

A PLATONIC PAIR.

"IT'S ever so handsome, Jeremiah. You never tried making a head before, did you?"

"No, not without you count lambs and doves; there's enough of *them* in this cemetery, and when Mrs. White said she'd like a cherub on the old man's stone, I was willing to try."

"Well, I think you've succeeded real well."

Emmeline Kent stood thoughtfully eying the stone. She was a tall girl, dressed in a brown cashmere. She was rather slender, but large boned, and her head, with its dark hair and strong face, looked well set on her shoulders.

"These feathers are done well, too," she said, still regarding the little winged head.

Jeremiah Brayton studied them reflectively, as he sat on the grassy mound.

"I don't know how well they're done," he remarked slowly, "but there's a sight of work on feathers."

Emmeline and Jeremiah continued looking at the stone with its rude little relief. To them it was more beautiful than the waning October afternoon about them. The cemetery was very still, so still that you could hear an occasional belated cricket chirping in the leaf strewn grass. The grass was a dark green, and the leaves seemed to trace red and yellow patterns on it. It was cold under the feet, but the sun was quite warm, and shed a hazy glory over everything. The maples were golden, and there was a faint whirring sound among their topmost branches, as if the spirit of the Wisconsin summer still lingered.

Jeremiah Brayton stood up suddenly, and whipped his handkerchief over his Sunday clothes. A funeral procession had passed them earlier in the afternoon, and the dust had powdered Jeremiah's black suit. Sitting on the grave in his dusty clothes, surveying his craftsmanship with something of reverential awe for his own genius, he had been subtly allied to a poet or master painter; but the allusion was dispelled with the dust, for when he tucked his handkerchief into his pocket, and strolled along beside Emmeline, he looked the honest, practical fellow of thirty two that he was.

Emmeline was twenty eight. Her name and Jeremiah's were always coupled together by the village gossips. It was generally believed that they were engaged, or would be. Old Mrs. Kent, in spite of Emmeline's protest, clung to the same opinion. As a matter of fact, however, Jeremiah and Emmeline were not engaged—they were distinctly unengaged; that had been the understanding when they first began "going together," five years before. Emmeline, even then, had been sensible and quiet beyond her age. Her father had just died, leaving her with a mortgage to pay on their little house, and after a few weeks' training in the "business college" of a neighboring town, she had returned to become bookkeeper and buyer in the only dry-goods store of the village, beginning her labors soberly and with very little romance in the outlook. She had never had much attention from young men, and when Jeremiah Brayton made his straightforward proposition for their mutual enjoyment, she had accepted it in the same spirit. He did not wish to marry, and said so plainly. His reason, if he had one, Emmeline did not trouble herself to guess. It might or might not be his mother, who was credited with an "awful tongue," and was too grasping to allow Jeremiah to build them a comfortable house, although there was no lack of money—of which, according to the terms of her husband's will, the widow had entire control during her lifetime. As to the effect of the arrangement on Emmeline, Jeremiah had not failed to represent to her that he might be keeping others away by his attentions, but she had waived this objection. There was no one in Edgerton that she wanted, if indeed there was any one that wanted her, which she doubted; and so the sort of friendship that bears the name of the Athenian philosopher found earnest, if unconscious, followers in these two.

Jeremiah kept a good horse; he also owned a boat which could outsail any other on the little lake, and they had driven and boated together for five years, and had attended all the social events in the village in each other's company, as openly as an engaged pair. People sometimes questioned

Mrs. Kent, and, though she evaded direct replies, she said nothing to dispel the prevalent impression. Lately, however, she had thrown out mysterious hints about another admirer of her daughter. These had been given principally to Mrs. Brayton; and today, as Jeremiah walked by Emmeline's side between the graves, he cast furtive glances at her. She was looking extremely well, and was all unconscious of what was passing in his mind. Ordinarily there was a square set to her chin, her mouth was too tightly closed, her gray eyes lacked animation, and her hair was too smooth. People called her "sensible looking" instead of pretty; but today she seemed to be transformed by one of those rare gleams of beauty dependent on a more natural carriage, and perhaps upon the effect of the air on her cheeks and her spirits. There was no longer the usual sober resemblance between her and Jeremiah. She glanced at every stone which they passed with interest. She knew every one that Jeremiah had cut. Suddenly she halted.

"There," she cried, "I always liked this one. It hasn't any fancy carving on it, but the marble is such a pretty streaked gray, and I like just the simple lettering. This was the first of your work that you brought me to see. Do you remember?"

Jeremiah nodded. He took a step nearer, and laid his hand on the slab. Emmeline's hand, from which she had drawn the cotton glove, rested, pink with cold, on the edge, but his fingers did not touch hers.

"Say, Emmeline," said he, "I heard something yesterday which has set me to thinking. It was about the young chap that the Davises have been getting their goods of lately. Folks say he's taken a shine to you."

Emmeline let her hand slip from the stone. Her color deepened.

"Do you mean Mr. Lessing?"

"Yes, I guess that was the name. Now you understand, Emmeline, that I ain't never wanted to injure your chances with any one, and I don't believe I have so far, but now, if you think—" He hesitated, but she did not help him. She looked away, and her face seemed to gather something of the cold light that was settling over the cemetery. "And so if you think—well, the long and short of it is that I wouldn't stand in your way for anything, and—and so, perhaps—" Jeremiah's face was burning, but Emmeline waited as irresponsibly as the earth waited the downfall of night. It seemed to him from the expression of her face that she never intended

to speak again. "And so, perhaps," he concluded, "I'd better give this Lessing fellow a chance. What do you think?"

He watched her with keen anxiety. After a moment, during which the question seemed to hang in mid air between them, she brought her eyes around to meet his.

"Very well, Jeremiah," she said.

Her color had faded, and she looked at him steadily. He drew a sigh of relief.

