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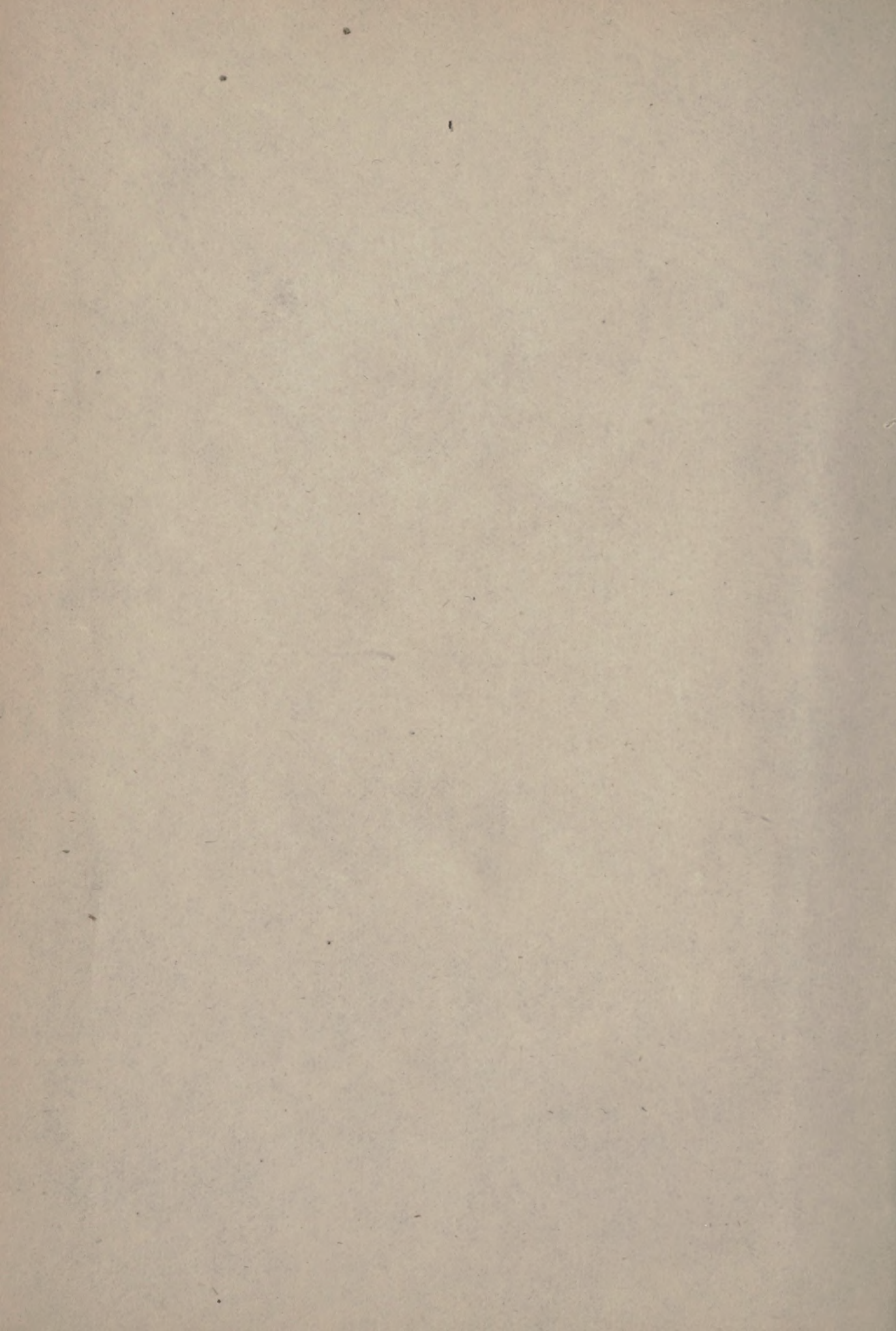
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