THE SHOULDERS of ATLAS

By Mary E. Wilkins Freeman

ROSE GAZED AT SYLVIA WITH SUDDEN EAGERNESS.

SYNOPSIS

Henry Whitman and his wife, Sylvia, a middle aged couple, poor and hard working, living in the New England village of East Westland, come unexpectedly into the property of Sylvia's cousin, Abrahama White. Abrahama's will cuts off her own sister's child, Rose Fletcher, an orphan, living with rich people in New York. The property consists of a big house standing on 50 acres of ground and an annual income of $600 from stocks. Horace Allen, principal of the local school, who had boarded with the Whitmans in the days of their poverty, remains with them in their prosperity.

Lucinda Hart, a timid young woman, keeps the hotel. Miss Farrel dwells therein, an object of suspicion because of great beauty, despite her advanced years. One morning she is found dead in bed of poison. Lucinda Hart is suspected of giving her poisoned candy and is arrested together with Hannah Simmons, who is supposed to be her accomplice. Now, Miss Farrel, it turns out, was the person who took care of Rose Fletcher, having secretly settled her entire fortune on her, but giving all the credit to the New York people. Consequently Rose Fletcher is summoned to the funeral. On her arrival she captures the Whitman family, though they look with awe and misgiving upon her city clothes and city manners. The case against Lucinda Hart and Hannah Simmons falls through. Because of the departure for Europe of the Wilton family, with whom she had been living, Rose Fletcher decides to remain with the Whitmans. She makes friends with a nervous, hysterical girl named Lucy Ayres, whose morbid fancies have greatly disturbed her mother. Incidentally, Horace and Henry hear that Lucy is fond of making candy and uneasiness is aroused in the minds of both. When Lucy offers Rose a box Horace snatches it away and crumples it into his pocket.

Himself in love with Rose, Hiram is outraged to find that Lucy cherishes a mad passion for him. Meanwhile Henry, weary of enforced idleness, is anxious to return to his old life in the shop. To add to his distress, he sees that something is preying on his wife's mind. She confesses that she is worrying for fear she may lose Rose, whom she has learned to love with a jealous maternal affection.

CHAPTER XXV

ON his way home Henry stopped at Sydney Meeks'. He found the lawyer in a demoralized dining room which had nevertheless had an air of homely comfort with its chairs worn into hollows to fit human anatomies and its sideboard set out with dusty dishes and a noble ham. Meeks was a very good cook, although one could not confidently assert that dust and dirt did not form a part of his ingredients. One of his triumphs was ham cooked in a manner which he claimed to have invented. After having been boiled it was baked and frequently basted in a manner which Meeks kept as secret as the bouquet of his grape wine. Sydney sat at the table, eating bread and ham spread with mustard, and there was also a mysterious pie in reserve and a bottle of wine. "Draw up, Henry," said Sydney.

"I've had supper."

"What?"

"Sylvia had chicken salad, and flapjacks, and hot biscuits."

Sydney sniffed. "Cut a slice off that ham," he ordered, "and draw a chair up; not that one; you'll go through. Yes, that's right. Bring over another wineglass while you're about it. This is daisy wine, 10 years old. I've got a pie here that I'll be willing to stake you a fortune you can't analyze. I made it. It's after the pattern of the cold pastries you read about in old English novels. You shall guess what's in it. Draw up."

Henry obeyed. He found himself sitting opposite Sydney, eating and drinking with intense enjoyment. Sydney chuckled. "Good?" said he.

"I don't know when my victuals have tasted right before," said Henry. He received a large wedge of the pie on his plate, and his whole face beamed with the first taste. Sydney leaned across the table and whispered, "Squabs," said he, "and robins; big, fat ones. I shot 'em night before last. It's all nonsense, the fuss folks make about robins and a lot of other birds; as far as that goes—damned sentiment. Year before last I hadn't a bushel of grapes on my vines because the robins stole them, and not a peck of pears on that big Seckel pear tree. If they'd eaten them up clean I wouldn't have felt so bad; but there the ground would be covered with pears rotted on account of one little peck. They are enough sight better on women's bonnets than eating up folks' substance, though I don't promulgate that doctrine abroad. And one thing I ain't ashamed to say, big, fat robins ought to be made use of. This pie is enough sight more wholesome for the bodies of men who have immortal souls dependent a little on what is eaten, in spite of the preaching, than western tainted beef. I made up my mind that pie was the natural destiny of a robin, and I make squab and robin pies every week of my life. The robins are out of mischief in that pie, and they are doing us good. What makes you look so, though, Henry? There's something besides my pie and ham and wine gives that look to your face."

