

Nothing

by Zephine Humphrey, 1874-1956

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THIS is not going to be an easy story to write. Its theme is precisely that which I have chosen for my title; and naturally its positive significance is not obvious. But I must somehow get the thing into words. The spiritual value which I found in the experience may come home to some reader. At any rate, it is good for us all to stop now and then and challenge the conventional standards of our lives.

To begin with, I presume that there are few sympathetic students of humanity who will not agree with me that the strain of mysticism which sometimes appears in the New England character is one of the most interesting and touching of all the manifestations of our human nature. It is so unexpected! The delicate pearl in the rough oyster is not more apparently incongruous, rarer, or more priceless. Nay, it is more than that. The development is so impossible as to be always a miracle, freshly wrought by the finger of God.

There are all sorts of elements in it which do not appear in other kinds of mysticism: humor (that unfailing New England salt!), reserve, and a paradoxical mixture of independence and deference. It knows how inexplicable it must seem to its environment, how it must fret its oyster; so it effaces itself as much as possible. But it yields not one jot of its integrity. It holds a hidden, solitary place apart—like a rare orchid in the woods, like a hermit thrush. Even to those who love it, it will not lightly or often reveal itself. But when it does—well, I would take a weary, barefoot pilgrimage for the sake of the experience which I had last summer. And here I may as well begin my narrative.

I

I sat behind her in the little country church; and when I had studied her profile for a few moments, I was glad of a chance to rise and sing the Doxology. She was a woman of fifty-odd, a typical Vermonter, with the angular frame and features peculiar to her class. Her mouth was large, her cheek-bones high; her thin, dark hair, streaked with gray, was drawn smoothly down behind her ears. But her expression!—that gave her away. Not flagrantly, of course. To discover her one had to be temperamentally on the watch for her. Apparently, like all the rest of us, she was looking at the flowers before the pulpit; but I was sure that her wide blue eyes were really intent on something behind and beyond. Her mouth brooded, her forehead dreamed, her whole face pondered grave and delectable matters. I am afraid that I did not hear much of the sermon that morning.

When church was over, I followed her out, and waited to see in what direction she turned her homeward steps. Then I made up my mind to devote the next week to taking walks in that same direction. The minister's wife saw me looking after her, and approached me with a smile which I understood. She was about to say, „That is one of our native oddities, a real character. I see that she interests you. Shall I take you to see her? You will find her a curious and amusing study.“ But I headed her off by letting the wind blow my handkerchief away. Nobody should tell me anything about my mystic—not even what her name was, or where she lived!

I was fully prepared not to find her for several days. I went forth in quest of her in the spirit in which I always start out to find a hermit thrush—ready to be disappointed, to wait, humbly aware that the best rewards demand and deserve patience. But she was not so securely hidden as the thrush. Her little house gave her away to my seeking, as her expression, the day before, had given her away to my sympathy.

It was just the house for her: low and white, under a big tree, on the side of a brook-threaded hill, a little apart from the village. I recognized it the instant I saw it; and when I had read the name—„Hesper Sherwood“—on the mailbox by the side of the road, I confidently turned in at the gate.

She was working in her garden, clad in a blue-checked gingham apron and a blue sunbonnet. When she heard my footsteps, she looked up slowly, turning in my direction, and, for the first time, I saw her full face.

It was even better than her profile. Oh! when human features can be moulded to such quietness and confidence, what an inexplicable pity it is that they ever learn

the trick of fretfulness! In Hesper Sherwood, humanity for once looked like a child of God.

I was not sure at first that she saw me distinctly. Perhaps the sun dazzled her shaded eyes. Her expectant expression held itself poised a little uncertainly, as if she were doubtful of the exact requirements of the situation. But when I said something—commonplace enough and yet heartfelt—about the beauty of the view from her gate, her face lighted and she came forward.

„It's better from the house,“ she said, shyly, yet eagerly. „Won't you come up and see?“

It was indeed as fair a prospect as threshold ever opened out upon. Close at hand was the green hillside, dropping down to the smiling summer valley; and beyond were the mountains, big and blue, with their heads in the brilliant sky and with cloud-shadows trailing slowly over them. Directly across the way, they were massive; in the distance, where the valley opened out to the south, they were hazy and tender. One of them loomed above the little house, and held it in its hand. Everywhere, they were commanding presences; and it was clear that the house had taken up its position wholly on their account.

