Poor Mrs. Marks.
Virginia Woodward Cloud.
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"IT was flounced to the waist and had a gray stripe and a rose-vine running through, and cost two and a half a yard. It was grand quality; they don't have such nowadays."

The speaker critically surveyed the maple-leaf shadows flecking the grass back of Newton Home, where four women sat talking. She was protected by a blue shawl and white-cotton gloves, and a sundown was tied upon her gray curls.

"You must ha' had some fine frocks, Miss Pammy," said Mrs. Marks, from her rocking-chair, groaning as she wrapped a shawl around her rheumatic foot. "Nothin' extry in the way of clothes ever come my way. He gave me a black silk and a watch and chain onc't on a weddin' anniversary, but everybody 's got them. No; fine dressin' warn't for me. There 's them that gets all and them that gets none. 'T ain't good for rheumatism to set so near the earth. Don't you smell the damp, Mis' Parks?"

Her neighbor was a wiry little woman in black, who drew strips of flannel through a piece of coffee-sacking with a crochet-needle. She agreed that it was damp:

"The 'cacia-leaves turned the wrong way, Mis' Marks, and the smoke 's fell."

"I tell by the shootin' pains in my foot," said Mrs. Marks. "I told Mis' Doyle that this place was damp, and the trustees oughter be made to build one of them sun-parlors for them that can't set out in the damp. She said that some was n't to be made, and others oughter be thankful for their home, 'stead o' wantin' the earth. She warn't hittin' at me, though, Mis' Doyle warn't, for I never was a hand to fault-find, and land knows I don't want the earth, for I 'll soon have plenty of that for my bed. I ain't goin' to be a burden long."

Mrs. Marks leaned back with her eyes closed, an image of portly resignation, and the others sighed in trio.

"Mis' Doyle is n't matron of a charity-house," said Miss Pammy. "I never would have come to one. We all paid our hundred dollars down. Mary Pinney, will you get my carpet, child? I feel the damp through my shoes. I never could abide heavy shoes."

A little cripple who was paring apples upon the circular bench under the tree hopped away upon her crutch, and returned with a strip of carpet, which she placed under Miss Pammy's feet.

"And I don't see that we are called upon to help get supper, either," spoke Mrs. Marks, eying the apples through half-closed lids.

"I 'd rather," said the cripple. "I finished a strip of edgin' to-day, and I can take a half-holiday. Besides, the apples smell like the country—some. I went there once on a 'scursion, and the boat landed. It was just grand."

"Mercy, child! I never could abide the dust, and things crawling," said Miss Pammy.

"Nor me." Mrs. Marks rocked heavily. "It 's good for dryin' clothes, that 's all. Give me a city house shut up tight of a day with green blinds, and a rocker in the window of an evenin', where a body can see into the street. But I 'll never have that no more. Here I am, and here I 've got to stay. But my days are numbered—they 're numbered."

Mrs. Marks closed her eyes and sighed ponderously, and the others echoed the sigh; for although they may have known adversity, it was more natural to concentrate sympathies upon an impressive and habitual monument to trouble.

Mrs. Parks was assiduously forming the mane of a brown-flannel lion.

"That 's like the house in Newburg, Mis' Marks," she said. "I got this scar there, when my green lamp-shade took afire. It was a day of bad luck. I laughed before seven, and I certainly did cry before eleven. Don't touch 'em, child,"—for the little cripple had stooped to pick up the speaker's scissors,—"don't you know there 's nothin' like scissors stickin' up for bringin' somebody? They 're pointin' straight to Miss Pammy. I never see such a person as you, Miss Pammy, for luck. There 's somebody comin' sure."

"They ain't comin' for me," said Mrs. Marks, creaking her rockers resignedly. "I 've nobody 'cept a brother, who 's dead, I reckon. Some 's born to luck, and some ain't. When I was a girl things always went contrariwise. I mind onc't I planted a 'zalea, and lemons grew on to it."

Suddenly the matron spoke behind her:

"There 's some don't know luck when they see it. Mary Pinney, I 'll take those apples now. Thank you, child. Mis' Parks, you do a heap of talkin' about luck signs, and Mis' Marks does a heap about not havin' any. Now, I 'd been glad to had lemons 'stead of 'zaleas, 'cause one can use the lemons; and I 'd think it mighty lucky to have a good home here 'stead of workin' day in and day out."

