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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ABIJAH'S BUBBLE ***

ABIJAH'S BUBBLE

By F. Hopkinson Smith

1909

Ezekiel Todd, her dry, tight-fisted, lean father, had named her, bawling it out so loud that the more suitable, certainly the more euphonious, "Evangeline," proffered in a timid whisper by her faded and somewhat romantic mother, was completely smothered.

"I baptize thee, Evang—" began the minister, when Ezekiel's voice rose clear:

"Abijah, I tell ye, Parson—A-b-i-j-a-h—Abijah!" And Abijah it was.

The women were furious.

"Jes' like Zeke Todd. He's too ornery to live. I come mighty near speakin' right out, and hadn't been that Martha held on to me I would. Call her Abbie, for short, Mrs. Todd," exclaimed Deacon Libby's wife, "and shame him."

Abbie never minded it. She was too little to remember, she always said, and there were few people in the village of Taylorsville present at the christening who did.

Old Si Spavey, however, never forgot. "You kin call yourself Abbie if you choose," he used to say, "and 'tain't none o' my business, but I was in the meetin'-house and heard Zeke let drive, and b'gosh it sounded just like a buzz-saw strikin' the butt-end of a log. 'Abijah! *Abijah!* he hollered. Shet Parson Simmons up same's a steel trap. Gosh, but it was funny!"

Only twice since the christening had she to face the consequences of her father's ill temper. This was after his death, when the needs of the poor mother made a small mortgage imperative and she must sign as a witness. It came with a certain shock, but there was no help for it, and she went through the ordeal bravely, dotting the "i" and giving a little flourish to the tail of the "h".

The second time was when she signed her application for the position of postmistress of the village. The big mill-owner, Hiram Taylor, brought her the paper.

"Got to put it all in, Miss Abbie," he said with a laugh. "Shut your eyes and sign it and then forget it. Awful, ain't it?—but that's the law, and there ain't no way of getting round it, I guess."

Hiram Taylor had left the village years before, rather suddenly, some had thought, when he was a strapping young fellow of twenty-two or three, and had moved West and stayed West until he came back the year before with a wife and a houseful of children. Then the lawyers in the village got busy, and pretty soon some builders came down from Boston, only fifty miles away, and then a lot of bricklayers; and some cars were switched off on the siding, loaded with lumber and lath and brick, and next a train-load of machinery, and so the mills

were running again with Hiram sole owner and in full charge. One of the first things he did after his arrival—the following morning, really—was to look up Abbie's mother. He gave a little start when he saw how shabby the cottage looked; no paint for years—steps rotting—window-blinds broken, with a hinge loose. He gave a big one when a thin, hollow-chested woman, gray and spare, opened the door at his knock.

"Hiram!" she gasped, and the two went inside, and the door was shut.

All she said when Abbie came home from school—she was teaching that year—was: "The new mill-owner came to see me. His name's Taylor."

That same day a heavy-set man with gray hair and beard, and jet-black eyebrows shading two kindly eyes, got out of his wagon, hitched his horse to a post in front of the school-house and stepped to Abbie's desk.

"I'm Hiram Taylor, up to the mills. Going to send one of my girls to you to-morrow and thought I'd drop in." Then he looked around and said: "Want another coat of whitewash on these walls, don't you, and—and a new stove? This don't seem to be drawin' like it ought to. If them trustees won't get ugly about it, I got a new stove up to the mill I don't want, and I'll send it down." And he did. The trustees shrugged their shoulders, but made no objections. If Hiram Taylor wanted to throw his money away it was none of their business. Abbie Todd never said she was cold—not as they had "heard on."

When the new school building was finished—a brick structure with stone trimmings, steam-heated, and varnished desks and seats—the craze for the new and up-to-date so dominated the board that they paid Abbie a month's salary in advance and then replaced her with a man graduate from Concord. Abbie took her dismissal as a matter of course. Nothing good ever lasted long. When she went up one step she always slid back two. It had been that way all her life.

Hiram heard of it and came rattling into the village, where he expressed himself at a town meeting in language distinguished for its clearness and force. The result was Abbie's application for the position of postmistress.

This time he didn't consult the trustees or anybody else. He wrote a private note to the Postmaster-General, who was his friend, and the appointment came by return mail.

