The Democratic Advocate.

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A CUMBERLAND IDYL.

From Chambers' Journal.

CHAPTER I.

Somewhat less than half-a-dozen miles from Carlisle lies a pretty but sleepy little village, which we shall call Linthwaite. Far removed from the march of progress, it reposes in a peaceful slumber, unbroken by the rattle and din of locomotives, and unmolested by the "kettle o' steam"-driven inventions, so dear to agriculturists of the modern style. Save that in summer and autumn, the whir of the new-fangled reaping-machine is heard in the meadows and cornfields, as it sweeps down broad swaths of hay and yellow corn—usurping the place of the sturdy scant-clad husbandman, wielding his keen-edged scythe, and the bands of Irishmen, each armed with his trusty sickle, who formerly invaded the land at harvest-time—no sound is ever heard there that might not have broken the silence fifty years ago. Certainly, now and again, at times when there is going to be rain, as the old folks say in their weather wisdom, the distant sound of a railway engineer's whistle may be heard borne on the wind, faint and weird as the plaintive piping of the plover overhead in his autumn flight; but then it is so intangible as to seem like a "wandering voice" from a far-off country, with which the good folks of Linthwaite can have nothing in common.

The young people have most of them, to be sure, at one time or another ventured their necks and limbs in a railway train; but there are those among its older inhabitants who have never yet known, and probably never will enjoy, that dangerous luxury. The farmers, with their wives and daughters, betake themselves to Carlisle every Saturday to dispose of their farm produce and make their marketing; and at less frequent intervals the villagers make fitful visits to the same place with the latter object, and this constitutes their main personal intercourse with the outer world. For the rest, the weekly newspaper supplies them with all the information they require touching markets and crops, politics for the men, and fashions and gossip for the women; and so they live their uneventful lives.

A stone's throw from the road that skirts the village green stands Knowecroft, an old-fashioned farmhouse, which has been the patrimony of one generation of Martindales after another, time out of mind. At the period of our story it is occupied by a widow, her son and daughter. Her husband has been dead some years; but his place as head of the household is filled by his son, Joe Martindale, who has now reached the age of twenty-five, his sister Ruth being some seven years younger.

It was on a bright September morning that Mrs. Martindale, still a buxom and active dame, trotted down the orchard and called to her son, who was superintending harvesting operations in an adjoining field: "Joe, Joe!"

"Ay, ay, mother. What is it?"

"Come here; I want the'."

Obedient to her call, Joe made his appearance, ruddy and sunburnt, and mopping his brow as he came.

"Here's letter fra' Ruth," continued his mother. "She says she's comin' back to-night, an' thoo has to meet her at Carel by the seven o'clock train. I divvent know what lasses are meade on nooadays! Dis she think we've nowt to do wid the horses than to gan' rakin' off to the toon wid them at this teyme, an' half the fields to cut yet?"

"Well, mother," rejoined Joe, laughing, "she must come back some time, and I don't know that she could come at a better. And we won't hinder work either, for I'll take old Blossom. He's good enough for that yet, and I'll give him his time."

"Wey, I daresay thoo'll be able to mannish wid him," replied Mrs. Martindale; "and I'll be reet glad to git the lass back again, onyway."

To explain which we may mention that Miss Ruth had been away from home for a whole week, to officiate as bridesmaid at the wedding of a cousin in Westmorland; and her mother had so missed her winsome face, that, notwithstanding her apparent reluctance, she would have been glad to get her daughter back again at the price of a day's work of every horse about the place.

So in good time Joe, having harnessed Blossom to the dogcart, drove leisurely off to Carlisle. Joe, as we said, is five-and-twenty years old, and stands rather over five feet ten in his stockings; is straight as a poplar and lithe as a willow; slim in build, but wiry and muscular, as a Cumberland yeoman should be. In the saddle he rides like a fox-hunter; on foot, his gait approaches the martial, as, with square shoulders well thrown back and head erect, he "looks the whole world in his face." His head is covered with curly brown hair, cropped short; his face, untouched by razor, is adorned by whiskers and beard of a darker shade. The general expression of his face is suggestive of good nature and merriment; but something in the set of his lips betokens firmness, and even doggedness of purpose.

A good farmer for his years, and fairly accomplished in all the sports and pastimes of the country-side, he is also possessed of a taste for literature, and has read more than most of his class. For this latter tendency he is probably indebted to the fact that his education was completed under the eye of his father's cousin, who was vicar of a parish in Westmorland, and eked out his scanty stipend there by taking Joe and one or two other lads to educate along with his own sons.

CHAPTER II.

After an easy drive, Joe reached the station at Carlisle a few minutes before seven, and in due course the train arrived; but, to his disappointment, no Ruth came with it. On making inquiry he found that this train did not stop at Tebay—a fact which his sister must have overlooked when making arrangements for his meeting her—and that she could not reach Carlisle before half-past ten. So he drove back to the Lion, which was their usual quarters, and putting Blossom in charge of the hostler he strolled out into the town. Walking up Lowther street, he noticed that most of the people there were moving in the opposite direction, so he turned and joined them. He then found that they were bound for the theatre; and as he had nearly three hours to wait before his sister's train was due, he determined to drop in there and see what was to be seen. The play was one of the usual melodramatic type, with a "good murder" to begin with, a virtuous young man on whom suspicion falls, complications innumerable brought about by the machinations of a wicked uncle, heart-rending scenes between the hero and his devoted sweetheart, another murder, and a detective officer of superhuman sagacity, who clears everything up just at the right moment, bringing the whole to an orthodox conclusion, with "virtue triumphant and villainy vanquished."

