DOORYARDS.*

Sweet as these homespun spots can make themselves, in their mixture of thrift and prodigality, they are dearer than ever at the points where they register family traits, and so touch the humanity of us all. Here is imprinted the story of the man who owns the farm, that of the father who inherited it, and the grandfather who reclaimed it from waste; here have they and their womenkind set the foot of daily

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living and traced indelible paths. They have left here the marks of tragedy, of pathos, of joy. One yard has a level bit of graceless ground between barn and pump, and you may call it a battlefield, if you will, since famine and desire have striven there together. Or, if you choose to read fine meanings into threadbare things, you may see in it a field of the cloth of gold where simple love of life and childlike pleasure met and sparkled for no eye to see. It was a croquet ground laid out in the days when croquet first inundated the land, and laid out by a woman. This was Della Smith, then mother of two grave children, and the wife of a farmer who never learned to smile. Eben was duller than the ox which ploughs all day long for his handful of hay at night and his heavy slumber; but Della, though she carried her end of the yoke with a gallant spirit, had dreams and desires forever bursting from brown shells, only to live a moment in the air, and then, like bubbles, die. She had a perpetual appetite for joy. When the circus came to town, she walked miles to see the procession; and, in dreams of satisfied delight dropped potatoes all the afternoon, to make up. Once a hand-organ and monkey strayed that way, and it was she who followed them; for the children were little, and all the saner housemothers contented themselves with leaning over the gates till the wandering train had passed. But Della drained her draught of joy to the dregs, and then tilted her cup anew. With croquet came her supremest joy —one that leavened her days till God took her somewhere, we hope, where there is playtime. Della had not money to buy a croquet set, but she had something far better, an alert and undiscouraged mind. On one dizzy afternoon, at a Fourth of July picnic, when wickets had been set up near the wood, she had played with the minister, and beaten him. The game opened before her an endless vista of delight. She saw herself perpetually knocking red-striped balls through an eternity of wickets, and she knew that here was the one pastime of which no soul could tire. Afterwards, driving home with her husband and two children, still in a maze of satisfied delight, she murmured absently:

"Wonder how much they cost?".

"What?" asked Eben, and Della turned, flushed scarlet, and replied:—

"Oh, nothin'!"

That night she lay awake for one rapt hour, and then she slept the sleep of conquerors. In the morning, after Eben had gone safely off to work, and the children were still asleep, she began singing, in a monotonous, high voice, and took her way out of doors. She always sang at moments when she purposed leaping the bounds of domestic custom. Even Eben had learned that, dull as he was. If he heard that guilty crooning from the buttery, he knew she might be breaking extra eggs or using more sugar than was conformable.

"What you doin' of?" he was accustomed to call. But Della never answered, and he did not interfere. The question was a necessary concession to marital authority; he had no wish to curb her ways.

Della scudded about the yard like a wilful wind. She gathered withes from a waiting pile, and set them in that one level space for wickets. Then she took a handsaw, and pale about the lips, returned to the house and to her bedroom. She had made her choice. She was sacrificing old associations to her present need; and one after another she sawed the ornamenting balls from her mother's high-post bedstead. Perhaps the one element of tragedy lay in the fact that Della was no mechanician, and she had not foreseen that, having one flat

side, her balls might decline to roll. But that dismay was brief. A weaker soul would have flinched; to Della it was a futile check, a pebble under the wave. She laid her balls calmly aside. Some day she would whittle them into shape; for there were always coming to Della days full of roomy leisure and large content. Meanwhile apples would serve her turn—good alike to draw a weary mind out of its channel or teach the shape of spheres. And so, with two russets for balls and the clothes-slice for mallet (the heavy sledge-hammer having failed, Della serenely, yet in triumph, played her first game against herself.

"Don't you drive over them wickets," she called imperiously when Eben came up from his lot in his dingle cart.

"Them what?" returned he, and Della had to go out to explain. He looked at them gravely; hers had been a ragged piece of work.

"What under the sun'd you do that for?" he inquired. "The young ones wouldn't turn their hand over for't. They ain't big enough."

"Well, I be," said Della briefly. "Don't you drive over 'em."

Eben looked at her and then at his path to the barn, and he turned his horse aside.

Thereafter, until we got used to it, we found a vivid source of interest in seeing Della playing croquet and always playing alone. That was a very busy summer, because the famous drought came then, and water had to be carried for weary rods from spring and river. Sometimes Della did not get her playtime till three in the afternoon, sometimes not till after dark; but she was faithful to her joy. The croquet ground suffered varying fortunes. It might happen that the balls were potatoes, when apples failed to be in season, often her wickets broke, and stood up in two ragged horns. Sometimes one fell away altogether, and Della, like the planets, kept an uneven track. Once or twice the mistaken benevolence of others gave her real distress. The minister's daughter, noting her solitary game, mistook it for forlornness, and, in the warmth of her maiden heart, came to ask if she might share. It was a timid though official benevolence; but Della's bright eyes grew dark. She clung to her kitchen chair.

"I guess I won't," she said, and, in some dim way, everybody began to understand that this was but an intimate and solitary joy. She had grown so used to spreading her banquets for one alone that she was frightened at the sight of other cups upon the board; for although loneliness begins in pain, by and by, perhaps, it creates its own species of sad and shy content.

Della did not have a long life; and that was some relief to us who were not altogether satisfied with her outlook here. The place she left need not be always desolate. There was a good maiden sister to keep the house and Eben and the children would be but briefly sorry. They could recover their poise; he with the health of a simple mind, and they as children will. Yet he was truly stunned by the blow; and I hoped, on the day of the funeral that he did not see what I did. When we went out to get our horse and wagon, I caught my foot in something which at once gave way.

I looked down—at a broken wicket and a withered apple at the stake.