The matron passed on, and there was a moment of silent disapprobation. Miss Pammy's curls shook slightly; then Mrs. Marks spoke:

"I ain't speakin' about Mis' Doyle, but there 's some has n't any feelin' for the troubles of others. I do say, though, that luck signs never done *me* no good yet."

"But there 's a heap in 'em," said Miss Pammy. "Mis' Parks always says I 'm born lucky."

"Humph! and you 're here, just like me," said Mrs. Marks.

Miss Pammy bridled slightly:

"I—I went to Washington once for three days to help Cousin Augusta nurse her son's wife. The Capitol was a grand building."

"It 's well enough," said Mrs. Marks. "I did my sight-seein' three mortal weeks there, and boarded; but my back was like to break, and one place was mostly like another."

"I 've never been anywhere," said Mary Pinney, "but I 'm lucky—Mis' Parks says so—'cause I got in here through the Ladies' Auxiliary, and I 've got a flower in a pot, and my window 's got a tree outside. I 'm lucky, ain't I, Mis' Parks?"

"So 's my window got a tree," spoke Mrs. Marks. "What 's a tree? I 've saw many a one, and they never done nothin' for me yet. As for gettin' in here, there 's others here besides me."

Mrs. Marks's deceased husband's nephew had influence with the board, and her accommodations were the best afforded by Newton Home, but, as Mrs. Marks said, there was nothing unusual about that.

"Nothin' in signs!" exclaimed Mrs. Parks, biting off a thread from the flannel lior.'s mane, "Mis' Doyle don't know everything. The night before Mr. Parks asked me to marry him I dreamed about a' army, which is a sure sign of glad tidin's; and before I lost my hundred dollars in the loan company I dreamed of makin' up a batch of rye bread, and that 's a sign of losses."

"I don't see how you keep 'em in your head," said Mary Pinney.

"I was born that way. I 'm a seventh daughter, born on Hallow-eve, and there has been times"—here the oracle waited until Miss Pammy's roving gaze returned from the blue shawl—"there has been times when I could see a double shape if I turned my head to one side."

"Mostly do see queer when your head 's to one side," said Mrs. Marks, rocking.

"What sort of shape?" asked Mary.

"'T ain't for me to specialate," said the oracle.

"He 's been dead nigh thirty year," interpolated Mrs. Marks, "but you say it warn't at my door?"

"No 'm. But years don't count, Mis' Marks. I 've knowed 'em to come back when their partner was all married and settled happy a second time."

"Maybe if she 'd been in affliction he would n't ha' been so anxious to come," said Mrs. Marks. "No, 't warn't him, Mis' Parks; he never was a hand to worry himself about other folks, anyway."

"Is it a bad sign to see a shape at one's door?" asked Miss Pammy, timidly.

"It depends upon the dream, Miss Pammy. What did you dream about?"

Miss Pammy twisted a curl ruminatingly.

"The—the rain-barrel, seems to me."

"That 's grand, Miss Pammy! Barrels mean overflowin' wealth. I should n't wonder if one of your rich relations had died and left you everythin'."

Miss Pammy was wont to relate tales of early days, the characters of which were always in affluent circumstances. The rich relatives never materialized, but their possibility only added high lights upon the horizon of her sanguine imagination.

"Some gets all, and some gets none," repeated Mrs. Marks, rocking heavily. "I was born to trouble, nor was I ever a hand to dream luck dreams. And since I been shut up here I 've stopped dreamin' for good. I reckon it 's the dry eatin'. Remember, Mis' Parks, onc't I dreamed about a long-eared rabbit, and you allowed it was the sign of success in life? I been waitin' for that success this many a day. I ain't seen its shadow yet."

"Yes; but was you eatin' the rabbit, Mis' Marks?"

"I reckon likely I was. I 'm right fond of rabbit stewed."

"Then that 's a sign of health," declared the oracle.

"And here I been achin' all over with sciaticky for a month back!" exclaimed Mrs. Marks.

