SISTER MARTHA.

By AUGUSTA LARNED.

Copyright, 1892, by American Press Association.]

"That's Marthy Marier Whitcumb all over," muttered Ann, as she retired to the woodshed to give vent to her feelings.

The tea party came off that evening without anything to mar the pleasure of the occasion. It was all that had been anticipated in the way of culinary excellence. Deacon Folsom, a nervous dyspeptic, ate far more than was good for him, and his wife was up nearly all night applying mustard plasters to sensitive parts of his body. There were several old ladies who feasted as they seldom did except at Thanksgiving. They laughed and joked softly together at the amount they had eaten, though it had slightly stupefied their brains. The three Miss Stows, who were genteelly poor, and starved themselves habitually on bread and weak tea to keep up appearances, only wished their capacity for salad and ice cream had proved greater, and that the food might abide with them for days to come. The clergyman even, though bound to set an example, made noble inroads on the viands before him.

The high tea had been so delicious, such a conspicuous example of good cookery that the guests were loath to leave the table. Mrs. Whitcumb scintillated in her black silk with bead trimmings. It was one of the proudest moments of her life. Her religious convictions were elastic and easily accommodated themselves in all companies. Had she been at home in Bath among her own set she would have proposed cards for the evening's diversion, but with a minister and a deacon present such a thing could not be thought of. Instead there was a trifling little game introduced on which no taint of worldliness rested and in which all could take part.

As it was rather noisy Sister Martha carefully closed all the doors between the parlor and Miss Mayhew's room. The eldest Miss Stow had proposed to go up stairs and pay a flying visit to the invalid, but Ann brought her mistress' thanks and excuses. So well did Sister Martha play her role that the lady of the house was quite forgotten. And when at half past ten the guests went away she felt that she had triumphed. The fame of her veal loaf and chicken salad and pickled oysters was at that moment traveling over Littlefield.

She was just on the point of locking the house door and putting out the lights, when a man's step came down the gravel walk and mounted the porch. There was no knock or ring, but a slight pause—a sound of fumbling about the threshold, then the steps went away and she heard the gravel crunch under the man's heel. With a lamp in her hand she stepped out into the hall. A bit of something white protruded from under the door. She pulled at it, and as she stooped down the light fell on a torn envelope. Her face flushed angrily. "Well," said she half aloud, "If that ain't the impolitest thing I ever did hear of! A regular slap in the face."

It was the invitation she had sent to Captain Bligh returned without thanks. She stood there a long time with a black drop of bitterness diffusing itself through her thoughts. To be so scorned had tarnished the glory of her tea party. She had been a fool to think of having it. Anger, hatred, remorse by turns came uppermost. When she went to bed there were hot, miserable tears in her eyes, and she was a woman who seldom wept.

The next morning as soon as Ann opened the chamber door she saw that something strange had happened to Miss Mayhew. Her face looked almost transparent with the shiny luster of mother-of-pearl, and her eyes were wide open and glassy bright. She took hold of Ann's arm when she came to set down the tray, and said in a half whisper, "What made him come into the yard last night and up the steps?"

"Lord! Miss Mayhew, what do you mean?"

"Captain Bligh came into the yard; I heard him."

Ann's face wore the set, hard look of perfect incredulity, but she laid her hand not ungently on the thin, pale one that rested on the bedspread.

"There, there," said she, as if soothing an unreasonable baby; "don't take on so. Of course he never did come a-near."

Sister Martha, in spite of her sound constitution and great natural vigor, passed two very bad nights. The demon of insomnia sat by her pillow and goaded her to the point of desperation. The second night a change had come over the temper of the weather, an autumnal change that set the wind moaning around the corner of the house, while dead leaves trailed off on the blast in long lines, and a black scud sped over the face of the moon.

Sister Martha did not close an eye until four o'clock in the morning. She tossed and turned, and creaked the bedstead—one of Mother Mayhew's high posters, rather rickety in the joints—and every now and then raised herself on her elbows and hissed out between her teeth in a stage whisper, "I've got to do it, or I shall die!" thus witnessing to the stars that a burden lay on her conscience. Who could have believed that Mrs. Martha Whitcumb, that stout and self confident dame, was ever subjected to punishment under the lash of Nemesis? She, of all women, seemed the least open to such flagellation, though the black puffs under her eyes and the yellowness of her skin had, to Ann's eye, indicated some alteration of health.

