

Calico

By Elizabeth Stuart Phelps

It was about the for the four-o'clock train.

After all, I wonder if it is worth telling,—such a simple, plotless record of a young girl's life, made up of Mondays and Tuesdays and Wednesdays, like yours or mine. Sharley was so exactly like other people! How can it be helped that nothing remarkable happened to her? But you would like the story?

It was about the for the four-o'clock train, then.

Sharley, at the cost of half a sugar-bowl (never mind syntax; you know I mean the sugar, not the glass), had enticed Moppet to betake himself out of sight and out of mind till somebody should signify a desire for his engaging presence; had steered clear of Nate and Methuselah, and was standing now alone on the back doorsteps opposite the chaise-house. One could see a variety of things from those doorsteps,—the chaise-house, for instance, with the old, solid, square-built wagon roiled into it (Sharley passed many a long "mending morning" stowed in among the cushions of that old wagon); the great sweet-kept barn, where the sun stole in warm at the chinks and filtered through the hay; the well-curb folded in by a shadow; the wood-pile, and the chickens, and the kitchen-garden; a little slope, too, with a maple on it and shades of brown and gold upon the grass; brown and golden tints across the hills, and a sky of blue and gold to dazzle one. Then there was a flock of robins dipping southward. There was also the railroad.

Sharley may have had her dim consciousness of the cosey barn and chicken's chirp, of brown and gold and blue and dazzle and glory; but you don't suppose *that* was what she had outgeneralled Moppet and stolen the march upon Nate and Methuselah for. The truth is, that the child had need of none of these things—neither skies nor dazzle nor glory—that golden autumn afternoon. Had the railroad bounded the universe just then, she would have been content. For Sharley was only a girl,—a very young, not very happy, little girl,—and Halcombe Dike was coming home to spend the Sunday.

Halcombe Dike,—her old friend Halcombe Dike. She said the words over, apologizing a bit to herself for being there to watch that railroad. Hal used to be good to her when she was bothered with the children and more than half tired of life. "Keep up good courage, Sharley," he would say. For the long summer he had not been here to say it. And to-night he would be here. To-night—to-night! Why should not one be glad when one's old friends come back?

Mrs. Guest, peering through the pantry window, observed—and observed with some motherly displeasure, which she would have expressed had it not been too much trouble to open the window—that Sharley had put on her barbe,—that black barbe with the pink watered ribbons run through it. So extravagant in Sharley! Sharley would fain have been so extravagant as to put on her pink muslin too this afternoon she had been more than half inclined to cry because she could not; but as it was not orthodox in Green Valley to wear one's "best clothes" on week-days, except at picnics or prayer-meetings, she had submitted, sighing, to her sprigged calico. It would have been worth while, though, to have seen her half an hour ago up in her room under the eaves, considering the question; she standing there with the sleeves of her dressing-sack fallen away from her pink, bare arms, and the hair clinging loose and moist to her bare white neck; to see her smooth the shimmering folds,—there were rose-buds on that muslin,—and look and long, hang it

up, and turn away. Why could there not be a little more rose-bud and shimmer in people's lives! "Seems to me it's all calico!" cried Sharley.

Then to see her overturning her ribbon-box! Nobody but a girl knows how girls dream over their ribbons.

"He is coming!" whispered Sharley to the little bright barbe, and to the little bright face that flushed and fluttered at her in the glass,—“He is coming!”

Sharley looked well, waiting there in the calico and lace upon the doorstep. It is not everybody who would look well in calico and lace; yet if you were to ask me, I could not tell you how pretty Sharley is, or if she is pretty at all. I have a memory of soft hair—brown, I think—and wistful eyes; and that I never saw her without a desire to stroke her, and make her pur as I would a kitten.

How stiff and stark and black the railroad lay on its yellow ridge! Sharley drew her breath when the sudden four-o'clock whistle smote the air, and a faint, far trail of smoke puffed through the woods, and wound over the barren outline.

Her mother, seeing her steal away through the kitchen-garden, and down the slope, called after her:—

“Charlotte! going to walk? I wish you'd let the baby go too. Well, she does n't hear!”

I will not assert that Sharley did not hear. To be frank, she was rather tired of that baby.

There was a foot-path through the brown and golden grass, and Sharley ran over it, under the maple, which was dropping yellow leaves, and down to the knot of trees which lined the farther walls. There was a nook here,—she knew just where,—into which one might creep, tangled in with the low-hanging green of apple and spruce, and wound about with grape-vines. Stooping down, careful not to catch that barbe upon the brambles, and careful not to soil so much as a sprig of the clean light calico, Sharley hid herself in the shadow. She could see unseen now the great puffs of purple smoke, the burning line of sandy bank, the station, and the uphill road to the village. Oddly enough, some old Scripture words—Sharley was not much in the habit of quoting Scripture—came into her thoughts just as she had curled herself comfortably up beside the wall, her watching face against the grape-leaves: “But what went ye out for to see?” “What went ye out for to see?” She went on, dreamily finishing, “A prophet? Yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet,” and stopped, scarlet. What had prophets to do with her old friend Halcombe Dike?

Ah, but he was coming! he was coming! To Sharley's eyes the laboring, crazy locomotive which puffed him asthmatically up to the little depot was a benevolent dragon,—if there were such things as benevolent dragons,—very horrible, and she was very much afraid of it; but very gracious, and she should like to go out and pat it on the shoulder.

The train slackened, jarred, and stopped. An old woman with thirteen bundles climbed out laboriously. Two small boys turned somersaults from the platform. Sharley strained her wistful eyes till they ached. There was nobody else. Sharley was very young, and very much disappointed, and she cried. The glory had died from the skies. The world had gone out.

She was sitting there all in a heap, her face in her hands, and her heart in her foolish eyes, when a step sounded linear, and a voice humming an old army song. She knew it; he had taught it to her himself. She knew the step; for she had long ago trained her slippered feet to keep pace with it. He had stepped from the wrong side of the car, perhaps, or her eager eyes had missed him; at any rate here he was,—a young man, with honest eyes, and mouth a little grave; a very plainly dressed young man,—his coat was not as new as Sharley's calico,—but a young man with a good step of his own,—strong, elastic,—and a nervous hand.

