

XII. IN HER SELFLESS MOOD

The raw wind of an early May evening was puffing in and out the curtains of the room where Naomi Holland lay dying. The air was moist and chill, but the sick woman would not have the window closed.

"I can't get my breath if you shut everything up so tight," she said. "Whatever comes, I ain't going to be smothered to death, Car'line Holland."

Outside of the window grew a cherry tree, powdered with moist buds with the promise of blossoms she would not live to see. Between its boughs she saw a crystal cup of sky over hills that were growing dim and purple. The outside air was full of sweet, wholesome springtime sounds that drifted in fitfully. There were voices and whistles in the barnyard, and now and then faint laughter. A bird alighted for a moment on a cherry bough, and twittered restlessly. Naomi knew that white mists were hovering in the silent hollows, that the maple at the gate wore a misty blossom red, and that violet stars were shining bluely on the brooklands.

The room was a small, plain one. The floor was bare, save for a couple of braided rugs, the plaster discolored, the walls dingy and glaring. There had never been much beauty in Naomi Holland's

environment, and, now that she was dying, there was even less.

At the open window a boy of about ten years was leaning out over the sill and whistling. He was tall for his age, and beautiful--the hair a rich auburn with a glistening curl in it, skin very white and warm-tinted, eyes small and of a greenish blue, with dilated pupils and long lashes. He had a weak chin, and a full, sullen mouth.

The bed was in the corner farthest from the window; on it the sick woman, in spite of the pain that was her portion continually, was lying as quiet and motionless as she had done ever since she had lain down upon it for the last time. Naomi Holland never complained; when the agony was at its worst, she shut her teeth more firmly over her bloodless lip, and her great black eyes glared at the blank wall before in a way that gave her attendants what they called "the creeps," but no word or moan escaped her.

Between the paroxysms she kept up her keen interest in the life that went on about her. Nothing escaped her sharp, alert eyes and ears. This evening she lay spent on the crumpled pillows; she had had a bad spell in the afternoon and it had left her very weak. In the dim light her extremely long face looked corpse-like already. Her black hair lay in a heavy braid over the pillow and down the counterpane. It was all that was left of

her beauty, and she took a fierce joy in it. Those long, glistening, sinuous tresses must be combed and braided every day, no matter what came.

A girl of fourteen was curled up on a chair at the head of the bed, with her head resting on the pillow. The boy at the window was her half-brother; but, between Christopher Holland and Eunice Carr, not the slightest resemblance existed.

Presently the sibilant silence was broken by a low, half-strangled sob. The sick woman, who had been watching a white evening star through the cherry boughs, turned impatiently at the sound.

"I wish you'd get over that, Eunice," she said sharply. "I don't want any one crying over me until I'm dead; and then you'll have plenty else to do, most likely. If it wasn't for Christopher I wouldn't be anyways unwilling to die. When one has had such a life as I've had, there isn't much in death to be afraid of. Only, a body would like to go right off, and not die by inches, like this. 'Tain't fair!"

She snapped out the last sentence as if addressing some unseen, tyrannical presence; her voice, at least, had not weakened, but was as clear and incisive as ever. The boy at the window stopped whistling, and the girl silently wiped her eyes on her faded

gingham apron.

Naomi drew her own hair over her lips, and kissed it.

"You'll never have hair like that, Eunice," she said. "It does seem most too pretty to bury, doesn't it? Mind you see that it is fixed nice when I'm laid out. Comb it right up on my head and braid it there."

A sound, such as might be wrung from a suffering animal, came from the girl, but at the same moment the door opened and a woman entered.

"Chris," she said sharply, "you get right off for the cows, you lazy little scamp! You knew right well you had to go for them, and here you've been idling, and me looking high and low for you. Make haste now; it's ridiculous late."

The boy pulled in his head and scowled at his aunt, but he dared not disobey, and went out slowly with a sulky mutter.

His aunt subdued a movement, that might have developed into a sound box on his ears, with a rather frightened glance at the bed. Naomi Holland was spent and dying, but her temper was still a thing to hold in dread, and her sister-in-law did not choose to rouse it by slapping Christopher. To her and her co-nurse the

spasms of rage, which the sick woman sometimes had, seemed to partake of the nature of devil possession. The last one, only three days before, had been provoked by Christopher's complaint of some real or fancied ill-treatment from his aunt, and the latter had no mind to bring on another. She went over to the bed, and straightened the clothes.

"Sarah and I are going out to milk, Naomi, Eunice will stay with you. She can run for us if you feel another spell coming on."