Joe watched the whole of the first act with phlegmatic indifference, but not so the second. The scene of this was laid in a dairy, and the change in Joe's feeling was brought about by the entrance of the dairymaid Phœbe. Was there ever such a charming manipulator of butter seen outside of fairyland? She had not many words to speak, for she was only there as a foil to set off the heroine, resplendent in silks and lace, who had come to the dairy on the sly to meet the hero, the farmer's son.

But Phœbe, in her neat pink dress, with sleeves rolled up, displaying the plumpest of arms and the dimpliest of elbows, deftly patting the butter, and trotting about her work as though she had been brought up inside a dairy all her life, had all Joe's eyes, and he saw nothing of the thrilling love-scene that was being enacted by the resplendent lady and her suitor in the foreground.

The dairymaid was not tall by any means; if Joe had had his arm round her waist, and she had been looking up in Joe's face, her chin might have been the level of Joe's heart, and Joe was five feet ten, so you may guess her height from that. The chin in question was round, and had a most bewitching dimple; her lips were red and pouting. Her nose was just the least little bit "tip-tilted;" but her eyes—oh! we can't describe her eyes, for they were large and brown and liquid; and they could be cold and repelling, or languishing and attractive, or merry and sparkling, just as fitted the mood in which the fair Phœbe might be when she looked at you. Furthermore, she was plump, but jimp in the waist withal—not of the jimpness engendered by corsets and such-like devices, but of nature; and the pink gown in which she was dressed was not too long to hide a pair of the smallest feet and most delicately turned ankles that ever supported a daughter of Eve. And to crown all, she walked about her stage-dairy modestly as a nun, and apparently utterly unconscious of the lookers-on.

When she left the stage, Joe found time to examine his playbill to ascertain the name of this charming creature, whom he found to be therein described as—

Phœbe, a dairymaid—MISS PHYLLIS MAY.

All Joe's interest in the drama was now centred in the entrances and exits of Miss Phyllis May. He began to call her by that name to himself, dismissing "Phœbe, a dairymaid," as being a myth. Now and again he felt sure she was looking straight at him, when he blushed, and suddenly became very much interested in the doings of the other actors, until he gathered courage to steal another glance at the charming Phœbe.

Now, as Joe was not by nature a particularly bashful fellow, it may be fairly inferred from all this that he had fallen in love with the pretty actress. At any rate, when the curtain fell he had a very faint idea of what the play had all been about, and he had imprinted on his mental retina the picture of a bewitching sylph in a pink gown, which miniature, if not warranted to be indelible, promised to take some time to efface. On consulting his watch, he found that he had just time, by running all the way to the Lion, to get Blossom harnessed and reach the station soon enough to meet his sister's train. He could scarcely have done this had it been up to time, but fortunately for him it was a few minutes late, and he was waiting on the platform when it arrived. Ruth was looking out for him, and he soon had her seated in the dogcart, well wrapped up in the shawls which her mother had provided to protect her from the night air, and was driving homeward a good deal faster than he had come, for Blossom needed no reminder from the whip that there was a feed of corn and a cosy stable waiting for him at his journey's end.

After the first mutual inquiries about friends, Ruth had all the talk to herself, for Joe seemed too preoccupied to originate conversation; and as she was doing her best to open the way for telling him a most important secret, closely touching herself, she found his silence rather tantalizing. She lapsed into silence herself for a short while, but that made things no better; so at last she drew a long breath and went straight to the point.

"Dick is coming on Saturday, Joe," she began. "He would have come to-day, only they are so busy; and it is so rough traveling on Saturdays that aunt thought I had better not wait till then."

"Oh!" ejaculated Joe, only half following what she said; and thereupon followed another interval of silence.

"Joe," whispered Ruth at last, nestling closer to her brother, and laying her head against his arm—"Joe, Dick wants me to marry him, and—and—I love him very much; and that is what is bringing him on Saturday, to talk to mother and you about it. You like him, Joe; I know you do!"

This roused Joe from his reverie, and slipping his arm around his sister's waist, he kissed her and said: "Do you want to leave us, Ruthie? We can't part with you yet a bit, lassie. What would we do without you?"

"O Joe, no! I don't want to leave you," replied his sister; "but—but—but—I love Dick so much, and—and——"

"Well, well, Ruthie," rejoined Joe, "we can't keep you always; and a better fellow than Dick I couldn't wish you for a husband. So I suppose it will have to be 'Yes.' But what will the mother say about parting with you, Ruthie?"

"Well, but I've something else to tell you, Joe," said Ruth. "You know their lease is up at Candlemas, and Dalehead is not big enough for Dick and Tom, so Tom is going to take it on again by himself, and Dick is going to try to get Riggfield. So, if he does, it won't be like going away at all, hardly; will it, Joe?"

