# The Spring Lady

## The Romance of a New York Girl Who Made a Strange Experiment.

## By Mary Brecht Pulver

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SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

A New York woman, suddenly grown tired of home, of society and of the man who loves her, she runs away from all her old life and takes refuge in a tumble down cottage in the up-State village of Sweethills, calling herself "Rita Ashe." There she witnesses the miracle of springtime, the villagers nickname her "The Spring Lady," and make many conjectures as to her history. Paul Richter, a local poet, and Cynthia Field are especially interested in her. Van Vorden, a chum of Paul's, comes from New York to recuperate after an illness. Paul is jealous lest Van Vorden meet Rita, whom the poet himself has learned to love. Van Vorden and Rita meet, by chance, in the woods. They are old acquaintances, but neither knew the other was at Sweethills. Rita notices that the Sweethills people are beginning to eye her askance, and she wonders why.

### CHAPTER XV.

(Continued.)

### From Her Journal.

ONLY two days ago we had a scurry of snow and cold winds, and extra blankets on at night—but now!

There was a mist this morning that drifted up in soft, feathery layers toward the sun, like one of those shadowy illusion curtains David Belasco used to like. It was nearly 10 before the sun streamed through—and such a world as he found!

Lilacs all tasselled in white and purple; apple buds showing faintly pink; tulips—whole regiments, red and gold—and leaves, leaves, leaves, thousands on thousands, all unfurled overnight like clapping hands for joy. And under foot more golden dandelions than Rockefeller has dollars; and violets, whole purple lakes of them—oh, I can't write it all! How can I?

And how could I carry Seraphy's unpleasant gossip with me? I couldn't even bear a grudge against Sweethills.

I felt like laughing aloud. I had to smile at people I met.

I came around by the old Franklin house. A little silver-haired old lady was raking in the garden. No doubt the last of the Franklins!

She smiled at me pleasantly and we talked a little—about the flowers mostly. She told me the frosts had nipped the perennials the other night, but her sweet peas were all saved because she had covered them with old carpet.

I never realized how vital an interest the life of one's flowers may make, until I saw the anxiety in her wrinkled face. I was genuinely thankful with her for the safety of the sweet peas.

She gave me a great spray of yellow forsythia to carry away. I used to see it in Central Park.

I wish she had been a little curious about me—or had asked me in. The house has a certain charm for me. Perhaps it's the name—I don't know. But it looks old and lovely and comfortable—as if it had great fire-places and deep-curtained windows and easy chairs and big old-fashioned lamps to keep the dark out.

As I was leaving Paul Richter came along. He seems to "come along" so often on my rambles.

We went down the road together. Not a true road, but a lovely narrow leafy lane that joins the main road of the village.

In a curve of it there is a tiny spring beside a big sun-warmed stone with low bushes behind. We sat here a while.

I'm afraid I was very silly. . . .

We laughed a great deal at first and talked a lot of nonsense—but I would not let him flirt. He's versatile and attractive and I'm—well, lonely—but I've never meant to be serious. I'm done with that sort of thing forever—— And I'm not taking Heiney Van Vorden's advice.

After a little I got to thinking of what Seraphy had told me. It must have told on my spirit—or showed in my face.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"I was wondering if you knew Sweethills' latest version of me"—I felt myself flushing a little—"if—if—what people are saying"—— And I tried to tell him as lightly as I could.

"Sweethills is a bunch of fools—ignorant fools—always was," he growled.

"Thank you—but don't abuse your native heath. Sweethills is simply 'from Missouri,' but I think it's not a very kind place, after all—look at the way they treated poor little Martha Bruce."

But he can't get away from the Sweethills view-point. He winced as if I had spoken of something eminently improper.

"Oh—that girl," he said hastily, "but there's simply no comparison"——

"It must be because I'm alone," I said, more to myself than to him.

It was a cue for him. He covered my hands with both of his impetuously.

"You needn't be," he said, his face very close to mine; "I—let me tell you—won't you listen—we could stop all this—wait"——

I didn't wait. At his touch I sprang up and freed my hands.

"I can't wait—not a minute," I cried with pretended gayety. "I'm late now—Seraphy'll scold me. Besides, I wasn't joking about it."

