

6. — *The Story of Avis.* By ELIZABETH STUART PHELPS, author of "The Gates Ajar." Boston: J. R. Osgood & Co. 1877.

HER story opens with her appearance at a Reading Club in a University town which is placed so near to the sea that she can hear the sound of the tide. It is called Harmouth. Miss Phelps may have gathered some of her allusions in Portsmouth or its marine vicinity; we recognize the source of the allusion to the little birds which fly directly toward the great lantern of a Harbor Light-house, and of the bush of dead birds which was once picked up after one of the twilight ventures of the little innocents. We have used the same fact to gild the moral of another fancy. Avis is the sole child of a Professor who married rather late a lady who came near trying her fortune upon the stage. Avis is introduced to us as possessing a talent for painting. One of her charcoal sketches, representing Una followed by the lion and flying from her knight, has been purloined by her friend Coy, who exhibits it at the close of a reading from Spenser by Mr. Philip Ostrander, tutor in Latin. The mother of Avis is dead: there are two very delicate reminiscences, one of the child Avis who questioned her mother and touched the nerve which vibrated with disappointment, and one of a little picture of her own which she brought to her mother when she was dying. A childless widow-sister of the Professor, "of excellent Vermont intentions and high ideals in cup-cake," comes to take charge of Avis, who likes her, but hates her pastry and preserving occupations, — hates the kitchen just as so many other girls with no particular talent, not even talent for cooking, admire to do. Avis, having talent, is sent abroad to study, and receives from masters great encouragement. Her appearance at the Reading Club is soon after her return. She recognizes Mr. Ostrander, and remembers him as the man who looked so meaningly at her abroad in the church of the Madeleine. She undertakes to paint his portrait for his mother. He falls in love with her, and one day abruptly tells her so, but is repelled; for she loves art and not marriage, and does not think she is the woman to make any man happy. He enlists as a surgeon, is shot through the lungs, returns to be tenderly nursed at a friend's, and one day, when convalescent, meets her by accident in the fields, and discovers she is afraid she loves him. The conflict in the nature of Avis begins; she is created to care nothing for marriage, yet she is drawn towards him. Her prevailing sentiment through this and other scenes is that of dread; it is alloyed by womanly pity for him. Dazed with this mixed love and pity, she flies at length to his heart, like one of the little birds to the lantern of Harbor Light.

She knows nothing about housekeeping, and has the usual luck of all of us with the Hibernian sister. Her husband had sworn to respect her art, and let it have free scope. But practically the kitchen is more exacting than the studio in the attic. Her first child dismays her; she didn't want one, and she has to bear the brunt of its peevishness. Evidently a woman not made to take the risks of matrimony even with that kind of person, — that angelic being whom all women intend to marry. Her husband is not one of these angels; no literary man ever is. Perhaps he also never ought to marry. The first decided jar upon Avis's confidence was made by the discovery that he had been engaged to an up-country girl, and jilted her. Then of course there came another baby; and on the heels of that the husband began to shirk his college work, partly because the old wound weakened the lungs. Then naturally the children have the whooping cough, she comes down with diphtheria, and he has an attack of pleurisy, — a pretty insupportable Providence, she thinks. They are packed off to Florida with the hope to baffle the tendency to consumption, which appears to have been a remote result of his old wound. The children are left with that delicious cake-making and preserving Aunt Chloe, who is one of Miss Phelps's pleasantest sketches. In Florida, just before Philip dies, a reconciliation takes place which goes to the root of the matter and gives Avis a husband when Philip has no farther need of a wife.

The story is very brightly and picturesquely told, with an abundance of sharp and petulant turns of sentences, and a prevailing sense for character.

But Miss Phelps must have been pretty rigorously married to somebody in a preëxistent state. Fortunately for the sustenance of the universe, single people never anticipate the risks and conditions of matrimony; otherwise no marriage service would ever have stolen into print, and clergymen would be out of pocket to a limited extent in the matter of fees. This mutual unconsciousness of the youth and the maid is Nature's chief stratagem to perpetuate and stereotype that aboriginal scrape into which all her creatures get for her benefit.

Miss Phelps serves Avis just as Nature would have done. But the process of her story will only confirm our horde of art-loving, painting, scribbling, tinting, ornamenting, water-coloring women in their indifference to matrimony; and if the matter goes on at the present rate, we do not know what in the end will become of Nature.