

THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER

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*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER ***

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Deborah at dressing table

THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER

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What Will People Say?

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THE LAST ROSE OF SUMMER

CHAPTER I

As Mrs. Shillaber often said, the one good thing about her old house was the fact that "you could throw the dining-room into the poller" when you wanted to give parties or funerals or weddings or such things. You had only to fold up the

accordeon-pleated doors, push the sofa back against the wall, and lay a rug over the register.

To-night she had thrown the dining-room into the poller and filled both rooms with guests. There were so many guests that they occupied every seat in the house, including the up-stairs chairs and a large batch of camp-stools from Mr. Crankshaw's, the undertaker's.

In Carthage it was never a real party or an important funeral unless those perilous old man-traps of Mr. Crankshaw's appeared. They always added a dash of excitement to the dullest evening, for at a critical moment one of them could be depended upon to collapse beneath some guest, depositing him or her in a small but complicated woodpile on the floor.

Less dramatic, but even droller, was the unfailing spectacle of the solemn man who entered a room carrying one of these stools neatly folded, proceeded to a chosen spot, and there attempted vainly to open the thing. This was sure to happen at least once, and it gave an irresistibly light touch even to the funerals. The obstinacy of some of Mr. Crankshaw's camp-stools was so diabolic that it almost implied a perverse intelligence. And the one that was not to be solved generally fell to the solemnest man in the company.

To-night at Mrs. Shillaber's the evening might be said to be well under way; fat Mr. Geggat had already splashed through his camp-stool, and Deacon Peavey was now at work on his; a snicker had just sneezed out of the minister's wife (of all people!), and the Deacon himself had breathed an expletive dangerously close to profanity.

The party was held in honor of Mrs. Shillaber's girlhood friend, Birdaline Nickerson (now Mrs. Phineas Duddy). Birdaline and Mrs. Shillaber (then Josie Barlow) had been fierce rivals for the love of Asaph Shillaber. Josie had got him away from Birdaline, and Birdaline had married Phin Duddy for spite, just to show certain people that Birdaline could get married as well as other people and to prove that Phin Duddy was not inconsolable for losing Josie, whom he had courted before Asaph cut him out.

Luck had smiled on Birdaline and Phin. They had moved away—to Peoria, no less! And now they were back on a visit to his folks.

When Birdaline saw what Time had done to Asaph she forgave Josie completely. It was Josie who did not forgive Birdaline, for Peoria had done wonders for Phin. Everybody said that; and Birdaline also brought along a grown-up daughter who was evidently beautiful and, according to her mother, highly accomplished. Why, one of the leading vocal teachers in Peoria (and very highly spoken of in Chicago) had heard her sing and had actually told her that she ought to have her voice cultivated; he had, indeed; fact was he had even offered to cultivate it himself, and at a reduced rate from his list price, too!

It seemed strange to Birdaline and Josie to meet after all these years and be jealous, not of each other, but of daughters as big as they themselves had been the last time they had seen each other. Both women told both women that they looked younger than ever, and each saw the pillage of time in the opposite mien, the accretion of time in the once so gracile figure. It was melancholy satisfaction at best, for each knew all too well how her own mirror slapped her in the face with her own image.

When Birdaline bragged of her daughter's voice, Josie had to be loyal to her oldest girl's own piano-playing. Birdaline, perhaps with serpentine wisdom, insisted on hearing Miss Shillaber play the piano; it was sure, she thought, to render the girl unpopular. But the solo annoyed the guests hardly at all, for they could easily talk above the feeble clamor of that old Shillaber piano, in which even the needy Carthage tuner had refused to twist another wrest-pin these many years.

After the piano had ceased to spatter staccato discords, and people had applauded politely, of course Josie had to ask Birdaline's daughter to sing. And the girl, being of the new and rather startling school of manners which accedes without undue urging, blushing consented, provided there was any music there that she could sing and some one would play her accompa'ment.

A tattered copy of "The Last Rose of Summer" was unearthed, and Mr. Norman Maugans, who played the melodeon at the Presbyterian prayer-meetings, was mobbed into essaying the accompa'ment. He was no great shucks at sight-reading, he said, but he would do his durnedest.

The news that the pretty and novel Miss Buddy would sing brought all the guests forward in a huddle like cattle at home-coming time. Even Deacon Peavey gave up his vow to open that camp-stool or die and sat down in a draught to listen. The perspiration cooled on him and he caught a terrible cold, but that was Mrs. Peavey's business, not ours.

Miss Pamela Duddy sidled into the elbow of the piano with a most attractive kittenishness and waited for the prelude to be done. This required some time, since the ancient sheet-music had a distressing habit of folding over and, as it were, swooning from the rack into the pianist's arms. Besides, Mr. Maugans was so used to playing the melodeon that instead of tapping the keys he was continually squeezing them, and nothing came. And when he wished to increase his volume of tone he would hold his hands still and slowly open his knees against swell-levers that were not there. This earnest futility gave so much amusement to Josie's youngest daughter that she had to be eyed out of the room by her mother.

Miss Pamela saved the day by a sudden inspiration, a recollection of what she had seen done by one of the leading sopranos from Indianapolis at a recital in the Star course at Peoria; Miss Pamela bent her pretty head and took from her

juvenile breast one big red rose and held it in her hands while she sang. During the final stanza she plucked away its petals one by one and at the end let the shredded core fall upon the highly improbable roses woven in Josie's American Wilton carpet.

The girl's features and her attitudes were sheer Grecian; her accent was the purest Peoria. Now and then she remembered to insert an Italian "a," but she forgot to suppress the Italian "r," which is exactly the same as that of Illinois, but lacks its context or prestige. Her fresh, uncultivated voice was less faithful to the key than to her exquisite throat. To that same exquisite throat clung one fascinated eye of Mr. Maugans's, whose other orb angrily glowered at the music as if to overawe it. Had he possessed a third eye it might have guided his hands along the keyboard with more accuracy, but this detail could have affected the result but little, since his hands were incessantly compelled to clutch the incessantly deciduous music and slap it back on the rack.

Two stanzas had thus been punctuated before a shy old maid named Deborah Larrabee ventured to rise and stand at the piano, supporting the music. This compelled her to a closer proximity to a nice young man than she had known for so many years that she almost outblushed the young girl.

Deborah was afraid to look at anybody, yet when she cast her eyes downward she had to watch those emotional knees of Mr. Maugans's slowly parting in the crescendo that never came.

It was an ordeal for everybody—singer, pianist, and music-sustainer. But the audience was friendly, and the composer and the poet were too dead to gyrate in their distant graves. The song, therefore, had unmitigated success, and the words were so familiar that everybody knew pretty well what Pamela was driving at when she sang:

'Tis thuh lah-ha-ha strow zof sum-mah
 Le-ef' bloo-oo-hoo-minnng uh-lone;
 Aw lur lu-uh-uh vlee come-pan-yun
 Zah-har fay-ay-yay dud ahnd gawn-
 No-woe flow-wurr rof her kinn-drud,
 No-woe ro-hose buh dis ni-eye-eye-eye-eye-eye-eye
 To re-fle-eh-ec' bah-cur blu-shuzz
 Aw-hor gi-yi-hiv su-high for su-high!

