startled look of one who comprehends at once the requirements of time and place. Then, in all solemnity, he put forth his hands; and Dorcas, bending her head, received the benediction for the congregation he would never meet again. She roused herself to bring in his beef-tea, and at the moment of carrying away the tray, a step sounded on the walk. She knew who it was, and smiled happily. The lighter foot keeping pace beside it, she did not hear.

"Dorcas," said her father, "git your bunnit. It's time for Sunday-school."

"Yes, father."

The expected knock came at the door. She went forward, tying on her bonnet, and her cheeks were pink. The doctor stood on the doorstone, and Phoebe was with him. He smiled at Dorcas, and put out his hand. This, according to Tiverton customs, was a warm demonstration at so meaningless a moment; it seemed a part of his happy friendliness. It was Phoebe who spoke.

"I'll stay outside while the doctor goes in. I can sit down here on the step. Your father needn't know I am here any more than usual. I told the doctor not to talk, coming up the walk."

The doctor smiled at her. Phoebe looked like a rose in her Sunday white, and the elder woman felt a sudden joy in her, untouched by envy of her youth and bloom. Phoebe only seemed a part of the beautiful new laws to which the world was freshly tuned, Dorcas coveted nothing; she envied nobody. She herself possessed all, in usurping her one rich kingdom.

"All right," she said. "The doctor can step in now, and see father. I'll hurry back, as soon as Sunday-school is over." She walked away, glancing happily at the flowers on either side of the garden-path. She wanted to touch all their leaves, because, last night, he had praised them.

Returning, when her hour was over, she walked very fast; her heart was waking into hunger, and she feared he might be gone. But he was there, sitting on the steps beside Phoebe, and when the gate swung open, they did not hear. Phoebe's eyes were dropped, and she was poking her parasol into the moss-encrusted path; the doctor was looking into her face, and speaking quite eagerly. He heard Dorcas first, and sprang up. His eyes were so bright and forceful in the momentary gleam of meeting hers, that she looked aside, and tried to rule her quickening breath.

"Miss Dorcas," said he, "I'm telling this young lady she mustn't forget to eat her dinner at school. I find she quite ignores it, if she has sums to do, or blots to erase. Why, it's shocking."

"Of course she must eat her dinner!" said Dorcas, tenderly. "Why, yes, of course! Phoebe, do as he tells you. He knows."

Phoebe blushed vividly.

"Does he?" she answered, laughing. "Well, I'll see. Good-by, Miss Dorcas. I'll come in for Friday night meeting, if I don't before. Good-by."

"I'll walk along with you," said the doctor. "If you'll let me," he added, humbly.

Phoebe turned away with a little toss of her head, and he turned, too, breaking a sprig of southernwood. Dorcas was glad to treasure the last

sight of him putting to his lips the fragrant herb she had bruised for his sake. It seemed to carry over into daylight the joy of the richer night; it was like seeing the silken thread on which her pearls were strung. She called to them impetuously,--

"Pick all the flowers you want to, both of you!" Then she went in, but she said aloud to herself, "They're all for you--" and she whispered his name.

"Dorcas," said her father, "the doctor's been here quite a spell. He says there was a real full meetin.' Even Nancy Pete, Dorcas! I feel as if my ministrations had been abundantly blessed."

Then, in that strangest summer in Dorcas's life, time seemed to stand still. The happiest of all experiences had befallen her; not a succession of joys, but a permanent delight in one unchanging mood. The evening of his coming had been the first day; and the evening and the morning had ever since been the same in glory. He came often, sometimes with Phoebe, sometimes alone; and, being one of the men on whom women especially lean, Dorcas soon found herself telling him all the poor trials of her colorless life. Nothing was too small for his notice. He liked her homely talk of the garden and the church, and once gave up an hour to spading a plot where she wanted a new round bed. Dorcas had meant to put lilies there, but she remembered he loved ladies'-delights; so she gathered them all together from the nooks and corners of the garden, and set them there, a sweet, old-fashioned company. "That's for thoughts!" She took to wearing flowers now, not for the delight of him who loved them, but merely as a part of her secret litany of worship. She slept deeply at night, and woke with calm content, to speak one name in the way that forms a prayer. He was her one possession; all else might be taken away from her, but the feeling inhabiting her heart must live, like the heart itself.