He passed, humming his army song, and never knew how the world lighted up again within a foot of him. He passed so near that Sharley by stretching out her hand could have touched him,—so near that she could hear the breath he drew. He was thinking to himself, perhaps, that no one had come from home to meet him, and he had been long away; but then, it was not his mother's fashion of welcome, and quickening his pace at the thought of her, he left the tangle of green behind, and the little wet face crushed breathless up against the grape-leaves, and was out of sight and knew nothing.

Sharley sprang up and bounded home. Her mother opened her languid eyes wide when the child came in.

“Dear me, Charlotte, how you do go chirping and hopping round, and me with this great baby and my sick-headache! *I* can't chirp and hop. You look as if somebody'd set you on fire! What's the matter with you, child?”

What was the matter, indeed! Sharley, in a little spasm of penitence,—one can afford to be penitent when one is happy,—took the baby and went away to think about it. Surely he would come to see her to-night; he did not often come home without seeing Sharley; and he had been long away. At any rate he was here; in this very Green Valley where the days had dragged so drearily without him; his eyes saw the same sky that hers saw; his breath drank the same sweet evening wind; his feet trod the roads that she had trodden yesterday, and would tread again to-morrow. But I will not tell them any more of this,—shall I, Sharley?

She threw her head back and looked up, as she walked to and fro through the yard with the heavy baby fretting on her shoulder. The skies were aflame now, for the sun was dropping slowly. “He is here!” they said. A belated robin took up the word: “He is here!” The yellow maple glittered all over with it: “Sharley, he is here!”

“The butter is here,” called her mother relevantly from the house. “The butter is here now, and it's the to see about supper, Charlotte.”

“More calico!” said impatient Sharley, and she gave the baby a jerk.

Whether he came or whether he did not come, there was no more time for Sharley to dream that night. In fact, there seldom was any time to dream in Mrs. Guest's household. Mrs. Guest believed in keeping people busy. She was busy enough herself when her head did not ache. When it did, it was the least she could do to see that other people were busy.

So Sharley had the table to set, and the biscuit to bake, and the tea to make, and the pears to pick over; she must run upstairs to bring her mother a handkerchief; she must hurry for her father's clothes-brush when he came in tired, and not so good-humored as he might be, from his store; she must stop to rebuild the baby's block-house, that Moppet had kicked over, and snap Moppet's dirty, dimpled fingers for kicking it over, and endure the shriek that Moppet set up there-for. She must suggest to Methuselah that he could find, perhaps, a more suitable book-mark for Robinson Crusoe than his piece of bread and molasses, and intimate doubts as to the propriety of Nate's standing on the table-cloth and sitting on the toast-rack. And then Moppet was at that baby again, dropping very cold pennies down his neck. They must be made presentable for supper, too, Moppet and Nate and Methuselah,—Methuselah, Kate, and Moppet; brushed and washed and dusted and coaxed and scolded and borne with. There was no end to it. Would there ever be any end to it? Sharley sometimes asked of her weary thoughts. Sharley's life, like the lives of most girls at her age, was one great unanswered question.

It grew tiresome occasionally, as monologues are apt to do.

“I'm going to holler to-night,” announced Moppet at supper, pausing in the midst of his berry-cake, by way of diversion, to lift the cat up by her tail. “I'm going to holler awful, and make you

sit up and tell me about that little boy that ate the giant, and Cinderella,—how she lived in the stove-pipe,—and that man that builded his house out of a bungle of straws; and—well, there's some more, but I don't remember 'em just now, you know."

"O Moppet!

"I am," glared Moppet over his mug. "You made me put on a clean collar. You see if I don't holler an' holler an' holler an' keep a-hollerin'!"

Sharley's heart sank; but she patiently cleared away her dishes, mixed her mother's ipecac, read her father his paper, went upstairs with the children, treated Moppet with respect as to his buttons and boot-lacing, and tremblingly bided her time.

"Well," condescended that young gentleman, before his prayers were over, "I b'lieve—give us our debts—I'll keep that hollerin'—forever 'n ever—Namen—till to-morrow night. I ain't a—bit—sleepy, but—" And nobody heard anything more from Moppet.

The coast was clear now, and happy Sharley, with bright cheeks, took her little fall hat that she was trimming, and sat down on the front doorsteps; sat there to wait and watch, and hope and dream and flutter, and sat in vain. Twilight crept up the path, up to her feet, folded her in; the warm color of her plaided ribbons faded away under her eyes, and dropped from her listless fingers; with them had faded her bit of a hope for that night; Hal always came before dark.

"Who cares?" said Sharley, with a toss of her soft, brown head. Somebody did care nevertheless. Somebody winked hard as she went upstairs.

However, she could light a lamp and finish her hat. That was one comfort. It always *is* a comfort to finish one's hat. Girls have forgotten graver troubles than Sharley's in the excitement of hurried Saturday-night millinery.

A bonnet is a picture in its way, and grows up under one's fingers with a pretty sense of artistic triumph. Besides, there is always the question: Will it be becoming? So Sharley put her lamp on a cricket, and herself on the floor, and began to sing over her work. A pretty sight it was,—the low, dark room with the heavy shadows in its corners; all the light and color drawn to a focus in the middle of it; Sharley, with her head bent—bits of silk like broken rainbows tossed about her—and that little musing smile, considering gravely, Should the white squares of the plaid turn outward? and where should she put the coral? and would it be becoming after all? A pretty, girlish sight, and you may laugh at it if you choose; but there was a prettier woman's tenderness underlying it, just as a strain of fine, coy sadness will wind through a mazourka or a waltz. For who would see the poor little hat to-morrow at church? and would he like it? and when he came tomorrow night,—for of course he would come tomorrow night,—would he tell her so?

When everybody else was in bed and the house still, Sharley locked her door, furtively stole to the bureau-glass, shyly tied on that hat, and more shyly peeped in. A flutter of October colors and two great brown eyes looked back at her encouragingly.

"I should like to be pretty," said Sharley, and asked the next minute to be forgiven for the vanity. "At any rate," by way of modification, "I should like to be pretty to-morrow."

She prayed for Halcombe Dike when she kneeled, with her face hidden in her white bed, to say "Our Father." I believe she had prayed for him now every night for a year. Not that there was any need of it, she reasoned, for was he not a great deal better than she could ever be? Far above her; oh, as far above her as the shining of the stars was above the shining of the maple-tree; but perhaps if she prayed very hard they would give one extra, beautiful angel charge over him. Then, was it not quite right to pray for one's old friends? Besides—besides, they had a pheasant sound, those two words: "*Our Father.*"

"I will be good to-morrow," said Sharley, dropping into sleep. "Mother's head will ache, and I can go to church. I will listen to the minister, and I won't plan out my winter dresses in prayer-time. I won't be cross to Moppet, nor shake Methuselah. I will be good. Hal will help me to be good. I shall see him in the morning,—in the morning."

