The Road To Providence

Maria Thompson Daviess

Table of Contents

The Road To Providence

Maria Thompson Daviess

This etext was produced by Charles Franks, Robert Rowe and the
Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

CHAPTER I. THE DOCTORS MAYBERRY, MOTHER AND SON

"Now, child, be sure and don't mix 'em with a heavy hand! Lightness is expected of riz biscuits and had oughter be dealt out to 'em by the mixer from the start. Just this way—"

"Mother, oh, Mother," came a perturbed hail in Doctor Mayberry's voice from the barn door, "Spangles is off the nest again—better come quick!"

"Can't you persuade her some, Tom?" Mother called back from the kitchen door as she peered anxiously across the garden fence and over to the gray barn where the Doctor stood holding the door half open, but ready for a quick close−up in case of an unexpected sally. "My hands is in the biscuits and I don't want to come now. Just try, Tom!"

"I have tried and I can't do it! She's getting the whole convention agitated. You'd better come on, Mother!"

"Dearie me," said Mrs. Mayberry, as she rinsed her hands in the wash−pan on the shelf under tin cedar bucket, "Tom is just as helpless with the chickens at setting time as a presiding elder is at a sewing circle; can't use a needle, too stiff to jine the talk and only good when it comes to the eating, from broilers to frying size. Just go on and mix the biscuits with faith, honey−bird, for I mistrust I won't be back for quite a spell."

"Now let me see what all these conniptions is about," she said in a commanding voice, as she walked boldly in through her son's cautiously widened door gap.

And a scene of confusion that was truly feminine met her capable glance. Fuss−and−Feathers, a stylish young spangled Wyandotte, was waltzing up and down the floor and shrieking an appeal in the direction of a whole row of half−barrel nests that stretched along the dark and sequestered side of the feed−room floor, upon which was established what had a few minutes before been a placid row of setting hens. Now over the rim of each nest was stretched a black, white, yellow or gray head, pop−eyed with alarm and reproach. They were emitting a chorus of indignant squawks, all save a large, motherly old dominick in the middle barrel who was craning her scaly old neck far over toward the perturbed young sister and giving forth a series of reassuring and commanding clucks.

"I didn't do a thing in the world to them, Mother," said Doctor Tom in a deprecatory tone of voice, as if he were in a way to be blamed for the whole excitement. "I was across the barn at the corn−crib when she hopped off her nest and went on the rampage. Just a case of the modern feminine rebellion, I wager."

"No such thing, sir! They ain't nothing in the world the matter with her 'cept as bad a case of young−mother skeer as I have ever had before amongst all my hens. Don't you see, Tom, two of her setting have pipped they shells and the cheepings of the little things have skeered the poor young thing 'most to death. Old Dominick have took in the case and is trying her chicken−sister best to comfort her. These here pullet spasms over the hatching of the first brood ain't in no way unusual. The way you have forgot chicken habits since you have growed up is most astonishing to me, after all the helping with them I taught you." As she spoke, Mother Mayberry had been rearranging the deserted nest with practised hand and had tenderly lifted two feeble, moist little new−borns on her broad palm to show to the Doctor.

"What are you going to do with them, Mother?" he asked, for though his education in chicken lore seemed to have been in vain he was none the less sympathetically interested in his mothers practice of the hen−craft.

"I'm just going to give 'em to Old Dominick to dry out and warm up for her while I persuade her back on the nest. As she gets used to hearing the cheepings from under another hen she'll take the next ones that come with less mistrust." And suiting her actions to her words Mother Mayberry slipped the two forlorn little mites under a warm old wing that stretched itself out with gentleness to receive and comfort them. Some budding instinct had sent the foolish fluff of stylish feathers clucking at her skirts, so she bent down and with a gentle and sympathetic hand lifted the young inadequate back on the nest.

"I really oughter put on a cover and make her set on the next," she said doubtfully, "but it do seem kinder to teach her hovering a little at a time. Course all women things has got mothering borned into 'em, but it comes easier to some than to others. I always feel like giving 'em a helping hand at the start off."

"You have a great deal of faith if you feel sure of that universally maternal instinct in these days, Mother," said the Doctor with a teasing smile as he handed her a quart cup of oats from the bin. "Oh, I know what you're talking about," answered Mother, as she scattered a little grain in front of each nest and prepared to leave in peace

and quiet the brooding mothers. "It's this woman's rights and wrongs question. I've been so busy doctoring Providence Road pains and trying to make a good, proper husband outen you for some nice girl, what some other woman have been putting licks on to get ready for you, that I've been too pushed to think about the wrongs being did to me. But not knowing any more about it than I do, I think this woman's rumpus all sounds kinder like a hen scratching around in unlikely and contrary corners for the bread of life, when she knows they is plenty of crumbs at the kitchen door to be et up. But if you're going to ride over to Flat Rock this evening you'd better go on and get back in time for some riz biscuits as Elinory is a−making for you this blessed minute."

"She's not making them for me," answered the young Doctor with the color rising under his clear, tanned skin up to his very forelock. As he spoke he busied himself with bridling his restless young mare.

"Of course she is," answered his mother serenely. "Women don't take no interest in cooking unless they's a man to eat the fixings. Left to herself she'd eat store bread and cheese with her head outen the window for the birds to clean up the crumbs. Stop by and ask after Mis' Bostick and the Deacon. And if you bring me a little candy from the store with the letters, maybe I'll eat it to please you. Now be a−going so as to be a−coming the sooner." With which admonition Mother took her departure down the garden path.

She was tall and broad, was Mother Mayberry, and in her walk was left much of the lissome strength of her girlhood to lighten the matronly dignity of her carriage. Her stiffly starched, gray−print skirts swept against a budding border of jonquils and the spring breezes floated an end of her white lawn tie as a sort of challenge to a young cherry tree, that was trying to snow out under the influence of the warm sun. Her son smiled as he saw her stoop to lift a feeble, over−early hop toad back under the safety of the jonquil leaves, out of sight of a possible savage rooster. He knew what expression lay in her soft gray eyes that brooded under her Wide, placid brow, upon which fell abundant and often riotous silver water−waves. His own eyes were very like them and softened as he looked at her, a masculine version of one of her quick s quirked at the corner of his clean−cut mouth.

"The bread of life—she's found it," he said to himself musingly as he slipped the last buckle in his bridle tight.

"Elinory," called Mother Mayberry from the kitchen steps, "come out here and sense the spring. Everywhere you look they is some young thing a−peeping up or a−reaching out or a−running over or wobbling or bleating or calling. Looks like the whole world have done broke out in blooms and babies."

"I can't—I wish I could," came an answer in a low, beautiful voice with a queer, husky note. "It's all sticking to my hands, flour and everything, and I don't know what to do!"

"Dearie me, you've put in the milk a little too liberal! Wait until I sift on a mite more flour. Now rub it in light! See, it's all right, and most beautiful dough. Don't be discouraged, for riz biscuits is most the top test of cooking. Keep remembering back to those cup custards you made yesterday, what Tom Mayberry ate three of for supper and then tried to sneak one outen the milk−house to eat before he went to bed."

"Oh, did he?" asked Miss Wingate with delight shining in her dark eyes and a beautiful pink rising up in her pale cheeks. "I wish I COULD do something to please him and make him feel how—how— grateful I am—for the hope he's given me. I was so hopeless and unhappy—and desperate when I came. But I believe my voice is coming back! Every day it's stronger and you are so good to me and make me so happy that I'm not afraid any more. You give me faith to hope—as well as to mix biscuits." And a pearly tear splashed on the rolling− pin.

"Yes, put your trust in the Heavenly Father, child, and some in Tom Mayberry. Before you know it you'll be singing like the birds out in the trees; but I can't let myself think about the time's a−coming for you to fly away to the other people's trees to sing. When Tom told me about Doctor Stein's wanting to send a great big singer lady, what had lost her voice, down here to see if he couldn't cure her like he did that preacher man and the politics speaker, I was skeered for both him and me, for I knew things was kinder simple with us here and I was afraid I couldn't make you happy and comfortable. But then I remembered Doctor Stein had stayed 'most two weeks when he came South with Tom for a visit and said he had tacked ten years on to the end of his life by just them few days of Providence junketings and company feedings, so I made up my mind not to be proud none and to say for you to come on. I've got faith in my boy's doctoring same as them New York folks has, and I wanted him to try to cure you. Then I knew you didn't have no mother to pet up the sick throat none. A little consoling comfort is a good dose to start healing any kind of trouble with. I knew I had plenty of that in my heart to prescribe out to help along with your case; so here you are not three weeks with us, a−mixing riz biscuits for Tom's supper and like to coax the heart outen both of us. I told him—Dearie me, somebody's calling at the front gate!"

"Mis' Mayberry! Oh, Mis' Mayberry!" came a high, quavering old voice from around the corner of the house,

and Squire Tutt hove in sight. He was panting for breath and trembling with rage as he ascended the steps and stood in the kitchen door.

Mother hastened to bring him a chair into which he wheezingly subsided.

"Why, Squire," she questioned anxiously, "have anything happened? Is Mis' Tutt tooken with lumbago again?"

"No!" exploded the Squire, "she's well—always is! I'm the only really sick folks in Providence, though I don't git no respect for it. In pain all the time and no respect—no respect!"

"Now, Squire, everybody in Providence have got sympathy for your tisic, and just yesterday Mis' Pike was a−asking me—"

"Tisic! I ain't talking about tisic now! It's this pain in my stomick that that young limb of satan of your'n insulted me about not a hour ago. Me a−writhing in tormint with nothing less'n a cancer—insulted me!" As the Squire projected his remark toward Mother Mayberry he bent double and peered expectantly up into her sympathetic face.

"Why, what did he do, Squire?" demanded Mother, with a glance at Miss Wingate, who still stood at the biscuit block cutting out her dough. She regarded the old man with alarmed wonder.

"Told me to drink two cups of hot water and lie down a hour—me in tormint!" The Squire fairly spit his complaint into the air.

"Dearie me, Tom had oughter known better than that about one of your spells," said Mother. "Why, I've been a−curing them for years for you myself with nothing more'n a little drop of spirits, red pepper and mint. He had oughter told you to take that instead of hot water. I'm sorry—"

"Oughter told me to take spirits—told me to TAKE spirits! Don't you know, Mis' Mayberry, a man with a sanctified wife can't TAKE no spirits; they must be GAVE to him by somebody not a member of the family. Me a−suffering tormints—two cups of hot water—tormints, tormints!"

The old man's voice rose to a perfect wail, but came down a note or two as Mother hastily reached in the press and drew out a tall, old demijohn and poured a liberal dose of the desired medicine into a glass. She added a dash of red pepper and a few drops of peppermint. This treatment of the Squire's dram in Mother's estimation turned a sinful beverage into a useful medicine and served to soothe her conscience while it disturbed the Squire's appreciation of her treatment not at all. He swallowed the fiery dose without as much as the blink of an eyelid and on the instant subsided into comfortable complacency.

"Please forgive Tom for not having more gumption, Squire, and next time you're took come right over to me same as usual. Course I know all the neighbors feel as how Tom is young and have just hung out his shingle here, and I ain't expectin' of 'em to have no confidence in him. I think it my duty to just go on with my usual doctoring of my friends. I hope you won't hold this mistake against Tom."

"Well," said the Squire in a mollified tone of voice, "I won't say no more, but you must tell him to stop fooling with these here Providence people. Stopped Ezra Pike's wife feeding her baby on pot− liquor and give it biled milk watered with lime juice. It'll die— it'll die!"

"Oh no, Squire, it's a−getting well—jest as peart as can be," Mother said in a mollifying tone of voice.

"It'll die—it'll die! Cut one er the lights outen Sam Mosbey's side—called it a new fangled impendix name—but he'll die—he'll die!"

"Sam's a−working out there on the barn roof right this minute, Squire, good and alive," said Mother Mayberry with a good−humored smile, while Miss Wingate cast a restrained though indignant glance at the doubting old magistrate.

"And old Deacon Bostick drinking cow−hot milk and sucking raw eggs! He looks like a mixed calf and shanghai rooster! So old he'd oughter die—and he'll do it! Hot water and me in tormint! Hot water on his middle in a rubber bag and nothing inside er him! He'll die−he'll die!"

"Oh no, Squire, the good Lord have gave Deacon Bostick back to us from the edge of the grave; Tom a−working day and night but under His guidance. He have gained ten pounds and walks everywhere. It were low typhus, six weeks running, too! I'm glad it were gave to me to see my son bring back a saint to earth from the gates themselves. Have you been by to see him?"

"Yes," answered the Squire as he rose much more briskly than he had seated himself, and prepared to take his departure. "Yes, and it was you a−nussing of him that did it—muster slipped him calimile—but I ain't

a−disputing! Play actor, ain't you, girl?" he demanded as he paused on his way out of the door and peered over at Miss Wingate with his beetling, suspicious eyes.

"Yes," answered the singer lady as she went on putting her biscuit into the pan. If her culinary manoeuvers were slow they were at least sure and the "riz" biscuits looked promising.

"Dearie me," said Mother as she returned from guiding her guest down the front walk and into the shaded Road, "it do seem that Squire Tutt gets more rantankerous every day. Poor Mis' Tutt is just wore out with contriving with him. It's a wonder she feels like she have got any ease at all, much less a second blessing. Now I must turn to and make a dish of baked chicken hash for supper to be et with them feather biscuits of your'n. I want to compliment them by the company of a extra nice dish. If they come out the oven in time I want to ask Sam Mosbey to stop in and get some, with a little quince preserves. He brought his dinner in a bucket, which troubled me, for who's got foot on my land, two or four, I likes to feed myself. I expected he was some mortified at your being here. He's kinder shy like in the noticing of girls."

"That seems to be a failing with the Providence young—with Providence people," ventured Miss Wingate with ambiguity.

"Oh, country boys is all alike," answered Mother comfortingly, only in a measure taking in the tentative observation. "They're all kinder co'ting tongue−tied. They have to be eased along attentive, all 'cept Buck Peavey, who'd like to eat Pattie up same as a cannibal, I'm thinking, and don't mind who knows it. Now the supper is all on the simmer and can be got ready in no time. Let's me and you walk down to the front gate and watch for Tom to come around the Nob from Flat Rock and then we can run in the biscuits. Maybe we'll hear some news; I haven't hardly seen any folks to−day and I mistrust some mischief are a−brewing somewhere."

And Mother Mayberry's well trained intuitions must have been in unusually good working order, for she met her expected complications at the very front gate. She was just turning to point out a promise of an unusually large crop of snowballs on the old shrub by the gate−post when a subdued sniffling made itself heard and caused her to concentrate her attention on the house opposite across the Road. And a sympathy stirring scene met her eyes. Perched along the fence were all five of the little Pikes clinging to the top board in forlorn despondency. On the edge of the porch sat Mr. Pike in his shirt sleeves with his pipe in one hand and the Teether Pike balanced on his knee. His expression matched that of the children in the matter of gloom, and like them he glanced apprehensively toward the door as if expecting Calamity to issue from his very hearthstone.

"Why, what's the matter?" demanded Mother as she hurried to the edge of the sidewalk followed by the singer lady, whose acquaintance with the young Pikes had long before ripened to the stage of intimate friendship. At the sight of her sympathetic face, Eliza, the first Pike, slipped to the ground and buried her head in her new but valued friend's dainty muslin skirt. Bud, the next rung of the stair steps licked out his tongue to dispose of a mortifying tear and little Susie sobbed outright. At this juncture, just as Mother was about to demand again an explanation of such united woe, Mrs. Pike came to the door, and a large spoon and a bottle full of amber, liquid grease made further inquiry unnecessary.

"Sakes, Mis' Mayberry, I certainly am glad you have came over to back me up in getting down these doses of oil. Ez," with an indignant and contemptuous glance at her sullen husband, "don't want me to give it to 'em. He'd rather they'd up and die than to stand the ruckus, but I ain't a−going to let my own children perish for a few cherry seeds with a bottle of oil in the house and Doctor Tom Mayberry's prescription to give 'em a spoonful all around." Mrs. Pike was short and stout, but with a martial and determined eye, and as she spoke she began to measure out a first dose with her glance fixed on young Bud, who turned white around his little mouth and clung to the fence. Susie's sobs rose to a wail and Eliza shuddered in Miss Wingate's skirt.

"Wait a minute, Mis' Pike," said Mother hurriedly, "are you sure they have et cherry seeds? Cherries ain't ripe yet, and—"

"We didn't—we didn't!" came in a perfect chorus of wails from the little fence birds.

"Of course they did, Mis' Mayberry!" exclaimed their mother relentlessly. "It was two jars of cherry preserves that Prissy put up and clean forgot to seed 'fore she biled 'em, and the children done took and et 'em on the sly. Now they're going to suffer for it."

"We all spitted the seeds out, and we was so hungry, too!" Eliza took courage to sob from Miss Wingate's skirt. Bud managed to echo her statement, while Susie and the two little boys gave confirmation from their wide−open, terror−stricken eyes.

"Well, now, maybe they did, Mis' Pike," said Mother, coming near to argue the question. Her hand rested sustainingly on one of the brave young Bud's knees which jutted out from the fence.

"Can't trust 'em, Mis' Mayberry, fer if they'll steal they'll lie," said Mrs. Pike in a voice tinged with the deepest melancholy for the fallen estate of her family. "They'll have to suffer for both sins whether they did or didn't," and again the bottle was poised.

"Now hold on, Mis' Pike," again exclaimed Mother Mayberry as her face illumined with a bright smile. "If they throwed away the cherry pits they must be where they throwed 'em and they can go find 'em to prove they character. They ain't nothing fairer than that. Where did you eat the preserves, children?" she asked, but there was a wild rush around the corner of the house before her question was answered.

"Now," exclaimed the astonished mother, "I never thought of that and if they thought to spit out one stone they did the balance. But Doctor Tom was so kind to tell me about the oil and I paid fifteen cents down at the store for it, that I'm a mind to give it to 'em anyway."

"I'll be blamed if you do," ejaculated her indignant husband as he shouldered Teether and strode into the house, unable longer to restrain his rage.

"Ain't that just like him!" said his wife in a resigned voice. "And I was just going to try to make him take this spoonful I've poured out. It won't hurt him none and it's a pity to pour it back, it wastes so. Do either of you all need it?" she asked hospitably.

Miss Wingate was dissenting with an echo of Eliza's shudder and Mother Mayberry with a laugh, when the reprieved criminals raced back around the house, each dirty little fist inclosing a reasonable number of grubby cherry stones.

"Well," assented their mother reluctantly, "I'll let you off this time, but don't any of you never take nothing to eat again without asking, and I'm a−going to punish you by making you every one wash your feet in cold water and go to bed. Now mind me and all stand to once in the tub by the pump and tell your Paw I say not to touch that kettle of hot water. I don't want you to have a drop. Go right on and do as I say."

The threatened punishment had been too great for the youngsters to mind this lesser and accustomed penalty, so they retired with cheerfulness and spirits and in a few seconds a chorus of squeals and splashes came from the back yard.

After an exchange of friendly good−bys Mrs. Pike entered her front door and Mother and the singer lady returned to their own front gate.

"Dearie me," said Mother in a tone of positive discouragement, "I don't know what I will do if I have to undo another one of Tom Mayberry's prescriptions to−day. But you couldn't expect a man to untangle a children quirk like that; and oil woulder been the thing for the cherry stones in children's stomachs, but not for ones throwed on the back walk. I hope the Squire won't hear about it," she added with a laugh.

"I think," said Miss Wingate with her dark eyes fixed on Mother's face with positive awe, "I think you are wonderful with everybody. You know just what to do for them, and what to say to them and—"

"Well," interrupted Mother with a laugh, "it are gave to some women to be called on the Lord's ease mission, and I reckon I'm of that band. Don't you know I'm the daughter of a doctor, and the wife of a doctor and the mother of one as good as either of the other two? I can't remember the time when I didn't project with the healing of ailments. When I married Doctor Mayberry and come down over the Ridge from Warren County with him, he had his joke with me about my herb−basket and a−setting up opposition to him. It's in our blood. My own cousin Seliny Lue Lovell down at the Bluff follows the calling just the same as I do. I say the Lord were good to me to give me the love of it and a father and a husband and now a son to practise with."

"The Doctors Mayberry, Mother and Son, how interesting that sounds, Mrs. Mayberry," exclaimed Miss Wingate with a delightful laugh, "And no wonder Doctor Mayberry is so gifted that he gets National commissions to study Pellagra and—and has a troublesome singer lady sent all the way from New York to patch up."

"Yes, it do look like that Tom Mayberry gets in a good chanct everywhere he goes. Some folks picks a friend offen every bush they passes and Tom's one. He was honored considerable in New York and then sent over to Berlin, Europe, and beyont to study up about people's skins. And then here he comes back, sent by the Government right down to Flat Rock, on the other side of Providence Nob, to study out about that curious corn disease they calls Pellagra, what I don't think is a thing in the world but itch and can be cured by a little sulphur and hog lard. But I'm blessing the chanct that brought him back to me, even if I know it are just for a spell. And,

too, he oughter be happy to have brung his mother such a song bird as you. I'm so used to you and your helping me with Cindy away to Springfield, that I don't see how I ever got along without you or ever will." As she spoke, Mother Mayberry smiled delightedly at the singer girl and drew her closer. Mother's voice at most times was a delicious mixture of banter and caress.

"Perhaps I'll stay always," said the singer lady as she drew close against the gray print shoulder. "When I look around me I feel as if I had awakened in a beautiful world with no more dirty, smoky cities that hurt my throat, no more hot, lighted theaters, no noises, and everything is just a great big bouquet of soft smells and colors."

As she spoke, Elinor Wingate, who was just a tired girl in the circle of Mother Mayberry's strong arm, let her great dark eyes wander off across the meadow to where a dim rim of Harpeth Hills seemed to close in the valley. Her glance returned to the low, wing− spreading, brick farm−house, which, vine−covered, lilac−hedged and maple−shaded, seemed to nestle against the breast of Providence Nob, at whose foot clustered the little settlement of Providence and around whose side ran the old wilderness trail called Providence Road. And her face was soft with a light of utter contentment, for under that low−gabled roof she was finding strength to hope for the recovery of her lost treasure, without which life would seem a void. Then for a moment she looked down the village Road, across which the trees were casting long afternoon shadows and along which was flowing the tide of late afternoon social life. Women hung over the front gates to greet men in from the fields or from down the Road, girls laughed and chaffed one another or the blushing country boys, and the children played tag and hop−scotch back and forth along the way.

"It's all lovely," she said again with a contented little sigh. When she spoke softly there was not a trace of the burr in her voice and it was as sweet as a dove note.

"Days like these we had oughter take the world as a new gift from God," said Mother musingly. "It were a day like this I come with Doctor Mayberry along the Road to Providence to live, and stopped right at this gate under this very maple tree, thirty−five years ago; and thirty of 'em have I lived lonesome without him. I had a baby at my breast and Tom by my knee when he went away from us, and I know now it was the call laid on me to take up his work that saved me. When I got back from the funeral and had laid the baby on the bed Mis' Jim Petway come a−running up the road crying that Ellen, her youngest child, were a−choking to death with croup. I never had a thought but to take his saddle−bags and follow her, and somehow the good Lord guided my hand amongst his medicines, and with what I had learned from him and Pa I fought a good fight and saved the little thing's life, though it took the night to do it. And in one of them dark hours a sister−to−woman sense was born in me what I ain't never lost. A neighbor took Tom and they brought my baby to me and I stayed by Mis' Petway until they weren't no more danger. Next day it were Squire Tutt's first wife tooken down with the fever and not the week passed before that very Sam Mosbey were borned. We was too poor to have a doctor come and live here and they was a doctor over to Springfield took up my husband's county practice, so I jest naturally had to do the healing myself, only a−sending for him in the worst cases. They was a heap of teethers that summer and it kept me busy looking after 'em. I expect I made mistakes but I kept up me and the patients' courage by sympathizing and heartening. It didn't cost nobody nothing and we wasn't so prosperous then that it wasn't a help for me to do the doctoring when I could, and I mostly were able. I were glad of the work and did it with a thankful mind; not as they wasn't times when I felt sick at heart, and in danger of questioning why, but I tried to steady myself with prayer until I could find the Everlasting Arm to lean on that is always held out to the widow and the fatherless. And so a−leaning I have got me and Tom Mayberry along until now."

"And the whole rest of the world leaning on you," said the lovely lady as she drew nearer and caught Mother Mayberry's strong hand in her own slender fingers.

"Well," answered Mother, as she shaded her eyes with her other hand to look far up the Road toward the Ridge over which they were waiting for the Doctor's horse to appear, "looks like often hands a− reaching out for help gives strength before they takes any, and a little hope planted in another body's garden is apt to fly a seed and sprout in your own patch. There he is—let's hurry in the biscuits!"

CHAPTER II. THE SINGER LADY AND THE BREAD−BOWL

"Well, I don't know as I'd like to have her messing around my kitchen and house, a stranger and a curious one at that. But you always was kinder soft, Mis' Mayberry," said Mrs. Peavey as she glanced with provoked remonstrance at Mother Mayberry, who went calmly on attending to the needs of a fresh hatching of young chickens. Mrs. Peavey lived next door to the Doctor's house and the stone wall that separated the two families was not in any way a barrier to her frequent neighborly and critical visitations. She was meager of stature and soul, and the victim of a devouring fire of curiosity which literally licked up the fagots of human events that came in her way. She was the fly that kicked perpetually in Mother Mayberry's cruse of placid ointment, but received as full a mead of that balm of friendship as any woman on the Road.

"Why, she ain't a mite of trouble, but just a pleasure, Hettie Ann," answered Mother with mild remonstrance in her tone. "I expected to have a good bit of worry with her, having no cook in my kitchen, 'count of waiting for Cindy to get well and come back to me and nobody easy to pick up to do the work, but she hadn't been here a week before she was reaching out and learning house jobs. I think it takes her mind offen her troubles and I can't say her no if it do help her, not that I want to, for she's a real comfort."

"Well, if it was me I couldn't take no comfort in a play−acting girl. I'd feel like locking up what teaspoons I had and a−counting over everything in my house every day. It's just like you, Mis' Mayberry, to take her in. And I can't sense the why of you're being so close−mouthed about her. Near neighbors oughter know all about one another's doings and not have to ask, I say." Mrs. Peavey sniffed and assumed an air of injured patience.

"Why, Hettie Ann," Mother hastened to answer, "you know as I always did hold that the give and take of advice from friends is the greatest comfort in the world, though at times most confusing, and I thought I told you all about Elinory."

"Well, you didn't. Muster been Bettie Pratt or Mis' Pike you was a− talking to when you thought it was me," answered her friend with the injured note in her voice becoming with every word more noticeable. "Are she rich or poor? Do you know that much?"

"Well now, come to think of it, I don't," answered Mother promptly. "Connecting up folks and they money always looks like sticking a price tag on you to them and them to you. I'd rather charge my friends to a Heaven−account and settle the bill with friendly feelings as we go along. This poor child ain't got no mother or father, that I know. All her young life when most girls ain't got a thought above a beau or a bonnet, she have been a−training of her voice to sing great 'cause it were in her to do it. And she done it, too. Then all to onct when she had got done singing in a great big town hall they call Convent Garden or something up in New York, she made the mistake to drink a glass of ice water and it friz up her throat chords. She haven't been able to sing one single tune since. She have been a−roaming over the earth a−hunting for some sort of help and ain't found none. Now she have lit at my door and I've got her in trying to warm and comfort her to enough strength for Tom to put her voice back into her."

"Well, you don't expect no such thing of Tom Mayberry as that, do you?" asked Mrs. Peavey with uncompromising and combative frankness.

"That I do," answered the Doctor's mother, and this time there was a note of dignity in her voice, as she looked her friend straight in the face. "You know, because I told you about it, Hettie Ann, how Tom Mayberry cured that big preacher of a lost voice who was a friend to this Doctor Stein, while the boy wasn't nothing but serving his term in the hospital. He wrote a paper about it that made all the doctors take notice of him and he have done it twice since, though throats are just a side issue from skins with him. Yes, I'm expecting of him to cure this child and give her back more'n just her voice, her work in life. I'm one that believes that the Lord borns all folks with a work to do and you've got to march on to it, whether it's singing in public places, carrying saddle− bags to suffering or jest playing your tune on the wash−board at home. It's a part of his hallelujah chorus in which we've all got to join."

"Well, I shorely drawed the wash−board fer my instrumint," answered Mrs. Peavey with a vindictive look across the wall at a line of clothes fluttering in the breeze.

"And they ain't nobody in Providence that turns out as white a shirt−song as you do, Hettie Ann. Buck and

Mr. Peavey are just looked at in church Sundays fer the color of they collars," Mother hastened to say with pride in the glance that followed Mrs. Peavey's across the wall. "Ain't Tom always a−contriving with you to sneak one of his shirts into your wash, so as not to hurt me and Cindy's feelings? I don't see how you get 'em so white."

"Elbow grease and nothing else," answered Mrs. Peavey in a tone of voice that refused to be mollified. "I've got to be a−going."

"Just wait and look at these chickens; ain't they pretty? Tom sent all the way to Indiany fer the settin' of eggs fer me and I've just been a−watching the day for 'em to hatch. I feel they are a−going to be a credit to me and I'm glad I gave 'em to Ruffle Neck to set on. She's such a good hoverer and can be depended on to run from the rain. Now ain't they pretty?" and Mother even looked at Mrs. Peavey with hope for a word of sympathy in her pleasure—after a thirty years' experience with her neighbor.

"No," answered her friend, "I don't hold with no fancy chickens. Just good dominicks is all I've got any faith in and not much in them. With strange chickens and girls around your house something misfortunate is a−going to happen to you, Mis' Mayberry, and I see it a−coming. Don't say I didn't tell you."

"No, I'll give you credit for your warning," answered Mother propitiatingly. "How's that pain in your side?" she hastened to ask, to change the subject from a disagreeable one to what she knew by experience would prove at least interesting.

"It's a heap better," answered Mrs. Peavey promptly.