He looked at me with a dull red in his face.

"Neither was I," he said stiffly.

We were very quiet until we reached my door. I put out my hand.

"Come to see me soon and bring the play again, neighbor."

I emphasized the last word and he took the rebuke.

"I'll come," he said, "only let me do that"—— He spoke with genuine emotion and I was surprised. Yes—and disturbed. I don't want to make havoc for anybody. I've tried to show him it won't be any use.

I've about decided on my course. After all, it's the only one.

I'll stay here until my money's gone. Then when the laurel's out and the nests are full of young birds I'll slip away as I came.

Oh, I'll have to go back to the city. It's the only place I really know—where I can be of any use.

I'll get a place in one of the shops and take a tiny room, high up in one of those forlorn boarding-houses and sit on the stoop summer evenings when the street smells hot and thick and gasoliny, and I'll dream of Sweethills and the woods and the garden and the winds and the stars—and I'll sell ribbons or pins by day.

It won't be much of a solution, will it? I'll not be more useful there than in my other life—or here. After all, that's what counts, I believe—one's use. To the world, I mean.

Women seem to be of three kinds—and most of us belong to two. Those who fertilize the earth in the end; those who give to the world the fruit of some great gift or special labor, and those who make the world—who give it life.

I have no gift, no talent. And I have not handed on the torch of life—so I shall be just earth. A dust woman!

But at least I shall break no man's heart—nor take his money while I hate him.

If the worst comes to the worst I might sell my hair. It's a sort of curse, anyhow. * * * Larry used to love it.

### CHAPTER XVI.

### Loyalty and a Kiss.

"WHAT I'd like to know really is—are you always going to do these things?"

The remark coming apropos of nothing in particular, Cynthia Field looked up inquiringly at her companion. They had not spoken for several minutes—indeed Cynthia's cheeks were still pink with her exertion.

She knelt on a tussock of grass—a little islet in a deceptive and alluring sea of vivid water-pearled green. She held a grimy little knife in her fingers and a basket partly filled with watercress stood beside her. There was also something else in the picture—the figure of a carelessly dressed, red-haired young man, his eyes now with an absorbed attention on Cynthia's face under the big sun hat.

"I don't think I understand," she smiled; "you don't mean the watercress, do you? I've only been at it fifteen minutes and I'll be finished directly."

"Oh—only as a symbol. What I mean is, are you going to stay here forever and dust Mrs. Stanford's parlors, and brew her tea, and take spots out of her clothes with gasoline, and darn her table-cloths?"

She threw back her head and laughed.

"You have a good memory—perhaps if you timed your calls differently these domestic details wouldn't trouble you."

"It wouldn't make any difference. You'd be doing something for her. And that's what I mean. As a career are you going to find that entirely satisfying?"

"I hadn't thought of my career. Mrs. Stanford has always been so kind—and there's nothing I've ever been prepared for—what else could I do?"

"The answer to that is obvious, my dear Cynthy. But it really shouldn't be necessary for you to do anything. When I see you digging for cress here and think what and where you ought to be—the watering places abroad—Nice, Monte Carlo—and gowns by Paquin"——

She made an amused grimace.

"It doesn't sound attractive, and Monte Carlo sounds positively wicked. About the gowns, though—I've never seen a Paris gown, you know. But Rita Ashe has told me of some she's seen. They must be lovely."

"'Rita Ashe.' So you've got to that stage? And she tells you about French gowns?"

She looked up at him quickly.

"Why, don't you like her? You've never cared to meet her"—— She stopped suddenly, her eyes growing wide. "You don't mean these things—you must have heard—you don't believe these dreadful things people say of her?"

"What things?" he asked.

"Oh—things," she said with a little tremor in her voice, "terrible unjust things—because she hasn't gossiped with people about herself and told everything. Because she's young and pretty and all alone—and hasn't enough money to awe people. But I know—she told me. There's nothing to make a mystery of. Only that she has no one—and just a little to live on—and—and a great deal of sadness has been in her life. And she wants the peace and quiet of Sweethills"——

"She—she told you that herself. The part about the sadness in her life and all that"——

Van Vorden studied his finger nails meditatively.

