

NABBY'S HUSBAND.

A knock at the squire's door.

An eager "come in" from the squire, to whom any outside diversion is an inestimable boon, he having just reached that uncomfortable stage of masculine convalescence when life becomes a burden not only to the so-called "patient" himself, but also to those unlucky feminine relatives whose duty it is to officiate as his "ministering angels."

Mary, the servant, came in.

"Please, Mr. Hosley, there's a woman down stairs who says she must see you. She's been here before since you were sick, and now she won't take 'no' for an answer."

"Show her right up, Mary," said the squire, alertly, brightening up visibly, like the war-horse who scents the battle afar off. Not all the cozy comfort of his surroundings, the "Sleepy Hollowness" of his easy-chair, the pleasant pictures on the wall, the wood fire which, now that the wintry twilight was settling down over the bit of gray sky left visible by the curtains' heavy folds, danced and flashed all over the room in rosy shadows, could reconcile the squire to his enforced seclusion. Secretly he pined for his dingy old den of an office, and chafed at the doctor's restrictions, which as yet forbade all thought of business. But now the moral police force, represented by his wife and daughter, being luckily off duty, there was nothing to prevent his seeing this probable client.

"Show her up, Mary," said the squire cheerfully, straightening himself, and assuming as much of legal dignity as dressing-gown and slippers permitted.

Mary disappeared. Presently the door opened again. "Why, Nabby," said the squire, "is it you? How do you do?"

"Yes, squire, it's me," said Nabby, dropping down with a heavy sigh into a chair; "and I don't do very well."

Nabby was a short, squarely built woman of fifty, with considerable gray in the coarse, black hair, drawn stiffly and uncompromisingly back under a bonnet about five years out of date. She had sharp black eyes, and a resolute, go-ahead manner. Evidently a hard-working woman; yet in looking at her you could not help the conviction that something more than hard work had plowed the deep wrinkles which ran across and across her forehead, and threatened to lift her eyebrows up to her hair.

Nabby had lived with the squire's mother fifteen years—from the time when Mrs. Hosley took her in, a ten-year-old orphan, who was, as the good old lady sometimes expressed it, "more plague than profit," until she grew into the steady and reliable handmaiden, who finally with every one's good wishes, married young Josiah Gould, and set up in the world for herself. Old Mrs. Hosley had long since gone to her reward, but the family still kept up a friendly interest in Nabby and her fortunes, the squire in particular being her "guide, philosopher, and friend" in all the emergencies of life.

"Why, what's the matter now, Nabby?" said the squire, good-naturedly. "Are you sick?"

"Yes, I am," said Nabby, emphatically, with a snap of her black eyes. "I'm sick to death of Josiah. I can't stan' it any longer, and I've come to talk with you about gittin' a divorce. You see he's ben a-growin' worse and worse now for a good while. I've kep' it to myself pretty much, because I was ashamed on't, and then I kep' hopin' he'd do better. I've talked and talked to him, and said and done every thing a woman could, but it seemed as if the more I talked the worse he grew."

The squire looked at Nabby's rather sharp, hard face, and perhaps was hardly so surprised as Nabby expected that Josiah had not been reformed by the vigorous "talking to" he had undoubtedly received. "He grew more and more shiftless and good for nothin'," continued Nabby, "till finally, he didn't do much but set around the kitchen fire, half boozed. If there's any thing I hate," burst out Nabby, "it's a man forever sittin' round the house underfoot. And there I was a-takin' in washin', and a-slavin' early and late, to be kinder decent and forehanded, and him no better'n a dead man on my hands, so far as helpin' any was concerned. And so I told him, time and again. He worked just about enough to keep himself in drink. He knew he couldn't git any of my money for that."

"But I stood it till about a fortnight ago. I'd been workin' hard all day helpin' Miss Barber clean house, and it seemed as if every bone in my body ached, I was so tired. I came along home, thinkin' how good my cup of tea

'd taste. The first thing I see, when I opened the kitchen door, was old Hank Slater settin' there in my rockin' chair. He and Josiah were both drunk as—hogs," said Nabby, slandering an innocent animal to suit her taste for a simile.

"They'd tracked the mud all over my clean floors. The cookin'-stove was jammed full of wood, roarin' like all possessed. I wonder they hadn't burned the house up before I got there. And they'd got my best tea-pot out to heat some water, and the water 'd all billed away, and the bottom come out. But the worst was to see my husband a-consortin' with such scum of the earth as that miserable, low-lived Hank Slater. I tell you, squire, I was mad. I just flung that kitchen door wide open, and sez I—

"'Git out o' this house, Josiah Gould, and don't never let me see your face inside on't again.'"

"Sez he, meek as Moses, 'Where shall I go to, Nabby?'"

"Sez I, 'I don't care where you go to, so long's you don't come near me. I've always ben a respectable woman, and I don't want none of Hank Slater's friends round my house.'"

"Well?" queried the squire, as Nabby's narration came to a pause.

"Well," said Nabby, in rather a subdued tone, "he went off. And he hain't come back. And I want a divorce."