"Oh, I'm so glad," exclaimed Mother, immediately beginning to beam with pride. "I told you Tom could help it with that new kind of dry plaster he made for you. Ain't it wonderful?"

"Shoo! I never put that on! It didn't have smell enough to do any good. I knew that as soon as I unrolled it. I just rubbed myself heavy with that mixture of kerosine, vinegar and gum camfire you've been making me for twenty years, and I slept uncommon well."

"Oh," answered Mother Mayberry, "I wish you had tried Tom's plaster. I feel sure—"

"Well, I don't—of anything that a boy like Tom Mayberry knows. If he lives here a spell and learns from you maybe he'll get some doctoring sense, but I wouldn't trust him for ten years at the shortest. But have you heard the news?" A flame of positive joy flared up in Mrs. Peavey's eyes and flushed her sallow cheeks.

"Why, what is it?" asked Mother with a guarded interest and no small amount of anxiety, for she was accustomed to the kind of news that Mrs. Peavey usually took the trouble to spread.

"Well, I knowed what was a−going to happen when I seen Bettie Pratt setting the chairs straight and marshaling in the orphants at poor Mis' Hoover's funeral, not but eleven months ago. It'll be a scandal to this town and had oughter be took notice of by Deacon Bostick and the Elder. She's got four Turner children and six Pratts and he have got seven of his own, so Turner, Pratt and Hoover they'll be seventeen children in the house, all about the same size. Then maybe more—I call it a disgrace, I do!"

"I don't know," answered Mother, though her eyes did twinkle at the thought of this allied force of seventeen, "there never was a better child−raiser than Bettie Pratt and I'll be mighty glad to see them poor, forlorn little Hoovers turned over to her. They've been on my mind night and day since they mother died and they ain't a single one of 'em as peart as it had oughter be. Who told you about it?"

"They didn't nobody tell me—I've got eyes of my own! Just yesterday I seen her hand a pan of biscuits over the fence to Pattie Hoover and he had a Turner and two Pratts in the wagon with him coming in from the field last night. But you can't do nothing about it—she have got the marrying habit. They are other widows in this town that have mourned respectable to say nothing of Miss Prissy Pike, that have never had no husband at all and had oughter be gave a chanct. Mr. Hoover are a nice man and I don't want to see him made noticeable in no such third−husband way."

"Course it do look a little sudden," said Mother, "and seventeen is a good lot of children for one family, but if they love each other— "

"Love! Shoo! I declare, Mis' Mayberry, looks to me like you swallow what folks give you in this world whole, pit and all, and never bat a eye. I've got to go home and put on Buck's and Mr. Peavey's supper and sprinkle down some of my wash." And without further parley Mrs. Peavey marched home through a little swinging gate in the wall that had been for years a gap through which a turbid stream had flowed to trouble Mother's peaceful waters.

"It do seem Mis' Peavey are a victim of a most pitiful unrest," said Mother to herself as she watched with satisfaction Ruffle Neck tuck the last despised little Hoosier under her soft gray breast. "Some folks act like they

had dyspepsy of the mind. Dearie me, I must go and take a glass of cream to my honey−bird, for that between−meal snack that Tom Mayberry are so perticular about." And she started down toward the spring−house under the hill.

And returning a half hour later with the cool glass in her hand, she was guided by the sound of happy voices to the front porch, where, under the purple wistaria vine, she found the singer lady absorbed in the construction of a most worldly garment for the doll daughter of Eliza Pike, who was watching its evolution with absorbed interest.

"Pleas'm, Miss Elinory, make it a little bit longer, 'cause I want her to have a beau," besought the small mother, as she anxiously watched the measuring of the skirt.

"Want her to have a beau?" asked Miss Wingate with the scissors suspended over the bit of pink muslin which matched exactly her own ruffled skirts,

"Yes'm! Pattie Hoover wored shoe−tops all winter and now she's got foot−dresses and Buck Peavey for a beau."

"Oh, I see," said the singer lady as she smiled down into the eager little face. "Do you think—er, beaux are—are desirable, Eliza?"

"Yes'm, I do," answered the bud of a woman, as she drew nearer and said with an expression of one bestowing a confidence, "When I'm let down to my feet I'm going to have Doctor Tom for my beau, if you don't get him first."

"I'm sure you needn't worry about that, Eliza," Miss Wingate hastened to exclaim with a rising color. "I wouldn't interfere with your plans for the world—if I could."

"Well, you take him if you can get him," answered Eliza generously; "somebody'll grow up by that time for me. But he couldn't make you take oil, could he?" she asked doubtfully, the memory of yesterday's escape lurking in her mind and explaining her most unfeminine generosity.

Miss Wingate eyed her for a moment with mirth fairly dancing over her face, "Yes," she said with a laugh, "I believe he could!"

"Elinory, child," said Mother as she came out from the front hall, "here we are a half hour late with this cream, and both of us under promise solemn to Tom to have it down by four o'clock. 'Liza, honey, how's the baby?"

"He have got a new top−tooth and throwed up onct this morning," answered Eliza in a practical tone of voice.

"Dearie me," said Mother anxiously, for the Pike teether had up to this time been the Doctor's prize patient. "I wonder if your Maw remembered the lime water faithful?"

"I expect she forgot it, for she was whipping Susie for sassing Aunt Prissy, and Bud for saying fool," answered Eliza, not at all hesitating to lay bare the iniquities of her family circle.

"I'm sorry they did like that," said Mother with real concern at the news of such delinquencies.

"Yes'm, Susie told Aunt Prissy Mis' Peavey said she were a−setting her cap fer Mr. Hoover and it made Bud mad 'cause he fights 'Lias Hoover and he called her a fool. He hadn't oughter done it, but he's touchy 'bout Aunt Prissy and so's Paw. There comes Deacon and a little boy with him."

As she spoke, Mother rose to greet Deacon Bostick who had turned in the front gate and got as far up the front walk as the second snowball bush. The Deacon was tall, lean, bent and snow−crowned, with bright old eyes that rested in a benediction on the group on the porch that his fine old smile confirmed. By the hand he led a tiny boy who was clad in a long nondescript garment and topped off by a queer red fez, pulled down over a crop of yellow curls, a strange little exotic against the homely background of Mother Mayberry's lilac bushes.

"Sister Mayberry," said the deacon as he paused at the foot of the steps, "this is Martin Luther Hathaway who was left at my house this morning by the Circuit Rider, as he came through from Springfield on his way to Flat Rock, to be delivered to you, along with his letter. I trust his arrival is not unexpected to you."

"No, indeed, Deacon, I was hoping for him though not exactly expecting him. A month ago while you was sick, our missionary society had news of a missionary and his wife down at Springfield who wanted to go up to Chicagy to study some more about some heathen matter, and couldn't quite make it with two children. My cousin Seliny Lue down to the Bluff have took the little girl and we sent five dollars and a letter saying to send the boy to me for the summer. Come to Mother Mayberry, sonny," and Mother sat down on the lowest step and stretched out her arms to the little ward of the church militant.

Martin Luther's big blue eyes, which were set in his head like those of a Raphael cherub, looked out from under a huge yellow curl that fell over his forehead, straight into Mother's gray ones for a moment, and sticking

his pink thumb into his mouth, he sidled into her embrace with a little sigh of evident relief.

"Eat some, thank ma'am, please," he whispered into her ear by way of a return of the introduction. His little mother tongue had evidently suffered a slight twist by his birth and sojourn in a foreign country, but it served to express the normal condition of all inhabitants of boy−land.

"Of course he's hungry, bless his little heart," answered Mother as she removed the fez and ruffled up the damp curls. "Run fetch the tea−cake bucket from the kitchen safe, 'Liza, and won't you come sit down, Deacon?"

"No, thank you, Sister," answered the Deacon with a glance of real regret at the comfortable rocker Miss Wingate had hastened to draw forward into a sunny but sheltered corner of the porch, "I'm on my way to take tea with Sister Pratt. I'm to meet Mrs. Bostick there. How's the throat, child?" And his smile up at the singer lady was one of the most sympathetic interest.

"Better, thank you, I think," said Miss Wingate, answering both question and smile. "How well you are looking to−day, Deacon!"

"Why, I'm made over new by that boy of a Doctor," said the Deacon, fairly beaming with enthusiasm. "Your cure will be only a matter of time, a matter of time, my dear—Squire Tutt to the contrary," he added with a chuckle.

"There, bless my heart, if my ears ain't heard two testimonies to Tom Mayberry all in one minute!" exclaimed Mother with a delighted laugh. "Have a cake, won't you, Deacon?" she asked, offering the bucket.

She then established Eliza and the small stranger on the edge of the steps, with an admonition as to the disposal of the crumbs over on to the grass, and filled both pairs of hands with the crisp discs. Eliza spread the end of her short blue calico skirt over Martin Luther's chubby knees, and they both proceeded to eat into the improvised napkin with the utmost comradeship. Miss Wingate had strolled down to the gate with the Deacon and had paused on the way to decorate the buttonhole of his shiny old coat with a bit of the white lilac nodding over the wall.

"'Liza, child," said Mother as she glanced at Martin Luther with a contemplative eye, "when you're done eating run over and ask your Maw to send me a pair of Billy's britches and a shirt. No, maybe young Ez's 'll be better, and bring 'em and Martin Luther on back to the kitchen to me." With which she disappeared into the house, leaving the munchers to finish their feast alone.

And in an incredibly short time the last crumb, even those rescued from the skirt, had disappeared and Eliza had led Martin Luther down the walk, across the Road and around the corner of the Pike cottage, while the Deacon still lingered talking to Miss Wingate at the gate. Eliza had taken upon herself, with her usual generalship, the development of Mother Mayberry's plan for the arraying of the young stranger in what Providence would consider a civilized garb.

And for some minutes Miss Wingate stood leaning over the top rail of the low gate idly watching a group of Pratts, Turners, Mosbeys, Hoovers and Pikes playing a mysterious game, which necessitated wild dashes across a line drawn down the middle of the Road in the white dust, shrill cries of capture and frequent change of base. The day had been a long sunshiny one, full of absorbing interests, and as she stood drinking in the perfume from a spray of lilac she had broken to choose the bit for the Deacon, she suddenly realized that not one minute had she found in which to let the horrible dread creep close and clutch at her throat. Helping along in the construction of a bucket of tea−cakes, the printing of four cakes of butter, the simmering of a large pan of horehound syrup and the excitement of pouring it into the family bottles that Mother was filling against a sudden night call from some crouper down or across the Road, to say nothing of a most exciting pie, that had been concocted entirely by herself from a jar of peaches and frilled around with the utmost regard for its artistic appearance, to which could be added the triumph of the long−tailed pink gown for the daughter of young Eliza, had kept her busy and—with a quick smile she had to admit to herself, happy. Indeed the remembrance of the rapid disappearance of the pie and Doctor Mayberry's blush when, after he had eaten two−thirds of it, his mother had informed him of the authorship, brought a positive glow of pleasure to her cheeks. Such a serious, gentle, skilful young Doctor as he was—and "a perfect dear" she went as far as admitting to herself, this time with a low laugh.

And as if her pondering on his virtues had had power to bring a materialization, suddenly Doctor Tom stood in front of her on the other side of the gate. He had come from up the Road while she had been looking down in the other direction, and in his hand he held a spray of purple lilacs which he had broken from a large bush that hung over the fence from the Pratt yard into the Road and also spread itself a yard or two into Hoover territory.

"Aren't they lovely and plumy?" she asked, as she took the bunch he offered and laid the purple flowers against the white ones she held in her hand. "These are so much darker than Mrs. Mayberry's purple ones. I wonder why."

"Some years they bloom lighter than Mother's and other years still darker—just another one of the mysteries," he answered as he leaned against the gate−post and looked down at her with a smile. He was tall, and strong, and forceful, with a clean−cut young face which was lit by Mother Mayberry's very own black−lashed, serene gray eyes, and his very evident air of a man of affairs had much of the charm of Mother Mayberry's rustic dignity. His serge coat, blue shirt and soft gray tie had a decided cut of sophistication and were worn with a most worldly grace that was yet strangely harmonious with his surroundings. For with all of his distinctions in appearance and attainments, as a man he struck no discord when contrasted with Mr. Pike's shirt−sleeved, butternut−trousers personality and he seemed but the flowering of Buck Peavey's store− clothes ambitions. The accord of it all struck Miss Wingate so forcibly that unconsciously she gave voice to the feeling.

"How at home you are in all this—this?" she paused and raised her eyes to his with a hint of helplessness to express herself within them.

"Simple life," he supplied with a smile that held a bit of banter.

"It's not so simple as one would think to balance a pie plate on one hand and cut around it with a knife so the edges aren't jagged—to be all consumed within the hour," she answered with spirit, rising to the slight challenge in his voice and smile. "And there are other most complicated things I have discovered that—"

But just here she was interrupted by a sally from around the corner of the Pike house which streamed out across the Road, headed precisely in their direction. Eliza was in the lead and held little Teether swung perilously across one slender hip, while she clasped Martin Luther's chubby fingers in her other hand. And behold, the transformation of the young stranger was complete beyond belief! His yellow thatch was crowned by a straw hat, which was circled by a brand new shoestring, though it gaped across the crown to let out a peeping curl. Young Ez's garments even had proved a size too large and the faded blue jeans "britches" were rolled up over his round little knees and hitched up high under his arms by an improvised pair of calico "galluses" which were stretched tight over a clean but much patched gingham shirt. His feet and legs had been stripped in accordance with the time−ordered custom in Providence that bare feet could greet May Day, and his little, bare, pink toes curled up with protest against the roughness of even the dust−softened pike. Susie May, Billy and young Ez beamed with pride at their share in the rehabiting of the recent acquisition and waited breathlessly for words of praise from Miss Wingate and the Doctor.

"Why, who is this?" asked the Doctor quickly with a most gratifying interest in his big voice, while Miss Wingate came out of the gate on to the pavement.

"It's the little missionary boy that the Deacon brought Mother Mayberry. I guess the Lord sent him, for he's too big to come outen a cabbage," answered Eliza, and as she spoke she settled the hat an inch farther down over the curls with a motherly gesture. She had failed to grasp with exactness the situation concerning the advent of Martin Luther, but was supplying a version of her own that seemed entirely satisfactory to the youngster's newly acquired friends.

"Spit through teeth," ventured the young stranger, anxious to display an accomplishment that had been bestowed upon him by Billy while the "galluses" were in process of construction a few minutes ago. "Thank ma'am, please," he hastened to add with pathetic loyalty to some injunction that had been impressed upon his young mind before his embarkation upon strange seas.

"Let me see you do it," demanded the Doctor, in instant sympathy with his pride in this newly acquired national accomplishment.

"He hasn't got time to do it now," answered Eliza importantly, as she hitched Teether a notch higher up on her arm. "I've got to take him and the baby in to Mother Mayberry to see if his other top−tooth have come up enough for Maw to rub it through with her thimble." Though she did not designate Teether as the subject of the operation the audience understood that it was he and not Martin Luther so fated.

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed Miss Wingate in horror, and she reached out and took Teether into protective arms. The day had been a long and weary one for Teether Pike and he dropped his tired little head over on the cool pink muslin shoulder and nestled his aching jaw against the smooth white neck.

"Hold him still just a second as he is," said Doctor Tom quickly, and in an instant he had whipped a case from

his pocket, selected an instrument and, inserting his finger between the pink lips, he rendered unnecessary the agony of the maternal thimble. It had been done so quickly that Teether himself only nestled a bit closer with a faint moan, and Miss Wingate looked up at the operator with grateful eyes. She hugged the limp baby closer and started to speak, but was interrupted by an anxious question from Eliza.

"Did you cut it?" she demanded.

"Yes," answered the Doctor non−committally.

"Well, Maw'll be mighty mad at you, for Mother Mayberry asked her last night to let you cut it and she said she'd thimbled the rest of us and she reckoned he could stand it too. If it was me, I'd let you cut me wide open and sew me up again if you wanted to," and Eliza beamed upon the Doctor with an affection that was the acme of idealization. She had forgotten that only a few hours ago she had renounced her loyalty at the memory of the oil, but Miss Wingate smiled in appreciation of this display of further feminine inconsistency.

"Shucks," said Billy, "you'd holler 'fore he could cut onct. I'm a− going to let him fix my next stump toe and 'Lias Hoover have got two warts he can cut off, if he gives him a piece of catgut string to tie on fish hooks." And Billy looked as if he expected to see the Doctor entirely overwhelmed at the prospect of so much practice so easily obtained.

"Go take Martin Luther to show Mrs. Mayberry, Eliza," said Miss Wingate with a laughing smile over the baby's head at the Doctor and his practice. "I'll come on with the baby." And with Teether still embraced she strolled up the walk with Doctor Mayberry at her side. When they reached the front steps she seated herself on the top one and slowly lowered the drowsy little chap, until his head rested on her breast and her arms held him cradlewise. She began a low husky humming as she rocked herself to and fro, watching breathlessly the fringed lashes sink over his wearied eyes, until they lay like shadows on the purple circles beneath. She was utterly absorbed in getting Teether into a comatose condition, and had neither eyes nor ears for the Doctor; not that he claimed either.

He sat for some moments watching her and listening breathlessly to the low music that came out through the wonderful throat, as if from some master instrument with strings uncouthly muted. And as he looked, the horrible thought clutched at his own heart. Suppose he should not be able to free her voice for her! Many others had tried−−the greatest—and they had all been baffled by the strange stiffness of the chords. He knew himself to be, in a way, her last resort. A world of music lovers awaited the result. He had been obliged to send out two Press bulletins as to her condition within the week—and she sat on the steps in the twilight humming Teether Pike to sleep, shut in by the Harpeth Hills with only him to fight her fight for her. He almost groaned aloud with the pain of it, when into his consciousness came Mother Mayberry's placid voice shooing the Pike children home with promises and admonitions. A line from Doctor Stein's letter flashed into his mind: "And first and above all I want your mother to put heart and hope into the girl." The fight was not his alone, thank God, and he knew just how much he could trust to his mother's heart−building. Why not? Over the land men were learning to strengthen the man within before attempting to cure the man without. Hadn't that always been his mother's unconscious policy out on Harpeth Hills? A deep calm fell into his troubled spirit and, as the singer lady and Mother escorted the escort down the walk, he slipped away into his office for an hour before supper with his reports and microscope.

A half hour later Mother Mayberry came into his office for the little chat she often took the time for just before the summons to supper. She seated herself by the open window, through which the twilight was creeping, and he threw down his pen and came and stood leaning against the casement.

"Well," she said with a long breath of contentment, "well, I do feel about ready to get ready to rest. The Pikeses is all in, I heard Bettie Pratt calling in the Turners and Pratts and Hoovers, Buck have come home to supper on time, as I know will relieve Hettie Ann's mind, Squire Tutt just went in the front gate as I come up the walk and I seen Mis' Bostick light the lamp in the Deacon's study from my kitchen window a minute ago. They ain't nothing in the world that makes me so contented as to know that all Providence is a− setting down to meals at the same time and a−feeding together as one family, though in different houses. The good Lord will get all the rendered thanks at the same time and I feel it will please Him—ours is late on account of Elinory deciding at the last minute to beat up some clabber cheese with fresh cream for your supper, like she says they fix it up over in Europe somewhere she lived while she was a− studying to sing. I come on out so she could have a swing to herself and not think anybody was a−hurrying of her. It's a riled woman as generally answers the call of hurry and I never gives it, lessen it's life or death or a chicken−hawk."

"But, Mother," remonstrated the Doctor with a very real distress in his voice, "ought you to let her—Miss Wingate—do such things—so many things? Are you sure she enjoys it and is not just doing it to help or because she thinks she ought? Or do you—?"

"Well," interrupted Mother decidedly, "it's my opinion they ain't nothing in the world so heavy as empty hands. She have had to lay down a music book and I don't know nothing better to offer than a butter−paddle and a bread−bowl. It's the feeding of folks that counts in a woman's life, whether it be songs or just bread and butter. If Elinory's tunes was as much of a success as her riz biscuits have come to be, I wisht I could have heard her just onct."

"I did, Mother, the first night she sang in America—and it was very wonderful. When I think of the great opera house, the lights and the flowers, the audience mad with joy and the applause and—I—I— wonder how she stands it!"

"Yes," answered Mother, "I reckon wondering how Eve stood things muster took Adam's mind offen hisself to a very comforting degree. Courage was the ingredient the good Lord took to start making a woman with and it's been a−witnessing his spirit in her ever since. I oughtn't to have to tell you that."

"You don't," Doctor Tom hastened to answer as he smiled down on Mother. "I only spoke as I did about Miss Wingate because you see she is—well, what we would call a very great lady and I wouldn't have her think that I did not realize that−?"

"Well, you can do as you choose," answered Mother placidly as she prepared to take her departure to see to the finishing up of the supper, "but I ain't a−letting no foolish pride hold my heart back from my honey−bird. Love's my bread of life and I offers it free, high or low. Come on and see how you like that cheese fixing she's done made for you."

CHAPTER III. THE PEONY−GIRL AND THE BUMPKIN

"There's just no doubt about it, if Tom Mayberry weren't my own son and I had occasion to know better I'd think he had teeth in his heels, from the looks of his socks. Every week Cindy darns them a spell and then I take a hand at it. Just look, Elinory, did you ever see a worser hole than this?" As Mother Mayberry spoke she held up for Miss Wingate's interested inspection a fine, dark blue sock. They were sitting on the porch in the late afternoon and the singer lady was again at work on a bit of wardrobe for the doll daughter of her friend Eliza.

"How does he manage such—such awful ones?" asked Miss Wingate with a laugh.

"That you can't never prove by me," answered his mother as she slipped a small gourd into the top of the sock and drew a thread through her needle.

"Sometimes I wish the time when I could turn him barefooted from May to November had never gone by. But a−wishing they children back in years is a habit most mothers have got in common, I reckon. When he's away from me I dream him often at all ages, but it's mostly from six to eleven I seem to want him. When he were six, with Doctor Mayberry gone, I took to steadying myself by Tom and at eleven I made up my mind to give him up."

"Give him up?" asked Miss Wingate as she raised her eyes from her work. "I don't think you seem to have given him up to any serious extent." And she smiled as she turned her head in the direction of the office wing, from which came a low whistled tune, jerkily and absorbedly rendered.

"Oh, he don't belong to me no more," answered his mother in a placid tone of voice as she rocked to and fro with her work. "I fought out all that fight when I took my resolve. I just figured something like this, Pa Lovell had been a−doctoring on Harpeth Hills for a lifetime and Doctor Mayberry had gave all his young−man life to answering the call, a−carrying the grace of God as his main remedy, so now I felt like the time had come for a Lovell and a Mayberry to go out and be something to the rest of the world, and Tom were the one to carry the flag. I seen that the call were on him since he helped me through a spell of May pips with over two hundred little chickens before he were five years old, and he cut a knot out of the Deacon's roan horse by the direction of a book when he weren't but eleven, as saved its life. That kinder settled it with me and the Deacon both, though we talked it back and forth for two more years. Then Deacon took to teaching of him regular and I set in to save all I could from the thin peeling of potatoes to worser darnings and patches than this. Would you think they could be any worser?" And she smiled up over her glasses at the girl opposite her.

"Tell me about it," demanded the singer lady interestedly. "Where did you send him to school first?"

"Right down here to the City. You see Doctor Mayberry left me this home, fifty acres and a small life insurance, so they was a little something to inch and pinch on. You can't save by trying to peel nothing, but the smallest potatoes have got a skin, and I peeled close them days. Tom did his part too and he run the plow deep and straight when he wasn't much taller than the handles. I had done talked it over with him and asked him would he, and he looked right in my eyes in his dependable way and said yes he would. That finished it and he wasn't but eleven; but I don't want to brag on him to you. If you listen to mothers' talk the world are full of heroes and none−suches." Again Miss Wingate received the smile from over Mother Mayberry's glasses and this time it was tinged with a whimsical pride.

"Please, Mrs., Mayberry, tell me about it; you know I want to hear," begged the girl, and she moved her chair nearer to Mother's and picked up the mate of the blue sock off her knee. "How old was he when he went to college?"

"Just sixteen, big and hearty and with enough in his head to get through the examinations. I packed him up, and him and the Deacon started down Providence Road at sun−up in the Deacon's old buggy. He looked both man and baby to me as he turned around to smile back; but I stood it out at the gate until they turned the bend, then I come on back to the house quick like some kind of hurted animal. But, dearie me, I never got a single tear shed, for there were Mis' Peavey with Buck in her arms, shaking him upside down to get out a brass button he hadn't swallowed. By the time we poured him full of hot mustard water and the button fell outen his little apron pocket, I had done got my grip on myself."

"I just can't stand it that you had to let him go," Miss Wingate both laughed and sobbed.

"Yes, but I ain't told you about the commencement, honey−bird. There's that tear _I_ didn't get to drop a−splashing outen your eyes on the doll's hat! That day was the most grandest thing that ever happened to anybody's mother, anywhere in this world. I didn't think I could go to see him get the diplomy, for with all his saving ways and working hard in the summer, it had been a pull to make buckle and tongue meet and there just wasn't nothing left for me to buy no stylish clothes to wear. I set here a−worrying over it, not that I minded, but it was hard on the boy to have to make his step−off in life and his mother not be there to see. And somehow I felt as if it would hurt Pa Lovell and Doctor Mayberry for me not to be with him. Then with thinking of Pa Lovell a sudden idea popped into my head. There was Seliny Lue Lovell right down to the Bluff, on the road to town, and with Aunt Lovell's fine black silk dress packed away in the trunk, as good as new, and me and Seliny Lue of almost the same figger as her mother. That just settled the question and I got up and washed out my water−waves in a little bluing water to make 'em extra white, dabbed buttermilk on my face to get off some of the tan and called over Mis' Peavey and Mis' Pike to let 'em know. The next morning I started off gay with everybody there to see and sending messages to Tom."

"Wasn't it fortunate you thought of the dress and lovely for you to be able to go right by and get it!" exclaimed Miss Wingate, her eyes as bright as Mother Mayberry's and her cheeks pink with excitement as the tale began to unfold its dramatic length.

"Yes, and Seliny Lue was glad enough to see me! We laughed and talked half the night, was up early, and she took a time to rig me out. It is a stiff black silk, as anybody would be proud of, cut liberal with real lace collar and cuffs. Seliny Lue said I looked fine in it. I wisht she could have gone with me, but they wasn't room for both of us inside the dress." And Mother laughed merrily at the memory of her borrowing escapade.

"Did Doctor Mayberry know you were coming?" asked the singer lady, hurrying on the climax of the recital.

"Not a word! He'd gone off the week before taking it sensible, but I could see hurt mightily about it. I got to the University Hall late, and 'most everybody in the world looked like they was there. I stood at the back and didn't hope to see or hear, just thankful to be near him, but I seen one of them young usher men a−looking hard at me and he came up and asked me if I wasn't Mr. Thomas Mayberry's mother. He had knew me by the favor. I told him yes and he took me up to the very front just as the singing begun. I soon got me and the silk dress settled, with the bokay all Providence had sent Tom on my knee, and looked around me. There next to me was the sweetest young− lady girl I have 'most ever saw, and she smiled at me real friendly. I was just about to speak when the music stopped and the addressing began by a tall thin kinder man. Elinory, child, did you ever hear one of them young men's life−commencement speeches made?" This time Mother Mayberry peered over the top of her glasses seriously and her needle paused suspended over the fast narrowing hole in the sock.

"Yes, but I don't think I ever listened very carefully," admitted Miss Wingate with a smile.

"Well, I felt that if the Lord had gave it to me to stand up there and say a word of start−off to all them boys setting solemn and listening, it wouldn't have been about no combination of things done by men dead and gone, that didn't seem to prove nothing in particular on nobody. I woulder read 'em a line of scripture and then talked honest dealing by one another, the measuring out of work according to the pay and always a little over, the putting of a shoulder under another man's pressing burden, the respect of women folks, the respect of theyselves and the looking to the Lord to see 'em through it all. That speech made me so mad I'most forgot it was time for Tom's valediction. Honey−bird, I wisht you coulder seen him and heard him."

"I wish I could," answered Miss Wingate with a flush.

"Dearie me, but he was handsome and he spoke words of sense that the other gray−haired man seemed to have forgot! And they was a farewell sadness in it too, what got some of them boys' faces to working, and I felt a big tear roll down and splash right on the lace collar. Then he sat down and they was a to−do of hollering and clapping, but I just sat there too happy to take in the rest of what was did. Sometimes they is a kinder pride swell in a mother's heart that rises right up and talks to her soul in psalm words, and I heard mine that day." Mother's eyes softened and looked far away across to the blue hills.

"What did he do when he saw you?" asked Miss Wingate gently.

"Oh, I didn't pay much attention to him when he come up to me, or let on how I felt. That sweet child next to me had done found out I was his mother, I couldn't help telling her. And then she had sent for her father, who was the head Dean man, and about the time Tom came up, he was there shaking hands with me and telling me how proud the whole University was of Tom and about the great scholarship for him to go to New York to study he

had got, and that he must go. It didn't take me hardly two seconds to think a mortgage on the house and fifty acres, the cows and all, so I answered right up on time that go he should. While I was a−talking Tom had gave the bokay from Providence to the girl, what he had been knowing all the time at her father's house. And she had her nose buried in one of Mis' Peavey's pink peonys, a−blushing as pretty as you please over it at that country bumpkin of mine with all his fine manners. That Miss Alford is one of the most sweet girls you ever have saw. She and me have been friends ever since. She comes out to see me in her ottermobile sometimes. She ain't down to the City now, for I had a picture card from some place out West from her, but when she comes back I'm a−going to ask her to come up and have a stay−a−week−in−the−house party for you; and she can bring her brother. You might like him. The four of you can have some nice junketings together. Won't that be fine?"

"Y−e−s," answered the singer lady slowly, "but I'm afraid I'm not able now to interest anybody, and my voice, when I speak—I—I—Will it be soon?" Her question had a trace of positive anxiety in it and her joy was most evidently forced.