At last, at daylight, she fell asleep and dreamed that she was trying to force her way into a shining company with only one thin garment on and without stockings and shoes, while she suffered an agony of shame at her unclothed condition. In spite of the creaking of Sister Martha's bedstead, Miss Mayhew slept more soundly than she had for many a long month. The cool change seemed to brace her and do her good. She was folded like a child and cradled in the long swing of the wind, as it bowed the tops of the trees and sent the dead leaves scurrying. She lay snug and warm, breathing easily, and dreamed that she was dressed in white, walking in a rose garden, and as she looked the roses blossomed into the faces of little children she had known. Some of them were dead, but they were all smiling on her, turning their pretty heads to look as she passed.

The sweetness of the dream seemed to linger with her some time after waking, with her vibrating nerves all pleasantly a-throb in every atom of her flesh. She was very sensitive to dreams and omens, what she called "intimations." Could it be that something good was going to happen? How long it seemed since anything had happened in the strange monotony of her life. At any rate she felt stronger and brighter that windy morning with its splendid broken gleams. There was life and excitement in the air. It seemed to stir her languid pulses. She rang for Ann Baskett to help her dress, and would have on her blue wrapper and white shawl and pink worsted slippers. She was going down to the sitting room to take her place by the window, and her face had a little anticipatory brightness in it as she gazed out on the bronzing tree tops. One bough of the big maple by the front gate was already a deep crimson, a color that seemed to blow a trumpet blast as it sparkled in the sun. Sister Martha found her already down stairs when Ann had kindled a wood fire on the hearth, and the smell of the burning sticks was pleasant in the nostrils. It was the first time they had met since the "high tea."

"Your party was a great success," Miss Mayhew said in a simple, impersonal way that was touching. "It seemed real cheerful to have folks coming to the house again; I felt as if mother would like it if she could know, and father, too, for he was always fond of having company. I crep' out on the stairs in th' dark and heard the deacon telling his old stories—that one about the coon hanging by his tail, and how the minister did laugh!"

CHAPTER III.

"And it was you that spread that damnable story."

She went musing along, feeling glad that the old house had redeemed its character for hospitality, the ideal so dear to her heart, so dread when presented in a concrete form involving responsibility. Miss Mayhew was more pleasantly expansive than was her wont with Sister Martha, who usually acted on her nerves like an east wind, but the latter had fallen into an unwonted sulky, silent mood; the reaction from the tea party seemed to have come in as a back stroke, bringing with it a sense of disillusion. Even the excitement of "spiting" the Woods and Tuckers until they were green with envy had lost some of its charm.

She said she was going out and might not be back for some time. She went to her room, and put on the bonnet with the red flowers, her best mantle and kid gloves. She looked in the glass and remarked to herself that the red flowers made her face look more "jaundicy" than ever. The black, baggy spaces under her eyes were very noticeable. Her bad nights were telling tales. "It's got to be done," she said, through her clinched teeth, and then her face grew rigid and gray. If she was going to lose her sleep and go off in her looks like that what was the use of living?

She went down the back stairs to Ann's kitchen with the crumpled invitation in her hand and carefully deposited it on a big bed of coals in the stove. Ann sat with her back turned, a pan of apples in her lap she was paring for pies.

"I may pack up and go home by the afternoon train, Ann," she said abruptly, "but don't mention it to her quite yet, for I may conclude to stay."

Ann turned her whole person slowly around toward Sister Martha, her neck joint being somewhat stiff.

"I thought Miss Warren had asked you to tea for Sattday, and that's this evenin."

"So she did, Ann, but I may have to send a regret. I'm beginning to get kind of oneasy about things at home on the farm."

Ann gave an incredulous grunt. She was constitutionally incapable of believing all that Mrs. Martha Whitcumb said. The appearance of the red artificials and the kid gloves so early in the morning seemed rather suspicious. Mrs. Whitcumb went out the back way aware that Ann was watching her from the window. She made the circuit of a large square and then darted down Spring street until she came to Captain Bligh's door, where she stopped, panting, and furtively looked up and down with a nervous quiver in her legs she had never experienced until within a few months past, when broken nights had begun to be the torment of her life. Now she glanced up at Captain Bligh's house as she stood there hesitating and afraid. It was a long, low, unadorned house, dingy white in color, much streaked by weathering, with a high pitched, shingled roof of old style, a door in the middle and two windows on each side. The front yard was bare of flowers, though in the time of Mary Bligh it had blazed with beauty.

