

The Plain Two-Cent Letter

BY LUCY PRATT

THE June twilight crept softly along the highways and byways in the little, lazy village of Greenbush, and Martelia Flagg sat on her leaf-covered porch and looked off at the "South Meadows." Her handkerchief lay in suggestive readiness on her lap, but, in spite of a perhaps seeming forethought, Martelia had not come out on the porch to cry. Martelia never planned to cry. When she cried it was because the tears were wrung out from her against her will. She had wandered out on the porch because she didn't know what else to do. The supper dishes were done, it wasn't time to light up, and she was lonesome. She wanted her brother William. And with slow persistence his face came back to her as it had looked that afternoon in its stiffly flower-trimmed casket. It had lain there very quietly under her own long, quiet, last look. Was this peaceful physical mask that she looked at symbolic of a real peace somewhere for the real William, the joyous, noisy, living William, whom she had protected with her comfortable, housewifely little ways for so many years? It hardly seemed to her that she could endure it not to know that William was comfortable now. She could go on alone herself, it wasn't that, but not to know—surely—just how it was with him! She pressed her hand to her high, worn forehead, where the gray hair fell softly, and her eyes looked absently at the meadows, full of an unexpressed pain.

And up and down the little village the principal subject of discussion, as Martelia sat there, was what was to become of her. What would she do? William Flagg hadn't left a cent of money behind him. They all knew that. They knew that William hadn't any money to leave. He had always worked hard on the farm; there were lines on his round, twinkling face that suggested risings with the sun

in summer and without the sun in winter; but for all that, they knew that William was "never any hand to save." Martelia knew it only too well. She knew more. "He was never any hand to make—let alone saving."

And back of all her other troubled thoughts was always the question which kept repeating and repeating itself. What was going to become of her now? And with a vision of details always clear in her practical mind, she thought of the pantry, with its fair allowance of food and its flour-barrel still perhaps a quarter full; of the hens that were laying three or four eggs a day, of the piece of meadow-land, green with tender new tobacco and corn that must be sold to pay the doctors' bills, and of the cows that were already sold. William had never known about that. She was glad that he hadn't. It was only when they talked about the operation and another nurse that, with the desperation of necessity upon her, she had gone to work and sold both the cows. Oh, that had been an expensive and cruel illness, and out of it she had come with deeper lines across her forehead, a helpless realization that it was all over, and a clear knowledge that there was nothing left for her to live on.

A breeze fanned across the meadow as she meditated, and blew up to her in gentle gusts, just stirring the gray hair over the troubled forehead. She turned her head at the sound of approaching steps. It was her old neighbor, Eben Moore, and he came along the soft earth walk which ran in front of the house. He hesitated a moment before turning into the little path leading to the steps, but it was only for a moment, and then he came slowly, steadily on again.

"Good-evening, Eben." Martelia's voice was even to colorlessness, but she looked at the new-comer with a serious directness. "Won't you sit down?"

Eben glanced questioningly at the steps below him. He was painfully going over again in his mind the events of the afternoon, Martelia's part in them, Martelia's present pain, Martelia's future perplexities. It was a real grief to Eben, this sorrow which had come to Martelia, and he wanted very much to express something of his feeling to her. His mind groped hesitatingly for a moment, and then he cleared his throat and sat down on one of the lower steps.

"It's some cooler this evening," he declared, with a quite accidental-sounding cheerfulness in his voice.

Martelia's eyes wandered, with a shade of uneasiness in them, from his half-turned face.

"Yes," she agreed, with a perceptible cheerlessness of tone.

A painful longing to make her understand his sympathy—to make her entirely, perfectly understand—clutched at Eben's heart. He took out his handkerchief and blew his nose with careless brevity.

"We may get a shower yet, though," he added, again clearing his throat.

"I hope if it's going to rain it'll get through before Thursday," observed Martelia, in perfectly safe, middle tones.

Eben glanced at her but momentarily, and his curiosity was well concealed.

"I'm going up to Lynne Thursday for a little visit with Julia."