"Oh, not till June rose time! And your voice now sounds like a angel's with a bad cold. I'll tell Tom about it, he'll be so pleased. Her father was such a friend to him and as proud of him now as can be."

"Did Doctor Mayberry stay in the City—after his graduation?" asked Miss Wingate, a trace of anxiety in her voice.

"That he didn't! He come on home with me that night, got into his overalls and begun to plow for winter wheat by sun−up the next morning. We made a good crop that year and the mortgage wasn't but a few hundred dollars, what we soon paid. We've been going up ever since. Tom reminds me of a kite, and I must make out to play tail for him until I can pick him out a wife."

"Have you thought of anybody in particular?" asked the lovely lady without raising her eyes from her work. She had commenced operations on the blue sock unnoticed by Mother, who was taken up in the unfolding of her tale.

"Not yet," answered she cheerfully. "I mustn't hurry. Marrying ain't no one−day summer junket, but a year round march and the woman to raise the hymn tune. I take it that after a mother have builded up a man, she oughter see to it that he's capped off fine with a wife, and then she can forget all about him. I've got my eyes open about Tom and I'm going to begin to hunt around soon."

"I wonder just what kind of a wife you—you will select for him," murmured Miss Wingate with her eyes still on the sock, which she was industriously sewing up into a tight knot on the left side of the heel.

"Well, a man oughter marry mostly for good looks and gumption; the looks to keep him from knowing when the gumption is being used on him. Tom's so say−nothing and shy with women folks that he won't be no hard proposition for nobody. But with that way of his'n I'm afraid of his being spoiled some. I have to be real stern with myself to keep from being foolish over him."

"But you want his wife to—to love him, don't you?" asked Miss Wingate, as she raised very large and frankly questioning eyes to Mother Mayberry, who was snipping loose threads from her completed task.

"Oh she'll do that and no trouble! But a man oughter be allowed to sense his wife have got plenty of love and affection preserved, only he don't know where she keeps the jar at. As I say, I don't want Tom Mayberry spoiled. What did I do with that other sock?" And Mother began to hunt in her darning bag, in her lap and on the floor.

"Here it is," answered Miss Wingate as she blushed guiltily. "I— darned it." And she handed her handiwork over to Mother Mayberry with trepidation in voice and expression.

"Well, now," said Mother, as she inspected the tight little wad on the blue heel. "It was right down kind of you to turn to and help me like this, but, honey−bird, Tom Mayberry would walk like a hop toad after he'd done got it on. You have drawn it bad. I don't know no better time to learn you how to darn your husband's socks than right now on this one of Tom's. You see you must begin with long cross stitches in the—Now what's all this a−coming!" And Mother Mayberry rose, looked down the Road and hurried to the sidewalk with the darning bag under her arm and her thimble still on her finger.

Up the middle of the Road came, in a body, the entire juvenile population of Providence at a break−neck speed and farther down the street they were followed by Deacon Bostick, coming as fast as his feeble old legs would bring him. Eliza Pike headed the party with Teether hitched high up en her arm and Martin Luther clinging to her short blue calico skirt. They all drew up in a semicircle in front of Mother Mayberry and Miss Wingate and looked at Eliza expectantly. On all occasions of excitement Eliza was both self−constituted and unanimously

appointed spokesman. On this occasion she began in the dramatic part of the news without any sort of preamble.

"It's a circus," she said breathlessly, "a−moving over from Bolivar to Springfield and nelephants and camels and roar−lions and tigers and Mis' Pratt and Deacon and Mr. Hoover and everybody is a−going over to watch it pass—and we can't—we can't!" Her voice broke into a wail, which was echoed by a sob and a howl from across the street just inside the Pike gate, where Bud and Susie pressed their forlorn little bodies against the palings and looked out on the world with the despair of the incarcerated in their eyes.

"Why can't you?" demanded Mother.

"Oh, Maw have gone across the Nob to Aunt Elviry's and left Susie May and Bud being punished. They can't go outen the gate and I ain't a−going to no circus with my little brother and sister being punished, and I won't let Billy and Ez go either." By this time the whole group was in different stages of grief, for the viewing of a circus without the company of Eliza Pike had the flavor of dead sea fruit in all their small mouths. From the heart in Eliza's small bosom radiated the force that vivified the lives of the whole small− fry congregation, and a circus not seen through her eyes would be but a dreary vision.

"Now ain't that too bad!" said Mother Mayberry with compassion and irritation striving in her voice. "What did they do and just what did she say?"

"Susie hurted Aunt Prissy's feelings, by taking the last biscuit when they wasn't one left for her, and Maw said she would have to stay in the yard until she learned to be kind and respectful to Paw's sister, She didn't mean to be bad." And Eliza presented the case of her small sister with hopelessness in every tone.

"Well, Susie," said Mother Mayberry, "don't you feel kind to her yet?" There was a note of hope in Mother's voice that silenced all the wails, and they all fixed large and expectant eyes upon this friend who never failed them. By this time the Deacon had joined the group and his gentle old eyes were also fixed on Mother Mayberry's face, with the same confident hope that the children's expressed.

"I've done been kind to her," sniffed the culprit. "I let her cut all my finger−nails and wash my ears and never said a word. She have been working on me all afternoon and it hurt."

"Susie," said Mother Mayberry, "you can go over to the cross−roads and see that circus with the Deacon. They can't no little girl do better than that, and your Maw just told you to stay until you learned that lesson. You are let out! Now, what did you do, Bud?"

"I slid on the lean−to and tored all the back of my britches out. She couldn't stop to mend 'em and she said I could just stay front ways to folks until she come home, and they shouldn't nobody mend 'em for me." Bud choked with grief and mortification and edged back as little Bettie Pratt started in his direction on an investigating tour.

"Well course, Bud," said Mother with judicial eye, "you can't take them britches off." She paused and looked at him thoughtfully.

"I ain't a−going a step without him," reiterated the loyal Eliza, and the rest of the children's faces fell.

"Too bad," murmured the Deacon, and Miss Wingate could see that his distress at the plight of young Bud was as genuine as that of any of the rest.

"But," began Mother Mayberry slowly, having in the last second weighed the matter and made a decision, "your mother ain't said you couldn't go outen the yard and she ain't said I couldn't wrap you up in one of my kitchen aprons. That wouldn't be the same as changing the britches. She didn't know about this circus and if she was here you all know she woulder done as I asked her to do about Bud, so he ain't a−disobeying her and I ain't neither, Run get the apron hanging behind the door, Susie, and I'll fix him."

"Sister Mayberry," said the Deacon with a delighted smile in his kind eyes, but a twinkle in their corners, "your decision involves the interpretation of both the letter and the spirit of the law. I am glad it, in this case, rested with you."

"Well," answered Mother Mayberry, as she took the apron from Susie and started across the Road on her rescue mission, "a woman have got to cut her conscience kinder bias in the dealing with children. If they're stuffed full of food and kindness they will mostly forget to be bad, and oughtent to be made to remember they CAN be by being punished too long. Now, sonny, I'll get you fixed up so stylish with these pins and this apron that the circus will want to carry you off. Start on, Deacon, he's a−coming."

"I've got to get the baby's bonnet," said Eliza as the whole party started away in a trail after the Deacon, who led Martin Luther by one hand and little Bettie by the other. Over by the store they could see Mrs. Pratt waiting to

marshal the forces on down the Road and Mr. Hoover stood ready as outstanding escort. He had brought the news of the passing of the circus train and she had promptly consented to taking the children and the Deacon over for a view.

"Please, Eliza, please don't take the baby! Leave him with me," said Miss Wingate and as she spoke she stretched out her arms to Teether. Teether was looking worn with the excitement of the day and his sympathetic friend felt the journey would be too much for him. He smiled and fell over on her shoulder with a sigh of contentment.

"Don't you think he oughter see them nelephants and things?" asked Eliza doubtfully, her loyalty to Teether warring with the relief of having him out of her thin little arms for the journey.

"He won't mind. Let me keep him here on the front porch until you come back. Now run along and have a good time," and Miss Wingate started up the front walk, as Eliza darted away to join the others.

"I do declare," said Mother Mayberry, as she watched the expedition wend its way down the white Road in the direction of the Bolivar pike, "the way the Deacon do love the children is plumb beautiful, and sad some too. I don't know what he would do without Jem or they without him. Seeing 'em together reminds me of that scraggy, old snowball bush in full bloom, leaning down to the little Stars of Bethlehem reaching up to it. What that good man have been to me only my Heavenly Father can know and Tom Mayberry suspicion. I tell you what I think I'll do; I'll take one of them little pans of rolls what Cindy have baked for supper, with a jar of peach preserves, and go down and set with Mis' Bostick while the Deacon are gone. We can run the pan of rolls in to get hot for him when he comes home and I know he likes the preserves. I want to stop in to see Mis' Tutt too and give her a little advice about that taking so much blue−mass. I don't see how anybody with a bad liver can have any religion at all, much less a second blessing. I know the Squire have his faults, but others has failings too. And, too, I'll have to stop in and pacify Miss Prissy about turning the children loose, before I go down the Road."

"Miss Prissy always seems to be getting the children into trouble. I wonder why," said the singer lady with a shade of resentment in her voice. The little Pikes had established themselves firmly in the heart of this new friend, and she found herself in an attitude of critical partisanship.

"I reckon Miss Prissy is what you call a kinder crank," answered Mother Mayberry as she paused at the foot of the steps. "A married woman have got to be the hub of a family−wheel, but a old maid can be the outside crank that turns the whole contraption backwards if she has a mind to. I wish Miss Prissy had a little more understanding of the children, 'cause the rub all comes on Mis' Pike, and she's fair wore out with it. But I must be a−going so as to be the sooner a−coming. I wisht you would tell Tom Mayberry to go and let you help him put the hens and little chickens to bed. Feed 'em two quarts of millet seed, and you both know how to do it right if you have a mind to. I'm going to compliment you by a−trusting you this once, and don't let me wish I hadn't! I'll be back in the course of time."

And so it happened that as Doctor Mayberry was in the act of swinging his microscope over a particularly absorbing new plate, a very lovely vision framed itself in his office door against the background of Harpeth Hill, which was composed of the slim singer girl with the baby nodding over her shoulder. The unexpectedness of the visit sent the color up under his tan and brought him to his feet with a delighted smile.

"I don't know how you are going to feel about it, but I bring the news of an honor which we are to share. Do you suppose, do you, that we can put the chickens to bed for Mrs. Mayberry? She says we are to try, and if we don't do it the right way she is never going to compliment us with her confidence again. Help, please! I'm weighted down by the responsibility." And as she spoke Miss Wingate's eyes shone across Teether's bobbing head with delighted merriment.

"Well, let's try," answered the Doctor with the air of being ready to do or dare, an attitude which a vision such as his eyes rested upon is apt to incite in any man thus challenged. "Will you take command? I'm many times proved incompetent on such occasions, and I feel sure Mother trusted to your generalship." And together they went through the garden and over into the chicken yard.

"Now," said Miss Wingate, "I think the thing to do is not to let them know we are afraid of them. Let's just take their going under the coops as a matter of course, and then, perhaps, they will go without any remonstrance."

"Sort of a mental influence dodge," answered the Doctor enthusiastically. "Let's try it on Spangles first. I somehow feel that she will be more impressionable than Old Dominick. You influence while I spread the millet seed in front of her coop." And he bent down in front of the half barrel and carefully laid a tempting evening

meal, with his eye on Fuss−and−Feathers. Spangles hesitated, stood on one foot, clucked in an affected tone of voice to her huddling babies and coquettishly turned her head from one side to the other as if enthusing over his artistic service before accepting his hospitality. Then, just as she was poising one dainty foot ready for the first step in advance, and had sounded a forward note to the cheepers around her, Old Dominick calmly stalked forward, stepped right across the Doctor's coaxing hand held out to Spangles, and, settling herself in the coop, began, with her voracious band of little plebeians, to devour the grain with stolid appreciation.

Miss Wingate laughed merrily, Teether Pike gurgled and the Doctor looked up with baffled astonishment.

"That was your fault," he accused; "you influenced Dominick while I was expending my force in beguiling Spangles. Now, you try to get her in the next coop yourself. I shan't help you further than to spread the grain in front of all the coops." And in accordance with his threat the Doctor disposed of the rest of the food and stood with the empty pan in his hand. And, like the well−trained flock of biddies that they were, all the rest of the hen mothers clucked and cajoled their fluffy little families into their accustomed shelters and began to dispose of their suppers with contented clucks and cheeps. Only Mrs. Spangles stood afar and eyed the only vacant coop with evident disdain.

"I don't know what to do," murmured Miss Wingate pleadingly. But the Doctor stood firm, and regarded her with maliciously delighted eyes. Teether bobbed his head over her shoulder and giggled with ungrateful delight The poor little chicks peeped sleepily, but still Spangles held her ground. The truth of the matter was that Dominick had really taken the coop usually occupied by her ladyship, and with worldly determination, the scion of all the Wyandottes was holding out against the exchange.

With a glance out of the side of her eyes from under her lowered lashes in the direction of Doctor Mayberry in his stern attitude, the singer lady cautiously veered around to the rear of the insulted grandee, and, grasping her fluffy skirts in her free hand, she shook them out with a pleading "Shoo!" Instantly a perfect whirlwind of spangled feathers veered around and faced the cascade of frills, and a volume of defiant hisses fairly filled the air. Teether squealed and Miss Wingate retreated to the bounds of the fence. The Doctor laughed in the most heartless manner, and still Spangles held her ground.

To make matters worse, Mother Mayberry's jovial voice, mingled with the shrill treble of the combined circus party, who were trying all at once to tell her the wonders of the adventure, could be distinctly heard in an increasing volume that told of their rapid approach. The situation was desperate, and the loss of Mother Mayberry's faith in her seemed inevitable to the nonplussed singer lady as she leaned against the fence with Teether over her shoulder. Then the instinct that is centuries old presented to her the wile that is of equal antiquity and, raising her purple eyes to the defenseless Doctor, she murmured in a voice of utter helplessness, into which was judiciously mingled a tone of perfect confidence:

"Please, sir, get her in for me."

The response to which, being foreordained from the beginning of time, took Doctor Mayberry just one exciting half−minute grab and shove to accomplish, at the end of which a ruffled but chastened Spangles was forced to assemble her family and content herself behind the bars of the despised coop.

"Well," said Mother Mayberry as she hurried around the corner of the house with the depleted and milk−hungry Martin Luther trailing at her skirts, "did you make out to manage 'em? Why, ain't that fine; every one in and settled and Fuss−and−Feathers in that end coop where I have been wanting her to be for a week, seeing Dominick have got so many more chickens and needs that larger barrel. I didn't depend on Tom Mayberry, but I did on you, Elinory. This just goes to show that if you put a little trust in people they are mighty apt to rise in the pan to a occasion. You all look like you've been having a real good time!"

CHAPTER IV. LOVE, THE CURE−ALL

"Eat milk, thank ma'am, please, Mother Lady," demanded Martin Luther as he stood on the top step in front of Mother Mayberry, who, with Miss Wingate beside her, sat sewing away the early hours of the morning. A tiny blue−check shirt was taking shape under Mother's skilful fingers, and the singer lady was deep in the mysteries of the fore and aft of a minute pair of jeans trousers. The limitations of young Ez's wardrobe had necessitated the speedy construction of one for the little adopt, and Miss Wingate's education along the lines of needle control was progressing at what she considered a remarkable rate.

"Why, Martin Luther!" She looked down at him over a carefully poised needle. "How can you be hungry when you ate your breakfast not two hours ago?" she added with the intent to beguile him from his demand.

"All gone, thank ma'am, please," he answered, looking out from under his curl with a pathetic cast of his blue eyes, and at the same time spreading both hands over his entire vital region.

"I reckon maybe we'd better fill him up again," said Mother. "Them legs still look 'most too much like knitting−needles to suit me, and I kinder want to feel him to be sure his stomick haven't growed to his backbone. Anyway, you can't never measure a boy's food by his size. Please run and get him a glass of buttermilk and a biscuit, child, while I finish setting in this sleeve. Let me see them britches legs 'fore you put 'em down. Dearie me, if you ain't gone and made 'em both for the same leg! Too bad, with all them pretty baste−stitches!"

"Oh!" gasped Miss Wingate in dismay; "have I ruined them?"

"No, indeed, just turn the left leg inside out and hem it up again— or you might make two more right legs to sew on to these. It would be a good thing to double one failing mistake up into two successes, wouldn't it? Often bad luck turned inside out makes a cap that fits plumb easy. While you fill the boy up, I'll cut out his other legs for you to baste right this time. Take a peep around the garden before you come back to see if Spangles have got her chickens in the wet weeds. I hadn't oughter let her pretty feathers make me distrust her, but it do." And Mother went placidly on with her sewing as she watched the girl and the tot go hand−in−hand down the path to the spring−house under the hill. She had just placed in her sleeve and was regarding it with entire satisfaction, when the front gate clicked and she looked up with interest.

"Well, good morning, Mis' Mayberry," came in Bettie Pratt's hearty voice as she swung up the walk at a brisk pace. On one arm she held a bobbing baby in a white sunbonnet, a toddler clung to her skirts and a small boy trailed behind her with a puppy in his arms. She was buxom and rosy, was the Widow Pratt, with a dangerous dimple over the corner of her mouth, a decided come−hither in her blue eyes, and a smile that compelled a response.

"Why, Bettie child, how glad I am to see you!" exclaimed Mother, rendering the smile from out over her glasses. "I didn't see you all day yesterday and not the day before, neither. But I put it down to a work−hold on us both, and didn't worry none. And now here you are, with some of the little folks! Here's a empty spool for little Bettie," and she held out the treasure to the toddler, who sidled up to her knee with confidence to grasp the gift.

"I told Pattie Hoover if she would stay at home this morning and clean up some like her Pa wants her to that I'd let my Clara May help her and would bring the baby on up here to get him outen the way. 'Lias come along to get you to look at his puppy's foot, and I want you to see if you don't think the baby have fatted some since I've took holt and helped Pattie with the feeding of him."

"He have that," answered Mother heartily. "I can tell it without even feeling of his legs. You've got the growing hand with babies, Bettie, and I'm glad you don't hold it back from this little half− orphant. I don't know what the poor little Hoovers would do without you!"

"That's what poor Mr. Hoover says," answered Bettie with the utmost unconsciousness. "Show Mis' Mayberry the puppy's foot, 'Lias."

"Why, the pitiful little thing!" exclaimed Mother when a small, brown, crushed paw was presented to her inspection. "What happened to it?"

"Mr. Petway's horse stepped on it—he didn't care. He just got in the buggy and went on. I'm a−going to kill him with a gun when I get one." Tears of rage and grief welled up in 'Lias' eyes, but he choked them back with a resolution that boded ill for Mr. Petway when the time of reckoning came.

"You mustn't talk that way, 'Lias, though it are a shame," said Mother as she looked closely at the injured paw. "The bone's all crushed. I'll tell you what to do; just take him around to Doctor Tom's office and he'll fix it in no time for you, in a way I couldn't never do. He won't even limp, maybe." And Mother Mayberry made the offer of a piece of skilled surgery with the utmost generosity.

'Lias clasped the puppy closer, looked down and drew one of his bare toes along a crack in the floor. "I'd rather you'd do it," he said.

"Now, don't that just beat all!" exclaimed Mother with both amusement and exasperation in her face. "Looks like I can't even get Tom a puppy practice."

"Why, 'Lias Hoover, I'm ashamed of you not to want Doctor Tom to fix his foot, and thank you, too! Didn't Bud Pike tell you last night how he cut his little brother's mouth and didn't hurt him a bit, neither? Bud is going to get him to fix his next stubbed toe hisself. Bud ain't no bigger boy than you, but he knows a good doctor same as Mis' Mayberry and me does when he sees one." There are ways and ways of controverting masculine obstinancy, and evidently life had taught Mrs. Pratt the efficacy of beguilement. Without more reluctance 'Lias disappeared around the house in the direction of the office wing.

"I'm mighty glad you come along this morning, Bettie," said Mother Mayberry, as she threaded a new needle with a long thread. Little Bettie had seated herself on the floor and begun operations with the spool and a piece of string that vastly amused little Hoover, whom Mrs. Pratt deposited opposite her within reach of her own balancing foot, for the baby's age and backbone were both at a tender period. "I've got a kinder worry on my mind that I'd like to get a little help from you as to know what to do about. Have you noticed that both the Deacon and Mis' Bostick look mighty peaky? Course Deacon have been sick, and she have had a spell of nursing, but they don't neither of them pick up like they oughter. Mis' Bostick puts me in mind of a little, withered−up, gray seed pod when all the down have blowed away, and the Deacon's britches fair flap around his poor thin shanks. Something or other just makes me sense what is the matter."

"And me, too, Mis' Mayberry. I've been a−feeling of it for some time, since we all quit out with the nursing and taking 'em complimentary dishes of truck. They is—is hungry." Mrs. Pratt brought out the statement of the fact in a positively awestruck voice.

"That's what I'm afraid it is, Bettie," answered Mother, "and it hurts me hard to think how he have served the Lord and helped us all in our duty to Him and each other, she a−giving us of her bounty of sister−love, and now, when they's old and feeble, a−feeling the pinch of need. The young can reach out and help theyselves to they share of life, but it oughter be handed old folks with thoughtful respect. We've got to do something about it."

"Course we have," assented the widow heartily. "But how are we a− going to just give 'em things offen a cold collar? They're both so proud. With owning the house, the bit the church gives 'em would do the rest, but the Deacon have tooken that debt no−'count Will Bostick run off and left down in the City to pay, and it have left 'em at starvation's door. But that's neither here nor there; we've got to do something. They don't need much but food, and Mis' Bostick is most too weak now to cook it if they has the ingredients gave 'em to hand. They must be did for some way."

"And we've got to do it without a−giving them a single hurt feeling, either," said Mother. "Enough good−will jelly will hide any kind of charity pill, I say. Not as what we do for her and the Deacon can ever be anything but thanks rendered for the blessing of them. But you get to thinking, Bettie. The knees to my wits are getting old and stiff."

"Well, there's a donation party," suggested the widow thoughtfully. "Everybody could help, and it could be made real pleasant with the men asked to come in after supper. Everything could be gave from stovewood to the Deacon some new Sunday pants. We did that once before, five years ago to his birthday, and they was mighty pleased. Let's do it again."

"But that was before this disgrace of Will happened, and they didn't downright need the things then—it were all sort of complimentary. When needs are gave it's charity, but what you don't want is just a present. We've got to find a way to do up needs in a present package for 'em. I declare, I feel right put to know what to do." Mother Mayberry's voice was actually worried, and she paused with her scissors ready to snip a bit of the gingham into narrow bands.

"Well, we oughter be thankful we've got the things to give, and we'll find some sort of way to slip up on the blind side of them about the taking of them. The Deacon's britches is one pressing thing. Can't we take some of

the church carpet money and get Mr. Hoover to buy him a pair when he hauls corn to town Monday?"

"Yes, indeed, we can," answered Mother Mayberry, radiant at the very thought of this relief proposition. "It's a heap more important to carpet the Deacon with britches than the church floor right now. Between them and her old bombersine, Mis' Bostick have spent the year with her patch−thimble on her finger."

"I declare, it hurts me so in church to look at her elbows and back seams that I can't hardly listen to the Deacon pray. Patching is the most worrisome job a woman has to do, according to my mind," said the widow, with an expression of distaste on her beaming face. "I've done patched two men, and I know what I'm talking about."

"It is a trial," answered Mother Mayberry, "and Mis' Bostick's life have been a patched one at the best, a−moving in the Methodist wagon from one station to another and a−trying every time to cut herself out by a new style to suit each congregation, Anyway, I reckon all women's lives have wored thin and had to be darned in some places, but patches on her garment of life ain't going to make no difference to a woman when she puts it on to meet her Lord, just so it's cut on the charity mantle pattern. And Mis' Bostick's was hung to cover the multitude. But a−talking here have made me sprout a idea: 'Liza Pike have blazed the trail for us, bless her little heart! Her mother don't never cook a single thing that 'Liza haven't got a dish handy to beg some for the Deacon and Mis' Bostick. And she don't stop at her own cook stove, but she's always here looking into what Cindy cooks with an eye to the old folk's sweet−tooths or chicken−hankers. I know, too, she gets what she wants from you for them, so there is our leading. The Deacon loves 'Liza, and she is such a entertainment to him that he'd eat ten meals a day at her dictation and no questions asked. And she do beat all with her mothering ways with them old folks. Last Wednesday night she had Deacon a−leading prayer meeting with a red flannel band around his throat for his croaks, and just yesterday she made Mis' Bostick stay in bed half the day, covered up head and ears, to sweat off a little nose−dripping cold. She's always a−consulting Tom and leaving me out. I think she's got her eye on my practice. They never was such a master−hand of a child in Providence before."

"There you are right," laughed the widow. "It's getting so that they ain't a child on the Road as will let its own mother look at a cut finger or a black bruise 'fore 'Liza have done had her say about what is to be did. I believe it is as you say, Mis' Mayberry, and 'Liza can play raven for us in fine style. I know Mis' Pike will push it on and more'n do her part in the filling of the child's covered dish."

"That she will," answered Mother Mayberry heartily. "Judy Pike spends a heap of time turning over life to find for certain which is the right and wrong of it, but once found, she sticks close to the top weave. We'll plan it all out at the Sewing Circle, and then get it down to days who's to send what regular. I'm thankful for this leading of how to take care of our old folks, and I know you are, too."

"Couldn't nobody be thankfuller," answered the rosy widow, "and the filling of that dish is a−going to give me a lot of good pride. But I'd better be going and seeing after them girls and the house cleaning. They are both master hands, but if Buck Peavey was to happen to tie hisself up to the front gate, it would be good−by dust−pan and mop for Pattie. Not that I don't feel for her in the liking of that rampaging boy of Mis' Peavey's, and it's mighty hard not to kinder saunter into a little chat when the men folks call you. How are Miss Elinory to−day? Ain't she the prettiest and most stylishest girl you have ever saw? I wonder if she would lend me that long−tailed waist she wears to get the pattern off to make me and Clara May and Pattie one?" As she spoke, Mrs. Pratt rose, picked up little Hoover and set Bettie on her little bare feet.

"I know she will be glad to, and such a head sewer as you are can copy it most exact. Here she are now! Child, Mis' Pratt have been so complimenting of your looks and clothes that I'm sorter set up with pride over you."

"Good morning, Mrs. Pratt," exclaimed the singer lady, as she appeared in the doorway with the resuscitated Martin Luther at her side. "The darling babies! You are not going, are you?" The widow and Miss Wingate had developed a decided attraction for each other, and their blossoming friendship delighted Mother Mayberry most obviously.

"I wish I didn't have to," answered Mrs. Pratt, beaming with smiles, which little Bettie echoed as she coquetted around her mother's skirts with Miss Wingate, "but it's most dinner−pot time, and I've got mouths to feed when the horn blows."

"Elinory, child, run get that pink, long−tailed waist of your'n to let Bettie make one by, please," said Mother Mayberry, with total unconsciousness of that very strong feminine predilection for exclusiveness of design in wearing apparel. The garment in question was a very lovely, simply−cut linen affair that bore a distinguished

foreign trade−mark. "I know you feel complimented by her wanting to make one for herself by it, and maybe Clara May and Pattie, too. They ain't no worldly feeling as good as having your clothes admired, is they?"

"Indeed there isn't," answered Miss Wingate cordially, and if there was chagrin in her heart at the thought of seeing Providence in uniform with the precious pink blouse, her smile belied it. She immediately ascended to her room, and returned quickly with the treasure in her hand. "Let me come and see you fit them," she entreated. "I don't know how to sew one, but I can tell how it ought to look."

"Come spend the day next Monday. We'll all have a good time together and I'll make you some more of them fritters you liked for supper the other night." The widow fairly beamed like a headlight at the thought of the successful impromptu supper party a few nights before, when Doctor Mayberry had brought Miss Wingate down upon her unexpectedly with a demand to be invited to stay to supper for that especial dainty. As she spoke she was half−way down the walk, and looked back, smiling at them over the baby's bonnet.

"Yes, I heard Tom Mayberry disgraced himself over your maple syrup jug, Bettie Pratt," called Mother Mayberry after her. "That Hoover baby surely have growed. Good−by!"

"They ain't nothing in this world so comforting to a woman as good feeling with her sisters, one and all," Mother Mayberry said as she watched the last switch of the widow's skirt. "Mother, wife and daughter love is a institution, but real sistering is a downright covenant. Me and Bettie have held one betwixt us these many a year. But you and me have both put a slight on the kitchen since Cindy got back. Let's go see if dinner ain't most on the table."

And they found that from their neglect the dinner had suffered not at all. Cindy, a gaunt, black woman with a fire of service and devotion to Mother Mayberry in her eyes, and apparently nothing else to excuse existence, had accomplished the meal as a triumph.

She had set the table out on the side porch under the budding honeysuckle, and as Mother Mayberry and Miss Wingate, followed by Martin Luther, ever ready to do trencher duty, came out of the back hall Doctor Tom emerged from his office door.

"Why, I didn't see you come in, Tom," said Mother. "You muster used wings and lit."

"No, I came from across the fields and in the back way. I've had a patient and I'm puffed up with pride." As he spoke he smiled at Miss Wingate and his mother delightedly.

"'Lias Hoover's puppy," said Mother, stating the fact to Miss Wingate. "Was you able to fix him up, Tom?"

"Oh, yes; his puppyship will navigate normally in ten days, I think; but this was a real patient."

"Why, who, son? Don't keep me waiting to know, for I'm worried at the very thought of a Providence pain. Who's down now and what did you do for 'em?" And Mother bestowed upon the young doctor a glance of inter−professional inquiry. "Squire Tutt," answered her son promptly. "I met him up by the store and he asked me what I would do if a man had a snake bite out in the woods, ten miles from any hot− water kettle. I diagnosed the situation and prescribed with the help of Mr. Petway, and I think—I think, Mother, I've proselyted your patient."