Sharley's self-knowledge, like the rest of her, was in the bud yet.

Her Sunday, her one warm, shining day, opened all in a glow. She danced down stairs at ten o'clock in the new hat, in a haze of merry colors. She had got breakfast and milked one cow and dressed four boys that morning, and she felt as if she had earned the right to dance in a haze of anything. The sunlight quivered in through the blinds. The leaves of the yellow maple drifted by on the fresh, strong wind. The church-bells rang out like gold. All the world was happy.

"Charlotte!" Her mother bustled out of the "keeping-room" with her hat on. "I've changed my mind, Sharley, and feel so much better I believe I will go to church. I'll take Methuselah, but Nate and Moppet had better stay at home with the baby. The last time I took Moppet he fired three hymn-books at old Mrs. Perkins,—right into the crown of her bonnet, and in the long prayer, too. That child will be the death of me some day. I guess you'll get along with him, and the baby is n't quite as cross as he was yesterday. You'd just as lief go in the after-noon, I suppose? Pin my shawl on the shoulder, please."

But Sharley, half-way down the stairs, stood still. She was no saint, this disappointed little girl. Her face, in the new fall hat, flushed angrily and her hands dropped.

"O mother! I did want to go! You're always keeping me at home for something. I did *want* to go!"—and rushed up stairs noisily, like a child, and slammed her door.

"Dear me!" said her mother, putting on her spectacles to look after her,—"dear me! what a temper! I'm sure I don't see what difference it makes to her which half of the day she goes. Last Sunday she must go in the afternoon, and would n't hear of anything else. Well, there's no accounting for girls! Come, Methuselah."

*Is there not any "accounting for girls," my dear madam? What is the matter with those mothers, that they cannot see? Just as if it never made any difference to them which half of the day they went to church! Well, well! we are doing it, all of us, as fast as we can,—going the way of all the earth, digging little graves for our young sympathies, one by one, covering them up close. It grows so long since golden mornings and pretty new bonnets and the sweet consciousness of watching eyes bounded life for us! We have dreamed our dreams; we have learned the long lesson of our days; we are stepping on into the shadows. Our eyes see that ye see not; our ears hear that which ye have not considered. We read your melodious story through, but we have read other stories since, and only its *hæc fabula docet* remains very fresh. You will be as obtuse as we are some day, young things! It is not neglect; it is not disapproval,—we simply forget. But from such forgetfulness may the good Lord graciously deliver us, one and all!*

There! I fancy that I have made for Mrs. Guest—sitting meantime in her cushioned pew (directly behind Halcombe Dike), and comfortably looking over the "Watts and Select" with Methuselah—a better defence than ever she could have made for herself. Between you and me, girls,—though you need not tell your mother,—I think it is better than she deserves.

Sharley, upstairs, had slammed her door and locked it, and was pacing hotly back and forth across her room. Poor Sharley! Sun and moon and stars were darkened; the clouds had returned after the rain. She tore off the new hat and Sunday things savagely; put on her old chocolate-colored morning-dress, with a grim satisfaction in making herself as ugly as possible; pulled down the ribboned chignon which she had braided, singing, half an hour ago (her own, that chignon); screwed her hair under a net into the most unbecoming little pug of which it was

cal)able, and went drearily down stairs. Nate, enacting the cheerful drama of “Jeff Davis on a sour apple-tree,” hung from the balusters, purple, gasping, tied to the verge of strangulation by the energetic Moppet. The baby was calmly sitting in the squash-pies.

Halcombe Dike, coming home from church that morning a little in advance of the crowd, saw a “Preraphaehite” in the doorway of Mr. Guest’s barn, and quietly unlatching the gate came nearer to examine it. It was worth examining. There was a ground of great shadows and billowy hay; a pile of crimson apples struck out by the light through a crack; two children and a kitten asleep together in a sunbeam; a girl on the floor with a baby crawling over her; a girl in a chocolate-colored dress with yellow leaves in her hair,—her hair upon her shoulders, and her eyelashes wet.

“Well, Sharley!”

She looked up to see him standing there with his grave, amused smile. Her first thought was to jump and run; her second, to stand fire.

“Well, Mr. Halcombe! Moppet’s stuck yellow leaves all over me; my hair’s down; I’ve got on a horrid old morning-dress; look pretty to see company, don’t I?”

“Very, Sharley.”

“Besides,” said Sharley, “I’ve been crying, and my eyes are red.”

“So I see.”

“No, you don’t, for I’m not looking at you.”

“But I am looking at you.”

“Oh!”

“What were you crying about, Sharley!”

“Because my grandmother’s dead,” said Sharley, after some reflection.

“Ah, yes, I remember! about ’36, I think, her tombstone gives as the date of that sad event?”

“I think it’s wicked in people to laugh at people’s dead grandmothers,” said Sharley, severely. “You ought to be at church.”

“So I was.”

“I was n’t; mother would n’t—” But her lip quivered, and she stopped. The memory of the new hat and Sunday dress, of the golden church-bells, and hush of happy Sabbath-morning thoughts came up. That he should see her now, in this plight, with her swollen eyes and pouting lips, and her heart full of wicked discontent!

“Would n’t what, Sharley?”

“*Don’t!*” she pleaded, with a sob; “I’m cross; I can’t talk. Besides, I shall cry again, and I *won’t* cry again. You may let me alone, or you may go away. If you don’t go away you may just tell me what you have been doing with yourself this whole long summer. Working hard, of course. I don’t see but that everybody has to work hard in this world! I hate this world! I suppose you’re a rich man by this time?”

The young man looked at the chocolate dress, the yellow leaves, the falling hair, and answered gravely,—a little coldly, Sharley thought,—that his prospects were not encouraging just now. Perhaps they never had been encouraging; only that he in his young ardor had thought so. He was older now, and wiser. He understood what a bard pull was before young architects in America,—any young architect, the best of young architects,—and whether there was a place for him remained to be proved. He was willing to work hard, and to hope long; but he grew a little tired of it sometimes, and so—He checked himself suddenly. “As if,” thought Sharley, “he were tired of talking so long to me! He thought my question impertinent.” She hid her face in her drooping hair, and wished herself a mile away.