"She let me see it," trembled Cynthia; "any one can see the shadow of it. And how any one could want anything else but to love her and comfort her—and these—these people"—she stopped breathlessly, a mist of unshed tears in her eyes—"why, they—they're demons." She brought the word out with sudden furious emphasis.

Van Vorden laughed aloud.

"Encore. Encore, pretty Cynthy. But you mustn't swear you know, really"——

"Oh, but I could—when I think. It's Porter Vessey—he's always so loathsome—he pats one on the cheek—or—or pinches one in the arm—or tries to 'salute' one in a f-fatherly fashion. Ugh!"

"Let me catch him patting or pinching," said Van Vorden quickly.

"Oh, everybody forgives him—they wouldn't dare do otherwise. He's so popular. And they believe whatever he says"——

"I believe," said Van Vorden musingly, "I understand your Politician and your Pink Lady have been quite active regarding yours truly. There's many a pretty little pot of tea brewed over me. And now Rita Ashe. You can't be at all susceptible to these village contagions, Cynthia—why is it? You confess to loving Rita Ashe—but I can not—I dare not flatter myself it is sentiment in my own case—or else why refuse so often to let me come up?"

She flushed and spoke nervously.

"We've got a long way from French gowns—the ones Rita's seen. Don't you want to hear about them?"

"My dear—Cynthia—there's nothing I'd like so much as to see them—on you."

"Sometimes I think"——she began.

"You mustn't," he said briskly. "It's beastly for the face. First thing you know you'll be wearing thick glasses, and growing a mustache. Come Brains—farewell Beauty. Voila! Do you hear that robin calling its mate? Would you like to hear me give an imitation? I can do it capitally."

"That was a squirrel," said Cynthia dryly. "It's the little things," she said in a minute, "just the hints. I can't help trying to put things together—and then there's what Rita said about you."

"What did she say?" Heiney wheeled to her quickly.

"She said you were quite the 'best-hearted, straightest thing ever.' How did she know? Sometimes—I think you've known each other before."

"And suppose we had. Come—I'll tell you something. We did know each other. We do know each other. Does that satisfy you?"

"Then why—why—" she began.

"You mustn't question and you mustn't doubt. You'll do her good. And she is worth while. I've always thought so. Just now she's come some bally cropper or other—you women get these mental streaks—that's made her turn hermit and hide in the woods. Come! Don't look so scared. There's nothing wrong. She's an all-right girl—the 'straightest ever.' And some day she'll tell you everything."

But Cynthia still looked disturbed.

"Oh, it wouldn't make any difference with me—what she was. I know. And she's my friend. But I was thinking"—her eyes rested on his doubtfully—"about your both being here—it wasn't—it couldn't"——

"Not in the least. I'm not Rita's 'follower,' as I believe your Vessey person intimates. One of these days Richter's going to kill that chap."

"I think—Paul loves her," said Cynthia in a low voice.

"Oh—Paul loves everybody," said Van Vorden.

They had risen to go, and stood close together under the beeches that grew by the stream. It was dim already with a tender dusk here under the trees and only the mellow afterglow of a mountain sunset downstream. He looked down at her a moment before he spoke.

"Cynthia," he said, "you care for me about as much as you do for a paper of pins. And that's as it should be. I'm—out of the running. But—would you care—just once—if I kissed you?"

For some odd reason she could not speak. Her heart felt curiously muffled; her eyes full of unshed tears.

She lifted her face to his as a child might, and he stooped and kissed her cheek reverently.

"You're a nice little girl," he said, "a nice little girl."

She let him take her basket from her hand and they turned homeward silently.

Cynthia could not have told why, but words would have been impossible to her, and she was glad of the dusk that hid the tears that lay on her eyelashes.

### CHAPTER XVII.

### Against Heavy Odds.

THERE was a mighty battle going on in the little green house at the end of the town.

The battle went on in one of the upper chambers—where a little mother fought gallantly for life against cruel odds; where sometimes, questioning, to her door came a little forlorn, frightened child, to sob or whisper her name and go unheeded.