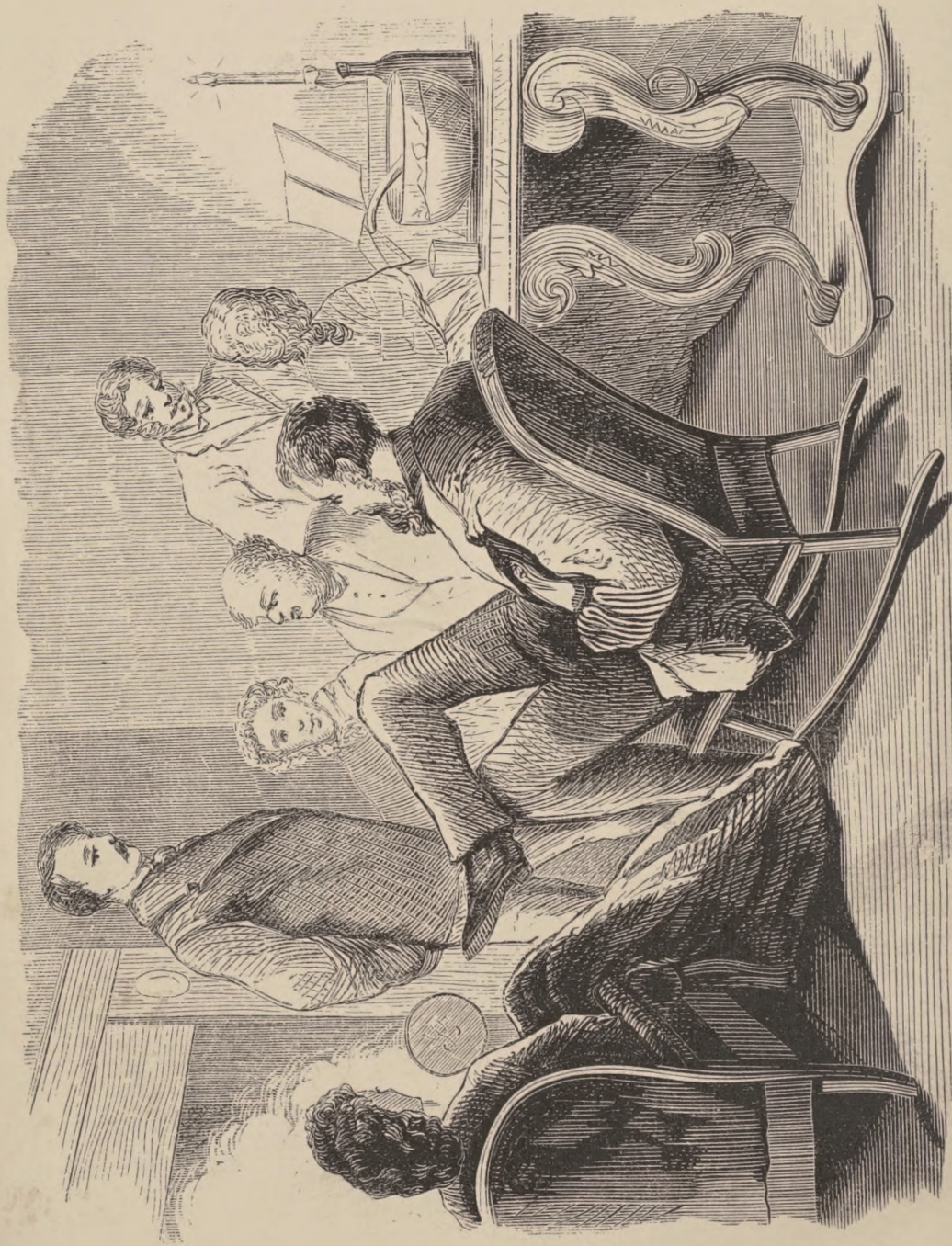
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“Story I have none, Blythe, but I will give you a Christmas experience.”