Naomi Holland looked up at her sister-in-law with something like malicious enjoyment.

"I ain't going to have any more spells, Car'line Anne. I'm going to die to-night. But you needn't hurry milking for that, at all. I'll take my time."

She liked to see the alarm that came over the other woman's face. It was richly worth while to scare Caroline Holland like that.

"Are you feeling worse, Naomi?" asked the latter shakily. "If you are I'll send for Charles to go for the doctor."

"No, you won't. What good can the doctor do me? I don't want either his or Charles' permission to die. You can go and milk at your ease. I won't die till you're done--I won't deprive you of

the pleasure of seeing me."

Mrs. Holland shut her lips and went out of the room with a martyr-like expression. In some ways Naomi Holland was not an exacting patient, but she took her satisfaction out in the biting, malicious speeches she never failed to make. Even on her death-bed her hostility to her sister-in-law had to find vent.

Outside, at the steps, Sarah Spencer was waiting, with the milk pails over her arm. Sarah Spencer had no fixed abiding place, but was always to be found where there was illness. Her experience, and an utter lack of nerves, made her a good nurse. She was a tall, homely woman with iron gray hair and a lined face. Beside her, the trim little Caroline Anne, with her light step and round, apple-red face, looked almost girlish.

The two women walked to the barnyard, discussing Naomi in undertones as they went. The house they had left behind grew very still.

In Naomi Holland's room the shadows were gathering. Eunice timidly bent over her mother.

"Ma, do you want the light lit?"

"No, I'm watching that star just below the big cherry bough.

I'll see it set behind the hill. I've seen it there, off and on, for twelve years, and now I'm taking a good-by look at it. I want you to keep still, too. I've got a few things to think over, and I don't want to be disturbed."

The girl lifted herself about noiselessly and locked her hands over the bed-post. Then she laid her face down on them, biting at them silently until the marks of her teeth showed white against their red roughness.

Naomi Holland did not notice her. She was looking steadfastly at the great, pearl-like sparkle in the faint-hued sky. When it finally disappeared from her vision she struck her long, thin hands together twice, and a terrible expression came over her face for a moment. But, when she spoke, her voice was quite calm.

"You can light the candle now, Eunice. Put it up on the shelf here, where it won't shine in my eyes. And then sit down on the foot of the bed where I can see you. I've got something to say to you."

Eunice obeyed her noiselessly. As the pallid light shot up, it revealed the child plainly. She was thin and ill-formed--one shoulder being slightly higher than the other. She was dark, like her mother, but her features were irregular, and her hair

fell in straggling, dim locks about her face. Her eyes were a dark brown, and over one was the slanting red scar of a birth mark.

Naomi Holland looked at her with the contempt she had never made any pretense of concealing. The girl was bone of her bone and flesh of her flesh, but she had never loved her; all the mother love in her had been lavished on her son.

When Eunice had placed the candle on the shelf and drawn down the ugly blue paper blinds, shutting out the strips of violet sky where a score of glimmering points were now visible, she sat down on the foot of the bed, facing her mother.

"The door is shut, is it, Eunice?"

Eunice nodded.

"Because I don't want Car'line or any one else peeking and harking to what I've got to say. She's out milking now, and I must make the most of the chance. Eunice, I'm going to die, and..."

"Ma!"

"There now, no taking on! You knew it had to come sometime soon.

I haven't the strength to talk much, so I want you just to be quiet and listen. I ain't feeling any pain now, so I can think and talk pretty clear. Are you listening, Eunice?"

"Yes, ma."

"Mind you are. It's about Christopher. It hasn't been out of my mind since I laid down here. I've fought for a year to live, on his account, and it ain't any use. I must just die and leave him, and I don't know what he'll do. It's dreadful to think of."

She paused, and struck her shrunken hand sharply against the table.

"If he was bigger and could look out for himself it wouldn't be so bad. But he is only a little fellow, and Car'line hates him. You'll both have to live with her until you're grown up. She'll put on him and abuse him. He's like his father in some ways; he's got a temper and he is stubborn. He'll never get on with Car'line. Now, Eunice, I'm going to get you to promise to take my place with Christopher when I'm dead, as far as you can. You've got to; it's your duty. But I want you to promise."

"I will, ma," whispered the girl solemnly.

"You haven't much force--you never had. If you was smart, you

could do a lot for him. But you'll have to do your best. I want you to promise me faithfully that you'll stand by him and protect him--that you won't let people impose on him; that you'll never desert him as long as he needs you, no matter what comes.