“There was something you once told me about some sort of buildings?” she ventured, timidly, in a pause.

“The Crumpet Buildings. Yes, I sent my proposals, but have not heard from them yet; I don’t know that I ever shall. That is a large affair, rather. The name of the thing would be worth a good deal to me if I succeeded. It would give me a start, and—”

“Ough!” exclaimed Sharley. She had been sitting at his feet, with her face raised, and red eyes forgotten, when, splash! an icy stream of water came into her eyes, into her mouth, down her neck, up her sleeves. She gasped, and stood drenched.

“O, it’s only a rain-storm,” said Moppet, appearing on the scene with his empty dipper. “I got tired of sleeping. I dreamed about three giants. I did n’t like it. I wanted something to do. It’s only *my* rain-storm, and you need n’t mind it, you know.”

Dripping Sharley’s poor little temper, never of the strongest, quivered to its foundations. She took hold of Moppet without any observation, and shook him just about as hard as she could shake. When she came to her senses her mother was coming in at the gate, and Halcombe Dike was gone.

“I s’pose I’ve got to ’tend to that hollering tonight,” said Moppet, with a gentle sigh.

This was at a quarter past seven. Nate and Methuselah were in bed. The baby was asleep. Moppet had thrown his shoes into the water-pitcher but twice, and run down stairs in his nightgown only four times that evening; and Sharley felt encouraged. Perhaps, after all, he would be still by half past seven; and by half past seven—If Halcombe Dike did not come to-night, something was the matter. Sharley decided this with a sharp little nod.

She had devoted herself to Moppet with politic punctiliousness. Would he lie at his lazy length, with his feet on her clean petticoat, while she bent and puzzled over his knotted shoestrings? Very well. Did he signify a desire to pull her hair down and tickle her till she gasped? She was at his service. Should he insist upon being lulled to slumber by the recounted adventures of Old Mother Hubbard, Red Riding-Hood, and Tommy Tucker? Not those exactly, it being thought proper to keep him in a theologic mood of mind till after sundown, but he should have David and Goliath and Moses in the bulrushes with pleasure; then Moses and Goliath and David again; after that, David and Goliath and Moses, by way of variety. She conducted every Scriptural dog and horse of her acquaintance entirely round the globe in a series of somewhat apocryphal adventures. She ransacked her memory for biblical boys, but these met with small favor. “Pooh! *they* were n’t any good! They could n’t play stick-knife and pitch-in. Besides, they all died. Besides, they were n’t any great shakes. Jack the Giant-Killer was worth a dozen of ’em, sir! Now tell it all over again, or else I won’t say my prayers till next winter!”

After some delicate plotting, Sharley manœuvred him through “Now I lay me,” and tucked him up, and undertook a little Sunday-night catechizing, conscientiously enough.

“Has Moppet been a good boy to-day?”

“Well, that’s a pretty question! Course I have!”

“But have you had any good thoughts, dear, you know?”

“O yes, lots of ’em! been thinking about Blessingham.”

“Who? O, Absalom!”

“O yes, I’ve been thinking about Blessingham, you know; how he must have looked dreadful funny hanging up there onto his hair, with all the darts ’n things stickin’ into him! *Would* n’t you like to seen him! No, you need n’t go off; ’cause I ain’t begun to be asleep yet.”

Time and twilight were creeping on together. Sharley was sure that she had heard the gate shut, and that some one sat talking with her mother upon the front doorsteps.

“O Mioppet! *Would* n’t you go to sleep without me this one night,—not this one night?” and the hot, impatient tears came in the dark.

“O no,” said immovable Moppet, “of course I can’t; and I ’spect I’m going to lie awake all night too. You’d ought to be glad to stay with your little brothers. The girl in my library-book, she was glad, anyhow.”

Sharley threw herself back in the rocking-chair and let her eyes brim over. She could hear the voices on the doorsteps plainly; her mother’s wiry tones and the visitor’s; it was a man’s voice, low and less frequent. Why did not her mother call her? Had not he asked to see her? Had he not? Would nobody ever come up to take her place? Would Moppet never go to sleep? There he was peering at her over the top of the sheet, with two great, mischievous, wide-awake eyes. And time and twilight were wearing on.

Let us talk about “affliction” with our superior, reproving smile! Graves may close and hearts may break, fortunes, hopes, and souls be ruined, but Moppet would n’t go to sleep; and Sharley in her rocking-chair doubted her mother’s love, the use of life, and the benevolence of God.

“I’m lying awake to think about Buriah,” observed Moppet, pleasantly. “David wanted to marry Buriah’s wife. She was a very nice woman.”

Silence followed this announcement.

“Sharley? you need n’t think I’m asleep,—any such thing. Besides, if you go down you’d better believe I’ll holler! See here: s’pose I’d slung my dipper at Hal Dike, jest as David slung the stone at Go-li—”

Another silence. Encouraged, Sharley dried her tears and crept half-way across the floor. Then a board creaked.

“O Sharley! Why don’t people shut their eyes when they die? Why, Jim Snow’s dorg, he did n’t. I punched a frog yesterday. I want a drink of water.”

Sharley resigned herself in despair to her fate. Moppet lay broad and bright awake till half past eight. The voices by the door grew silent. Steps sounded on the walk. The gate shut.

“That child has kept me up with him the whole evening long,” said Sharley, coming sullenly down. “You did n’t even come and speak to him, mother. I suppose Halcombe Dike never asked for me?”

“Halcombe Dike! Law! that was n’t Halcombe Dike. It was Deacon Snow,—the old Deacon,—come in to talk over the revival. Halcombe Dike was at meeting, your father says, with his cousin Sue. Great interest up his way, the Deacon says. There’s ten had convictions since Conference night. I wish you were one of the interested, Sharley.”

But Sharley had fled. Fled away into the windy, moonless night, down through the garden, out into the sloping field. She ran back and forth through the grass with great leaps, like a wounded thing. All her worry and waiting and disappointment, and he had not come! All the thrill and hope of her happy Sunday over and gone, and he had not come! All the winter to live without one look at him,—and he knew it, and he would not come!

