Criss−cross

Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman

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SELMA WHEELOCK sat in her accustomed place beside a front window. She swayed gently in her hair−cloth rocker. She leaned her head back and sidewise, and gazed out at the prospect with an expression almost absurdly tragic. Tragedy did not sit comfortably upon those mild features in that long, sweet face, softly curtained with folds of thin, blond hair which had not turned gray, although Selma was almost an old woman. However, tragedy, hawk−like, unswerving, did look from Selma's blue eyes. She might, from her expression, have been gazing at some scene of horror instead of at her own tidy, square front yard with its gravel walk bordered with leafless shrubs, with a leafless cherry−tree standing stark upon one side, and a leafless horse−chestnut on the other. Beyond the front yard with its prim fence was the main street of the village; opposite was Maria Hopkins's house. When Selma's eyes roved beyond her own front yard and the main street, and fastened upon Maria Hopkins's house, the tragedy deepened. It seemed about to swoop, fierce beaked and clawed. There was seemingly nothing exasperating about the opposite house. It was a plain white structure with a door in the middle front and two windows on each side of the door. The house was raised upon terraces over which clambered rough stone steps. Upon each of the terraces were two trees — cherry upon the upper, horse−chestnut upon the lower. Two of the windows at the front displayed slants of lace curtains, two plain white shades.

As Selma gazed at the house an ugly frown came between her eyes. She set her mouth hard. Her face did not relax when a woman opened the opposite door. The woman wore a gray shawl and a white wool head−tie. She locked the door and put the key under a blind of the first window to the right. Selma frowned more deeply, but her eyes lit up.

The woman, who was Maria Hopkins, came down the rough stone steps. She trudged across the street. She carefully held up her black gown, although the wind−swept road was quite dry. Maria's skirts whipped around her advancing knees; her shawl−ends flew out, her head−tie fluttered. Maria did not bend her head before the icy blast. She came on, setting her large rubbered feet down squarely. Maria always wore rubbers in winter, whether it was wet or dry. She opened Selma's front gate, closed it carefully, walked up the gravel path, nodded to Selma in the window, and went through another gate to the side door on the south. She left her rubbers on the door−stone, opened the door, entered, crossed Selma's large, cold kitchen, and was in the warm sitting−room.

"Good afternoon, Selma," said she, drearily. Selma responded as drearily.

"Good afternoon," said she. "Take your things off, Maria."

Maria removed the white hood and large gray shawl, and stood revealed — a short, stout figure, with a face which had been pretty, but now was old and sagging and worried. She wore a black skirt and a purple waist and a white apron trimmed with knitted lace.

"Sit down," said Selma.

Maria took the chair at the opposite window. That was also a rocker. Both women swayed to and fro, and did not speak for some time. Now and then they exchanged glances of mournful understanding. Finally Selma spoke.

"We would have been most there by this time," said she.

"Yes, we would," agreed Maria.

"Well, we did what was right, anyway," said Selma.

"I did," said Maria. "Aggie is related to me. You hadn't any call to do anything." "We would have been most there by this time," said she.

"Yes, we would," agreed Maria.

"Well, we did what was right, anyway," said Selma.

"I did," said Maria. "Aggie is related to me. You hadn't any call to do anything."

"I had as much call as you."

"Aggie is no kin of yours. You had no call."

"I had a call to do my duty," said Selma.

"It is a good deal to do your duty when you ain't any direct call from relations. Aggie ain't related to you."

"No, she ain't, and I guess I can stand it," said Selma.

"Aggie means right," declared Maria, with half−hearted defense. Her eyes were condemnatory, even as she spoke.

"For my part, I am sick of folks meaning so well and not acting up to it," said Selma. "I would rather they didn't mean quite so well and act as if they meant a good deal better. Aggie always treated you as if you were the dirt under her feet, Maria."

"She did mean well," repeated Maria, but her eyes continued to condemn.

"She didn't act well," said Selma; "when she came to live with you after her folks died, she let you slave, and never lifted a finger."

"She had to practise, and give music−lessons."