Eunice, promise me this!"

In her excitement the sick woman raised herself up in the bed, and clutched the girl's thin arm. Her eyes were blazing and two scarlet spots glowed in her thin cheeks.

Eunice's face was white and tense. She clasped her hands as one in prayer.

"Mother, I promise it!"

Naomi relaxed her grip on the girl's arm and sank back exhausted on the pillow. A death-like look came over her face as the excitement faded.

"My mind is easier now. But if I could only have lived another year or two! And I hate Car'line--hate her! Eunice, don't you ever let her abuse my boy! If she did, or if you neglected him, I'd come back from my grave to you! As for the property, things will be pretty straight. I've seen to that. There'll be no squabbling and doing Christopher out of his rights. He's to have the farm as soon as he's old enough to work it, and he's to

provide for you. And, Eunice, remember what you've promised!"

Outside, in the thickly gathering dusk, Caroline Holland and Sarah Spencer were at the dairy, straining the milk into creamers, for which Christopher was sullenly pumping water. The house was far from the road, up to which a long red lane led; across the field was the old Holland homestead where Caroline lived; her unmarried sister-in-law, Electa Holland, kept house for her while she waited on Naomi.

It was her night to go home and sleep, but Naomi's words haunted her, although she believed they were born of pure "cantankerousness."

"You'd better go in and look at her, Sarah," she said, as she rinsed out the pails. "If you think I'd better stay here to-night, I will. If the woman was like anybody else a body would know what to do; but, if she thought she could scare us by saying she was going to die, she'd say it."

When Sarah went in, the sick room was very quiet. In her opinion, Naomi was no worse than usual, and she told Caroline so; but the latter felt vaguely uneasy and concluded to stay.

Naomi was as cool and defiant as customary. She made them bring

Christopher in to say good-night and had him lifted up on the bed to kiss her. Then she held him back and looked at him admiringly--at the bright curls and rosy cheeks and round, firm limbs. The boy was uncomfortable under her gaze and squirmed hastily down. Her eyes followed him greedily, as he went out. When the door closed behind him, she groaned. Sarah Spencer was startled. She had never heard Naomi Holland groan since she had come to wait on her.

"Are you feeling any worse, Naomi? Is the pain coming back?"

"No. Go and tell Car'line to give Christopher some of that grape jelly on his bread before he goes to bed. She'll find it in the cupboard under the stairs."

Presently the house grew very still. Caroline had dropped asleep on the sitting-room lounge, across the hall. Sarah Spencer nodded over her knitting by the table in the sick room. She had told Eunice to go to bed, but the child refused. She still sat huddled up on the foot of the bed, watching her mother's face intently. Naomi appeared to sleep. The candle burned long, and the wick was crowned by a little cap of fiery red that seemed to watch Eunice like some impish goblin. The wavering light cast grotesque shadows of Sarah Spencer's head on the wall. The thin curtains at the window wavered to and fro, as if shaken by ghostly hands.

At midnight Naomi Holland opened her eyes. The child she had never loved was the only one to go with her to the brink of the Unseen.

"Eunice--remember!"

It was the faintest whisper. The soul, passing over the threshold of another life, strained back to its only earthly tie. A quiver passed over the long, pallid face.

A horrible scream rang through the silent house. Sarah Spencer sprang out of her doze in consternation, and gazed blankly at the shrieking child. Caroline came hurrying in with distended eyes. On the bed Naomi Holland lay dead.

In the room where she had died Naomi Holland lay in her coffin. It was dim and hushed; but, in the rest of the house, the preparations for the funeral were being hurried on. Through it all Eunice moved, calm and silent. Since her one wild spasm of screaming by her mother's death-bed she had shed no tear, given no sign of grief. Perhaps, as her mother had said, she had no time. There was Christopher to be looked after. The boy's grief was stormy and uncontrolled. He had cried until he was utterly exhausted. It was Eunice who soothed him, coaxed him to eat,

kept him constantly by her. At night she took him to her own room and watched over him while he slept.

When the funeral was over the household furniture was packed away or sold. The house was locked up and the farm rented. There was nowhere for the children to go, save to their uncle's. Caroline Holland did not want them, but, having to take them, she grimly made up her mind to do what she considered her duty by them. She had five children of her own and between them and Christopher a standing feud had existed from the time he could walk.

She had never liked Naomi. Few people did. Benjamin Holland had not married until late in life, and his wife had declared war on his family at sight. She was a stranger in Avonlea,--a widow, with a three year-old child. She made few friends, as some people always asserted that she was not in her right mind.