Plain enough in itself it was, that house. Its three small rooms were meagrely furnished; and its windows were curtainless, inviting the eyes beyond themselves. It was utterly restful. It made me want to go home and burn up half the things I possess. Later, as I came to know it and its owner better, I understood what perfect counterparts they were. She, too, invited the gaze beyond herself.

It is, of course, not my intention to trace the development of our friendship. Though we trusted each other from the beginning, we took the whole summer to feel our way into each other's lives. It was a beautiful experience. I would not have hurried it. But now I want to proceed at once to the conversation in which she finally told me explicitly what had not happened to her. It was but the definite statement of what I had known all along: that here was a life which God had permitted Himself the luxury of keeping apart for his own delectation.

We were sitting out on the front steps, in the face of the mountains and valley; and we had said nothing for a long time. Our silence had brought us so close that when she began to speak, my ear ignored the uttered words and I felt as if my thoughts were reading hers.

„It's queer about folks' lives isn't it?“ she said thoughtfully—though I am not sure that she was any more aware of her lips than I was of my ears. „How they follow one line; how the same things keep happening to them, over and over. I suppose it's what people call Fate. There's no getting away from it.

„Take my brother Silas. As a boy, he was always making the luckiest trades; couldn't seem to help it. Then when he married and moved to his new farm, he began to get rich; and now he couldn't stop his money if he wanted to. He must be worth fifteen thousand dollars.

„Take my sister Persis. She's had eleven children.

„Take my uncle Rufus. He's been around the world three times, and is just starting again.

„Take—“

She paused and hesitated.

„You,“ I supplied softly.

„Well, yes, take me.“ She turned and flashed a sudden smile at me. „I’ve always wanted everything, and I’ve had—nothing.“

She spoke the word as if it were the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow.

„It took me a long time to understand,“ she went on quietly, as I made no comment. „I suppose that was natural. I was young; and I had never happened to hear of a case like mine. At first, I thought that, just because I wanted a thing, I was bound to have it. There was my mother.“

Again she paused, and a tender, glowing light appeared in her face, like the quickening of a latent fire. It was eloquent of all sorts of passionate, youthful, eager things.

„I guess I worshiped my mother,“ she submitted simply. „Maybe you think that, anyway, I had her. But, no, I hadn’t. She liked me well enough. Mothers do. But we had a big family, and we lived in a big house, and she was very busy. It bothered her to have me get in her way with my huggings and kissings. Why in the world couldn’t I wait until bedtime? Poor mother! She never did seem to know what to make of my devotion. People don’t like to be loved too well; it embarrasses them.

„She died when I was fourteen. And I thought I’d die too.“

There was no shadow on Hesper’s face as she remembered her young, far-away anguish; rather, there was a strange deepening of peace. But she was silent for two or three minutes; and I noticed that she put out her hand and caressed an old-fashioned, crocheted tidy that lay on the arm of a chair which she had brought out on the porch. When she resumed her story, she spoke somewhat more rapidly.

„I was sick a long time. If I hadn’t been, I think I might have gone crazy. But pain took my attention, and weakness made me sleep a good deal; and when I came to get up again, I was quieter. I spent lots of time in the fields and woods. I had always loved them, and now they seemed to help me more than anything else. There was something about them so big that it was willing to let me love it as much as I wanted to. That was comforting. When I was in the woods, I felt as if I had hold of an endless thread. You know how it is?“

She appealed to me.

„Indeed, yes!“ I answered her. And I quoted William Blake—

„Only wind it into a ball—
It will lead you in at heaven’s gate,
Built in Jerusalem’s wall.“

She nodded soberly, yet glowingly, and pondered the words for a moment. Then, „That’s very good,“ she said. „Please say it again.