Eben's surprise seemed to leak out round the edges and corners, as it were, as he looked straight up at Martelia.

"I don't see my way clear to going, but she's so set on my having the change that I had to give in to it."

"Well, I guess it'll do you good!" came the final agreement. "It ain't been any too easy a stretch for you since last Christmas. I guess your sister's got the brains to see that."

He felt delightfully lubricated, limbered up, so to speak, after this long and positive affirmation, and Martelia glanced at him responsively.

"I suppose the change won't do me any hurt, but it'll seem strange. I don't know how it'll feel to go away."

"You've always been a great hand to stay right at home, ain't you?" observed Eben, in half-admiring tones. "Well, I don't know as I blame you; I'm consid'erable of a stay-at-home myself."

"It's nineteen years this coming August since I've really been off visitin'. That was the summer after Julia married and went to Lynne to live."

"Yes—seem 's if I remembered that," agreed Eben, softly.

"Yes," echoed Martelia, "she was possessed to have me go up and see the new house and all, and I stayed a fortni't. I guess it's changed some since then. And of course her bein' alone 'll make it seem diff'rent. George is off at the poultry show in Westboro, and visitin' his mother at the same time, so we'll be pretty much to ourselves."

Eben meditated. "Lynne's a nice town, they say," he finally ventured, humbly. "Was you planning to stay about a fortni't this time?"

"I ain't really made my plans," replied Martelia, with the suggestion of a quaver in her voice.

Eben looked steadily at the meadow, and Martelia struggled with herself. Should she say it?

"What I'd like would be to get some kind—of a place," she broke out, weakly.

Eben continued to look at the meadow.

"Some kind of easy work—out some-where's?" He tried to make his voice so very easy and unsurprised.

"I don't know so much—about it's being easy. But—something to do. I—I guess I've got to get something to do."

Eben's thoughts fought one another desperately, lamely. For a long time Eben had wanted to marry Martelia. He had wanted to for almost twenty years. And in that time he had always waited for what seemed to him just the right and proper opportunity of saying so to her—without causing her any sudden and embarrassing discomfort, any rude and startling surprise. Had that opportunity come at last in the form of a sorrow which took her out of the realm of even that possibility?

"What kind of—what kind of work was you thinking of?" he asked, with hesitating gentleness.

"I don't know as it's for me to say; I guess I'm ready to do most anything—that's self-supportin'. I didn't ever make any plans for it. I wouldn't ever supposed I'd be left alone like this—without William."

"There wouldn't anybody supposed

so," murmured Eben, out of the chaos of his battling thoughts. . . . "Would you—do you think you'd take to—well, to bein' a housekeeper, or anything like that—if you could find just the right kind of folks?"

"I suppose I could do that better than most anything else; it's about all I've ever done—housekeepin'—and I guess it's about all I know how to do extra well."

"I was thinkin' of Daniel Wright—"

"Daniel Wright," she echoed, passively—"up at Pemberton?"

"Yes; I heard last week Daniel's housekeeper's left him. Would you take to doin' anything like that—would you care anything about housekeepin' for Daniel?" His tone was one admirably adapted to a child confronted by something disagreeable. He watched the sudden shrinking on her worn, delicate face.

"Yes, I'd be willin' to do housekeepin' for Daniel Wright," she answered, slowly.

"I was goin' to drive up there to-morrow to look over some cattle. I'll see Daniel, if you say so."

She looked down at him a moment without answering, and then her words seemed to feel their way along in a brave effort at reasonableness.

"I'd be much obliged to you if you would, Eben. As I told you just now, it ain't a time for me to be tellin' what I'll do or what I won't do; it's—what can I get to do." Her voice floundered and dropped onto a helpless sort of pause. Eben had an overwhelming desire to take her in his arms and tell her not to worry—not to worry, that he would take care of her always—all the rest of his life! Hadn't the time come? How would she take it? She would be glad! No, she wouldn't be glad; yes, she would be glad, no—his thoughts trailed off weakly. Who was he, to startle her with anything like that?