"Now, Nabby," remonstrated the squire, "you don't want a divorce. I know you better than that. You are not the woman to give Josiah up, and let him go to the bad, without a struggle. You feel a little vexed with him now, and I don't blame you. It is hard very hard. But you know you took him for better or worse."

"Do you think, yourself, it is quite right to break your contract because it proves the worse for you—because you are the strong one and he the weak one of the two? That don't strike me as good Bible doctrine, Nabby. We that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves," you know.

"Well, I dunno," said Nabby, twisting the corner of her shawl dubiously. "I hadn't thought on't in that light, I must say. It's so aggravatin' to have such a man for a husband. Besides, I dunno's he'd come back now if I wanted him to."

"Hasn't he been back at all?"

"Why, yes, he did come once, for a pair of pantaloons. But I didn't take no notice of him."

"Now, Nabby, you may depend upon it, it wasn't the pantaloons he was after. He wanted to see if you wouldn't relent. If he comes again, be a little pleasant to him, and I'll warrant he will stay. Give him another chance, Nabby. Josiah isn't the worst fellow in the world, by any means. He has his redeeming traits, after all. I believe he will do better, if you will try to help him. You know Josiah is one that bears a good deal of encouragement, Nabby."

"Well, squire, I'll think it over. Anyhow, I'm obliged to you. You talk so sorter comfortin' to a body. You're your mother's own son; just the same good heart. Would you be able to eat some of my cheese, squire?"

"Try me, and see, Nabby," said the squire, smiling, not impervious to Nabby's compliments. Nabby made her exit just as Mrs. Hosley rushed in, full of wifely indignation that the squire had been allowed to see a client.

Nabby's home was over at "the Corners," three miles from the village. She walked rapidly along in the fast-thickening darkness, with the steady, strong gait becoming the self-reliant woman that she was. Yet even her unimaginative nature was not proof against the depressing influence of the chilly, raw November evening. The wind whistled through the bare tree branches, which creaked and groaned mournfully, and waved wildly up and down in the dim light overhead. The wind seemed to cherish a special spite against Nabby. It blew her bonnet off and her hair into her eyes, struggled madly with her for her shawl, took her breath away, and firmly resisted her every step. Finally, it began to send spiteful dashes of cold rain drops in her face—rain that seemed almost to freeze as it fell.

"Josiah used to come after me with an umbrella when I was caught out in the rain," thought Nabby. "He was always real kind and good to me, after all. I dunno's he ever give me a cross word in his life, even when he'd ben drinkin'."

Here the driving, sleety rain and piercing wind pounced down upon Nabby with renewed fierceness, hus-

tlung her madly around in fiendish glee. "An awful night to be homeless, Nabby," something seemed to say.

"I don't care," said Nabby to herself, beginning to feel cross again and generally ill used as she grew wetter and colder. "It serves him right. He's made his bed, and he can lie in it."

At "the Corners," the light streaming cheerfully out into the night from other homes made Nabby's little house look particularly gloomy and uninviting. Nabby fumbled under the mat for the door-key, fumbled with stiffened fingers for the key-hole, and, finally succeeded in unlocking the door, felt her way in through the little entry.

There is always something "uncanny" about going alone at night in a dark and shut-up house. Even people of the best-regulated minds experience a vague suspicion of something behind them, a sense of possible ghostly hands about to clutch them in the darkness. Nabby was a woman, like Mrs. Edmond Sparkler, with "no nonsense about her," but, nevertheless, a cheerful tale she had read only yesterday in the *Chronicle*, about a burglar and a lone woman, kept coming into her head, and she carefully avoided the thick blackness of the corners and the pantry door as she groped around the kitchen for a candle. Of course the fire had gone out.

"Two heads are better than one, if one is a sheep's head," Nabby might have been heard muttering out in the wood-house as she stooped painfully down picking up chips; by which oracular utterance I suspect she was thinking what a good supply of kindlings Josiah always kept on hand for her, and how much more comfortable it was in the old times coming home to a house bright with light and warmth and Josiah's welcome.

For Josiah cherished the most profound admiration for Nabby—an admiration not unmingled with awe. He thought her a most wonderful woman. She was just as beautiful to him now as in the old courting days, before the brightness and quickness of the black eyes had degenerated into sharpness, before the smiling mouth had acquired its hard, firmly set expression, before there were any wrinkles in the smooth forehead. People thought Nabby had done well in marrying Josiah Gould—a pleasant, good-natured young fellow that every one liked; a young mechanic; not very rich yet, it was true; but, with a good trade and such a wife as Nabby, there seemed nothing to prevent his figuring as "one of our first citizens."

Any body can be somebody in this country if they are only determined. But that was exactly the difficulty with Josiah. He never was determined about any thing. He fell into the habit of drinking because he lacked sufficient strength of will to avoid it. Then Nabby's sharp words, and his own miserable sense of meanness and self-contempt, of utter discouragement and despair, drove him lower and lower, and he sank down supinely into the Slough of Despond without effort or hope.

