

"Me and Mose."

BY ANNIE E. S. FEARING.



HE had many qualities in common with the sparrow which she outwardly resembled. She was small and plump, and had a waistless figure with a slight stoop behind the base of the neck that gave her a round, fluffy sort of look. Then her dress, and hair, and skin were only varying tones of a general dun color. Her movements were short and quick, and she had the same fierce instinct to fend for her family, and the same eager and critical interest in the doings of her neighbors, that distinguished her feathered prototype. Comparisons aside, she was a past mistress in the fine art of washing clothes, and her book of engagements was always full. No prima donna, haughtily breaking her appointments at will or whimsy, ever excelled her in glib and mendacious excuses for failing to appear at crucial moments, when the clothes were "over the floor" and the boiler was on the stove awaiting her. When she did come, she had to stand on a stool to reach the tubs, but from there she dominated the situation, and tongue and hands worked ceaselessly without interrupting each other. Her conception of conversation was monologue, and when she did allow a hiatus in which to receive directions or obtain an acquiescence, it was with an air of patience under temporary suspension, and you felt that you had only partial attention, while her thoughts were still carrying on the thread. Her cult was work. She gloried in the activities of the household, and life was never without excitement while the endless campaign against dirt and disorder went on. She had an eye for spots and blemishes and a passion for removing them. The artistic temperament is not limited in its avenues.

"I ben at it," she would say as she "sudsed out" the clothes, "sence I was little an' hed to stan' on a stool to work — wots

that? 'I hev to yit'? Well, that's jest it, I dun s' much it's kindly stunted me an' kep me on a stool ever sence."

There were two people in the world she thought forever exempt from effort, Mose, her husband, and her grown-up daughter. Mose had long suffered from some mysterious and disabling complaint "acrost his back," and the girl she regarded as a fragile creature whose only strong point was a "good appetite to eat." Nothing so roused her indignation as any suggestion that her Ettie might earn her bread on lines of employment similar to her own. The moral effect was not unlike that of urging a position as cook upon a princess of the blood.

"Mose Van Loan's girl go into somebody's kitchen? Well, I guess! Mis' Denton rode up t' our house one day in her carriage an' hed the impidence t' offer to take Ettie and *train* her fer a waitress! I think I see my pop's — old Tjerck TenEyck's gran'-chile a-handin' the butter round on a tray to the likes of them! North River Dutch is proud of their blood even wen they goes out washin', an' that woman's father worked out by the day for Mose's gran'father on the farm!"

I ventured to inquire to what high destiny Ettie's powers were reserved.

"Well," said the little creature, holding a garment up from the steaming tub, her head on one side like a bird, and her eye critically fixed on a doubtful spot, "I've got the refusal of suthin' wuth while in a milliner's shop fer Ettie; it's urrand-lady. The pay ain't much to speak of, but it's very respectable work, an' she may rise to be forelady — ef she don't git married!"

She rubbed away in silence for a moment on the obstinate spot and then held it up to the light, with a restored serenity of expression. From the radiance of her habitual toothless smile, one might have supposed that life was filled with the cheap joys of a merry-go-round, or instinct with the perpetual promise of a circus or a coming show, these being the coveted and dearly bought diversions of the family. In answer to a question she began again: —

"No, Ettie ain't got no beau on hand — I got my eye on that — she ain't agoin' to keep company with none of this here trash. I says ef some young man come along wots come of folks ez good

ez Mose's folks, an' wants to set up with her, I ain't got nothin' to say agin it — but I want to know his *folks*, I do!”

Here she wrung out the offending garment and tossed it into another tub. I felt that she had fully stated the prejudice and the obligation of long descent. Then she stripped the soapsuds off her bare arms and turned round on her stool to deliver herself of a thought too big for her to contain; and she had a very elfish look as, with one hand on her hip and the other holding out the forefinger, she emphasized her words.

“Wen it comes to hookin' up double, it's a solemn thing,” — it would seem to have turned out a very momentous thing in her own case, — “ef you kin be *contented*,” and she wagged her head in time with her finger, “ef you kin be *contented* — there ain't nothin' like it!”

Socrates himself could not have put the truth more concisely or have more comprehensively expounded the philosophy of matrimony than she upon the rostrum of her washing stool. She was the living embodiment of the art of contentment, and her great pop eyes looked through magic lenses that the wealth of the Indies cannot buy. Prince Charming could not have appeared to his lady love half so gallant and brave, so chivalric and brilliant, as poor old shuffling Mose, half blind, and blundering, and stupid to the point of semi-idiotcy, looked to Marthy's devotion. Her respect for his astuteness was unlimited, and she always prefaced any statement that seemed to convey a deduction from facts with “ez Mose sez.” I never knew any one except Marthy who had heard Mose say anything.

She guarded him and toiled for him with unremitting affection, and defended him from offers of jobs that were “too heavy fer the cords acrost his back,” or that might “fetch on that there bleedin' of the lungs he hed wen he was a boy,” a tradition he had long since imbued her with. She seemed like a feminine Sinbad with two human burdens astride her bowed shoulders instead of one, and there was no way to help her except to give her work that she might feed their insatiable maws. Any proffer of employment for Mose or Ettie, and she saw you through her magic glasses no longer a friend but a threatening enemy.