There was hardly a dry eye or a protesting ear in the throng as she reached the climax:

Thu-us ki-yine-dlee I scat-tur-r-r
 Thy-hi lea-heave zore thuh be-eh-eh-eh-head
 Whur-r-r thy may-hay-yate zuv thuh gar-r-dun-n-n-n
 Lie-eye sceh-eh-entluss ahnd dead,
 Whur-r thy may-YAH-YAH-yah thuh gah-dah
 Lie-eye sceh-heh-hen-less ahnd-ah dead-ah.

The girl's mother was not hard to find among the applauding auditors. She

looked like the wrecked last September's rose of which her daughter was the next June's bud. The softened mood of Birdaline and the tears that bedewed her cheeks gave her back just enough of the beauty she had had to emphasize how much she had lost.

And Josie, her quondam rival in the garden, was sweetened by melancholy, too. It was not hospitality alone, nor mere generosity, but a passing sympathy that warmed her tone as she squeezed Birdaline's arm and told her how well her daughter had sung.

A number of matrons felt the same attar of regret in the air. They had been beautiful in their days and in their ways, and now they felt like the dismantled rose on the floor. The common tragedy of beauty belated and foredone saddened everybody in the room; the old women had experienced it, the young women foresaw it, the men knew it as the destruction of the beauties they loved or had loved. Everybody was sad but Deborah Larrabee.

That homely little old spinster slipped impudently into the elbow of the piano—into the place still warm from the presence of Pamela—and she railed at the sorrow of her schoolmates, Josie and Birdaline. Her voice was as sharp as the old piano-strings:

"That song's all wrong, seems to me, girls. Pretty toon and nice words, but I can't make out why ever'body feels sorry for the last rose of summer. It's the luckiest rose in the world. The rest of 'em have bloomed too soon or just when all the other roses are blooming, or when people are sort of tired of roses. But this one is saved up till the last. And then, when the garden is all dying out and the bushes are just dead stalks and the other roses are wilted and brown and folks say, 'I'd give anything for the sight of a rose,' along comes this rose and—blooms alone!

"It's that way in my little yard. There's always a last rose that comes when the rest have gone to seed, and that's the one I prize. Seems to me it has the laugh on all the rest. The song's all wrong, I tell you, girls!"

This heresy had the usual success of attacks on sacred texts—the orthodox paid no heed to the value of the argument; they simply resented its impudence.

But all they said to Deborah was an indulgent "That's so, Debby," and a polite "I never thought of that."

As Deborah turned away, triumphant, to repeat what she had just said to Mr. Maugans, she overheard Birdaline murmur to Josie in a kinship of contempt, "Poor old Debby!"

And Josie consented: "She can't understand! She never was a rose."

CHAPTER II

It was as if Birdaline and Josie had slipped a knife under Deborah's left slipped a knife under Deborah's left shoulder-blade and pushed it into her heart. She felt a mortal wound. She clung to the piano and remembered something she had overheard Birdaline say in exactly that tone far back in that primeval epoch when Debby had been sixteen—as sweetless a sixteen as a girl ever endured.

Deborah had not been pretty then, or ever before, or since. But she had been a girl, and had expected to have lovers to select a husband from.

Yet lovers were denied to Deborah. The boys had been fond of her and nice to her. For Deborah was a good fellow; she was never jealous or exacting. She was jolly, understood a joke, laughed a lot, and danced well enough. She never whined or threatened if a fellow neglected her or forgot to call for his dance or pay a party-call—or anything. She accepted attentions as compliments, not as taxes. Consequently she collected fewer than she might have had. The boys respected her so much, too, that none of them insulted her with flirtatiousness. But how her hungry heart had longed to be insulted! How she had yearned to fight her way out from a strong man's audacious arms and to writhe away from his daring lips!

On that memorable night Josie had given a party and Deborah had gone. No fellow had taken her; but, then, Josie lived just across the street from the Larrabees, and Debby could run right over unnoticed and run home alone safely afterward. Debby was safe anywhere where it was not too dark to see her. Her face was her chaperon.

Asaph Shillaber took Birdaline to Josie's party that night, and he danced three times with Debby. Each time—as she knew and pretended not to know—he had come to her because of a mix-up in the program or because she was the only girl left without a partner. But a dance was a dance, and Asaph was awful light

on his feet, for all he was so big.

After she had danced the third time with him he led her hastily to a chair against the stairway, deposited her like an umbrella, and left her. She did not mind his desertion, but sat panting with the breathlessness of the dance and with the joy of having been in Asaph's arms. Then she heard low voices on the stairway, voices back of her, just above her head. She knew them perfectly.

Asaph was quarreling with Birdaline. Birdaline was attacking Asaph because he had danced three times with Josie.

"But she's the hostess!" Asaph had retorted, and Birdaline snapped back:

"Then why don't she dance with some of the other fellas, then? Everybody's noticing how you honey-pie round her."

"Well, I danced with Deb Larrabee three times, too," Asaph pleaded. "Why don't you fuss about that?"

Deborah perked an anxious ear to hear how Birdaline would accept this rivalry, and Birdaline's answer fell into her ear like poison:

"Deb Larrabee! Humph! You can dance with that old thing till the cows come home, and I won't mind. But you can't take me to a party and dance three times with Josie Barlow. You can't, and that's all. So there!"

Asaph had a fierce way with women. He talked back to them as if they were men. And now he rounded on Birdaline: "I'll take who I please, and I'll dance with who I please after I get there, and if you don't like it you can lump it!"

Deborah did not linger to hear the result of the war that was sure to be waged. There was no strength for curiosity in her hurt soul. She wanted to crawl off into a cellar and cower in the rubbish like a sick cat. Birdaline's opinion of her was a ferocious condemnation for any woman-thing to hear. It was her epitaph. It damned her, past, present, and future. She sneaked home without telling anybody good-by.

She had the next dance booked with Phineas Duddy, but she felt that he would not remember her if he did not see her. And since on the next day nobody—not even Phineas—ever mentioned her flight, she knew that she had not been missed.

She cried and cried and cried. She told her mother that she had a bad cold, to excuse her eyes that would not stop streaming. She cried herself out, as mourners do; then gradually accepted life, as mourners do.

That was long ago, and now, after all these years—years that had proved the truth of Birdaline's estimate of her; years in which Birdaline had married Asaph out of Josie's arms, and Josie had married Phineas out of Birdaline's private graveyard, and both of them had borne children and endured their consequences—even now Deborah must hear again the same relentless verdict as before. Time had

not improved her or brought her luck or lover, husband or child.

She had thought that she had grown used to herself and her charmless lot, but the wound began to bleed afresh. She had the same impulse to take flight—to play the cat in the cellar—again. But her escape was checked by a little excitement.

Close upon the heels of Birdaline's unconscious affront to Deborah, Birdaline herself received an unconscious affront.