Mr. Taylor would often chat with her through the little window with which she held converse with the public—he often came himself for his mail—but she made no mention of her state of mind. She was earning her living, and she was for the time content. He had helped her and she was grateful—more than this it was not her habit to dwell upon. One thing she was convinced of: she wouldn't keep the position long.

Her mother knew her misgivings, and so did a small open wood fire in the sitting-room. Many a night the two would croon together. The mother shrivelled and faded; Abbie herself being over thirty—not so fresh-looking as she had been—not so pretty—never had been very pretty. Her mother knew, too, how hard she had always struggled to do something better; how she had studied drawing at the normal school when she was preparing to be a teacher; and how she had spent weeks in the elaboration of wall-paper patterns, which she had sent to the Decorative Art Society in Boston, only to have them returned to her in the same wrapper in which they had been mailed, with the indorsement "not suitable." That's why she didn't think she was going to be postmistress long. Far into the night these talks would continue—long after the other neighbors had gone to bed—nine o'clock maybe—sometimes as late as ten—an unheard-of thing in Taylorsville, where everybody was up at daylight.

Then one day an extraordinary thing happened—extraordinary so far as her modest post-office was concerned. A poster appeared on the wall of her office—a huge card, big as the top of a school desk, bearing in large type this legend: "Rock Creek Copper Company. Keep & Co., Agents," and at the bottom, in small type, directions as to the best way of securing the stock before the lists were closed. She had noticed the name of the company emblazoned on many of the communications addressed to people in the village—the richer ones—but here it was in cold type—"hot type," for that matter, for it was in flaming red—on the wall, in front of her window.

Abbie lifted her head in surprise when she saw what had been done without even "By your leave." She had found auction sales, sheriff's notices and tax warnings opposite her window, but never copper mines. The longer she looked at it the better she liked it. There was a cheery bit of color in its blazing letters, and she was partial to bits of color. That's why she kept plants all winter in the little sitting-room at home, and nursed one cactus that gave out a scarlet bloom once in so many months.

It was Miss Maria Furgusson, of Boston—summer boarder at the next cottage; second floor, six dollars a week, including washing—that revived, kept alive, in fact, fanned to fever heat, Abbie's first impression of the poster. Maria called for her mail, and the intimacy had gone so far that before the week was out "Miss Todd" had been replaced by "Abbie" and then "Ab," and Miss Furgusson by "Maria"—the postmistress being too dignified for further abbreviation.

"Oh, there's our lovely copper mine—where did you get it? Who put it up?"

Maria was a shirt-waisted young woman with a bang and a penetrating voice. She had charge of the hosiery counter in a department store and could call "Cash" in tones that brought instant service. This, with her promptness, had endeared her to many impatient customers—especially those from out of town who wanted to catch trains. It was through one of these "hayseeds" that she secured board at so reasonable a price in Taylorsville during her vacation.

"What do you know about it?" inquired Abbie. Such things were Greek to her.

"Know? I've got twenty shares, and I'm going to have money to burn before long."

Abbie bent her head, and took in as much of Miss Furgusson as she could see through the square hole in her window.

"Who gave it to you?" The idea of a girl like Maria ever having money enough to buy anything of that kind never occurred to her.

"Nobody; I bought it; paid two dollars a share for it and now it's up to three, and Mr. Slathers, our floor-walker, says it's going to twenty-five. I've got a profit of twenty dollars on mine now."

Abbie made a mental calculation; twenty dollars was a considerable part of her month's salary.

"And everybody in our store has got some. Mr. Slathers has made eight hundred dollars, and I know for sure that Miss Henders is going to leave the cloak department and set up a typewriting place, because she told me so; she's got a brother in the feed business who staked her."

"Staked her? What's that?"

"Loaned her the money," answered Maria, a certain pity in her voice for one so green and countrified.

"How do you get it?" Abbie's eyes were shining like the disks of a brass letter scale and almost as large—they were still upon Maria.

"The money?"

"No, the stock."

"Why, send Mr. Keep the money and he buys the stock and sends you back the certificate. Want to see mine? I've got it pinned in—Here it is."

Abbie opened the door of the glass partition and beckoned to the shopgirl. She rarely allowed visitors inside, but this one seemed to hold the key to a new world.