"But I don't specialate the sort of health, Mis' Marks. It may be bad health, for all I know. But since I 've saw what I did, I 've laid off to do the cards about it. They 're in the pocket of my brown-alpaca skirt."

The cripple hopped off after the cards.

"Nor did I ever take any stock in cards," said Mrs. Marks. "My father never had a card in his house, and when I married *he* did n't never play, so I don't know nothin' about 'em, 'cept hearin' Mis' Parks go over the shovels and hoes and things. No; luck don't point my way."

"I used to play old maid," said Miss Pammy, "but it never came out right. They all used to say I never was cut out for an old maid."

"Not you, Miss Pammy," said the oracle. "I 'll be bound you had more offers than you could count."

Miss Pammy's curls shook with complacency.

"I showed you the daguerreotype in the striped silk and the hair in a bandeau, did n't I?"

"I never was a hand for looks," put in Mrs. Marks. "When he married me he says, 'Sarah, 't ain't your looks; it 's your comfortin' cookin'.' He was mournin' his first then."

Here Mary Pinney returned with the cards, and the oracle cut them.

"I 've got a way I tell 'em double. I 'll take Mis' Marks and Miss Pammy. I ain't puttin' you in, Mary Pinney, because your luck 's all told. But Miss Pammy 's born lucky, and though Mis' Marks has seen a sight of trouble,"—Mrs. Marks groaned,—"there ain't any luck that can't turn. Three nines—three times three—ace on top. There! ten o' diamonds! One of you 's goin' a journey—"

"'T ain't me," put in Mrs. Marks; "I 'll go when I 'm carried foot first."

"And there 's a death—"

"That 's me," said Mrs. Marks.

"And a fortune on to it—"

"Then 't ain't me," said Mrs. Marks; "I 'm not a hand for gettin' things."

"That was a pretty calendar you got Easter, Mis' Marks," ventured Mary Pinney, comfortingly.

"It 's well enough. But what 's the use of countin' off the days here? I know when Wednesday comes, 'cause I never did eat corned beef even when I was at home."

The oracle's thimble rested upon a king.

"There 's money comin', and I 'll find the death somewheres, for I heard somethin' last night, too—it was tickin' at my head in the night."

Mary Pinney's lips opened to speak, but closed again, and the oracle resumed:

"I did. I reckon Miss Pammy's letter 'll come to-day to explain it."

Newton Home understood that Miss Pammy was liable to receive letters. The letters had never arrived, but it added importance to her little, gray-curled figure to anticipate daily the coming of the postman. Mrs. Marks received letters; but there was no anticipation, mystery, or suggestiveness about Mrs. Marks. Twice yearly she received a box, the contents of which were prosaic, and as the occurrence was customary, it gave no contagious thrill to the other inmates of the house.

There had been an Easter, however, when Miss Pammy was the recipient of a flower in a pot, and the excitement attending the event shook Newton Home from cellar to roof. It rose to an exuberant height when Miss Pammy appeared at tea with a hyacinth bloom pinned on her blue shawl. Mrs. Doyle lighted an extra lamp in honor, and more than one of the happy participators declared that it was better than being invited out to tea. They remained down-stairs an hour later and told stories, and the oracle was especially radiant because Miss Pammy had dreamed that the chimney was on fire, which meant an inheritance, a flower in a pot being virtually the same thing if you look at it the right way.

Mrs. Parks addressed the ace of spades:

"If Mis' Marks had dreamed her hair had fell out I could understand this here journey, for—my land! There 's a hack now comin' in the gate, and 't ain't trustee day, neither! You might as well get ready, Miss Pammy."

The carriage in question disappeared around

the drive, and presently the matron's voice called loudly from the back door.

"Marks," said the oracle.

"She said Parks," said Mary Pinney.

"'T ain't me," said Mrs. Marks, rocking; "there ain't nobody comin' to see me. I ain't got any live friends."

The oracle gathered up the cards and started for the house, declaring that it could not be for her, because she had n't dreamed a thing except that she climbed a hill, which meant a fire, and she had kept the matches in a stone jug ever since.

There was a brief silence. Mrs. Marks rocked and sighed. Mary Pinney counted: "One, two, three—loop; four, five, six—chain."