"I'll come over and let you know about it as soon 's I get home to-morrow," he murmured, getting up from the low step and turning into the little path which led to the sidewalk. "Of course, Daniel may have got somebody before now, or he may have got his eye on somebody, but 'twon't do any harm to inquire."

"I'd be much obliged to you, Eben."

He paused a moment, looking back at her, as the breeze from the meadows

fanned her gently and stirred the leaves which hung around her on the porch. "Well, I guess I'll have to be goin' back," he said.

"Yes, I s'pose it's most bedtime, but it's so warm it's pleasant to sit out. Listen to the frogs singin'!"

"That's so; they're makin' consid'able of a rumpus, ain't they; well—"

"Good-night, Eben." She was accustomed to helping him over hard places like that. And she watched him as he moved noiselessly along the soft earth sidewalk till he wavered dimly and then faded under the shadow of the big elm at the turning.

"Eben was always good—like that!" she meditated, her hand reaching out quickly for the handkerchief on her lap. "I wonder how I'd like—bein' housekeeper!"

She wondered about it all night, and the next day it was still going round in her mind, round and round in a circle which had neither beginning nor end. It was not until evening, when she again hung over her little pile of supper dishes in the kitchen, that it seemed to suddenly stop going round, and she looked up in relief. Eben was standing there in the kitchen door, his eyes traveling toward her with vague uneasiness.

"Oh, sit down, Eben," encouraged Martelia. "I was just finishing up the dishes."

He watched her as she picked up a hot teacup draining on a carefully spread towel and wiped it with another towel, stiff with air and soap-suds. "It won't take me but a minute now."

Eben still hovered in the open doorway, his hand resting on the door-jamb just above his head. Outside the birds piped drowsily, and the leaves of a butter-nut-tree waved sleepily in the creeping twilight.

"About Daniel Wright—" began Eben, his voice groping its way softly across the room to her.

"Did you see him?" encouraged Martelia, steadily.

"Why, yes, I saw him. He seemed favorable to you, but there's—there's a party he's waitin' to hear from."

"Some one that's considerin' the place?"

"Well, yes, I judge she's kind o' half considerin' it—but Daniel didn't seem to

put much stock in her, either. She ain't much to get, I guess—an' I don't think he's really lookin' for her to take it." He paused cautiously. "He's goin' to let you know by next week," he added.

Martelia took up a last remaining spoon and held it thoughtfully for a moment in the dampened, sun-dried towel. "An' here I am goin' to Lynne tomorrow! 'Twon't do to keep him waitin' for his letter to go round Robin Hood's barn like that."

"Well, I s'pose I oughter told him about that," apologized Eben, "but he was feelin' kind of irritable over bein' without anybody for so long—and I thought 'twan't best to bother him by confusin' him any." He looked slowly at Martelia. "I don't know as you'd really like, anyway—" he ventured, gently. "David gits more cranky and irritable as he gits on in years."

"I wouldn't be surprised," agreed Martelia, going to the pantry with the little pile of dishes, "but it ain't for me to pick and choose. I suppose he'll want me to write him my answer just as soon 's his letter comes—supposin', of course, the other party don't want the place."

"I s'pose he does. He says—well, he says he wants you to write him your answer the same day for sure. I oughter 'a' told him about your goin' to Lynne," added Eben, humbly.

"Of course I could have his letter sent right up to Lynne special deliv'ry. I s'pose I'd get it the same day that way."

"That's it," declared Eben, admiringly; "that's better'n confusin' him about the address. Tell Ashael if anything comes from Pemberton to have it sent right on special."

"An' I don't know as I want Ashael figurin' over the Pemberton postmark, either. I'd sooner tell him send ev'rything that comes special than have him makin' his guesses that way. I ain't lookin' for anything else, anyway."

"Well, leave it like that, then. Ashael 'll be glad enough to accomodate you. Don't you want me to stop in an' tell him about it?"

"No, I'll stop in on my way to the depot and tell him."