The girl slipped her fingers inside her shirtwaist and drew out a square piece of paper bearing the inscription of the poster in big letters. At the bottom of the paper a section of cement drain-pipe poured forth a steady stream of water, and the whole was underlined by a motto meaning "Peace and Plenty"—of water, no doubt.

Abbie looked at the beautifully engraved document and a warm glow suffused her face. Was it as easy as this? Did this little scrap of paper mean rest and the spreading of wings, and freedom for her mother? Then she caught her breath. She hadn't any brother in the feed business—nor anywhere else, for that matter. How would she get the money? She had only her salary; her mother earned little or nothing—the interest on the mortgage would be due in a day or so; thank God it was nearly paid off. Then her heart rose in her throat. Mr. Taylor! Why he was so kind she never knew—but he was. But if he insisted as he had with the store and the position in the post-office! No—he had done too much already. Besides, she could never repay him if anything went wrong. No—this was not her chance for freedom.

Abbie handed the certificate back. "Queer way of making money," was all she said as she reached for her hat and shawl, and went home to dinner.

That evening after supper, the two crooning over the fire, Abbie talked it over with her mother—not the stock—not a word of that—but of how Maria had made a lot of money, and how she wished she had a little of her own so she could make some, too. This the mother retailed, the next morning, to her neighbor, who met the expressman, who thereupon sent it rolling through the village. In both its diluted and enriched form the neighbor had helped. The story was as follows:

"That Boston girl who was boardin' up to Skitson's had a thousand dollars in the bank—made it all in a month—so Abbie Todd, who knew her, said. It was a dead secret how she made it, but Abbie said if she had a few hundred dollars she could get rich, too. Beats all how smart some girls is gettin' to be nowadays."

The next morning Mr. Taylor called for his mail. He generally sent a boy down from the mill, but this time he came himself.

"If you see anything lying around loose, Miss Abbie, where you can pick up a few dollars—and you must now and then—so many people going in and out from Boston and other places—and want a couple of hundred to help out, let me know. I'll stake you, and glad to."

In answer, Abbie passed his mail through the square window. "Thank you, Mr. Taylor," was all she said. "I won't forget."

Hiram fingered his mail and hung around for a minute. Then with the remark: "Guess that expressman was lying—I'll find out, anyway," he got into his buggy and drove away.

"He'll *stake* me, will he?" said Abbie thoughtfully. "That's what the feed man did for Maria's friend." With the stake she could get the stock, and with the stock the clouds would lift! Perhaps her turn was coming, after all.

Then she resumed her work pigeon-holing the morning's mail. One was from Keep & Co., judging from the address in the corner, and was directed to Maria Fergusson, care Miss Skitson—a thick, heavy letter. This she laid aside.

"Yes, a big one," she called from the window as she passed it out to that young woman five minutes later. "About the stock, isn't it!"

The girl tore open the envelope and gave a little scream.

"Oh! Gone up to ten dollars a share! Oh, cracky!—how much does that make? Here, Ab—do you figure—twenty shares at—Ten! Why, that's two hundred dollars! What?—it can't be! Yes, it is. Oh, that's splendid! I'm going right back to answer his letter"—and she was gone.

When the supper things were washed up that night, and the towels hung before the stove to dry, and the faded old mother was resting in her chair by the fire, Abbie told her the facts as they existed. She had seen the certificate with her own eyes—had had it in her hand and she had read the letter from the broker, Mr. Keep. It was all true—every word of it. Maria had borrowed forty dollars and now she could pay it back and have one hundred and sixty dollars left—more than she herself could earn in three months.

"If I could get somebody to lend me a little money, Mother," she continued, "I might—"

The girl stopped and stole a look at her mother sitting hunched up in her chair, her elbows on her knees, the chin resting on the palms of her hands, the angle of her thin shoulders outlined through the coarse, worsted shawl—always a pathetic attitude to the daughter:—this old mother broken with hard work and dulled by a life of continued disappointment.

"I was saying, Mother, perhaps I might get somebody to lend me a little money, and then—"

The figure straightened up. "Don't do it, child!" There was a note almost of terror in her voice. "Don't you

ever do it! That was what ruined my father. Abbie—promise me—promise me, I say! You won't—you can't."

The girl laid her hand tenderly on her mother's shoulder.'

"Why, Mother, dear—why, what's the matter? You look as if you had seen a ghost."