By the time September had yellowed all the fields, there came a week when Phoebe's aunt, down at the Hollow, was known to be very ill; so Phoebe no longer came to care for the parson through the Sunday-school hour. But the doctor appeared, instead.

"I'm Phoebe," he said, laughing, when Dorcas met him at the door. "She can't come; so I told her I'd take her place."

These were the little familiar deeds which gilded his name among the people. Dorcas had been growing used to them. But on the' next Sunday morning, when she was hurrying about her kitchen, making early preparations for the cold mid-day meal, a daring thought assailed her. Phoebe might come to-day, and if the doctor also dropped in, she would ask them both to dinner. There was no reason for inviting him alone; besides, it was happier to sit by, leaving him to some one else. Then the two would talk, and she, with no responsibility, could listen and look, and hug her secret joy.

"I ain't a-goin' to meetin' to-day!" came Nance Pete's voice from the door. She stood there, smoking prosperously, and took out her pipe, with a jaunty motion, at the words. "I stopped at Kelup Rivers', on the way over, an' they gi'n me a good breakfast, an' last week, that young doctor gi'n me a whole paper o' fine-cut. I ain't a-goin' to meetin'! I'm goin' to se' down under the old elm, an' have a real good smoke."

"O Nancy!" Dorcas had no dreams so happy that such an avalanche could not sweep them aside. "Now, do! Why, you don't want me to think you go to church just because I save you some breakfast!"

Nance turned away, and put up her chin to watch a wreath of smoke.

"I dunno why I don't," said she. "The world's nothin' but buy an' sell. You know it, an' I know it! 'Tain't no use coverin' on't up. You heerd the news? That old fool of a Sim Barker's dead. The doctor, sut up all night with him, an' I guess now he's layin' on him out. I wouldn't ha' done it! I'd ha' wropped him up in his old coat, an' glad to git rid on him! Well, he won't cheat ye out o' no more five-cent pieces, to squander in terbacker. You might save 'em up for me, now he's done for!" Nance went stalking away to the gate, flaunting a visible air of fine, free enjoyment, the product of tobacco and a bright morning. Dorcas watched her, annoyed, and yet quite helpless; she was outwitted, and she knew it. Perhaps she sorrowed less deeply over the loss to her pensioner's immortal soul, thus taking holiday from spiritual discipline, than the serious problem involved

in subtracting one from the congregation. Would a Sunday-school picnic constitute a bribe worth mentioning? Perhaps not, so far as Nance was concerned; but her own class might like it, and on that young blood she depended, to vivify the church.

A bit of pink came flashing along the country road. It was Phoebe, walking very fast.

"Dear heart!" said Dorcas, aloud to herself, as the girl came hurriedly up the path. She was no longer a pretty girl, a nice girl, as the commendation went. Her face had gained an exalted lift; she was beautiful. She took Miss Dorcas by the arms, and laughed the laugh that knows itself in the right, and so will not be shy.

"Miss Dorcas," she said, "I've got to tell you right out, or I can't do it at all. What should you say if I told you I was married?--to the doctor?"

Dorcas looked at her as if she did not hear.

"It's begun to get round," went on Phoebe, "and I wanted to give you the word myself. You see, auntie was sick, and when he was there so much, she grew to depend on him, and one day, when we'd been engaged a week, she said, why shouldn't we be married, and he come right to the house to live? He's only boarding, you know. And nothing to do but it must be done right off, and so I--I said 'yes! And we were married, Thursday. Auntie's better, and O Miss Dorcas! I think we're going to have a real good time together." She threw her arms about Dorcas, and put down her shining brown head upon them.

Dorcas tried to answer. When she did speak, her voice sounded thin and faint, and she wondered confusedly if Phoebe could hear.

"I didn't know--" she said. "I didn't know--"

"Why, no, of course not!" returned Phoebe, brightly. "Nobody did. You'd have been the first, but I didn't want the engagement talked about till auntie was better. Oh, I believe that's his horse's step! I'll run out, and ride home with him. You come, too, Miss Dorcas, and just say a word!"