"I'm going back to the shop tomorrow," said Henry. Sydney looked at him. "Most folks would say you were an uncommon fool," said he. "I suppose you know that."

"I can't help it," said Henry, happily. Along with the savory pie in his mouth came a subtler relish to his very soul. The hunger of the honest worker who returns to his work was being appeased.

CHAPTER XXVI

WHILE Henry was at Sydney Meek's Horace sat alone in the south room smoking and reading the evening paper. He kept looking up from his paper and listening. He was hoping that Rose, in spite of the fact that she had not been able to come down to supper, might yet make her appearance. He speculated on her altered looks and manner at dinner. He could not help being a little anxious, in spite of all Mrs. Ayres' assurances and the really vague nature of his own foreboding. He asked himself if he had had from the beginning anything upon which to base suspicion. Given the premises of an abnormal girl with a passion for himself which humiliated him, an abnormal woman like Miss Farrel, with a similar passion, although under better control, the melodramatic phases of the candy, and sudden death and traces of arsenical poison, what should be the conclusion?

He himself had eaten some of presumably the same candy with no ill effects. Mrs. Ayres had assured him of her constant watchfulness over her daughter, who was no doubt in an alarmingly nervous state, but was she necessarily dangerous? He doubted if Mrs. Ayres had left the two girls a moment to themselves during the drive. What possible reason, after all, had he for alarm?

When he heard Sylvia mounting the stairs and caught a glimpse of a little tray borne carefully he gave up all hope of Rose's coming down. Presently he went out and walked down the village street, smoking. As he passed out of the yard he glanced up at Rose's window and saw the light behind the curtains. He thought how glad he was that the girl had a woman like Sylvia to care for her. As he looked Sylvia's shadow passed between the window and the light. It had in its shadowy enlargement a benignant aspect. There was an angelic, motherly bend to the vague shoulders. Sylvia was really in her element. She petted and scolded the girl, whom she found flung upon her bed like a castaway flower, sobbing pitifully.

"What on earth is the matter?" demanded Sylvia in a honeyed tone, which at once stung and sweetened. "Here you are in the dark crying and going without your victuals. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Suddenly Rose sat up. "Nothing is the matter," she said. "I am just nervous." She made an effort to control her face. She smiled at Sylvia, with her wet eyes and swollen mouth. She resolutely dabbed at her flushed face with a damp little ball of handkerchief. Sylvia turned to the bureau and took a fresh handkerchief from the drawer. She sprinkled it with some toilet water that was on the dressing table and gave it to Rose. "Here is a clean handkerchief," she said, "and I've put some of your perfumery on it. Give me the other."

Rose took the sweet smelling square of linen and tried to smile again. "I just got nervous," she said.

"Sit down here in this chair," said Sylvia, "and I'll draw up the little table, and I want you to eat your supper. I've brought up something real nice for you."

Rose looked hopelessly at the dainty fare. Then she looked at Sylvia. The impulse to tell another woman her trouble got the better of her. If women had not other women in whom to confide there are times when their natures would be too much for them. "I heard some news this morning," said she. She attempted to make her voice exceedingly light and casual.

"What?"

"I heard about Mr. Allen's engagement."

"Engagement to whom?"

"To—Lucy."

"Lucy?"

"Lucy Ayres. She seems to be a very sweet girl. She is very pretty. I hope she will make him very happy." Rose's voice trembled with sad hypocrisy.

"Who told you?" demanded Sylvia.

"She told me herself."

"Did her mother hear her?"

"She heard, but I think she did not understand. Lucy spoke in French. She talks French very well. She studied with Miss Farrel, you know. I think Lucy has done all in her power to fit herself to become a good wife for an educated man."

"What did she tell you in French for? Why didn't she speak in English?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I know. She did it so her mother wouldn't hear and say in English that she was telling an awful whopper. Mr. Allen is no more engaged to Lucy Ayres than I am."

Rose gazed at Sylvia with sudden eagerness. "What makes you think so, Aunt Sylvia?"

"Nothing makes me think what I know. Mr. Allen has never paid any attention to Lucy Ayres beyond what he couldn't help, and she's made a mountain out of a mole hill. Lucy Ayres is man crazy, that's all. You needn't tell me."

