

Seffy

(Continued from page 5)

"And you to me—it's efen—say nosing more."
"You have kept me from going crazy, I think."

"You haf kep' my ol' heart from breaking, I expect. Yas, I know, now, that there is such a sing as proke herts," he averred.

"Pappy, I—"
"What?" asked he.
"I don't know what I'm going to do now. I got to work for my living, I expect. There is not enough left for—"

"You'll nefer work for you' keep while I'fe got a dollar," said the old man. "I owe you that much for—"

She liked that. She was sitting on a low stool at his feet, her elbow on his knee—her favorite attitude. She crowded a little closer.

"Pappy," she said presently, "let me come and keep your house."
"Do you mean that?" asked the old man joyously.

"Yes!" she said.
"But why? That's hard work for a gal that's not used to it."

"Oh, maybe I want to be where Seffy was. For—some day—he'll come back and I—want to be there—to ask his pardon."

They were silent for a while and then the old man said huskily:

"You shall. You shall sleep in Seffy's bed. You shall look in his little cracked looking-glass. You shall set in his place at the table. You shall be my Seffy! And we'll wait for him together and we'll bese at his pardon—when he comes—when he comes."

"May I ride his mare—and plow with her?"

"You—you—you?" he questioned in his ecstasy. "Ken you?—say—do you sink you ken?"

"Yes," she said very softly. "If you will let me, I will be all and everything Seffy was to you. I took him from you. Let me do my best to replace him. It is for that—that, only, that I have cared. We shall rent this house and that will help—for I know you have been getting poor, too—and—and—if you will take it—I—I—want to give you—the pasture-field—for—oh, for Seffy's sake. Will you take it?" For he had demurred. "For Seffy's sake—just as you would take it from him—and as he would give it to you—if he were ali—here? I want to be both son and daughter to you. Let me be Seffy and myself too! It is much—but let me try."

But he had caught that little slip of the tongue, and was dumb.

They sat silent by the fire for a long time then. Presently the old man rose and lifting her he said, with a smile, as she had never seen on his face:

"Yas—for Seffy's sake—come! Now!" It was night. But he led her from her own house to his. And that night she slept in Seffy's bed.

One of Sally's duties was the nightly reading of the *Farm Journal*. And just now this paper, edited by a gentleman who knew nothing about farming—and by him edited well—was full of the great meeting of the National Farmer's League of the United States of America, which was in session at Omaha.

"By far the most intelligent and interesting paper of the session, thus far," Sally read one night, "was that on *The Proper Succession of Crops in Maryland* by the youthful president of the Kansas State League, Mr. —" Sally rose suddenly and vanished to the kitchen where there was a light.

"What was it?" asked the old man when she returned.

"I—I choked," said Sally quite truthfully, "and went for a drink."
"Yas—don't read no more. We'll find out about the succession to-morrow night. But what was the smart fellow's name?"

She pretended to look for it, and when she pretended to have found it:

"Mr.—S. P. Brown," she read.

"A Kansas man—about Maryland! Huh!"

But that night, after Seffy's father was in bed, Sally wrote a pitiful letter—perhaps the first she had ever written: "Dear Seffy (it ran)

Please come home. Come as soon as you get this. Your pappy wants you. He is old and sorry, so please come right away.

Sepehniyah P. Baumgartner, Senior."
But the envelop was addressed to "Mr. S. P. Baumgartner, Jr., President Kans. State League, Kansas."

The post-mistress smiled indulgently as Sally handed in the letter the next day.

"A long way off" she said.
"Yes," said Sally, fidgeting with her bonnet. "How soon do you think it will get there?"

The post-mistress reflected.
"About a week," she said then.

"So long?"
But as a matter of fact, she had thought it would take longer. Kansas was a vague place in those days, and a vast distance away.

"Well," said the post-mistress comfortably, "mebby not quite so long. But better not count much on its getting there sooner. I'll give it a good start. I'll put it in the mail bag now."

"Thank you," said Sally.