"She doesn't hear," he would mourn and then "some one," Cynthia Field perhaps, or Rita Ashe, or even that stern neighbor of yesterday, old Honey Hyslop, would catch him and hold him close for a little as though he had stumbled on some pathetic secret.

And in truth he had. For it was a losing battle the little dressmaker fought, and a world that had hardened its heart to her yesterday suddenly yearned in pity over her little "love-child," and kissed him with reddened eyelids.

Rita found Paul Richter at her gate, as she so often found him lately.

"I've brought you the 'Pippa' you wanted," he began, putting the thin little book into her hand.

"Thank you," she said.

"I'm alone to-day," he said; "Van Vorden's gone down to New York to see his doctor. He seems to have improved considerably."

"It seems to me that any one would improve here," she said.

"It's done the almost impossible. It's made a difference even with you. Like painting the lily," he said with his ardent eyes on her.

She evaded them.

"It seems like a place where every one ought to be well and strong. With all the sun and the flowers and the sweet air—like a place too lovely for death to come to."

"Oh, but death is lovely too—it is only completing the cycle. I don't know that anything could be lovelier. To live; to die—to go back to the great mother; to live again in this"—he waved his hand toward the blossoming garden—"'kiss of lips or kiss of bee'—what difference?"

She shook her head.

"I've felt that way sometimes—but there is a death that is infinitely cruel. To leave behind a loved helpless thing—I was thinking of poor Martha Bruce. Perhaps you've heard she isn't going to get well?"

He was silent a moment.

"Perhaps," he said presently, "she will be much happier. She was—rather odd—for her type of woman."

"You know her of course?"

"A little," he said shortly.

"There's the boy. It's going to mean a long heartache for him."

"It will be better for him—in the end. She—I've heard people say that she always refused any offer of financial help. There'll be a chance for him now—for advantages, education."

"But not love. Cynthia loves him, but how could she keep him? And I—I couldn't take him to the city."

He looked at her with startled eyes.

"The city! Do you mean— You're not going away."

It cost her something to smile.

"Why shouldn't I?" she asked with brave lightness; "I'm the 'Spring Lady'—and spring is over."

"You—you—but I thought," he began, "but I—we—you've been here only a little while."

"Almost two months," she said, fighting to keep the quiver from her voice. "I—I'm fond of Sweethills—but there are other things for me to do. I must go back."

"But you're going to tell me where," he cried; "there's—I'd follow you anywhere—no, listen, please—I won't go on unless you wish. You've kept me at arm's length from the beginning. But you will tell me this. After all the hours we've had—the poems and reading—you're not going to run away from me?"

At the genuine misery in his face her heart softened.

"There's really no reason why I should tell you, Mr. Richter. But if you wish—I'm going back where I came from. You've known all along, New York."

He leaned forward, a sudden eagerness in his face.

"Yes—I knew. It's your setting. What platinum is to the diamond, New York!" he cried; "it's like a wine—like a drink of the gods. It's life itself. There's room in it for everything. When my play's finished—oh, I'll see you in New York! And it won't be as it is here. You've forced me to be your neighbor here—your neighbor! Faugh! I'll be your 'hunter at the gate,' Rita—listen. Let me call you so this once. I thought I knew love before—oh, I'll be honest; but I never even crossed the threshold. Now," he seized her hand suddenly, "no, no—not yet. Unless you wish. Oh, but you shall wish—sometime, soon," his voice trembled, "oh, girl—my girl with daffodil hair—I'll teach you what love means. You're like a fair white vestal—a neophyte in love. But there—in the city we'll learn life together— Love! I could teach a thousand forms of love."

He was an ardent, handsome boy, now, his warm flushed face so close to hers.

The girl released her hand gravely.

"No doubt," she said, "you could teach me much of—love. But I shall not listen. I must not. Oh, I've let men make love to me before—it was amusing for me—but not now. No, don't look hurt. Yours does not amuse me. I'm only sorry—sorry. I haven't been honest, you see—but I'm going to be now. I'm going to tell you why you must go now—and not come back. And you must forget me. I've been afraid of this—of your caring for me. You see"—she broke off suddenly, then hurried to the end. "You see, I'm married."