Within a year of her second marriage Christopher was born, and from the hour of his birth his mother had worshiped him blindly. He was her only solace. For him she toiled and pinched and saved. Benjamin Holland had not been "fore-handed" when she married him; but, when he died, six years after his marriage, he was a well-to-do man.

Naomi made no pretense of mourning for him. It was an open secret that they had quarreled like the proverbial cat and dog.

Charles Holland and his wife had naturally sided with Benjamin, and Naomi fought her battles single-handed. After her husband's death, she managed to farm alone, and made it pay. When the mysterious malady which was to end her life first seized on her she fought against it with all the strength and stubbornness of her strong and stubborn nature. Her will won for her an added year of life, and then she had to yield. She tasted all the bitterness of death the day on which she lay down on her bed, and saw her enemy come in to rule her house.

But Caroline Holland was not a bad or unkind woman. True, she did not love Naomi or her children; but the woman was dying and must be looked after for the sake of common humanity. Caroline thought she had done well by her sister-in-law.

When the red clay was heaped over Naomi's grave in the Avonlea burying ground, Caroline took Eunice and Christopher home with her. Christopher did not want to go; it was Eunice who reconciled him. He clung to her with an exacting affection born of loneliness and grief.

In the days that followed Caroline Holland was obliged to confess to herself that there would have been no doing anything with Christopher had it not been for Eunice. The boy was sullen and obstinate, but his sister had an unfailing influence over him.

In Charles Holland's household no one was allowed to eat the bread of idleness. His own children were all girls, and Christopher came in handy as a chore boy. He was made to work--perhaps too hard. But Eunice helped him, and did half his work for him when nobody knew. When he quarreled with his cousins, she took his part; whenever possible she took on herself the blame and punishment of his misdeeds.

Electa Holland was Charles' unmarried sister. She had kept house for Benjamin until he married; then Naomi had bundled her out. Electa had never forgiven her for it. Her hatred passed on to Naomi's children. In a hundred petty ways she revenged herself on them. For herself, Eunice bore it patiently; but it was a different matter when it touched Christopher.

Once Electa boxed Christopher's ears. Eunice, who was knitting by the table, stood up. A resemblance to her mother, never before visible, came out in her face like a brand. She lifted her hand and slapped Electa's cheek deliberately twice, leaving a dull red mark where she struck.

"If you ever strike my brother again," she said, slowly and vindictively, "I will slap your face every time you do. You have no right to touch him."

"My patience, what a fury!" said Electa. "Naomi Holland'll never

be dead as long as you're alive!"

She told Charles of the affair and Eunice was severely punished.

But Electa never interfered with Christopher again.

All the discordant elements in the Holland household could not prevent the children from growing up. It was a consummation which the harrassed Caroline devoutly wished. When Christopher Holland was seventeen he was a man grown--a big, strapping fellow. His childish beauty had coarsened, but he was thought handsome by many.

He took charge of his mother's farm then, and the brother and sister began their new life together in the long-unoccupied house. There were few regrets on either side when they left Charles Holland's roof. In her secret heart Eunice felt an unspeakable relief.

Christopher had been "hard to manage," as his uncle said, in the last year. He was getting into the habit of keeping late hours and doubtful company. This always provoked an explosion of wrath from Charles Holland, and the conflicts between him and his nephew were frequent and bitter.

For four years after their return home Eunice had a hard and

anxious life. Christopher was idle and dissipated. Most people regarded him as a worthless fellow, and his uncle washed his hands of him utterly. Only Eunice never failed him; she never reproached or railed; she worked like a slave to keep things together. Eventually her patience prevailed. Christopher, to a great extent, reformed and worked harder. He was never unkind to Eunice, even in his rages. It was not in him to appreciate or return her devotion; but his tolerant acceptance of it was her solace.

When Eunice was twenty-eight, Edward Bell wanted to marry her. He was a plain, middle-aged widower with four children; but, as Caroline did not fail to remind her, Eunice herself was not for every market, and the former did her best to make the match. She might have succeeded had it not been for Christopher. When he, in spite of Caroline's skillful management, got an inkling of what was going on, he flew into a true Holland rage. If Eunice married and left him--he would sell the farm and go to the Devil by way of the Klondike. He could not, and would not, do without her. No arrangement suggested by Caroline availed to pacify him, and, in the end, Eunice refused to marry Edward Bell. She could not leave Christopher, she said simply, and in this she stood rock-firm. Caroline could not budge her an inch.