"Now, Tom, don't make fun of the Squire. Them are real pains he has, and I don't think it is right for a doctor to have a doubting mind towards a patient. Sympathy will help worry any kinder bad dose down. You know I want you to do your doctoring in this life with love to be gave to help smooth all pain." Mother regarded him seriously over her glasses as she admonished.

"I will—I do, Mother," answered the Doctor, and his gray eyes danced before he veiled them with his black lashes as he looked down at his plate.

Miss Wingate flushed ever so slightly and busied herself with spreading butter on a large piece of bread for Martin Luther, an unnecessary attention, as she had performed that same office for him just the moment before, and even he had not been able to make an inroad thereon.

"I think you are right, Mrs. Mayberry," she said slowly after a second's rally of her forces. "The sympathy and—and regard of one's physician is very necessary at times and—and—" She paused, but not so much as a glance out of the corner of her purple black eyes did she throw in the direction of the Doctor.

"Course they ain't nothing so encouraging in the world as love, and I think the sick oughter have it gave to 'em in large and frequent doses! I'm thankful I've got so much in my heart that I can just prescribe it liberal when needed. Dearie me, could that shadow be a chicken−hawk? Just excuse me, children; finish your dinner while I go out and look after my feather babies." And Mother hurried away through the kitchen, leaving the singer lady and the Doctor sitting at the table under the fragrant vine, with the replete Martin Luther nodding his sleepy head

down into his plate between them.

And thus deserted, the flush rose up under Miss Wingate's eyes and a dimple teased at the corner of her red lips, but she busied herself with removing the plate from under Martin Luther's yellow mop and making a pillow of her own bare arm, against which he nestled his chubby little cheek with a sigh of content, as he drifted off into his usual after−dinner nap.

The Doctor watched her from under his half−closed eyes, then he lit a cigarette, leaned his elbow on the table and sat silent for a few moments, while under her breath she hummed a little sleep song to the drifting baby.

"On the whole," he asked at last, the usual delightful courtesy with which he always addressed her striving with an unusual trace of gentle banter in his deep voice, "what do you think of Mother's philosophies?"

"I think," she answered as she ruffled the baby's curls with one white hand, "they are so true that no wonder they are—are more healing than—than your medicines."

She raised her eyes to his suddenly and they were filled to the brim with frank merriment.

"Don't tell me I'm going to lose my one and only star patient, Teether Pike and the puppy excepted!" he exclaimed with a laugh.

"Yes," she answered slowly, "I'm going to let you operate when the time comes—but it's your Mother that's healing me. Oh, can't you, can't you see what she's doing for me?" she turned to him and asked suddenly, the burr thrown across her voice heavily because of the passion in her tones. "I came to you a broken instrument—useless for ever, perhaps—unfit for all I knew of life unless you healed me, and now—now I can make things and do things—a pie and a good one, bread to feed and the butter thereto, and to−day two halves of a pair of trousers, no the halves of two pairs of trousers. What matter if I never sing again?" She stretched her white arm across the table and looked over the head of the sleeping baby straight into his eyes. Hers were soft with tears, and a divine shyness that seemed to question him.

He lifted the white hand, with its pink palm upward, gently into his own brown one, and placed the tip of one of his fingers on a tiny red scar on her forefinger.

"Do you know the story the drop of blood I took from this prick this morning told?" he asked with his eyes shining into hers. "A gain of over thirty percent in red corpuscles in less than a month. Yes, I admit it; Mother is building, but when she has you ready—I'm going to give it back to you, the wonderful voice. I don't know why I know, but I do."

"And I don't know why I know that you will—but I do," she answered with lowered voice and eyes. "When all the others tried I knew they would fail. The horrible thought clutched at my throat always, and there seemed no help. I don't feel it now at all. I'm too busy," she added with a catch in her laugh and a sudden mist in her eyes.

"Mother's treatment again," he laughed as he laid her hand gently back on the table.

"And yours—when directed by her—her philosophies," she ventured daringly, as she lifted Martin Luther into her arms, with a view to depositing him upon the haven of Mother's bed to finish his nap.

The Doctor looked at her a second, started to answer, thought better of it, took the heavy youngster out of her arms into his own and strode across the hall with him into Mother's room.

The singer lady walked to the edge of the porch, pulled down a spray of the fragrant vine and looked out through it to the blue hills beyond the meadows. She hummed a waltz−song this time, and her eyes were dancing as if she were meditating some further assault on the Doctor's imperturbability. He came back and stood beside her, and was just about to make a tentative remark when Mother Mayberry hurried around the side of the house.

"Children!" she exclaimed, her eyes shining, her cheeks pink with excitement, and the white curls flying in every direction; "I never did have such a time in my life! It WERE a chicken−hawk and he were right down amongst the hens and little chickens. Old Dominick was spread out like a featherbed over all hers and most of Spangles', and there Spangles was just a−contending with him over one of her little black babies. He had it in his claw, but she had him by a beak full of feathers and was a−swinging on for fare−you−well. Old Dominick was a−directing of her with squawks, and Ruffle Neck was just squatting over hers, batting her eyes with skeer, for all the world like she was a fine lady a−going into a faint. And there stood all four of the roosters, not a one of 'em a−turning of a feather to help her! They looked like they was petrified to stone, and I'm a great mind to make 'em every one up into pies and salad and such. They's a heap of men, come trouble, don't make no show, and the women folks have to lead the fight. But they might er helped her after she's took holt!"

"The brutes!" exclaimed Doctor Tom with real indignation. "When are you going to have the pie, Mother?" he

added teasingly.

"Well, I've got no intentions of feeding no such coward truck to you, sir," answered his mother, still flurried with belligerency.

"But the little baby chicken—what DID become of it?" demanded Miss Wingate, and she, too, cast a glance of scorn at the Doctor.

"Why, he dropped it and flew away as soon as he caught sight of me. It ain't hurt a mite, and Spangles have hovered it and all the rest she could coax out from under Dominick. Now this do settle it! Good looks don't disqualify a woman from nothing; it's the men that can't stand extra long tail feathers and fluted combs. I'm a−going to put 'em all four in the pot before Wednesday."

"I apologize; I apologize, with emotion, for all my doubts, both expressed and unexpressed, of Mrs. Spangles!" the Doctor hastened to exclaim. "Neck under heel for the whole masculine fraternity and suffrage triumphant!"

"Well, it's not as bad as that," answered Mother in a jovially mollified tone of voice. "Meek, plain−favored men like you may be let live, with no attention paid 'em. Now go on over to Flat Rock and stop a−wasting me and my honey−bird's time with your chavering. Come back early for supper or you won't get none, for all three of us are a−going to prayer meeting."

"I'll be here, and thank you for−crumbs of attention," answered the Doctor, and, with a laughing glance at both his mother and Miss Wingate he took himself off in the direction of the barn, for the purpose of saddling his horse for his afternoon visit to his patients beyond the Nob.

"Ain't he good to look at?" asked Mother Mayberry as she watched his tall figure swing down the garden path. "Good looks in a man can be a heap of pleasure to a woman, but she mustn't let on to him."

"I believe," said Miss Wingate in an impersonally judicial tone of voice, "that Doctor Mayberry is the very handsomest man I ever saw. One would almost call him beautiful. It isn't entirely that he is so tall and grand and has such eyes, but—do you know I think it is because he is so like you that he is so lovely." And the singer lady tucked her hand into Mother Mayberry's with a shy blush.

"Liking folks kinder shines 'em up, same as furniture polish, honey− bird," laughed Mother Mayberry with delight at the compliment. "You're a−rubbing some on me and Tom Mayberry. But he were the best favored baby I 'most ever saw, if I do say it, as shouldn't."

"Oh!" said Miss Wingate delightedly, "I know he must have been lovely! What was he like?"

"Well," answered Mother reminiscently, "he were about like he are now. He come so ugly I cried when I seen him first, and Doctor Mayberry teased me about it to the day of his death. He called Tom 'Ugly' for short. But he mighty soon begun to sprout little pleasing ways, a−looking up under them black lashes and a−laughing acrost my breast. His cheeks was rosy, his back broad and his legs straight, same as now. He teethed easy, walked soon, have never learned to talk much yet, and had his measles and whooping−cough when his time come. I just thought he were something 'cause he were mine. All babies is astonishing miracles to they mothers."

"But I'm sure Doctor Mayberry was really wonderful," said Miss Wingate, instantly sympathetic. "Had he always such black hair?"

"Borned with it. Now, my little girl had beautiful yellow curls and I can show you one, by the Lord's mercy I've got it." Mother paused and an ineffable gentleness came into her lovely old face. "I want to tell you about it, honey−heart, 'cause it have got a strange sweetness to it. She wasn't but five years old when she died, tooken sudden with pneumony cruel bad. Nobody thought to cut me one of her curls before they laid her away, and when I come to myself I grieved over it more than I had oughter. But one day when the fall come on and the days was short and dark; and it looked like nothing couldn't light up the old house with that sunshine head gone, me almost a− feeling bitter and questioning why, Tom went out and picked up a robin's nest that had blowed down from a tree in the yard. And there, wound around inside it, was the little curl I had cut off in the spring, out on the porch, what had tagged into her eyes and worried her! The mother bird had used it to make the nest soft for her babies and now didn't need it no more. When I looked at it I took it as a message and a sign that my Lord hadn't forgot me, and I ain't never mistrusted Him again. Come, let me show it to you."

CHAPTER V. THE LITTLE RAVEN AND HER COVERED DISH

Wednesday morning dawned clear and bright. From over Providence Nob the round red old sun looked jovially and encouragingly down upon Providence, up and stirring at an unusually early hour, for in the mid−week came Sewing Circle day and the usual routine of work must be laid by before the noon meal, and every housewife in condition to forgather at the appointed place on the stroke of one. Mrs. Peavey had aroused the protesting Buck at the peep of dawn, the Pikes were all up and breakfasting by the first rays of light that fell over the Ridge, and the Hoover biscuits had been baked in the Pratt oven and handed across the fence fifteen minutes agone. Down the road Mr. Petway was energetically taking down the store shutters and Mr. Mosbey was building the blacksmith shop fire. Cindy had milked and started breakfast and Mother Mayberry had begun the difficult task of getting the Doctor up and ready for the morning meal. Martin Luther had had a glass of warm milk and was ready for an energetic attack upon his first repast.

Above, in her room under the gables, the singer lady had been awakened by the brushing of a white−capped old locust bough against her casement as it attempted to climb with all its bloom into her dormer window. As she looked through the mist, a long golden shaft of light shot across the white flowers and turned the tender green leaves into a bright yellow. Suddenly a desire to get up and look across at the Nob possessed her, for the arrival of the sun upon the scene of action was a sight that held the decided charm of novelty. And on this particular morning she found it more than worth while. Providence lay at her feet like a great bouquet of lilacs, locust and fruit blossoms. The early mist was shot through with long spears of gold and the pale smoke curled up from the brick chimneys and mingled its pungent wood−odor with the perfume laden air. She drank in great drafts of exhilaration and delighted her eyes with the picture for a number of minutes, until an intoxicating breakfast aroma began to steal up from Cindy's domain. Then, spurred by a positive agony of hunger, it took the singer lady the fewest possible number of minutes to complete a dainty and most ravishing breakfast toilet.

"Why, honey−bird," exclaimed Mother Mayberry as she descended the steps and found them all at breakfast in the wide−open dining−room, "what did you get up so soon for? It's Wednesday and the Sewing Circle meets with me, so Cindy and us must be a−stirring, but I had a breakfast in my mind for you two hours from now. You hadn't oughter done it. Them ain't orders in your prescription."

"I'm so hungry," she pleaded with a most wickedly humble glance at the Doctor, who was busy consuming muffins and chicken gravy. "Can't I have a breakfast now, Doctor—and the other one two hours later? Please!"

"Yes," answered the Doctor, "but don't forget the two glasses of cream and dinner and some of the Sewing Party refreshments, to say nothing of supper−and are you going to make custards for us to eat before seeking our downy couches?"

"The cup custards are going to be part of the Sewing Circle refreshments," his mother answered him. "I want to show off my teaching to the Providence folks. Give the child some chicken, Tom Mayberry, and then you can go to your work. We don't want you underfoot."

"Don't you need my help?" asked the Doctor, as, in a disobedient frame of mind, he lingered at the table to watch the singer lady begin operations on her dainty breakfast.

"Well, you can set here and see that Elinory gets all she wants and more too, but I must be a−doing around. There cames the Deacon! I wonder what the matter is!" And Mother Mayberry hurried out of the house and down to the front gate to meet the Deacon who was coming slowly up the Road.

"Good morning, Sister Mayberry," he said cheerily enough, though there was an expression of anxiety on his gentle old face. "I thought I would find you up, even at this unusually early hour. Your lamp is always burning to meet emergencies. Mrs. Bostick is not well this morning and I came up to see if you could find a moment to step down to see her soon. I also wanted to ask Thomas to stop in for a moment on his way over to Flat Rock. I am sure that she is not at all ill, but I am just overly anxious."

"Why, of course, we will both come right away, Deacon! What did she eat last night for supper? She oughter be careful about her night eating."

"Let me see," answered the Deacon thoughtfully, "I think we both had a portion of milk and toast administered by our young sister, Eliza Pike. I recall I pleaded for some of the peaches, still in the jar you gave

Mrs. Bostick, but was sternly denied." As he spoke the Deacon beamed with affectionate pride over having been vanquished by the stern Eliza.

Just at this moment from around the corner of the Pike home came the young woman in question, with a pitcher in one hand and a covered dish in the other. Ez followed her with a plate wrapped in a napkin, and Billy brought up the rear with a bucket of cool water which he sloshed over his bare feet with every step.

"Why, Deacon," demanded Eliza sternly, "you ain't gone and et breakfast with Mother Mayberry, when I told you about Maw making light rolls before she went to bed 'cause to−day is Wednesday?"

"No, Eliza," answered the Deacon meekly, with a delighted glance at Mother Mayberry out of the corner of his eye. "Neither Mrs. Bostick nor I would think of breakfasting without your superintendence. I was just starting over to tell you that she felt indisposed and would like to see you and Sister Mayberry, along with the Doctor, later in the day."

"Well," answered Eliza confidently, "I think I can tend to her if Mother Mayberry is too busy to come. I was a−going to watch for Doctor Tom and ask him in anyway. Please come on home, Deacon, 'fore the rolls get cold and the scrambled eggs set. Ez, hold the plate straight or the butter will run outen the rolls! Please come on, Deacon!"

"Yes, Deacon, go along with her right away," answered Mother Mayberry, as her eyes rested on the serious face of the ministering child with a peculiar tenderness tinged with respect. "And, 'Liza, honey, stop by and tell me how Mis' Bostick does when you come back, and let me know if you need me to help you any."

"Yes'm, Mother Mayberry," answered Eliza with a flash of pure joy shining in her devoted little face when she found that she was not to be supplanted in her attendance on her charges. "I was a−coming to see you this morning anyway about the place Mr. Mosbey burned his finger and I tied up last night. Please come on, Deacon!"

"And a little child shall lead them," said Mother Mayberry to herself, as she watched the breakfast party down the road. Martin Luther had come out from the table by this time and now trotted along at the Deacon's heels like a replete and contented puppy. Ez held the plate carefully and Billy seemed about sure of arriving at his destination with at least half the bucket of cool water. "Yes, a little child—but some children are borned with a full−growed heart."

And true to her promise Eliza appeared an hour or two later to hold serious consultation over the blacksmithing finger down the Road.

"'Liza," said Mother Mayberry as she prepared a stall for the finger and poured a cooling lotion in a small bottle for which the child waited eagerly, "you are a−doing the right thing to take nice things to Mis' Bostick and the Deacon and I'm proud of your being so kind and thoughtful. Do they ever ask you where you bring 'em from?"

"I always tell 'em, Mother Mayberry. Deacon said I oughtn't to get things from other folks to bring to 'em, but I told him that you and Mis' Pratt and Mis' Mosbey and Mis' Peavey would be mad at me if I just took things from Maw to 'em and slighted they cooking. I pick out the best things everybody makes. Maw's light rolls, Mis' Pratt's sunshine cake and cream potatoes, Cindy's chicken and Mis' Peavey for baked hash. I took the custards from Miss Elinory to please her; but Mis' Mosbey's is better. I wanted 'em to have the best they is on the Road, 'cause they is old and they is our'n."

"Bless your dear little heart, the best they shall have always!" exclaimed Mother Mayberry, as she hugged her small confrere close against her side and wiped away a tear with a quick gesture. "Now you can go fix up Nath Mosbey's finger to suit your mind, Sister Pike," she added with a laugh as she, bestowed the bottle.

The rest of the morning was filled to the minute for the Mayberry household, which seemed possessed with a frenzy of polishing and garnishing. After Cindy had done her worst with broom and mop, Mother Mayberry with feather duster and cloth, Miss Wingate threw her energies with abandon into the accomplishing of a most artistic scheme of decoration. She set tall jars of white locust blossoms in the hall which shone out mystically in the cool dusk. She mingled lilac and red bud, cherry blossoms and narcissus and trailed long vines of honeysuckle over every possible place.

"Dearie me," said Mother Mayberry, as she paused in her busy manoeuvers to take in what Miss Wingate proudly declared to be the completed effect, "everybody will think they have walked into a flower show. I'm sorry I never thought of inviting in the outdoors to any of my parties before. I wonder if some of the meek folks, that our dear Lord told about being invited in from the byways and hedges, mightn't a−brought some of the hedge blooms along into the feast with 'em. Thank you, child, the prettiness will feed everybody's eye, I know, but you'd

better run along and get to whipping on that custard for they stomicks. This here is a Mission Circle, but it have got a good knife and fork by−law to it. Make a plenty and if we feel well disposed toward Tom Mayberry, come bedtime, we may feed him a half dozen."

And in accordance with time−honored custom the stroke of one found the Providence matrons grouped along the Road and up Mother Mayberry's front walk, in the act of assembling for the good work in hand.

"Come in, everybody," exclaimed Mother Mayberry, as she welcomed them from the front steps. "I'm mighty glad all are on time, for I have got the best of things to tell, as I have been saving by the hardest for three days. A woman holding back news is mighty like root−beer, liable to pop the cork and foam over in spite of all."

"I'm mighty glad to hear something good," said Mrs. Peavey in a doleful tone. "Looks like the world have got into astonishing misery. Did you all read in the Bolivar Herald last week about that explode in a mine in Delyware; a terrible flood in Lottisianny and the man that killed his wife and six children in Kansas? I don't know what we're a−coming to. I told Mr. Peavey and Buck this morning, but they ain't either of 'em got any sympathy. They just went on talking about the good trade Mr. Hoover made in hogs over to Springfield and the fine clover stand they have got in the north field."

By this time the assembly had removed their hats, laid them on Mother Mayberry's snowy bed and settled themselves in rocking−chairs that had been collected from all over the house for the occasion. Gay sewing bags had been produced and the armor of thimbles and scissors had been buckled on. Mother Mayberry still stood in the center of the room watching to see that all of her guests were comfortably seated.

"Them were mighty bad happenings, Mis' Peavey, and I know we all feel for such trouble being sent on the Lord's people," said Mother Mayberry seriously, though a smile quirked at the corners of the Widow Pratt's pretty mouth and young Mrs. Nath Mosbey bent over to hunt in her bag for an unnecessary spool of thread. Mrs. Peavey's nature was of the genus kill−joy, and it was hard to steer her into the peaceful waters of social enjoyment.

"I don't think any of that is as bad as three divorce cases I read about in a town paper that Mr. Petway wrapped up some calico for me in," answered Mrs. Peavey, continuing her lamentations over conditions in general, which they all knew would get to be over conditions in particular if something did not intervene to stop the tide of her dissatisfaction.

"Divorces oughtn't to be allowed by the United States," answered Mrs. Pike decidedly. "They are too many people in the world that don't seem to be able to hitch up together, without letting folks already geared roam loose again. But what's the news, Sister Mayberry?" There came times when only Judy Pike's uncompromising veto could lay Mrs. Peavey on the table.

"Well, what do you think! Tom Mayberry have got this Providence Meeting−house Sewing Circle a good big sewing order from the United States Government. Night drawers and aprons and chimeses and all sorts of things and—"

"Lands alive, Sister Mayberry, you must be outen your head!" exclaimed Mrs. Peavey with her usual fear−the−worst manner. "What earthly use can the United States Government have for night drawers and chimeses?"

"Now, Hettie Ann, you didn't let me have my say out," remonstrated Mother Mayberry as they all laughed merrily at Mrs. Peavey's scandalized remonstrance. "They are for them poor misfortunates over at Flat Rock what the Government have sent Tom down here to study about, so he can find the bug that makes the disease and stop it from spreading everywhere. While he's a−working with 'em he has to see that they are provided for; and they condition are shameful. He wants outfits for the women and children and Mr. Petway have the order to buy the men's things down in the City for him. He's a−going to pay us good prices for the work and it will mean a lot of money for the carpet and the repair fund. A quarter apiece for the little night drawers without feet to 'em is good money. He wanted to give us fifty cents but I told him no, I wasn't a−going to cheat my own country for no little child's night rigging. A quarter is fair to liberal, I say."

"That it is, Mis' Mayberry, and thank Doctor Tom, too, for giving us the order," answered Widow Pratt heartily. "When can we begin? I'll cut 'em all out at home, so as to save time, if you'll give me the goods. I can cut children's clothes out with my eyes shut and sew 'em with my left hand if needs be."

"Well, if all we hear be true, Bettie Pratt, it's a good thing it comes easy to you. The sewing for seventeen might be a set−back to any kind of co'ting, but seeing as you likes it so, why, maybe—" Mrs. Peavey paused and

peered at the blushing widow with goading curiosity in her keen eyes.

"Well, it hasn't been a bit to me and Mr. Hoover, Mis' Peavey," she answered with dancing eyes and a lovely rose color mounting her cheeks. "Looks like all the love we have got for each other's orphant children have mixed itself up into a wedding cake for the family. I had laid off to tell you all about it this afternoon, and here's a box of peppermints Mr. Hoover sent everybody. He said to make you say sweet things about him to me. Have one, Mis' Peavey, and pass the box!"

With which a general laugh and buzz of inquiry went around with the box of sweets provided by the wily widower.

"Well, we think we'll just build a long, covered porch acrost the fronts of the two houses to connect 'em up," answered Mrs. Pratt to a friendly inquiry about her future domestic arrangements.

"I know it will look sorter like a broke−in−two steamboat but I can put the boys all over into one house and take the girls with me. We can rent a room in the boys' house to Mr. Petway and he'll look after them if need be, though 'Lias Hoover and my Henny Turner are getting big, dependable boys already. I'm so glad the children match out in pairs. I always did want twins and now I'm going to have eight pairs and the baby over. I don't think I ever was so happy before." And pretty Bettie fairly radiated lovingness from her big, motherly heart.

"Bettie Pratt, you are a regular Proverbs, last chapter and tenth to thirtieth verse woman and your husband's heart is a−going to 'safely rejoice' in you," said Mother Mayberry as she beamed across the little sleeve she was basting in an apron. "And this brings me to the mention of another little Bible character we have a−running about amongst us. It's 'Liza Pike, as should be called one of God's own little ravens arid you all know why."

"Yes, we do, Sister Mayberry," spoke up Mrs. Mosbey quickly. "And I've just caught on to her doings, and thankful I am to her for letting in the light to us before it were too late maybe."

"Why, what have my child been a−doing to be spoke of this way?" asked her mother with both pride and uneasiness in her tone, for Eliza, as is the way of all geniuses, especially those of a philanthropic turn of mind, was apt often to confront those responsible for her with the unexpected.

"Just seeing what we was failing to notice, that Mis' Bostick and the Deacon was in need of being tooken care of and, without a word to anybody, starting out with a covered dish and a napkin to do the providing for 'em. And in the right spirit, too, walking into each kitchen and taking the best offen the stove—no left−over scraps in her offering to the Lord, and she have gave a lesson to grown−ups. We all love the old folks and was ready to do, but 'Liza have proved that love must be mixed with a little gumption to make wheels go round. And ain't she cute about it? She told the Deacon that she had to bring something from everybody's kitchen or hurt all our feelings. They is a way of putting what−oughter−be into words that makes it a truth, and she did it that time." As she delivered her little homily on the subject of the absent small Sister Pike, Mother Mayberry's face shone with emotion and there was a mist in her eyes that also dimmed the vision of some of the others.

"And the way of her," laughed the widow softly. "Told me yesterday I didn't brown my hoe−cake enough on both sides for the Deacon's greens—that Mis' Peavey's was better."

"Why, Mis' Pratt, 'Liza oughtn't to speak that way to you; it ain't manners," her mother hastened to say as they all laughed, even the misanthrope, who was much pleased over this public acknowledgment of the superiority of her handiwork.

"Now, Judy honey, don't you say one word to 'Liza about that! She have got the whole thing fixed up for us now, and it won't do to get her conscious like in her management of the old folks. The thing for us to do is to make our engagements for truck with her regular and take her dictation always about what is sent. Keep it in her mind how complimented we are to be let give to the Deacon and she'll manage him, pride and all, in a sorter game. We'll make it a race with her which pleases him. most. And now," Mother paused and looked from the face of one hearty country woman to another with a wealth of affection for each and every one, "let's don't none of us forget to take the child up to the throne with us each night in the arms of prayer, as one of His ministers!—Well it's time for us to walk out to the dining−room and see what kind of a set−out Cindy and Elinory have got for us. Yes, Mis' Nath, did you ever see such a show of decorations? She must a−kinder sensed the wedding in the air in compliment to you, Bettie. Come in, one and all!"

And the cheerful company assembled around the hospitable Mayberry board put into practice the knife and fork by−law of the Circle with hearty good will. Cindy's austerity relaxed noticeably at the compliments handed her in return for her offer of the various viands she had prepared for their delectation, and Miss Wingate blushed

and beamed upon them all with the most rapturous delight when her efforts met with like commendation. She had insisted on helping Cindy wait on them and was such a very lovely young Hebe that they could scarcely eat for looking at her.

"Sakes, Mis' Mayberry," said Mrs. Pike, who had unbent from her reserve over her second cup of tea to a most remarkable degree, "it were hard enough to ask Doctor Tom in to pot−luck with my chicken dumplins, that he carries on over, a−knowing about what you and Cindy could shake up in the kitchen, but with Miss Elinory's cooking added I'm a−going to turn him away hungry next time."

"Oh, please don't!" exclaimed Miss Wingate. "Yours is the next place he has promised to take me to supper. And Bud and Eliza have both invited me."

"I'll set a day with him this very night," responded Mrs. Judy, all undone with pride. Nothing in the world could have pleased the hospitable country women more than the parties that Doctor Tom had been improvising for the amusement of the singer girl. Before each visit he openly and boldly made demands of each friend for her CHEF− D'OEUVRE and consumed the same heartily and with delight in the stranger's growing appetite.

"If you folks don't stop spoiling Tom Mayberry I won't never be able to get him a wife. I'll have to take little Bettie to raise and teach her how to bit and bridle him," laughed Mother Mayberry, as they all rose and flocked to the front porch.

In the Road in front of the house had congregated the entire school of small−fry, drawn by the mother lode, but too well trained to think of making any kind of interruption to the gathering. They were busily engaged in a tag and tally riot which was led on one side by Eliza and the other by Henny Turner, whose generalship could hardly be said to equal that of his younger and feminine opponent. Teether and little Hoover sat in the Pike wheelbarrow which was drawn up beside the Pike gate, and attached thereto by long gingham strings were Martin Luther and little Bettie. They champed the gingham bits drawn through their mouths and pranced with their little bare feet in the dust, as Eliza found time every minute or two to call out "whoa" or cut at them with a switch as she flashed past them. They were distinctly of the game and were blissfully unconscious of the fact that they were not in it. This arrangement for keeping them happy, though out of the way, had been of Eliza's contriving and did credit to her wit in many senses of the word.

At the appearance of their be−hatted parents on Mother Mayberry's front walk they all swooped over and stood in a circle around the gate. A mother who has many calls in the life−complicated to take her out of reach of the children is different from a mother who is always in the house, kitchen, garden or at a convenient neighbor's, and this weekly three−hour separation occasionally had disastrous results.

"Have anything happened, 'Liza?" asked her mother, as she ran a practised eye over her group and detected not a loose end. Eliza and Bud had rolled over the wheelbarrow, led by the prancing team.

"No'm," answered Eliza, "everybody's been good and the Deacon have told us three Bible tales, and my side have beat Henny's five catches and one loose. But Henny played his'n good," she added, with a worthy victor's generosity to the fallen foe.

"Here's a whole bucket of cakes Cindy and Miss Elinory made in case we found a good passel of children when the meeting was over," said Mother Mayberry as she tendered the crisp reward of merit to Bud Pike, who stood nearest her.

"Thank you, ma'am," answered Bud, mindful of his manners. "Say, 'Liza, let's all go down and set on the pump and eat 'em, and we can drink water, too, so they will last longer."

"All right," answered Eliza, and she set about unharnessing the young team, who immediately scampered after the rest. She handed little Hoover to Mrs. Pratt and was preparing to set off with Teether in the wake of the cake bucket, when the widow called to her.

"'Liza, honey," she said, "here's some peppermints for you. They wasn't enough to give some to all the children, but I want you to get a bite, anyway."

"Thanky, ma'am, but I don't like the fresh air taste of 'em in my mouth," answered Eliza. "But can you give me five of 'em? I want one for Deacon and Mis' Bostick and I want one for Squire Tutt, 'cause he do love peppermint so. He wouldn't take the medicine Mother Mayberry fixes for him if she didn't put peppermint in it. He says so. He's porely and have got his head all tied up in a shawl, 'cause prayer meeting day Mis' Tutt sings hymns all the time and music gives him misery in his ears. I want to give her one, too, and I want one for Cindy."

"I'll save all in the box for you, sweetie," assented Mrs. Pratt heartily. "Now run along, for you might get left

out of that cake eating."

"No, ma'am, I won't," answered Eliza with confidence; "they won't begin till I get there. It wouldn't be fair." And she hurried down the Road to where the group waited impatiently but loyally around the town pump.