"Fiddlesticks! She never had more than five music scholars, and she never played the piano well enough to teach, anyhow, and she only taught so as to be able to get fine feathers to catch Tom Willard. Well, she caught him, and she kept right on meaning well and working him for all she was worth. She was so extravagant he got in debt. I had it straight that she used six eggs in cake when the hens wasn't laying, and she used to leave all the draughts on the sitting−room stove open till it was so hot she had to fling up all the windows in midwinter to cool off, instead of saving the coal bills. Then, just when we had saved enough to go on that excursion to Washington, it had to come out that Tom was behind in his taxes and the house would be sold over their heads, and she had to come whining around you, all dressed up, too, with a hat with a long feather, and a silk dress, and we had to give up our money we had saved to take that excursion we had been lotting on so long."

"You never ought to have given it up," said Maria. "Aggie is no kith nor kin of yours."

"You don't suppose," replied Selma, with delicate hauteur, "that I gave that money to Aggie Willard? I gave that money to the Lord."

"I suppose we both did."

Selma brought her gentle swaying to an abrupt conclusion. She set both slender, pointed feet in their congress shoes firmly on the floor. "Yes, we both did," said she, "and it ain't becoming in women that call themselves Christians to complain, even if the Lord does send such a silly, extravagant thing as Aggie out collecting. What we've got to do now is just one thing — "

Maria stared. "What?"

Selma looked almost sternly at her friend. "Maria Hopkins, we have got to have a change."

"I don't see how, Selma. I haven't a cent except just what I need to keep going, and you haven't; and I haven't got anybody to visit except Aggie, and you haven't got anybody."

"Who said anything about visiting anybody? I wouldn't visit anybody if I had a town full of relations. Visiting was never according to my ideas, but you and I, Maria Hopkins, have got to have a change, and I have just found out how."

"How?"

"It won't cost a cent. It won't mean any traveling except crossing the street, but it will mean a change."

Maria was a little pale as she continued to stare at her friend. "I guess I don't just see what you are driving at yet, Selma," she said, feebly.

"It is as easy as the nose on your face. You stay here and live in my house awhile with my things. You are at perfect liberty to nose round the whole house, and peek into every closet and bureau drawer, and use my things just as if they were yours, and — I will go and live in your house while you are here."

Selma gazed at Maria with a defiant expression which gradually changed before the one of wondering delight on the other face. "It is complete," gasped Maria. "I'll admire to do it."

"Then," said Selma, "you can look out of my front windows at your house, and I can look out of your front windows at mine, and it will look entirely different. The Lord above alone knows how awful sick I am of sitting here day after day, and staring over at your everlasting front yard, and the same old trees, and the same old house, with two drapery curtains at two windows, and two plain ones at two. Sometimes I feel almost wicked enough to wish your house would burn down, Maria Hopkins. Seems as if I would admire to look over and see your chimney standing in a pile of ashes just for a change." Selma's eyes gleamed fiercely; then she laughed.

Maria laughed, too, after a little start. "You ain't a mite more tired of staring at my house than I am of staring at yours, if the truth was told, and its making me out wicked, too, but sometimes I've thought I smelled smoke, and — "

Selma nodded. "Don't blame you one mite. Then you and me can start in right away. You understand, whilst you are here this house is just as much yours as mine — more so. It is yours."

Maria nodded. "And my house is yours," said she. Then she looked a bit doubtfully at the other woman. "You know you mustn't give goldfish too much to eat. I will own I set a lot by that bowl of goldfish," said she.

"I have heard you talk about not over−feeding those goldfish enough to make me know," said Selma. "I shall look out after them just the same as I expect you to look out for my hens and see to it that they have their food warm on a cold day. There will be plenty of eggs. What you don't want to use you can trade to the grocer for his truck."

"Land, Selma! You don't mean you want me to sell your own hens' eggs!"

"Whilst you live in my house my hens is your hens," declared Selma, firmly, "and I shall feel the same way about that pig you're raising. He shall be my pig."

"He's fat enough to kill now," said Maria. "I calculated to hire Tom Simmons to do it. It's cold enough now to keep what pig−meat I want, and I always dispose of the extra easy enough. The butcher is always tickled to death to get my sausage−meat and headcheese and pork."

"I," said Selma, "will do the pig work."

"It's a big chore," said Maria.

"You can't teach me anything about pig work. We always kept a pig. Sometimes we kept two pigs. I'd admire to get a chance to try my hand at it again."

"I want to speak for some of the sausage," said Maria; "and a half a fresh ham, and half a salt, and some head−cheese, and some of the salted−down pork."