It took him a minute to realize her words.

"Married," he repeated in a colorless voice.

"Yes," she nodded. She did not like to look at his face. She knew now that he really had cared—that all his sensuous nature had been deeply aroused by her. "I'm so sorry," she repeated.

"Married," he said again. The color was coming to his stricken face now. "Then— why — but that doesn't mean"——

"Oh, but it does," she stopped him quickly.

He rose and faced her now, his face working with a sudden unlovely passion.

"Then you've played with me—played with me. You've let me believe"——

"Nothing," she finished crisply; "your beliefs did not concern me, Mr. Richter. I—I had my reasons for coming here as I did. I accepted you as my neighbor, only."

"But I'm—why, God, I loved you. You let me come. You knew—you must have known. Out of all the world, you're the only woman I've ever loved," his voice rose almost shrill with emotion.

"Hush!" she said, "you must go now—I can't listen."

"Why not? You've played with me. Why shouldn't you know what you've done? Does it mean nothing to you to wear a man's devotion like a glove and toss it aside when it cumbers you?"

She would have liked to smile, but she frowned instead.

"I don't think I've really done all that, Mr. Richter—I've not meant to, at any rate. I can only say I'm sorry."

He stared at her unseemly.

"And I loved you," he said tragically.

Suddenly he turned on his heel without another word and left her.

There was something both pathetic and comical to her in the sudden lowered carriage of his confident young head.

"It isn't as if I had really done all that," she said half resentfully, "but I'm sorry. I wonder, though, if Heiney Van Norden isn't right—and he needed it. I wonder if he's not made more than one heart ache."

### CHAPTER XVIII.

### Conduct of a Gentleman.

THE windows of Richter's living room were open wide to the night.

It was a dark night, one of those velvety warm nights in early June that, in the mountains, precede a period of rain and cold. There was neither moon nor star outside.

And into the room and into Richter's mood suddenly came Van Vorden freshly returned from New York.

Had there been lights he must have put them out of countenance by the radiance of his expression. But Richter saw neither his face nor for a moment him.

"Wake, dreamer," said his friend, and some unusual quality in his voice made the other turn to him.

"You've had good news?" he asked.

"I've travelled back-light," said Van Vorden, "hardly a symptom in my grip."

Richter got up and paced the floor before he spoke.

"Van Vorden," he said, "I'm going away—to Europe. Will you stay on and look after things—the grounds and Stine. I'll be back in the autumn probably—but I've got to get away now—no, don't answer offhand. You've got to stay here—and we've been pals. You'll do me all kinds of a favor by it—you asked if it was going well with me—it's going like hell. I—I've got to go." His voice trembled, broke boyishly.

"By love! You are hard hit. I knew though, it wouldn't do at all"——

"You knew"—said Richter sharply.

"Guessed—rather," said Van Vorden. "I haven't been presented to the lady, but I've always fancied she'd turn you down. I've rather thought she's been keeping up an incog.; am I right?"

"She's going away," said Richter harshly, as though that sufficed. "I—I shouldn't care to stay on—for a while. I—you think it over—what I said. I'm going out for a walk now."

He left the room abruptly and a minute later Heiney heard his step on the graveled walk, outside the gate.

Contrary to custom the Ford house showed no light to-night. The mysterious, alluring quality of the night brooded close over it—hid it like a pall in its thick tangle of shrubbery.

It lent color to a thousand imaginings.

The garden, vital with life, might conceal anything, any one in the deep shadow of tree or shrub.

As he came up, Paul fancied first that some one sat in the porch, but it was empty. A faint splash of gray under the elm tree was equally deceptive. Surely the house with its eyes so tightly closed was empty, but in spite of this he sounded the old knocker. Only its clangor within and the shriek of a frightened owl in the vine replied.

Then he heard some one coming up the road and he went out into it. At first he thought it was Seraphy Bassett, under the moonless sky, but a minute later the dark, irregular shape grew recognizable and his pulses throbbed with the realization.

He had not known before why he came, but he knew now.

He started forward so suddenly that Rita Ashe cried out.

"It's I—Richter," he said a little hoarsely.