„Well, by and by,“ she continued, touching her finger as if she were half unconsciously enumerating the points of a discourse—there was something indescribably simple and downright in her manner of unfolding her experience— „by and by, somebody gave me a card to the village library, and I began to read. Of course I had always gone to school, but the pieces in the readers didn’t interest me particularly, and I hadn’t followed them up. A reader isn’t a book, anyway; it’s a crazy quilt. I guess I shan’t ever forget that summer. I couldn’t do anything but read. I read stories and poems and books about travel and history and peoples’

lives. I had a hiding-place up in the woods, where I used to go and stay for hours, sometimes whole days. My older sister couldn't get anything out of me in the way of housework. It was wonderful." Her voice rose a little, and something of the old exultation came flooding back into her face. "Isn't it silly to talk of books as if they were just print and paper, when they are really stars and seas and cities and pictures and people and everything! There was nothing my books didn't give me that summer; and yet, on the other hand, there was nothing they didn't make me want. I wanted to travel, to go everywhere, to see and hear everything; above all, by way of a beginning, I wanted to go to school.

"I was always an impatient child; and it did seem as if I couldn't wait till autumn, when the schools opened. There's a good school at Fieldsborough, over the mountain. I coaxed my father to let me go there; and, after a while, he consented. On the day he wrote to enter my name, I ran up in the woods and lay in a bed of ferns and cried for joy. I hugged every tree that came in my way. I tried to hug the brook. Dear me!" Again she broke off, and the light which had begun to burn in her eyes softened into a smile. "That's the way I was then. I was so hot-hearted. I didn't understand."

"But you went?" I inquired, my sympathetic eagerness suddenly breaking bounds. It seemed to me that I could not stand it if she had been disappointed. "Oh! why not?" My voice faltered, for she shook her head.

"My eyes," she said briefly. "They had always bothered me; and, before he let me go to school, father had them examined by a city doctor who was boarding in the village. He said I'd surely be blind some day; and that, of course, the more books I read, the sooner the end would come."

She spoke as if she referred to the wearing out of an umbrella or a pair of shoes; and, fortunately for us both, my distress kept me dumb.

"It was pretty hard at first—a real blow. But I was sixteen years old, and I had suffered once. Then, too, I thought I had to make a choice, and I needed all my wits about me. So I held on to myself, and went off to the woods to think. Should I go to school, or should I keep my eyes as long as I could? As soon as I had put my mind to it, however, I found that there wasn't any real question there. Of course I'd got to keep my eyes, and the school must go. There were all sorts of reasons. I wanted to see the woods and mountains as long as possible. I didn't want to become dependent on any one. My memory wasn't very good; and I knew, most likely, if I went to school and stuffed my mind full that year, I'd soon forget everything, and there I'd be—worse off than ever. So I gave over thinking about it, and just lay in the ferns all the afternoon.

"Maybe you'll hardly believe me when I tell you that I was happy that day. I don't know what it was. Something moved in the treetops and in the shadows. I watched it closely; and, by and by, when I was just on the point of seeing it, I realized that both my eyes were closed. If I hadn't been so surprised by that discovery and so taken up with wondering how I had happened to shut my eyes without knowing it, I believe I'd have seen—"

Her voice trailed off into silence; and I presently found myself wondering if she had left that sentence unfinished also without knowing it.

II

„My father died the next year,“ she continued, after a few thoughtful minutes, „and my sister married, and I came to live in this little house. I had it fixed over to suit me, so that it was as simple and convenient as possible; and I set myself to learn it by heart. I did a lot of my housework after dark. Inside a year, I was so independent that I knew I need never worry about having to get anybody to help me. By taking plenty of time, I managed to learn some books by heart too; and I found it was much more interesting to sit and think about one paragraph for an hour than to read twenty pages. Even a few words are enough. Take, *Be still, and know that I am God*; or, *Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace*. There’s no end to those sentences.

„Well,“—She touched her third finger, and then, for the first time, she came to a full pause, as if she were not sure about going on. Her face grew shy and reserved and reluctant.

I looked away—not for anything would I have urged her further confidence. But she went on presently. She had committed herself to the stream of this confession, and she would not refuse to be carried by it wherever it might wind.

„After a while I had a lover. He was a man from the city, and I met him in the woods. We were never introduced; and, for a long time, I didn’t know anything about him—except that I loved him and he loved me. We couldn’t help it, for we felt the same way about the woods. I had never known any one like him before, and never expected to, because I’m so different from most folks. He made me understand how lonely it is to be different. I—we—“

But, after all, she could not dwell on this experience, and I did not want her to. The poignant beauty of the relation was already sufficiently apparent to my imagination.