Mrs. Todd drew her shawl closer about her shoulders and leaned nearer to the girl, her voice trembling:

"It's worse than a ghost, child—it's a *debt!* Debt along of money you never worked for; money somebody gives you sort o' friendly-like, and when you can't pay it back, they bite you, like dogs. No—let's sit here and starve first, child. We can shut the door and nobody 'll know we're hungry." She straightened up and threw the shawl from her shoulders. Terror had taken the place of an undefined dread.

"You ain't gettin' discouraged, Abbie, be you?" she continued in a calmer tone. "Don't get discouraged, child. I got discouraged when I was younger than you, and I ain't never been happy since. You never knew why, and I ain't goin' to tell you now, but it's been black night all these years—all 'cept you. You've been the only thing made me live. If you get discouraged, child, I can't stand it. Say you ain't, Abbie—let me hear you say it—please Abbie!"

The girl rose from her chair and stood looking down at her mother. The sudden outburst, so unusual in one so self-restrained, the unmistakable suffering in the tones of her voice, thrilled and alarmed her. Her first impulse was to throw her arms about her mother's neck and weep with her. This had been her usual custom when the load seemed too heavy for her mother to bear. Then the more practical side of her nature asserted itself. It was strength, not sympathy, she wanted. Slipping her hand under her mother's arm, she raised her to her feet, and in a firm, decided voice, quite as a hospital nurse would speak to a restless patient, she said:

"You'd better not sit up any longer, Mother dear. Come, I'll help put you to bed."

There was no resistance. Whatever suddenly aroused memory had stirred the outburst, the paroxysm was over now.

"Well, maybe I am tired, child," was all she said, and the two left the room.

"Poor, dear old Mother! Poor, tired old Mother!" the girl remarked to herself when she had resumed her place by the dying fire. "Wonder if I'll get that way when I'm as old as she is!"

Then the hopelessness of the struggle she was making rose before her. How much longer would this go on? Up at six o'clock; a cup of coffee and a piece of bread; then the monotonous sorting of letters and papers—the ceaseless answering of stupid questions; then half an hour for dinner; then the routine again till train time, and home to the mother and the two chairs by the fire, only to begin the dreary tread-mil! again the next morning. And with this the daily growing older—older; her face thinner and more pinched, the shoulders sharp; her hair gray, head bent, just as her poor mother's was, and, with all that, hardly money enough to buy herself a pair of shoes—never enough to give her dear mother the slightest luxury.

Discouraged! Hadn't she reason to be?

The next morning Hiram walked into the post-office and called to Abbie, through the square window, to open the door. Once inside he loosened his fur driving-coat, took out a long, black wallet, picked out a thin slip of paper and laid it on Abbie's desk.

"I have been thinking over what I told you yesterday. There's a check drawn to your order for two hundred dollars. All you got to do is to put your name on the back of it and it's money. It's good—never knew one that warn't."

The girl started back.

"I didn't ask you for it. I don't—"

"I know you didn't, and when you did it would be too late maybe—got to catch things sometimes when they're flying past. I don't know whether it's those town lots they're booming over to Haddam's Corners, and I don't care, but if that ain't enough there's more where that came from. Good-day!" and he slammed the glass door behind him. Abbie picked up the thin slip of paper and studied every line on its face, from the red number in the upper corner to "Hiram Taylor" in a bold, round hand. Then her eyes lighted on "Abijah Todd or order."

Yes, it was hers—all of it. Not to spend, but to *make money out of*. Then her mother's words of warning rang clear: "Worse than a ghost, my child!" Should she—could she take it? She turned to lay it in a drawer until she could hand it back to him and her eyes fell upon the poster framed in by the square of her window. She stopped and shut the drawer. Was she never to have her chance? Would the treadmill never end? Would the dear mother's head never be lifted? Folding the check carefully, she loosened the top button of her dress and pushed it inside. There it burned like a hot coal.

That night, after putting her mother to bed, she pinned a shawl over her head, threw her mother's cloak about her shoulders, sneaked into Maria's house, and crept up into her friend's room like a burglar. What was to be done must be done quickly, but intelligently.

"I've got some money," she exclaimed to the astonished girl who, half undressed, sat writing at her table. (It was after nine o'clock—an unheard-of hour for visiting.) "How much stock can I buy for two hundred dollars?" and she shook out the check, keeping her finger over the signature.

"Twenty shares," answered Maria.