She looked up at the windows that seemed to gaze out of forlorn, womanless eyes. The yellow curtains hung limp and stringy, and one rebellious shade had come down bodily and exposed the interior nakedness. The shutters were thick with dust and the panes darkened with fly specks. She knocked discreetly, for the bell was broken, and to the first summons there came no response. She knocked again, more emphatically, and footsteps began to draw near, as if from an immense distance, echoing along uncarpeted floors and empty passages. It was Captain Bligh in person who flung the door open wide with a jerk and stood there on the threshold in his shirt sleeves, a tall, dark bearded man, with tanned face and hands and singularly bright eyes. He was a little taken aback at seeing a woman on his threshold, a woman, too, so handsomely dressed, for he was accustomed to tramps and beggars, but not to visitors of this finished description. The morning sun, too, was in his eyes and made him blink.

"What's wanted," he asked in the tone of command natural to a man who for years has walked the quarter deck with undisputed sway.

"Why, don't you know me Cap'n Bligh." He scowled blackly as he stooped a little to peer under the veil that covered the lady's face. "Is it the woman who applied for a housekeeper's place?"

"La, Cap'n Bligh, as if I would ask such a thing, a person of my means. I am Martha Whitcumb, Martha Andrews that was."

The cloud darkened on the captain's strong face, and there were running ruts over the eyebrows that betokened storms.

"Oh, you!" he said, drawing in his breath with a sharp sound.

"Won't you let me darken your door, Cap'n Bligh?" she said, not without a tremor. "You scorned my invitation, I know, but I have something to say to you."

The captain still stood darkling and looming over her, piercing her with his wary eyes, as if trying to probe the motive of her visit. At last he pulled himself together, having suddenly remembered his manners.

"You can walk aft, if you don't mind," said he in a softer tone. "The decks haven't been swabbed of late; I have been too busy about other things to think of them."

Mrs. Whitcumb, quivering more than ever, did step aft through an uncarpeted passage to what had been the dining room of the Bligh homestead. The room was flooded with sunshine. There were three large, high windows from which the captain, in his manly impatience of swathings that shut out the light, had torn down the curtains. A cook stove had been set up near the chimney, and Mrs. Martha's sharp nose at once detected the odor of a burning teakettle. She stepped straight to the stove and deftly lifted it off the fire. The breakfast table, still uncleared, occupied the middle of the large room. It was the captain's practice to use all the dishes in the house successively and to stack them in what he called the locker, meaning the cupboard, to await the arrival of his old woman helper who came over once a week to wash up and tidy the house. A pile of red and yellow squashes were penned up in one corner of the room, and other nooks were filled with a litter of books, magazines and newspapers heaped on the floor.

A melancholy old white parrot, much denuded of feathers about its scrawny neck, sat dozing on a perch. On the casing of one of the curtainless windows, letting in pitiless floods of daylight to revel over the damaged and dusty condition of Captain Bligh's belongings, was stuck a long row of immense needles with black and white threads dangling, ready for immediate use in the sewing on of buttons and the drawing up of rents in the captain's wardrobe. On the wall over his sea chest hung a chronometer and a marine chart, and the demijohn of whisky rescued from the deep stood on the chimney piece cluttered with pipes and garden tools, currycombs and bootjacks.

Captain Bligh looked around rather ruefully, as if the presence of a well dressed woman had for the first time made him conscious of the clutter and confusion and discomfort of his abode. "I know I ain't shipshape, Mrs. Whitcumb, but I haven't much time to pipe clay inside."

"It ain't right to live so," returned Sister Martha, taking in the scene with her housewifely glance. "You're a woman hater, Cap'n Bligh, and I guess you've found out you can't manage a house as you would a three master."

A strange look came into the captain's face, something between a satirical smile and a terrible, black frown. "I don't suppose you have come here to talk me over," he said sharply, as he seated himself with his back to the light, but where the Widow Whitcumb, gently swaying back and forth her stout person in the rocking chair, presented a fair target for his keen eyes.

"Yes, I have," she answered, plucking up courage, as she fussed with the fringes of her mantle. "I've come to talk about what you air, and what you might have been and ought to have been—a better and happier man."

"Well," said he, in a tone of grim restraint that his schooner hands understood as a sign of tempest piping up in the shrouds, "pay out your hawser if you must, Mrs. Whitcumb. I'll be dumned if I can make out your bearings, or which way you are tryin to steer."