"Then you don't think——"

"I know better. I'll ask Mr. Allen."

"If you asked him it would make it very hard for him if it wasn't so," said Rose.

"I don't see why."

"Mr. Allen is a gentlemen, and he could not practically accuse a woman of making an unauthorized claim of that sort," said Rose. She looked at the tray and took up a fork.

"Well, I won't say anything about it to him if you think I had better not," said Sylvia, "but I must say I think it's pretty hard on a man to have a girl going round telling folks he's engaged to her when he ain't. Eat that lamb chop and them peas while they're hot."

"I'm going to. They are delicious. I didn't think I was hungry at all, but to have things brought up this way——"

"You've got to eat a saucer of strawberries afterward," said Sylvia happily. She watched the girl eat and she was in a sort of ecstasy, which was nevertheless troubled. After a while, when Rose had nearly finished the strawberries, she ventured a remark:

"Lucy Ayres is a queer girl," said she. "I've known all about her for some time. She has been thinking young men were in love with her when they never had an idea of such a thing, ever since she was so high (Sylvia indicated by her outstretched hand a point about a foot and a half from the floor).

"It seems as if she must have had some reason sometimes," said Rose, with an impulse of loyalty toward the other girl. "She is very pretty."

"As far as I know no young man in East Westland has ever thought of marrying her," said Sylvia. "I think myself they are afraid of her. It doesn't do for a girl to act too anxious to get married. She just cuts her own nose off."

"I have never seen her do anything unbecoming," began Rose, then she stopped, for Lucy's expression which had caused a revolt in her was directly within her mental vision. It seemed as if Sylvia interpreted her thought. "I have seen her making eyes," said she.

Rose was silent. She realized that she also had seen poor Lucy making eyes.

"What a girl is so crazy to get married for anyway when she has a good home and a good mother I can't see," began Sylvia, leading directly up to the subject in the secret place in her mind.

Rose blushed with apparently no reason. "But she can't have her mother always, you know, Aunt Sylvia," said she.

"Her mother's folks are awful long lived. But Lucy is younger; in the course of nature she will outlive her mother, and then she will be all alone."

"What if she is? Ain't she got her good home and money enough to live on if she's careful?"

"I always thought it would be very dreadful to live alone," Rose said with another blush.

"Well, she needn't be alone. There's plenty of women always in want of a home. No woman need live alone if she don't want to."

"But it isn't quite like——" Rose hesitated.

"Like what?"

"It wouldn't seem quite so much like your own home, would it, as if——" Rose hesitated again.

Sylvia interrupted her. "A girl is a fool to get married if she's got money enough to live on," said she.

"Why, Aunt Sylvia, wouldn't you have married Uncle Henry if you had had plenty of money?" asked the girl, exactly as Henry had done.

Sylvia herself colored faintly. "That was a very different matter," said she.

"But why?"

"Because it was," said Sylvia, bringing up one of her impregnable ramparts against argument. But the girl persisted. "I don't see why," she said.

Sylvia colored again. "Well, for one thing, your Uncle Henry is one man in a thousand," said she. "I know every silly girl thinks she has found just that man, but it's only about once in a thousand times she does, and she's mighty lucky if she don't find out that the man in a thousand is another woman's husband when she gets her eyes open. Then there's another thing—nothing has ever come betwixt us."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean we've had no family," said Sylvia firmly, although her color deepened. "I know you think it's awful for me to say such a thing, but look right up and down this street at the folks that got married about the same time Henry and I did. How many of them that's had families ain't had reason to regret it? I tell you what it is, child, girls don't know everything. It's awful having children and straining every nerve to bring them up right and then to have them go off in six months in consumption the way the Masons lost their three children—two boys and a girl—or to worry and fuss until you are worn to a shadow the way Mrs. George Emerson has over her son and then have him take to drink. There wasn't any consumption in the Mason family on either side in a straight line, but the three children all went with it, and there ain't any drink in the Emerson family on her side or his, all as straight as a string, but Mrs. Emerson was a Weaver, and she had a great-uncle who drank himself to death. I don't believe there's a family anywhere around that hasn't got some dreadful thing in it to leak out, when you don't expect it, in children. Sometimes it only leaks in a straight line, and sometimes it leaks sidewise. You never know. Now, here's my family. I was a White, you know, like your Aunt Abrahama. There's consumption in our family, the worst kind. I never had any doubt but what Henry and I would have lost our children if we'd had any."