"You're a fool, Eunice," she said, when she was obliged to give up in despair. "It's not likely you'll ever have another chance.

As for Chris, in a year or two he'll be marrying himself, and where will you be then? You'll find your nose nicely out of joint when he brings a wife in here."

The shaft went home. Eunice's lips turned white. But she said, faintly, "The house is big enough for us both, if he does."

Caroline sniffed.

"Maybe so. You'll find out. However, there's no use talking. You're as set as your mother was, and nothing would ever budge her an inch. I only hope you won't be sorry for it."

When three more years had passed Christopher began to court Victoria Pye. The affair went on for some time before either Eunice or the Hollands go wind of it. When they did there was an explosion. Between the Hollands and the Pyes, root and branch, existed a feud that dated back for three generations. That the original cause of the quarrel was totally forgotten did not matter; it was matter of family pride that a Holland should have no dealings with a Pye.

When Christopher flew so openly in the face of this cherished hatred, there could be nothing less than consternation. Charles Holland broke through his determination to have nothing to do with Christopher, to remonstrate. Caroline went to Eunice in as

much of a splutter as if Christopher had been her own brother.

Eunice did not care a row of pins for the Holland-Pye feud.

Victoria was to her what any other girl, upon whom Christopher cast eyes of love, would have been--a supplanter. For the first time in her life she was torn with passionate jealousy; existence became a nightmare to her. Urged on by Caroline, and her own pain, she ventured to remonstrate with Christopher, also. She had expected a burst of rage, but he was surprisingly good-natured. He seemed even amused.

"What have you got against Victoria?" he asked, tolerantly.

Eunice had no answer ready. It was true that nothing could be said against the girl. She felt helpless and baffled.

Christopher laughed at her silence.

"I guess you're a little jealous," he said. "You must have expected I would get married some time. This house is big enough for us all. You'd better look at the matter sensibly, Eunice. Don't let Charles and Caroline put nonsense into your head. A man must marry to please himself."

Christopher was out late that night. Eunice waited up for him, as she always did. It was a chilly spring evening, reminding her of the night her mother had died. The kitchen was in spotless

order, and she sat down on a stiff-backed chair by the window to wait for her brother.

She did not want a light. The moonlight fell in with faint illumination. Outside, the wind was blowing over a bed of new-sprung mint in the garden, and was suggestively fragrant. It was a very old-fashioned garden, full of perennials Naomi Holland had planted long ago. Eunice always kept it primly neat. She had been working in it that day, and felt tired.

She was all alone in the house and the loneliness filled her with a faint dread. She had tried all that day to reconcile herself to Christopher's marriage, and had partially succeeded. She told herself that she could still watch over him and care for his comfort. She would even try to love Victoria; after all, it might be pleasant to have another woman in the house. So, sitting there, she fed her hungry soul with these husks of comfort.

When she heard Christopher's step she moved about quickly to get a light. He frowned when he saw her; he had always resented her sitting up for him. He sat down by the stove and took off his boots, while Eunice got a lunch for him. After he had eaten it in silence he made no move to go to bed. A chill, premonitory fear crept over Eunice. It did not surprise her at all when Christopher finally said, abruptly, "Eunice, I've a notion to get

married this spring."

Eunice clasped her hands together under the table. It was what she had been expecting. She said so, in a monotonous voice.

"We must make some arrangement for--for you, Eunice," Christopher went on, in a hurried, hesitant way, keeping his eyes riveted doggedly on his plate. "Victoria doesn't exactly like--well, she thinks it's better for young married folks to begin life by themselves, and I guess she's about right. You wouldn't find it comfortable, anyhow, having to step back to second place after being mistress here so long."

Eunice tried to speak, but only an indistinct murmur came from her bloodless lips. The sound made Christopher look up. Something in her face irritated him. He pushed back his chair impatiently.

"Now, Eunice, don't go taking on. It won't be any use. Look at this business in a sensible way. I'm fond of you, and all that, but a man is bound to consider his wife first. I'll provide for you comfortably."

"Do you mean to say that your wife is going to turn me out?" Eunice gasped, rather than spoke, the words.

Christopher drew his reddish brows together.

"I just mean that Victoria says she won't marry me if she has to live with you. She's afraid of you. I told her you wouldn't interfere with her, but she wasn't satisfied. It's your own fault, Eunice. You've always been so queer and close that people think you're an awful crank. Victoria's young and lively, and you and she wouldn't get on at all. There isn't any question of turning you out. I'll build a little house for you somewhere, and you'll be a great deal better off there than you would be here. So don't make a fuss."