Eben hovered in the doorway, through which the sounds of the piping birds came more and more faintly.

"Are you all packed up for startin'?"

"Yes; I finished packin' my trunk yesterday. Hiram's comin' for it in the mornin' about eight, and I'll ride to the depot with him."

Eben moved several steps into the kitchen and looked silently at Martelia through the darkening light.

"I hope you ain't goin' to feel obliged to take up with David's offer if it comes," he began, with an unhappy realization of helplessness; "it might not be—any too easy a job for you."

"I told you before it ain't for me to pick and choose. As I'm left, there ain't nobody to take care of me—so I guess—I guess I'll take care of myself."

Eben moved a step nearer.

"Would you—you oughter 'a' got married," he whispered, huskily. He could just see her delicate, tired face through the soft shadows which seemed to hang between them. He could see the little, startled response which touched it at his words.

"Mebbe you're better off not to be, though." His voice came with brief naturalness again. "Well—" He moved back to the open door.

"Well, good-night," encouraged Martelia, "and good-by if I don't see you again."

He turned and looked back at her, his hands hanging loosely at his sides.

"Good-by," he echoed, glancing out at the dark trees in an awkward effort at perfect ease. "Well—if you decide on goin' to Pemberton I hope you'll like—" He stumbled a little as he made his way down the low steps in the dim light, and then he moved slowly across the yard, while the last, faint, final pipings died away in the trembling branches, and Martelia watched him, as she had the evening before, while he turned to the sidewalk and then traveled on until he was lost again under the shadow of the big elm at the turning.

Sister Julia felt a certain amount of self-satisfaction and elation at her success in getting Martelia safely settled in Lynne, and it was on Julia's own trig porch that they both rocked comfortably the next evening, while a neatly set house or two looked back at them confidingly from the other side of the street. It was

a cozy, compact little town, and Martelia swayed restfully, while Julia talked as her rockers creaked.

"Yes, I suppose it's changed some since you were here," she declared for the third time; "and yet, after all, it ain't the kind of a town that would ever change very *much*. There's about the same families here that there was twenty years ago, take 'em all in all. Of course death makes changes, but it's the same kind of folks that's left, too. It must be strange to live in a city where you don't know scarcely anybody," she added, musingly.

"Yes, it must be awful lonesome," agreed Martelia, fresh from the sleeping highways and byways of Greenbush and the South Meadows, where the tender, growing things were still trembling soundlessly up into life.

"It can't be any satisfaction at all, not knowin' folks," reasoned Julia; "why, in Lynne, it ain't only that you *know* folks, but you know what *happens* to 'em. Now, take it this mornin', Mis' Holland lost Spot, the black-an'-tan she's had since he was a puppy. Well, by noon there wa'n't scarcely anybody in town but what knew Spot was lost, and was on the lookout for him."

"Did they find him?" questioned Martelia, interestedly.

"Oh yes, land! they found him. He was visitin' Mis' Porter, and they might 'a' known it at the beginnin'. She's always made consid'erable of him, and he feels about the same as at home there, I guess. She luffed when she found out ev'rybody was lookin' for him. Mis' Porter wants us to come down there to supper to-morrow. You know who she is, don't you? She used to live right over there in the brown house before she was married. Lura Burnham she was. Don't you remember Lura Burnham? She wa'n't married when you were here. She used to come over here and visit with you on the porch, I remember. I recollect a white dress she had that summer with green ribbon trimmings. She was real pretty then, but she's faded a good deal since she was married."

"Yes, seem 's if I remember her," mused Martelia; "she had front teeth set extra wide apart, didn't she? Yes, I remember her. Has she got any children?"

"Only one. Martin. He's just passed his twelfth birthday. Well, I guess here comes Martin now, speakin' of angels. No, it ain't, either; it's Goodlet Ashley. Well, it might 's well be one 's another. An' they ain't either of 'em any too much of an angel, I guess."

Goodlet Ashley turned up the path which led to the house, with an air purely of business and the concerns only of business.