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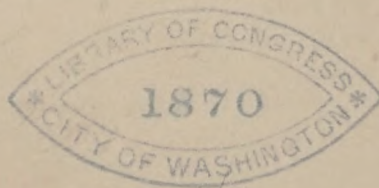
CROSS PURPOSES.

A CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE IN
SEVEN STAGES.

Thomas
Comedy
BY
T. C. DE LEON,

AUTHOR OF "FOUR YEARS IN REBEL CAPITALS," "PLUCK, A
COMEDY," & C. ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY W. B. MYERS.



PHILADELPHIA
J. B. LIPPINCOTT & CO.

1871.

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CROSS PURPOSES.

PROLOGUE.

CHRISTMAS night of 1869.

Without, the wind howls dismally round the gables of the old homestead. Ever and anon it rises into a wild shriek that makes the sturdy timbers of "Shadynook" tremble as if in fear, and sends the sashes rattling against each other like the teeth of a wanderer belated in the blast. Light snow-flakes flutter upon and whisper softly against the broad panes, clinging to them as if to urge messages of pity for storm and stress without; then dissolving, as if in tears, and dropping helplessly away, as a rougher voice of the wind rises over them and drowns their soft accents in the sharp rattle of icicles borne on its breath.

Within, mellow wax-light from a dozen old-time sconces floods, soft and warm, the antique furniture, heavy curtains and festoons of glossy green, through which rich red berries gleam. Far back in the capacious hearth roars and splutters a veritable Yule-log, sending forked tongues of lambent flame up the broad chimney, with message of defiance from the Fire King to the Storm Fiend shrieking in baffled wrath around its tall tops.

The genial glow creeps into the farthest recess of the long parlor, where a gentle-looking blonde sits at the quaint-carved piano, and with delicately emphasized touch makes it speak feelingly the sweet thoughts of the "Moonlight Sonata." Over the piano courteously bends a tall, bearded man, while near by a boy of ten turns over the leaves of an album, occasionally lifting a pair of eyes wonderfully bright and roguish, yet wistful in the moist depth of their blackness.

On a sofa by the chimney sits a very prim and very aged lady, every pucker in her black satin dress and in her sallow face, every ruffle

on her high, starched cap, speaking the one word, "Unmated!" But the warmth of Christmas-tide seems to thaw even her ice, and she melts into a grim smile at some joke a portly and dignified gentleman whispers into the trumpet she holds to her ear. And that gentleman has the contentment only brought by an honest heart, a good digestion and a Christmas dinner! Before the fire, with outstretched feet, and sitting all over a small rocking-chair, is a ruddy, jolly and most contented-seeming specimen of the "bold soldier boy," the double bars upon his shoulder-straps denoting ten years of meritorious pay-drawing that made him captain in the staff.

— This unworthy narrator stands with his back to the fire listening to the low tones of a very sweet, rich voice. That voice has in it soft echoes of the long ago; and the sloe-black eyes raised to mine dance in contagious merriment as it frames the words:

"Eleven years to-night!"

The sonata ceases; the handsome group from the piano join us, and the little boy, stealing his

hand into that of my interlocutor, raises to hers the pair of eyes that are her own in miniature.

“Mamma,” he says, “can I hear a Christmas story before Netta takes me to bed?”

She looks at me; there is a world of eloquence in the silent inquiry of those glorious eyes, but the rich voice only murmurs, as they seek the carpet,

“*You* can tell him one?”

A flood of recollection sweeps over my mind—a flood of color over my cheek—at the emphasis upon the pronoun. I am sure I blush; I believe I sigh. Stepping to the table, I cover my confusion and my vest with a ladle of egg-nogg as I mutter to myself, “Eleven years to-night!” Then I resume my stand with my back to the fire, and say cheerily:

“Story have I none, Blythe, but I will give you a Christmas experience.”

And I do it.



I.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

COME along, old boy! I've fixed it at last."

Thus cried Lieutenant Tom Jones, U. S. A., bounding into my room in his usual hop-skip-and-jump style, and causing thereby a deep gash in both the chins reflected in the cracked shaving-glass of my bachelor lodgings.

"I rather think you have," I responded, half-savagely, as I mopped my bleeding feature with a piece of blotting-paper—"I rather think you have; but what in the world have you fixed, besides my chin?"