"Of course," agreed Selma. "And you will find there's about six roosters of mine ought to be killed. But how about milking the cow?"

"If I can't milk a cow at my age, I'll give up beat," said Maria.

"I've got two steady customers for the milk, and some scattering ones."

"All right. I'll tend to them."

The two regarded each other with curiously child−like expressions. They felt like two children about to engage in a most exciting game.

"When," said Maria, with a fairly infantile grin, "shall we begin?"

"Right away. Why not?" replied Selma. "It ain't as if we had to pack up or anything. We haven't. All you've got to do is stay here, and all I've got to do is to cross the street. Land! It is the completest way of getting a change I ever heard of. We sha'n't even need to take our sewing." I'll get any of yours I find round, and you can get at mine. And of course you know you are welcome to wear any of my clothes. If my skirts are too long, you can just baste tucks in them."

Maria began to laugh. "That part of it is going to be easier for me than for you," said she; "my skirts will all be too short for you."

"Land! I don't mind that. Of course I shall wear your petticoats, too; and I was reading the other day how short skirts were all the go. I ain't worrying about that part of it. I guess we might as well begin now. I am sick and tired of looking across at your house. Guess I'll run across the street and look at mine."

"I know just how you feel," said Maria. "I've felt real sort of rested since I came in here, being able to look out of the window and not see your house."

Selma rose. "Well," said she, "I'll put on your shawl and hood and be going. There's plenty in the house for supper. You can just hunt round and find it. You'll enjoy it."

"And you'll find plenty for your supper over there," said Maria.

"O Lord!" said Selma, "to think of the relief of going into your pantry and hunting up victuals and getting supper on another stove. My!"

"That is just the way I feel," said Maria.

Selma arose with no more ado. She went to the old−fashioned secretary which stood against the south wall. She rummaged under some papers, and took out an old wallet. "Here's some money," said she. "It will last awhile. When you want more, you hang a towel out the sitting−room window, and I'll see that you have some. It all depends on how long we stay before we get tired of the change."

"If," said Maria, "you go into my pantry and take the cover off the old−fashioned sugar−bowl on the second shelf at the right of the door, you will find some dollar bills, and there is some change tucked in the cracked pink cup on the lower shelf behind the tea−caddy. You hang out a towel, too, if you get short. You may, with hiring the pig−killing."

"All right," said Selma. She tied on Maria's white worsted hood; she wrapped Maria's gray shawl around her shoulders, which, high and thin, retained something of the grace of youth. Selma looked much better in the shawl than Maria did. She even put on Maria's rubbers. They were rather large, and she shuffled, but she was intent upon acting the role to the full. "Good night, Maria," said she.

"Good night," said Maria.

The two women looked at each other, and suddenly startled expressions appeared upon their faces. For the first time in their lives they meditated upon the unusual and the unconventional, and a quick tremor of alarm shot over both.

"If you get scared in the night, you set a candle in the sitting−room window and you ring the dinner−bell, and I'll be right over," said Selma.

"Yes, I will," agreed Maria, "and you, too."

"Yes, I will."

Then Selma went, shuffling in her large rubbers, across the street. Maria watched her find the key under the blind, unlock the front door, and enter; then she drew a long breath and looked about her.

"My goodness," said she. "I wonder if we are both plumb crazy!"

Maria actually turned around several times like a cat or a dog trying to become accustomed to strangeness. The primitive asserted itself, lifting its live head from the dust of the ages. After her turning around, Maria's face no longer looked bewildered. "Guess I had better see to feeding those hens, first thing before it gets dark," she thought. She found, with a revival of the delicious, childish joy of hide−and−seek, Selma's meal−bag. She mixed the chicken food with hot water and went out to the chicken−house. The fowls clustered around her greedily. Maria had never cared for chickens. Now she realized a certain fondness for the fluffy, pecking things. "They don't know a mite of difference betwixt me and Selma," she thought. Then she called, "Biddy, biddy, biddy!"

When she re−entered the house, she experienced the delight of a child rummaging about Selma's pantry. She also had a double delight from the reflection that Selma was rummaging about her own. "She won't find a thing out of order, and there's plenty to eat," she thought. She made daintily a pan of biscuits for her supper. She opened a can of peach preserve. She made tea. She cut a slice from a frosted cake. She set the table in the dining−room punctiliously, and ate her solitary meal with relish. Across the street Selma was doing precisely the same thing. Each of the lone women was a guest at her own feast. Selma also had hot biscuits. She had also a bit of toasted salt codfish, and raspberry jam, and plum−cake, and tea.