"How do I get it?"

"Send the money to Keep & Co. Oh, you got a check! Well, put 'Keep & Co.' on—here, I'll do it, and you sign your name underneath. And I'll write 'em a letter and tell 'em I helped sell it to you. Oh, ain't I glad, Ab. You must be getting awful big pay to have saved all that. Wish I—"

"How long before I know?" She had not much time to talk—her mother might wake and call her.

"They'll telephone you. You got a long-distance, ain't you, in the office? Yes, I seen it."

Abbie took the name of the senior partner, replaced the check, and was by her own fire again. The mother hadn't stirred.

All the next day she waited for the rattle of the bell. At three o'clock she sprang to the 'phone.

"This Miss Todd—postmistress?"

"Yes."

"Got your check—bought you twenty Rock Creek at ten—mail you certificate to-morrow."

The following morning the certificate took the place of the check—pinned tight. She could feel it crinkle when she walked. All that day she moved about her office like one dazed. There was no exaltation—no thrill of triumph. A dull, undefined terror took possession of her. What if the stock went down in price and she couldn't pay back the money? Of whom, then, could she borrow? Repay Hiram she must and would. Again her mother's warning words rang in her ears. Then came the resolve never to tell her. If it went right she would add to the dear woman's comforts in silence. If it went wrong—but it couldn't go wrong: Maria had said so: the papers had said so: the posters said so—everybody and everything said so.

As the day wore on she became so nervous that she mixed the letters in their pigeon-holes.

"That ain't for me, Miss Todd," was called out half a dozen times when B or F or S letters had gone into the wrong box. "Guess you must a-got it in the B's by mistake. Woolgathering, ain't ye?"

Maria was her only confidante and her only comfort. The Boston girl laughed when she listened to her fears, and braced her up with fairy stories of the winnings of Miss Henders and Slathers and the money they were making; but the relief was only temporary.

Soon the strain began to show itself in her face. "You ain't sick, Abbie, be you?" asked the mother. "No? Well, you look kind o' peaked. Don't work too hard, child. Maybe something's worryin' you—something you ain't told me. No man I don't know about, is there?" and the mother's sad eyes searched the daughter's.

To all these inquiries the girl only shook her head, adding that the down mail was late and a big one and she had hurried to sort it.

When the Boston mail arrived the next morning and was dumped from its bag upon her sorting-table, her own name flamed out on one of Keep & Co.'s envelopes.

Abbie broke the seal and devoured its contents with bated breath, her fingers trembling:

We are happy to inform you that the last sales of Rock Creek ranged from 13 to 14 3/4—15 bid at close. We confidently expect the stock will sell at 20 before the week is out. We shall be glad to receive your further orders as well as those of any of your friends.

Abbie's heart gave a bound; the blood mounted to the roots of her hair.

"Fifteen—twenty—why—why! that's two hundred dollars for me after paying Mr. Taylor." The chill of doubt was over now. The fever of hope had set in. "Two hundred! Two hundred!" she kept repeating, as her fingers caressed the certificate snuggling close to her heart.

When she swung wide the porch door and threw her arms around her astonished mother's neck, the refrain was still on her lips. It had been years since the hard-working girl had given way to any such joyous outburst.

"Oh, I'm so happy! Don't ask me why—but I am!"

The mother kissed her in reply and patted the girl's shoulder. "There *is* somebody," she sighed to herself. "And they've made up again"—and a prayer trembled on her lips.

Her joy now became contagious. The expressman noticed it; so did Mrs. Skitson and the storekeeper. So did Mr. Taylor, who stopped his wagon and leaned half out to shake her hand.

"You do look wholesome this morning, and no mistake, Miss Abbie" (he always called her so). "Don't forget what I told you—lots more where that come from"—and he drove on muttering to himself: "Ain't no finer woman in Taylorsville than Abbie Todd."

Keep & Co. letters arrived now by almost every mail. With these came a daily stock-list printed on tissue-paper, giving the sales on the exchange. Rock Creek was still holding its own between 13 and 15. "From my brokers," she would say with a smile to Maria, falling into the ways of the rich.