"Oh, bother your bleeding! Just listen: I've borrowed the major's gray and the surgeon's 'Jalap,' done Uncle Bob out of his double sleigh, and we'll drive over to Shadynook and

spend Christmas. Hurrah!" And Lieutenant Tom Jones, U. S. Boomerangs, spun round my room as if he had just been promoted to the first corps of the Black Crook. I looked at him until he regained a *pose* on the back of my arm-chair, with his feet on the cushion. Then I said gravely—the tone was meant to convey the most crushing sarcasm—

“Slicer’s Jalap and the major’s gray?”

“Certainly—why not?”

“Why not? Because, firstly, the gray never was in traces in his life; secondly, because the sorrel never would go in double harness, you know.”

“Yes, I know. But, then, they’re both old enough to begin; so come, old fellow, pack your traps. I’ll give the ponies a whirl down the road to keep ’em quiet and use ’em to the bells. Hurry; I’ll be back before you say ‘Jack Robinson!’”

I stared at my friend to see if he was really in earnest before I replied:

“Tom Jones, do I look like a lunatic? Have you any reason to justify believing me a fit sub-

ject for the padded room? My dear boy," I added, gently, "my neck is far too valuable to my country to risk breaking it for the sake of breaking old Slicer's sorrel and your uncle's sleigh."

"Why, they're at the door now—just look at 'em," responded the lieutenant, walking to the window. "They're as quiet as a pair of lambs. The sorrel has only one leg over the pole, and the sergeant and my orderly can hold the gray's head nearly still! Come! throw some things into a valise and be ready by the time I get back."

I threw myself on the sofa and stretched out my comfortable slippers to the sea-coal fire by way of reply.

"Can't do it, Tom. I'm too valuable a member of society to think of suicide at present."

"Nonsense! We'll have no end of a jolly time at Belton's—raise the neighborhood—skate on the pond—make floods of eggnogg—shock the old 'un—and have a glorious German to wind up."

I shook my head.

“Can’t do it, T. Jones. Even did I want to ruin my life-insurance people, I’ve engagements at home I cannot break;” and I looked very important as I dwelt on this announcement. “You see I lead the choir for their Christmas practice to-night; I’ve been pledged for a month for my Xmas dinner at the mayor’s; and I—ahem—I skate Miss Bettie on the pond this after—”

“Oh what a head I have!” Tom broke in. “Didn’t I mention that? Uncle Bob says Bet’s to go with us, and she says you must be sure to come. And mind, you are to tell him the horses are dog quiet. Bet swears he’d never believe me.”

Miss Bettie was going!

Before that young lieutenant had half finished his sentence, I was at the window gazing at those horses with an interest no quadrupeds ever possessed for me before. The sorrel had fallen in his effort to get his leg back over the pole, the grizzly old sergeant was sitting composedly on his head, blowing huge clouds from

his pipe, while the orderly unbuckled the traces. The gray amused himself meanwhile by snapping viciously at the boy who held him, and with every snap he made a vain lunge with his heels at the orderly's fatigue cap, the latter dodging beautifully as ever did a practiced sparrer before a big bruiser. The view was not encouraging. They certainly were hardly the pair to risk a young lady's—or my own—neck with, even though Tom was famous throughout his corps as a perfect Rarey.

“By George!” I half soliloquized; “I don't think she'd be safe behind those devils.”

“Bosh! With *me* driving? Only the bells tease them a little for the moment. One turn down the road, and I'll bring them back like a pair of sheep.”

“But I hardly think—”

“And I certainly *know*. Come! Bet's crazy to go, and says she depends on you to persuade Uncle Bob the horses are quiet.”

“Miss Bettie does?” I hesitated. There was a lump in my throat and a singing in my ears; I was deucedly afraid of the mad beasts myself;

but then *she* wanted to go, so I added: "Well, perhaps, after all, they may be a little quieter soon. And, Tom, you do—ah—*really* think them safe?"

"Certainly I do, and Bet does too. *She's* not a bit afraid." That decided me.

