The Storyteller

MRS. ATWOOD'S COSTUME.

'How much will a new suit cost, Jo?' Mr. Atwood held his fingers reflectively on the rubber band of his pocketbook as he asked the question, and glanced as he did so at the round brunette face of his wife, which had suddenly become all flush and sparkle.

'Oh Edward!'

'Well?'

'You oughtn't to give me the money for it now—you really oughtn't. There are so many calls on you at this season of the year, I don't see how we can meet them as it is The second quarter of Josephine's music lessons begins next month, and the dancing-school bill comes in, too—besides the coal. Everything just piles in before Christmas. I meant to have saved the money for a coat, at any rate, this summer, out of my allowance, but I was obliged to fit Josephine out from head to foot, she grows so fast; she takes as much for a dress as I do. But it doesn't make any difference. I can do very well for a while with what I have—really!'

'How about the Washington trip with me next month? I thought you said you couldn't go anywhere without a new suit?'

'Well, I *can't*, but——'

'That settles it.'

Mr Atwood pulled off the rubber band from the pocket book, and laid it on the table before him, as he extracted a roll of bills and began to count them. It was a shabby article, worn brown at the edges, but it had been made of handsome leather to begin on, and still held together in spite of many years of service. Mrs Atwood would hardly have known her husband without that pocketbook. It represented in its way the heart of a kind and generous man, always ready to do his utmost in help of the family needs, without complaint or cavilling.

His wife always experienced mingled feelings when the leather receptacle appeared—a quick and blessed relief and a sharp wince, as if it were really his heart's blood that she was taking. Her fervent imagination was perennially ready to picture unknown depths of stress.

He paid no attention now to her inarticulate murmur of protest; but asked in a business-like way:—

'How much will it take?'

'I *could* get the material for a dollar a yard'—Mrs Atwood sat with her hands clasped, and her eyes looking off into space, feeling the words wrung from her—'I could get it for a dollar a yard; but I suppose it ought to be heavier weight for the winter.'

'Have it warm enough, whatever else you do,' interrupted her husband.

'It would take seven yards or I might get along with six and a half; it depends on the width. It's the linings that make it mount up to so much, and the making. You can get a suit made for six dollars—Cynthia Callender did, and hers looks well, but Mrs Nicholas went to the same place, and——'

'Will 30 dollars be enough?' asked Mr Atwood with masculine directness, seeking for some tangible fact.

'Oh, yes, I'm sure it will be; I——'

'Then here's 50,' said Mr Atwood. He counted out five tens and pushed them over to her. 'Get a good suit while you are about it, Jo.'

'Oh, Edward! I don't want——'

'Make her take it,' said a girl of 16, rising from the corner where she had been sitting with a book in her hand, a very tall and thin and pretty girl, brunette like her mother, with a long, black braid that hung down her back. She came forward and threw her arms around her mother's neck, bending protectingly over her.

'Make her take it, papa. She buys everything for me and the boys, and goes without herself, so that I'm ashamed to walk out in the street with her; it makes me look so horrid to be all dressed up when she wears that old spring jacket. When it's cold she puts a cape over it. I wish you'd *see* that cape! She's had it since the year one. She doesn't dare wear it when she goes out with you; she just shivers.'

'Hush, hush, Josephine,' said her mother, embarrassed, yet laughing, as her husband lifted his shaggy eyebrows at her in mock severity. 'You needn't say any more, either of you. I'll take the money.' She paused impressively, and then gently pushed the girl aside and went over and kissed her husband.

'If I were only as good a manager as some people! I don't know what is the matter with me. I try, and I try, but——'

'Yes, yes, I know,' said the husband. 'All I ask now is that you spend the money on yourself.'

'Yes, I will,' said Mrs Atwood, with the guilty thrill of the perjured at the very moment of her promise. She knew very well that some of it would have to be spent for other needs. She had but 50 cents left of her allowance to last her until the end of the month, five long days away. No one but the mother of a family on moderate means realises what the demand for pads, pencils, shoe-strings, lunches, postage-stamps, hair ribbons, medicines, mended shoes, and such like can amount to in that short time. She had meant to ask Edward to advance her a little more on the next month's allowance—already largely anticipated—but she had not the face to, after his generosity to her now. A couple of dollars out of the fifty would make very little difference, and she did not need it all, anyway. She almost wept as she thought of Josephine's championship of her and her husband's thoughtfulness.

Mrs Atwood adored her husband and her three children. She firmly believed them to be superior in every way to all other mortals; sacrificing service for them was her joy of joys, her keenest affection the fear that she did not appreciate them half enough. It is certain that the children, truthful, loving and obedient as they had been trained to be, would have been spoilt beyond tolerance if it were not that the very strength of her admiration made it innocuous. They were so used to being told that they were the loveliest and dearest things on earth that the words were not even heard. As they grew older the extravagance of her devotion was beginning to rouse the protective element in them, to her wonder and humility.