One of these letters, marked "Private and confidential," she took to Maria. It was in the writer's own hand and signed by the senior member of the firm. Literally translated into uncommercial language by that female financier, it meant that Miss Todd, "*on notice from Keep & Co.*" should write her name at the bottom of the transfer blank on the back of the certificate and mail it to them. This done they would buy her another ten shares of stock, using her certificate as additional margin. There was no question that Rock Creek would sell at forty before the month ended, and they did not want her to be "left" when the "melon was cut."

Another and a newer and a more vibrant song now rose to her lips. Forty for Rock Creek meant four—six—yes, eight hundred dollars—with two hundred to Mr. Taylor! Yes! Six hundred clear! The scrap of paper in her bosom was no longer a receipt for money paid, but an Aladdin's lamp producing untold wealth.

That night the music burst from her lips before she had taken off her cloak and hat.

"You made six hundred dollars, Abbie! *You!*" cried the mother, with a note of wonder in her voice.

Then the whole story came out; her mother's arms about her, the pale cheek touching her own, tears of joy streaming from both their eyes. First Maria's luck, then that of her fellow-clerks; then the letters, one after another, spread out upon her lap, the lamp held close, so the dim eyes could read the easier—down to the stake-money of two hundred dollars.

"And who gave you that, child? Miss Fergusson?" The mother's heart was still fluttering. After all, the sun was shining.

"No; Mr. Taylor."

The mother put her hands to her head.

"*Hiram!* You ain't never borrowed any money of Hiram, have you?" she cried in an agonized voice.

"But, Mother dear, he forced it upon me. He came—"

"Yes, that's what he did to me. Give it back to him, child, now, 'fore you sleep. Don't wait a minute. Borrowed two hundred dollars of Hiram—and my child, too! Oh, it can't be! It can't be!"

The mother dropped into a chair and rocked herself to and fro. The girl started to explain, to protest, to comfort her with promises; then she crossed to where her mother was sitting, and stood patient until the paroxysm should pass. A sudden fright now possessed her; these attacks were coming on oftener; was her mother's mind failing? Was there anything serious? Perhaps it would have been better not to tell her at all.

The mother motioned Abbie to a chair.

"Sit down, child, and listen to me. I ain't crazy; I ain't out of my head—I'm only skeered."

"But, Mother dear, I can get the money any day I want it. All I've got to do is to telephone them and a check comes the next day."

"Yes, I know—I know." She was still trembling, her voice hardly audible. "But that ain't what skeers me; it's Hiram. He done the same thing to me last December. Come in here and laid the bills on that table behind you and begged me to take 'em; he'd heard about the mortgage; he wanted to fix the house up, too. I put my hands behind my back and got close to the wall there. I couldn't touch it, and he begged and begged, and then he went away. Next he went to the school-house, and you know what he did. That's why you got the post-office."

A light broke in upon the girl. "And you've known him before?"

"Yes, forty years ago. He loved me and I loved him. We had bad luck, and my father got into trouble. He and Hiram's father were friend's; been boys together, and Hiram's father loaned him money. I don't know how much—I never knew, but considerable money. My father couldn't pay, and then come bad blood. The week before Hiram and I were to be called in church they struck each other, and when Hiram took my father's part his father drove him out of his house, and Hiram hadn't nothing, and went West; and I never heard from him nor saw him till the day he come in here last fall. Don't you see, child, you got to take him back his money?"

Abbie squared her shoulders. The blood of the Puritan was in her eyes. This was a fight for home and freedom. Her flintlock was between the cracks of her log cabin. The old mother, with the other women and children, lay huddled together in the far corners. This was no time for surrender!

"No!" she cried in a firm voice. "I won't give it back, not till I get good and ready. Mr. Taylor loaned me that two hundred dollars to make money with, and he won't get it again till I do." She wondered at her courage, but it seemed the only way to save her mother from herself. "What happened forty years ago has nothing to do with what's happening to-day."

The look in the girl's eyes; her courage; the ring of independence in her voice, the sureness and confidence of her words, began to have their effect. The Genie of the Lamp was at work: the life-giving power of Gold was being pumped from her own into the poor old woman's poverty-shrunken veins.

"And you don't think, child, that it will bring you trouble?"

"Bring trouble!" No!

The cabin was saved; the enemy was in retreat. She could sing once more! "It will bring nothing but joy and freedom, you precious old Mother! Do you know what I'm going to do?"

"What, child?"

"I'm going to pay off the mortgage, every cent of it."