Asaph, desiring to be hospitable and to pay beauty its due, came forward at the end of the song to where little Pamela stood, receiving Carthage's homage with all the gracious condescension of Peoria. And Asaph roared out in the easy hearing of both his own wife and of Pamela's mother:

"Well, Miss Pamela, you sang grand. I got no ear for music, but you suit me right down to the ground. And you're so dog-on pretty! I wouldn't care if you sang like all-get-out. You look like your mother did when she was your age. You might not think it to look at your ma now, but in her day she was one of the best lookers in this whole town; same color eyes as you—and hair—and, oh, a regular heart-breaker."

Asaph's memory of Birdaline's eyes and hair was wrong, as a man's usually is. His praise was a two-edged sword of tactlessness.

He slashed Birdaline by forgetting her color and by implying that she retained no traces of her beauty, and he gashed Josie because he implied a livelier memory of Birdaline's early graces than a husband has any right to cherish.

Asaph had counted on doing a very gracious thing. When he had finished his little oration he glanced at Birdaline for recompense and received a glare of anger; he turned away to Josie and received from her eyes a buffet of wrath. He felt that he had made a fool of himself again, and his ready temper was up at once. He crossed glares with his wife, and everybody in eye-shot instantly felt a duel begun. It was not going to be so dull an evening, after all. Even Debby lingered to see what the result of the Shillaber conflict would be. She was also checked by the evidences that refreshments were about to be served. Chicken-salad and ice-cream were not frequent enough in her life to be overlooked. Disparagement and derision were her every-day porridge. Ice-cream was a party. So she lingered.

The Shillabers' hired girl, in a clean apron and a complete armor of blushes, appeared at the dining-room door and beckoned. Josie summoned her more than willing children to pass the plates. She nodded to Asaph to come and roll the ice-cream freezer into place and scrape off the salty ice. Then she waylaid him in the kitchen, and their wrangle reached the speedily overcrowded dining-room in little tantalizing slices as the swinging door opened to admit or emit one of the children. But it always swung shut at once. It was like an exciting serial with most of the instalments omitted.

CHAPTER III

The guests made desperate efforts to pretend that they were unaware to pretend that they were unaware of the feud and at the same time to follow it. They were polite enough even to try to ignore the salt the wrathful Asaph had let slip into the ice-cream.

In the cheerful stampede for the dining-room Debby had crowded into a sofa alongside another re-visitor to the town, Newton Meldrum, whom she had known but slightly. He had gone with the older girls and had already left Carthage when Debby came out—as far as she ever came out before she went back.

Newt Meldrum had prospered, according to Carthage standards. He was now the "credit man" for a New York wholesale house. Debby had not the faintest idea what a credit man was. But Asaph knew all too well. As the owner of the largest department store in Carthage, Asaph owed the New York house more money than he could pay. He gave that as a reason for owing it still more. The New York house sent Meldrum out to Carthage to see whether it would be more profitable to close Asaph up or tide him over another season.

Asaph's wife chose this anxious moment to give a party to Birdaline! Asaph protested violently that it would make a bad impression on Meldrum to be seen giving parties when he could not pay his bills. But Josie was running a little social business of her own, and not to entertain Birdaline would be to go into voluntary bankruptcy. She could still get the necessary things charged—and to Josie getting a thing charged was just a little cheaper than getting it for nothing. It didn't put you under obligations, like accepting gifts. Asaph forbade her to give the party, but of course she gave it, anyway, and he was not brave enough to forbid the grocer to honor her requisitions.

Asaph had to invite Meldrum, and Josie announced that she would show how much a wife can help her husband; she promised to lavish on Meldrum especial consideration and to introduce him to some pretty girls (he was a notorious bachelor).

She forgot him at once for her ancient rivalry with Birdaline. And now Asaph forgot him in the excitement of quarrel.

Indeed, host and hostess ignored their fatal guest so completely that they left him to eat his supper alongside the least-considered woman in town—poor old "Dubby Debby."

Debby had long ago fallen out of the practice of expecting attention from anybody. To-night she was so grievously wounded that she forgot her custom

of squandering the consideration she rarely got back. She said nothing to her elbow neighbor, but sat pondering her own shame and trying to extract some ice-cream from between the spots of salt. A few big tears had welled to her eyelids and dropped into her dish. She blamed herself for the salt. Then she heard her neighbor grumble:

"Say, Debby, is your ice-cream all salty?"

"Ye-es, it is," she murmured, fluttering.

"So's mine. Funny thing, there's always salt in the ice-cream. Ever noticed it?"

"Tha-that's so; there usually is—a little."

"A lot! That's life, I guess. Poor old Asaph! Plenty of salt in his ice-cream, eh? What's the matter with that wife of his, anyway? Aren't they happy together?"

"Oh, I guess they're as happy as married folks ever are," Debby answered, absently, and then gasped at the horrible philosophy she had uttered.

Meldrum threw her a glance and laughed.

Debby winced. He probably was saying to himself, "Sour grapes!" At least she thought he would think that. But she had not meant to be foxy. The fox in the fable had tried to leap to the grapes before he maligned them. Debby had hardly come near enough to them or made effort enough toward them to say that she had failed.

But Meldrum had not thought, "Sour grapes!" He only remembered that "Debby" was "Debby." In these returns to childhood circles one rarely knows what has happened between then and now. He remembered Debby as an ugly little brat of a girl, and he saw that she was still homely. But plenty of homely women were married. He proved his ignorance by his next words:

"You married, Debby?"

"N-no," she faltered, without daring even to venture a "not yet." He surprised her shame with a laughing compliment:

"Wise lady! Neither am I. Shake!"

Then she turned on the sofa so that she could see him better. His eyes were twinkling. He was handsome, citified, sleek, comfortable. Yet he had never married!

He was holding out his hand. And because it commanded hers she put hers in it, and he squeezed her long, fishy fin in a big, warm, comfortable palm. And she gave her timid, smiling eyes into his big, smiling stare and wondered why she smiled. But she liked it so much that fresh tears rushed to her eyelids—little eager, happy tears that could not have had much salt in them, for one or two of them bounced into her ice-cream. Yet it did not taste bitter now.

CHAPTER IV

Asaph came in then and looked around the room with defiant eyes around the room with defiant eyes that dared anybody to be uncomfortable. He recognized Meldrum with a start, and realized that the most important guest had been left to Deb Larrabee, of all people. This misstep might mean ruin to him. His anger changed to anxiety, and he made haste to carry Meldrum away. He was inspired to present him to Pamela.

Deborah, abandoned on the sofa, studied Pamela with wonder. How beautiful the child was! How she drew the men! How their eyes fed upon her! How she queened it in her little court! Everywhere she went it must be so. In Peoria they must have gathered about her just as here. They must be missing her in Peoria now. When she went back they would be glad. Or if she went on to Chicago men would gather about her there—or in Omaha, or Council Bluffs, or Toledo—anywhere!

It was manifest enough why the men gathered about the girl. She delighted the senses. She improved the view. She was the view. Suavity of contour, proportion of feature, silkiness of texture, felicity of tint; every angle masked with a curve, every joint small and included, desirableness, cuddlesomeness, kissableness, warmth, and all the things that make up loveliness were Pamela's.