She also ate heartily. "It is a real change from my own victuals," she said, quite aloud, and smiled happily. After she had cleared away the supper dishes she saw the light across the street from her own sitting−room window. It looked charming to her. She lit Maria's lamp, and Maria also looked across and realized that it was

charming.

"Selma's been real quick. She has cleared away the supper dishes," she thought.

Presently Selma pulled down the white shades opposite, and Maria did the same. Then each woman could discern the silhouette of the other seated peacefully beside the evening lamp, moving a hand and arm regularly back and forth.

"Selma, she has found those napkins I was making out of the old tablecloth, and she's hemming them," thought Maria.

Selma was puzzled awhile about Maria's needlework, then she remembered the new dish−towels. "She is hemming them," she thought. Each woman saw a light later on in the cellar, and knew that coal was being got for the night. Then each saw the light in the other's bedroom. Selma's light went out first. "I do hope she sleeps well," she thought, as she lay looking across at Maria's light. Then that also went out, and both women lay thinking fondly of each other with drowsiness stealing over them.

The next morning there was a hard snow−storm. The visiting neighbors saw each other's faces at their opposite windows. Both nodded vehemently to give assurance of entire content and well−being. Each had her head tied up in a towel.

"She's sweeping," thought Selma. "Of course it's sweeping−day, but I don't believe she'll find half a dust−pan full."

Maria thought the same. Each felt radiantly happy. Later Selma wrapped herself up well and went out to interview the man about the pig−killing. Maria saw her go.

"She thought she wouldn't wait, because it is likely to clear off cold," she told herself.

Maria milked the cow and fed her, and dispensed milk to children who came whooping through the snow with swinging pails; then she went to one of the upstairs bedrooms and dusted. She had previously swept it. She had found it more in need of sweeping than many of the rooms, since it was always unused, and Selma had had a cold, and had neglected sweeping it longer than usual. Maria had entered the room hesitatingly. She had stepped softly. Her middle−aged face had reddened, then paled. She had smiled almost a motherly smile. The memory of the boy who had during his life occupied that room seemed to her, in her settled state of life, like the memory of a departed child of youth. He had been Selma's only brother, Henry. He had died when he was only twenty−one. Maria had been a year older, and nobody knew what a torture of mortification that one year of life upon earth had been to the girl Maria. How she had loved that dear boy, who had died in one week of a fever! But she had not thought he had loved her, although sometimes he had looked at her like a lover, and Maria had trembled — that poor young Maria, who had been slim and rosy−cheeked, with bright eyes, ready for wistful questioning and tears, who remembered with shame that terrible additional year of earth−life. When Henry had died, she had thought her heart broken. Now, as she entered the room, the old pain came back, and she wondered, not only how she had lived at all, but not even unhappily except for a certain restlessness which at times stung her. It was that same restlessness which she could not outlive which had put the idea of the excursion into her head. It was the outcome of that restlessness which caused her presence in that room. It had not been changed since the boy's death. She had seen it before, during his lifetime; she and Selma had been girls together, and familiar with all the rooms in the Wheelock and Hopkins houses. But now it looked strange, with the sweet and terribly pathetic strangeness of past youth which is not entirely regretted, and seems to reproach because of it. Maria looked at the dead boy's room which he had left; at treasures few and poor enough — a shaving−mug lettered with gold on the bureau, a brush and comb in a hand−painted tray, which he had bought at a church fair. Another young girl had painted that tray, and young Maria had suffered tortures of jealousy when Selma had displayed it decorating Henry's bureau. "Henry bought it at the fair. He paid seventy−five cents for it. Hattie Loomis painted it," she had said, artlessly, and Maria had gazed at her as if she had been an Inquisitor. Then Selma had calmly added that Hattie had painted seven trays just like that, and Henry had paid seventy−five cents when the others had brought only fifty, which she thought all they were worth; and Maria, comprehending the purely commercial nature of the transaction, felt her heart leap to heights of delight. Selma had been far from understanding. Henry was simply her brother. She knew just how many griddle−cakes and how little plain bread he could eat at a meal. She knew about the mending his socks required. She knew all the little homely details of his life and never thought of him in connection with love and romance. However, Selma thought little about love and romance in any case. She had not been a dreamer, even as a young girl, and moonlight nights had never quite rhymed with her moods. She was