As Riggfield was only about a quarter of a mile from Knowecroft, Joe had to acknowledge that there was a saving clause in this arrangement; and as he was on intimate terms with its proprietor, he thought there were good hopes of Dick's being able to secure it.

By this time Blossom had brought them close to their own gate, where Mrs. Martindale, who had heard the sound of wheels, was waiting to receive them, having been in a fidget for hours at their non-arrival. And before they went to bed the matter of Ruth's engagement was broached to her mother, and sufficiently advanced to leave little doubt that when Dick came on Saturday his answer would not be "No."

CHAPTER III.

All next day, while Joe was going about his work in the harvest field, the vision of a plump and pretty dairymaid, attired in pink, haunted his brain, and pertinaciously refused to be driven away. Then he found himself repeating her name—"Phyllis, Phyllis—Phyllis May; nice name, Phyllis; just seems to suit her too." And thereupon he began humming to himself the ditty, "Phyllis is my only joy!" which from thence forward Joe declared to be the sweetest song in the English language.

"Heigh-ho!" thought he; "I shall likely never see her again; and even if I did——Come, Joe, lad! this will never do; a pretty farmer's wife an actress would make; and what would the mother say!" Which was all very well in its way; but when the vision of a pretty woman takes possession of a young fellow's heart at five-and-twenty, it is not to be exorcised in that fashion.

Saturday came, and with it arrived Dick, a burly, good-natured young farmer; intelligent enough too, but one who found the "Stock-book" a great deal more to his taste than either Milton or Shakespeare. But to little Ruth he was as a demi-god; for had he not been enshrined in her heart for two long years, ever since she paid a long visit to his sisters on her leaving school? And as both Mrs. Martindale and Joe looked with favorable eyes on his suit, Master Dick had a very pleasant time of it that week-end, you may depend upon it. It was a short stay, though, after all; for he had to go back home again on the Monday evening; but before then he had seen the owner of Riggfield and made arrangements to enter upon that, under the circumstances, "most desirable" farm, at Candlemas, on a fourteen years' lease.

"Why, Dick," said Ruth, when he returned to report progress, "by the time the lease is up I'll be quite an old woman."

"Nay, Ruthie, lass," rejoined Dick; "it will be time to talk like that when three such leases are up."

Joe drove Dick to Carlisle, and prayed that Blossom might fall lame or take some temporary ailment that would afford him an excuse to stay later in the town, and so give him another opportunity of seeing his fair enslaver; but no such good luck fell to his lot, and he had to take his way homeward long before the hour at which the theatre opened. And as this was "positively the last week" of their performance in Carlisle, he quite made up his mind that he should never look upon her again. But on the Friday an event happened at Linthwaite which roused that drowsy hamlet from its normal torpor, and it came about in this wise. About 4 o'clock in the afternoon, while Joe was overlooking the harvesters in one of his fields that lay a short distance from Knowecroft, in an angle where two roads met, he heard the clatter down the main road of a runaway horse and cart. He made a rush for the corner of the field, in the hope of being able to stop the runaway, and leaping the gate, was just in time to see the horse turn into the byroad at full speed. His heart gave a sudden bound, for between him and the excited animal stood, in the middle of the road, and apparently paralyzed with fear, a young lady in a pink dress. Now, in Joe's mind for the past week, the conjunction of a young lady and a pink dress had been suggestive of one thought only—of the adorable Phyllis; and now he felt assured that it was she who was going to be killed before his very eyes. The bare idea of this gave him the speed of an athlete and the strength of a madman, and he tore down the road like one possessed. But he was too late to save her, for before he could grasp the bridle, she had been struck down senseless; and he was just in time, by exerting all his force, to twist the animal round and prevent the wheel of the cart from passing over her helpless form.

The men from the harvest-field were by this time running with all speed to the scene of the accident, and to one of them Joe turned over the care of the frightened horse, while he stooped over his victim, to see how much she had suffered from the blow. And it was Phyllis May! Her eyes were closed and her cheeks were pallid as death; but Joe could detect the flicker of a pulse in her slender wrist, and lifting her in his arms, he carried her into the house. It was only a couple of minutes' walk, but what minutes they were to Joe—alike blissful and terrible. Her dainty head lay on his shoulder, and the light autumn breeze blew stray tresses of her bright brown hair against his cheek. To clasp her thus was ecstacy; but the fear lest those pale eyelids, white as twin snowdrops, should never more unclose in life, was agonizing.

Mrs. Martindale attended poor Phyllis with motherly anxiety; and as soon as Joe had borne the injured girl up to Ruth's bedroom he left her to the care of his mother and sister, and saddling his best horse, rode off at full speed for the country-side doctor, who lived some three miles away. Fortunately, he found that gentleman at home, with his sturdy cob standing at the door, ready to carry him on a distant visit; so they were enabled to reach Knowecroft without delay. Meanwhile the patient had been placed in bed, where, notwithstanding all Mrs. Martindale's rustic appliances, she still lay unconscious. But as the doctor entered the room a feeble moan was heard, and the injured girl began to move about, as though in pain. The kind-hearted old doctor, after carefully examining her condition, gave instructions as to her treatment—above all things enjoining perfect quiet—and assured them that there was no cause for alarm; for although she was suffering from concussion of the brain, it was only slight. He, however, said that he would call again in a few hours, on his way back from visiting some patients at a distance, and then took his departure.