The contrast between herself and Pamela was so cruel that Deborah's heart rebelled. She demanded of Heaven: "Why so much to her and none to me? My mother was as good as her mother, and better-looking in her day; and my father was a handsome man. Why was I made at all if not well made? Why allowed to live if not fit for life? My elder sister that died was more beautiful than Pamela, but she died. Why couldn't I have died in her place, or taken the beauty she laid aside as I wore her cast-off clothes? Yet I live, and I shall never be married, shall never be a mother, shall never be of any use or any beauty. Why? Why?"

Bitter, bitter were her thoughts as she sat with her plate in her lap. She hardly noticed when Josie took the plate away. She fell into an almost sleep of reverie and woke with a start to find that everybody else was crowding forward to hear Pamela sing. She was repeating "The Last Rose" by request. Mr. Maugans had said he would like another whack at that accompa'ment.

Debby felt again that stab of Birdaline's—"Poor Debby! She never was a rose."

She could not bear to remain. She tiptoed from the dining-room, unnoticed, and went out at the side-door, drawing her shawl over her head. She must sneak home alone as usual. Thank Heaven, it was only a block and the streets were

black.

As she reached the front gate she met a man who had just come down from the porch. It was Meldrum. He peered at her in the dim light of the street-lamp and called out:

"That you, Debby? Couldn't you stand it any longer? Neither could I. That girl is a peach to look at, but she can't sing for sour apples; and as for brains, she's a nut, a pure pecan! I guess I'm too old or not old enough to be satisfied with staring at a pretty hide on a pretty frame. Which way you going? I'll walk along with you if you don't mind."

If she didn't mind! Would Lazarus object if Dives sat down on the floor beside him and brought along his trencher?

Debby was so bewildered that the sidewalk reeled beneath her intoxicated feet. She stumbled till Meldrum took her hand and set it in the crook of his arm, and she trotted along as meek as Tobias with the angel.

All, all too soon they reached her house. But he paused at the gate. She dared not invite him even to the porch.

If her mother heard a man's voice there she would probably open the window upstairs and shriek: "Murder! Thieves! Help!"

So Debby waited at the gate while the almost invisible Meldrum chattered on. She was so afraid that he would go every next minute that she hardly heard what he said. But he had only a hotel room ahead of him. He was used to late hours. He was in a mood for talk. The paralyzed Debby was a perfect listener, and in that intense dark she was as beautiful as Cleopatra would have been.

To her he was solely a voice, a voice of strange cynicisms, yet of strange comfort to her. He was laughing at the people she held in awe. "This town's a joke to me," he said. "It's a side-show full of freaks." And he mocked the great folk of the village as if they were yokels. He laughed at their customs. He ridiculed many, many things that Debby had believed and suffered from believing. He ridiculed married people and marriage from the superior heights of one who could have married many and had rejected all. It was strangely pleasant hearing to her who had observed marriage from the humble depths of one whom all had rejected. He talked till he heard the town clock whine eleven times, then he said:

"Good Lord! I didn't know it was so late. I must have talked your arm off, Debby. I don't get these moods often. It takes a mighty good listener to loosen me up. Good night! Don't let any of these fellows bunco you into marrying 'em. There's nothing in it, Debby. Take it from me. Good night."

She felt rather than saw that he lifted his hat. She felt again his big hand enveloping hers, and she answered its squeeze with a desperate little clench of her own.

He left her wonderfully uplifted. Now she felt less an exile from marriage

than a rebel. She almost convinced herself that she had kept out of matrimony because she was too good for it. The solitary cell of her bed was a queenly dais when she crept into it. She dreamed that General Kitchener asked for her hand and she refused it.

CHAPTER V

Meldrum's cynicisms had been strangely opportune to the strangely opportune to the despondent old maid. He unwittingly helped her over a deep ditch and got her past a bad night.

But when she woke, the next morning was but the same old resumption of the same old day. Poverty, loneliness, and the inanity of a manless household were again her portion. The face she washed explained to her why she was not sought after by the men. The hair she combed and wadded on her cranium clouded with no romance even in her own eyes. She realized that she was not loved for the simple reason that she was not lovely. She had never been a rose, and men did not pluck dog-fennel to wear. And the camomile could never become a marguerite by wishing to be one.

Debby haled her awkward self out of her humble cot, out of her coarse and frilless nightgown, into her matter-of-fact clothes, and slumped down to a chill, bare kitchen. There she made a fire in a cold stove, that she might warm up oatmeal and fry eggs and petrify a few slices of bread into a scratchy toast.

Not hearing her mother's slippers flap and shuffle on the stairs as usual, she climbed again to learn the cause. She found her mother filled with rheumatism and bad news. A letter had come the day before, and she had concealed it from Deborah so that the child might have a nice time at the party; and did she have a nice time, and who was there? But that could wait, for never was there such news as she had now, and there was never any let-up in bad luck, and them with no man to lean on or turn to.

When Deborah finally pried the letter from the poor old talons she found an announcement that the A.G.&St.P.Ry. would pass its dividend this year. To the Larrabees the A.G.&St.P. had always been the most substantial thing in the world next to the Presbyterian Church.

Deborah's father had said that his death-bed was cheered by the fact that he had left his widow and his child several shares of that soulful corporation's

stock. He called it the "Angel Gabriel & St. Peter Railway." The dividend was as sure as flowers in June. It had never failed, and the Larrabee women always spent it before it was paid. They had pledged it this year.

If they had followed the stock-market, of which they had hardly heard, they would have known that the railroad's shares had fallen from 203 to 51 in two years and that the concern was curving gracefully toward a receivership. The two women breakfasted that morning on cold dismay and hot flashes of terror. The few hundred dollars that had come to them like semi-annual manna and quails would not drop down this year, perhaps not next year, or ever again. Their creditors would probably throw them into the town jail. The poorhouse would be a paradise.

In her distraction Debby had an impulse to consult Newt Meldrum. She hurried to Shillaber's Bazar, hoping he might be there. Asaph met her himself and told her that Newt had gone back to New York on an early train. Debby broke down and told of her plight. She supposed that she would have to go to work at once somewhere. But what could she do?

Asaph was feeling amiable; he had won a reprieve from Meldrum and had made it up with his wife in private for the public quarrel. His heart melted at the thought of helping poor old Dubby Debby, whom everybody was fond of in a hatefully unflattering way. He had helped other gentlewomen in distress, and now he dumfounded Debby by saying, "Why don't you clerk here, Debby?"

"Why, I couldn't clerk in a store!" she gasped, terrified. "I don't know the least thing about it."

"You'd soon learn the stock, and the prices are all marked in plain letters that you can memorize easy. You've got a lot of friends, and we give a commission on all the sales over a certain amount. Better try it."

Debby felt now, for the first time, all the sweet panic that most women undergo with their first proposal. This offer of the job of saleswoman was as near as Debby had come to being offered the job of helpmeet. She even murmured, "This is so sudden," and, "I'll have to ask mama." It was an epoch-making decision, a terrible leap from the stagnant pool of the Larrabee cottage to the seething maelstrom of Shillaber's Bazar. She went home to her mother with the thrilling, the glorious news that henceforth she could acquire all of five dollars a week by merely being present at Shillaber's for twelve hours or so a day, except Sat'days, when the store was open evenings till the last possible customer had gone home to bed. Mrs. Larrabee apologized to Heaven for doubting its watchfulness, commended Asaph Shillaber to its attention, and bespoke for him a special invoice of blessings.