One bleak and bitter day in January she came to see me, and

from the way in which she radiated pleasure all over her little person, I knew that something momentous had occurred. For one wild moment I had a hope that Ettie had "hooked up double" and transferred her helplessness to a back more able to carry the load. Marthy worked herself up on a chair and sat with her feet dangling, and her hands folded in their gray cotton gloves across the old black shawl she wore around her. On her head was a sailor hat, and this youthful headgear, combined with her childish expression of joy, made of her a picture half farcical, half pathetic, of the youth of old age.

"Well," she said triumphantly, "you can't never guess wot happened now!"

I dared not attempt to fill in the pause. What I should have considered the workings of Providence in her behalf would have been insulting even to mention to her. Thus happily is it ordered that we do not lay down the lines of life for our fellows. She swung her foot in impatience of the silence.

"I've heired money!" she burst out at last, "heired most a thousand dollars!"

She pursed up her empty mouth like a hickory nut, and her eyes gleamed with the news. I expressed suitable sympathy with her happiness, and ventured the hope that now her future would be assured, and she need not worry about old age — not that she ever had. I even offered, with the design of saving her from herself, immediate suggestions as to getting it invested at a good rate of interest.

"Yes," she said evasively, "it comes in good jist now — it's from a old skinflint uncle er mine wot went out West years ago — they's a good deal we need. I say fust of all a good red plush parlor suit, but Ettie wants blue — an' that's wot I wanted your advice about, red er blue, wich'll wear best?"

There was a clear implication in tone and emphasis of the exact limit of the required advice, so I gave up and leaned back on Marthy's manifest destiny, abandoning all designs of capturing that money to save for her.

"I'm goin' to fix the front room fer Ettie! She's alwis wanted a real parlor, an' that'll be hers. Ef she ever *doos* keep comp'ny it'll come in good, an' then Mose ain't never hed no proper chance

in life, an' I'm goin' t' see 't he gits it now! We ain't jist decided,” she continued, with a wary reticence I well understood as covering some peculiarly outrageous and spendthrift design, “that is, we ain't quite sure wot Mose'll do yit with his'n. Of course, I cal'late to give him some more'n Ettie's share.”

There was such an unconscious forgetfulness of self in it all that I had not the heart to express my vexation, and when she slid down off the chair and the moment came, as it usually did with her, when she had to be helped to make her exit, I was poor spirited enough to abandon my high ground altogether and wish her joy of the spending.

A short time afterward I was moved by curiosity to make an errand to the Van Loan apartments. There Ettie received me on the plush sofa — it was blue — with languid elegance, attired in a gay purple gown, while from her buttonhole hung a gold chain in token of the watch within. The room was unquestionably the achievement of the girl's ambition, and she surveyed the cheap pictures in their gaudy frames, the gilt wall paper, and the gay new carpet with proud satisfaction. On the backs of the chairs, depending from the corner of the mantel, and over the corner of a table between the windows, were gay and flimsy draperies which she called “throws.” A young man, whose hat and overcoat lay on the brand new parlor organ, stood awkwardly shifting himself from one foot to the other during my visit.

“This is my gentleman friend,” Ettie announced serenely, and I realized that the parlor had already borne fruit. “Yes, ma and pa's away,” and she vouchsafed no further information. I wondered in what form Mose had decided to spend “his'n,” but I was at least glad that he had the grace to take Marthy along to help him get rid of it.

“Don't you think it's handsome?” and Ettie indicated with a comprehensive wave of her hand, on which I noticed a flashy ring, the entire contents of the room, including her blushing admirer.

“Oh, certainly,” I said weakly. “It's very, very rich.”

I did not see Marthy until one day in the following May, and then she came bustling in to see if she could have back her “wash place.”

“It's ben beautiful!” she said ecstatically, “the *beautifullest*

thing I ever seen, an' it's done Mose a heap er good! Yes, we ben South, clean on to Floridy! We've lived to good hotels, and done evything fust class, an' hed sich eatin' ez Mose said he never knowed they was in this world! You see Mose ain't never ben well, an' he *doos* feel the winters dretful. 'S he ses, he don't remember never to hev ben real warmed through sence he was born! So I jist thought of the plan myself, an' he 'was more'n pleased with it, an' I tell you we've jist hed one good swing to last a lifetime! 'S I tell Ettie, we've got s' much to tell it'll take years." Here her face fell for a moment. "Of course Ettie hedn't ought to went and got married while we's gone. My, there's quite a cobweb up on your wall! But I know his folks, an' they've got good blood, them Strykers. Come from down Mom-boccus way." She waited for some encouragement, and I tried vainly to think of a cheering thing to say. There was no need; she had the sort of heart that cheers itself.

"Ez Moses sez, 'it's too bad the boy ain't never got no work winters; he plays on a baseball nine summers, but we'll pull through somehow, ez long ez we keep together, an' I git my places back, an''" — she burst out bravely — "land's sakes, we ain't never wanted yit for vittles and drink, and we ain't agoin' to!"