Long before this time, the party in whose company Miss May had come to Linthwaite had arrived at Knowecroft in a state of great alarm, having heard of her accident. It appeared that Mr. Nelson, the principal of the dramatic company to which she was attached, had taken his wife and Miss May for a drive from Carlisle round by Linthwaite; and shortly before reaching that place their horse had cast a shoe, and they had stopped at the village smithy to have it fastened on. Mrs. Nelson had remained seated in the conveyance, but Miss May had taken advantage of the halt to saunter on ahead, and it thus happened that she was alone when the accident occurred. As may be imagined, her friends awaited the result of her examination by the doctor in great trepidation, and it was with a feeling of relief that they heard his report as above mentioned. Having to be in Carlisle for that evening's performance, and as a substitute for "Phœbe" would have to be got even at the eleventh hour, they could not prolong their stay at Knowecroft; but Mr. Nelson promised to drive back as soon as his duties at the theatre were over for the night, to ascertain how Miss May was progressing, and if necessary to procure additional professional assistance. Dr. Graham, however, assured him that this would not be required, and that, although the recovery of his fair patient might be slow, he had every confidence that she was not in a dangerous condition.

Joe was overjoyed at this declaration, and was almost wicked enough to feel that this accident, which might have been fraught with such serious consequences to one who had been in all his thoughts for a whole week, was a most happy one for him. He would allow no one but himself to go to Dr. Graham's for some drugs which that gentleman wished to have in readiness in case they should be required; and all the way going and returning he was drawing in his mind roseate pictures of what might be the result of this fortunate meeting with the maiden of his dreams.

The doctor came back according to promise, and found all going on quite satisfactorily. Mr. Nelson returned about midnight, and before taking his leave, said that his professional engagements necessitated his going to Edinburg on the following day, and would keep him there for at least a week; but he instructed Joe that no expense was to be spared in hastening the recovery of Miss May, who was, he said, much more to him than a mere member of his company, for she was the daughter of a very dear friend, long since dead.

To which Joe replied: "Mr. Nelson, Miss May is my guest, and no one but myself shall spend one shilling on her behalf while she is in my house. And I shall see that nothing is wanting that will be for her good."

"Mr. Martindale," rejoined the other, "you are a good fellow. God bless you for it! I leave my friend in your care with the utmost confidence; and whatever you may do for her, I am sure you will never regret. She is not like one of our set. But I must be off, for my wife will be worrying herself to death till I get back with news how Phyllis is going on." And shaking hands heartily with Joe, the worthy manager set out once more for Carlisle.

CHAPTER IV.

The recovery of Miss May from the effects of her accident were slow, but satisfactory. For some days she lay in a state of semi-stupor; and afterwards, when full consciousness returned, her feelings were more like those of one in a dream than in waking life. She was aware of the gentle, mother-like assiduity for her comfort of an elderly lady, who seemed to be always at hand to attend to her wants; and in that visionary stage of convalescence in which at times the patient can scarcely distinguish between dreams and realities, she was fain to believe it but a dream that she had been an orphan from infancy, for here was her own dear mother tending her again with watchful care. The other figure, that glided round her bed with noiseless footsteps, she could not make out at all. With dreamy eyes she could see it was that of a blue-eyed, flaxen-haired girl of her own age, or younger. She had an intuition, too, that her name was Ruth; and she liked to hear her speak, for her voice was low and musical, and so full of sympathy for her. But further thought cost too much effort, so she was fain to lie in a state of dreamy comfort.

Strength and mind and body came back, however, gradually but surely; and at last the doctor granted permission, one afternoon, that she might leave her room and join the family at tea in the parlor. By this time Mrs. Martindale, Ruth and she were great friends; and she had learnt from them the circumstances under which she came to be in her present condition. Her recollection was a blank from the time that she was struck down by a runaway horse. She had indeed a dim remembrance of seeing some one apparently spring out of the ground and seize the horse's bridle simultaneously with the blow she received; but further than this she could recollect nothing. So it was as a perfect stranger that Joe appeared to her that afternoon in the cosy parlor, redolent of rose leaves, and in which the first fire of autumn had been lighted for her comfort. How grateful she felt for all this kindness, bestowed upon her, an utter stranger—a playactress too, one of a class whom country folks look upon still as a species of social pariah. And how prettily, and with what emotion, she expressed that gratitude, two precious little tears gemming her eyes as she thanked Joe for the life he had preserved her.

Joe would have considered it sacrilege to call that afternoon and evening by such a commonplace term as pleasant. It was heavenly! And who but he knew how to place Miss May's easy chair just at the very angle where she could enjoy all the comfort of the fire without being inconvenienced by its glare? And who but he could arrange the cushions in the easiest position to support her dainty head? Why, nobody; and Ruth made the discovery that Joe had missed his vocation in life, which should have been that of a nurse. Then after tea, when Joe and his mother had retired for a while, Ruth thought that her new friend was now sufficiently strong to become the recipient of her confidences touching her engagement to Dick, and this seemed to cement their friendship still more; so that with one thing and another, before bedtime they were like a little family party, instead of the strangers they had been only a few weeks before.