She said "I" now; it had been "we" all the years before: Keep rubbing, dear old Genie. "Then I'll fix up the house and paint it, and get you some nice clothes, and a new cook stove that isn't all rusted out—"

"You won't resign, will you, Abbie—and leave me?" the mother exclaimed. The chill of possible desertion suddenly crept over her, (The Genie is often unmindful of others, especially the poor.)

"Leave you! What, now? You darling Mother. As to resigning, I may later. But I'm going to Boston when I get my vacation and stay a week with Maria, and go to the opera if I never do another thing. Oh! just you wait, Mother, you and I will lead a different life after this."

"And you think, Abbie, you'll make more than six hundred dollars?" Already the mother's veins were expanding—wonderful elixir, this Extract of Gold.

"Six hundred! Why, if the stock goes to what they call par—and that's where they all go, so Maria says—I'll have—have—two thousand, less Mr. Taylor's two hundred—I'll have eighteen hundred dollars!" The little fellow in her bosom was rubbing away now with all his might. She could hear his heart beat against her own.

It was nearly midnight when the two went to bed. Stick after stick had been thrown on the fire; the logs had flamed and crackled in sympathy with their own joyous feelings, and had then fallen into piled-up coals, each heap a castle of delight, rosy in the glow of freshly enkindled hopes.

And the song in her heart never ceased. Day by day a fresh note was added; everything she touched; everything she saw was transformed. The old tumble-down house with its propped-up furniture and makeshift carpets seemed to have become already the place she planned it to be. There would be vines over the door and a new summer kitchen at the back; and there would be a porch where her mother could sit, flowers all about her—her dear mother, bent no longer, but fresh and rosy in her new clothes, smiling at her as she came up the garden path.

And what delight it was just to breathe the air! Never had her step been so light, or her daily walk to the dingy office—dingy no longer—so bracing. And the out-of-doors—the sky and drifting clouds; the low hills, bleak in the winter's gloom—what changes had come over them? Was it the first blush of the coming spring that had softened their lines, or had her eyes been blind to all their beauty? Oh! Marvellous elixir that makes hopes certainty and gilds each cloud!

One morning a man waiting for a letter from an absent son heard the telephone ring, and saw Abbie drop her letters and catch up the receiver:

"Yes, I'm Miss Todd.—Oh! Mr. Keep? Yes.—Yes—I've got it here." Her face grew deathly white. "What! Selling at twelve!" The man feared she was about to fall. "I thought you told me... A big slump! Well, I don't want to lose if... Yes, I'll mail it right away... Reach you by the 9.10 to-morrow."

"I hope you ain't got any bad news, have you?" the man asked in a sympathetic voice.

"No," she answered in a choking voice, as she handed him his letter; then she turned her back and took the certificate from her bosom.

"Selling at twelve," she kept saying to herself; "perhaps at ten; perhaps at five. Would it go lower? Suppose it went down to nothing. What could she say to her mother? How would she pay Mr. Taylor?" Her breath came short; a dull sense of some impending calamity took possession of her. Everything seemed slipping from her grasp.

An hour passed—two. In the interim she had indorsed the certificate and had dropped it into the open mouth of the night-bag. Again the bell sounded.

"Yes," she answered in a faint voice; her shoulder was against the wall now for support.

She was ready for the blow; all her life they had come this way.

"Sold your twenty at ten. Mail you check for \$190 on receipt of certificate."

Abbie clutched her bosom as if for relief, but there came no answering throb. The little devil was gone, and the lamp with him.

"And is it all over, Abbie?" asked her mother, as she drew her shawl closer about her head. One stick of wood must last them till bedtime now.

"Yes—all." The girl lay crouched at her feet sobbing, her head in her mother's lap.

"Can you pay Hiram?"

"I have paid him in full. I gave him Mr. Keep's check and ten dollars of my pay—paid him this morning. He wouldn't take any interest."

"Oh, that's good—that's good, child!" she crooned.

There came a long pause, during which the two women sat motionless, the mother looking into the smouldering coals. She had but few tears left none for disappointments like these.

"And we have got to keep on as we have?"

"Yes." The reply was barely audible.

The mother lifted her thin, worn hand, and laid it on Abbie's head.

"Well, child," she said slowly, "you can thank God for one thing. *You had your dream*; ain't many even had that."

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK ABIJAH'S BUBBLE ***

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