Eunice did not look as if she were going to make a fuss. She sat as if turned to stone, her hands lying palm upward in her lap. Christopher got up, hugely relieved that the dreaded explanation was over.

"Guess I'll go to bed. You'd better have gone long ago. It's all nonsense, this waiting up for me."

When he had gone Eunice drew a long, sobbing breath and looked about her like a dazed soul. All the sorrow of her life was as nothing to the desolation that assailed her now.

She rose and, with uncertain footsteps, passed out through the hall and into the room where her mother died. She had always

kept it locked and undisturbed; it was arranged just as Naomi Holland had left it. Eunice tottered to the bed and sat down on it.

She recalled the promise she had made to her mother in that very room. Was the power to keep it to be wrested from her? Was she to be driven from her home and parted from the only creature she had on earth to love? And would Christopher allow it, after all her sacrifices for him? Aye, that he would! He cared more for that black-eyed, waxen-faced girl at the old Pye place than for his own kin. Eunice put her hands over her dry, burning eyes and groaned aloud.

Caroline Holland had her hour of triumph over Eunice when she heard it all. To one of her nature there was no pleasure so sweet as that of saying, "I told you so." Having said it, however, she offered Eunice a home. Electa Holland was dead, and Eunice might fill her place very acceptably, if she would.

"You can't go off and live by yourself," Caroline told her.

"It's all nonsense to talk of such a thing. We will give you a home, if Christopher is going to turn you out. You were always a fool, Eunice, to pet and pamper him as you've done. This is the thanks you get for it--turned out like a dog for his fine wife's whim! I only wish your mother was alive!"

It was probably the first time Caroline had ever wished this. She had flown at Christopher like a fury about the matter, and had been rudely insulted for her pains. Christopher had told her to mind her own business.

When Caroline cooled down she made some arrangements with him, to all of which Eunice listlessly assented. She did not care what became of her. When Christopher Holland brought Victoria as mistress to the house where his mother had toiled, and suffered, and ruled with her rod of iron, Eunice was gone. In Charles Holland's household she took Electa's place--an unpaid upper servant.

Charles and Caroline were kind enough to her, and there was plenty to do. For five years her dull, colorless life went on, during which time she never crossed the threshold of the house where Victoria Holland ruled with a sway as absolute as Naomi's had been. Caroline's curiosity led her, after her first anger had cooled, to make occasional calls, the observations of which she faithfully reported to Eunice. The latter never betrayed any interest in them, save once. This was when Caroline came home full of the news that Victoria had had the room where Naomi died opened up, and showily furnished as a parlor. Then Eunice's sallow face crimsoned, and her eyes flashed, over the desecration. But no word of comment or complaint ever crossed

her lips.

She knew, as every one else knew, that the glamor soon went from Christopher Holland's married life. The marriage proved an unhappy one. Not unnaturally, although unjustly, Eunice blamed Victoria for this, and hated her more than ever for it.

Christopher seldom came to Charles' house. Possibly he felt ashamed. He had grown into a morose, silent man, at home and abroad. It was said he had gone back to his old drinking habits.

One fall Victoria Holland went to town to visit her married sister. She took their only child with her. In her absence Christopher kept house for himself.

It was a fall long remembered in Avonlea. With the dropping of the leaves, and the shortening of the dreary days, the shadow of a fear fell over the land. Charles Holland brought the fateful news home one night.

"There's smallpox in Charlottetown--five or six cases. Came in one of the vessels. There was a concert, and a sailor from one of the ships was there, and took sick the next day."

This was alarming enough. Charlottetown was not so very far away and considerable traffic went on between it and the north shore

districts.

When Caroline recounted the concert story to Christopher the next morning his ruddy face turned quite pale. He opened his lips as if to speak, then closed them again. They were sitting in the kitchen; Caroline had run over to return some tea she had borrowed, and, incidentally, to see what she could do of Victoria's housekeeping in her absence. Her eyes had been busy while her tongue ran on, so she did not notice the man's pallor and silence.

"How long does it take for smallpox to develop after one has been exposed to it?" he asked abruptly, when Caroline rose to go.

"Ten to fourteen days, I calc'late," was her answer. "I must see about having the girls vaccinated right off. It'll likely spread. When do you expect Victoria home?"

"When she's ready to come, whenever that will be," was the gruff response.