incapable of understanding Maria's tremors of pain and delight about the hand−painted trays. On the bureau stood, also, what the girls called vaguely "a fancy picture" of an ornate maiden mysteriously decked with roses, as far as the photographer had discreetly depicted her. Both girls thought it somewhat improper, and their maiden eyes took delicate shies at it. The picture was in a tarnished gilt frame. Selma had told young Maria that she guessed Henry had paid quite a price for it and got cheated. Maria had always feared lest the maid of the picture might prove to be some beauty whom Henry had mysteriously met and fallen in love with. Now, as she gazed at it, she smiled pitifully at her own young folly. The photograph was only that of some actress whom Henry could never have seen at all. There was a little brass ash−tray on the bureau. Henry, young as he was, had smoked. Maria had thought that delightfully wicked. On a little swinging shelf were two pipes. There was a dingy handkerchief−box on the bureau. Selma had given it to her brother one Christmas. She had also given him the fat pin−cushion worked in squares of red and green. On the table lay Henry's Bible and an ancient story−book bound in blue and gold. Maria took up the bible reverently, and put it back. She took up the story−book. She remembered it so well — that dull old romance full of prosy sentiment. She opened the book idly, and there was a letter. Her name was on the sealed envelope in Henry's handwriting. Poor Henry had put it there and it had lain undiscovered all these years. Maria felt faint. She gathered up her broom, dust−pan, and dusting−cloth, and the letter, and went down−stairs. It was icy cold in Henry's room. Maria was not completely warmed by this unexpected flash of flame in the ashes of old love. "I will read the letter down in the sitting−room where it is warm," she told herself. "It is mine. I have the right."

Down in the sitting−room Maria read the letter, but first with a touching revival of youthful vanity she removed the towel from her head and looked at herself in the glass. She gave her hair a touch. Well, after all, a letter has no eyes. She sat down and read.

The boy in the old letter confessed his love for her; his adoration, which he spelled with two d's. He asked her to be his wife. Maria leaned back and closed her eyes. She realized that in some strange fashion she had received an answer to a question which she had asked, without really knowing it, during her whole life. She realized that henceforth she would know peace, the peace which she had seen on the faces of the aging and married women who had been girls with her. She felt utterly contented. "How could I have cared so much about that excursion?" she asked herself. Then she reflected what a blessing to her the caring and the disappointment had proved. It had given her the letter. It had given her peace and respite from restlessness. Maria suddenly felt a wish to go back to her own home. The need which had prompted her to this plan was over. "I hope nobody will ever hear of it," she thought. Suddenly the humor struck her — never the pathos. She chuckled to herself. "What old fools Selma and I are?" she remarked quite aloud. Then she heard a series of wild staccato yells of agony mercifully dying away soon. "Selma has had the pig killed," thought Maria, and laughed again. She looked at her letter, and remembered how Henry had loved sausage. "I could have cooked it just the way he liked," she considered with pride. She also considered how daintily his house would have been kept. She did not think of Henry as among the angel band of her childhood's teaching, but as of a banished youth whom she could have made warm and comfortable with the dear, homely comforts of earth. Maria had a pocket in her petticoat. There she stowed the letter. Then she went on with her tasks. She got the kitchen stove heated, and made a great fruit−cake. Selma always liked to have one on hand, and had none now. Maria worked away, all the time in her own atmosphere of perfect peace. It was tainted by no regret for what she had missed. That letter in her pocket proved that she had had the essential of life and love of the whole world. She was content and crowned with content. She now understood why her young cousin, Aggie, who had made apparently such a failure of her married life, could yet hold up her head, and, as some critical women said, "Walk like a peacock." Whatever the attitude of women in the wider world might be, the attitude of the women in this little village remained, however covertly, that of half a century ago. In their innermost hearts they were not, and never could be, emancipated from the old conception of the proper estate for woman. It was true that Maria's lover had died before his due time; that she had never been married to him, yet love had been hers; the dream in a man's heart had belonged to her. Death had taken him, but not before the love and the dream, and she was triumphant over death. Maria's voice was cracked, and she had never been able to keep to the key, and she sang horribly, yet with joy, while she worked.