"Don't use foul langwidge, George Bligh, in the presence of a woman. Them sailor oaths are repugnant to my feelins. It's not associatin with the sex for so many years that's made you what you are, George, and its the greatest of pities, for you had in you the makin of a fine man—I may say a splendid man. And you know I was livin, when we both was young, at Mother Mayhew's as a sort of left handed connexion of the family, doin sewin and helpin with the housework; and Vinie was just grown up then. Well, yes; I do suppose Vinie was as pretty as a picture—all pink and white and the sweetest hair falling around her head in big loose ringlets. I didn't wonder you admired Vinie, George, but I knew then she hadn't any physical staminy. Her hands were always weak and white, she couldn't lift or work hard, and you, George, needed a wife that could help you along—could go in and rough it if there was any need; and there was more than one woman in this town that would have been glad to do it. But, of course, with land adjoining and you livin neighbors and seein her every time you was home from sea, you fell in love with Vinie. But she wasn't the one cut out for you. I always knew it and so did Mother Mayhew, partly on account of Vinie's being such a weaklin and partly because she knew you would never be a professin Christian."

A slight quiver seemed to pass over the captain's strong frame, and when Mrs. Whitcumb came to a pause he was silent a moment before he put out his hand and said in a strange, hoarse... "I won't hear any more of this."

"You've got to hear it," said the w... in tremulous tones, sitting bolt up in the rocking chair. "I can't go a... way much longer with my appe... comin and goin like the old wa... soap, and me a turnin a marigold... low that always had a good, clear... and my nights on a bed of thorns in... of a good hair mattress with the springs."

"For God's sake try to keep before... wind," muttered the captain, as he p... ered his forehead and moved impatie... in his chair.

"You know," she went on nervo... "it was at that time Josiah Whit... was paying attention to me. Josiah... a kind of lubberly, thick skulled... but he had inherited a good far... Bath from his father, Deacon Whit... that was, Mother Mayhew's first... band, and his mother wanted to get... married off. There wasn't many... that would look at Josiah in spite of... farm, and Mother Mayhew worri... good deal about it. She thought it w... be just the makin of Josiah to get... ried, and I bein right there in the fa... and havin nothing of my own it did... as if it might be intended. Mother... hew was always talking about the... ings of providence. She was a ve... ligious woman. But you see I co... love Josiah no way. I never prete... I loved him even when I thought it... to take him. I was a girl then, a... had my fancy for a dark man, w... fine figger and a high spirit. I al... did admire high strung men, and y... you was lookin at Vinie, Cap'n B... I was lookin at you, which I h... ought to."

Here she paused, and fumbling i... pocket for her handkerchief put it t... eyes.

"Go on!" shouted the captain i... tiently, "for God's sake let's warp... dock."

Sister Martha had turned pale u... the sallow tint of her skin.

"Cap'n Bligh," she faltered, "I f... if I was exposin myself dreadfully... I've got to do it. Have you got... Testament you saved from your last... wreck along with the demijohn of w... ky? I want to see it."

The captain got up and strode t... bedroom, adjoining the room they w... in. Mrs. Whitcumb could see thr... the open door the tumbled bed a... confusion of garments. He seemed t... searching for some time in the dra... of a bureau, whirling over the cont... with large, impatient hand. At la... he came out, bringing a small thick... ume bound in leather, with the l...

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

SHEPHERD & KAH...

Att'ys and Counsellors at L...

Will practice in the State and Uni... States Courts.

Office over Levy's bank, corne... Milam & Market Sts., Shreveport, La

C. D. HICKS,

NOTARY :: PUBL...

—AND—

Justice of the Pea...

Office, 205 Milam Street, Shreveport, La

Constable Sale.

No. 1—K. E. Keating vs. Caesar Jo...

By virtue of a writ of fieri facias to me in the above entitled and ... bered suit by Hon. Hoyl-Tomkeis, j... of the peace in and for the 4th W... Caddo parish, La., I have seized an... sell at public auction at the court... door, No 208 Milam street, betwee... legal hours of sale, on

SATURDAY, SEPT. 10, 1892,

the following described property, to... One lot household and kitchen furn... Terms of sale cash on the spot, su... to appraisement. L. M. McDUFFI... Consta...

The Progress, Aug. 27, 1892.

Constable Sale.

No. 3379—James Cook vs. George ...

By virtue of a writ of fieri facias ... to me in the above entitled and ... bered suit by Hon. C. D. Hicks, justi... the peace in and for the Fourth war... Caddo parish, La., I have seized and ... sell at public auction at the Texas ... front door of the court house of Ca... parish on

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 18...

the following described property to... A certain one square acre of ground ... ing in the northeast corner of lot N... of Cook's subdivision of the north... quarter of section five, township 17 n... range 15 west, with all the buildings ... improvements thereon. Also 10 saw... Terms of sale cash on the spot, subje... appraisement. C. W. KELLY, ...

The Progress, Aug. 6, '92. Consta...