"Tom Jones"—I spoke with deep solemnity. I knew that moment what they felt who saw the tumbril ready to bear them to the hungry knife of the First Revolution—"Tom Jones, I will go, of course. But, Tom, pray do not use that horrid abbreviation of your cousin's name. There are some subjects too sacred for the profanation of slangy condensation; and your cousin's name is—"

"Bully! You'll go, then?" interrupted the irrepressible Boomerang. "I'll wheel 'em round the block and bring 'em in cool, you—*Bet.*"

He bounded down the stairs, sprang into the sleigh, seized the reins, and, as the men jumped from the horses' heads, was off with a flurry of snow and a hurrah from the crowd.

I am not a dab at the classics, so I will not

say how, having plunged like Curtius into this gaping sleigh-ride, I now sat like Marius, amid the ruins of my wardrobe. But I did tumble all its contents into the middle of the floor and then sat among them, hopeless of cramming into my small valise half enough for this all-important Xmas visit. But *she* wanted to go! I was to risk my neck for her sake—by *her* side. Delicious thought! So just as the bells again jingled at the door, I jumped upon my distended portmanteau, sprung the lock, and answered Tom with a yell as wild as his own.

Now, perhaps I should explain that Tom Jones and I had always been chums. Residents of the same village and children of intimate friends, we had thumbed the same algebra, robbed the same orchards and been flogged by the same pedagogue. In fact, we had never been two weeks apart until his appointment to West Point, five years before, had separated us. Tom's persevering industry in running bounds to "Cozzens," and his assiduous course of "Benny Havens," had scarcely been thor-

oughly rewarded; for his graduation—third in his class counting from the bottom—made him a brevet second lieutenant in U. S. Boomerangs. It had found me a dignified but patient lawyer in the incipient metropolis of Picketon. Happy chance had thrown Tom at the arsenal near by, and had introduced his chosen friend to the family circle of his Uncle Blythe.

There I soon became *ami de maison*. Mayor Blythe—he was the revered chief magistrate of Picketon—was a brother lawyer, and a man of high social and literary renown. He had a capitally chosen library, a warm heart, a celebrated cook and a rare assortment of *such* wines! And then—hem!—like Jephthah of old, he had “one fair daughter and no more.”

But such a daughter!

Bettie Blythe was just turned of nineteen, and the most perfect mould of female form divine. Of medium height, just plump enough for perfection of rounded outline, and with the tiniest models of feet and hands that ever fell to the lot of woman, her face was still her chiefest charm. Not regularly beautiful, with scarce a

feature in it that would have been pronounced fine under critical analysis, there was yet an indescribable witchery in that face, or in the character reflected by it, that bound me hand and foot from the first week I knew her. Those rich, dark oval lines, with heavy bands of glossy hair, seemed to command, rather than ask, a second look. And who could look twice and forget?

“There was a merry devil in her eye”—

large, languid and black as sloe—that drew a timid man’s heart right up into his throat and kept it kicking there with forty-horse power. And then the face was but an index of the sprightly but sound and well-stored mind her father had sedulously cultivated during a long widowerhood. And the steady, tender gleam that sometimes replaced the mischievous twinkle in those eyes could only have been drawn from the well-spring of a pure heart.

With the first month of our acquaintance, I began to believe I cared for Bettie Blythe; with the second, I believed I loved her; and

with the third, I knew it for a certainty. On the fourth month I had told her I adored her wildly; and for three subsequent ones had come, again and again, to the very threshold of a repetition. Gentle and womanly, she had at first told me gravely—the rest of the face demure, while the eyes danced a very witches' dance to the tune of suppressed merriment—that, though we were very excellent friends, we were still almost strangers. I could only acknowledge the truth of what she said, so I prayed for forgiveness and for hope. She gave the pardon, the pardon gave the hope, and I wandered on in a fool's paradise. But though we became better and better friends, though she let me meander unchecked through the most extensive fields of rhapsody and lay the tallest flowers of sentiment at her feet, yet the first outright word I spoke carried up the taper forefinger in arch warning, and the ripe lips formed the one word, "Remember!"

I could not believe Bettie Blythe was flirting with me. There was something too genuine, too womanly, about her whole being for that.