„One day he told me that he had a wife at home,“ she concluded; „and I never saw him again. I think it was then that I really knew and understood.“

Knew what? Understood what? She had an air of having said all that was necessary, of having come to the end of her story; and I shrank from putting any crude questions to her. But it seemed to me that, if she did not tell me something more of her secret, I should just miss the most significant revelation I had ever caught a glimpse of.

Perhaps she read my suspense. At any rate, she said presently—

„It was very simple. If it hadn’t been, I couldn’t have understood it; for I was never a good hand at trying to reason things out. It was just that I wasn’t ever to have anything I wanted. When I once knew and accepted that, I felt as if I’d slipped out into a great, wide, quiet sea.“

This was, to her own mind, so definitely the end of her narrative, that, after sitting a moment in silence, she half rose as if to go into the house and attend to some domestic task. But I put out my hand and held her apron’s hem.

„You mean—“ I stammered.

Really, she must tell me a little more!

A look of perplexity, almost of distress, came into her tranquil face, and she shook her head.

„I told you I was no hand at working things out,“ she said. „It’s better just to know.“

„Please!“ I insisted.

It was crass in me; but I felt that something as precious as life itself depended on my grasping the full significance of this story.

Gently, but very resolutely, she stooped and released her apron from my clutch.

„I’ve some bread in the oven,“ she said, and disappeared.

III

She was gone so long that I had time to do what I would with the fragments of the story which she had so non-committally delivered to me. Since analysis was my way, I should have full scope for it. I sat with my head in my hands, my elbows on my knees. The sunset deepened and glowed around me, but I paid no attention to it. The cloudy abstraction which hovered before my inner vision, and let me grasp here a fringe, there a fold, was all-absorbing to me.

Souls that want greatly, like Hesper, are doomed to failure or disappointment. No earthly having can possibly satisfy them. For what they really want is simply God, and earth represents Him very imperfectly. Hesper had not been happy with the thing she had come nearest having—her mother. Would she have been happy with her lover? Would he have let her love him „too well“? Books and education and travel are all finite and fragmentary means to an end which never arrives. Only adventurous spirits can escape the torment in them. And, with all her eagerness, Hesper was not adventurous. She was too earnest and humble, she was too direct. Fate had been good to her; and, in giving her nothing, had really given her everything. Everything: that was God. Well, her story had not once referred to Him, but it had been as instinct with Him as a star with light. It was He who had beckoned and lured her by lurking in her three definite interests, and then had shattered them before her in order that she might find Him. She had Him fast at last, and He had her. There was no mistaking the heavenly surrender of her face. I was awed with the apprehension of the passionate seeking and finding between a human soul and its Maker. Did she recognize and acknowledge the situation? Or, here again, did she prefer a blind certainty?

Blind! The word had dogged me for several weeks, but I had evaded it. Now, when it suddenly confronted me, I was all but staggered by it. I think I groaned slightly; I know I pressed my hand closely over my eyes. Then my own action admonished me. Here was I, deliberately shutting myself away from the sight of the outer world in order that I might hold and marshal my thoughts in the presence of reality. The hills and sky are distracting; the whole flying glory of creation is a perpetual challenge and disturbance to the meditative spirit. How supremely excellent it would be if one could only look long and hard and adoringly enough at it to see through it once; and then never see it again, for the rapt contemplation of That which lies behind!

I had come to this point in my reverie when Hesper softly returned and stood in the doorway behind me. I looked up at her. She returned my smile, but I thought that her eyes did not quite fix me. Neither did she glance at the sky when I

commented on the beauty of the sunset—although she assented to the comment convincingly. As she sat down beside me, her hands and feet made a deft groping. I said nothing; and I have never known whether she or any one else knew that she was blind.

The minister's wife waylaid me, as I passed her house that evening on my way back to my room.

„You've been to see Hesper Sherwood again?“ she remarked, with a righteous, tolerant air of ignoring a slight. „I'm so glad! Her life is so empty that any little attention means riches to her.“

„Empty!“

The expostulation was a mistake, but I really could not help it.

„I have never known such a brimming life,“ I added, still more foolishly.

The minister's wife stared at me.

„Why, she has nothing at all,“ she said.

„Precisely!“ I commented, and went on my way.