"But you didn't have any!" said Rose in a curiously naive and hopeful tone.

"We are the only ones that got married about the time we did who didn't have any," said Sylvia in her conclusive tone.

"But, Aunt Sylvia," said Rose, "you wouldn't stop everybody's getting married? Why, there wouldn't be any people in the world in a short time."

"There's some people in the world now that would be a good sight better off out of it for themselves and other folks," said Sylvia.

"Then you don't think anybody ought to be married?"

"If folks want to be fools, let them. Nothing I can say is going to stop them, but I'll miss my guess if some of the girls that get married had the faintest idea what they were going into they would stop short, if it sent them over a rail fence. Folks can't tell girls everything, but marriage is an awful risk, an awful risk. And I say, as I said before, any girl who has got enough to live on is a fool to get married."

"But I don't see why, after all."

"Because she is," replied Sylvia. This time Rose did not attempt to bruise herself against the older woman's imperturbability. She did not look convinced, but again the troubled expression came over her face. "I'm glad you relished your supper," said Sylvia.

"It was very nice," replied Rose, absently. Suddenly the look of white horror which had come over her face on the night of her arrival possessed it again. "What on earth is the matter?" cried Sylvia.

"I almost remembered then," gasped the girl. "You know what I told you the night I came. Don't let me remember, Aunt Sylvia. I think I shall die if I ever do."

Sylvia was as white as the girl, but she rose briskly. "There's nothing to remember," she said. "You're nervous, and I'm going to make some of that root beer of mine tomorrow. It has hops in it, and it's real quieting. Now you stop worrying and wait a minute. I've got something to show you. Here, you look at the book you've been reading and stop thinking. I'll be back in a minute. I've just got to step into the other chamber."

Sylvia was back in a moment. She never was obliged to hesitate for a second as to the whereabouts of any of her possessions. She had some little boxes in her hand and one rather large one under her arm. Rose looked at them with interest. "What is it, Aunt Sylvia?" said she.

Sylvia laughed. "Something to show you that belongs to you," she said.

"Why, what have you got that belongs to me, Aunt Sylvia?"

"You wait a minute."

Sylvia and Rose both stood beside the white dressing table, and Sylvia opened the boxes one after another and slowly and impressively removed their contents and laid them in orderly rows on the white dimity of the table. The lamplight shone on them, and the table blazed like an altar with jeweled fires. Rose gasped. "Why, Aunt Sylvia!" said she.

"All these things belonged to your Aunt Abrahama, and now they belong to you," said Sylvia in a triumphant tone.

"Why, but these are perfectly beautiful things!"

"Yes, I don't believe anybody in East Westland ever knew she had them. I don't believe she could have worn them here even when she was a girl, or I should have heard of them. I found them in her bureau drawer. She didn't even keep them under lock and key, but then she never went out anywhere, and if nobody even knew she had them they were safe enough. Now they're all yours."

"But they belong to you, Aunt Sylvia."

Sylvia took up the most valuable thing there, a really good pearl necklace, and held it dangling from her skinny hand. "I should look pretty with this around my neck, shouldn't I?" she said. "I wanted to wear that pink silk, but when it comes to some things I ain't quite out of my mind. Here, try it on." Rose clasped the necklace around her white throat and smiled at herself in the glass. Rose wore a gown of soft green china silk, and the pearls over its lace collar surrounded her face with soft gleams of rose and green.

"These amethysts are exquisite," said Rose after she had done admiring herself. She took up one after another a ring, a bracelet, a necklace, a brooch and earrings all of clear pale amethysts in beautiful settings.

"You should wear these," she said to Sylvia.

"I guess I shan't begin to wear jewelry at my time of life," declared Sylvia. Her voice sounded almost angry in its insistence. "Everything here is yours," she said, and nodded her head and set her mouth hard for further emphasis.

The display on the dressing table, although not of great value, was in reality rather unusual. All of the pieces were, of course, old, and there were more semi-precious than precious stones; but the settings were good and the whole enough to delight any girl. Rose hung over them in delight. She had not many jewels. Somehow her income had never seemed to admit of jewels. She was as pleased as a child. Finally she hung some pearl earrings over her ears by bits of white silk, her ears not being pierced; she allowed the pearl necklace to remain. She clasped on some charming cameo bracelets and a heavy gold one set with a miniature of a lady. She covered her slender fingers with rings and pinned old brooches all over her bosom. She fastened a pearl spray in her hair, and a heavy shell comb. Then she fairly laughed out loud. "There," said she to Sylvia, and laughed again.