"Why, he's got a letter!" murmured Julia, in sudden consternation. "I hope there ain't anything the matter with anybody."

"No," explained Martelia, in a hurried sort of apology, "I guess it's something to do with that Pemberton place I was tellin' you about. No; it couldn't be time to hear from that, either. This must 'a' come about 's soon as I started. Well, what do you suppose—"

But the Ashley boy was wasting no time. "It's for Miss Martelia Flag," he explained.

"Well, thank you for bringin' it over, Goodlet," returned Julia, briskly; "did you inquire for us? I hope you didn't have to come a-purpose."

"It's special deliv'ry," explained Goodlet, both brief and curt in his dignity. "You have to sign for it."

Julia looked awed. "What in the world are they sendin' you anything like that for, Marty?" she inquired, as Goodlet departed. "I never had such a thing, long 's I've been here. It ain't any more bad news, I hope."

"I guess I've had about all the bad news there is to have," returned Martelia, with a dry resignation; "no, it's on account of that Pemberton fix. I told 'em to send ev'rything special—like this. Well, this wa'n't hardly worth it," she continued, as her eyes traveled down the unfolded sheet; "it's from Zeri Smith about the meadow-land. It ain't any secret; you can see it, but he knows he's got to offer more'n that."

"I guess he's tryin' to do you, ain't he?" meditated Julia, as she scrutinized the sheet.

"I guess he is. He's close. And *mean*? My, but Zeri Smith's mean when it comes to any business dealin's! He talked me most to death about it last week, and now he thinks he'll try writin'. Well, the

meadow-land ain't goin' for any such price as that!"

She repeated her declaration emphatically after she was settled for the night in Julia's stiff, clean guest-chamber. And she repeated it again at the breakfast table the next morning, while the June sun streamed across the room to meet the coffee-scented steam which rose from her cup, and a June rose bowed to her breezily through the open window.

"Well, I guess you're right," encouraged Julia.

They talked about it as they went on with the morning work. And then they talked of the other conditions surrounding Martelia, with their various and possible outcomes.

"If William had only been a little more of a hand to look ahead!" declared Julia, finally, with an inevitable and sort of mournful survey of the whole unfortunate situation.

"Oh, well, it doesn't do any good to talk like that! He wasn't made that way, and that's all. You can't change people, and there's others that never 'd have half the good things about them that William had."

"Oh, I ain't saying anything against William!" Julia paused. "Say, whatever's become of Eben Moore?" she questioned, after brief meditation.

Martelia flushed faintly with surprise.

"There ain't anything become of him," she returned, stiffly; "he's there in Greenbush the same as ever."

"I used to think he'd like to have married you, Marty," went on Julia, frankly.

The flush spread itself all over Martelia's faded, delicate face.

"There never was any cause for you to think anything like that," she replied, in a low voice, with the slightest perceptible tremor waving through it.

"Oh, p'r'aps not, but I just used to think so. Well—what's the matter now?" And she gazed curiously through the open window. "What's Goodlet Ashley after this time? I declare I believe he's got another letter for you, Marty; I believe he has, sure's the world."

The flush was still deep on Martelia's cheeks, and Julia glanced at her briefly as she hurried to the door.

"Well, they seem to be keepin' you in

business, Goodlet," she declared, cheerfully. "What you got now? Another one?"

"Yessum; she's got to sign for it," announced Goodlet, still brief and business-like.

"Well, come here, Marty; you got to sign. How much do they pay you for doin' post-office business for them?" she inquired, interestedly.

"Five cents," replied Goodlet, promptly.

"Well, accordin' to that, you're ten cents better off than you was yesterday at this time, ain't you?"

"Yessum," replied Goodlet. And, without a thought of complicating the conversation further, he immediately departed, while a neighbor from across the street gazed after him in questioning perplexity.