“I don’t care!” sobbed Sharley, like a defiant child, but threw up her hands with the words and wailed. It frightened her to hear the sound of her own voice—such a pitiful, shrill voice—in the lonely place. She broke into her great leaps again, and so ran up and down the slope, and felt the wind in her face. It drank her breath away from her after a while; it was a keen, chilly wind. She sat down on a stone in the middle of the field, and it came over her that it was a cold, dark place

to be in alone; and just then she heard her father calling her from the yard. So she stood up very slowly and walked back.

"You'll catch your death!" fretted her mother, "running round bareheaded in all this damp. You know how much trouble you are when you are sick, too, and I think you ought to have more consideration for me, with all my care. Going to bed? Be sure and not forget to put the baby's gingham apron in the wash."

Sharley lighted her kerosene lamp without reply. It was the little kerosene with the crack in the handle. Some vague notion that everything in the world had cracked came to her as she crept upstairs. She put her lamp out as soon as she was in her room, and locked her door hard. She sat down on the side of the bed and crossed her hands, and waited for her father and mother to come upstairs. They came up by and by and went to bed. The light that shone in through the chink under the door went out. The house was still.

She went over to the window then, threw it wide open, and sat down crouched upon the broad sill. She did not sob now nor wail out. She did not feel like sobbing or wailing. She only wanted to think; she must think, she had need to think. That this neglect of Halcombe Dike's meant something she did not try to conceal from her bitter thoughts. He had not neglected her in all his life before. It was not the habit, either, of this grave young man with the earnest eyes to do or not to do without a meaning. He would put silence and the winter between them. That was what he meant. Sharley, looking out upon the windy dark with straight-lidded eyes, knew that beneath and beyond the silence of the winter lay the silence of a life.

The silence of a life! The wind hushed into a moment's calm while the words turned over in her heart. The branches of a cherry-tree, close under her sight, dropped lifelessly; a homesick bird gave a little, still, mournful chirp in the dark. Sharley gasped.

"It's all because I shook Moppet! That's it. Because I shook Moppet this morning. He used to like me,—yes, he did. He did n't know how cross and ugly I am. No wonder he thought such a cross and ugly thing could never be—could never be—"

She broke off, crimson. "His wife?" She would have said the words without blush or hesitation a week ago. Halcombe Dike had spoken no word of love to her. But she had believed, purely and gravely, in the deeps of her maiden thought, that she was dear to him. Gravely and purely too she had dreamed that this October Sunday would bring some sign to her of their future.

He had been toiling at that business in the city now a long while. Sharley knew nothing about business, but she had fancied that, even though his "prospects" were not good, he must be ready now to think of a home of his own,—at least that he would give her some hope of it to keep through the dreary, white winter. But he had given her nothing to keep through the winter, or through any winter of a wintry life; nothing. The beautiful Sunday was over. He had wine, and he had gone. She must brush away the pretty fancy. She must break the timid dream. So that grave, sweet word had died in shame upon her lips. She should not be his wife. She should never be anybody's wife.

The Sunday Night Express shrieked up the valley, and thundered by and away in the dark. Sharley leaned far out into the wind to listen to the dying sound, and wondered what it would seem like tomorrow morning when it carried him away. With its pause one of those sudden hushes fell again upon the wind. The homesick bird fluttered about a little, hunting for its nest.

"Never to be his wife!" moaned Sharley. What did it mean? "Never to be his wife?" She pressed her hands up hard against her two temples, and considered:—

Moppet and the baby, and her mother's headaches; milking the cow, and kneading the bread, and darning the stockings; going to church in old hats,—for what difference was it going to make

to anybody now, whether she trimmed them with Scotch plaid or sarcenet cambric?—coming home to talk over revivals with Deacon Snow, or sit down in a proper way, like other old people, in the house with a lamp, and reach Somebody's Life and Letters. Never any more moonlight, and watching, and strolling! Never any hoping, or wishing, or expecting, for Sharley.

She jumped a little off her window-sill; then sat down again. That was it. Moppet, and the baby, and her mother, and kneading, and milking, and darning, for thirty, for forty, for—the dear Lord, who pitied her, only knew how many years.

But Sharley did not incline to think much about the Lord just then. She was very miserable, and very much alone and unhelped. So miserable, so alone and unhelped, that it never occurred to her to drop down right there with her despairing little face on the window-sill and tell Him all about it. O Sharley! did you not think He would understand?

She had made up her mind—decidedly made up her mind—not to go to sleep that night. The unhappy girls in the novels always sit up, you know. Besides, she was too wretched to sleep. Then the morning train went early, at half past five, and she should stay here till it came.

This was very good reasoning, and Sharley certainly was very unhappy,—as unhappy as a little girl of eighteen can well be; and I suppose it would sound a great deal better to say that the cold morning looked in upon her sleepless pain, or that Aurora smiled upon her unrested eyes, or that she kept her bitter watch until the stars grew pale (and a fine chance that would be to describe a sunrise too); but truth compels me to state that she did what some very unhappy people have done before her,—found the window-sill uncomfortable, cramped, neuralgic, and cold,—so undressed and went to bed and to sleep, very much as she would have done if there had been no Halcombe Dike in the world. Sharley was not used to lying awake, and Nature would not be cheated out of her rights in such a round, young, healthful little body.

But that did not make her much the happier when she woke in the cold gray of the dawn to listen for the early train. It was very cold and very gray, not the for the train yet, but she could not bear to lie still and hear the shrill, gay concert of the birds, to watch the day begin, and think how many days must have beginning,—so she crept faintly up and out into the chill. She wandered about for a time in the raw, brightening air. The frost lay crisp upon the short grass; the elder-bushes were festooned with tiny white tassels; the maple-leaves hung fretted with silver; the tangle of apple-trees and spruces was powdered and pearly. She stole into it, as she had stolen into it in the happy sunset-time so long ago—why! was it only day before yesterday?—stole in and laid her cheek up against the shining, wet vines, which melted warm beneath her touch, and shut her eyes. She thought how she would like to shut and hide herself away in a place where she could never see the frescoed frost or brightening day, nor hear the sound of chirping birds, nor any happy thing.

By and by she heard the train coming, and footsteps. He came springing by in his strong, man's way as he had come before. As before, he passed near—how very near!—to the quivering white face crushed up against the vine-leaves, and went his way and knew nothing.

The train panted and raced away, shrieked a little in a doleful, breathless fashion, grew small, grew less, grew dim, died from sight in pallid smoke. The track stood up on its mound of frozen bank, blank and mute, like a corpse from which the soul had fled.