"I didn't think you'd misunderstand me, Emmeline; for of course you know I ain't considering my own feelings in the matter. I've enjoyed your company ever so much, and it will be lonesome for me going around alone, but it's only fair to you; for according to what I hear this Lessing is a real likely fellow—likelier than any of the boys around here."

"It's growing chilly," said Emmeline abruptly. "We'd better be getting home."

She kept along ahead of him until they gained the road leading from the cemetery; then Jeremiah took his place by her side on the narrow walk. Some embarrassment still lingered in his manner, but every glance at her reassured him. She was not offended, as he had half imagined; indeed, she was more talkative than usual, but she walked very rapidly.

The cemetery was only half a mile from the village, and when they had nearly reached home, he caught her arm.

"It ain't more nor a league to your house, Emmeline, and I'd like to slow up a little. I shan't have another chance of walking with you this way, I suppose; and I want to say again that I've enjoyed your society ever so much during the time we've been going together. You've been kind to me in lots of ways, Emmeline, and I ain't one to forget such things."

"You've been kind to me, Jeremiah."

"Well, I think I've had the best of the bargain," he rejoined.

Then some words of his mother's surged insistently through his mind. The Braytons lived next door to the Kents, and Mrs. Kent had extended many little courtesies to her wealthier neighbor, whom she secretly despised for her stinginess. Mrs. Brayton never returned thanks, and in answer to Jeremiah's expostulations was in the habit of declaring that the money he spent on Emmeline more than paid.

"If it wasn't for you, Jeremiah," she would conclude, "that girl wouldn't go a place from year's end to year's end, and I guess her mother knows it. Now she has about as good a time as any of 'em, though she is so awkward and black."

Jeremiah did not think Emmeline was awkward and black, and he was almost glad of this new admirer to silence his mother's taunts. But the next moment he was filled with a vague regret.

"There you are again, walking as fast as ever," he remonstrated. "What's your hurry?"

"Mother'll be waiting for her tea," said Emmeline, but she slowed her steps a little. When they reached her gate, however, she did not pause. Jeremiah would have liked to stay talking with her a little. The feeling of regret had grown apace during the last few minutes, but she closed and latched the gate between them.

"Good night, Jeremiah."

"Good night, Emmeline," he responded helplessly.

The Kents' little house had a comfortable, home-like look, despite the rigid economy that was practised within its walls. Jeremiah stared at it, even after Emmeline had gone in. He could just catch a glimpse of the sitting room table, and of the stove, whose isinglass glowed red through the meshes of the lace curtain. Jeremiah sighed as he turned away and went slowly towards the house next door. There was no light there.

"That you, Emmeline?" Mrs. Kent, who had been crippled by a fall years ago, sat beside the stove.

"Yes," came her daughter's voice from the hall door.

"Did Jeremiah come in with you?" Mrs. Kent's voice was furtively sweet.

"No, I didn't ask him to." Emmeline hung up her jacket and hat. Then she entered the sitting room.

"Well, you might just as well have asked him, and I don't see why you didn't. I've been out and cut some cake and got all the things fixed on the tray ready to bring in."

"You needn't have taken that trouble, mother." Emmeline approached the stove and stood before it warming her hands.

"How was I to know I needn't? Last Sunday, when there wasn't any cake in the house, you didn't like it, so I made sure to have some this week. How was I to know you wasn't going to bring him in?"

"You told his mother about Mr. Lessing's coming here the other night, didn't you?"

"Well, what if I did? What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing, only Jeremiah's stepped back."

"What's he stepped back for?" inquired Mrs. Kent in bewilderment.

"To give Mr. Lessing a chance, he said," returned Emmeline grimly, though the corners of her mouth twitched. She was not wholly insensible to the humor of the situation. Her mother dropped back in her chair.

"Well if I ever *did*!" she said. Her daughter glanced at her, and her face hardened.

"I hope now, mother, you're convinced. You never would understand that there was nothing between Jeremiah and me but friendship. This is a lesson to you."

"A lesson—yes, a lesson never to have any more to do with them Braytons," cried Mrs. Kent, suddenly growing excited. "The son's as bad as the mother, every bit, and after the way I've let her use my cellar, and borrow my kittles and flatirons, and she with more money than any other woman in town; and after the way Jeremiah's been with you! It's five years he's been waitin' on you, Emmeline."

"Jeremiah's done all right," answered Emmeline stolidly. "You're the only one that's done wrong."

"Oh, dear!" wailed the mother. "I was only tryin' to act for the best. I wanted to hurry him up. I couldn't bear to have you keep goin' with him, and people thinkin' you was engaged when you wasn't."

"Well, I've stopped going with him, so you won't have to worry any more about that."

"But people'll say that he jilted you."

"Let them say it, then," rejoined the girl. Her eyes were defiant, but the crimson began to burn again in her cheeks.

"I declare, Emmeline Kent, you ain't got a bit of proper pride," shrieked her mother. "Before I'd let a man treat me that way, and not even be mad about it! He's treated you mean, *di*rt mean, and you ain't got sense enough to know it."

Emmeline seated herself in a chair opposite her mother, and, leaning back, closed her eyes. "Go on," said she, "since you seem to know all about it."

"I *do* know about it, and I *will* go on." Mrs. Kent rose tremblingly, and stood, a little, wavering, crooked figure, before her stolid faced daughter. "I'll go on and cart every speck of Mis' Brayton's fruit up cellar this very night, and throw it over the fence; and when I see Jeremiah I'll tell him what I think of him!"

"You won't do any such thing," returned the other in a dull, expressionless voice, without opening her eyes.

"And I'll have Jeremiah arrested and sued for breach of promise!"

Emmeline's face quivered. She opened

her eyes, and before that look her mother sank down in her chair. It was the inmost soul of her womanhood, from which the natural covering had been torn, that showed itself for an instant.

"Don't you ever mention Jeremiah Brayton in that way again," said she. "He's been perfectly upright and fair, and if there were more men like him in the world, it would be a good thing."