And Asaph went home to his midday dinner as cheerfully as if he had received them. First he announced the good word about Meldrum's leniency, which

Josie greeted with:

"You see! I told you that the party would be the proper caper. Maybe after this you'll believe that your wife knows a thing or two."

Asaph assured her that he would never doubt that she knew at least that much. Then, like the wag he was, he said that he had added a new clerk to his staff—a lady and a beauty, whose charms would draw no end of custom to the store and dazzle the drummers from far and near.

Josie's facile temper flashed at once into glow. One of her chief interests in the Bazar had been to make sure that it never harbored any saleswoman whose beauty could possibly lure her husband's mind from his ledgers or his home ties. Under the pretext of purchases or suggestions she made frequent tours of inspection, and if a girl too young or a pair of eyes too bright gleamed behind a counter Asaph heard of it at once. Some years before he had bowed to the inevitable and made it a rule to engage no woman who could imaginably disturb Josie's delicate equipoise.

Meldrum had noticed the strange array and had been inclined to impute the decline of the store's prosperity to the appearance of its staff.

"Good Lord, Ase!" he had groaned. "What you got here—the overflow of the Home for Aged and Indignant Females? You've collected a bunch of clock-stoppers that makes a suffragette meeting look like a Winter Garden chorus. People like those can't sell pretty things. Send 'em all to the bone-yard and get in some winners."

Asaph promised, and Meldrum promised to arrange an extension of credit. But Asaph would have feared bankruptcy less than such a step. As soon as Meldrum was gone he put the cap-sheaf to his little army of relicts and remnants by engaging Debby Larrabee! She made the rest look handsome by contrast.

She was the joke that he tried to spring on his wife. Josie took the allusion seriously, and Asaph was soon trying to hold her down.

"Wait! Wait till you hear who it is!" he pleaded; but she stormed on:

"I don't care who it is. I'm not going to have you exposed to the wiles of any of those designing minxes. I won't have her, I tell you."

At length he shouted above the din: "I was only joking. It's Debby Larrabee! I've engaged Debby Larrabee! They've lost all their money."

When Josie understood, she saw the joke. She began to laugh with hysterics, to slap and push her husband about hilariously. "Aw, you old fraud, you! So you've engaged Dubby Debby! Well, you can keep her. I don't care how late you stay at the store as long as Debby's there."

Deborah was fortunate enough not to overhear this. In fact, the long drought in Debby's good luck seemed to be ending. The skies over her grew dark with the abundance of merciful rain. A gentle drizzle preceded the cloudburst.

There usually is a deluge after a drought.

A few days later found Debby installed in the washable silks. The change in her environment was complete. Instead of dozing through a nightmare of ineptitude in the doleful society of her old mother in a dismal home where almost nobody ever called, and never a man, now she stood all day on the edge of a stream of people; she chattered breezily all day to women in search of beautiful fabrics. She handled beautiful fabrics. Her conversation was a procession of adjectives of praise.

Trying to live up to her surroundings, she took thought of her appearance. Dealing in fashions, with fashion-plates as her scriptures, she tried to get in touch with the contemporary styles. She bounded across eight or ten periods at one leap. First she found that she could at least put up her hair as other women did. The revolution in her appearance was amazing. Next she retrimmed her old hat, reshaped her old skirt—drew it so tightly about her ankles that she was forced to the tremendous deed of slitting it up a few inches so that she could at least walk slowly. The first time her mother noticed it she said:

”Why, Debby, what on earth! That skirt of yours is all tore up the side.”

Debby explained it to her with the delicious confusion of a Magdalen confessing her entry upon a career of profligacy. Her mother almost fainted. Debby had gone wrong at this late day! She had heard that department-stores were awful places for a girl. The papers had been full of minimum wages and things.

Worse yet, Debby began to attitudinize, to learn the comfort of poses. She must be forever holding pretty things forward. She took care of her hands, polished her nails. Now and then she must drape a piece of silk across her shoulder and dispose her rigid frame into curves. She began to talk of ”lines” to cold-cream her complexion.

The mental change in her was no less thorough. Activity was a tonic. Her patience was compelled to school itself. Prosperity lay in unfaltering courtesy, untarnished cheer. Cynicism does not sell goods. All day long she was praising things. Enthusiasm became her instinct.

Few men swam into her ken, but in learning to satisfy the exactions of women she built up tact. She had long since omitted malekind from her life and her plan of life. She was content. Women liked her; women lingered to talk with her; they asked her help in their vital struggle for beauty. It was enough.

CHAPTER VI

One morning, as she was making ready to go to the store, and taking ready to go to the store, and taking much time at the process, she observed at her forehead a white hair. It startled her, frightened her for a moment; then she laughed.

"Why, I'm growing old!"

What use had she for youth? It had never been kind to her. All the loss of it meant was that it might harm her a little at the store. She plucked out the white thread and forgot it—nearly.

Another day there was another white hair. She removed that, too. Then came another, and others, swiftly, till she was afraid to take any more away.

At last there was a whole gray lock. She tucked it in and pinned it beneath the nondescript mass of her coiffure. It would have terrified her more if she had not been so busy. She chattered and proffered her wares all day long. Hunger became one of her most sincere emotions. Fatigue wore her out but strengthened her, sweetened her sleep, kept dreams away. When she woke she must hurry, hurry to the store. The old stupidity of her life had given way to an eternal hurry.

And now the white hairs were hurrying, too, like the snowflakes that suddenly fill the air. But with this snow came the quickening of pulse and glistening of eyes, the reddening of cheeks that the snow brings.

The white fell about her hair as if she stood bareheaded in a snow-storm. There was a kind of benediction in it. She felt that it softened something about her face, as the snow softens old rubbish-heaps and dreary yards and bleak patches.

People began to say, "How well you look, Debby!" They began to dignify her as "Deborah" or "Miss Larrabee." Her old contemnners came to her counter with a new meekness. Age was making it harder and harder for them to keep the pace. Bright colors did not become them any longer. Their petals were falling from them, the velvet was turning to plush, and the plush losing its nap, rusting, sagging, wearing through. The years, like moths, were gnawing, gnawing.

Debby felt so sorry for the women who had been beautiful. She could imagine how the decay of rosehood must hurt. It is not necessary to have been Napoleon to understand Elba.

One day a sad, heavy figure dragged along Deborah's aisle and sank upon the mushroom stool in front of her. Deborah could hardly believe that it was Josie Shillaber. She could hardly force back the shock that leaped to her expression. From thin, white lips crumpled with pain came a voice like a rustling of dead leaves in a November gust. And the voice said, with a kind of envy in it:

"Why, Deborah, how well you look!"

"Oh, I am well!" Deborah chanted, then repressed her cheer unconsciously.

It was not tactful to be too well. "That is, I'm tol'able. And how are you this awful weather?"

"Not well, Debby. I'm not a bit well; no, I'm never well any more. Why, your hair is getting right white, isn't it, dear? But it's real becoming to you. Mine is all gray, too, you see, but it's awful!"

"Indeed it's not! It's fine! Your children must love it. Don't they?"