"Ain't they all the Lord's blessings?" asked Mother Mayberry, as she looked down the Road at the little swarm with tender pride in her eyes.

"That they are," answered the widow, with an echo of the pride in her own rich voice, "and to think that pretty soon seventeen of 'em will be mine!"

And it was an hour or two later that the old red sun had reluctantly departed across the west meadows, just as a soft lady moon rose languidly over Providence Nob. Providence suppers had all been served, the day's news discussed with the men folk, jocularly eager to get the drippings of excitement from the afternoon infair, and the Road toddlers put to bed, when the soft−toned Meeting−house bell droned out its call for the weekly prayer meeting. Very soon the Road was in a gentle hum of conversation as the congregation issued from their house doors and wended their way slowly toward the little church, which, back from the Road in an old cedar glade, brooded over its peaceful yard of graves. The men had all donned their coats and exchanged field hats for stiff, uncomfortable, straight−brimmed straw, and their wives still wore the Sewing Circle gala attire. The older children walked decorously along, each group in wake of the heads of their own family, though Buck Peavey had managed to annex himself to the Hoover household.

"Well, I don't know just what to do with you all," said Mother Mayberry, as she came out on the front porch, sedately bonneted, with her Bible and hymn−book under her arm and fortified with a huge palm−leaf fan. "It's my duty to make you both come with Cindy and me to prayer meeting, but I don't hold with a body using they own duty as a stick to fray out other folks with. I reckon I'll have to let you two just set here on the steps and see if you can outshine the moon in your talk, which you can't, but think you can."

"Oh, we'll come with you! I was just going to get my hat," exclaimed the singer lady as she rose from the steps upon which Doctor Tom kept his seat and puffed a ring of his cigar smoke at his mother daringly.

"No, honey−bird, you've had a long day since your sun−up breakfast and I'll excuse you. I'd LET Tom Mayberry go only I have to make him stay to keep care of you. Put that lace fascination around your throat if a breeze blows up! Tom, try to make out, with Elinory's help, to bring a fresh bucket of water from the spring for the night. Good−by, both of you; I'm a−going to bring you a blessing!"

"Yourself, mother," called the Doctor after her.

"Honey−fuzzle," called Mother back from the gate. "Better keep it, son, you'll need it some day."

"Was there ever, ever anybody just like her?" asked Miss Wingate, as she sank back on the step beside the Doctor.

"I think not," he answered with a hint of tenderness in his voice; "but then, really, Mother is one of a type. A type one has to get across a continent from Harpeth Hills to appreciate. She's the result of the men and women who blazed the wilderness trail into Tennessee, and she has Huguenot puritanism contending with cavalier graces of spirit in her nature."

"Well, she's perfectly darling and the little town is just an exquisite setting for her. Do you know what this soft moonlight aspect of Providence reminds me of, with those tall poplars down the Road and the wide−roofed houses and barns? The little village in Lombardy where—where I met—my fate."

"Met your fate?" asked the Doctor quickly after a moment. His face was in the shadow and not a note in his voice betrayed his anxiety.

"Yes," answered the singer lady in a dreamy, reminiscent voice. The moon shone full down into her very lovely face, fell across her white throat and shimmered into the faint rose folds of her dainty gown. Her close, dark braids showed black against the fragrant wistaria vines and her eyes were deep and velvety in the soft light. "Yes, it was the summer I was eighteen and I had gone over with my father for a month or two of recuperation for him after a long extra session of Congress. Monsieur LaTour was staying in the little village, also recuperating. He heard me singing to father, and that night my fate was sealed. It was a wonderful thing to come to me— and I was so young."

"Tell me about it," said the Doctor quietly, and his voice was perfectly steady, though his heart pounded like mad and his cigar shook in his fingers.

"My father died at the end of the summer, after only a few day's illness, and he had grown to believe what

LaTour said of my voice, and to have great confidence in my future. I had no near relatives and in his will he left me to Monsieur LaTour and Madame, his wife. She is an American and her father had been in the Senate with father for years. Monsieur is a very great teacher, perhaps the greatest living. Madame wanted to come to Providence with me, but Doctor Stein insisted that I come alone. I—I'm very glad she didn't, though they both love me and await—" She paused and leaned her flower head back against the wistaria vine,

And the great breath that Doctor Thomas Mayberry of Providence drew might have cracked the breast of a giant. In this world no record is kept of the great moments when a private individual's universe collides with his far star and of the crash that ensues.

"I rather thought you meant another—another kind of fate. I was preparing for confidences," he managed to say in a very small voice for so large a man.

"Mais, non, Monsieur, jamais—never!" she exclaimed quickly. "I—I— have been tempted to think sometimes I might like that sort—of a— fate, but I haven't had the time. It was work, work, sleep, eat, live for the voice! And—and once or twice it has seemed worth while. My debut night in Paris when I sang the Juliette waltz−song− just the moment when I realized I could use it as I would and always more volume—and the people! And again the night in New York when I had made it incarnate Elizabeth as she sings to Tannhauser—the night it went away." And as she spoke she dropped her head on her arms folded across her knees.

"Have you picked out the song you are going to sing first when it comes back?" demanded the very young Doctor with a quick note of tenderness in his voice, still under a marvelous control.

"Yes," she answered as she turned her head and peeped up at him with shining eyes, a delicious little burr of a laugh in her throat, "Rings on my fingers, bells on my toes, for Teether Pike. He is wild about my humming it, and dances with his absurd, chubby little legs at the first note. What will he do if I can really sing it? And I'll sing Beulah Land for Cindy, and I'm sitting on the stile, Mary, for your mother, perhaps, Oh, the kingdom of my heart for Buck, and Drink to me only, for Squire Tutt, hymns for the Deacon—and a paean for you, if I have to order one from New York."

"Do you know," said the Doctor after a long pause in which he lit his cigar and again began to puff rings out into the moonlight, "I'd like to say that you are—are a—perfect wonder."

"You may," she answered with a laugh. Then suddenly she stretched out her hand to him and, as he took it into his, she asked very quietly with just the one word, "When?"

"In a few weeks, I hope," he answered her just as quietly, comprehending her instantly.

"I'll be good—and wait," she answered him in a Hone of voice that would have done credit to little Bettie Pratt. "Let's hurry and get that bucket of water; don't you hear them singing the doxology?"

CHAPTER VI. THE PROVIDENCE TAG−GANG

"Miss Elinory, do you think getting married and such is ketching, like the mumps and chickenpox?" asked Eliza Pike as she sat on the steps at the daintily shod feet of the singer lady, who sat in Mother Mayberry's large arm−chair, swinging herself and Teether slowly to and fro, humming happily little vagrant airs that floated into her brain on the wings of their own melody. Teether's large blue eyes looked into hers with earnest rapture and his little head swayed on his slender neck in harmony with her singing.

"Why, Eliza, I'm sure I don't know. Do you think so?" answered Miss Wingate, as she smiled down into the large eyes raised to hers. The heart−to−heart communions, which she and Eliza found opportunities to hold, were a constant source of pleasure to Miss Wingate, and the child's quaint little personality unfolded itself delightedly in the sunshine of appreciation from this lady of her adoration.

"Yes'm, I believe I do. Mis' Pratt and Mr. Hoover started it, and last night Mr. Petway walked home with Aunt Prissy and Maw set two racking−chairs out on the front porch for 'em. Paw said he was more'n glad to set in the back yard and smoke his pipe. Maw wouldn't put Teether to bed, but rocked him in her lap 'cause he might wake up and disturb 'em. She let me set up with her and Paw and he told tales on the time he co'ted her. She said hush up, that co'ting was like mumps and chickenpox and he was about to get a second spell. Does it make you want a beau too, Miss Elinory?"

"Well," answered Miss Wingate slowly with a candor that would have been vouched no other soul save the sympathetic Eliza, "it might be nice."

"I thought you would like one," answered Eliza enthusiastically, "and you know I had done picked out Doctor Tom for you, but since I saw him dress up so good this morning and go to Bolivar to take the train to the City and he got the letter from Miss Alford day before yesterday—that is, Aunt Prissy says Mr. Petway thinks it was from her—I reckon it won't be fair to get him for you, when she had him first last summer. Oughtn't you to be fair about taking folk's beaux just like taking they piece of cake or skipping rope?" Eliza was fast developing a code of morals that bade fair to be both original and sound.

"Yes," answered Miss Wingate with the utmost gravity and not a little perturbation in her voice, "yes, of course. When did Doctor Mayberry go?"

"This morning before you came down−stairs. He give Mother Mayberry some drops for Mis' Bostick and told me, too, how to give 'em to her. Mother Mayberry is down there now and I'm a−going to stay with her this afternoon. But I tell you what we can do, Miss Elinory, there is Sam Mosbey—I believe you can get him easy. He picked up a rose you dropped when you went in the store to get your letters the other day, and when Mr. Petway laughed he got red even in his ears. And just this week he have bought a pair of pink suspenders, some sweet grease for his hair and green striped socks. He'll look lovely when he gets fixed up and I hope you will notice him some." Eliza spoke in the most encouraging of tones of the improvement in appearance of the suitor she was advocating, and was just about to continue her machinations by further enthusiasm when, from down the road at the Bosticks, came Mother Mayberry's voice calling her, and like a little killdee she darted away to the aid of her confrere.

And for several long minutes Miss Wingate sat perfectly still and looked across the meadow to the sky−line with intent eyes. Teether was busily engaged in drawing by degrees his own pink toes up to his rosy lips in an effort to get his foot into his mouth, an ambition that sways most mortals from their seventh to tenth month. A thin wraith of Miss Alford's personality had been drifting through the singer lady's consciousness for some days, but she was positively stunned at this sudden materialization. There come moments in the lives of most women when they get glimpses into the undiscovered land of their own hearts and are appalled thereby. Suddenly she hugged the chuckling baby very close and began a rapid rocking to the humming accompaniment of a rollicking street tune, a seemingly inexplicable but perfectly natural proceeding.

"Well, I'd like to know which is the oldest, you or the baby, honey− bird!" exclaimed Mother Mayberry as she came up the steps in the midst of the frolic. "You and him a−giggling make music like a nest full of young cat−birds. Did you ever notice how 'most any down− heart will get up and go a−marching to a laugh tune? I needed just them chuckles to set me up again." As she finished speaking Mother Mayberry seated herself on the

top step and Miss Wingate slipped down beside her with the baby in her arms.

"What is the trouble this morning, Mrs. Mayberry?" she asked, as she moved a little closer, so Teether could reach out and nozzle against Mother Mayberry's shoulder. "Anybody sick?"

"No, not to say sick much," answered Mother, with a touch of wistfulness in her gentle eyes, "but it looks like, day by day, I can see Mis' Bostick slipping away from us, same as one of the white garden lilies what on the third day just closes up its leaves when you ain't looking and when you go back is gone."

"She isn't so old she can't—can't recuperate when the lovely warm days come to stay this summer, is she?" asked the singer lady with a quick sympathy in her voice and eyes.

"No, she ain't so old as to die by old age, but what hurts me, child, is that it is just her broke heart giving out. She have always been quiet and gentle−smiling, but since the news of Will's running off with that money came to Providence she have just been fading away. A mother's heart don't break clean over a child, but gets a jagged wound that won't often heal. When I think of her suffering it puts a hitch in my enjoying of that Tom Mayberry." And Mother blinked away the suspicion of a tear.

"But Mrs. Bostick and the Deacon both are so fond of Doctor Mayberry that it must be a joy to have him such a comfort to them," said Miss Wingate softly, as she carried one of Teether's pink hands to her lips.

"Yes, child, I know he is all that. Somehow, here in Providence, we women have all tried to put some of our own sister love for one another in our young folks. I hold that when the whole world have learned to cut sister and brother deep enough into they children's hearts, then His kingdom is a−going to come in about one generation from them. Now there's a picture that goes on the page with my remarks! Bettie sure do look pretty with that white sunbonnet on her head, and count how many Turners, Pratts, Hoovers and Pikes she have got trailing peacefully behind her, all like full−blood brothers and sisters. I'm so glad she's a−bringing her sewing to set a spell. Come in, Bettie, here's a rocker a−holding out arms to you!" Little Hoover was as usual bobbing in Bettie's arms and he gurgled at the sight of Teether Pike as if in joy at this encounter with his side partner and when deposited upon the floor beside him made a brotherly grab at one of young Pike's pink feet in the most manifest interest.

"Well, if this just ain't filling at the price," said the widow as she settled herself in the rocker, and Mother Mayberry established herself in one opposite, while Miss Wingate elected to remain on the step by the babies. "I left Pattie over to my house helping Clara May get a little weed−pulling outen 'Lias and Henny in my garden. Buck Peavey have just passed by looking like the last of pea−time and the first of frost. I do declare it were right down funny to see Pattie toss her head at him, and them boys both giggled out loud. He ain't spoke to Pattie for a week 'cause she sang outen Sam Mosbey's hymn−book last Wednesday night at prayer meeting. He've got a long−meter doxology face for sure."

"And he's a−suffering, too," answered Mother Mayberry with the utmost sympathy in her placid face at the troubles of her favorite, Buck, the lover. "To some folks love is a kinder inflammatory rheumatism of the soul and a−deserving of pity."

A vision of a girl at a college commencement with her nose buried in a pink peony, looking up and smiling, flashed across the consciousness of the singer lady and she pressed her head between little Hoover's chubby shoulders, and acknowledged herself a fit subject for sympathy. To go and not even think of telling her good− by was cruel, and a forlorn little sob stifled itself in the mite's pink apron.

"Well, folks," broke in the widow's cheerful voice that somehow reminded one of peaches and cream, "I come over to−day to get a little help and encouragement about planning the wedding. I knowed Miss Elinory would think it up stylish for me and Mis' Mayberry would lend her head to help fitting notions to what can be did. Mr. Hoover's clover hay will be laid by next week and he says they ain't nothing more to keep us back. I've sewed up four bolts of light caliker, two of domestic, one of blue jeans, and three of gingham into a trousseau for us all to wear on the wedding trip, and Mr. Petway are a−going to take measures and bring out new shoes and tasty hats all 'round, next wagon, trip to town. I think we will make a nice genteel show."

"Are you−going to take everybody on the trip?" asked Miss Wingate, roused out of her woe by the very idea of the tour in the company of the seventeen.

"That we are," responded the widow heartily, "but not all to onct. We'll have to make two bites of the cherry. The day after the wedding we are a−going to take the two−horse team, a trunk and the ten youngest and go a−visiting over the Ridge at Mr. Hoover's brother's, Mr. Biggers. We won't stay more'n a week and stop a day or

two coming back to see Andy and Carrie Louise. Then we'll drop the little ones here on you neighbors and pick up the seven big ones, add Buck for a compliment and go on down to the City for two days' high jinks. We're going to take 'em up to the capitol and over the new bridge and we hope to strike some kind of band music going on somewhere for 'em to hear. We want a photygraft group of us all, too. We are going to put up at the Teamsters' Hotel up on the Square and Mr. Hoover have got party rates. He says he are a−going to get that seven town−broke anyway, if it costs two acres of corn. Now won't we have a good time?" The bright face of the prospective bride fairly radiated with joy at the prospect—Miss Wingate could but be sympathetically involved, and Mother Mayberry beamed with delight at the plan.

"That'll be a junket that they won't never a one of 'em forget, Bettie!" she exclaimed with approval. "They ain't nothing in the world so educating as travel. And you can trust a country child to see further and hear more than any other animal on earth. I wouldn't trust Tom to go to town now without coming back pop−eyed over the ottermobiles," and Mother Mayberry laughed at her own fling at the sophisticated young Doctor. Another dart of agony entered the soul of the singer lady and this time the vision of the girl and the peony was placed in a big, red motor−car—why red she didn't know, except the intensity of her feelings seemed to call for that color. She was his patient and courtesy at least demanded that he should tell her of his intended absence. What could—

"Well, to come out with the truth," Mrs. Pratt was going on to say by the time Miss Wingate brought herself to the point of listening again, "it's just the wedding itself that have gave me all these squeems. Why, Mis' Mayberry, how on earth are we a−going to parade all the seventeen into the Meeting−house without getting the whole congregation into a regular giggle? I don't care, 'cause I know the neighbors wouldn't give us a mean laugh, but I can see Mr. Hoover have got the whole seventeen sticking in his craw at the thought, and I'm downright sorry for him."

"Yes, Bettie, men have got sensitive gullets when it comes to swollering a joke on theyselves," said Mother Mayberry, as she joined in the widow's merry laugh at the plight of the embarrassed widower. "Looks like when we all can trust Mr. Hoover to be so good and kind to you and your children, after he have done waded into the marrying of you, we oughter find some way to save his feelings from being mortified. Can't you hatch out a idea, Elinory?"

"Oh, yes, I know, I know just what to do—it came to me in a flash!" exclaimed the singer lady with pink−cheeked enthusiasm over the inspiration that had risen from the depths at the call of Mrs. Pratt and brought her up to the surface of life with it for a moment anyway. "I saw a wedding once in rural England. All the children in the village in a double line along the path to the church, each with baskets of flowers from which they threw posies in front of the bride as she came by them! Let's get all the children together and mix them up and let them stand along the walk to the church door. It will just make a beautiful picture with no—no thought of—of who belongs to anybody. Everybody from Pattie and Buck down to little Bettie and Martin Luther! Won't it be lovely? I can show them just how to march, down the road with their baskets in their arms, and Mrs. Pratt, you can come from your house with the Deacon and Mr. Hoover can come out of the back of the store—with—with, who is going to be his groomsman?"

"Lawsy me, I hadn't thought of that," answered the widow. "I'll tell you, Mr. Pratt's brother is coming over from Bolivar to the wedding, and as he is a−going to be a kinder relation in law by two marriages with Mr. Hoover, I think it would be nice to ask him."

"Er—yes," assented the singer lady, controlling a desire to smile at this mix−up of the bride's present and past relations to life. "The little girls ought to have white dresses and the boys—well, what could the little boys wear?" Miss Wingate felt reasonably sure that white dresses for all the feminine youth of Providence would be forthcoming, but she hesitated at suggesting a costume for the small boys.

"Yes, all the little girls have got white dresses and ribbons and fixings, but dressing up a herd of boys is another thing," answered Mother Mayberry. "If just blue jeans britches could be made to do we might make out to get the top of them rigged out in a white shirt apiece; couldn't we, Bettie?"

"That we can," answered the bride heartily. "Give me a good day at the sewing−machine, with somebody to cut and somebody to baste, and I will get 'em all turned out by sundown. But they feet! Mis' Mayberry, could we get Jem into shoes, do you reckon? About how many bad stumped toes is they in Providence now?"

"Well," answered Mother Mayberry reflectively, "I don't know about but two, but we can ask 'Liza Pike. Thank you for your plan, honey− bird, and we're a−going to put it through so as to be a credit to you. Children are

sorter going out of style these days and I'm proud to make a show of our'n. Women's leaving babies outen they calculations is kinder like cutting buds offen the tree of life, and I'm glad no sech fashion have struck Harpeth Hills yet."

"Now, ain't that the truth?" exclaimed the Widow Pratt. "Sometimes when I read some of the truck about what women have took a notion to turn out and do in the world, I get right skeered about what are a− going to happen to the babies and men in the time to come."

"Don't worry about 'em, Bettie," laughed Mother Mayberry, with a quizzical sparkle in her eyes. "Even when women have got that right to march in the front rank with the men and carry some of the flags, that they are a−contending for, they'll always be some foolish enough to lag behind with babies on they breasts, a string of children following and with always a snack in her pocket to feed the broke down front−rankers, men or women. You'll find most Providence women in that tag−gang, I'm thinking; but let's do our part in whooping on the other sisters that have got wrongs to right."

"I suppose the world really has done women injustice in lots of ways," said the singer lady plaintively, for she had very lately, for the first time in her life, felt the sit−still−and−hold−your− hands−while−he−rides−away grind, and it had struck in deep.

"Yes, I suppose so," answered Mother Mayberry, as she picked up little Hoover, who was nodding like a top−heavy petunia in a breeze, and stretched him across her lap for a nap. "But as long as she have got the spanking of man sprouts from they one to ten years she oughter make out to get in a vote to suit herself, as time comes along, especially if she have picked her husband right."

"She—she can't—can't pick her husband," hazarded the singer lady desperately.

"Yes, she can, honey−child," answered Mother Mayberry comfortably. "The smile in her eye and the switch of her skirts is a woman's borned−vote, and she can elect herself wife to any man she cares to use 'em on. But what about the collation, Bettie? Everybody is going to help you with the cooking and fixings, and let's have a never− forget supper this onct."

"That we are," answered Mrs. Pratt emphatically. "Mr. Hoover says no hand−around, stand−around for him; he wants a regular laid table with a knife and fork set−down to it. He says we are a−going to feed our friends liberal, if it takes three acres of timothy hay to do it, and he's about right. We'll begin thinking about that and deciding what the first of the week. But I must be a−going to see that the dinner horn blows in time. I want to get my sparagrasses extra tender, for 'Liza have notified me that she is going to stop by to−day with the covered dish, and I want to fill it tasty for her. Come visiting soon, Miss Elinory, for I've got something to show you that are too foolish to speak about to Mis' Mayberry." And the widow gave a delicious little giggle as she lifted the sleeping baby from Mother Mayberry's lap and started down the steps.

"Dearie me, Bettie," answered Mother with a laugh, "don't you know that poking up a woman's curiosity is mighty apt to start a yaller jacket to buzzing? I'll be by your house sometime before sundown myself."

"Some women's ship of life is a steamboat that stops to take on passengers at every landing. Bettie's are one of them kind, and she'll tie up with 'em all in glory when the time comes," remarked Mother Mayberry as she watched the sturdy widow swing away down the Road with the baby asleep over her shoulder.

Just at this moment, Cindy found occasion to summon Mother Mayberry to the chicken yard on account of a dispute that had arisen between old Dominick and one of the ungallant roosters that had resulted in an injury to one of the small fry, which lay pitifully cheeping on the back steps. Dominick, with every feather awry, was holding command of the bowl of corn−meal while her family feasted, and the Plymouth rooster stood at a respectful distance with a weather eye on both the determined mother and Cindy's broom. Retribution in the form of Mother Mayberry descended upon him swiftly and certainly, and he lost no time in seeking seclusion under the barn.

And by the time order and peace were restored to the barn−yard, Mother came in to dinner and spent an hour in interested hen−lore with the singer lady, who was really fond of hearing about the feathered families when she saw how her interest in them pleased Mrs. Mayberry. The subject of the Doctor, his absence and the probable time of his return was not mentioned by his mother, and for the life of her Miss Wingate could not muster the courage for a single question. She felt utterly unable to stand even the most mild eulogy on the peony−girl and was glad that nothing occurred to turn the conversation in that direction. She was silent for the most part, and most assiduous in her attentions to Martin Luther, whose rapidly filling outlines were making him into a chubby

edition of the Raphaelite angel. Martin had landed in the garden of the gods and was making the most of the golden days. He bore his order of American boyhood with jaunty grace, and the curl had assumed a rampant air in place of the pathetic.

"Martin, do you want me to wash your face and hands and come go visiting with me?" asked the singer lady, as she stood on the front steps and watched Mother Mayberry depart in her old buggy on the way to visit a patient over the Nob. A long, lonely afternoon was more than she could face just now, and she felt certain that distraction, if not amusement, could be found in a number of places along the Road.

"Thank, ma'am, please," answered Martin Luther, who still clung to the formula that he had found to be a perfectly good open sesame to most of the pleasant things of life, when used as he knew how to use it.

So, taking her rose−garden hat in one hand and Martin Luther's chubby fist in the other, Miss Wingate started down Providence Road for a series of afternoon calls, at the fashionable hour of one− thirty. She was just passing by Mrs. Peavey's gate with no earthly thought of going in when she beheld the disconsolate Buck stretched full length on the grass under a tree, which was screened by a large syringa bush from the front windows of the maternal residence. A hoe rested languidly beside him, and it was a plain case of farm hookey.

"Oh, Miss Elinory," called his mother from the side steps, "did Mis' Mayberry hear about that fire down in town that burned up two firemen, a police and a woman?" At the sound of his mother's strident voice, Buck curled up in a tight knot and with a despairing glance rolled under the bush.

"I don't know, Mrs. Peavey, but I'll tell her," Miss Wingate called back as she prepared to hasten on for fear Mrs. Peavey would come to the gate for further parley, and thus discover the exhausted culprit.

"And a man tooken pisen on account of a bank's failing in Louisville," she added in a still shriller tone, which just did carry across the distance to Mrs. Pike's front door, through which Miss Wingate was disappearing. Her prompt flight had saved the day for the disconsolate lover, who cautiously rolled from under the bush again and went on with his interrupted nap.

She found Mrs. Pike and Miss Prissy at home, and spent a really delightful hour in speculating and unfolding possible plans for the Pratt−Hoover nuptials. Miss Prissy blushed and giggled at an elephantine attempt at badinage that her sister−in−law directed at her on the subject of Mr. Petway, and after a while Miss Wingate went on her way, in a manner comforted by their wholesome merriment. She hesitated at the front gate of the Tutt residence, but the sight of the Squire pottering around in a diminutive garden at the side of the house decided her to enter, for Squire Tutt held the charm for her that a still−fused fire−cracker holds for a small boy.

"I ain't well at all," he exploded, in answer to her polite question, asked in the meekest of voices. "Don't you set up to marry Tom Mayberry, girl, if you don't wanter get a numbskull. Told me to eat a passel of raw green stuff for my liver, like I was a head of cattle. I'll die if I follow him. Everybody he doctors'll die. Snake bite is the only thing he knows how to cure, and snakes don't crawl until the last of the month. Don't marry him, I say, don't marry him!"

And it took Miss Wingate several minutes after her hurried adieus to get over the effect of the Squire's inhibitory caution. But the haven for which she had been instinctively aiming was just across the Road, and she found a peace and quiet which sank into her perturbed soul like a benediction. The Deacon sat by Mrs. Bostick's bed with his Bible across his thin old knees, and Eliza was crouched on the floor just in front of him, with her knees in her embrace and her eyes fixed on his gentle face. Little Bettie Pratt lay across Mrs. Bostick's bed, deep in her afternoon nap, and Henny Turner was stretched out full length on the floor in front of the window, while 'Lias sat with his back against the wall with the puppy in his arms. The pale face of the sweet invalid was lit by a gentle smile, and she held one of the sleeping child's warm little hands in her frail, knotted, old fingers. Unnoticed, Miss Wingate and Martin Luther paused a moment at the door.

"Golly, Deacon, but didn't he do him up at one shot, and nothing but a little piece of rock in the gum−sling!" exclaimed 'Lias in excitement over the climax of the tale the Deacon had just completed. "I wisht I was that strong!"

"It was the strength the Lord gived to him, 'Lias Hoover, to special kill the giant with," said Eliza in an argumentative tone of voice. "Do you reckon He tooken the strength away from David the next morning, Deacon, or let him keep it to use all the time?" Eliza's extreme practicality showed at all times, even in those of deepest excitement.

The Deacon was saved the strain of intellect involved in making reply to this demand by his wife's low

exclamation of pleasure as she caught sight of the girl and the tot in the doorway. She smiled softly as the singer lady seated herself on the side of the bed and took both her hand and that of the sleeping baby in a firm, young one. A peculiar bond of sympathy had arisen between the girl and the gentle old invalid, both fighting pain and anxiety. Mrs. Bostick would lie for hours drinking in tales of Miss Wingate's travels in the world, which she had timidly but eagerly asked for from the beginning of their friendship. The girl knew that the anxious mother−heart vas using her descriptions to fare forth on quests for the wanderer into the wide world beyond the Harpeth Hills, that had all her life bounded her horizon, and she sat by her long hours, leading the way into the uttermost parts. After a fatherly greeting, the Deacon departed with the children to his bench under the trees and left the two alone for their talk, and the long shadows were stretched across the Road and the sun sinking beyond the Ridge before the singer lady wended her way dejectedly home with the play− wearied Martin Luther trailing beside her. She found Mother Mayberry, much to her relieved astonishment, placidly rocking in her accustomed place, with her palm−leaf ruffling the water−waves and a fresh lawn tie blowing in the breeze.

"Come in, honey−hearts," she said eagerly, with bright tenderness shining in her face for the girl and the barefoot young pilgrim; "I have been setting here a−missing you both for a hour. With you and my young mission boy both gone I'm like an old hawk−robbed hen. I knew you was with Mis' Bostick, and I didn't come for you 'cause somehow them rocking−chair−bed travels you and her take seems to comfort her. I wouldn't interrupt one of 'em for the world, though I was getting plumb lonesome. I was even a−hankering after that Tom Mayberry what I left not over two hours ago."

"Has the Doctor come back from the City this soon?" demanded the singer lady, with a queer thump in her cardiac region that almost smothered her voice.

"Well now, to tell the truth, Tom Mayberry haven't been to no City," answered his mother with a chuckle as she looked at Miss Wingate over Martin Luther's head on her shoulder where he had buried it with a demand for "milk, milk, thank ma'am, please." "I don't think he wants you to know what he have been having happen to him, but I can't keep from telling you 'cause I'm tickled clean to my funny bone. Dave Hanks come over here at daylight wanting a doctor quick, and I had a cramp in my leg what I forgot to tie a yarn string around before I went to bed, so I had to let Tom hurry on over there 'count of the push they was in. Then I got to studying it over and while I knewed how Tom had had a lot of practice in such things in a hospital, I thought it was just as well to let him get a little Harpeth experience along that line and sorter prove his character to Squire Tutt and the rest. About dinner time, though, I got sorry for him and hitched up and went over there to see how they was a−getting along, without telling you or Cindy anything about it. And what did I find? That Tom Mayberry and Dave Hanks out on the back porch, Dave taking a drink outen a bottle and Tom with two babies wrapped up in a shawl showing 'em to a neighbor woman, proud as a peacock over 'em. He most dropped 'em when he seen me and I promised not to tell you about it at all, but if you coulder seen him!" And the tried and proven young AEsculapius' mother fairly rolled in her chair with mirth at the recollection.