"Well, of course I know that his mother's at the bottom of it," admitted Mrs. Kent apologetically. "I had almost the same kind of an affair when I was a girl—two affairs, in fact—and Jeremiah wants to marry you fast enough, only——"

"No, he doesn't want to marry me, either," returned Emmeline, "and I wouldn't have him if he did. What there was between us was friendship, and I'd rather have the friendship of such a man as Jeremiah than the love of fifty such men as you tell about. Now we'll eat. Did you say you made chocolate or tea?"

"Chocolate. But I ain't never goin' to eat again. I don't care what becomes of me. Givin' me such a goin' over for nothin'!" Mrs. Kent began weeping softly into her handkerchief.

Emmeline went out into the kitchen. In a moment she returned with the tray, which she placed on the table between them. She was not at all hungry, but she was determined that her mother should take something before she went to bed.

"I won't touch it," Mrs. Kent whimpered.

Emmeline took a little tin pail of chocolate from where it had been warming on the back of the stove, and poured it imperturbably into the two cups, one of which she extended to her mother. "Take it," said she, and Mrs. Kent took it. Then Emmeline seated herself and began to eat in a businesslike way.

Mrs. Kent held her chocolate cup in her two little shaking hands for a moment, then began to sip it pitifully.

"Did Mr. Lessing say when he'd be in town again?" she asked, after a pause.

"No, he didn't say anything about it."

"Well, don't you suppose he'll call when he's here?"

"No," said Emmeline. "I haven't the least idea that he'll ever come again. He only came up last night because he wanted those samples I brought for you to see."

Nevertheless, Mr. Lessing did call the following week. On Wednesday and Saturday evenings Davis Brothers kept open until nine o'clock, to accommodate the shoppers from the country. It was a large store

for so small a place. Men's ready made clothing from Chicago hung in the windows, and there were two wire frames with waxen heads that presented the latest styles in feminine gear. These models were closely followed by the Edgerton girls and matrons, most of whom were—or at least thought they were—as modishly and tastefully dressed as their sisters in the cities. Emmeline, however, was an exception. She seldom had a new dress, and when she did it was never really fashionable in material or cut; but she took pride in the draping and bonneting of the display figures.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays she always remained until the young boy clerk and the two shrewd, middle aged brothers had left; then she made up her accounts and closed the store. It was half past nine on Wednesday evening; she had just turned the key in the lock when a young man with a satchel in his hand stepped up to her.

"Good evening, Miss Kent."

Emmeline started. Her first thought was that Jeremiah had come as usual to walk home with her. She looked around and discovered Frank Lessing.

"Oh, it's you!"

"Yes, I just dropped off the train five minutes ago. Who did you think it was?"

"I didn't know," said Emmeline. She hesitated, and then stepped past him into the street, dark save for the red front of an occasional saloon.

"Are you going home?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll walk along with you, if I may. I've got some curtain samples in my satchel that I want to show you—elegant patterns!"

Mr. Lessing was a fair young man, and tall, but so slight that he bent to one side with the weight of his valise. His hands were almost as small and delicate as a woman's, and he had always the odor of white rose perfumery about him. Emmeline felt as if she ought to offer to carry his satchel for him.

Her mother was watching at the front window when they came up.

"There," she muttered, in a tone of relief. "Jeremiah stopped in for her. I knew he would." The two ascended the steps and Mrs. Kent drew back. "Why, it ain't Jeremiah; he's never as tall as all that. It's that Lessing fellow!" Her crutch beat a tattoo out of the room as the two entered.

Emmeline did not ask her escort to lay aside his coat, but he did so without being asked.

"It's awfully comfortable in here," he said, shrugging up his slender shoulders and approaching the fire. He stood glancing about him for a moment before he became conscious of any lack in Emmeline's manner. A gray cat, saturated with heat, crept out from under the stove with a soft scratching of the zinc, and, after stretching his sinuous length, stole confidently over to his mistress. Emmeline stooped and patted him, but her face wore a tired, uninviting expression. Frank Lessing perceived it.

"You must excuse me. I haven't been in a room like this for months, and it seems good; but perhaps you don't like my making myself at home so," he stammered.

"Yes, I do," said Emmeline. She was suddenly ashamed of her coldness. There was a boyish air about him which she had not noticed before. He looked very innocent, despite his foppish clothes. "You must get nice and warm," she added, "and I'll call mother—she'll want to see the samples you spoke of." Emmeline stepped to the door leading into the dining room. "Mother!"

Mrs. Kent gave a guilty start. She was just pinning an old shawl over her head, and a lantern stood on the table.

"Why, mother, where are you going?"

"I thought I'd just step over to one of the neighbors."

"Not tonight. It's too late."

"I thought I'd just run over for a minute," repeated Mrs. Kent in the same voice, but gesticulating angrily for Emmeline to close the door into the sitting room. "Smart, I must say," she whispered, "saying it was late, and he just come. You haven't got sense enough to last you over night."

She caught up the lantern and hobbled towards the entry door. Emmeline ran after her.

"But you can't go, mother. You'll slip down."

"No, I won't slip down, neither; there ain't no frost," and Mrs. Kent began descending the steps one foot at a time, clutching the lantern tightly. Emmeline went beside her and assisted her.

"There," she exclaimed, when they reached the bottom, "you go right back into the sitting room, and don't worry about me. I'll be back in a few minutes." Her good nature was restored now she was fairly started. She limped off with the lantern as happily as a child that had gotten its way. Her daughter's voice pursued her.

"Mr. Lessing's got some samples; don't you want to see 'em, mother?"

"Not tonight. Tell him to leave 'em."

Emmeline went dazedly into the house. Samples were her mother's chief delight, and when they failed to turn her from her purpose, further argument was useless.