The fruit−cake was a great success. Maria felt very happy over it, and also over the immaculate house. After supper, when she had milked the cow and fed the chickens and cleared the dishes away, she sat beside the window. Winter though it was, it was still not dark — Maria had worked rapidly. The snow had ceased. The

window faced west, which glowed with pale gold through the dark interlace of the trees. The road and her yard and Selma's were pure expanses of billowing white. Presently a light flashed out in an opposite window, and Maria knew that Selma had also finished her tasks for that day and had sat down to rest. "I am glad she didn't work too long over that pig," she thought. Maria felt a great warmth of sisterly love for Selma. She, had Henry lived, would have been her sister. Maria was sure that Selma had never had any romance, that she had never been in love. She was right about that; Selma had never loved, but she also had had her lover, and the lover had been Maria's own old widower uncle, Aggie's grandfather. Maria had never dreamed of it. Selma had been ashamed. In her youth old John Hopkins with his married daughter, Aggie's mother, had seemed a ridiculous lover. Nowadays she sometimes thought of him with a mixture of indignation, of pity, and of a queer, shamed gratitude. After all, old John Hopkins had loved her, and a woman never throughout her whole life entirely despises even a scorned and rejected love. It has its diamond lights for her heart, which cannot be shut out for ever.

That day, Selma, making her queer visit in her friend's house, had also made a discovery. When the pig−killing was in order she had fled to the remotest corner of the house, to a little bedroom which old John had occupied. It was a comfortable room, and evinced scholarly tastes on the part of the old man. Indeed, he had received a collegiate education, but had never entered a profession, preferring to work the little Hopkins farm and live an isolated life aside from the struggle of the world. A very gentle, mild man, but a man of deep thought, had been John Hopkins. Poor young Selma, had she really understood, had been honored by his love and by his seeking her for his wife, but she had not understood. She did not now. Selma had been a beauty in her youth, although of a type unappealing to the village young men. She had been too tall and pale and still and stately for them. She had always been a very simple village woman, whose life was narrow and quite translucent, flowing over her path of fate with no ripples of concealment. When she found herself in John Hopkins's room she stood with fingers in her ears to drown out all sounds of the tragedy being enacted behind the house; she looked about her and remembered how one evening old John had crossed the street — all his family and hers being away — and had declared himself, and she had replied that she had no mind to wed, but thanked him. Then she had watched him cross the street homeward bound, a slender, not old, as she had then thought, but middle−aged man, with a slight stoop, but a grace of motion. He had probably sought this very little room as asylum, and nobody had ever known if in that little solitude a heart had bled. Selma wondered a little. "I suppose he lit a candle and read a book," she thought. The room was lined with dingy volumes. There was a tiny hearth swept clean. There was dust like a silvery film over the old mahogany. Selma went out and returned with a dusting−cloth. She dusted everything with a sort of tenderness. After she had finished, some of the furniture still looked dull. She found Maria's bottle of furniture polish and set to work. At last all the old mahogany glistened and showed its beautiful grain. Selma stood regarding the room. She remembered so keenly its long−dead owner that she brought up his face quite distinctly to her vision. He would have liked her to do this service to his deserted room. He had been a most particular man. She and Maria had used to laugh about him and call him an old maid. He would surely have loved to see his mahogany shine. And — he had loved her. Suddenly that love which had burned in the heart of the man who had lived in that room seemed as evident as a perfume. Selma smiled — a lovely smile. A gentle content with life stole over her. She was as one breathing incense burning to her, and to her alone. That old love which had never before meant much to her meant suddenly ineffable things. She bent her head. Her soul, even, bent before it as before a great radiance. The little room glowed with love of her like a jewel, and the woman saw it and smiled a smile of which she had never before been capable.

At last she went back to the kitchen. Her feet were cold. She opened the door of the stove oven and sat with her skirts gathered up, basking in warmth, and reflecting.