A week later Caroline said to Eunice, "Whatever's got Christopher? He hasn't been out anywhere for ages--just hangs round home the whole time. It's something new for him. I s'pose the place is so quiet, now Madam Victoria's away, that he can find some rest for his soul. I believe I'll run over after

milking and see how he's getting on. You might as well come, too, Eunice."

Eunice shook her head. She had all her mother's obstinacy, and darkened Victoria's door she would not. She went on patiently darning socks, sitting at the west window, which was her favorite position--perhaps because she could look from it across the sloping field and past the crescent curve of maple grove to her lost home.

After milking, Caroline threw a shawl over her head and ran across the field. The house looked lonely and deserted. As she fumbled at the latch of the gate the kitchen door opened, and Christopher Holland appeared on the threshold.

"Don't come any farther," he called.

Caroline fell back in blank astonishment. Was this some more of Victoria's work?

"I ain't an agent for the smallpox," she called back viciously.

Christopher did not heed her.

"Will you go home and ask uncle if he'll go, or send for Doctor Spencer? He's the smallpox doctor. I'm sick."

Caroline felt a thrill of dismay and fear. She faltered a few steps backward.

"Sick? What's the matter with you?"

"I was in Charlottetown that night, and went to the concert. That sailor sat right beside me. I thought at the time he looked sick. It was just twelve days ago. I've felt bad all day yesterday and to-day. Send for the doctor. Don't come near the house, or let any one else come near."

He went in and shut the door. Caroline stood for a few moments in an almost ludicrous panic. Then she turned and ran, as if for her life, across the field. Eunice saw her coming and met her at the door.

"Mercy on us!" gasped Caroline. "Christopher's sick and he thinks he's got the smallpox. Where's Charles?"

Eunice tottered back against the door. Her hand went up to her side in a way that had been getting very common with her of late. Even in the midst of her excitement Caroline noticed it.

"Eunice, what makes you do that every time anything startles you?" she asked sharply. "Is it anything about your heart?"

"I don't--know. A little pain--it's gone now. Did you say that Christopher has--the smallpox?"

"Well, he says so himself, and it's more than likely, considering the circumstances. I declare, I never got such a turn in my life. It's a dreadful thing. I must find Charles at once--there'll be a hundred things to do."

Eunice hardly heard her. Her mind was centered upon one idea. Christopher was ill--alone--she must go to him. It did not matter what his disease was. When Caroline came in from her breathless expedition to the barn, she found Eunice standing by the table, with her hat and shawl on, tying up a parcel.

"Eunice! Where on earth are you going?"

"Over home," said Eunice. "If Christopher is going to be ill he must be nursed, and I'm the one to do it. He ought to be seen to right away."

"Eunice Carr! Have you gone clean out of your senses? It's the smallpox--the smallpox! If he's got it he'll have to be taken to the smallpox hospital in town. You shan't stir a step to go to that house!"

"I will." Eunice faced her excited aunt quietly. The odd resemblance to her mother, which only came out in moments of great tension, was plainly visible. "He shan't go to the hospital--they never get proper attention there. You needn't try to stop me. It won't put you or your family in any danger."

Caroline fell helplessly into a chair. She felt that it would be of no use to argue with a woman so determined. She wished Charles was there. But Charles had already gone, post-haste, for the doctor.

With a firm step, Eunice went across the field foot-path she had not trodden for so long. She felt no fear--rather a sort of elation. Christopher needed her once more; the interloper who had come between them was not there. As she walked through the frosty twilight she thought of the promise made to Naomi Holland, years ago.

Christopher saw her coming and waved her back.

"Don't come any nearer, Eunice. Didn't Caroline tell you? I'm taking smallpox."

Eunice did not pause. She went boldly through the yard and up the porch steps. He retreated before her and held the door.

"Eunice, you're crazy, girl! Go home, before it's too late."

Eunice pushed open the door resolutely and went in.

"It's too late now. I'm here, and I mean to stay and nurse you, if it's the smallpox you've got. Maybe it's not. Just now, when a person has a finger-ache, he thinks it's smallpox. Anyhow, whatever it is, you ought to be in bed and looked after. You'll catch cold. Let me get a light and have a look at you."

Christopher had sunk into a chair. His natural selfishness reasserted itself, and he made no further effort to dissuade Eunice. She got a lamp and set it on the table by him, while she scrutinized his face closely.

"You look feverish. What do you feel like? When did you take sick?"

"Yesterday afternoon. I have chills and hot spells and pains in my back. Eunice, do you think it's really smallpox? And will I die?"

He caught her hands, and looked imploringly up at her, as a child might have done. Eunice felt a wave of love and tenderness sweep warmly over her starved heart.