The daughter returned to the sitting room, but she could hardly talk connectedly. What sudden attraction had the neighbors for her mother? She seldom went out anywhere, even in the daytime. Though she had no trouble in getting around the house, knowing every inch of the floors, out of doors she was afraid of falling. Emmeline hovered near the window, and, lifting up a corner of the shade, watched the progress of the lantern. It was slowly moving toward the next house. "I don't see what she's going there for," she muttered.

The young man stared, hardly knowing whether to be offended or not.

"Where are you, Miss Kent?" he asked at last, with an attempt at facetiousness.

The shade rattled, but Emmeline did not withdraw her head. "I'm watching mother. She's gone over to the Braytons', and I'm afraid she'll fall."

Frank Lessing crossed the room. He, too, peeped out. The lantern crept up to the neighbors' door.

"Well, she's got there all right; and if you want me to, when you think she's about ready to start back, I'll run over there and fetch her."

"Oh, no," said Emmeline, "I don't want you to—that is, it won't be necessary. Mother can walk better than I thought she could."

She shrank from the thought of Frank Lessing appearing in person to substantiate her mother's story to the Braytons. The young salesman did not make a long call. He was half angry when he left, though he told himself that he was sorry for her. Indeed, Emmeline's manner betrayed her state of mind more clearly than she knew. She could not keep away from the window.

Mrs. Kent hobbled in at the gate about ten minutes after Lessing had left. She was going around to the side door, but Emmeline descended the front steps, and helped her in without a word. Mrs. Kent panted a little as she limped into the sitting room with the lantern.

"Oh, he's gone!" she said in a tone of disappointment. "Seems to me he didn't make a very long call, Emmeline."

The girl made no reply. A hopeless expression had settled on her face. She waited to take her mother's shawl. Mrs. Kent sat down, and laid her crutch on the

floor beside the lantern. Then she began unpinning the shawl. Between its folds, her face looked as irresponsible as a child's.

"It's real pleasant out, if it is so cold," said she. "I really enjoyed goin' out, Emmeline. You needn't have made such a fuss about it. That Mr. Lessing must have thought you acted funny."

She handed her shawl to the other, and a newspaper fluttered to the carpet. She tried to push it under the stove, but Emmeline had seen it.

"What have you got there?"

Mrs. Kent picked it up. "It's the *Times*. They take it, and Mis' Brayton's goin' to let me have the readin' of it."

"I'd rather have taken the paper for you, mother, than have had you ask Mrs. Brayton for it."

"I didn't ask her. She offered it to me."

"It was something you said that made her."

"I didn't say anything; and if I did, I had a right to. You've thought it all right that we should let her use our cellar all these years, and why shouldn't I get something back, I'd like to know? The paper ain't half pay, but I'd like the readin' of it, and we can't afford to take it."

"We *could* take it, I suppose," said Emmeline, "but I thought that was one of the things we could get along without. After the mortgage is paid——"

"After the mortgage is paid!" interrupted her mother. "It won't be paid while I'm livin', though it might be settled by now if you'd been different, and you know it."

"I don't know it, either; I don't know what you mean." Emmeline looked down at the carpet and her face flushed. "I'm sure I work as hard as I can," she added.

"No one's complainin' about your not workin'. Don't you suppose I know you work a good deal too hard, and that it's going to wear you out if you can't let up pretty soon? And there ain't no need of it, if you had a mind to act a little different—show you cared and fix up a little. You must like slavin' from mornin' till night, and goin' without, the way we have to."

"Aren't we comfortable, mother? Isn't the house warm? Don't we have all the food and clothes we need?"

"Well, what if we do? That isn't all there is to livin', Emmeline Kent."

"No, I don't suppose it is," said Emmeline. She went up stairs to her room with a heavy step. "It isn't all there is to life," she repeated; yet her own present, continuing indefinitely into the future, seemed to assert that it was all.

She made no reference to the paper the next morning. After her departure for the store, her mother got it out and read it defiantly while she was waiting for her dish water to heat. She regaled her daughter with bits of news when Emmeline returned at noon.

"But the greatest piece of news ain't in the paper at all, Emmeline. What do you think? Soon after you went this mornin' I see Jeremiah drive up with a great load of stone and dump it behind the house. I guess he's persuaded his mother at last to let him build a cellar."

Emmeline turned very pale. She rose from the table, and walked to the window. The pile of stone in the next yard swam before her eyes. In spite of her resolve to let her mother go her own way, she could not refrain from pinning her down to at least a partial confession. She wheeled around abruptly.

"I want you to tell me one thing, mother, and I want the truth. Just what did you say over there last night?"

Mrs. Kent began to struggle like a bird that finds itself in a trap. She beat her wings furiously. "I declare, that's a pretty way to talk to your mother, Emmeline Kent!"

"I don't care whether it's pretty or not." Emmeline herself did not look at all pretty. Her countenance was dark and hard as she faced the little angry old woman.

"Tell you what? I can't remember what I said."

"Yes, you can."

"Well, since you must know, I said a little something about her havin' used the cellar so long, and I had a right to."

"Did you say anything about Mr. Lessing—or Jeremiah?"

"I didn't say anything about Jeremiah. I couldn't, he was right in the next room."

"Or Mr. Lessing?"

"I just said he was over here."

The girl drew a hard breath, and turned to the window again. Her mother's anger increased.

"But I tell you one thing," she cried, "I can't stand this kind of thing no longer, nor I ain't a-going to, being took to task every time I turn 'round. I ain't to blame for the way Jeremiah Brayton's acted, and I ain't got nothin' to do with his buildin' that cellar. If they're so stingy they ain't even willin' to pay the readin' of a paper for the use of one, let 'em build one, I say."

The winter was unusually cold and snowy, but Emmeline plodded steadily to and from her work at the store. Frank

Lessing called on her as often as once in two weeks now. He made no trip, apparently, which did not include Edgerton on its route. It was rumored that Emmeline had jilted Jeremiah for the salesman. Once a gossiping acquaintance charged her with something of the kind and met with an unexpected, though dignified, explanation.