"Poor man, he certainly thought a great deal of me," she told herself. She admitted at last her old lover to his place of dignity which true love owed him. She remembered him and she also remembered herself. She remembered how her face used to gaze back at her from her looking−glass. It had been certainly a very beautiful face. How the golden hair used to ripple over the pale, perfect curves of the cheeks, how serenely the great eyes had examined their owner! "I was like that," Selma thought. She valued herself as never before, and suddenly there came into her serene and monotonous existence a keen savor. She had missed that vaguely, just as Maria had missed something without knowing what. Both women had counted pitifully upon that excursion to Washington. Because of that now Maria would no longer miss anything; neither would Selma. Selma felt as if her life had been suddenly and pungently flavored with a most agreeable flavor. She withdrew her feet from the oven

and began to work with wonderful zeal. Both she and Maria during one week did an incredible amount of work, each in the other's house. Neither stirred abroad during that time. They were too busy during the week−days, and Sunday there was an ice−storm which made it out of the question to go to church. It was clear, but the street was a glare of smooth ice. Selma looked across the road and hoped Maria did the same. Both breathed easily when they saw the other seated quietly beside a window, swaying back and forth and reading the Bible.

Maria had a roast chicken for Sunday, and Selma had spare−rib of pork. That week the visits ended. Maria was the first to go home. She had the homing instinct of every woman to whom love, or the knowledge of it, comes. Ever since she had read that old letter of her dead young lover she had longed to go home, although she had been extremely happy. She knew that she could enjoy more fully what had come to her, in all its exquisite meaning, under her own roof. Nevertheless, until the week was up she flew about Selma's house, working with vigor and full of delight. Then one afternoon she put on Selma's shawl and head−tie; Selma's rubbers were too small, and as the ice still endured she drew on a pair of old stockings. Then she tiptoed across the road gingerly, toeing out carefully, like a pigeon. Selma saw her coming and ran to the door. Selma's face looked much rounder, and was broadening with smiles.

"Well, I never! So you have got home," said she.

Maria beamed at her. "Yes, I thought I might as well come," said she. "I've been away a whole week."

"So have I," said Selma. "I'd just been thinking it was time for me to be getting home."

Both entered the sitting−room, sat down, and giggled like two children.

"Don't we two beat anything?" said Maria.

"I wouldn't believe it if anybody told me," said Selma. They giggled again.

Maria took off Selma's shawl and head−tie, and pulled off the stockings.

"Didn't you wear any rubbers?" asked Selma.

"I can't get my feet into rubbers just about big enough for a little girl," laughed Maria.

"Well, I guess your rubbers must be over here," laughed Selma.

"I have brought over some chocolate−cake and fruit−cake and mince−pie I baked," said Maria. "I thought we might have supper together before you went home."

"Well, maybe I can stay enough longer for that," said Selma. "I've got some biscuits most riz enough to put in the oven, too, and I've made I don't know how many pounds of sausage−meat; and I've salted down and tried out, and there's as nice a mess of pig meat as ever I have seen. We'll have some sausage for supper, or cold spare−rib, whichever you say."

"We might have a little of both," said Maria, briskly.

It was not long before the two sat down to supper. Both felt famished. Both ate almost greedily, and smiled at each other across the table.

"You certainly do look younger and fatter in the face than I've seen you in years, Selma," said Maria.

"You do, too," said Selma. "You look just as I remember you when you were a little girl and used to go to district school," said Selma.

Maria smiled happily. She felt exactly as if she were that little girl. She looked at her bowl of goldfish on the stand in the south window.

"Not one of them died," said Selma, proudly. "They are beautiful, swimming around. I guess I will have some, too."

The largest goldfish in the bowl flashed suddenly across its liquid world, a swift grace of golden scales. "I always have liked goldfish," said Maria. "I guess you will enjoy having some, and I can show you just how to take care of them."

When the moon was up after supper, Selma put on her own shawl and head−tie and rubbers. Maria had brought them over. The two women kissed each other when they parted in the doorway facing the street, which was a glorious track of silver under the moon. "I certainly am glad to see you looking so well," said Maria.

"I am well. All I needed was a little change," replied Selma, "and I am certainly glad to see you looking so well."

"All I needed was a little change," replied Maria. "I have been away a whole week, and it has done me good."

Both laughed aloud. They kissed each other again.

"Look out you don't slip on the ice," said Maria.

"Me slip? Why, I feel as young and spry as I ever did in my life, after such a nice change," said Selma. She went carefully down the steps. Maria stood watching her.

When Selma was half−way across the street she turned and waved her hand, and her laugh rang out. Maria laughed, too. She waited until Selma had closed her door. Then she closed hers, but the echo of the laughter was in the hearts of both, like the refrain of a glad song of life which can never be silenced.