Sharley came into the kitchen at six o'clock. The fire was burning hotly under the boiler. The soiled clothes lay scattered about. Her mother stood over the tubs, red-faced and worried, complaining that Sharley had not come to help her. She turned, when the girl opened the door, to scold her a little. The best of mothers are apt to scold on Monday morning.

Sharley stood still a moment and looked around. She must begin it with a washing-day then, this other life that had come to her. Her heart might break, but the baby's aprons must be boiled—to-day, next week, another week; the years stretched out into one wearisome, endless washing-day. O, the dreadful years! She grew a little blind and dizzy, sat down on a heap of table-cloths, and held up her arms.

“Mother, don't be cross to me this morning,—*don't!* O mother, mother, mother! I wish there were anybody to help me!”

The battle-fields of life lie in ambush. We trip along on our smiling way and they give no sign. We turn sharp corners where they hide in shadow. No drum-beat sounds alarm. It is the music and the dress-parade to-night, the groaning and the blood to-morrow.

Sharley had been little more than a child, in her unreasoning young joy, when she knotted the barbe at her throat on Saturday night. “I am an old woman now,” she said to herself on Monday morning. Not that her saying so proved anything,—except, indeed, that it was her first trouble, and that she was very young to have a trouble. Yet, since she had the notion, she might as well, to all intents and purposes, have shrivelled into the caps and spectacles of a centenarian. “Imaginary griefs *are* real.” She took, indeed, a grim sort of pleasure in thinking that her youth had fled away, and forever, in thirty-six hours.

However that might be, that October morning ushered Sharley upon battle-ground; nor was the struggle the less severe that she was so young and so unused to struggling.

I have to tell of nothing new or tragic in the child's days; only of the old, slow, foolish pain that gnaws at the roots of things. Something was the matter with the sunsets and the dawns. Moonrise was an agony. The brown and golden grass had turned dull and dead. She would go away up garret and sit with her fingers in her ears, that she might not hear the frogs chanting in the swamp at twilight.

One night she ran away from her father and mother. It chanced to be an anniversary of their wedding-day; they had kissed each other after tea and talked of old times and blushed a little, their married eyes occupied and content with one another; she felt with a sudden, dreary bitterness that she should not be missed, and so ran out into the field and sat down there on her stone in the dark. She rather hoped that they would wonder where she was before bedtime. It would be a bit of comfort. She was so cold and comfortless. But nobody thought of her; and when she came weakly up the yard at ten o'clock, the door was locked.

For a week she went about her work like a sleepwalker. Her future was settled. Life was over. Why make ado? The suns would set and the moons would rise: let them; there would always be suns to set and moons to rise. There were dinners to get and stockings to mend; there would always be dinners to get and stockings to mend. She was put into the world for the sake of dinners and stockings, apparently. Very well; she was growing used to it; one could grow used to it. She put away the barbe and the pink muslin, locked her ribbon-box into the lower drawer, gave up crimping her hair, and wore the chocolate calico all day. She went to the Thursday-evening conference, discussed the revival with Deacon Snow, and locked herself into her room one night to put the lamp on the bureau before the glass and shake her soft hair down about her colorless, inexpectant face, to see if it were not turning gray. She was disappointed to find it as brown and bright as ever.

But Sharley was very young, and the sweet, persistent hopes of youth were strong in her. They woke up presently with a sting like the sting of a frost-bite.

“O, to think of being an old maid, in a little black silk apron, and having Halcombe Dike’s wedding-cards laid upon a shelf!”

She was holding the baby when this “came all over her,” and she let him drop into the coal-hod, and sat down to cry.

What had she done that life should shut down before her in such cruel bareness? Was she not young, very young to be unhappy? She began to fight a little with herself and Providence in savage mood; favored the crimped hair and Scotch plaids again, tried a nutting-party and a sewing-circle, as well as a little flirtation with Jim Snow. This hastened for another week. At the end of that she went and sat down alone one noon on a pile of kindlings in the wood-house, and thought it over.

“Why, I can’t!” her eyes widening with slow terror. “Happiness *won’t* come. I *can’t* make it. I can’t ever make it. And O, I’m just at the beginning of everything!

Somebody called her just then to peel the potatoes for dinner. She thought—she thought often in those days—of that fancy of hers about calico-living. Was not that all that was left for her? Little dreary, figures, all just alike, like the chocolate morning-dress? O, the rose-bud and shimmer that might have been waiting somewhere! And O, the rose-bud and shimmer that were forever gone!

The frosted golds of autumn melted into a clear, sharp, silvered winter, carrying Sharley with them, round on her old routine. It never grew any the easier or softer. The girl’s little rebellious feet trod it bitterly. She hated the darning and the sweeping and the baking and the dusting. She hated the sound of the baby’s worried cry. She was tired of her mother’s illnesses, tired of Moppet’s mischief, tired of Methuselah’s solemnity. She used to come in sometimes from her walk to the office, on a cold, moonlight evening, and stand looking in at them all through the “keeping-room” window,—her father prosing over the state of the flour-market, her mother on the lounge, the children waiting for her to put them to bed; Methuselah poring over his arithmetic in his little-old-mannish way; Moppet tying the baby and the kitten together,—stand looking till the hot, shamed blood shot to her forehead, for thought of how she was wearied of the sight.

“I can’t think what’s got into Sharley,” complained her mother; “she has been as cross as a bear this good while. If she were eight years old, instead of eighteen, I should give her a good whipping and send her to bed!”

Poor Sharley nursed her trouble and her crossness together, in her aggrieved, girlish way, till the light went out of her wistful eyes, and little sharp bones began to show at her wrists. She used to turn them about and pity them. They were once so round and winsome!

Now it was probably a fact that, as for the matter of hard work, Sharley’s life was a sinecure compared to what it would be as the wife of Halcombe Dike. Double your toil into itself, and triple it by the measure of responsibility, and there you have your married life, young girls,—beautiful, dim Eden that you have made of it! But there was never an Eden without its serpent, I fancy. Besides, Sharley, like the rest of them, had not thought as far as that.

Then—ah then, what toil would not be play-day for the sake of Halcombe Dike? what weariness and wear could be too great, what pain too keen, if they could bear it together?