There was a flash in Martelia's eye that went well with her warmly tinted cheek. "It's that old fool of a Zeri Smith!" she mumbled, wrathfully. "Now did you ever hear of anything more ridiculous than him startin' up a special-deliv'ry route like this! For pity's sake let me set down and write to him this minute!" She looked back at Julia as she stood in the open dining-room door. "If we're *goin'* down to Mis' Porter's to supper," she suggested, "I s'pose we'll have to have dinner in pretty good season, won't we, so 's to get the work out the way in time?"

"Yes, we'll have it prompt twelve," returned Julia, reasonably. "I'll pare the potatoes now, I guess, an' git the turnips ready. I'll bet Lura has cold roast pork and gooseberry jam for supper," she added, in comfortable meditation. "You see if she don't. Nothing against her if she does. But you just notice. It 'll be all right if we leave here about three."

The clock was striking as they went down the steps in their neat black dresses, and at four they sat in Mrs. Porter's best parlor, while the hostess herself, a person of unquestioned versatility, talked cordially, kept an eye always on the window for any chance passing sight, and knitted petticoat edging.

"Well, what's Henry Basset tearin' along like that for!" she volunteered presently. "I hear he's havin' his house



"SHE'S GOT TO SIGN FOR IT," ANNOUNCED GOODLET

an' barn shingled. I guess something's the matter from the looks. Why, he's comin' in here!" She had already risen from her seat by the window, and, with her ball of yarn trailing after her, she met the messenger at the door.

"Is Miss Martelia Flagg here?" he panted, breathlessly; "there's a special-deliv'ry letter here for her. It put me back some goin' up to her sister's with it first, but I got down here quick 's I could!" Mr. Basset emitted all the remaining breath he had in a fearful gust, and Martelia approached him expressionlessly with an outstretched hand.

"Yes, you just sign there, will you, Miss Flagg?" panted Mr. Basset. "I hope I ain't brought you any bad news."

"No, I guess not," murmured Martelia. Her hostess's eyes were on her with an eager light of anticipation, as the messenger blew out another gust and departed, looking both relaxed and relieved. Martelia hovered uneasily in the doorway.

"Well—I hope it ain't any bad news?" encouraged Mrs. Porter.

"No." Martelia's eyes were on her open letter. "It's just a note from the sewin' society," she explained, carelessly.

"From the sewin' society?" persisted Mrs. Porter.

"They're goin' to sew for the Perkinses at the meetin' next Wednesday—the Perkinses that were burnt out last week.

"They want a good full meeting," declared Martelia, weakly.

"Sew for the Perkinses!" Mrs. Porter's mouth sagged open in unconcealed astonishment. "Well, I don't see any call for scarin' you half to death if they are! They ain't tryin' to start you *home* to sew for the Perkinses, are they?"

"I guess they sent 'em to ev'rybody in the society," explained Martelia; but Mrs. Porter still gazed in amazement and disgust at the official-looking envelope.

"I don't wonder she was surprised at it," observed Julia, as they walked home under the trees together in the evening, "gettin' anything like that special deliv'ry. Why didn't you explain it a little to her?"

"Oh, I don't want folks discussin' my affairs," returned Martelia, a bit irritably, "and don't for pity's sake say a word about Pemberton to anybody! There ain't anything sure about it, anyway, and I certainly don't want them discussin' me."

"No, but I guess they'll be discussin' you more if you keep this special-deliv'ry circus a-goin'. There—didn't I tell you she'd have cold pork and gooseberry jam for supper?" She turned her head at the sound of pursuing steps. "Good land! Say, this is goin' too fur, Marty!" And Goodlet Ashley, back in his own rightful business again, stopped directly beside them on the sidewalk.

Martelia glanced down at him with a kind of shrinking evasion.

"It's a letter for you," he answered, briefly; "you have to sign for it."

"I suppose it come in on the evening mail," declared Julia, good-naturedly. "Well, how happened it you didn't get the one that came this afternoon? You lost your job, didn't you?"

"Yessum," replied Goodlet, and, just glancing at Martelia's hastily written signature, he silently sped away.