"You—frightened me," she faltered, "it's so dark—I wasn't expecting"——

She peered at him, a vague discomfort stirring in her. Some indefinable quality in his voice, his presence—perhaps the suggestive influence of the night—alarmed her faintly.

"I—will you come in? I shall not let you stay long"—she began.

She wondered why he had sought her. Was he ashamed of his childishness of the afternoon?

"I—won't come in. It's a night for outdoors. Walk with me a little, won't you? I want to tell you something"——

He tried to speak coolly, but it took all his self-control.

The night was making its appeal to him. All that was sensuous, emotional in him responded. The fluid poetry of his nature thrilled to its soft oppressive warmth.

But his words disarmed her. She hesitated, then said, "I'm very tired—but I'll walk a few steps."

They turned up the road into the shadowy night together.

"I wanted you to know—I'm going away—to Europe."

"Europe!" she said; then with a touch of nervousness, "It will be a wonderful experience—I've always wanted to go—I hope to some day."

He swung round to her suddenly.

"And you will not go alone? No—after what you said to-day. He will go with you."

"Must you speak of that?" she cried. "Don't let us speak of it. Let it stand closed—forgot."

"Forgot." He bit his lips suddenly.

"It is best," she said quietly.

"Best for him," he said savagely; "best for you—for him. But what about me? What have you done to me?"

"I am not responsible for you," she answered gravely; "if I have in any way misled you—oh, I tried not to." In spite of herself her voice trembled. "You would not understand—you wanted to deceive yourself, Mr. Richter—but for any share of mine, I am deeply regretful."

"No woman," he cried, "has ever played with me before—you let me love you. You knew it—there's no use denying—and now! I—I—why don't you play the game—Rita, there's no part of me doesn't worship you. In your own heart you must know it—I could teach you—if you came away with me—love's the only life worth while—for both of us"——

He caught her arm impetuously and she shook herself free with disdain.

"You are insane," she said, "unstrung. I must turn back—your opening up the subject is useless—I would be your friend, but it is impossible. Besides, you're really a very insulting boy—if you realize what you're saying."

"'A boy!'" he cried. "Then I'll play the man's part—you shan't throw me aside like this—stop—I'll make you listen—you shall—Do you think you can come here and masquerade like this—and not pay?"

She turned and would have passed him haughtily but he stopped her with outstretched arms.

"Let me by," she said.

But he had thrown restraint to the winds. All that was erotic, bestial in him beneath his superficial culture rose to ascendency.

He pressed suddenly close to her.

"Rita—love me a little—oh, but you shall"—he said thickly.

Before she could move or speak he had seized her in his arms, and held her close.

For one instant, unguarded, she was still. Her soft hair brushed his forehead and maddened him. His lips, buried in the strands, kissed them. Then she struck at him furiously and broke free of his embrace.

"Is that your 'man's part?'" she panted. "I call it a coward's part. Do you think you can ride roughshod over a woman's will—I—Some day—you will learn—what it is to be a man—now, you're just a spoiled child"——

Contemptuously, she turned and left him. At her gate she found Seraphy waiting for her.

"Ain't there some one else? I thought I heard somebody speakin'—You ain't been talkin' to some one? And you're all out of breath." Seraphy peered at her suspiciously.

"I walked—too fast. I should have waited for you—I do very foolish things—sometimes, Seraphy—I shall never be a wise—sensible person"——

"You're the way the Lord made you. Nice to look at—and to have folks love you. They's enough sensible homely people runnin' loose now"——

Seraphy was busy unlocking the door. She did not see the other's sudden weary pose—and the darkness hid the thick mist of tears in her eyes.

### CHAPTER XIX.

### From Her Journal.

I THINK this is the last time I shall write in my book. I am coming to the end of things——

The doctor tells us Martha will not live beyond to-morrow. I shall wait until—then.

Then I must go. . . .

I do not want to go away. I have been so happy these two months. And all's not right with my world. There's Larry. If I did go back, I should be afraid—that he might not forgive me. I dare not try it. And he wouldn't understand how I've changed. I couldn't go back to him.

I wish I knew what it meant. Perhaps it's fear.