Dorcas loosened the girl's arms about her, and, bending to the bright head, kissed it twice. Phoebe, grown careless in her joy, ran down the walk to stop the approaching wagon; and when she looked round, Dorcas had shut the door and gone in. She waited a moment for her to reappear, and then, remembering the doctor had had no breakfast, she stepped into the wagon, and they drove happily away.

Dorcas went to her bedroom, touching the walls, on the way, with her groping hands. She sat down on the floor there, and rested her head against a chair. Once only did she rouse herself, and that was to go into the kitchen and set away the great bowl of _blanc-mange_ she had been making for dinner. She had not strained it all, and the sea-weed was drying on the sieve. Then she went back into the bedroom, and pulled down the green slat curtains with a shaking hand. Twice her father called her to bring his sermons, but she only answered, "Yes, father!" in dull acquiescence, and did not move. She was benumbed, sunken in a gulf of shame, too faint and cold to save herself by struggling. Her poor innocent little fictions made themselves into lurid writings on her brain. She had called him hers while another woman held his vows, and she was degraded. Her soul was wrecked as truly as if the whole world knew it, and could cry to her "Shame!" and "Shame!" The church-bells clanged out their judgment of her. A new thought awakened her to a new despair. She was not fit to teach in Sunday-school any more. Her girls, her innocent, sweet girls! There was contagion in her very breath. They must be saved from it; else when they were old women like her, some sudden vice of tainted blood might rise up in them, no one would know why, and breed disease and shame. She started to her feet. Her knees trembling under her, she ran out of the house, and hid herself behind the great lilac-bush by the gate.

Deacon Caleb Rivers came jogging past, late for church, but driving none the less moderately. His placid-faced wife sat beside him; and Dorcas, stepping out to stop them, wondered, with a wild pang of perplexity over the things of this world, if 'Mandy Rivers had ever known the feeling of death in the soul. Caleb pulled up.

"I can't come to Sunday-school, to-day," called Dorcas, stridently. "You tell them to give Phoebe my class. And ask her if she'll keep it. I sha'n't teach any more."

"Ain't your father so well?" asked Mrs. Rivers, sympathetically, bending forward and smoothing her mitts. Dorcas caught at the reason.

"I sha'n't leave him any more," she said. "You tell 'em so. You fix it."

Caleb drove on, and she went back into the house, shrinking under the brightness of the air which seemed to quiver so before her eyes. She went into her father's room, where he was awake and wondering.

"Seems to me I heard the bells," he said, in his gentle fashion. "Or have we had the 'hymns, an' got to the sermon?"

Dorcas fell on her knees by the bedside.

"Father," she began, with difficulty, her cheek laid on the bedclothes beside his hand, "there was a sermon about women that are lost. What was that?"

"Why, yes," answered the parson, rousing to an active joy in his work. "'Neither do I condemn thee!' That was it. You git it, Dorcas! We must remember such poor creatur's; though, Lord be praised! there ain't many round here. We must remember an' pray for 'em."

But Dorcas did not rise.

"Is there any hope for them, father?" she asked, her voice muffled. "Can they be saved?"

"Why, don't you remember the poor creatur' that come here an' asked that very question because she heard I said the Lord was pitiful? Her baby was born out in the medder, an' died the next day; an' she got up out of her sickbed at the Poorhouse, an' come totterin' up here, to ask if there was any use in her sayin', 'Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!' An' your mother took her in, an' laid her down on this very bed, an' she died here.

An' your mother hil' her in her arms when she died. You ask her if she didn't!" The effort of continuous talking wearied him, and presently he dozed off. Once he woke, and Dorcas was still on her knees, her head abased. "Dorcas!" he said, and she answered, "Yes, father!" without raising it; and he slept again. The bell struck, for the end of service. The parson was awake. He stretched out his hand, and it trembled a moment and then fell on his daughter's lowly head.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ--" the parson said, and went clearly on to the solemn close.

"Father," said Dorcas. "Father!" She seemed to be crying to One afar. "Say the other verse, too. What He told the woman."

His hand still on her head, the parson repeated, with a wistful tenderness stretching back over the past,--

"Neither do I condemn thee; go, and sin no more."