"Well, ain't you really carryin' it a little too fur, Marty?" questioned Julia, again in low tones; "look at 'em peekin' out the winder over there at the Liscombs'. It attracts consid'able attention to stop like that and sign for anything on the street. There's Andrew Cam'ell come to a dead standstill down there, he's a-lookin' at you so hard. An' Mis' Sears is stoppin' her baby-carriage.

You'll have the whole town up in arms, Marty, if you don't call a halt on this special deliverin'."

Martelia's hand shook with unmistakable agitation as she put a folded sheet back into the torn envelope.

"I never was one to want to attract attention," she replied, in a quavering voice of dignity.

"Maybe you wasn't, but you're attractin' it all right; an' look at the bill you're runnin' up! You'll be gettin' *that* special deliv'ry, next you know. Well—" She looked down at the envelope with no attempt to conceal her curiosity.

"Well," echoed Martelia, with a faint red spot on each cheek, "it ain't anything worth *talkin'* about; it's—a bill for kindlin'; that's the amount of it."

"Wanter know!" murmured Julia.

"I guess I better write to Ashael, an' tell him not to do this way any longer," she broke out, suddenly, in faint, unhappy concession. "I can't be makin' myself ridikerlous this way."

"Oh, well, I guess likely this 'll end it, won't it?" Julia glanced at her good-naturedly. "Don't you worry. You won't get any more."

But Martelia felt hounded by vague apprehensions. She went to bed with an unhappy cloud hanging over her, and she awoke in the morning conscious that it was still there. But as the day wore on and nothing happened to disturb it she found herself gradually relaxing into the atmosphere of peace and calm which seemed to prevail generally. And finally, from their swaying rockers, she and Julia surveyed each other with comfortable satisfaction.

"I told you I guessed that was the last of your special deliv'ries," began Julia.

"'Sh-sh-sh!" broke out Martelia, faintly. She turned her head with an expression of hunted helplessness. "Don't say a word! Here comes— Goodlet Ashley!"

Goodlet advanced with his familiar, business-like tread, quite conscious that he had attracted both attention and curiosity all along his way.

"It's another special deliv'ry," he announced.

It was an unfortunate word which he had added to his previous set form of

speech, and Martelia looked at him belligerently.

"You have to sign for it," said Goodlet.

"Well, don't you s'pose I know that by this time?" returned Martelia, with a flash of heat; "you needn't tell me that *ev'ry* time you come!"

But Goodlet remained unperturbed.

"Wait a minute!" she commanded, as he made ready to leave once more; "if they give you any more special-deliv'ry letters, tell 'em I don't want 'em; an' 'twas a ridikerlous piece o' business your bringin' this one. Tell 'em it's an advertisement of spring-beds, if they ask. Tell 'em I don't *want* any more!" she repeated. "Do you understand?"

"Yessum," returned Goodlet, as he promptly and silently left them.

Martelia watched him for a moment, and then turned a dreary, cheerless gaze on Julia, who rocked softly without speaking.

"Well, I'll go down there and tell them myself, then, and I'll go just as I am, too!" She went down the steps and glanced briefly back at Julia.

"You look all right, if that's what you mean," said Julia.

"You needn't wait supper or anything else for me," she added, "though I sha'n't likely be gone long. I'll at least be back as soon as I can get here." And Martelia walked down to the sidewalk, and then turned and walked straight on to the post-office.

Half an hour later Julia still sat on the porch and watched her as she came slowly up the street in the fading light.

"She don't seem to be in anything of a hurry," meditated Julia. "What's the matter now, I wonder?"

Slowly Martelia came on, on to the little path which led to the porch, and then straight up the steps. She carried a sealed envelope in her hand, and Julia's eye fastened on it apprehensively.

"No, no—" From Martelia's voice she might have been parrying a blow. "It ain't one of that—one of that kind! It's just a plain two-cent letter!"

Her voice broke weakly, and Julia looked at her, not just able to understand.

"Who's it from?" she inquired.

"It's from—I ain't opened it yet," she hesitated. "I guess I'll go in and open it."