Mrs Atwood, at twenty, the time of her marriage, had been a warm-hearted, fervent, loquacious, impulsive child. At thirty-eight she was still in many ways the girl her husband had married, even to her looks, while he appeared much older than his real age, in reality but a couple years ahead of hers. She was always longing to be a silent, noble, and finely-balanced character, quite oblivious of the fact that she suited him, a humorous but self-contained man, exactly as she was, and that he would have been very lonesome with anything more perfect. Perhaps, after all, there are few things that are better to bring into a household than an uncalculated and abounding love, even if the manifestations of it are not always of the wisest. The extra money cast a rich glow over Mrs Atwood's horizon. In the effulgence of it she received a bill for twelve dollars presented to her just after breakfast the next morning by the waitress, with the word that the man waiting outside the door had already brought it once before, when they were out of town. Could Mrs Atwood pay it now? He needed the money.

'Why, certainly,' said Mrs Atwood, with affluent promptness. The bill was for work on the lawn during the summer, something her husband always paid for; but it seemed a pity to have the man go away again when the money was there at hand. She would not in the least mind asking Edward to refund it to her. But she felt the well-known drop into her usual condition of calculating economy.

Her husband came home that night with a bad headache, and, the night after, she had another bill waiting for him for repairs on the furnace. It was unexpectedly and villainously large, and Mrs Atwood was constitutionally incapable of adding another straw to his burden, while she stood by consenting sympathetically unto his righteous wrath. A day later, when she spoke of going to town to buy the material for her new costume, with outward buoyancy, but inward panic at the rapid shrinkage of her funds, Sam, a boy of twelve, announced the fact that he must have a new suit of clothes at once. As it was Saturday he would accompany her.

'What is the matter with those you have on? They are not in the least worn out,' said his mother.

'Mamma, they're so thin that I'm freezing all the time I'm in school. You ought to have heard me coughing yesterday.'

'You have the old blue suit. I'm sure that's thick enough.'

'The blue suit! Yes, and it hurts me; it's so tight I can hardly walk in it. I can't sit down in it at all. It makes ridges all round my legs.'

Mrs Atwood looked at her son with rare exasperation. It was well known that when Sam took a dislike to his clothes for any reason, they always hurt him. His coats, his trousers, his caps, his shoes, even his neckties, developed hitherto unsuspected attributes of torture. And there was always a haunting feeling with the outraged dispenser of these articles that it might be true.

A penetrative and scornful remark from the passing Josephine at once emphasised this view of the case to the anxious mother, remorseful already at her own lack of sympathy.

'I'm astonished at you Josephine. If the clothes hurt him——' but the girl had disappeared beyond hearing.

Sam came from town that evening jubilant in warmy and roomy jacket and trousers, and, O weakness of woman! with a new football besides. Mrs Atwood carried with her a box of lead soldiers for Eddy, and a sweet little fluffy thing in neckwear for Josephine, such as she saw other girls displaying. After all, what was her own dress in comparison with the darling children's happiness? She would get some cheap stuff and make it up herself. No one would know the difference.

'How about your suit, Jo?' asked her husband one evening as the sat round the fire. 'Is it almost finished?'

'Not—exactly,' said Mrs Atwood.

'The Club goes to Washington on the 15th of the month; it was decided to-day. Nearly all the men are going to take their wives with them. I'm looking forward to showing off mine.'

'My mamma will look prettier than any one of them,' said Eddy, belligerently.

'And lots younger,' added Sam.

'Have you ordered the suit yet?' asked the voice of Josephine. Oh, how her mother dreaded it.

'No, I haven't—yet,' she felt herself forced into saying.

'I don't believe there is any money left for it,' pursued the pitiless one. 'She spends it for other things, papa. She pays bills and doesn't tell, because she hates to bother you. And she buys things for us. And she paid a subscription to the Orphans' Home yesterday, and she got a new wash-boiler for Katy. And ——'

'Hush, hush, Josephine,' said her father, severely. 'I found that receipted bill of Patrick's lying around the other day, Jo. I should have paid you back at once. How much money have you left?'

'Oh, Edward, I'm so foolish, I——'

'Have you thirty dollars?'

'I—I don't think so.'

'Have you twenty?'

'I haven't more than that.' She had, as she well knew, the sum of nine dollars and sixty-seven cents in the purse in her dressing table drawer.

'Will this help you out?' His tone had the business-like quality in it as natural as breathing to a man when he speaks of money matters, and which a woman feels almost as a personal condemnation, in its chill removal from sentiment.