Days went by, and Phyllis—she was Phyllis now—was able to go about the house, and began to talk of the time when she must no longer trespass on their kind hospitality. But Mrs. Martindale would not hear of this, and declared she should not leave Knowecroft until she was perfectly strong; for where could she have such a chance of speedy recovery as in the clear bracing air and restful atmosphere of Linthwaite? The truth was, the winsome ways of the young girl had so twined round the good old lady's heart, that she was loath to think of the time when they must part with her. Many a time did she bewail to herself that the lot of such a sweet bit lassie should be cast among "them playactors!" She had gathered from Phyllis that she was an orphan, and had often wished that she had been sent to them sooner, to be trained up in good, solid, sensible country ways, instead of the nonsense of playacting.

After a while Phyllis was sufficiently strong to go into the dairy and watch Ruth making up the butter, which she always did with her own hands; and one day she surprised that young person by saying to her; "Let me help you, Ruthie; I think I can do it your way now, after seeing you."

"Why, Phyllis, replied Ruth, "what can you know about making butter? Those little hands of yours were never made for such work as this."

"Oh, wern't they, though?" rejoined Phyllis, laughing. "But they were! Why, you dear, delicious little Ruthie, they have put up pounds and pounds and pounds of butter many a time. See!" she continued, turning up her sleeves, and setting to work in orthodox fashion, seizing a handful of butter, and rolling it and patting it and moulding it as deftly as the astonished Ruth could have done it herself. "Does that look as if I were doing this work for the first time?"

"Where did you learn?" asked Ruth in amazement. "Why, Phyllis, you could beat me hollow!"

"Have I never told you?" replied Phyllis. "My dear old uncle and aunt, with whom I have lived nearly all my life, had a farm in Shropshire, and I always used to help with the dairywork. You know my father was an actor; my mother died when I was only three years old, and my father before I was five; so, as uncle and aunt had no children of their own, they adopted me. Poor uncle died twelve months ago last Christmas; and when everything was settled, it was found that there was little or no money left, so I had to set to work to make my own living. Aunt did not live long after him; and now I have no relations left. Well, I tried a situation as governess first; but it was miserable, Ruthie, dear! So I was glad when Mr. Nelson, who was my father's dearest friend, looked me up, and proposed that I should try how I would like to be an actress. I made my first appearance in Carlisle only the week before I came here, so you see I am a long way off the top of the tree yet."

But Ruth could not wait to hear more. She was off like a bird to find her mother and tell her the news. She found that good lady pouring out Joe's tea; and rushing in she broke into a merry laugh, and cried: "Mother! Phyllis is a ready-made farmer's wife, and not a bit of an actress after all!"

Whatever other effect this declaration had, it quite took away Joe's appetite; a state of things which under other circumstances would have aroused maternal anxiety; but now his mother was too much interested in this wonderful intelligence to notice it. And before they could question Ruth further, she was off again, and in another minute had Phyllis among them, to tell her story for herself.

Candor compels us to admit that this discovery of their charming guest being a possible candidate for matrimony in their domestic circle gave the good mother a slight twinge of jealousy on Joe's behalf. For what mother can look in the face for the first time the possibility that even a part of her only son's affection towards herself may be diverted into another channel? But she was too sensible a woman to brood over such thoughts; for after all, if Joe did get such an idea into his head, where would he find a sweeter and better little wife than Phyllis? Her heart melted towards the desolate girl, who had never known a mother's love and care; and she kissed the young face, where the roses were again blooming, with such tenderness as called up the tears once more into the orphan's eyes. But they did not remain there long, for she had to satisfy Mrs. Martindale's curiosity concerning the art and mystery of butter making as practised in Salop; and Ruth was too full of rejoicing at her discovery to leave room for any but merry hearts in her company. And here was such a glorious chance for doing a bit of that match-making which all women, and particularly women who are newly matched themselves, so dearly love. So Ruth firmly made up her mind that she would have Phyllis for her sister; and Joe on his part determined that it should not be his fault if she had not.

And Phyllis? Well, Phyllis had not been asked for her opinion on that delicate subject as yet, and so it would hardly be fair in us to divulge her feelings. Mrs. Martindale in *her* mind fully resolved that there should be no more playacting for Miss Phyllis May. Ruth was going to leave her, and she should take Ruth's place in the household. If Joe took it into his head to marry her, well and good; but if not, there would soon be plenty of eligible suitors for her hand, and anything was better than to let her go back among "them playactor folk."

CHAPTER V.

It must not be supposed that Phyllis had been deserted by her actor-friends all this time. On the contrary, Mr. Nelson had managed to pay one or two hurried visits to Knowecroft during the first weeks of her illness, and on one occasion he brought his wife, to give the latter an opportunity of seeing that Phyllis was really comfortable and happy. Possibly Mrs. Nelson was shrewd enough to surmise what was likely to be the outcome of the charming stranger's stay at Knowecroft; at anyrate, neither she nor her husband showed any signs of any wish to shorten her stay there, although Phyllis was not left without every assurance that the worthy couple were looking forward with pleasure to her return.