Julia darted a keen, curious look at her sister as she hovered there before her, the plain two-cent letter in her hand, and suddenly a vivid and unexpected light flashed across the groping questions of Julia's mind.

"No, I'm goin' in to get supper," she said; "you set down right here and read it." She murmured something to herself as she went in, and Martelia sat down as her sister's footsteps came back to her more faintly from the house.

The birds were piping with thin sweetness, as they had piped another evening in Greenbush—and a dim, shadowy light dropped round her protectingly. As she tore the envelope across and slowly drew out the letter between her thumb and forefinger, her eyes dwelt once again on the plain, two-cent stamp.

"It seem 's if he must 'a' known how plagued I'd been," she murmured, "an' took the pains to tell 'em not to send it special. Eben was always like that—about savin' anybody."

Slowly her eyes gathered up the first words of the little trembling sheet before her.

"DEAR MARTELIA,—Greenbush dont hardly seem like Greenbush with you away, and we will all be glad to see you back again. But there is something I would like to ask you before you return; it is something I would like to have asked for a considrable number of years, but there has not ever seemed to be just the right opportunity for it. When I could say it without most likely givin you considrable of a surprise or shock."

A faint flush spread itself all over Martelia's face, as she leaned forward in the retreating light, her eyes steadily gathering up the words of the letter.

"It didnt seem like doing the fair thing by you to take you unawares with anything so unexpected and suddin. It would most likely be unhingin to you, and it didnt seem scarcely like a decent way for a man to do. But now as you are visitin in Lynne I can write it and that way save you being any confused by it, as you will most likely be alone, with nobody pryin at you when you get it. This is it, and it is nothing to scaire you. It is only that I would like

more than anything else to marry you. Of course I dont know how you would feel about it, or whether you would ever feel as if you would like to marry me. But you are there where you can have time to think it over by yourself, and tell me by and by, by a letter if you would rather do it that way. And you neednt be afraid; I will always think just the same way about you, whichever way you decide to answer me.

"As I began the letter, Greenbush dont hardly seem like Greenbush with you away. Was you planning to stay about a week longer?"

"Your true friend,
"EBEN MOORE."

She was all alone, the shadows drew up round her, covering her, hiding her away with soft, fluttering movements; the birds closed their eyes; the leaves above just stirred, to whisper to her of a still, still solitude; and Eben's letter lay waiting on her lap.

"It was just like him to—to think—to save anybody!" she whispered, brokenly. A tear trickled down her cheek and her hand trembled up to it. "It was just like him."

She still sat there all alone, but she was looking up at a little twinkling star in the sky. Was it looking at her?

She stood up, with a smile quivering back at it out of her damp eyes.

"You can look," she whispered, "you can look now; anybody can look now!"

One by one the stars came twinkling out, shining, smiling down at her, and a breeze waved through the leaves above her till they sang a gay refrain.

"Oh, ain't it beautiful!" she broke out, weakly.

There was a step behind her, and Julia stood there looking up at Martelia's dampened and star-lighted face.

"Ain't it!" she echoed, gently. Julia seemed to understand.

"It must be—it must be beautiful in Greenbush to-night!" quavered Martelia.

"That's so," agreed Julia; "but I guess you better come in an' get your supper now." She turned and went softly back herself. And again Martelia looked up at the stars.

"It must be just beautiful," she repeated, in an awed breath. "Oh, seem 's if I couldn't wait to get back to Greenbush!"

Like a Belated Bird

BY CONINGSBY DAWSON

LOVE comes to men like a belated bird:
 He through the sunlit hours forgets to sing,
 And folds in darkling woods his timid wing,
 Nor knows himself a prophet of the word.

From moon-ribbed turrets of earth's steepest trees,
 When loud-voiced Day hath slumbered into Night,
 Viewing anew his plaintive old delight,
 He thrills to such as chance his ecstasies.

And those who hear his glad full-throated song
 Must share his passion to the end of days;
 And those who see his shadow, these always
 Must search for one to whom it doth belong.

But they who see Love's self and not his shade,
 May ever hear him singing in the glade.