"There's just as much between Jeremiah Brayton and me today as there ever was; we're good friends. There was never any engagement, so there was nothing to break off."

The girl, who had her own opinion of the other's attractions, regarded her curiously. She could not understand why Emmeline should trouble to contradict such a report. As for Frank Lessing, Emmeline received his attentions quietly, though her first manner of treating him as a boy had to be dropped. He knew far more of the world than she, a steady country girl, would ever know. A certain suggestion of dissipation overbalanced his youthfulness, and made him seem older than he was. He urged small gifts upon Emmeline—now and then a few yards of ribbon or a handkerchief, and these she accepted, appearing not altogether displeased; but when he offered her enough black silk for a dress she refused it.

"I should think you would have taken it," said Mrs. Kent, after the young man had gone. It was Sunday, and he had been spending the afternoon there. "It wouldn't have been anything so dreadful, and I'm sure you need a nice dress bad enough. That brown cashmere ain't hardly respectable. I declare, Emmeline, if you keep on scrimpin' and savin' much longer, you'll get to be as close as old Mis' Brayton."

Mrs. Brayton was no older than Mrs. Kent, and the latter did not consider that she was. She used the term slightly.

"Do you know," continued her mother, as the girl made no reply, "Mrs. Brayton 'll never get over tellin' me about the expense they've been put to in buildin' that cellar. She told me this mornin', when I was over there, that the bills for the gravel and sod were awtut; but Jeremiah 'll have it finished in about a week now, and then, says she, 'I won't have to trouble you any further, Mrs. Kent.' But I intend to have the readin' of that paper until she takes her fruit away."

Emmeline looked dully at the rising mound in the next yard. It was an "up ground" cellar, and Jeremiah worked on it noons and nights, after his return from the shop, and sometimes on Sundays. He was out there now in

the winter twilight. The metallic ring of his tools on the stone chimed with the church bells. Jeremiah was not a church member, but Emmeline knew that ordinarily he would not have worked thus on Sunday. It seemed to her sometimes that she must go out and stop him, but something held her back. He had always wanted to build the cellar, she told herself, and was probably glad that his mother had at last given her consent. How much her own mother had to do with it, it galled her to think. Still, she knew Jeremiah understood.

When she passed him in the street his manner was eagerly pleasant, as though to reassure her; but he never called at the house now, and when they met at social gatherings she was with her new admirer, who was considered quite an acquisition to village society. Some of the girls, younger and prettier than Emmeline, tried openly to attract him, but, though he flirted with them, he remained loyal to her. No one had thought it strange that Jeremiah should admire Emmeline. They were cut out for each other, people said; but what Frank Lessing saw in her they could not think. Indeed, the young fellow had asked himself this question at first, but lately he had not asked it. He dropped off even more frequently at the red painted wooden depot, and remained longer in the little, sordid, winter bound village. He took Emmeline driving in a livery turnout, and sent her flowers and fruit, of which her mother never let the neighbors be in ignorance. His attentions were considered extravagant. The object of them, however, kept on with her work steadfastly. Sometimes she looked a little conscious, and carried her head higher when she knew her acquaintances were envying her. Her mother, by dint of much talk, persuaded her into affording a pretty plaid waist, which was really very becoming to her; and this she wore on the evenings when Frank Lessing called, losing thereby a certain steadiness of aspect which had come to be characteristic; but her bearing towards the young man was never anything but kind and a little stiff.

One evening, when she opened the door, he caught her hands and drew her out on the porch. It was a wondrous night of moonlight and snow. The maple trees in the yard stood like soft white ghosts, and the air was full of sparkles and fluffs of snow which blew like feathers into the face.

"Isn't it beautiful?" he whispered. He had been drinking a little. Emmeline tried to draw back, but he held her wrists firmly.

"No, you're not going in yet; you've got

to hear me!" Then he went on speaking rapidly, half inarticulately, and Emmeline listened perforce, standing awkward and frightened with him clinging to her hands. She could not shake him off when a square, stout figure turned in at the gate.

"That's you, Emmeline, ain't it? I've come after the paper. Jeremiah hadn't seen it when your ma took it."

Mrs. Brayton pushed up to the steps, eying Frank Lessing sharply as she spoke. He straightened up and buttoned his coat nervously across his narrow chest. There was something antagonistic in the glance of this strange old woman.

"All right," said Emmeline, rather breathlessly; "I'll get it;" but in the hall she ran against her mother.

"Here it is," Mrs. Kent exclaimed. "No need to go in for it." She pushed Emmeline ahead of her, and hobbled along to the door. Her thin old hand shook as she extended the paper out to the other old hand reached up for it. "Here 'tis, Mis' Brayton; I'm real sorry you had to come for it." Her voice was sweet, but it trembled with a feeling that was not sweet.

Mrs. Brayton muttered that she didn't mind coming, and turned away, but she had only gone a few steps when another thought seemed to occur to her. "You understand that I ain't any objection to your borrowing the paper, Mis' Kent," she called back. "You can have it again soon's Jeremiah's seen it." Then she went on, a dumpy, bundled old figure which the moonlight failed to transform into loveliness.

Frank followed Emmeline into the house, and remained half an hour. But it was the last time; he never came again.

When a fortnight went by and he did not put in an appearance, Mrs. Kent could conceal her anxiety no longer.

"I guess Mr. Lessing's gone on a longer trip than usual," she remarked tentatively.

Emmeline crushed the smart sleeves of the new waist, which she had taken to wearing at the store, into her old cloak. "I shouldn't wonder."

"Didn't he say anything about it?"

"He may have. I don't remember."

Her mother waited as patiently as she could for another week; then she broke out again. "It's about a month, Emmeline, since Mr. Lessing's been here. Did you know it?"

Emmeline was drawing lines with red ink in her cash book, which she sometimes brought home. She laid the ruler down squarely on the page.