"Oh," gasped the singer girl, as she sank weakly down upon the top step and leaned her head against the convenient post. "It was awful− −I—I—" she caught herself quickly in the expression of the intensity of her relief.

"No, it wasn't awful," answered Mother Mayberry, fortunately losing the trend of the exclamation. "They are mighty sweet little babies, both girls. The joke is mostly on me getting uneasy and following Tom up. When I pick out his wife, I must be sure and see she are a girl what don't worry none about what he is up to. A trouble−hunting wife is a rock sinker to any man, but around a doctor's neck she'll finish him quick. Don't let on to the shame−faced thing when he comes! He asked me what you'd been a−doing all day, and I told him I thought maybe you had a few custards in your mind for him to−night when he gets back from Flat Rock. Don't you want to beat up some with Cindy's help? And they is a bunch of pink peonies he sent you from Mis' Hank's bushes, sticking in a bucket on the back porch. Pin one in your hair to sorter compliment him after all the trouble he have had this day, poor Tom!"

CHAPTER VII. PRETTY BETTIE'S WEDDING DAY

And even old Dame Nature of Harpeth Hills aroused herself for the occasion and took in hand the wedding day of pretty Bettie Pratt on Providence Road. In the dark hours before dawn she spread a light film of clouds over the stars, from which she first puffed a stiff dust−cleansing breeze and then proceeded to sprinkle a good washing shower which took away the last trace of wear and tear of the past hot days, so by the time she brought the sun out for a final shine up, the village looked like it had been having a most professional laundering. And after an hour or two of his warm encouragement, the roses lifted their buds and began to blow out with joyous exuberance. Mother Mayberry's red−musks tumbled over the wall almost on to the head of Mrs. Peavey's yellow−cluster, and Judy Pike's pink−cabbage fairly flung blossoms and buds over into the Road. The widow's own moss−damask nodded and beckoned hospitably to Mrs. Tutt's Maryland tea, and Pattie Hoover's Maiden's Blush mingled its sweetness with that of the dainty white−cluster that climbed around Mrs. Bostick's window. A haunting perfume from the new−mown clover fields drifted over it all and the glistening silver poplar leaves danced in the breezes.

"Was they ever such a day before!" exclaimed Mother Mayberry as she stood on the front steps with the singer lady, who was as blooming herself as any rose on the Road. "And everything is well along towards ready when it's turned twelve. The children have all been washed from skin out and just need a last polish−off. I've put 'em all on honor not to get dirty again and I think every shoe will be on by marching time."

"The baskets and the tubs of roses are in the milk house, and I will arrange them at the last minute so they won't wilt," answered Miss Wingate with enthusiasm that matched Mother Mayberry's. "Do you suppose there is anything I can do to help anybody anywhere? I never was so excited before."

"I don't believe they is a loose end to tie up on the Road, child. Even Bettie herself have finished for the day and have gone over to set a quiet hour with Mis' Bostack. Clothes is all laid out on beds, and cold lunch snacks put on kitchen tables. They ain't to be a dinner cooked on the Road this day 'cept what 'Liza and Cindy are a−stewing up for the Deacon and Mis' Bostick. Looks like everything is on greased wheels, and—but there comes the child running now! I do hope they haven't nothing flew the track."

"Mother Mayberry, please ma'am, tell me what to do about Mis' Tutt!" Eliza exclaimed with anxiety spread all over her little face, which was given a comic cast by a row of red flannel rags around her head over which were rolled prospective curls, due to float out for the festivities. "She says she won't go to the wedding 'cause it's prayer meeting night, and it were a sin to put off the Lord's meeting 'till to−morrow night. I didn't know she were a−going to do this way! I got out her dress for her yesterday. The Squire is so mad he says tell Doctor Tom to come do something for him quick and not to bring no hot water kettle neither."

"Dearie me," said Mother Mayberry with mild exasperation in her voice. "You run along, 'Liza, and don't you worry with Mis' Tutt. I'll come down there tereckly and see if I can't kinder persuade her some. Go around there and give that message to Doctor Tom yourself. I don't take no stock in such doctoring as he does to the Squire these days."

"Isn't it too bad for Mrs. Tutt to feel that way and miss the wedding?" asked Miss Wingate with a trace of the same exasperation in her voice that had sounded in Mother Mayberry's tones.

"It are that," answered Mother regretfully. "Looks like religion oughter be tooken as a cooling draft to the soul and not stuck on life like a fly blister. But I think we can kinder fix Mis' Tutt some. And that reminds me, I want you to undertake a job of using a little persuading on Tom Mayberry for me. He have got the most lovely long tail coat, gray britches, gray vest and high silk hat up in his press, and he says he are a−going to wear his blue Sunday clothes same as usual, when I asked him careless like about it this morning. I'm fair dying to behold him just onct in them good clothes he wears out in the big world and thinks Providence people will make fun of him to see, but I wouldn't ask him outright to put 'em on for me, not for nothing."

"Do you know, Mrs. Mayberry, you really—really flirt with the Doctor?" laughed Miss Wingate as she rubbed her delicate little nose against Mother Mayberry's shoulder with Teether Pike's exact nozzling gesture.

"Well, it's a affair that have been a−going on since the first time I laid eyes on Ugly, and they ain't nothing ever a−going to stop it 'lessen his wife objects," answered Mother Mayberry as she glanced down quizzically at

the face against her shoulder.

"She's sure to—to adore it," answered the singer lady as she buried her head in Mother's tie so only the rosy back of her neck showed.

"Yes, I think she will understand," answered the Doctor's mother with a sweet note in her rich voice as she bestowed a little hug on the slender body pressed close to hers. "You see, child, the tie twixt a woman and her own man−child ain't like anything on earth, and I feel it must hold between Mary and her Son in Heaven. I felt it pull close like steel when mine weren't fifteen minutes old, and it won't die when I do neither. And that Tom Mayberry are so serious that a−flirting with him gets him sorter on his blind side and works to a finish. Can't you try to help me out about that coat and the silk hat?"

"Yes," answered Miss Wingate with a dimpling smile, "I'll try. I'll ask him what I shall wear and then maybe—maybe—"

"That's the very idea, honey−bird!" exclaimed Mother Mayberry delightedly. "Tell him you are a−going to put on your best bib and tucker and it'll start the notion in him to keep you company. If a woman can just make a man believe his vanity are proper pride, he will prance along like the trick horse in a circus. Now s'pose you kinder saunter round careless like to—"

"Mis' Mayberry," came in a doleful voice over the wall near the porch, and Mrs. Peavey's mournful face appeared, framed in the lilac bushes. "I've just been reading the Tuesday Bolivar Herald, and Bettie Pratt's own first husband's sister−in−law's child died last week out in Californy, where she moved when she married the second time. I hate to tell Bettie and have the wedding stopped, but I feel it are my duty not to let her pay no disrespect to her Turner children by having a wedding with some of they law−kin in trouble."

"Well, Hettie Ann, I don't believe I'd tell her, for as bad as that would be on the Turner children, think how much the Pratts and Hoovers would lose in pleasure, so as they are the majority, it's only fair they should rule." Mother Mayberry had for a moment stood aghast at the idea of the misanthrope's descent upon happy Bettie with even this long distance shadow to cast across her joy, but dealing with her neighbor for years had sharpened her wits and she knew that a sense of fair play was one of Mrs. Peavey's redeeming traits that could always be counted upon.

"Yes, I reckon that are so," she answered grudgingly. "Then we'll have to keep the bad news to tell her when she gets back from the trip. Did you know that spangled Wyandotte hen have deserted all them little chickens and is a−laying again out in the weeds behind the barn? Told you them foreign poultry wasn't no good," with which she disappeared behind the top stone of the wall.

"Poor Spangles! she carried them chickens a week longer than could be expected and now don't get no credit for it," said Mother Mayberry, as the singer lady gave vent to the giggle she had been suppressing for a good many minutes. "Now run on, sweet child, and use them beguilements on Tom for me, while I go try to rub some liniment on Mis' Tutt's conscience. Fill up Martin Luther sometime soon, will you?"

And in accordance with directions, after a few minutes spent before Mother Mayberry's old−fashioned mirror in tucking three very perfect red−musk buds in the belt of her white linen gown, the singer lady descended upon the unwitting victim, in the north wing and began the machinations according to promise. Doctor Mayberry, unfortunately for him, showed extravagant signs of delight at the very sight of the enemy, for it was almost the first voluntary visit she had ever paid him, and thus he gave her the advantage to start with.

"You aren't busy, are you?" she asked as she glanced around the book−lined room and into the laboratory beyond. "This is only a semi−professional consultation. Could I stay just a few minutes?" and the lift of her dark lashes from her eyes was most effectively unfair. As she spoke she settled herself in his chair, while he leaned against the table looking down upon her with a very shy delight in his gray eyes and a very decided color in his tan cheeks.

"As long as you will," he answered. "I never can prescribe from a hurried consultation. It always takes several hours for me to locate anything. I'm very slow, you know."

"Why, I rather thought you treated your patients with—with very little time spent in consultation," a remark which she, herself, knew to be a dastardly manoeuver. "You attended to Squire Tutt's trouble in a very few minutes, it seems," she hastened to add, as she glanced at a flask that lay on the corner of the table.

"The Squire's trouble is chronic, and simply calls for refilled prescriptions," he laughed, his generosity giving over the retort that was his due. "I somehow think this matter of yours will prove obscure and will call for time."

"It's a wedding dress I want you to prescribe for me," she hazarded a bit too hurriedly, for before she could catch up with her own words he had flashed her an answer.

"That depends!" was the victim's most skilful parry.

"Would you wear a white embroidery and lace or a rose batiste? A rose hat and parasol go with the batiste, but the white is perfectly delicious. You haven't seen either one, so I want you to choose by guess." Only the slightest rose signal in her cheeks showed that she had been pricked by his quick thrust. She had taken one of the damask buds from her belt and was daintily nibbling at the folded leaves. Over it, her eyes dared him to follow up his advantage.

"I don't know—I'll have to think about it," he answered her, weakly capitulating, but still on guard. "If I choose one for to−day, when will you wear the other? Soon?" he bargained for his forbearance.

"Whenever you want me to if you'd like to see it," she answered with what he ought to have known was dangerous meekness. "What are you going to wear?" she asked, putting the direct question with disarming boldness.

"Blue serge Sunday−go−to−meetings," he answered carelessly, as if it were a matter to be dismissed with the statement. "Let's see—say them over again—white dress, pink parasol, rose hat, how did they go?"

"Once, not long ago, I was in your room with Mrs. Mayberry hunting for the kittens the yellow cat had hidden in the house, and I caught a glimpse of a most beautiful frock coat—it made me feel partyfied then, and I thought of the rose gown I have never worn and—and—" she paused to let that much sink in well. "I thought I would ask you," she ended in a pensive tone, as she kept her eyes fixed on the rose determinedly.

"You don't have to ask me things—just tell me!" he answered with an exquisite hint of something in his voice which he quickly controlled. "The frock coat let it be—and shall we say the rose gown? Then the high gods protect Providence when it beholds!" he added with a laugh.

"Oh, will you really?" she asked, overwhelmed with the ease with which the battle had been won.

"I will," he answered, "only don't let Mother tease me, please!"

At which pathetically ingenuous demand the conquering singer lady tossed him the rose and laughed long and merrily.

"You and your Mother are perfect—" she was observing with delighted dimples, when Mother Mayberry herself stood in the doorway with well−concealed eagerness as to the outcome of the mission, in her face.

"Well," she observed with a laugh, "I'm glad to see somebody that has time to stand−around, set−around, passing the news of the day. Did you all know that Bettie Pratt were a−going to get married in about two hours and a half?"

"We did," answered her son as he drew her a chair close to that of Miss Wingate. "We were just discussing in what garb we could best grace the occasion. Did you succeed in getting Mrs. Tutt to change her mind about honoring the festivities?"

"Oh, yes, she just wanted to be persuaded some. It's a mighty dried− up mind that can't leaf out in a change onct in a while, and it's mostly men folks that take a notion, then petrify to stone in it. But you all oughter see what is a−going on down the Road."

"What?" they both demanded of her at the same second.

"It's that 'Liza Pike again. Just as soon as that child hatches a idea, the whole town takes to helping her feather it out. She got Mis' Bostick's bed moved to the front window, and then found that Nath Mosbey's fence kept her from seeing the Road where the procession are a−going into the Meeting−house yard. But that didn't down her none at all, for when I left she had Nath and Buck and Mr. Petway a−knocking down the two panels of fence, and leaving Mis' Bostick a clean sweep of view, Did you ever?" and mother Mayberry chuckled over the small sister's triumph over what to the rest of Providence would have seemed an insurmountable obstacle.

"It's just like her, the darling!" exclaimed the singer lady appreciatively.

"And she have got the Deacon all tucked out until he is a sight to behold. She have made Mis' Peavey starch his white tie until it sets out on both sides like cat whiskers, and have pinned a bokay on his coat 'most as big as the bride's. Then she have reached his forelock up on his head so he looks like Martin Luther, and she have got him a−settin' down, so as not to get out of gear none. Mis' Bostick is a−wearing a little white rose pinned on her night−gown, and they is honeysuckle trailed all over the bed. But here am I a−chavering with you all, with time a−flying and no chance of putting salt on her tail this day. Please, Tom Mayberry, go down to the store and buy a

nickel's worth of starch, and it's none of your business how I want to use it. I'm gaing to look a surprise for you myself, before sundown."

"Well, how did you get along with him, honeybird?" she asked eagerly, as they ascended the front steps together, while the Doctor strode down the Road on his errand.

"Beautifully!" exclaimed the singer lady with enthusiasm and the very faintest of blushes.

"I thought so from his looks," answered the beguiled young Doctor's wily mother. "A man always do have that satisfied martyr−smile when he thinks he are doing something just to please a woman. Now, honey− child, you ain't got nothing to do but frill out your own sweet self; and make a job of it while you are about it." With which command Mother Mayberry dismissed Miss Wingate up the stairs to her dormer−window room.

And it is safe to say that no two such teeming hours ever fleeted their seconds away on Providence Road as did those ensuing. The whole village buzzed and bumbled and swarmed in and out from house to house like a colony of clover−drunken bees on an August afternoon. Laughter floated on the air and mingled with banter and song, while the aroma of flesh pots and fine spices drifted from huge waiters being hurriedly carried from down and up the Road and into the Pratt gate. The wedding supper was being laid on improvised tables in Bettie's side yard, with Judy Pike in command, seconded by Mrs. Peavey with her skirts tucked up out of possible harm and her mind on the outlook for any possible disaster, from the wilting of the jelly mold to a sad streak in the bride's cake, baked by the bride herself with perfectly happy confidence.

Then on the heels of the excitement came a quiet half−hour devoted to the completing of all toilets behind closed family doors. A shrill squeal issuing now and then from an open window told its tale of tortures being undergone, and a smothered masculine ejaculation added a like testimony.

At exactly a quarter to five, Miss Wingate issued from her room after a completely satisfactory seance with her mirror, and from the front steps looked down in dismay upon a scene of rebellion, that threatened at any moment to become one of riot.

On the grass beside the porch stood a group of little girls all starched, frilled, curled and beribboned until they resembled a large bouquet of cabbage roses themselves. Each one clasped carefully a gaily decorated basket filled with roses, and from each and every pair of eyes there danced sparks of rage, aimed at a huddled company of small boys who were returning their indignation by sullen scorn mixed with determination in their polished, freckled faces. Half way between each group stood Eliza Pike, a glorified Eliza, from a halo of curls to brand new small shoes. She had evidently been carrying on a losing series of negotiations, for her usually sanguine face had an expression of utter hopelessness, tinged with some of the others' feminine indignation.

"Miss Elinory," she exclaimed as the singer lady came to the edge of the porch, "I don't know what to make of the boys, they never did this way before!"

"Why, what is the matter?" asked Miss Wingate, something of Eliza's panic communicating itself to her own face and voice.

The boys all suddenly found interest in their own feet or the cracks in the pavement, so Eliza as usual became the spokesman for the occasion.

"They say they just won't carry baskets of flowers, because it makes them look silly like girls. They will march with us if you make 'em do it, but they won't carry no baskets for nobody. I don't want Mis' Pratt to find out how they is a−acting, for three of 'em are hers and five Hoovers, and it is they own wedding." Eliza's voice almost became a wail in which Miss Wingate felt inclined to join.

At this juncture, Martin Luther took it upon himself to create a further diversion and to add fuel to the flame. By a mistake, and through a determination to follow instructions, he had clung to little Bettie's hand, and when she picked up one of the tiny baskets provided for the two tots, so had he, and thus he found himself humiliatingly equipped and on the wrong side of the yard and question. Disengaging himself from the wide−eyed Bettie, he marched to the center of the middle ground and cast the despised basket upon the grass.

"No girl—BOY, thank ma'am, please!" he announced with a defiant glance at the singer lady up from under the rampant curl, and that he did not fail in his usual shibboleth of courtesy was due to his habitual use of it, rather than a desire to soften the effect of his announcement.

Miss Wingate sank down upon the steps in helpless dismay, and tears began to drop from Eliza's eyes, when Mother Mayberry appeared upon the scene of action, stiff and rustling as to black silk gown, capped with a cobweb of lace over the water−waves and most imposing as to mien.

"Now what's all these conniptions about?" she demanded, and eyed the boys with an expression of reserving judgment that did her credit, for a forlorn and surly sight they presented.

And again Eliza stated the case of the culprits in brief and not uncertain terms.

"Well, well," said Mother Mayberry, and a most delicious laugh fell on the overcharged air and in itself began to clear the atmosphere, "so you empty−handed, cross−faced boys think you look more stylisher for the wedding than the girls look, do you?"

"No'm, we never said that," answered young Bud with a grin coaxing at his wide mouth. "We just don't want to carry no baskets. Buck said he wouldn't, and Sam Mosbey said they had oughter tie a sash around the middle of all of us for a show. We think the girls look fine," and he cast an uneasy glance at his sister,

"Well, seeing as you came down as far as to pass a compliment on 'em, I reckon the girls will have to forgive you for talking about them that way. I am willing to ask Miss Elinory here to give you each a little bunch of roses to carry in your hand instead of a basket, and to let you walk along beside the girls, though nobody will look at you anyway or know you are there. Is that a bargain and is everybody ready to step into line?"

And almost instantly there was a relieved and amicable settling of the difficulties, a sorting of bunches from the despised baskets, and a quick line−up.

"Now start on down! Don't you hear Miss Prissy playing the organ for you?" exclaimed Mother Mayberry from the steps. "Billy, lift up your feet, and Henny, you throw the first rose just where Miss Elinory told you to. Everybody watch Henny and throw a flower whenever he does. Aim them at the ground and not at each other or the company. We'll be just behind you. Now, Martin Luther, take Bettie by the hand and don't go too fast!"

"A little fun poked at the right time will settle most man conniptions," she added, in an aside to the relieved and admiring singer lady, as they prepared to follow in the wake of the bridal train.

And among all the weddings over all the land, that fill to a joyous overflowing almost every hour of the month of June, none could have been more lovely or happier than that of pretty Bettie Pratt, and the embarrassed but adoring Mr. Hoover on Providence Road. The train of solemn, wide−eyed little flower bearers was received by the wedding guests, who were assembled around the Meeting−house door, with a positive wave of rapture and no hint of the previous hurricane of rebellion showed in their rosy, cherubic countenances. They separated at the designated point and according to instructions took their stand along the side of the walk from the gate to the steps. Billy stepped high, roly−poly little Bettie steered Martin Luther into place and Eliza had the joy of catching a glimpse of the pale face across the store−yard, peering out of the window with the greatest interest.

Then from the Pratt home, directly across the Road, came the Deacon and Bettie, and the enthusiasm at this point boiled up and ran over in a perfect foam of joy. And, indeed, the pair made a picture deserving of every thrill, Bettie in her dove gray muslin and the Deacon bedight according to Eliza's expert opinion of good form. He beamed like a gentle old cherub himself, while she giggled and blushed and nodded to the children as she stepped over the rain of roses, on up to the very door itself. Immediately following the children, the congregation filed in and settled itself for the long prayer, that the Deacon always used to open such solemn occasions.

The singer lady found herself seated between Mother Mayberry and the Doctor on the end of the pew, and out of the corner of her eye she essayed a view of his magnificence, but caught him in the act of making the same pass in her direction. They both blushed, and her smile was wickedly tantalizing, though she kept her eyes fixed on the Deacon's face as he began to read the words of the service in his sweet old voice, with its note of tender affection for the pair of friends for whom he read them. And she never knew why she didn't realize it or why she thought of permitting it, but as the impressive words enfolded the pair at the altar, one of her own small hands was gently possessed in a warm, strong one, and tightly clasped. For moments the pair of hands rested on the bench between them, hid by a filmy fold of the rose gown. There was just nothing to be done about it that the singer lady could see, so she let matters rest as they were and gave her attention to trying to keep the riot in her own heart in reasonable bounds. However, it might have been a comfort to her to know that across the church, Buck had captured five of Pattie's sunburned fingers, and Mr. Petway was sitting so close to Miss Prissy that Mr. Pike came very near being irreverent enough to nudge the devout Judy. Then what a glorious time followed the solemn minutes in the church! The very twilight fell upon the entire wedding party still feasting and rejoicing, and it was under the light of the early stars that the guests had to wend their way home. Mother Mayberry was surrounded by a court of small boys, each one eager for her words of commendation on their more than exemplary conduct and she smiled and joked them as they escorted her to her door−step. Cindy had gone on ahead and a light shone from

the kitchen window, which was answered by flashes all along and across the Road as the various households settled down to the business of recovering sufficient equilibrium to begin the conduct of the ordinary affairs of daily life at the morrow sun−up.

"Sit down here on the steps just a minute," pleaded the Doctor with trepidation in his voice, for the rose lady had found the strength of mind to reprove him for their conduct in church by ignoring him utterly at the wedding feast, even going to the point of partaking of her supper in the overwhelmed company of Sam Mosbey, who not for the life of him could have told from whence came the courage to ask for such a compliment, and the result of which had been to send him back later to the table in a half−famished condition; he not having been able to feast the eyes and the inner man at the same time.

"Can I trust you?" she demanded of the Doctor in a very small and reproving voice.

"If that is a condition—yes," he reluctantly consented, as he looked up at her in the starlight.

"Thank you—you were very grand," she said after she had settled herself in what she decided to be an uncompromising distance from him. "You really graced the occasion."

"Miss Wingate," he said slowly, and he turned his head so that only his profile showed against the dusk of the wistaria vine, "you wouldn't really be cruel to a country boy with his heart on his sleeve and only his pride to protect it, would you?"

"I suppose it was unkind, for he was so hungry and couldn't seem to eat at all; but I saw Mrs. Pike giving him a glorious supper later, so please don't worry over him." Which answer was delivered in a meek tone of voice that it was difficult to hold to its ingenuous note.

The Doctor ignored this feint and went on with the most exquisite gentleness in his lovely voice that somehow brought her heart into her throat, and without knowing it she edged an inch or two closer to him and her hand made an involuntary movement toward his that rested on the step near her, but which she managed to stop in time. "You realize, do you not, dear lady, that your friendliness to—to us all, commands my intensest loyalty? You'll just promise to remember always that I do understand and go on being happy with us, won't you—us country folks of Providence Road?" The note of pride in his voice was struck with no uncertain sound.

"Oh, but it's you that don't—don't—" the singer lady was about to commit herself most dreadfully by her exclamation in the low dove notes that alone had no trace of the disastrous burr, when Mother Mayberry stepped out of the hall door and came and seated herself beside them.

"Well, of course, I know the Bible do say that they won't be no marriage or giving in marriage in the hereafter, but I do declare we all might miss such infairs as these, even in Heaven," she observed jovially. "Didn't everybody look nice and act nice? Course it was just country doings to you, honey−bird, but I know you enjoyed it some even if it were." Like all sympathetic natures Mother Mayberry fell with ease into the current of any thought, and the young Doctor reached out and took her hand into his with quick appreciation of the fact.

"It was so very lovely that it made me—made me want—" the daring with which the singer lady had begun her defiant remark gave out in the middle and she had to let it trail weakly.

"Well, I hope it made Mr. Petway want Prissy bad enough to ask her, along about moon−up," said Mother Mayberry in a practical tone of voice. "Seems like I hear they voices; and if he IS over there I don't see how he can get out of co'ting some. It's just in the air to−night—and WE'D better all be a−going to bed so as to get up early to start off. Tom Mayberry, seems to me as I remember it, you looked much less plain favored to−day than common. Did you have on some new clothes? And ain't you a−going to pass a compliment on Elinory and me, both with new frocks wored to please you?"

The Doctor laughed and as they all rose together he still held his mother's hand in his and instead of an answer he bent and kissed it with a most distinctly foreign−acquired grace.

"That's honey−fuzzle again, Tom Mayberry, if not in words, in acts," she exclaimed with a delighted laugh. "But pass it along to Elinory if only to keep her from feeling lonesome. Let him kiss your hand, child, he ain't nothing but a country bumpkin that can't talk complimentary to save his life. Now, go get your bucket of water, sonny, and don't let in the cat!"

CHAPTER VIII. THE NEST ON PROVIDENCE NOB

"Why, honey−bird; troubles ain't nothing but tight, ugly little buds the Lord are a−going to flower out for us all, in His good time; maybe not until in His kingdom. I hold that fact in my heart always," said Mother Mayberry as she looked down over her glasses at the singer lady sitting on the top step at her feet.

"I know you do," answered Miss Wingate with a new huskiness rather than the burr in her voice, which made Mother look at her quickly before she drew another thread through her needle. "But I was just thinking about Mrs. Bostick and wishing—oh! I wish we could in some way bring her son back to her before it is too late. Yesterday afternoon when I started home she drew me down and asked me if when− −when I went out into the world again I would look for him and help him. Is there nothing that can be done about it?"

"I reckon not, child," answered Mother Mayberry gently. "If Will was to come back now it would be just to tear up her heart some more. Last night, when I was a−settling of her for bed, I began to talk about the other five children she have buried under God's green grass, each in a different county, as they moved from place to place. I just collected them little graves together and tried to fill her heart with 'em, and when I left she was asleep with a smile on her face I ain't seen for a year. It's as I say—a buried baby are a trouble bud that's a−going to flower out in eternity for a woman. I'll find a lone blossom and she a little bunch. I'm praying in my heart that Will's a stunted plant that'll bloom late, but in time to be sheathed in with the rest. But bless your sweet feeling− heart, child, and let's keep the smile on our faces for her comfort! Woman must bend and not break under a sorrow load. Take some of them calcanthuses to her when you go down for one of them foreign junkets and ask her to tell you about them little folks of her'n. Start her on the little girl that favored the Deacon and cut off all his forelock with the scissors while he were asleep, so he 'most made the congregation over at Twin Creeks disgrace theyselves with laughing at his shorn plight the next Sunday. I've got to turn around 'fore sundown for I've got 'most a day's work to straighten out the hen house and settle the ruckus about nests. The whole sisterhood of 'em have tooken a notion to lay in the same barrel and have to be persuaded some. Now run on so as to be back as early as you can before Tom comes." And as Mother Mayberry spoke, she began to gather together her sewing, preparatory to a sally into the world of her feathered folk.

But before she had watched the singer lady out of sight down the Road, with her spray of brown blossoms in her one hand and her garden hat in the other, she espied young Eliza rapidly approaching from up the Road and there was excitement in every movement of her slim, little body and in every swish of her short calico skirts, as well as in the way her long pigtail swung out behind.

"Mother Mayberry," she exclaimed, as she sank breathless on the top step, "they is a awful thing happened! Aunt Prissy was 'most disgraced 'bout a box of soap and Bud and 'Lias and Henny might have got killed and Buck too, because he sent one to Pattie and wrote what was on the card. I've been so scared I am in the trembles now, but you said always pray to the Lord and I did it while I was a− running down to the store to beg Mr. Petway not to make her jump off from Bee Rock on the Nob like the lady Mis' Peavey read about in the paper did because the man wouldn't marry her that she was in love with. Fast as I were a−running I reckon the Lord made out what I said and beat me to him and told him—"

"'Liza, 'Liza, honey, stop this minute and tell me what you are a− talking about," demanded Mother Mayberry, with almost as much excitement in her voice as was trembling in that of the small talking machine at her feet. "Now begin at the beginning and tell me just what is the matter with your Aunt Prissy?"

"Nothing now," answered Eliza, taking a fresh breath, "she's a−going to marry Mr. Petway, only she won't know it until to−night and I've promised him not to tell her."

"What?" was all that Mother Mayberry managed to demand from the depths of her astonishment as she sank back in her rocking−chair and regarded Eliza with positive awe.

"Yes'um, and it were all about them two beautiful boxes of sweet− smelling soap that he bought in town and have had in the store window for a week. Buck bought one to send to Pattie for a birthday present and he wrote, 'When this you see, remember me,' on a card and put it in the box. I carried it over to her for him and Mr. Hoover jest laughed, and said Buck meant Pattie didn't keep her face clean. But Mis' Hoover hugged Pattie and whispered something to her and told Mr. Hoover to shut up and go see how many children he could get to come in and be

washed up for dinner. Buck was a−waiting for me around the corner of the store and when I told him how pleased Mis' Hoover and Pattie were, he—"

"But wait a minute, 'Liza," interrupted Mother Mayberry with a laugh, "them love jinks twixt Buck and Pattie is most interesting, but I'm waiting to hear about your Aunt Prissy and Mr. Petway. It's liable to be serious when two folks as old as they is—but go on with your tale, honey."

"Well, Buck wrote two of them beautiful 'Remember me' verses on nice pieces of white paper, in them curlycues the Deacon taught him, before he got one to suit him and he left one on the counter, right by the cheese box. While we was gone, along come 'Lias and Bud and Henny and disgraced Aunt Prissy."

"Why, what did them scamps do?" demanded Mother Mayberry, looking over her glasses in some perturbation as the end of the involved narration began to dawn upon her.