O, you mothers! do you not see that this makes “a” the difference”? You have strength that your daughter knows not of. There are hands to help you over the thorns (if not, there ought to be). She gropes and cuts her way alone. Be very patient with her in her little moods and selfishnesses. No matter if she might help you more about the baby: be patient. Her position in your home is at best an anomalous one,—a grown woman, with much of the dependence of a child. She must have all the jars and tasks and frets of family life, without the relief of

housewifely invention and authority. God and her own heart will teach her in time what she owes to you. Never fear for that. But bear long with her. Do not exact too much. The life you give her did not come at her asking. Consider this well; and do not press the debt beyond its due.

"I don't see that there is ever going to be any end to anything!" gasped Sharley at night between Mop-pet's buttons.

This set her to thinking. What if one made an end?

She went out one cold, gray afternoon in the thick of a snow-storm and wandered up and down the railroad. It was easy walking upon the sleepers, the place was lonely, and she had come out to be alone. She liked the beat of the storm in her face for a while, the sharp turns of the wind, and the soft touch of the snow that was drifting in little heaps about her feet. Then she remembered of how small use it was to like anything in the world now, and her face grew as wild as the storm.

Fancy yourself hemmed in with your direst grief by a drifting sleet in such a voiceless, viewless place as that corpse-like track,—the endless, painless track, stretching away in the white mystery, at peace, like all dead things.

What Sharley should have done was to go home as straight as she could go, put on dry stockings, and get her supper. What she did was to linger, as all people linger, in the luxury of their first wretchedness,—linger till the uncanny twilight fell and shrouded her in. Then a thought struck her.

A freight-train was just coming in, slowly but heavily. Sharley, as she stepped aside to let it pass, fixed her eyes upon it for a moment, then, with a little hesitation, stopped to pick up a bit of iron that lay at her feet,—a round, firm rod-end,—and placed it diagonally upon the rail. The cars rumbled by and over it. Sharley bent to see. It was crushed to a shapeless twist. Her face whitened. She sat down and shivered a little. But she did not go home. The Evening Accommodation was due now in about ten minutes.

Girls, if you think I am telling a bit of sensational fiction, I wish you would let me know.

"It would be quick and easy," thought Sharley. The man of whom she had read in the Journal last night,—they said he must have found it all over in an instant. An instant was a very short time! And forty years,—and the little black silk apron,—and the cards laid up on a shelf! O, to go out of life,—anywhere, anyhow, out of life! No, the Sixth Commandment had nothing to do with ending one's self!

An unearthly, echoing shriek broke through the noise of the storm,—nothing is more unearthly than a locomotive in a storm. Sharley stood up,—sat down again. A red glare struck the white mist, broadened, brightened, grew.

Sharley laid her head down with her small neck upon the rail, and—I am compelled to say that she took it up again faster than she laid it down. Took it up, writhed off the track, tumbled down the banking, hid her face in a drift, and crouched there with the cold drops on her face till the hideous, tempting thing shot by.

"I guess consumption would be—a—little better!" she decided, crawling to her feet.

But the poor little feet could scarcely carry her. She struggled to the street, caught at the fences for a while, then dropped.

Somebody stumbled over her. It was Cousin Sue—Halcombe Dike's Cousin Sue.

"Deary me!" she said; and being five feet seven, with strong Yankee arms of her own, she took Sharley up in them, and carried her to the house as if she had been a baby.

Sharley did not commit the atrocity of fainting, but found herself thoroughly chilled and weak. Cousin Sue bustled about with brandy and blankets, and Sharley, watching her through her half-

closed eyes, speculated a little. Had *she* anybody's wedding-cards laid up on a shelf? She had the little black apron at any rate. Poor Cousin Sue! Should she be like that? "Poor Cousin Charlotte!" people would say.

Cousin Sue had gone to see about supper when Sharley opened her eyes and sat strongly up. A gentle-faced woman sat between her and the light, in a chair cushioned upon one side for a useless arm. Halcombe had made that chair. Mrs. Dike had been a busy, cheery woman, and Sharley had always felt sorry for her since the sudden day when paralysis crippled her good right hand; three years ago that was now; but she was not one of those people to whom it comes natural to say that one is sorry for them, and she was Halcombe's mother, and so Sharley had never said it. It struck her freshly now that this woman had seen much ill-fortune in her widowed years, and that she had kept a certain brave, contented look in her eyes through it all.

It struck her only as a passing thought, which might never have come back had not Mrs. Dike pushed her chair up beside her, and given her a long, quiet look straight in the eyes.

"It was late for you to be out in the storm, my dear, and alone."

"I'd been out a good while. I had been on—the track," said Sharley, with a slight shiver. "I think I could not have been exactly well. I would not go again. I must go home now. But oh"—her voice sinking—"I wish nobody had found me, I wish nobody had found me! The snow would have covered me up, you see."

She started up flushing hot and frightened. What had she been saying to Halcombe's mother?

But Halcombe's mother put her healthy soft hand down on the girl's shut fingers. Women understand each other in flashes.

"My dear," she said, without prelude or apology, "I have a thing to say to you. God does not give us our troubles to think about; that's all. I have lived more years than you. I know that He never gives us our troubles to think about."

"I don't know who's going to think about them if we don't!" said Sharley, half aggrieved.

"Supposing nobody thinks of them, where's the harm done? Mark my words, child: He sends them to drive us out of ourselves,—to *drive* us out. He had much rather we would go of our own accord, but if we won't go we must be sent, for go we must. That's just about what we're put into this world for, and we're not fit to go out of it till we have found this out."

Now the moralities of conversation were apt to glide off from Sharley like rain-drops from gutta-percha, and I cannot assert that these words would have made profound impression upon her had not Halcombe Dike's mother happened to say them.

Be that as it may, she certainly took them home with her, and pondered them in her heart; pondered till late in her feverish, sleepless night, till her pillow grew wet, and her heart grew still. About midnight she jumped out into the cold, and kneeled, with her face hidden in the bed.

"O, I've been a naughty girl!" she said, just as she might have said it ten years ago. She felt so small, and ignorant, and weak that night.

Out of such smallness, and ignorance, and weakness great knowledge and strength may have beautiful growth. They came in time to Sharley, but it was a long, slow time. Moppet was just as unendurable, the baby just as fretful, life just as joyless, as if she had taken no new outlook upon it, made no new, tearful plans about it.

"Calico! calico!" she cried out a dozen times a day; "nothing *but* calico!"