"Mr. Lessing don't have to come to

Edgerton now," she said. "Davis Brothers are getting their goods of another firm."

Her mother stared at her. Her little peaked face grew paler, and her lips twitched.

"Then he's stepped back, too!" she announced tragically.

Emmeline drew another line without answering. Mrs. Kent caught her breath, and it sounded like a sob. Suddenly, however, her expression sharpened to one of anxious pity. She laid a hand on her daughter's arm. "But you ain't a-goin' to let yourself feel bad, Emmeline?" she quavered.

The girl shook her head, but a deep red surged into her cheeks.

"That's right; he ain't worth it. There ain't a man livin' that's worth feelin' bad about, I don't care who he is. They're all alike."

"Don't you worry about me, mother," said Emmeline quietly. "There's no need." And Mrs. Kent relapsed into a painful silence, though every now and then she shot furtive glances at the other woman.

"I'm sure I'm glad she can take it so calm," she thought, quivering sensitively at the slights put upon her daughter. Emmeline's utter lack of resentment annoyed her, even while it was reassuring. She herself was consumed with rage against the recreant suitors. She watched Emmeline for some minutes before she spoke again; then her thoughts took another channel.

"Do you know, I've just about decided what made him step back," she said at length. "It was Mis' Brayton comin' after the paper that night that scairt him out. He probably thought if we was so awful poor we couldn't even afford to take the paper, he couldn't afford to marry you."

"Oh, mother, what nonsense!"

"Depend upon it, that was it," persisted the other, "for if he wasn't in love, I never see any one that was."

Emmeline was silent.

The cellar had at last reached completion. The work had dragged more than Mrs. Brayton had anticipated, and there had been a delay of a week or two when Jeremiah was laid up with a cold; but one evening he came in wearily and pronounced it finished, and the next day his mother went after her fruit. Mrs. Kent caught sight of her before she reached the house, and in feverish haste hobbled to the different doors, and locked them. She had just regained her chair when Mrs. Brayton knocked. She smiled spitefully to herself.

"Let her stand there and knock. It'll do her good."

The rap sounded again, louder this time. Mrs. Kent leaned forward, listening. She rested her chin on the top of her cane, and her eyes gleamed like little dark jewels. She looked like some tiny old witch.

"There, she's got her nice new cellar all ready, and she can't get her fruit to put in it," she chuckled. The door was softly tried. "She'd come right in if she could," chuckled the little old lady, pressing her hand to her side in the excess of her mirth. "But I was too smart for her, and she's going back. She thinks I ain't to home. Well, she'll find I ain't ever to home when she comes after that fruit."

In the evening, Mrs. Brayton plodded over again. Before she had taken the side door; this time she went around to the kitchen door. Her knock sounded loudly through the little house. Emmeline, up stairs changing her dress, heard it. She listened for the murmur of voices, but instead the knock was repeated.

Hastily catching up the lamp and fastening her wrapper as she went, she descended the stairs. Her mother sat in the sitting room, calmly piecing samples together for a sofa cushion. Just then there came a violent shake at the door.

"Why, mother, didn't you know there was somebody at the door?"

"Yes, I knew it. It's Mis' Brayton. She wants her fruit."

"Well, why don't you let her in?"

Emmeline paused, lamp in hand, staring at her mother. Mrs. Kent looked up at her, a mixture of cunning and defiance in her face. "Let her want it, then; I ain't bound to wait on her."

Emmeline uttered an exclamation and walked out of the room. Mrs. Brayton was pounding on the door. When Emmeline opened it, she looked red and angry.

"Well, I should think it was about time. I've come after that fruit your ma's been fussin' about so long. I came after it this mornin', but she wouldn't let me in."

"I'll hold the lamp for you," said Emmeline quietly, and the two went down into the cellar together.

"Funny folks," snorted Mrs. Brayton, bending over her fruit. There were three boxes of the glass jars set on the cellar bottom. She hauled them with wrathful energy towards the stairway where Emmeline stood with the lamp. Suddenly she straightened up.

"My back, it takes me sometimes when I lean over!"

Her broad face was drawn with pain. Emmeline handed her the light.

"I'll carry it up," said she, and then she tugged the three boxes up, one after another, in her strong arms, and set them in the kitchen.

Mrs. Brayton placed the light on the table. "I'm much obliged, Emmeline; but don't you lift no more. I'll have Jeremiah come over with the wheelbarrow tomorrow and get 'em." Her manner was half apologetic. She hesitated when she got out of the door and looked back. "I hope there ain't any truth in what folks are sayin' about that Lessing fellow. You see as much of him as ever, don't you?"

Emmeline's glance grew cold. "Good night, Mrs. Brayton," said she, and closed the door.

All the next day Mrs. Brayton's fruit stood in the Kents' kitchen, and Mrs. Kent fretted and scolded about it. "I can't git into the pantry without goin' 'round it, and I can't sweep. It clutters up the kitchen so there ain't no place to walk. I declare, I don't see what possessed Emmeline to let her set it right there."

But when the second day passed, and still Jeremiah did not come, she began to eye the fruit with interest. "It's workin', true as you live," she chuckled, bending down and holding her ear over one of the boxes. "I suppose it's being so near the stove. My, won't she be mad, though!"

After dinner it was her custom to let the fire in the kitchen die down, but that afternoon she kept it going briskly. The juice began to trickle over the tops of some of the cans, and when Emmeline came home she noticed it.

"Why, mother," she cried, "I believe that fruit of Mrs. Brayton's is working."

"I know it is; it's been sizzlin' all the afternoon," announced the other, with unruffled tranquillity.

The girl looked perplexed and troubled. She took a lamp and examined the fruit.

"Yes," said she; "it ought to be moved right off. I don't see why Jeremiah don't come after it. There's danger of its bursting the cans."

"Well, it can't burst in my kitchen," screamed Mrs. Kent, "and I won't bother no longer with it. You can go and tell her to git it right off, or I'll dump it in a snow bank!"