As day by day went past, each one bringing nearer the time when she must leave Knowecroft and all the kind friends there, Phyllis's heart had grown very heavy. It had been such a peaceful, happy time—even while she was an invalid, she had felt it so—after buffeting with the world for nearly two years alone, meeting with harsh words from some, indifference from many, and kindness from few; and as a last resource, having to adopt for a livelihood a calling for which she had little liking—that Knowecroft had seemed to her a perfect haven of rest. It was not as a stranger that the little household there seemed to look upon her; nay, it was more as a daughter and a sister, and her heart yearned so towards all this love, which she must leave behind her. It appeared so much harder to face the world now, than it did before she came; but she knew that it must be done, and she felt that the sooner her departure was taken now, the better it would be, both for herself and her hospitable friends. She could not be blind to the fact that Joe's regard for her was of a warmer nature than that of a brother; and without daring to analyze her own feelings towards him, she dreaded a declaration on his part, as being sure to cause unhappiness to his mother, for whose goodness she was so deeply grateful that she shrank from causing her a moment's pain. And that it must be a matter for pain to her, that her son should wish to marry a penniless stranger, Phyllis felt sure; all the more so that the stranger had been, even for so short a time, a "playacter." So she came to the resolution to write to Mr. Nelson at once, telling him that she was at last well enough to resume her histrionic duties, and then to intimate to Mrs. Martindale that she must now really leave them.

But when she came to talk to her about it, she found that good lady had very different views on the subject. "Gan to leave us? said she. "Nay, Phyllis, my dear lass, thoo mustn't talk that way. Ruth's gan, an' I'm to be left by mysel', an' I've been thinkin' hoo neyce it wad be if thoo wad nobbut bide wid us awthegithe. I ken thoo might mak' mair money wid thom playactors, but bless the', bairn! thoo wad be far better wid us. Thy oan mother wadn't be kinder till the' than I'll be, if thoo'll only stop."

"Oh! Mrs. Martindale"——began Phillis.

"Nay; divvent co' me Mrs. Martindale; co' me *mother*, that's a good bairn," interpolated the kindly dame. "I's sure I fin' like a mother to the', an' I always will, whether thoo gans or stops; but thoo's gan nin."

"Well, mother, dear mother," continued Phyllis, "if I stayed, I should only be a trouble to you, and that would make me miserable as well as you. It is very, very hard to leave you; but as I have my livelihood to make, it is best I should."

"There's nea 'best' about it, that I can see," rejoined Mrs. Martindale. "Ruth's gan to leave me, an' I's gittin' oald an' feckless, an' there'll hev to be somebody to tak' her place, an' thoo could mannish 't famously. Thoo maybe thinks that Joe wad object; but here he is comin', and we'll see what he says." And Joe, whose face had been lengthening daily at the prospect of Phyllis withdrawing the light of her presence from Knowecroft, walked into the room. "Joe," said his mother, "here's Phyllis talkin' aboot leavin' us; an' I believe she's feeart thoo wad object. Wad te, Joe?"

Would *he* object! The idea was ridiculous. So he replied: "Miss May" (*he* had not advanced to the 'Phyllis' stage yet), "if any persuasions of mine could prevail upon you to remain with us, I would use them all. Could you not be happy with us?"

"Oh, so happy!" replied Phyllis, half sobbing. "You have all been so good and so kind to me; but——"

"We want nea *buts*," interrupted Mrs. Martindale. "If thoo's gan to be happy, an' I's gan to be happy, an' Joe's gan to be happy, thoo stops, an' we're aw gan to be miserable if thee gans; thoo'll stop, an' that's aw aboot it. Sea, its settled!"

With the ground cut from beneath her whichever way she turned, what could poor Phyllis do? So it was arranged then and there that she should resume the *role* of Phœbe; but in earnest this time; and Ruth undertook, before leaving Knowecroft, to make her such an adept in poultry-rearing and Cumberland dairy-work as would leave nothing for her mother to teach her.

CHAPTER VI.

Winter time in the country is not the most cheery of seasons, and the evening in particular, even although ten o'clock is thought a late hour to be out of bed, are apt to lag rather drearily. But there had never been such a merry winter at Knowecroft as this one. Ruth's piano had not been used much of late; but when it was found that Phyllis could both play and sing, Joe soon had a tuner out from Carlisle, and it was marvellous how swiftly the nights sped by listening to her. Beethoven and Mendelssohn were perhaps just a little bit too abstruse for her audience—at least for two of them—but Joe would have thought any music celestial, if played by her.

Then to hear her sing plaintive old ballads, with now and again a merry ditty, or a reel or jig to enliven matters—why, it was just like having a little concert all to themselves every evening. And to crown all, to Mrs. Martindale's intense delight, Phyllis set to work, under Joe and Ruth's tuition, to learn some of the vernacular songs—so dear to the hearts of Cumbrians all the world over—and now she would conclude the evening's performance with a lift of *Sally Gray*, or *The Redbreast*, *King Roger*, or *The Impatient Lassie*. To vary the monotony, they would sometimes have a little dance, in which they would be joined by the neighboring farmers' sons and daughters; and so with one thing and another, the winter was over almost before they knew it was there.