She watched her put it into the bag and then went dreaming home, and for all of the two weeks of waiting she was very happy—dreaming always. Poor girl—she had made her life so unhappy that joy seemed divine. She was sure of Seffy. Sometimes she wondered with a blush and a start if he might not come himself in answer. She would not have been surprised to have him steal up behind her—that was his way, she remembered—and call out softly her name. So she went about almost on tiptoes so that she might hear him if he should. It was a little difficult to keep it from the inquisitive old man, who did not quite understand her sudden happiness. But she did it.

And, finally, the two weeks were up. She was quite sure Seffy would not waste a moment with his answer. And he might use that mysterious instrument, the telegraph, which she understood would not take more than an hour from Kansas. She supposed his message, even if he used the telegraph, would come to the post-office.

The ceremonial of a letter, with simple people is as much a matter of concern as treaty between two nations. And now, as she dressed herself in her best clothes to go to the post-office, she felt, somehow, as if she were to be in Seffy's personal presence, and must be as immaculate as always. She wondered how he would address her!—forgetting that his answer must come to the one whose name she had signed. She had heard of various most dear head-lines to letters. I am afraid she blushed at all this. For, as she looked in the glass, she saw a face so radiant that she looked again to identify it.

So, all the more, she dressed herself with the same care she would have taken were she going to him instead of to the post-office for his letter. She remembered what he had said about her hair, and she ventured to pull it about her face, much as it had been that night in the dark parlor. But at the thought of that the tears came slowly into her eyes. She had been very happy that night. It was all the happiness she had ever known, it seemed now. She dried her eyes and then she sat at the table where Seffy had often sat, and looked again in his broken mirror. The radiance was quenched. Her face was pale and thin now. She thought of it quite as if he were soon to see it.

"I wonder if he'll think me handsome, now?" She shook her head doubtfully at the face she saw in the glass. "No, I have no red cheeks no more—and my eyes are bigger—and my lips thinner—and my hair is paler—and my hands—"

She remembered how he had kissed them, and put her head down and sobbed. They did not seem fit to be kissed now—nor worth kissing.

But the post-mistress liked her bet-

ter that way and so do I. For she had acquired a daintiness that was almost immaculate.

As soon as Sally came, the post-mistress smiled and shook her head. For she had understood what the letter contained quite as if she had seen it. And she had watched anxiously for the answer.

"Not yet," she said compassionately. Sally's legs weakened and she clutched at the little shelf before her. It took a moment to swallow the thing in her throat. Then she murmured: "It's two weeks."

"Yes. But he'd have to be pretty prompt to get it here by this time."

Sally had been sure of this promptly. It never occurred to her to doubt. She would not have wasted a minute. She turned hopelessly away.

"Perhaps tomorrow!" said the kind post-mistress.

Sally veered, smiling. "You think so?"

"Perhaps. One can never tell. Don't worry, dear. You see the address was very vague and it may be some time before they find him."

"You don't think it is too late?"

"I hope not, dear."

She had not thought of that before. She had fancied him waiting for some such recall. But, of course, he had formed other ties—he would be glad to forget her. *He might be married!* Of course he was! Otherwise he could not be a president!

"I guess it's too late," she said again. "I would not think that. The address was very vague. But after you were gone, I took the precaution to put a return address on the envelop and if he does not get it, it will come back; but that will take some little time."

There was nothing the next day nor the next, nor for the many days afterward that she went to the post-office. She no longer dressed up for the trip, and she was glad now she had not told his father.

For a while she had to lock herself in her room when the desire came on her to go to the post-office. And then she remained away three days, then a week, and then the post-mistress admitted that the letter had had time to be returned. She must not give up though. Strange things happen, sometimes, with letters.

The letter had been returned, the post-mistress had it then. But she pityingly thought it best that Sally should wait for it still, while she tried to send it back to him.