Sylvia also laughed and her laugh had the ring of a child's. "Don't you feel as if you were pretty well off as you are?" said she. Rose sprang forward and hugged Sylvia. "Well off!" said she. "Well off! I never knew a girl who was better off. To think of my being here with you and your being as good as a mother to me, and Uncle Henry as good as a father, and this dear old house, and to see myself fairly loaded down with jewels like a crown princess! I never knew I liked such things so much. I am fairly ashamed."

Rose at that minute was wonderful. Something akin to the gleam of the jewels seemed to have waked within her. Sylvia gazed at her in a sort of rapture. She felt a warmth of love and ownership of which she had never known herself capable. She felt that the girl and her jewels—the girl, who was the greatest jewel of all—were her very own. For the first time a secret anxiety and distress of mind, which she had confided to no one, was allayed. She said to herself that everything was as it should be. She had Rose, and Rose was happy. Then she thought how she had found the girl when she first entered the room and had courage, seeing her as she looked now, to ask again, "What was the matter? Why were you crying?"

Rose turned upon her with a smile of perfect radiance. "Nothing at all, dear Aunt Sylvia," she cried happily, "nothing at all."

Sylvia smiled. A smile was always somewhat of an effort for Sylvia, with her hard, thin lips, which had not been overused to smiling. Sylvia had no sense of humor. Her smiles would never be possible except for sudden and unlooked for pleasures, and those had been rare in her whole life. But now she smiled, with her lips and her eyes. "Rose wasn't crying because she thought Mr. Allen was going to marry another girl," she told herself; "she was only crying because a girl is always full of tantrums. Now she is perfectly happy. I am able to make her perfectly happy. I know that all a girl needs in this world to make her happy and free her from care is a woman to be a mother to her. I am making her see it. I can make up to her for everything. Everything is just as it should be."

She stood gazing at Rose for a long moment before she spoke. "Well," said she, "you look like a whole jewelry shop. I don't see, for my part, how your aunt came to have so many, why she wanted them."

"Maybe they were given to her," said Rose. A tender thought of the dead woman who had gone from the house of her fathers and left her jewels behind softened her face. "Poor Aunt Abrahama," said she. "She lived in this house all her life, and was never married, and she must have come to think that all her pretty things had not amounted to much."

"I don't see why," said Sylvia. "I don't see that it was any great hardship to live all her life in this nice house, and I don't see what difference it made about her having nice things, whether she got married or not. It could not have made any difference."

"Why not?" asked Rose, looking at her with a mischievous flash of blue eyes. A long green gleam, like a note of music, shot out from the emerald on her finger as she raised it in a slight gesture. "To have all these beautiful things put away in a drawer and never to have anybody see her in them must have made some difference."

"It wouldn't make a mite," said Sylvia stoutly.

"I don't see why."

"Because it wouldn't."

Rose laughed and looked again at herself in the glass. "Now you had better take off all those things and go to bed and try to go to sleep," said Sylvia.

"Yes, Aunt Sylvia," said Rose. But she did not stir, except to turn this way and that to bring out more colored lights from the jewels.

(To Be Continued Next Sunday.)

SYLVIA SURVEYED HER WITH A SOUL OF RAPTURE.

THE NEW YORK HERALD-SAN FRANCISCO CALL ANGLO-AMERICAN COMPETITION

Max Pemberton, England, vs. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, America.

Referee——The Public

The NEW YORK HERALD and THE SAN FRANCISCO CALL have purchased the exclusive rights to two novels, simultaneous publication of which began January 26, to continue, in weekly installments, for about 18 weeks, announcement of the closing date to be made hereafter. One novel is by a distinguished Englishman, Mr. Max Pemberton; the other by an equally distinguished American woman, Mrs. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman. In order to supplement the purely artistic incentive to high endeavor the NEW YORK HERALD and THE SAN FRANCISCO CALL will award a large prize to the author of the better novel of the two. In event of a tie the prize money will be divided equally.

Believing that the public is a more competent judge than a self styled "critic," the NEW YORK HERALD and THE SAN FRANCISCO CALL invite their readers to express their individual opinions of the weekly installments by filling out the subjoined ballot and sending it to the Anglo-American Competition Committee, care of THE CALL, San Francisco.

I consider this week's installment of (name of novel) ..... better than that of (name of novel) .....

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