To-day I fainted for the second time this week. Seraphy put me to bed herself. My kind old Seraphy! She sat and watched me the longest time. Perhaps—but no, she doesn't dream I'm going away—but I could feel her watching me.

It's strange that I should be ill—I've seemed so strong and looked so well lately.

And I've never been the fainting kind. . . . Last night I had the strangest fancy—I though perhaps—it might be—I wonder how—what nonsense I am writing—No, no, that will never be mine to know——

I've lied about one thing in writing here. And I've known it all the time—in my heart. I love Larry. I shall love him always.

### CHAPTER XX.

### A Revelation Is Made.

THE little dressmaker died at sunset.

At the last there were two watchers with her—Seraphy and the Spring Lady—and they brought the baby to her and lifted him for her to kiss.

The frail, wasted face lighted with a mighty mother passion.

"So beautiful," she whispered, and Seraphy laid his warm little hand on the cold cheek. "God"—she said faintly, "God—keep"——

And suddenly she smiled a brave confident little smile as of one who is assured an answer, and closed her eyes.

The little child touched her mouth with his fingers.

"Mamma happy" he said.

It was two hours before this that Martha told them.

At first they thought her mind wandered, but presently they knew that it had strayed only back through the years of her girlhood. There were sentences—fragments of sentences—incoherent at times—disconnected—but, together, links in the tangled chain of her unhappy life.

They told first—mere hints—of the girl, shy, inexperienced, wistful, unworldly, snug in the shelter of her little shabby home. They told of her first great loneliness—the dead parents—the kindly friends—the new life to be faced alone.

There had seemed no way to help her—no way to escape the needle and shears until——

It was here that she spoke of the afternoons in the mountains—long Sunday afternoons in the stillness of the wood. She had been brought up a Methodist, but somewhere she had strayed upon an old Episcopal prayerbook. She took it with her to the woods at first, to read and reread its gracious beauty of phrase. Presently there was no need. She was alone no longer.

He had come upon her suddenly at first—so suddenly that like a timid fawn she had started to run.

He had never spoken to her before, but now he followed, and half-coaxing, half-jesting, had begged to look at her book. "He had a book in his pocket—poetry. I loved books always."

She was silent, introspective for a moment.

"He read beautifully—it was like water to a thirsting man. I knew—so little. Then he said he would be there next Sunday. He had many lovely things he would read me."

She sighed and smiled a little.

"There had been many "next Sundays." All through the long dreaming summer they had met—to the very last day that the cricket sang and the trees were green. After that he went away.

"At first they had merely read together and he had given her a new world—brought to her famishing heart a feast. He taught her things—the mountain boundaries had dropped away before her eyes, revealing mighty world pictures, cities, rivers, dim half-forgotten countries, the legends of centuries——

"She had opened her heart to him as a flower does to the sun—had told him her dreams and ambitions.

"No man had ever talked to me before—I loved him—loved him."

"One afternoon he kissed her. One drowsy August Sunday. He had been reading the 'Lotus Eaters' to her——

"She had floated away on a dream—a world-old dream of nature's making, that knows no morals nor standards.

"I loved him," she whispered, "but—— remembered it all afterward—he never spoke of love—nor marrying. It was just I. Perhaps I fooled myself—there were the foreign countries he spoke of going to. Sometimes I dreamed of being with him there—I—I—it was all like a dream till afterward. Afterward when I was waiting I saw it all clearly. It meant nothing to him—just—what they call in books—a passing romance—but with me it was—different."

All through the summer they had met unknown to any one—and the girl had clung to her happiness with passionate fervor.

"Then the end came. He went away—without speaking. And she had nothing—through the months whose bitterness had filled her cup and heart-breaking realization had been hers, but had not spoken, nor named him.

"But he knew"——

He came once and offered her money. She had refused all aid.

"I wasn't angry—why should I have been—he had not tried to deceive me—it was all myself, what I wanted to believe—and I had Robbie."

They got some conception here of what the child had meant to her. How much heartache she had wept away on his little breast——

"I was afraid always—he would take him from me—it seemed to me every one should want him—and his father. He never troubled me—but now—I've asked God to open Paul Richter's eyes—it's his little son—his own boy with his own blue eyes"—

(To Be Continued.)