Emmeline hesitated, her eyes fixed abstractedly on the other's excited face; then she slowly put on her shawl and started for the next house. Her mother took up her station at the window to watch. She stood on the steps for some minutes, talking; then Mrs. Kent saw her go round behind the new

cellar. In a moment she reappeared, trundling a wheelbarrow.

"What's she doing that for, I should like to know?" her mother gasped. When she heard the creak of the snow as Emmeline approached, she flung open the door.

"Now, Emmeline Kent, do tell me what you mean! You ain't a-goin' to tote that fruit over yourself, are you?"

The girl brushed past her into the house.

"Yes, I am; Jeremiah's sick."

"Well, what if he is? You ain't a-goin' to push no wheelbarrow for him, the way he's treated you?"

"There's no other way," responded the other; and lifting a box of the fruit a second time, she carried it down the steps and put it into the wheelbarrow. Then she grasped the handles, and started away in the twilight. The snow crisped under her feet, and the iron bound wheel marked a wavering track. When she returned her cheeks were flushed with the exertion, and strands of hair, which she had not stopped to push back, had blown across her face. She brushed these under her shawl and stooped for a second box.

Her mother eyed her sarcastically. "I'd do everything I could for 'em; they're such obligin' people, and they've treated you so well. Why don't you offer to bring in the coal for old Mis' Brayton, and nurse Jeremiah?"

"I don't know but I shall," responded Emmeline. Her mouth was set hard. She passed out, staggering under her load.

She was gone longer this time. When she returned for the last box, she rested a moment, holding her reddened hands over the stove.

"I'm going to do what you said, mother," she announced. "I'm going over there to nurse Jeremiah. His mother hasn't had a doctor."

Mrs. Kent looked at her daughter without saying anything; she was past words. Emmeline took advantage of it. "I went in there. He's got a high fever and is out of his head, and she's been giving him I don't know what all—things she's read about that were good. Now I'm going down to the store, mother, and I'm going to tell 'em that I won't be there for a few days; and on my way back I'm going to stop for Dr. Sanders."

"I thought you didn't care nothin' about Jeremiah," remarked Mrs. Kent.

"I don't intend to have him die for the lack of a little care," retorted Emmeline.

And Jeremiah had good care. Emmeline nursed him faithfully for a fortnight, and

then he began to struggle slowly back to health. The rheumatic fever, however, had done its work, leaving the sturdy frame gaunt and weak, and the man's face above the scraggy beard delicate as a girl's. The poor fellow, naturally so active, was pathetic in his helplessness. The great thin hands lay mutely over the coverlid, and the sunken eyes followed Emmeline with a strange intensity.

"Have you noticed that new cellar, Emmeline?" he asked her suddenly, the last day she sat with him.

Emmeline looked up from her crochet work. "Yes, but you ought not to have worked on it the way you did. That's how you got sick."

Jeremiah shook his head. "There's something queer about it. Did you ever think that it looked something like a big grave, Emmeline?"

She tried to smile dissentingly. This fancifulness in the practical Jeremiah frightened her.

"Well, it does," he persisted, "and it is one; for I've buried five years of my life in it—years that have been spent wrong, and that I wish I had the chance of living over again."

Emmeline half started in her chair, then bent low over her work.

"I've been a fool in lots of ways," he continued in a weak, self accusing voice. "I can see it now. Working out there nights sort of opened my eyes. Say, Emmeline," he interrupted himself, "you won't take it wrong if I ask you something, will you?"

She made an almost imperceptible movement of the head.

Jeremiah hesitated, and the color rushed into his white face. "Well, it's this. I didn't judge that Lessing fellow right. He's acted the scamp, and hanging's too good for him; but did you mind—did you mind very much his going away?"

She tried to go on with her work, then let it fall in her lap. Turning a burning face towards him, she met his eyes squarely.

"No, I didn't mind his going away. I sent him."

"You sent him? Oh, why, Emmeline? Not because——" Jeremiah got hold of her hand. She pulled it away.

"Because he'd been married and was divorced," she said clearly. "That's why I sent him away."

Jeremiah fell back on the pillow. "Well, I don't blame you," he said in rather an abashed voice. "But folks around here don't understand it. Why don't you tell 'em, Emmeline?"

"I don't care whether they understand it or not," she returned.

She rose and began tidying the room. Jeremiah watched her. Then she put on her shawl. She was going back to her work at the store the next day. "Well, I guess you'll get along all right now, Jeremiah," she said, approaching the bed.

"Oh, I know I shall, Emmeline, and it's all owing to you. Mother and I both feel this, and want to thank you. She'll tell you when you go out."

"It was nothing."

Jeremiah reached out and caught her hand again. "Well, I rather guess it was something, but you ain't a-going to cast me off entirely, now I'm getting better, are you?" He clung to the work roughened fingers, and tried to see into her face. She trembled and turned her head away. "I know I've got no right to ask it," he continued huskily, after a pause, "no right at all; but the first day I can get out, would you mind walking a little ways with me, Emmeline?"

"I'd just as soon go as not," she said with gentle readiness. Her cheeks, could he have seen them, were glowing softly under the old shawl.

The last Sunday in February was warm; the air was almost caressing, and the sun had melted all the snow from the earth. Emmeline wore her cloak open, so that it showed the plaid waist, and she had on a new hat. Jeremiah, too, appeared strangely rejuvenated, but they walked slowly. He was leaning on her arm, and when they met anybody, which they did often, the afternoon being so pleasant, she blushed, she hardly knew why. People, passing them, invariably glanced around. "Jeremiah Brayton's gone back to Emmeline Kent," was the gossiping comment. They walked as far as the sidewalk extended through the village; then Emmeline was turning about, when Jeremiah stopped her.

"No," said he, "I want to go into the cemetery."

"I'm afraid it's too damp for you," she objected, but he shook his head and they entered the quiet, leaf strewn place.