By a beautiful dispensation of Providence, whenever a poor, shiftless, good-for-nothing man is sent into our world, some active, go-ahead little woman is invariably fastened to him to tow him along through, and keep his head above water. It's for the best, of course. What would become of the poor fellow without her? At the same time, she sometimes finds it a little hard.

Nabby was ambitious and proud spirited, willing to work hard, to save, to do her part—anxious to get on in the world and stand well among the neighbors. The fact gradually realized, that in her husband she had no help, no support, only a drag and burden, and finally a disgrace, had been a disappointment embittering her whole nature. To have a husband that no one respected, that even the boys around town called "Si Gould," was dreadful to Nabby. Perhaps it was hardly strange that she grew hard and bitter.

Meanwhile Nabby had succeeded in starting the fire, and having changed her dress, sat down to dry her feet until the tea-kettle boiled. But even the ruddy light and warmth with which the kitchen now glowed could not fend off the dreariness of the night. The rain "tapped with ghostly finger-tip upon the window-pane," and the wind howled and wailed around the house like the spirits of the lost pleading to be once more taken back into human life and warmth. Such a wind stirs in even the happiest heart a vague sense of loss, of change, of all that goes to make up the unsatisfactoriness of life. Dead sorrows creep forth from their graves on such nights, and stalk up and down the echoing chambers of the heart.

Nabby could not help wondering where Josiah was to-night. It was so lonely sitting there with no one to speak to, listening to the moaning wind, the creaking of the blinds, the loud ticking of the clock.

"And Thanksgivin' a-comin'," thought Nabby. "A pretty Thanksgivin' I shall have!"

The wind wailed and wailed, and Nabby thought and thought. The very fact of having "freed her mind," to the squire had relieved her long pent-up indignation, and now she felt more sad than angry. Up before her seemed to rise a picture of her life: the youthful dreams and hopes, the changes and disappointments, the love turned into wrangling. She even thought of Josiah with pity. For the first time she "put herself in his place," and realized how almost impossible it was for one of his weak nature to resist, unaided, the temptation which will cost a stronger will an effort.

"I'm afraid I've been a little too sharp with Josiah," thought she. "I've sorter took it for granted I was a saint and he a sinner, and scolded him right along down hill. A nice saint I am! As proud and high-strung as Lucifer himself! Oh dear!" sighed Nabby: "a pretty mess I've made of living! If we could only go back and begin over again, seems to me things would go better."

Just then there was a faint noise, like the clicking of the door latch. Nabby started and looked round. All was still again—no one visible. Yet Nabby could not rid herself of the impression that some one was near her, that odd sense we have of another's individuality near us though not present.

"There's some one hangin' round here, I know," said she to herself.

Nabby was one who always met things half way. Accordingly, she walked to the outside door, and, opening it quickly peered out into the darkness. There stood Josiah—wet, sheepish, sorry. Once he had started to go in, but his courage failing, he lingered in dubious hesitation on the door-step.

"Why don't you come in, Josiah?" said Nabby.

"I don't know's you'd want me, Nabby," replied Josiah, with all the meekness becoming a returning prodigal.

"Want you! Of course I do," said Nabby, heartily. "Come right along in. I'm goin' to have griddle-cakes for supper, and you must tend 'em while I set the table." Griddle-cakes were one of Josiah's favorite weaknesses, and Nabby knew it.

Josiah came in. If he ever gets into heaven, probably his sensations will not be one whit more delightful than they were now, as from the blackness and gloom of the night, the forlornness of his wretched wanderings, he came into the cozy brightness of the kitchen, and felt that he was home once more. How good the tea smelled! The fire roared and snapped, the tea-kettle boiled and bubbled and bubbled its lid up and down, and from the griddle the savory odor of the cakes ascended like a homely incense. Josiah's face, shining with mingled heat and happiness as he turned the griddle-cakes, was something worth seeing.

Nabby stepped briskly around getting supper ready. It seemed so pleasant to set the table for two again, to have some one to praise and appreciate her cooking. The November wind might howl its worst now. Its hold on Nabby was gone. In place of all the bitter sadness that had hung heavily around her heart was a warm feeling of happiness, of comfort and hope.

All the explanation they had wished was this: Josiah drew forth from under his shabby coat an exceedingly awkward and knobby bundle.

"I've bought something for you, Nabby," said he.

The "something," undone, proved to be a very handsome Britania tea-pot. That tea-pot must have known it was a peace-offering, with such preternatural brightness did it shine and glisten. Something in Nabby's eye shone and glistened too, although she winked hard, and scorned the weakness of a pocket-handkerchief.

"Thank you, Josiah," she said: "it's a regular beauty, and I shall set lots by it."

Which, so long as they understood each other, was, perhaps, as well as if Josiah had made a long-worded speech of repentance and reformation, and Nabby another of forgiveness.

I wish I could say that Nabby never scolded Josiah again. But I can't. However, she "drew it mild," and there was a general understanding between them that this was only a sort of exercise made necessary by habit—a