"Oh, the children!" Josie wailed. "What do they think of me? The grown ones are away, all flirting and getting married. They say they'll come back, but they never do. But I don't care. I don't want them to see me like this. And the young ones are so selfish and inconsiderate. It's awful, getting old, isn't it, Debby? It don't seem to worry you, though. I suppose it's because you haven't had sorrow in your life as I have. I'm looking for something to wear, Debby. The styles aren't what they used to be. There's not a thing fit to wear to a dog-fight in these new colors. What are people coming to? I can't find a thing to wear. What would you suggest? Do help me!"

Deborah emptied the shelves upon the counter, sent to the stock-room for new shipments that had not been listed yet, ransacked the place; but there was nothing there for the woman whose husband owned it all. The physician's wife was sick with time, and even he could not cure her of that. The draper's wife was turning old; he could not swaddle her from the chill of that winter. Josie was trying to dress up a rose whose petals had fallen, whose sepals were curled back; the husk could not endure colors that the blossom had honored.

Josie, however, would not acknowledge the inevitable autumn; she would not grow old with the grace of resignation. She limped from the store, shaking her unlovely head. Could this be Josie Shillaber, who had romped through life with beauty in and about everything she was and wore and did?

Deborah could have moralized over her as Hamlet over Yorick's skull: Where be your petal cheeks, your full, red lips, your concise chin, and that long, lithe throat, and those pearly shoulders, and all that high-breasted, spindle-hipped, lean-limbed girlishness of yours? And where your velocity, your tireless laughter, your amorous enterprise?

Could they have ever been a part of this cumberer of the ground, creeping almost as slowly and heavily as a vine along a cold, gray wall.

Deborah's hand went to her heart, where there was an ache of pity for one who had never pitied her. It was Deborah now that was almost girlish of form; she was only now filling out, taking flesh upon her bones and rhythm into her members. And that scrawny chicken-chest of hers was becoming worthy of that so beautiful name for so dear a place; she was gaining a bosom. She did not know how the whimsical sultan Time had shifted his favor to her from his other slaves.

She knew only that Josie was in disgrace with beauty and stared after her

in wet-eyed pity. Who can feel so sorry for a fallen tyrant as the risen victim of tyranny?

A few weeks later Deborah went again to the Shillaber house, sat again on the sofa in the dining-room. The children had all come home. Josie was in the parlor, almost hidden in flowers. She did not rise to receive her guests. They all filed by and looked at her and shook their heads. She did not answer with a nod. Birdaline wept over her, looking older and terrified. But Pamela was wonderfully pretty in black. She sang Josie's favorite hymn, "Jesus, lover of my soul," with a quartet accompanying her. Then the preacher said a few words and prayed.

Mr. Crankshaw was there, and so were his camp-stools. One of them had collapsed, and the bass of the choir had been unable to open his. Some of the young people giggled, as always. But even for them the laughter was but the automatic whirl of a released spring, and there was no mirth in the air.

Deborah was filled with a cowering awe, as one who sees a storm rush past and is unhurt save by the vision of its wreckage. The girl Pamela had sung here a year or so ago that song to the rose, and had shredded the flower and ruined it and tossed it aside. So time had sung away the rose that had been Josie. Deborah had heard the rose cry out in its agony of dissolution, and now it was fallen from the bush, scentless and dead. But it had left at least other buds to replace it. That was more than Deborah had ever done.

The store was closed the day of the funeral, and Deborah went home with her mother. All that her mother could talk about was:

"Poor Josie! But did you see Birdaline? My, how poorly she looks! And so kind of scared. And she used to be such a nice-looking girl! My, how she has aged! Poor Josie! But Birdaline! What was she so scared about?"

It was the very old triumphing over the old for meeting the same fate. In her own summer Mrs. Larrabee had been a rose and had shriveled on the stem.

That night Deborah thanked God that He had not lent her beauty. Its repayment was such ruin.

CHAPTER VII

The next morning the Bazar was open at the regular hour. Shoppers open at the regular hour. Shoppers came as numerously as before. People were as eager as ever to enhance their charms or disguise their flaws. In a few days Asaph

Shillaber was again in his office. He wore black always, and a black tie, and he moved about with mourning in his manner.

A month later his cravat was brown, not black, and the next week it was red. He was taking more care of his costume. He talked more with the women customers, especially the young women, and he did not keep his eye anxiously on the front door. He rubbed his hands once more, recommending his goods.

In a few months younger girls were behind many of the counters. Deborah felt that youth was invading and replacing. She wondered how soon her turn would come. It would be a sad day, for she loved the work.

But she took some reassurance from the praises of Asaph. He paused now and then to compliment her on a sale or her progress. He led up to her some of his most particular customers and introduced her with a flourish. Sometimes he paused as he went down the aisle, and turned back to stare at her. She knew that she had blushed, because her face was hot, and once Mrs. Crankshaw, who was trying to match a sample, whispered to her:

"Say, Deborah, what kind of rouge do you use? It gives you the nicest color, and it looks like real."

When Deborah denied that she painted, the undertaker's wife was angry. She thought Deborah was trying to copyright her complexion. Deborah's cheeks tactfully turned pale again, now that Asaph had taken his strange eyes from her, and now the woman said:

"You're right; it's your own. It comes and goes! Look, now it's coming back again."

And so was Asaph. When Mrs. Crankshaw had moved off Asaph hung about awkwardly. Finally he put the backs of his knuckles on the counter and leaned across to murmur:

"Say, Debby, I was telling Jim Crawford yesterday that you made more sales than any other clerk in the shop this last month."

"Oh, really, did I?" Deborah gasped, her eyes snapping like electric sparks. They seemed to jolt Asaph; he fell back a little. Then he leaned closer.

"Crawford said he'd like to have you in his store. I told him you were a fixture here. Don't you leave me, Debby. You won't, will you?"

"Why, Asaph!" she cried.

"Leastways, you'll let me know any offer you get before you take it. You can promise me that, can't you?"

"Of course I will, but— Well, I never!"

This last was true. She never had known till now that superlative rapture of a woman, to have one man trying to take her away from another. Debby had not known it even as a little girl, for if two boys claimed the same dance—which had happened rarely enough—they did not wrangle and fight, but each yielded to

the other with a courtesy that was odious.

On her way home Deborah began to doubt the possibility of it all. Asaph had been talking about somebody else, or he had been joking—he was such a terrible fellow to cook up things and fool people! Or else Jim Crawford was just making fun of Asaph. She would not tell her mother this news.

That night, as she was washing the dishes after her late supper, the door-bell burred.

"You go, mother, will you? My hands are all suds."

Mrs. Larrabee hobbled slowly to the hall door, but came back with a burst of unsuspected speed. She was pale with fright.

"It's a man!" she whispered.

"A man! Who could it be?" Debby gasped.

"One of those daylight burglars, prob'ly. What 'll we do?"

"We could run out the back door while he's at the front."

"He might have a confederut waiting to grab us there."

"That's so!"

What possible motive a burglar could have for grabbing these two women, what possible value they would have for him, they did not inquire. But Debby, in the new executive habit of her mind, grew bold enough to take at least a peek at the stranger.

The bell continued to ring while she tiptoed into the parlor and lifted the shade slightly aside. She speedily recognized a familiar suit.