But before it came to a close, Dick Braithwaite had taken possession of Riggfield, with his sister Mary as his housekeeper; and they were pretty frequent visitors at Knowecroft in the evenings. Dick and Ruth generally managed to get ensconced in a corner by themselves; and as matrimony seemed in the very air, and Mary Braithwaite had been spoken for by a bluff yeoman of Westmorland, Mrs. Martindale considered it to be for her good to give her matronly advice whenever occasion offered; so there was only Joe left to give undivided attention to Phyllis—to turn over the leaves of her music for her and suggest what they should have next. If Joe had not been head-over-ears in love with Phyllis, to begin with, no other conclusion could have come from this state of affairs; and as it was, every day riveted firmer the chain that bound him. But he dared not tell her how dear she was to him; the risk seemed too great. If she had showed any signs of meeting him half-way, he might have ventured on a declaration; or if she had been an inmate of another household, he might have broached the momentous question, and "put his fortune to the touch." But he surmised that a premature declaration of his love might drive away from Knowecroft this fairy creature, who had changed it from a matter-of-fact farm house to a bower of bliss; and so he waited, with all the patience he could summon to his aid, the arrival of the time when he could, with some certainty of success, ask her to become his wife.

Had he known the secrets of our dear Phyllis's heart, he need not have been so wary; for Phyllis was just as much in love with Joe as Joe was with her. She had taught Joe enough of music to enable him to follow her and know the right time to turn over; but sometimes he was so much taken up watching her nimble fingers as they slid over the keys as to forget to keep his eyes on the music, until brought to a sense of his duty by her pausing to turn the leaf over for herself. On such occasions, when their hands met, she would tingle and blush all over; but as he was behind her, he could not see this. And when he returned from ranging the fields or from his other outdoor vocations, and his light springing step was heard in the passage, accompanied by the stately tread of his faithful collie Yarrow, her heart would go pitapat and her rosy cheeks would grow rosier: all which signs told their tale plainly enough to Joe's mother and his wide-awake little sister, but scarcely so to him, although he had his hopes as well as his fears. What love could live without them?

Then spring returned in all her glory. First, her hardy pioneers and snowdrops, fearlessly advancing into the enemy's country; then in their track appeared an advance guard of purple and yellow crocuses in irregular order, closely followed by her standard-bearers, the daffodils, their golden banners waving in the breeze; after a while her fluters and fifers, the thrushes and blackbirds, were heard in the tall ash trees; last of all came her fairy court—violets and anemones, wild wood hyacinths, cowslips and buttercups, with all the myriad wild flowers; and her full orchestra of feathered songsters filled with melody the hedgerows and brakes—nay, the very sky itself. The swallows came back to their nests in the eaves, and the chaffinch piped his love-song to his mate in the apple trees in the orchard. With all which "spring's delights" Joe had been familiar from his youth up; but such a delicious spring as this had never blessed the earth since Adam ate that unfortunate apple. Joe was sure of that.

CHAPTER VII.

Mary Braithwaite's matrimonial arrangements required that she should be back in Westmorland by midsummer; and as it would never have done for Dick to have been left without a housekeeper, he had prevailed on Ruth to hasten their wedding so that it should take place before then. Accordingly, one fine day in May, when Dick and Joe had occasion to go to Carlisle, Ruth and Phyllis seized the opportunity to accompany them, to choose the wedding dress. This agreeable task having been accomplished to their entire satisfaction, and suitable habiliments selected for the bridesmaids, Mary and Phyllis—which latter costumes Ruth insisted on being of a pink hue—they rejoined their escorts. Now, as it was still early in the afternoon, and Phyllis had hitherto seen but little of the town, it was proposed that they should walk round it; and as they were passing down Castle street, Ruth exclaimed: "Joe, I've never been inside the cathedral in my life, and I *should* like to see it. I wonder if we could get in?"

"I daresay it will be open," replied Joe; "we'll go round and see."

So they sauntered down Paternoster Row and into the abbey, and sure enough the south door was open. They were duly shown over the building; and having sufficiently admired the exquisite tabernacle work of the stalls, the quaint and grotesque carving of the *misereres*, the lofty ceiling gorgeous in blue and gold—and, in fact, all that there was to be seen—above all, the crowning glory of the cathedral, its matchless great east window, with its delicate and symmetric tracery, they prepared to leave. Their guide, however, was ready with a new suggestion. "Would you not like," he said, "to go up to the tower? There's a splendid view from the top."

This was eagerly agreed to, and at once they began the ascent. A tiresome treadmill business it was, till they reached the clerestory, and looked down from that giddy height upon the choir beneath. Then came a dark passage, demanding slow and careful exploration, after which there was more treadmill work until they arrived at the bell-chamber. Here they paused to breathe awhile, and look at the massive bells which had for centuries rung out tidings of joy or woe to the city beneath. Whether Ruth and Dick were more tired with their ascent than their companions, or whether watching the slow and regular swing of the big clock pendulum had mesmerized them, or from whatsoever other cause, they seemed in no hurry to proceed when Joe led the way upward again; and so, when they emerged in the open air on the leads of the tower, Phyllis and he found themselves alone. And what a scene lay beneath them! At their feet was the busy city, the streets full of bustle and commotion, for it was market day; in the foreground, the venerable castle, with its blackened keep, wherein pined, in days aforetime, captives rude and gentle, from the redoubtable Kinmont Willie to the hapless and beautiful Mary of Scotland. Beyond, a wide expanse of meadow-land and verdant holms, now yellow with buttercups, through which Eden winds its sinuous course to the Solway, that glitters in the distant west like a line of silver; to the south, the lovely vale Caldew, with gently undulating hills and white hamlets glinting among the trees; and far away on every hand ranges of blue fells, Helvellyn, Blencathra and Skiddaw, Crossfell and Criffell.