# Can You Beat It?

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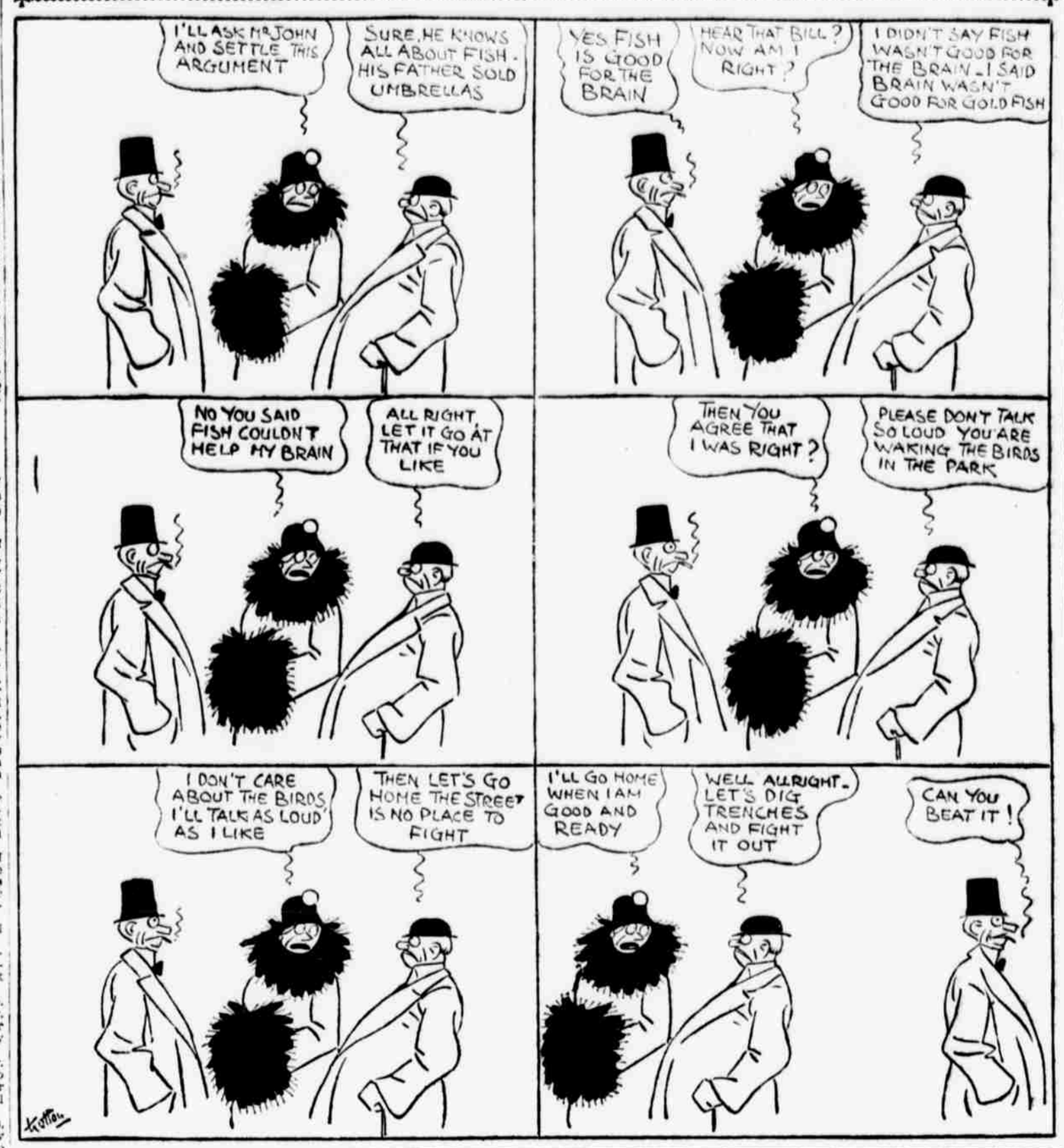
By Maurice Ketten

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