"It's old Jim Crawford," she said.

There was a panic of another sort now, getting Debby's hands dry, her sleeves down, her apron off, her hair puffed, the lamp in the parlor lighted. Old Jim Crawford was some minutes older before he was admitted.

It was the first male caller Deborah had had since her mother could remember. The old lady received him with a flourish that would have befitted a king. That he was a widower and, for Carthage, wealthy may have had something to do with it. A fantastic hope that at last somebody had come to propose to Deborah excited her mother so that she took herself out of the way as soon as the weather had been decently discussed.

Mr. Crawford made a long and ponderous effort at small talk and came round to his errand with the subtlety of an ocean liner warping into its slip. At length he mumbled that if Miss Debby ever got tired of Shillaber's there was a chance he might make a place for her in his own store. O' course, times was dull, and he had more help 'n he'd any call for, but he was a man who believed in bein' neighborly to old friends, and, knowin' her father and all—

It was such a luxury to Deborah to be sought after, even with this hip-popotamine stealth, that she rather prolonged the suspense and teased Crawford

to an offer, and to an increase in that before she told him that she would have to "think it over."

He lingered on the porch steps to offer Deborah "anything within reason," but she still told him she would think it over. When she thought it over she felt that it would be base ingratitude to desert Asaph Shillaber, who had saved her from starvation by taking her into his beautiful shop. No bribe should decoy her thence so long as he wanted her.

She did not even tell Asaph about it the next day. A week later he asked her if Crawford had spoken to her. She said that he had mentioned the subject, but that, of course, she had refused to consider leaving the man who had done everything in the world for her.

This shy announcement seemed to exert an immense effect on Asaph. He thanked her as if she had saved his life. And he stared at her more than ever.

A few evenings later there was another ring at the Larrabee bell. This time Mrs. Larrabee showed no alarm except that she might be late to the door. It was Asaph! He was as sheepish as a boy. He said that it was kind of lonesome over to his house and, seeing their light, he kind of thought he'd drop round and be a little neighborly. Everybody was growing more neighborly nowadays.

Once more Mrs. Larrabee vanished. As she sat in the dining-room, pretending to knit, she thought how good it was to have a man in the house. The rumble of a deep voice was so comfortable that she fell asleep long before Asaph could bring himself to going home.

He had previously sought diversion in the society of some of the very young and very pretty salesgirls in his store, but he found that, for all their graces, their prattle bored him. They talked all about themselves or their friends. Debby talked to Asaph about Asaph. He and she had been children together—they were of the same generation; she was a sensible woman, and she had learned much at the counter-school. He got to dropping round right often.

That long-silent door bell became a thing to listen for of evenings. Jim Crawford dropped round now and then; the elderly floor-walker at Shillaber's dropped round one night and talked styles and fabrics and gossip in a cackling voice. When he had left, the matchmaker's instinct led Mrs. Larrabee to warn Debby not to waste her time on him. "Two old maids talkin' at once is more'n I can stand."

Three times that year Newt Meldrum was in town and called on Deborah. She asked him to supper once, and he simply raved over the salt-rising biscuits and the peach-pusserves. After supper he asked if he might smoke. That was the last word in masculine possession. If frankincense and myrrh had been shaken about the room Debby and Mrs. Larrabee could not have cherished them as they did the odor of tobacco in the curtains next day. Mrs. Larrabee cried a little. Her

husband had smoked.

Deborah was only now passing through the stages the average woman travels in her teens and early twenties, Deborah was having callers. Sometimes two men came at once and tried to freeze each other out. And finally she had a proposal!—from Asaph!—from Josie’s and Birdaline’s Asaph! They had left him alone with Debby once too often.

CHAPTER VIII

It was not a romantic wooing, and Asaph was not offering the first love Asaph was not offering the first love of a bachelor heart. He was a trade-broken widower with a series of assorted orphans on his hands. And his declaration was dragged out of him by jealousy and fear.

Jim Crawford, after numerous failures to decoy Deborah, had at last offered her the position of head saleswoman; this included not only authority and increase of pay, but two trips a year to New York as buyer!

Deborah’s soul hungered to make that journey before she died, but she put even this temptation from her as an ingratitude to Asaph. Still, when Asaph called the next evening it amused her to tell him that she was going to transfer herself to Crawford’s—just to see what he would say and to amuse him. Her trifling joke brought a drama down on her head.

Asaph turned pale, gulped: "You’re going to leave me, Deborah! Why, I—I couldn’t get along without you. I don’t know what I’d do if I couldn’t talk to you all the time. Jim Crawford’s in love with you, the old scoundrel! But I won’t let you marry him. I got a nicer house than what he has for you to live in, too. There’s the children, of course, but you like children. They’d love you. They need mothering something awful. I been meaning to ask you to marry me, but I was afraid to. But I couldn’t let you go. You won’t, will you? I want you should marry me—right off. You will, won’t you?"

Deborah stared at him agape. Then she cried: "Asaph Shillaber, are you proposing to me or quarreling with me—which?"

"I’m proposin’ to you, darn it, and I won’t take ‘No’ for an answer."

Deborah had often wondered what she would say if the impossible should happen and a man should ask for her hand. And now it had come in the unlikeliest way, and what she said was:

"Sakes alive! Ase, one of us must be crazy!"

Asaph was in a panic; and he besieged and besought till she told him she would think it over. The sensation was too delicious to be finished with an immediate monosyllable. He went away blustering. Her mother had slept through the cataclysm. Deborah postponed telling her, and went to her room in a state of ecstatic distress.

Her room was prettier than it had been, and the bureau was more bravely equipped. It was a place of interesting mystery; there were curling-irons and skin-foods and nail-powders, and what not?

Now she was asked to give up this loneliness, this lifelong privacy, with its blessing and its bane, to move over into a man's house and share his room and her life with him.

Only, now she was asked this at the period when many women were returning to a second spinstership and one of her friends, who had married young and whose daughter had married young, was a grandmother. Deborah was experiencing the terror that assails young brides, the dread of the profoundest revolution in woman's life. Only in her case the terror was the greater from the double duration of her maidenhood. She was still a girl, and yet gray was in her hair.

The thought of marriage was almost intolerably fearful, and yet it was almost intolerably beautiful.

How wonderful that she should be asked to marry the ideal of her youth—she, the laughing-stock of the other girls; and now she could have a husband, a home, and children of various ages, from the little tot to the grown-ups. She would never have babies of her own, she supposed, but she could acquire them ready-made. All her stifled domestic instincts flamed at the new empire offered her.

And then she remembered Josie and Josie's sneer: "Poor old Debby. She never was a rose."

And now Josie was dead a year and more, and Josie's children and Josie's lover were submitted to her to take or leave. What a revenge it would be! What a squaring of old accounts! How she would turn the laugh back on them! How well she could laugh who waited to the last!

Then she shook her head. What had she to do with revenge? What meaner advantage could anybody take than to flaunt a dead enemy's colors? We can all deal sharply with our friends, but we must be magnanimous with our foes.

No, it was impossible. Josie had suffered enough in the ebb of her beauty. Debby could not strike at her in her grave.