"Mis' Marks! Mis' Marks!" The oracle's small black figure ran through the sunlight, beckoning excitedly. "It 's you, Mis' Marks! It 's you! The journey and the carriage and fortune and all a-waitin' at the gate! Such luck, Mis' Marks! Such luck!"

Mrs. Marks sat bolt upright as the oracle arrived, panting for breath.

"May I be prepared for the worst," she said solemnly. "What is it, Mis' Parks? More trouble?"

"*Trouble?* My land, no, Mis' Marks! Your own dear brother ain't dead at all. He 's come back with a fortune and a house and all, a-settin' there in the guest-parlor talkin' to Mis' Doyle this blessed minute! And a carriage at the gate to take you to end your days in peace and plenty! Hurry, Mis' Marks! Such luck I never see in all my life. You 'll drive around in your own carriage and pair—"

The oracle paused for breath, and Mrs. Marks arose with anguish upon her countenance.

"*Me* drive around in a carriage and pair, at my time o' life, and all crippled up? *Me* go away, and all settled here, and my days numbered? What are you talkin' about, Mis' Parks?"

"The gospel truth, Mis' Marks, as I draw my breath. Don't talk to me no more about there bein' nothin' in luck cards. He says you can do as you like and keep to your rooms when you want. It 's the grandest turn of luck. Hurry, Mis' Marks!"

The reply was a groan as the recipient of fate's bounty unwrapped her foot, assisted by the trio, who were in a tremor of excitement.

"*Me* stay shut up in a room, me that lives in the air? Mis' Parks, if it 's cards that 's worked this trouble and drove me out of a peaceful home, may them as done it be forgiven!"

Mrs. Marks went slowly toward the house, momentarily giving vent to a fresh outburst of

woe; but the rôle of chief mourner was too habitual to curb the excitement of the accompanying trio. Such an unqualified exhibition of luck had never before visited Newton Home. Mrs. Marks was escorted to the hands of the matron. Then Mary Pinney suggested that they should place themselves upon the lawn to witness the departure. It was an impressive half-hour, and they spoke in subdued tones, as though waiting for the beginning of a sermon.

By and by the front door opened and Mrs. Marks appeared. She wore a black bonnet and green veil, and was escorted by a hale middle-aged man, and followed by the matron. When near the gate, the matron called:

"Look a-waitin', Mis' Marks! Ain't you goin' to say good-by to anybody?"

Mrs. Marks looked back at the trio under the maple-trees, and raised a black-gloved hand and shook her head, as though implying monumental resignation, and they heard her say:

"I won't be a burden to nobody long."

It took time for Mrs. Marks to direct the adjustment of her numerous bandboxes and bundles, and her gestures were impressive with pent tragedy. The trio watched her breathlessly, until the matron remarked, *sotto voce*, and with a sniff:

"Some folks have a heap more trouble takin' care of just theirselves than others do with families dependin' on 'em for bread. I went to her door last night to see if 't was somebody in a fit, and 't was just Mis' Marks a-snorin'. Says she did n't sleep a wink all night. I 'm bound she 's never had a night of pain in her life like Mary Pinney, here."

But the trio, absorbed in the pantomime of Mrs. Marks being packed into the carriage, could not readjust their mental attitude upon suggestion.

"Poor Mis' Marks!" sighed the oracle. "When she 's went I 'll just have to try the cards for your letter, Miss Pammy."

"Seems 'most a pity," said Mary Pinney, "she won't want things any more; she 'll just have 'em all—poor Mis' Marks!"

And as a last expression of sympathy, the little cripple hopped forward and whispered in the carriage window:

"Mis' Marks, don't you take on about that there death-tick last night. It was just your own watch hangin' on the other side of the door at Mis' Parks' head."

But Mrs. Marks raised her eyes and shook her head.

"It won't be long, Mary Pinney. My days are numbered now, and the happy times we 've saw are over."

Then fortune's agent climbed in beside her and remarked genially:

"Now, sister Sarah, I told you that if you feel so bad about going away I can arrange for you to board here just as long as you like."

"William, I know my duty," said Mrs. Marks, as the carriage rolled away.

Virginia Woodward Cloud.