But by and by it dawned in her thoughts that this was a very little matter to cry out about. What if God meant that some hives should be "all just alike," and like nothing fresh or bonnie, and that hers should be one? That was his affair. Hers was to use the dull gray gift he gave—*whatever* gift he gave—as loyally and as cheerily as she would use treasures of gold and rose-tint. He

knew what he was doing. What he did was never forgetful or unkind. She felt—after a long time, and in a quiet way—that she could be sure of that.

No matter about Halcombe Dike, and what was gone. No matter about the little black aprons, and what was coming. He understood all about that. He would take care of it.

Meantime, why could she not as well wash Moppet's face with a pleasant word as with a cross one? darn the stockings with a smile as well as a frown? stay and hear her mother discuss her headaches as well as run away and think of herself? Why not give happiness since she could not have it? be of use since nobody was of much use to her? Easier saying than doing, to be sure, Sharley found; but she kept the idea in mind as the winter wore away.

She was thinking about it one April afternoon, when she had stolen out of the house for a walk in the budding woods. She had need enough of a walk. It was four weeks now since she had felt the wide wind upon her face; four weeks pleasantly occupied in engineering four boys through the measles; and if ever a sick child had the capacity for making of himself a seraph upon earth it was Moppet. It was a thin little face which stood out against the "green mist" of the unfurling leaves as Sharley wandered in and out with sweet aimlessness among the elms and hickories; very thin, with its wistful eyes grown hollow; a shadow of the old Sharley who fluttered among the plaid ribbons one October morning. It was a saddened face—it might always be a saddened face—but a certain pleasant, rested look had worked its way about her mouth, not unlike the rich mellowness of a rainy sunset. Not that Sharley knew much about sunsets yet but she thought she did, which, as I said before, amounts to about the same thing.

She was thinking with a wee glow of pleasure how the baby's arms clung around her neck that morning, and how surprised her mother looked when Methuselah cried at her taking this walk. As you were warned in the beginning, nothing remarkable ever happened to Sharley. Since she had begun in practice to approve Mrs. Dike's theory, that no harm is done if we never think of our troubles, she had neither become the village idol, nor in any remarkable degree her mother's pride. But she had nevertheless cut for herself a small niche in the heart of her home,—a much larger niche, perhaps, than the excellent Mrs. Guest was well aware of.

"I don't care how small it is," cried Sharley, "as long as I have room to put my two feet on and look up."

And for that old pain? Ah, well, God knew about that, and Sharley,—nobody else. Whatever the winter had taught her she had bound and labelled in her precise little way for future use. At least she had learned—and it is not everybody who learns it at eighteen,—to wear her life bravely—"arose with a golden thorn."

I really think that this is the place to end my story, so properly polished off with a moral. So many Sharleys, too, will never read beyond. But being bound in honor to tell the whole moral or no moral, I must add, that while Sharley walked and thought among her hickories there came up a thunder-storm. It fell upon her without any warning. The sky had been clear when she looked at it last. It gaped at her now out of the throats of purple-black clouds. Thunders crashed over and about her. All the forest darkened and reeled. Sharley was enough like other girls to be afraid of a thunder-storm. She started with a cry to break her way through the matted undergrowth saw, or felt that she saw, the glare of a golden arrow overhead; threw out her hands, and fell crushed, face downward, at the foot of a scorched tree.

When she opened her eyes she was sitting under a wood-pile. Or, to speak more accurately, she was sitting in Mr. Halcombe Dike's lap, and Mr. Halcombe Dike was under the wood-pile.

It was a low, triangular wood-pile, roofed with pine boards, through which the water was dripping. It stood in the centre of a large clearing, exposed to the rain, but safe.

“Oh!” said Sharley.

“That’s right,” said he, “I knew you were only stunned. I’ve been rubbing your hands and feet. It was better to come here than to run the blockade of that patch of woods to a house. Don’t try to talk.”

“I’m not,” said Sharley, with a faint little laugh, “it’s you that are talking”; and ended with a weak pause, her head falling back where she had found it, upon his arm.

“I *would* n’t talk,” repeated the young man, relevantly, after a profound silence of five minutes. “I was coming ‘across lots’ from the station. You fell—Sharley, you fell right at my feet!”

He spoke carelessly, but Sharley, looking up, saw that his face was white.

“I believe I will get *down*,” she observed, after some consideration, lifting her head.

“I don’t see how you can, you know,” he suggested, helplessly; “it pours as straight as a deluge out there. There is n’t room in this place for two people to sit.”

So they “accepted the situation.”

The clouds broke presently, and rifts of yellow light darted in through the fragrant, wet pine boards. Sharley’s hair had fallen from her net and covered her face. She felt too weak to push it away. After some thought Halcombe Dike pushed it away for her, reverently, with his strong, warm hand. The little white, trembling face shone out. He turned and looked at it—the poor little face!—looked at it gravely and long.

But Sharley, at the look, sat up straight. Her heart leaped out into the yellow light. All her dreary winter danced and dwindled away. Through the cracks in the pine boards a long procession of May-days came filing in. The scattering rain-drops flamed before her. “All the world and all the waters blushed and bloomed.” She was so very young!

“I could not speak,” he told her quietly, “when I was at home before. I could never speak till now. Last October I thought”—his voice sinking hoarsely

“I thought, Sharley, it could never be. I could barely eke out my daily bread; I had no right to ask you—to bind you. You were very young; I thought, perhaps, Sharley, you might forget. Somebody else might make you happier. I would not stand in the way of your happiness. I asked God to bless you that morning when I went away in the cars, Sharley. Sharley!”

Something in her face he could not understand.

All that was meant by the upturned face perhaps he will never understand. She hid it in her bright, brown hair; put her hand up softly upon his cheek and cried.

“If you would like to hear anything about the business part of it—” suggested the young man, clearing his throat. But Sharley “hated business.” She would not hear.

“Not about the Crumpet Buildings? Well, I carried that affair through,—that’s all.”

They came out under the wide sky, and walked home hand in hand. All the world was hung with crystals. The faint shadow of a rainbow quivered across a silver cloud.

The first thing that Sharley did when she came home was to find Moppet and squeeze him.

“O Moppet, we can be good girls all the same if we are happy, can’t we?”

“No, sir!” said injured Moppet. “You don’t catch me!”

“But O Moppet, see the round drops hanging and burning on the blinds! and how the little mud-puddles shine, Moppet!”

Out of her pain and her patience God had brought her beautiful answer. It was well for Sharley. But if such answer had not come? That also would have been well.