Drifts of dead leaves bordered the gravel paths, whispering faintly among themselves. In the older, sunken lots the graves were entirely obliterated under the rustling mass. On the rise of ground where the soldier boys slept, the village patriots, pale flags drooped and moved softly in the wind. Over all was the peace of unretarded decay; but the warmth of the sunshine brought spring to mind even here, and around the

roots of some of the trees the grass was beginning to start.

Emmeline pointed this out. Jeremiah scarcely seemed to notice. He hurried her along eagerly, his eyes fixed straight ahead. There was something so unusual in his manner that she ceased thinking of the muddy path, and splashed along recklessly, her eyes seeking his face. In spite of herself her heart began to thump heavily, and when Jeremiah stopped, with a strange, appealing glance at her, beside the streaked marble stone with the plain lettering, she grew as red as a poppy, and put out her hand to steady herself. Instantly Jeremiah's fingers closed over it.

"I want to take back what I said that day; that is, I—I've brought you here, Emmeline, to ask you to marry me," he began impetuously. "Not that I suppose you will, after the way I've acted," as she withdrew her hand and covered her face, "but I owed it to you and to myself to say this. Oh, Lord, Emmeline, you don't know what I've been through! I know I never talked this way before; I've been held back by—by things that ought not to have counted, but I never really sensed how I felt about you until I let that Lessing fellow step between us. Then I *knew*, and it seemed as though—well, as I told you, working out there nights, I buried the fool that I had been in that cellar, and I made up my mind that if you and Lessing didn't make a match of it—though I hadn't a hope that you wouldn't—that I'd tell you this. But I ain't expecting a thing," he hastened to add in the fervor of his humility. "No woman could—"

Emmeline turned on him. "Yes, she could—she could, too!" she cried passionately, and then he saw in the patient face what he had been foolish not to see before.

* * * *

An hour later Jeremiah and Emmeline walked into the Kents' little sitting room. Jeremiah's pale cheeks had gathered quite a color, and Emmeline was softly radiant. Mrs. Kent started when she saw the young man; then her eyes sought her daughter's, the lace bow atop of her cap fairly quivering with anxious inquiry.

Emmeline flushed. "I've brought Jeremiah in to have some chocolate, mother," said she, and her voice thrilled with a wonderful new note of pride.

She stood a moment, smiling vaguely into the uplifted face, then suddenly she knelt down and threw her arms around the little deformed old figure.

Mary M. Mears.

AN AVERAGE MAN.

COTTER was in love with the pretty girl who was staying with Mrs. Chase on Minetta Street, and he hardly knew what to do about it. He thought that this was his first attack. Indeed, he felt sure it was. He reasoned to himself that the others could have been nothing but fancies, because he had not been so anxiously careful to conserve his attitude toward them. He had not lain awake at night wondering how he could pay them attentions which they would accept as leading up to serious things, without attracting the notice of his sister in law, and inviting the consequent ruin of his hopes.

Cotter could not tell what tactics his sister in law employed to keep him still a widower, but he knew they were efficacious. She never said anything to him; she employed herself entirely with the party of the second part. Any number of times in the years since he began to "take notice," he had seen girls whom he had found charming, and who had displayed just that piquant spice of consciousness, when in his vicinity, which can sometimes add twenty per cent to the value of a pretty face. One at a time had filled him with an emotion which he called interest. One by one he had seen them grow chilly, indifferent, and commonplace, after the blight of an interview with his sister in law. And now that he was—as he told himself—honestly in love at last, he lay awake nights thinking of ways in which he could lead up to a declaration and yet leave Mrs. Shears in ignorance.

If any man has ever tried to keep a secret in a town of ten thousand inhabitants, he knows how hopeless a task Cotter had before him.

It may sound strange to say that Cotter had never been in love before, although he had had a wife; but it only sounds so because it is an unconventional thing to put on paper. He had married at twenty three—or, more properly speaking, had been married, being passive in the matter. He had been a lanky, rather shy young man who had never had a home in his life, and who knew nothing of the ways of women. He was a serious fellow, to whom vulgar dissipation meant nothing as a temptation,

and who lacked the vanity to read the innocent advances of young girls. So until he met Miss Clinch he had hardly known a woman. She was thirty, small, compact, with curls, sympathy, a lisp, and arched eyebrows that gave her an expression of childish wonder. She treated Cotter as though he were head and shoulders above any other man; and the sensation being new to his simple heart, he drank it in like a sponge.

Miss Clinch, under her semblance of youth, was wearily reminding herself that it was "now or never." Her charms had never been those that appealed to maturity. Men like young girls, but they like them in a natural state of bud, giving promise of luxuriant bloom; not as stunted little roses. At thirty, with Miss Clinch, it was a boy or nobody, and Cotter was at her hand. Heaven knows, his conquest was easy! She married him in less than six months; before another year she was dead, having done Cotter no particular harm, and leaving a not unpleasant fading memory behind her.

It is a wise provision of nature which makes so many men the victims of a youthful passion for a woman old than themselves. She educates them, keeps them free from entanglements, and lets them go, with open eyes and their eye teeth cut entirely through; but in the freemasonry of femininity the older woman who marries the boy is a traitor and a "cat," and when the inevitable arrives, and the boy, grown a man, realizes that he has been tricked out of the prize of life, she gets the scorn instead of the sympathy of her sex. No warning in the Book of Proverbs is bad enough to fit her fate. But happily Mrs. Cotter died, leaving—less fortunately—the legacy of a sister in law to keep her memory green.

Mrs. Shears, who had been the eldest Miss Clinch, was a power in the community. She managed all the church fairs and mothers' meetings. Her rather aggressive nose was carried triumphantly not only into, but through, the affairs of everybody, and Cotter was by no means least in her regard. She always spoke of him as "my brother, Mr. Cotter," and took credit for his prominence. In the fifteen years between twenty four and thirty nine, he had never been