CHAPTER IX

She waited to announce her decision till Asaph should call again. Then till Asaph should call again. Then she told him what she had decided, but not why. He suspected every other reason except the truth. He was always a quick, hard fighter, and now Deborah had to endure what Josie had endured all her life. He denounced her, threatened her, cajoled her, pleaded with her, but Josie's ghost chaperoned the two, forbade the banns, seemed to whisper, "His bad temper was what ruined my beauty."

The next day in the store Asaph looked wretched. Deborah grew the more desirable for her denial. He had thought that he had but to ask her; and now she refused his beseeching. He paused before her counter and begged her to reconsider.

He called at her home every evening. He went to her mother and implored her aid. The poor old soul could hardly believe her ears when she heard that Deborah was not only desired, but difficult. She promised Asaph that Deborah would yield, and he went away happy.

There was a weird conflict in the forsaken house that night. The old pictures nearly fell off the walls at the sight of the stupefied mother trying to compel that lifelong virgin to the altar. Mrs. Larrabee pointed out that there would never be another chance. The A.G.&St.P.Ry. was in the receiver's hands. They would starve if Deborah lost her job.

Deborah's only answer was that she would go to Crawford's. Her mother could not shake her decision, and hobbled off to bed in senile dismay. She had always been asking what the world was coming to, and now it was there. Deborah's heart was a whirlpool of indecision. Asaph's gloom appalled her, his evident need of her was his one unanswerable argument. He had given her her start in life. How could she desert his store, how could she refuse him his prayer? But how could she take Josie's place, kidnap Josie's children? Why was such a puzzle forced upon her, where every decision was cruel to some one, treacherous to something?

The turmoil made such a din in her soul that she could hardly transact the business at her counter. As she stood one morning asking a startled shopper if a bolt of maroon taffeta matched a clipping of magenta satin, she saw Newton Meldrum enter the store. As he went by to the office he saw her, lifted his hat, held it in air while he gazed, then went on.

It occurred to Deborah that he could help her. She could lay the case before him, and he would give her an impartial decision. She waited for him, and when

he left the office she beckoned to him and asked him shyly if he would take supper with her and her mother.

"You bet I will!" he said, and stared at her so curiously that she flashed red.

Through the supper, too, he stared at her so hard that she buttered her thumb instead of her salt-rising biscuit. Afterward she led him to the parlor and closed the door on her mother. This was in itself an epoch-making deed. Then she said to Newt: "Better light the longest cigar you have, for I have a long story to tell you. Got a match?"

He had, but he said he hadn't. She fetched one, and was so confused that she lighted it for him. Her hand trembled till he had to steady it with his own big fingers, and he stared at her instead of at the match, whose flickering rays lighted her face eerily.

When she had him settled in a chair—the best patent rocker it was—she told him her story. There is no surer test of character than the problem a mind extracts from a difficulty. As Meldrum watched this simple, starved soul stating its bewilderment he saw that her one concern was what she should do to be truest to other souls. There was no question of her own advantage.

He studied her earnestly, and his eyes were veiled with a kind of smoke of their own behind the scarf of tobacco-fumes. When she had finished she raised her eyes to his in meek appeal and murmured, "And now what ought I to do?"

He gazed at her a long while before he answered, "Do you want to go to Crawford's?"

"Well, I'd get more money and I'd get to see New York, but I don't like to leave Asaph. He says he needs me."

"Do you—do you want to marry Asaph?"

"Oh no! I—I like him awfully much, but I—I'm kind of afraid of him, too. But he says he needs me; and Josie's children need me, he says."

"But do you—I-love Asaph?"

"Oh no! not the kind of love, that is, that you read about. No, I'm kind of afraid of him. But I'm not expecting the kind of love you read about. I'm wondering what I ought to do?"

"And you want me to decide?"

"If you only would."

"Why do you leave it to me, of all people?"

"Because you're such a fine man; you know so much. I have more—more respect for you than for anybody else I know."

"You have!"

"Oh yes! Oh yes, indeed!"

"And you'll do what I tell you to?"

"Ye-yes, I will."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Give me your hand on it."

He rose and stood before her and put forth that great palm of his, and she set her slim white fingers in it. And then there must have been an earthquake or something, for suddenly she was swept to her feet and she was enveloped in his big arms and crushed against him, and his big mouth was pressed so fiercely to hers that she could not breathe.

She was so frightened that her heart seemed to break. And then she knew nothing till she found herself in the patent rocker, with him kneeling at her side, pleading with her to forgive him for the brute he was.

She was very weak and very much afraid of him and entirely bewildered. She wanted to run away, but he would not let her rise. The only thing that eased her was his saying over and over again, "You are the most beautiful thing in this world."

She had to laugh at that, and she heard herself saying, "Why, Newt Meldrum, one of us must be crazy!"

"I am—crazy with love of you."

"But to call me beautiful—poor old Debby!"

"You are beautiful; you're the handsomest woman I know."

"Me—with my white hair!"

"White roses. I don't know what's happened to you. You're not the woman I talked to at Asaph's, at all. You're like a girl—with silver hair—only you've got a woman's big heart, and you haven't the selfishness of the young, but that kind of wonderful sadness that sweetens a soul more than anything else."

Meldrum was as much amazed as Deborah was at hearing such rhapsodies from his matter-of-fact soul.

Her comment was prosaic enough. She fell back and sighed. "Well, I guess both of us must be crazy."

"I guess we are." He laughed boyishly. "We'd better get married and keep the insanity in one family."

"Get married!" she echoed, still befuddled. "And after you telling me what you did!"

"Yes, but I didn't know the Lord was at work on a masterpiece like you—girl, woman, grandmother, child, beauty, brains—all in one."

Deborah was as exhausted by the shock as if she had been stunned by lightning. She was tired out with the first kiss an impassioned man had ever pressed upon her lips, the first bone-threatening hug an ursine lover had ever inflicted upon her wicker ribs.

She was more afraid of Newt Meldrum than she had been of Asaph. But

when she told him she would think it over he declined to wait. He laughed at her pleas. She had promised to abide by his decision, and he had decided that she should go neither to Asaph's nor to Crawford's, but to New York—not as any old buyer, either, except of things for her own beautiful body and some hats for that fleecy white hair of hers. And she should live in New York, take her mother there if she wanted, and close up this house after they had been married in it.

She had been shaking her head to all these things and dismissing them gently as the ravings of a delirious boy. But now she said: "Oh, I could never be married in this town."

"And why not?"

"Oh, I don't know. I just couldn't."

She was still afraid that people would laugh at her, but more afraid that they would think she was trying to flaunt her triumph over them—the triumph of marrying the great Newton Meldrum. She could bear the laughter; she was used to the town's ridicule. But she could not endure to be triumphing over anybody.

Meldrum did not fret over her motives; he simply nodded.

"All right; then we'll be married in New York. How soon can you start?"

She stared at him, this amazing man. "How soon? Why, I haven't said I'd marry you yet! I'll have to think it over."

He laughed and crushed her in his arms and would not let her breathe till she breathed "Yes." He was the most amazing man. But, then, men were all so amazing when you got to know them. They must have all gone crazy at once, though.

THE END

*** END OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE LAST ROSE OF SUM-
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