"Don't worry. Lots of people recover from smallpox if they're properly nursed, and you'll be that, for I'll see to it. Charles has gone for the doctor, and we'll know when he comes. You must go straight to bed."

She took off her hat and shawl, and hung them up. She felt as much at home as if she had never been away. She had got back to her kingdom, and there was none to dispute it with her. When Dr. Spencer and old Giles Blewett, who had had smallpox in his youth, came, two hours later, they found Eunice in serene charge. The house was in order and reeking of disinfectants. Victoria's fine furniture and fixings were being bundled out of the parlor. There was no bedroom downstairs, and, if Christopher was going to be ill, he must be installed there.

The doctor looked grave.

"I don't like it," he said, "but I'm not quite sure yet. If it is smallpox the eruption will probably be out by morning. I must admit he has most of the symptoms. Will you have him taken to the hospital?"

"No," said Eunice, decisively. "I'll nurse him myself. I'm not afraid and I'm well and strong."

"Very well. You've been vaccinated lately?"

"Yes."

"Well, nothing more can be done at present. You may as well lie down for a while and save your strength."

But Eunice could not do that. There was too much to attend to. She went out to the hall and threw up the window. Down below, at a safe distance, Charles Holland was waiting. The cold wind blew up to Eunice the odor of the disinfectants with which he had steeped himself.

"What does the doctor say?" he shouted.

"He thinks it's the smallpox. Have you sent word to Victoria?"

"Yes, Jim Blewett drove into town and told her. She'll stay with her sister till it is over. Of course it's the best thing for her to do. She's terribly frightened."

Eunice's lip curled contemptuously. To her, a wife who could desert her husband, no matter what disease he had, was an incomprehensible creature. But it was better so; she would have Christopher all to herself.

The night was long and wearisome, but the morning came all too soon for the dread certainty it brought. The doctor pronounced the case smallpox. Eunice had hoped against hope, but now, knowing the worst, she was very calm and resolute.

By noon the fateful yellow flag was flying over the house, and all arrangements had been made. Caroline was to do the necessary cooking, and Charles was to bring the food and leave it in the yard. Old Giles Blewett was to come every day and attend to the stock, as well as help Eunice with the sick man; and the long, hard fight with death began.

It was a hard fight, indeed. Christopher Holland, in the clutches of the loathsome disease, was an object from which his nearest and dearest might have been pardoned for shrinking. But Eunice never faltered; she never left her post. Sometimes she dozed in a chair by the bed, but she never lay down. Her endurance was something wonderful, her patience and tenderness almost superhuman. To and fro she went, in noiseless ministry, as the long, dreadful days wore away, with a quiet smile on her lips, and in her dark, sorrowful eyes the rapt look of a pictured saint in some dim cathedral niche. For her there was no world outside the bare room where lay the repulsive object she loved.

One day the doctor looked very grave. He had grown well-hardened to pitiful scenes in his life-time; but he shrunk from telling

Eunice that her brother could not live. He had never seen such devotion as hers. It seemed brutal to tell her that it had been in vain.

But Eunice had seen it for herself. She took it very calmly, the doctor thought. And she had her reward at last--such as it was. She thought it amply sufficient.

One night Christopher Holland opened his swollen eyes as she bent over him. They were alone in the old house. It was raining outside, and the drops rattled noisily on the panes.

Christopher smiled at his sister with parched lips, and put out a feeble hand toward her.

"Eunice," he said faintly, "you've been the best sister ever a man had. I haven't treated you right; but you've stood by me to the last. Tell Victoria--tell her--to be good to you--"

His voice died away into an inarticulate murmur. Eunice Carr was alone with her dead.

They buried Christopher Holland in haste and privacy the next day. The doctor disinfected the house, and Eunice was to stay there alone until it might be safe to make other arrangements. She had not shed a tear; the doctor thought she was a rather odd

person, but he had a great admiration for her. He told her she was the best nurse he had ever seen. To Eunice, praise or blame mattered nothing. Something in her life had snapped--some vital interest had departed. She wondered how she could live through the dreary, coming years.

Late that night she went into the room where her mother and brother had died. The window was open and the cold, pure air was grateful to her after the drug-laden atmosphere she had breathed so long. She knelt down by the stripped bed.

"Mother," she said aloud, "I have kept my promise."

When she tried to rise, long after, she staggered and fell across the bed, with her hand pressed on her heart. Old Giles Blewett found her there in the morning. There was a smile on her face.