"They tooken the other box of soap outen the window and put the verse in it and carried it down to Aunt Prissy and told her Mr. Petway sent it to her. It was a joke they said, but they was good and skeered. I got home then and I seen her and Maw laughing about it and Aunt Prissy was just as pink and pleased and loving looking as Pattie were and Maw was a−joking of her like Mis' Pratt—no, Hoover—did Pattie and all of a sudden I knewed it were them bad boys, 'cause I seen 'em laughing in a way I knows is badness. Oh, then I was so skeered I couldn't swoller something in my throat 'cause I thought maybe Aunt Prissy would jump offen Bee Rock when she found she were so disgraced with Mr. Petway. I woulder done it myself, for I got right red in my own face thinking about it." And the blush that was a dawn of the eternal feminine again rose to the little bud−woman's face.

"It were awful, Eliza child, and I don't blame you for being mortified over it," said Mother Mayberry with a quick appreciation of the wound inflicted on the delicacy of the child, and the tale began to assume serious proportions in her mind as she thought of the probable result to the incipient affair between the elderly lovers that had been a subject of prayful hope to her for some time past. "What did you do?"

"I prayed," answered Eliza in a perfectly practical tone of voice, "and as I prayed I ran to Mr. Petway as fast as I could. He was filling molasses cans at the barrel when I got there and they wasn't nobody in the store, only I seen Bud and Henny peeping from behind the blacksmith shop and they was right white, they was so skeered by that time. Then I told him all about it and begged him to let Aunt Prissy have the box of soap and think he sent it, so her feelings wouldn't get hurted. I told him I would give him my seventy−five cents from picking peas to pay for it and that Aunt Prissy cried so when her feelings was hurted, and she thought so much of him that she kept her frizzes rolled up all day when she hoped he might be coming that night to see her and got Maw to bake tea−cakes to pass him out on the front porch and he MIGHT let her have just that one little box of soap."

"What did he say, child?" asked Mother Mayberry in a voice that was positively weak from anxiety and suppressed mirth at Eliza's own account of her management of the outraged lover.

"He didn't say a thing, but he sat down on a cracker box and just hugged me and laughed until he cried all over my dress and I hugged back and laughed too, but I didn't know what at. Then he told me that he didn't ever want Aunt Prissy to know about them bad boys' foolish joke 'cause he wanted to marry Aunt Prissy and didn't want her to find out that three young scallawags had to begin his co'ting for him."

"Did he say all that to you, 'Liza honey, are you sure?" asked Mother Mayberry, beginning to beam with delight at the outcome of the horrible situation.

"Yes'm, he did, and I went out and brought Bud and 'Lias and Henny in and he talked to 'em serious until 'Lias cried and Bud got choked trying not to. Then he give them all a bottle of soda pop and they ain't never anybody a−going to tell anybody else about it. He made them boys cross they hearts and bodies not to. I didn't cross mine 'cause I knew I had to tell you, but I do it now." And Eliza stood up and solemnly made the mystic sign, thus locking the barn door of her secret chambers after having quartered the troublesome steed of confidence on the ranges of Mother Mayberry's conscience.

"Well, 'Liza, a secret oughter always be wrapped up tight and dropped down the well inside a person, and suppose you and me do it to this one. And, child, I want to tell you that you did the right thing all along this line, and it were the Heavenly Father you asked to help you out that put the right notion in your heart of what to do."

"Yes'm, I believe He did, and He got hold of Mr. Petway some too, to make him kind about wanting to marry Aunt Prissy. He are a−going to ask her to−night and I promised to keep Paw outen the way for him, 'cause Paw WILL get away from Maw and come talk crops with him sometimes on the front porch. May I go out to the kitchen and get Cindy to make a little chicken soup for Mis' Bostick now? I can't get her to eat much to−day."

"Yes, and welcome, Sister Pike," answered Mother Mayberry heartily, and she shook with laughter as the end of the blue calico skirt disappeared in the hall. "The little raven have actually begun to sprout cupid wings," she said to herself as she went around the corner of the house toward the Doctor's office. "Co'ting are a bombshell that explodes in the big Road of life and look out who it hits," she further observed to herself as she paused to train up a shoot of the rambler over the office door.

The Doctor had just come from over the Ridge, put up his horse and made his way through the kitchen and hall into his office where he found his Mother sitting in his chair by the table. He smiled in a dejected way and seated himself opposite her, leaned his elbows on the table and dropped his chin into his hands.

"Now, what's your trouble, Tom Mayberry?" demanded his Mother, as she gazed across at him with anxiety and tenderness striving in glance and tone. "You've been a−going around like a dropped−wing young rooster with a touch of malaria for a week. If it's just moon− gaps you can keep 'em and welcome, but if it's trouble, I claim my share, son."

"I meant to tell you to−day, Mother," he answered slowly. After a moment's silence he looked up and said steadily, "I've failed with Miss Wingate—and I'm too much of a coward to tell her. I feel sure now that she'll never be able to use her voice any more than she can in the speaking tones and she—she will never sing again." As he spoke he buried his face in his hands and his arms shook the table they rested upon.

For a moment Mother Mayberry sat perfectly still and from the whispered words on her lips her son knew she was praying. "The Lord's will be done," she said at last in her deep, quiet voice, and she laid one of her strong hands on her son's arm. "Tell me about it, Tom. You ain't done no operation yet."

"Yes, Mother, I have," he answered quietly. "All the different laryngeal treatments she had tried under the greatest specialists. Her one hope was to be built up to the point of standing a bloodless operation with the galvanic shock. I have tried three times in the last week to release the muscles and start life in the nerves that control the vocal chords. In the two other cases with which I have succeeded the response was immediate after the first operation. Now I dare not risk another tear of the muscles. One reason I didn't tell her is that I had to count on her losing the fear that she wouldn't gain the control. You know she thinks they have been only preliminary treatments and you have heard her laugh as I held her white throat in my hands. She believes completely in the outcome. God, to think I have failed her—HER!"

"Yes, Tom, He knows—and Mother understands," his Mother answered gently.

"And she must be told right away," said the Doctor as he rose and walked to the window. "It is only fair. Shall I or you tell her? Choose, Mother, what will be best for her! But can she stand it?"

"Son," said his Mother, as she also rose and stood facing him with the late afternoon sun falling straight into her face which, lit by the light without and a fire within, shone with a wonderful radiance. "Son, don't you know these old Harpeth Hills have looked down in they day on many a woman open her arms, take a burden to her heart and start on a long journey up to the Master's everlasting hills? Sometimes it have been disgrace, or a lifelong loneliness, or her man hunted out into the night by the law. I have laid still−born children into my sisters' arms, and I've washed the blood from the wounds in women's murdered sons, but I ain't never seen no woman deny her Lord yet and I don't look to see this little sister of my heart refuse her cup. I'll tell her, for it's my part—but Tom Mayberry, see that you stand to her when your time comes, as it surely will."

"Don't you know, Mother, that I would lay down my life to do the least thing for her?" he asked, with the suffering drawing his young face into stern, hard lines. "But to do the one thing for her I might have done has been denied me," he added bitterly.

"No, Tom, there's one thing left to you to give her. Sympathy is God's box of precious ointment and see that you break yours over her heart this day. Now, I'm a−going down Providence Road to meet her and I know the Lord will help me to the right words when the time comes. I leave His blessing with you, boy!" And she turned and left him with his softened eyes looking up into her calm face.

Then for a long hour Mother Mayberry worked quietly among her dependent feather folk and as she worked, her gentle face had its brooding mother−look and her lips moved as she comforted and fortified herself with snatches of prayer for the journey through the deep waters, on which she was to lead this child of her affection. After the last tangle had been straightened out, each brood settled in comfortable quarters and the cause of all quarrels arbitrated, she walked to the front gate and stood looking down the Road.

And up from the Deacon's house came a little procession that made her smile with a sob clutching at her heart.

The singer lady had taken Teether from the arms of his mother, who stood happily exchanging the topics of the times with the Hoover bride, who had not had thus far sufficient opportunity to expatiate on quite all the adventures of the wedding journey and kept on hand still a small store of happenings to recount to her sympathetic neighbors as they found time and opportunity. The rosy rollicking youngster she had perched on her shoulder and held him steadily thus exalted by his pair of sturdy, milk−fed legs. Martin Luther, as usual, clung to her skirts, Susie Pike danced on before her and the Deacon was walking slowly along at her side, carefully carrying the rose−garden of a hat in both his hands. He was looking up at her with his gentle face abeam with pleasure and Mother Mayberry could hear, as they came near, that she was humming to him as he lined out some quaint, early−church words to her. It was a never failing source of delight to the old patriarch to have her thus fit motives from the world's great music to the old, pioneer hymns.

"Sister Mayberry," he exclaimed with exultation in his old face, "I never thought to hear in this world these words of my brother, Charles Wesley, sung to such heavenly strains as my young sister has put them this day. Never before, I feel, have they had fit rendition. While I line the verse, sing them again to Sister Mayberry, child, that her ears may be rejoiced with mine." And Mother Mayberry caught at the top of the gate as the girl slipped the nodding baby down into her arms and in her wonderful muted voice hummed the Grail motif while the Deacon raised his thin old hands and lined out the

"Hail, holy, holy, holy Lord, Whom one in three we know—"

on through its verses to its final invocation of the

"Supreme, essential One, adored In co−eternal Three."

"The Lord bless you, child, and make His sun to shine upon you," he said as the last note died away, while Teether chuckled and nozzled at Mother Mayberry's shoulder. "I must go on back to sit with Mrs. Bostick and will deposit this treasure with Sister Mayberry," he added with a smile as he handed the bouquet−hat over the gate.

"Susie, can't you take Teether over to your Aunt Prissy and tell her that Mother says please give him his milk right away, for it's past time, and she will come in a few minutes?" asked the singer lady, as she handed the reluctant baby to the small girl at her side.

"Milk, thank ma'am, please," demanded Martin Luther quickly, having no intention of being left out of any lactic deal.

"Run ask Cindy," answered Mother Mayberry, as she started him up the front walk, and came on more slowly with Miss Wingate at her side. In her soul she was realizing fully the influence the lovely woman had thrown over the hearts of the simple Providence folk and the greatness of her own nature was making her understand something of the loss to those of the outer world whom the great singer would be no longer able to call within the spell of her wonderful voice.

"Honey−bird," she said gently, as she drew the girl to the end of the porch where the wistaria vine, a whispering maple and the crimson rambler shut them in from the eyes of all the world save the spirit of Providence Nob, which brooded down over them in a wisp of cloud across its sun−reddened top, "here's the place and time and heart strength to tell you that your Lord have laid the hand of affliction on you heavy and have tooken back from you the beautiful voice He gave you to use for a time. I'm a−praying for you to be able to say His will be done."

For one instant the singer woman went white to the eyes and swayed back against the vine, then she asked huskily, "Did HE say so?"

"Yes," answered the Doctor's mother gently with her deep eyes looking into the girl's very soul. "Them treatments was operations and they is all he dares to make for fear of your losing the speaking voice what you have got so beautiful. If they is any love and pity in my heart after I have stopped giving it to you I'm going to pour some out on Tom Mayberry, for when a man's got to look sorrow in the eyes he goes blind and don't know what way to turn, lessen a woman leads him. But he ain't neither here or there and—"

"Where is he?" demanded Miss Wingate in her soft dove notes as she looked the tragedy−stricken young Doctor's mother straight in the face, with her dark eyes completely unveiling her heart, woman to woman. "I—I want HIM!"

"What's left of him is in the office, and you are welcome to the pieces," answered his Mother, a comprehensive joy rising above the sorrow in her eyes. "I reckon I can trust him with you, but if you need any

help, call me," she added, as the singer girl fled down the steps and around to the office wing.

And they neither one of them ever knew how it really happened, though she insisted on accusing herself and he claimed always the entire blame, but he had been sitting where his Mother had left him for an hour or more with his face in his hands when he suddenly found himself clasped in soft arms and his eyes pressed close against a bare white throat and a most wonderful dove voice was murmuring happy, comforting little words that fell down like jewels into his very heart of hearts. And his own strong arms held very close a palpitating, cajoling, flower of a woman, who was wooing for smiles and dimpling with raptures.

"I don't care, I don't, and please don't you!" she pleaded with her lips against his black forelock.

"I can't help caring! The one thing I asked of all my years of hard work was to give the music back to you—" and again he buried his face in the soft lace at her throat.

"You say, do you, that I'll never sing again?" she asked quickly, and as she spoke she lifted his head in her hands and waited an instant for the smothered groan with which he answered her.

"Now, listen," she answered him in a voice fairly a−tremble with joyous passion and as she spoke she laid his ear close over her heart and held him so an instant. "Does it matter that only you will ever hear the song, dear?" she whispered, then slipped out of his arms and across to the other side of the table before he could detain her.

"No, Tom Mayberry," she said as he reached for her, and her tone was so positive that he stopped with his arms in the air and let them sink slowly to his side. "We'll have this question out right here and if I have trouble with you I'll—call your Mother," and she laughed as she shook away a tear.

"Please!" he pleaded and his face was both so radiant and so worn that she had to harden her heart against him to be able to hold herself in hand for what she wanted to say to him.

"No," she answered determinedly, "and you must listen to every word I say, for I am getting frightened already and may have to stop."

"I want to talk some myself," he said with the very first smile coming into his grave young eyes. "I want to tell you that I can't help loving you, and have ever since I first saw you, but that it won't do at all for you to marry—marry a Providence country bumpkin with nothing but a doctoring head on his shoulders. I want you to understand that—"

"Please don't refuse me this way before I've ever asked you," she said with a trace of the grand dame hauteur in her manner and voice that he had never seen before. "I think—I think very suddenly I have come to realize, Doctor Mayberry, that—that—oh, I'm very frightened, but I must say it! I wouldn't blame you or your Mother for not wanting me at all. I—I somehow, I don't seem very great—or real to myself here in Providence. My training has been all to one end—useless now—and I'm all unlessoned and unlearned in the real things of life. I seem to feel that the hot theaters and the crowds that have looked at me and—am I what she has a right to demand in your wife?" And, with a proud little gesture, she laid her case in his hands.

And though she had not expected anything dramatic from him in the way of refutation of her speech, she was totally unprepared for the wonderful, absolute silence that met her heroics. He stood and looked her full in the eyes with a calm radiance in his face that reminded her of the dawn−light she had seen that morning come over Providence Nob and his deep smile gave a young prophet look to his austere mouth. And as she gazed at him she drew timidly nearer, even around the corner of the table.

"Your work is so wonderful—and real—and you ought to have a wife who—" By this time she had got much nearer and her voice trailed off into uncertainty. And still he stood perfectly still and looked at her.

"She loves me and I love her, so that, do you think, I might—I might learn? Cindy says I'm a wonder—and remember the custards," she finished from somewhere in the region of his collar. "Now that we've both refused each other do you suppose we can go on and be happy?" she laughed softly from under his chin.

And the young Doctor held her very close and never answered a word she said. The strain on him had been very great and he was more shaken than he wanted her to see. But from the depths of her heart she understood and pressed closer to him as she gave him a long silence in which to recover himself. Twilight was coming in the windows and a fragrant night breeze was ruffling her hair against his cheek before she stirred in his arms.

"We've got to ask—to ask Mother before—before," she was venturing to suggest in the smallest of voices in which was both mirth and tenderness, when a low laugh answered her from the doorway.

"Oh, no you don't," said Mother Mayberry, as she beamed upon them with the most manifest joy. "I had done picked you out before you had been here more'n a week, honey−bird. You can have him and welcome if you can

put up with him. He's like Mis' Peavey always says of her own jam; 'Plenty of it such as it is and good enough what they is of it.' A real slow−horse love can be rid far and long at a steady gate. He ain't pretty, but middling smart." And the handsome young Doctor's mother eyed him with a well−assumed tolerance covering her positive rapture.

"Are you sure, sure you're not disappointed about—about that peony− girl?" demanded the singer lady, as she came into the circle of Mother Mayberry's arm and nozzled her little nose under the white lawn tie.

"Le'me see," answered Mother Mayberry in a puzzled tone of voice. "I seem to understand you, but not to know what you are talking about."

"The girl to whom he gave the graduating bouquet with Mrs. Peavey's peony in it," she whispered, but not so low that the Doctor, who had come over and put a long arm around them both, couldn't hear.

"Well," answered Mother Mayberry in a judicial tone of voice as she bestowed a quizzical glance on the Doctor, who blushed to the roots of his hair at this revelation of the fact of his Mother's indulgence in personal reminiscence, "I reckon Miss Alford'll be mighty disappointed to lose him, but I don't know nothing about her riz biscuits. Happiness and good cooking lie like peas in a pod in a man's life and I reckon I'll have to give Tom Mayberry, prize, to you."

"Mother!" exclaimed the Doctor.

"Thank you," murmured Miss Wingate with a wicked glance at him from his Mother's shoulder that brought a hurried embrace down upon them both.

"Children," said Mother Mayberry, as she suddenly reached put her strong arms and took them both close to her breast, "looks like the Lord sometimes hatches out two birds in far apart nests just to give 'em wing−strength to fly acrost river and hill to find each other. You both kinder wandered foreign some 'fore you sighted one another, but now you can begin to build your own nest right away, and I offers my heart as a bush on Providence Nob to put it in."

CHAPTER IX. THE LITTLE HARPETH WOMAN OF MANY SORROWS

"This here are a curious spell of weather," remarked Mother Mayberry, as she paused beside the singer lady who was holding Martin Luther up on the broad window−sill, and with him was looking disconsolately down the Road. "June's gone to acting like a woman with nerves that cries just because she can. I'm glad all the chicken babies are feathered out and can shed rain. Them little Hoosier pullets have already sprouted tail feathers. They ain't a one of 'em a−going into the skillet no matter how hungry Tom Mayberry looks after 'em. If I don't hold you and Cindy back from spoiling him with chicken−fixings three times a day he'll begin to show pin feathers hisself in no time."

"He likes chicken better than anything else," murmured Miss Wingate as she buried a blush in Martin Luther's topknot.

"Well, wanting ain't always a reason for being gave to," said the Doctor's mother with a chuckle as she admired the side view of the blush. "But, seeing that he about half feeds hisself by looking at me and you at the table, I reckon I'll have to let him have two chickens a day to keep up his strength. Honey−fuzzle are a mighty satisfying diet, though light, for a growed man. Reckon we can persuade him to try a couple of slices of old ham onct in a while so as to give a few broilers time to get legs long enough to fry?"

"We can try," answered the singer lady in a doubtful tone of voice, for the Doctor's penchant for young chicken was very decided.

"Dearie me, it do beat all how some plans of life fall down in the oven," said the Doctor's mother, as she eyed Miss Wingate with her most quizzical smile quirking up the corners of her humorous mouth. "Here I put myself to all manner of troubles to go out into the big world to get a real managing wife for Tom Mayberry and I might just as well have set cross−handed and waited for Susie Pike or little Bettie to grow up to the spoiling of him. I thought seeing that you'd been raised with a silver spoon in your mouth and handed life on a fringed napkin, so to speak, you would make him stand around some, but for all I can see you're going to make another Providence wife. Ain't you got none of the suffering−women new notions at all?"

"I can't help it," answered the singer lady, ducking her head behind Martin Luther again, but smiling up out of the corners of her eyes.

"Are you just going to drop over into being a poor, down−trodden, miserable, man−bossed Harpeth Hill's wife, without trying a single new−fashioned husband remedy on him, with so many receipts for managing 'em being written down by ladies all over the world, mostly single ones?" demanded Mother Mayberry, fairly bubbling over with glee at the singer lady's abashment.

"Yes, I am," answered Miss Wingate sturdily. "I want him to have just what he wants."

"This are worse and more of it," exclaimed the Doctor's delighted Mother. "You are got a wrong notion, child! Marriage ain't no slow, plow−team business these days; it's hitched at opposite ends and pulling both ways for dear life. Don't you even hope you will be; able to think up no kind of tantrums to keep Tom Mayberry from being happy?"

"I don't want to," laughed the infatuated bride prospective.

"Then I reckon I'll have to give up and let you settle down into being one of these here regular old−fashioned, primping−for−a−man, dinner−on−the−table−at−the−horn−blow, hanging−over−the−front−gate− waiting kind of wives. I thought I'd caught a high−faluting bird of Paradise for him and you ain't a thing in the world but a meadow dove. But there comes Bettie scooting through the rain with little Hoover under her shawl. Providence folks have got duck blood, all of 'em, and the more it pours out they paddles. Come in and shake your feathers, Bettie."

"Howdy all," exclaimed the rosy Mrs. Hoover. "This here rain on the corn is money in everybody's pocket. I just stopped in to show you this pink flowered shirt−waist I have done finished for Miss Prissy Pike. Ain't it stylish?"

"It surely are, Bettie!" exclaimed Mother Mayberry. "I'm so glad you got it pink."

"And it don't run neither. I tried it," said the proud designer of the admired garment.

"That's a good sign for the wedding. You can rub happiness that's fast dyed through any kinder worry suds and

it'll come out with the color left. Any news along the Road?" asked Mother Mayberry, as she handled the rosy blouse with careful hands.

"Well, Henny Turner says that Squire Tutt are in bed covered up head and ears with the quilts, but 'Lias says that it are just 'cause Mis' Tutt have got a happy spell on her and have been exorting of him. She called all three of them boys in, Bud and Henny and 'Lias, and made 'em learn a Bible verse a−piece, and I was grateful to her for her interest, but the Squire cussed so to 'em while she went to get 'em a cake that I'm afraid the lesson were spoiled for the chaps."

"I don't reckon it were, Bettie. Good salts down any day, while Evil don't ever keep long. But I do wish we could get the Squire and Mis' Tutt to be a little more peaceably with one another. It downright grieves me to have 'em so spited here in they old age." And Mother Mayberry's eyes took on a regretful look and she peered over her glasses at the happy bride. On her buoyant heart she ever carried the welfare of every soul in Providence and the crabbed old couple down the Road was a constant source of trouble to her.

"You shan't worry over 'em, Mis' Mayberry," answered pretty Bettie quickly, "You get every Providence trouble landed right on your shoulders as soon as one comes. You don't get a chance to do nothing but deal out ease to other people's bodies and souls, too."

"Well, a cup of cold water held to other folks' mouths is a mighty good way to quench your own thirst, Bettie child, and I'm glad if it are gave to me to label out the blessing of ease. But have you been in to the Deacon's this morning?"

"No'm, I'm a−going to stop as I go along home," answered Bettie. "I have seed the little raven paddling back and forth, so I guess they is all right. I must hurry on now, for I see Miss Prissy at the window looking for me. Ain't my baby a−growing?" she asked, as she picked little Hoover off of the floor and again enveloped the bobbing head under her own shawl.

"Yes, it are, and Mr. Hoover's a−smiling hisself fat by the day, child," answered Mother Mayberry with a smile. "Do you pass on the word to Elinory here that Providence husbands wear good, both warp and woof?"

"That they do, Miss Elinory, and I never seed nothing like 'em in my travels," called back the bride from the door, as she reefed in her skirts and sailed out in the downpour.

"Well, your mind oughter be satisfied, child, for Bettie muster seen a good deal of the world in that three weeks' bridal trip in the farm wagon," laughed Mother Mayberry at the singer lady by the window. "Now I'm a−going to swim out to gather eggs and I'll be back if I don't drown." With which she left the girl and the tot to resume their watch down the Road for a horse and rider due in not over two hours' time.

And indeed the last of old June's days seemed in danger of dripping away from her in tears of farewell. Rain clouds hung low over Harpeth Hills and drifted down to the very top of Providence Nob. A steady downpour had begun in the night and held on into the day and seemed to increase in volume as the hours wore away. The tall maples were standing depressed−boughed and dripping and the poplar leaves hung sodden and wet, refusing a glimpse of their silver lining. A row of bleeding−hearts down the walk were turning faint pink and drooping to the ground, while every rose in the yard was shattered and wasted away.

"Rain, rain!" wailed Martin Luther under his breath, as he pressed his cheek to the window−pane and looked without interest at a forlorn rooster huddled with a couple of hens under the snowball bush.

"Don't you want a cake and some milk?" asked the singer lady, as she gave him a comforting hug and essayed consolation by the offer of a material distraction.

"No milk, no cake; L−i−z−a, thank ma'am, please" he sobbed a disconsolate demand for what he considered a good substitute sunbeam.

"There she comes now, darling," exclaimed the singer lady, with as much pleasure coming into her face as lit the doleful cherub's at her side. And from the Pike front door there had issued a small figure, also enveloped in an old shawl, which made its way across the puddles with splashing, bare feet. She had her covered dish under her arm and a bucket dangled from one hand. She answered Martin Luther's hail with a flash of her white teeth and sped across the front porch.

And in the course of just ten minutes the experienced young pacifier had established the small boy as driver to Mother Mayberry's large rocking−chair, mounted him on the foot of the bed with snapping switch to crack and thus secured a two−hour reign of peace for his elders.

"Miss Elinory," she said, as she came and stood close to the singer lady seated in the deep window, "I'm

mighty glad you got Doctor Tom; and it were fair to the other lady, too. He couldn't help loving you best, 'cause you are got a sick throat and she ain't. Do you reckon she'll be satisfied to take Sam Mosbey when she comes again? I'm sorry for her."

"So am I, Eliza," laughed Miss Wingate softly, as the rose blush stole up over her cheeks, "but I don't believe she'll need Mr. Mosbey. Don't you suppose she—that—is—there must be some one down in the City whom she likes a lot."

"Yes'm, I reckon they is. Then I'll just take Sam myself when I grow up if nobody else wants him," answered Eliza comfortably. "I'm sorry to be glad that your throat didn't get well, but Mis' Peavey says that you never in the world woulder tooken Doctor Tom if you coulder gone away and made money singing to people. I don't know what me or him or Mother Mayberry woulder done without you, but we couldn'ter paid you much to stay. You won't never go now, will you?"

"Never," answered the singer lady, as she drew the little ingenue close to her side. "And let me whisper something to you, Eliza—I never—would—have—gone—any—way. I love you too much, you and Mother Mayberry—and Doctor Tom."

"And Mis' Bostick and Deacon," exclaimed the loyal young raven. "Miss Elinory, I get so scared about Mis' Bostick right here," she added, laying her hand on her little throat. "She won't eat nothing and she can't talk to me to−day. Maw and Mis' Nath Mosbey are there now and waiting for Doctor Tom to come back. They said not to tell Mother Mayberry until the rain held up some, but they want her, too. Can't loving people do nothing for 'em, Miss Elinory?" and with big, wistful eyes the tiny woman put the question, which has agonized hearts down the ages.

"Oh, darling, the—loving itself helps," answered the singer lady quickly with the mist over her eyes.

"I believe it do," answered Eliza thoughtfully.

"I hold the Deacon's other hand when he sets by Mis' Bostick! He wants me, and she smiles at us both. I don't like to leave 'em for one single minute. I have to wait now for Cindy to get the dinner done, but then I'm a−going to run. Why, there goes Mother Mayberry outen the gate under a umbrella! And Aunt Prissy asked me to get a spool of number fifty thread from her to sew some lace on a petticoat Mis' Hoover have done finished for her. If I was to go to get married I'd make some things for my husband, too, and not so much for myself. I wouldn't want so many skirts unless I knewed he had enough shirts."

"But, Eliza," remonstrated Miss Wingate, slightly shocked at this rather original idea of providing a groom with a trousseau, "perhaps he would rather get things for himself."

"No'm, he wouldn't," answered Eliza positively. "I ain't a−going to say anything to Aunt Prissy about it 'cause you never can tell what will hurt her feelings, but I want you to get Mis' Hoover to show you how and make three nice shirts for Doctor Tom, so you can wash one while he wears the other and keep one put away for Sunday. That is the way Maw does for Paw and all the other folks on the Road does the same for they men. Mis' Peavey can show you how to iron them nice, for she does the Deacon's for me and Mother Mayberry is too busy to bother with such things 'count of always having to go to sick folks even over to the other side of the Nob. Cindy don't starch good. You'll do for Doctor Tom nice, now you've got him, won't you?"

"Yes, Eliza, I will," answered the singer lady meekly, as this prevision of the life domestic rose up and menaced her. She even had a queer little thrill of pleasure at the thought of performing such superhuman tasks for what was to be her individual responsibility among Providence men along the Road. The certainty that she would never be allowed to perform such offices at machine and tub actually depressed her, for the thought had brought a primitive sense of possession that she was loath to dismiss; the passion for service to love being an instinct that sways the great lady and her country sister alike. "Do you think he—will let me?" she asked of her admonisher.

"Just go on and do it and don't ask him," was the practical answer. "There he comes now leading his horse and he have been to see Mis' Bostick. I can get the dinner and run on to meet him and hear how he thinks she are," she exclaimed as she seized her dish and bucket and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen.

And a few minutes later, as Doctor Mayberry was unsaddling his horse in the barn a lithe figure enveloped as to head and shoulders in one of Cindy's kitchen aprons darted under the dripping eaves and stood breathless and laughing in the wide door.

"I saw you come up the Road," said the singer lady, as she divested herself of the gingham garment, "and I was dying to get out in the rain, much to Cindy's horror. You are late."

"Not much," answered the young Doctor, slipping out of his rain coat and coming over to stand beside her in the door. "What have you been doing all morning?"

"I've been being—being lectured," she answered, as she looked up in his face with dancing dark eyes.

"Who did it to you?" he asked, taking her fingers into his and drawing her farther back from the splash of the rain drops.

"Your Mother and then Eliza Pike," she answered with a low laugh. "Eliza is afraid I won't 'do for you' in proper Providence style and I'm very humble and—I—I want to learn. She thinks I ought to begin on some—some shirts for you right now and I'm going to. What color do you prefer?"

"Horrors!" exclaimed the Doctor, positively blushing at the thought of the very lovely lady engaged in such a clothing mission.

"I knew you wouldn't have any confidence in them" answered Miss Wingate mournfully, "and I haven't myself, but still I was willing to try."

"Oh, yes, I have!" the young Doctor hastened to exclaim. "Better make them suitable for traveling, for I've got marching orders in the noon mail. Are you ready to start to Italy on short notice and then on to India?"