When Joe and Phyllis had sufficiently feasted their eyes on this glorious sight, without Ruth or Dick making their appearance, Phyllis suggested that they had better descend again. But Joe was not at all impatient. In fact, having by this time begun to feel assured that a certain question would not now scare Phyllis away from Knowecroft, as he had at one time feared it might, he thought this was a glorious opportunity for putting it; so he called Phyllis back, and pointing to a mere speck of a house far down the valley, he said to her: "Look! do you see that house far away yonder, with two poplars beside it and the smoke curling up from the chimneys?"

"Yes," replied Phyllis, and then recognizing it, she clapped her hands and exclaimed: "Oh, it is dear old Knowecroft!" And she looked up at Joe with her big brown eyes in such a bewitching way, that his heart told him his hour had indeed come.

"Phyllis," he said, making a prisoner of one of her plump little hands—"Phyllis, you have made Knowecroft another paradise to me since you came to it. Will you make it still dearer?—will you be my own little wife?"

Phyllis looked shyly up into his face, and then down again, but did not reply; only her hand trembled in his, and her cheeks flushed and paled, and flushed again.

"I have loved you, darling," he went on, "ever since the first time I saw you. Do you—can you love me a little bit? It would make Ruth, and the mother, and all of them, so happy as well as me. Will you, Phyllis?"

Whether her lips said "Yes," or only her eyes, Joe never could tell, but he knew that that was his answer; and when his arm slipped round her waist, and her eyes looked up into his eyes, somehow her dimpled chin seemed to rise from the level of his heart almost to that of his lips, so wonderful a leveller is love. And before they had time to rush to opposite sides of the tower and try to look unconscious, up popped Dick's ruddy face in the doorway, followed by Ruth's demure one. Perhaps Ruth had not caused Dick to dally on their upward way on purpose to give Joe this chance of securing Phyllis; but we have our own suspicions on that point. At any rate, on seeing them so far apart she put on a look of great gravity, and exclaimed with mock surprise: "Gracious, have you two been quarreling? O, Dick, isn't it dreadful?"

Dick grinned, and Joe and Phyllis looked sheepish.

But Ruth was remorseless, and continued: "What shall I say to mother when we get back?"

To which query Joe, drawing Phyllis' arm within his own, replied: "You may tell her, Ruthie, that I have found another daughter for her, who is not half so saucy as the one that is leaving her."

Whereupon Ruth flung her arms around Phyllis' neck and kissed her, saying: "O, Phyllis, dear, I am so glad! And mother—oh, we'll have to go off at once and tell mother! She will be delighted. Come along this minute."

"But, Ruthie," rejoined Phyllis, "you have not seen this lovely view. Look! isn't it glorious?"

Ruth shrugged her shoulders, and gave a cursory glance around. "O yes; I've no doubt it's enchanting," she said. "But I've no time to look at it just now. Dick and I are too late to enjoy it to-day, so we'll have to come back again. Come along—I'm away." And she darted off down the corkscrew stairs, followed more sedately by the rest.

The drive homeward was a delightful one to all parties, albeit Phyllis had some slight flutterings of the heart as she meditated on the reception she would receive at Knowecroft under circumstances so changed since she left in the morning. But when Ruth tripped into the house and told Mrs. Martindale that Joe had won Phyllis for his wife, that good lady showed less surprise than pleasure. And when Joe led his blushing sweetheart in, and told his mother that Phyllis was going to become her daughter in truth, she took her in her arms, and looking fondly in her face, said: "Eh, Phyllis, lass, I am glad we're gan to get the' to keep awthegither." And then she kissed her, and said: "It was a lucky day for aw of us when that horse knocked the' doon; weyfe, an' me a good dowter! Who'd ha' thowte it! We niver know what's gan to come o' things!"

What did "come o' things" was that one bright morning, between haytime and harvest, Ruth Martindale became Ruth Braithwaite; and later on, after the harvest was all gathered in, Phyllis and Joe were made one. And now, if you should visit Knowecroft and peep into the dairy, there you may see Mrs. Joe Martindale, plumper and prettier than ever, making up the butter; and standing on a milking-stool beside her, a miniature copy of herself, pink gown, snow-white apron and all, doing her best to help. If, further, you should happen to ask this elf her name, she will look up at you with eyes just like her mother's, and say they call her Phœbe.

An Irishman to whom some wonderful story was told on the authority of a penny newspaper, declined to believe it, saying he distrusted all he saw in the "cheap prints." "Why shouldn't you believe in the cheap papers," he was asked, "as soon as any others?" "Because," was his ready answer, "I don't think they can afford to speak the truth for the money."