Otherwise it was very much as Sally had planned and hoped, save that she was a bit sadder. She kept Seffy's father's house, as, perhaps, no house was ever kept before. She had not been famous for the keeping of her own house in the days of her coquettishness. Her grandmother had attended to this—and then a maid who interpreted her faultlessly. But now her own hands did all—and did it with love. And she did replace Seffy—and more. For she plowed, and, after a brief apprenticeship, no one did it better. The bay mare was as kind to Sally as she had been to Seffy. Nothing in his life had ever been so sweet to the old man as those rests when they met. And no food was ever so piquant as that eaten under the trees at their nooning.

Sally still went to the post-office and the post-mistress still had her letter where she could have put her hand upon it, though she mercifully concealed this.

But there was no hope. Not a word of confidence had passed between Sally and the kind post-mistress, but each knew that the other understood quite as if their confidence was complete. So that it was as if they spoke of an old matter when Sally said, one day:

"Yes—I guess it's too late. He's married."

"I wouldn't think so, if I were you, till I heard it from him" said the compassionate woman behind the counter. "I thought so once. He went to war. I heard that he was killed. I married another man—just—oh, just because! Then he came back. I have always been sorry."

Something filled the speaker's eyes—

and Sally, with the dumb intuition of the primitive nature, stood there a long time and said only, "Thank you."

But after that hope rose and lived again.

That night the post-mistress received, from Washington, the address of the Kansas State League of Farmers' Clubs, and put it on the face of the returned letter and sent it forth again.

CHAPTER XV

SHALL SEFFY ENTER AT THIS CUE?

Winter had come again—the fifth one. They sat together in the great hearth of the kitchen, in their characteristic attitude when before a fire. The hickory logs sputtered savagely, but sent out to them, nevertheless, a grateful warmth. Their faces and bodies glowed in the fervor of it. And there is nothing like this to put one at peace with all the world.

"Sally," said the old man, "this is nice."

"Very nice," agreed Sally.

But also there is nothing like this to send one's memory backward. And this it was doing for both of them.

"Everybody don't haf no such fire tonight." And the everybody he thought of as he sighed was—Seffy.

"No, not everybody," sighed Sally, propping her head upon his knee.

"Sally—who do you mean by eferbody?"

"Just one person," admitted Sally, "the same one you mean."

"Yas," said Seffy's father very softly, and then they were silent.

"Mebby some's got no homes—and out freezing to-night," the old man said presently.

"I hope not," said Sally. "We could take them in here if we knew where they are—couldn't we, pappy?"

But that last note was the one which damps up tears.

"Yas—if we knowed where they air—my God—if we chust knowed where they air! Sally, don't you nefer turn no one away from the door on a cold cold winter's night. You don't know who it might be!"

"I'll never turn any one away from the door!" said Sally with emotion.

"That's right, Sally. Some's dead. I'd rather be dead than haf no home."

"And I," agreed Sally.

"Nor no friends."

Sally nodded.

"Sally how long is it sence you was married?"

"More than four years—nearly five, pappy."

"My! but sings is changed!" said the old man. "Efen the sun don't seem so bright no more."

"Yes, things are changed," said the girl.

"Yit it must be chust an idee. Why the Bible says that summer and winter shall not change tell eferysing come to pass—eferysing—eferysing—"

Then his voice broke. "Yit—yit—yit it's one sing ain't come to pass and it seems like it's nefer going to. It's better sence you came. But yit the house is damp—and shifery—"

he shivered himself—"and empty—like it was a funeral about all the time. Yit it's no one dead—no one's dead—he's not dead—chust gone. You said so—you said it first! And some day he'll come back and we'll git on our knees and beg his pardon. But it's so long—oh, my God—so long! Oh, Seffy—Seffy—little Seffy—I got a psin in my breast about you! You was all I had. Come back to me—come back! I'm a ol' man. And I'm sorry—sorry—and broke—broke down. But if you'll come back—Sally, do you think he'll haf a scar on his face?"

Something stifled his utterance. The

image of Seffy's face came before him.

He had seen it in the post-office, when she had handed in the letter.

He had seen it in the mirror, when she had looked at herself in the glass.

He had seen it in the eyes of the post-mistress, when she had looked at Sally.

He had seen it in the face of the old man, when he had looked at Sally.

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