"What?" demanded the singer lady with alarmed astonishment.

"Yes," answered the young Doctor coolly. "The Commission writes that my reports on Pellagra down here are complete enough now for them to send some chap down to continue them, while I go on to Southern Italy for a study of similar conditions there and then on to India for a still more exhaustive examination. The Government is determined to stamp this scourge out before it gets a hold, and it's work to put out the fire before it spreads. Better hurry the shirts and pack up your own fluff."

"But I'm not going a step or a wave," answered the singer girl defiantly. "I'm too busy here now. I don't ever intend to leave Mother as long as I live. I don't see how you can even suggest such a thing to me."

"Do you know what leaving Mother is like?" asked the young Doctor, as he looked down on her with tenderness in his gray eyes and Mother Mayberry's own quizzical smile on his lips. "It's like going to sleep at night with a last look at Providence Nob,—you wake up in the morning and find it more there than ever. She was THERE on sunny mornings over in Berlin and THERE on gray days in London and I had her on long hard hospital nights in New York. Just come with me on this trip and I promise she and Old Harpeth will be here when we get back. Please!"

"I don't know," answered Miss Wingate in a small voice as she rubbed her cheek against the arm of his coat. "I'm in love with Tom Mayberry of Providence Road. I don't know that I want to go traveling with a distinguished physician on an important Government mission and attend Legation dinners and banquets and—I don't want to leave my Mother," and there was a real catch in the laugh she smothered in his coat sleeve.

"Dearie girl," he exclaimed, looking down with delight at a small section of blush left visible against the rough blue serge of his coat, "you and Mother are—"

"Sakes, you folks, I wish you'd try to listen when you are called at!" came in a sharp voice as Mrs. Peavey looked down upon them from over the wall near the barn. "One of them foolish Indiany chickens are stretched out kicking most drowned in a puddle right by the barn door, and there you both stand doing nothing for it. Tom Mayberry, pick it up this minute and give it to me! I'm a−going to put it behind my stove until Mis' Mayberry comes home. I've got some feeling for her love of chickens, _I_ have."

"Oh, I didn't see it!" exclaimed Miss Wingate, in an agony of regret. "The dear little thing! Give it to me and I'll take care of it."

"Fiddlesticks! Chickens ain't 'dear little things,' and I wouldn't trust neither one of you to take care of a flea of mine, with your philandering. Hand it here to me, Tom Mayberry, like I tell you!" And the Doctor hastened to pick up the little gasping bunch of drenched feathers, which Mrs. Peavey tucked in the corner of her shawl "Did you all hear that a car busted into another one down in the City day before yesterday and throwed the driver and broke a lady's arm and cut a baby's leg shameful? It was in the morning paper I saw down to the store; and a wind storm blew off a man's roof too."

"I haven't read the paper yet," answered the singer lady in the subdued voice she always used in addressing Mother Mayberry's pessimistic neighbor.

"Well, you oughter take interest in accidents if you are a−going to be a Doctor's wife. It'll be all in the family then and you can hear it all straight and maybe see some folks mended" answered Mrs. Peavey, and she failed to

notice Miss Wingate's horrified expression at such a prospect. "How's Mis' Bostick, Tom? That is, how do your Mother say she are, for I couldn't trust your notion in such a case as her'n."

"I think Mother feels worried over her to−day," answered the Doctor gently, with not a trace of offense at his neighbor's outspoken question. "Her heart is very weak and it is impossible to stimulate her further. Mother is up there now and I'll come tell you what she says when she comes home to dinner."

"Well, I'm always thankful for news, bad as it mostly are," answered Mrs. Peavey in gloomy gratitude for his offer of a report from Mother Mayberry. "You all had better go on in the house now and put Miss Elinory's wet feet in the stove, for they won't be no use in her dying on Mis' Mayberry's hands with pneumony at this busy time of the year. Them slippers is too foolish to look at." With which the shawled head disappeared from the top of the wall.

"Do you know, I had a strange dream last night," said the singer lady, as the Doctor hung up his bridle and shut the feed−room door preparatory to following out Mrs. Peavey's injunction as to carrying Miss Wingate away to be dry shod. "I dreamed that I was singing to Mrs. Bostick and the Deacon, REALLY singing, and just as it rose clear and strong Mrs. Peavey called to me to 'shut up' and it stopped so suddenly that I waked up—and the strange part of it is that I heard, really heard, I thought, my own voice die away in an echo up in the eaves. For a second I seemed awake and listening—and it was lovely—lovely!"

"Dear," said the Doctor, as he took her hand in his and held it against his breast, "I would give all life has to offer me to get it back for you. I will hope against hope! I haven't written Doctor Stein yet. I can't make myself write. Perhaps we will find some one on this trip who has some theory or treatment or something to offer. I've been praying that help will come!"

"Would you—like me any better if I had it back?" she asked with a happy little laugh as she laid her cheek against their clasped hands. "Would you want L'ELEONORE more than you do just plain Elinor Wingate, care Mother Mayberry, Providence, Tennessee?"

"I'm going to carry you in the house so you can put on dry stockings," answered the Doctor with a spark in his gray eyes that scorned her question, and without any discussion he picked her up, strode through the rain with her and deposited her in the kitchen door.

And over by the long window they found Mother Mayberry standing with her hand on Cindy's shoulder, who sat with her head bowed in her apron sobbing quietly, while Martin Luther stood wide−eyed and questioning, with his little hand clutching Mother's skirts.

"Children," said Mother quietly as she came and stood beside them in the doorway, while Martin Luther nestled up to Doctor Tom, "I've come down the Road to tell you that it are all over up at the Deacon's. It were very beautiful, for Mis' Bostick just give us a smile and went to meet her Lord with the love of us all a−shining on her face. We didn't hardly sense it at first, for she had just spoke to 'Liza, and the Deacon were over by the window. I ain't got no tears to shed for her and Deacon are so stunned he don't need 'em yet."

"Mother," exclaimed the Doctor, as he took her hand in his, while the singer lady crept close and rested against her strong shoulder.

"Yes, son," answered his Mother gently, "it come so sudden I couldn't even send for you, but go on up there now and see what you can do for Deacon. He'll want you for the comfort of your presence, you and 'Liza."

"And Eliza!" exclaimed Miss Wingate with a sob, "it'll break her little heart."

"They never was such a child as 'Liza Pike in the world," said Mother Mayberry softly and for the first time a film of tears spread over her eyes. "She have never said a word, but just stands pressed up close with her arm 'round the Deacon's shoulders as he sits with his Good Book acrost his knees. She give one little moan when she understood, but she ain't made a mite of child−fuss, just shed her baby tears like a woman growed to sorrow. Her little bucket and dish of dinner is a−setting cold on the table and a little draggled rose she had brung in not a hour back is still in Mis' Bostick's fingers, and the other one pinned on the Deacon's coat. When Judy and Betty wanted to begin to fix things she understood without a word, led the Deacon out into the hall and are just a−standing there a−keeping him up in his daze by the courage in her own loving little heart. The good Lord bless and keep the child! Now, go on, Tom, and see what you can do! Yes, Cindy will run right over and tell Mis' Peavey. And stop in and see Squire Tutt, for Henny Turner says he are down to− day and a−asking for you. Come into my room, honey−bird, I've got to look for something."

"Somehow, I don't feel about dying as lot of folks do," she remarked to the singer lady, as she stood in front of

the tall old chest of drawers in her own room a few minutes later. "Death ain't nothing but laying down one job of work and going to answer the Master when He calls you to come take up another. Mis' Bostick have worked in His vineyard early and late, through summer sun and winter wind, and now He have summoned her in for some other purpose. He'll find her well−tried and seasoned to go on with whatever plans He have for her in His Kingdom."

"It's wonderful to believe that," answered the singer girl through her tears. "It seems to supply a reason for what happens to us here− −if we can go on with it later."

"Course we can," answered Mother Mayberry, as she began to search in her top drawer for something. "I hope He have got some good big job cut out for Tom Mayberry and me; but course it will have to be something different, for they won't be no more sickness or death or sorrowing for us doctors to tend on. But Pa Lovell and Doctor Mayberry have found something by this time and maybe it will be for me and Tom to work at it alongside of 'em. It might be you will have the beautiful voice back and come sing for us all, as have never heard you in this world. Then, too, I believe He'll give it to little Sister Pike to tend on the prophets and maybe I'll be there to see!"

"This is the first time I ever could take—take any interest in Heaven at all," confessed Miss Wingate, lifting large, comforted eyes to Mother Mayberry's face. "When I was so desperate and didn't know what to do, before I came and found out that there was a place for me in this world even if I couldn't sing any more, I used to dread the thought of Heaven, even if I might some day be good enough to go there."

"Well, a stand−around, set−around kind of Heaven may be for some people as wants it, but a come−over−and−help−us kind is what I'm hoping for. I want to have a good lot of honest acts to pack up and take into the judgment seat to prove my character by and then be honored with some kind of telling labor to do. I'm looking for something white to put at Mis' Bostick's neck, for we are a−going to lay her in her grave in the old dress with its honorable patches, but with a little piece of fine white to match her sweet soul. Here it is."

"Will you let me know if I can do anything for anybody or the Deacon later?" asked the singer lady gently.

"I know you will be a comfort to him, child, after a while. You can look after my chickens and things for me, for Cindy's a−going with me and that leaves you to feed the two boys, Tom and Martin Luther, for dinner. And don't you never forget that you are the apple−core of your Mother Mayberry's heart and she's a−going to hold you to her tender, even unto them Glory days we've been a−planning for, with Death here in the midst of Life."

CHAPTER X. THE SONG OF THE MASTER'S GRAIL

"In all my long life it have never been gave to me to see anything like Deacon Bostick and his Providence children," said Mother Mayberry, as she stood on the end of the porch with the singer girl's hand in hers. "He are a−setting on his bench under the tree right by her window, like he always did to listen for her, and every child in the Road is a−huddled up against him like a forlorn lot of little motherless chickens. He have got little Bettie and Martin Luther on his knees and the rest are just crowded up all around him. He don't seem to notice any of the rest of us, but looks to 'Liza for everything. She got him to go to bed at nine o'clock and when Buck and Mr. Petway went to set up for the night they found she'd done made 'Lias and Henny and Bud all lie down by him, one on each side and Bud acrost the foot. He wanted 'em to stay and the men let 'em do it. Judy says she were up by daylight and gone down the Road to see about his breakfast and things. And now she are just a− standing by him waiting for the bell to toll for the funeral. The Deacon have surely followed his Master in the suffering of little children to draw close to him in this life and now he are becoming as one of 'em before entering the Kingdom."

"This soft, misty, sun−veiled day seems just made for Mrs. Bostick," said Miss Wingate with unshed tears in her voice.

"It may be just a notion of mine, honey−bird, but it looks like up here in Harpeth Hills the weather have got a sympathy with us folks. Look how Providence Nob have drawed a mist of tears 'twixt it and the faint sun. When troubles are with us I've seen clouds boil up over the Ridge and on the other hand we ain't scarcely ever had rain on a wedding or church soshul day. I like to feel that maybe the good Lord looks special after us of His children living out in the open fields and we have got His word that He tempers the winds. People in the big cities can crowd up and keep care of one another, but out here we are all just in the hollow of His hand. Here comes Mis' Peavey. I asked her to go along to the funeral with me and you. It are most time now."

"Howdy, all," said Mrs. Peavey in an utterly gray tone of voice. "Mis' Mayberry, that Circuit Rider have never come from Bolivar yet. Do you reckon his horse have throwed him or is it just he don't care for us Providence folks and don't think it worth his while to come say the words over Sister Bostick?"

"Oh, he come 'most a half−hour ago, Hettie Ann," answered Mother Mayberry quickly. "Bettie had a little snack laid out for him 'count of his having to make such a early start to get here. He was most kind to the Deacon and professed much sorrow for us all. How are your side this morning?"

"I got out that foolish dry plaster Tom made me more'n a month ago and put it on last night, 'cause I didn't want to disturb you, and to my surprise they ain't a mite of pain hit me since. But I guess it are mostly the clearing weather that have stopped it."

"Maybe a little of both," answered the Doctor's mother with a smile, "but anyway, it's good that you ain't a−suffering none. We must all take good care of each other's pains from now on, 'cause we are most valuable one to another. Friends is one kind of treasure you don't want to lay up in Heaven."

"I spend most of my time thinking about folks' accidents and hurts and pains," answered Mrs. Peavey in all truth. "Miss Elinory, did you gargle your throat with that slippery−ellum tea I thought about to make for you last week?"

"Yes, Mrs. Peavey, I did," answered Miss Wingate quickly, for she had performed that nauseous operation actuated by positive fear of Mrs. Peavey if she should discover a failure to follow her directions.

"It'll cure you, maybe," answered the gratified neighbor. "There's the bell and let's all go on slow and respectful."

And the sweet−toned old Providence Meeting−house bell was tolling its notes for the passing of the soul of the gentle little Harpeth woman of many sorrows as her friends and neighbors walked quietly down the Road, along the dim aisle and took their places in the old pews with a fitting solemnity on their serious faces. The young Circuit Rider spoke to them from a full heart in sympathetically simple words and Pattie Hoover led the congregation from behind the little cabinet organ in a few of the Deacon's favorite hymns.

Then the little procession wound its way among the graves over to a corner under an old cedar tree, where the stout young farmers laid their frail burden down for its long sleep. The Deacon stood close by and the children clung around his thin old legs, to his hands, and reached to grasp at a corner of his coat. Eliza laid her head

against his shoulder and Henny and 'Lias crowded close on the other side, while Bud held the old black hat he had taken from off his white hair, in careful, shaking little hands. The singer lady, with the Doctor at her side and her hand in Mother Mayberry's, stood just opposite and the others came near.

The simple service that the Church has instituted for the committing of its dead to the grave had been read by the Circuit Rider, the last prayer offered, and as a long ray of sunlight came through the mist and fell across the little assembly, he turned expectantly to Pattie Hoover, who stood between her father and Buck at the other end of the grave. He had read the first lines of the hymn and he expected her to raise the tune for the others to follow. But when a woman's heart is very young and tender, and attuned to that of another which is throbbing emotionally close by, her own feelings are apt to rise in a tidal wave of tears, regardless of consequences; and as Buck Peavey choked off a sob, Pattie turned and buried her head on her father's arm. There was a long pause and nobody attempted to start the singing. They were accustomed to depend on Pattie or her organ and their own throats were tight with tears. The unmusical young preacher was helpless and looked from one to another, then was about to raise his hands for the benediction, when a little voice came across the grave.

"Ain't nobody going to sing for Mis' Bostick?" wailed Eliza, as her head went down on the Deacon's arm in a shudder of sobs.

Then suddenly a very wonderful and beautiful thing happened in that old churchyard of Providence Meeting−house under Harpeth Hills, for the great singer lady stepped toward the Deacon a little way, paused, looked across at the old Nob in the sunlight, and high and clear and free−winged like that of an archangel, rose her glorious voice in the

"Hail, holy, holy, holy Lord,"

which she had set for him and the gentle invalid to the wonderful motif of the Song of the Master's Grail. Love and sorrow and a flood of tears had relieved a pressure somewhere, the balance had been recovered and her muted voice freed. And on through the verses to the very end she sang it, while the little group of field people held their breath in awe and amazement. Then, while they all stood with bowed heads for the benediction, she turned and walked away through the graves, out of the churchyard and on up Providence Road, with an instinct to hide from them all for a moment of realization.

"And here I have to come and hunt the little skeered miracle out of my own feather pillows," exclaimed Mother Mayberry a little later with laughter, tears, pride and joy in her voice, as she bent over the broad expanse of her own bed and drew the singer girl up in her strong arms. "Daughter," she said, with her cheek pressed to the flushed one against her shoulder, "what the Lord hath given and taketh away we bless Him for and none the less what He giveth back, blessed be His name. That's a jumble, but He understands me. You don't feel in no ways peculiar, do you?" and as she asked the question the Doctor's mother clasped the slender throat in one of her strong hands.

"Not a bit anywhere," answered Miss Wingate, with the burr all gone from her soft voice. "Is it true?"

"Dearie me, I can't hardly stand it to hear you speak, it are so sweet!" exclaimed Mother Mayberry in positive rapture and again the tears filled her eyes, while her face crinkled up into a dimpled smile. "Don't say nothing where the mocking−birds will hear you, please, 'cause they'll begin to hatch out a dumb race from plumb discouragement. Come out on the porch where it ain't so hot, but I'm a−holding on to you to keep you from flying up into one of the trees. I'm a−going to set about building a cage for you right—"

"Now, didn't I tell you about that slippery−ellum!" came in a positively triumphant voile to greet them as they stepped out of the front door. Mrs. Peavey was ascending the steps all out of breath, her decorous hat awry, and her eyes snapping with excitement. "Course I don't think this can be no positive cure and like as not you'll wake up to−morrow with your voice all gone dry again, but it were the slippery−ellum that done it!"

"I think it must have helped some," answered the singer lady in the clear voice that still held its wonted note of meekness to her neighbor.

"Course it did! Tom Mayberry's experimenting couldn'ter done it no real good. His mother have been giving that biled bark for sore throat for thirty years and it was me that remembered it. But it were a pity you done it at the grave; that were Mis' Bostick's funeral and not your'n. Now look at everybody a−coming up the Road with no grieving left at all."

"Oh, Hettie Ann," exclaimed Mother Mayberry in quick distress, "it are a mean kind of sorrow that can't open its arms to hold joy tender. Think what it do mean to the child and—Look at Bettie!"

And indeed it was a sight to behold the pretty mother of the seventeen sailing up the front walk like a great full−rigged ship. Miss Wingate flew down the steps to meet her and in a few seconds was enveloped and involved with little Hoover in an embrace that threatened to be disastrous to all concerned. Judy Pike was close behind and, making a grab on her own part, stood holding the end of the singer lady's sash in her one hand while Teether, from her other arm, caught at the bright ribbons and squealed with delight. The abashed Pattie hung over the front gate and Buck grinned in the rear.

"Lawsy me, child," Mrs. Hoover laughed and sobbed as she patted the singer lady on the back, little Hoover anywhere he came upmost and included Teether and Judy also in the demonstration, "I feel like it would take two to hold me down! You sure sing with as much style as you dress! And to think such a thing have happened to all of us here in Providence. We won't never need that phonygraph we all are a− hankering after now. Speak up to the child, Judy Pike!"

"I don't need to," answered the more self−contained Sister Pike, "she knows how I'm a−rejoicing for her. Just look at Mr. Hoover and Ez Pike a−grinning acrost the street at her and here do come the Squire and Mis' Tutt walking along together for the first time I almost ever seed 'em."

"Wheeuh," wheezed the Squire, "I done come up here to give up on the subject of that Tom Mayberry! He don't look or talk like he have got any sense, girl, but he are the greatest doctor anywhere from Harpeth Hills to Californy or Alasky. He have got good remedies for all. I reckon you are one of the hot water kind, but he can give bitters too. You'd better keep him to the bitters though for safety."

"There now! You all have done heard the top testimony for Tom Mayberry," exclaimed Mother, fairly running over with joy.

"Glory!" was the one word that rose to the surface of Mrs. Tutt's emotions, but it expressed her state of beatitude and caused the Squire to peer at her with uneasiness as if expecting an outburst of exhortation on the next breath. Mrs. Peavey's experienced eye also caught the threatened downpour and she hastened to admonish the group of women.

"Sakes, you all!" she exclaimed, untying the strings of her bonnet energetically, "they won't be a supper cooked on the Road if we don't go get about it. A snack dinner were give the men and such always calls for the putting on of the big pot and the little kettle for supper. Miss Elinory will be here for you all to eat up to− morrow morning, 'lessen something happens to her in the night, like a wind storm. Go on everybody!"

"Oh," exclaimed Mother Mayberry, as she stood on the top step looking down at them all, "look how the sun have come out on us all, with its happiness after the sorrow we have known this day. I thank you, one and all, for your feeling with me and my daughter Elinory. The rejoicing of friends are a soft wind to folks' spirit wings and we're all flying high this night. Get the children bedded down early, for they have had a long day and need good sleep. Bettie, let Mis' Tutt walk along with you and the Squire can come on slow. Don't nobody forget that it are Sewing Circle with Mis' Mosbey to−morrow."

And, with more congratulations to the singer lady, laughs with Mother Mayberry, and the return of a shot or two with Mrs. Peavey, the happy country women dispersed to their own roof trees. The sorrow that had come they had endured for the night and now they were ready to rise up and meet joy for the morning. In the children of nature the emotions maintain their elemental balance and their sense of the proportions of life is instinctively true.

"Look, honey−bird, who's coming!" said Mother Mayberry, just as she was turning to seat herself in her rocking−chair, tired out as she was with the strain of the long day. "Run, meet 'em at the gate!" And up Providence Road came the old Deacon and Eliza hand in hand, with Martin Luther trailing wearily behind them. When she saw Miss Wingate at the gate, Eliza, for the first time during the day, loosed her hold on her old charge and darted forward to hide her head on the singer lady's breast as her thin little arms clasped around her convulsively.

"Now," she wailed, "Mis' Bostick are dead and you'll be goned away too. Can't you stay a little while, till we can stand to let you go? Poor Doctor Tom! Please, oh, please!"

"Darling, darling, I'm never going to leave you!" exclaimed Miss Wingate, as she hugged the small implorer as closely as possible and held out one hand to the Deacon as he came up beside them. "I'm going to stay and sing for you and the Deacon whenever you want me— if it will help!"

"Child," said the old patriarch, with an ineffable sweetness shining from his sad old face, "out of my affliction I come to add my blessing to what the Lord has given to you this day. And I take this mercy as a special

dispensation to me and to her, as it came when you were performing one of His offices for us. No sweeter strain could come from the Choir Invisible that she hears this night, and if she knows she rejoices that it will be given at other times to me, to feed my lonely soul."

"The songs are yours when you want them, Deacon," said the singer girl in her sweet low voice as she held his hand in hers gently.

"And it are true what the Deacon says, they ain't no help like music," said Mother Mayberry who had come down the walk and stood leaning against the gate near them. "A song can tote comfort from heart to heart when words wouldn't have no meaning. It's a high calling, child, and have to be answered with a high life."

"I know Pattie and Buck and Aunt Prissy will let you always sing in the choir if Deacon asks 'em," said Eliza in a practical voice as she again took hold of the Deacon's hand, "and Mr. Petway are a− going to buy a piano for Aunt Prissy when they get married and sometimes you can sing by it if Doctor Tom can't save up enough to get you one. But I want Deacon to come home now, 'cause he are tired." And without more ado she departed with her docile charge, leaving the tired Martin Luther with his hands clasped in Mother Mayberry's.

"Mother," faltered Miss Wingate as she and Mother Mayberry were slowly ascending the steps, assisting the almost paralyzed young missionary to mount between them, "where do you suppose—HE is?" For some minutes back the singer lady had been growing pale at the realization that the Doctor had not come to her since she had left his side in the churchyard and her eyes were beginning to show a deep hurt within.

"I don't know, Elinory, and I've been a−wondering," answered Mother Mayberry as she sank down on the top step and took the tired child in her arms.

"Oh," said Miss Wingate as she stood before her on the lower step and clasped her white hands against her breast, "do you suppose he is going to—to hurt me now?"

"Child," answered the Doctor's mother quietly, with a quick sadness spreading over her usually bright face, "they ain't nothing in the world that can be as cruel as true love when it goes blind. Tom Mayberry is a good man and I borned, nursed and raised him, but I won't answer for him about no co'ting conniptions. A man lover are a shy bird and they can't nothing but a true mate keep him steady on any limb. You ain't showed a single symptom of managing Tom yet, but somehow I've got confidence in you if you just keep your head now."

"But what can the matter be?" demanded Miss Wingate in a voice that shook with positive terror.

"Well," answered Mother Mayberry slowly, "I sorter sense the trouble and I'll tell you right out and out for your good. Loving a woman are a kinder regeneration process for any man, and a good one like as not comes outen it humbler than a bad most times. Tom have wrapped you around with some sorter pink cloud of sentiments, tagged you with all them bokays the world have give you for singing so grand, turned all them lights on you he first seen you acrost and now he's afraid to come nigh you. I suspect him of a bad case of chicken−heart and I'm a−pitying of him most deep. He's just lying down at your feet waiting to be picked up."

"I wonder where he is!" exclaimed Miss Wingate as a light flashed into her eyes and a trace of color came back to her cheeks.

"You'll find him," answered the Doctor's mother comfortably, "and when you do I want you to promise me to put him through a good course of sprouts. A wife oughtn't to stand on no pedestal for a man, but she have got no call to make squaw tracks behind him neither. Go on and find him! A woman have got to come out of the pink cloud to her husband some time, but she'd better keep a bit to flirt behind the rest of her life. Look in the office!"

"Well; Martin Luther," remarked Mother a few minutes later, as she lifted the absolutely dead youngster in her arms and rose to take him into the house, "life are all alike from Harpeth Hills to Galilee. A woman can shape up her dough any fancy way she wants and it's likely to come outen the oven a husband. All Elinory's fine songs are about to end in little chorus cheeps with Tom under Mother Mayberry's wings, the Lord be praised!"

And over in the office wing the situation was about as Mother Mayberry's experienced intuitions had predicted. Miss Wingate found the young Doctor sitting in the deep window and looking out at Providence Nob, which the last rays of the sun were dying blood red, with his strong young face set and white. The battle was still on and his soul was up in arms.

"Where have you been?" she asked quietly as she came and stood against the other side of the casement. The pain in his gray eyes set her heart to throbbing, but she had herself well in hand.

"When I came up the Road the others were all here and I waited to see you until they were gone," he answered her, just as quietly and in just as controlled a voice and with possibly just as wild a throb in his heart "I have been

writing to Doctor Stein and there are the Press bulletins, subject to your approval," He pointed to some letters on the table which she never deigned to notice. She had drawn herself to her slim young height and looked him full in the face with a beautiful stateliness in her manner and glance. Her dark eyes never left his and she seemed waiting for him to say something further to her.

"You know without my telling you how very glad I am for you," he said gently and his hand trembled on the window ledge.

"Are you?" she asked in a low tone, still with her eyes fixed on his face, but her lips pressed close with a sharp intake of breath.

"Yes," he answered quickly, and this time the note of pain would sound clearly in his voice. "Yes, no matter what it means to me!"

The pain of it, the haggard gray eyes, the firm young mouth and the droop of the broad shoulders were too much for the singer girl and she smiled shakily as she held out her arms.

"Tom Mayberry," she pleaded with a little laugh, "please, please don't treat me this way. I promised your mother to be stern with you but—I can't! Don't you see that it can only mean to me what it means to your happiness—if—do you, could you possibly think it would make any difference to me? Do you suppose for all the wide world I would throw away what I have found here in Providence under Harpeth Hills—my Mother and you? Ah, Tom, I'll be good, I'll go to Italy and India with you! I'll—I'll 'do for' you just the best I can!"

"But, dear, it isn't right at all," whispered the young Doctor to the back of the singer lady's head, as he laid his cheek against the dark braids. "Your voice belongs to the world—there must be no giving it up. I can't let you—I—"

"Listen," said the singer girl as she raised her head and looked up into his face. "For all your life you will have to go where pain and grief call you, won't you? Can't you take my voice with you and use it—as one of your—remedies? Your Mother says songs can comfort where words fail; let me go with you! Your father brought her and her herb basket to Providence, won't you take me and my songs out into the world with you? Don't send me back to sing in the dreadful crowded theaters to people who pay to hear me. Let me give it all my lifelong, as she has given herself here in Providence. Please, Tom, please!" And again she buried her head against his coat.

And as was his wont, the silent young doctor failed to answer a single word but just held her close and comforted. And how long he would have held her, there is no way to know, because the strain had been too great on Mother Mayberry and in a few minutes she stood calmly in the door and looked at the pair of children with happy but quizzical eyes.

"It's just as well you got Tom Mayberry straightened out quick, Elinory," she remarked in her most jovial tone. "I've been getting madder and madder as I put Martin Luther to bed and though I ain't never had to whip him yet, I'd just about made up my mind to ask him out in the barn and dress him down for onct. Now are you well over your tantrum, sir?" she demanded as she eyed the shamefaced young Doctor delightedly.

"Mother!" he exclaimed as he turned his head away and the color rose under his tan.

"Have you done made up your mind to travel from town to town with Elinory and take in the tickets at the door and make yourself useful to her the rest of your life? Are you a−going to follow her peaceable all over Europe, Asia and Africa?" And her eyes fairly over−danced themselves with delight.

"Mother!" and this time the exclamation came from Miss Wingate as she came over to rest her cheek against Mother Mayberry's arm. She also blushed, but her eyes danced with an echo of the young Doctor's mother's laugh as she beheld his embarrassment.

"Yes," answered the Doctor, rallying at last, "yes, I'm ready to go with her. Will you go too, Mother, as retained physician?"

"Well, I don't know about that," answered his Mother with a laugh; "not till 'Liza Pike have growed up to take my place here. But I'm mighty glad to see you take your dose of humble pie so nice, Tom, and I reckon I'll have to tell you how happy I am about my child here. It was kinder smart of you to cure her and then claim her sweet self as a fee, wasn't it?"

"I do feel that way, Mother, and I don't see how I can let her make the sacrifice. Her future is so brilliant and I—I—"

"Son," said Mother Mayberry with the banter all gone from her rich voice and the love fairly radiating from her face as she laid a tender hand on the singer lady's dark head on her shoulder, "I don't have to ask my

honey−bird the choice she have made. A woman don't want to wear her life−work like no jewelry harness nor yet no sacrificial garment, but she loves to clothe herself in it like it were a soft−colored, homespun dress to cover the pillow of her breast and the cradle of her arms to hold the tired folks against. Take her to India's coral strand if you must, for it's gave a wife to follow the husband−star. Long ago I vowed you to the Master's high call and now with these words I dedicates my daughter the same. She have waded through much pain and sorrow, but do it matter along how hard a Road folks travels if at last they come to they Providence?"