She could never stoop, I said to myself for comfort, to a little triumph in the misery of the heart she knew to be hers in all honesty and ardor. No! Either she was trying to make a real "friend" of me, or—delicious idea!—she was beginning to love me without admitting it to herself. I was willing to take the chances of the first so long as I saw a possibility of the second. And besides, either gave me so much of her delightful society.

Though no spoken word ever passed between us on the subject, there was yet that "mute converse of kindred souls," and Tom Jones apparently sympathized with me most completely. Bettie and he were fast friends, and Mayor Blythe permitted her to go anywhere under protection of "Cousin Tom," in whom he placed unbounded confidence. During the burning days of that August, many a charming pic-nic had we in the grand old woods about Piketon; in the mellow evenings of autumn many a never-to-be-forgotten sail on the little mirror of a lake. And what teas were those on the old verandah, with the soft breeze sigh-

ing through the vines in sympathy with the beatings of my heart, and the light just undecided enough for me to imagine any expression in her face that best suited my ardent longings! Later, when the early snows began to fall, how merry were those sleigh-rides in the mayor's sober family sleigh, drawn by the sober family horse, Tom always acting Jehu! And when the icier breath of winter blew over the little lake, sheeting it with a surface glossy smooth, I had tenderly strapped the tiny skate-thong round that ravishingly-turned ankle—had held the taper fingers in mine as we glided in swift circles over its cold bosom. As I have said, Tom was always with us on these jaunts; but we were a *partie carrée* and mindful of the philosophy as to what constitutes "company" and what "a crowd."

Anna Belton was ever Tom's companion. A quiet, fair-haired, sensitive mouse of a blonde, she was the direct antipode in all things of her sworn ally, Bettie, under whose fostering protection she would nestle confidingly as though no harm could reach her there. She was sole

heiress, and sole companion at her splendid residence, "Shadynook," of a very deaf but Argus-eyed grand-aunt. Unmated herself for the full allotment of the human span, the senior Miss Belton had small confidence in the taste or honor of the sterner sex. She jealously watched the every movement of her niece, religiously believing that each man who set his eye upon her fragile form used it but as a medium through which to cast unholy glances at the estate—some ten miles back of Piketon—whose exponent she was. But the home of the spinster had no great charms for her heiress unless brightened by the presence of her stronger friend and ally; so, when Bettie could not be spared from her household gods, it was great comfort to quiet little Anna to sit under these also, and to stay there meekly so long as Bettie could alternately cajole or coerce the deaf spinster into permitting. But that ancient and unwinking Cerberus had carefully reconnoitred the surroundings of the mayoralty. She had long since concluded that I was the property of the lady of the house, and Tom, being only a

piece of live furniture, like the cat, was not to be counted. So little Anna's last visit had been allowed to run into months. She could skate well, for all her fragility, and her taste and touch in music were both delicate but decided. So, after all, we made her useful, though I felt compunctious twinges when I reflected how heavy on hand she must be to poor Tom; for, besides all other reasons, it was an understood thing among us that Miss Belton was engaged. If not formally contracted to him, she was so far committed to a certain Mr. Goldwin as to make that consummation a mere matter of time. Not a very enticing person was Mr. Goldwin, sixty in years and money-grub in nature, but—as the senior Miss Belton was wont to say grimly—if not a brilliant man, he was at least a safe one. Twenty thousand a year was his allotment of this world's goods, and the very soul of the spinster swelled within her when she reflected what that would do for “Shady-nook.”

Yielding in all things, the white mouse appeared to accept her fate in this with perfect

composure, but she shrunk with peculiar sensitiveness from any allusion to it by one of us. So, of course, none ever was made; but I—and I was sure Tom as well—looked upon her as one of the least interesting of the victims to the Moloch of *convénance*. Hence, I fully appreciated the unselfish friendship that caused him to become a martyr to her stupidity, that I might be left *tête-à-tête* with his glorious cousin. One night when our bachelor pipes—or punch—had been stronger than usual, I said words to that effect. Tom's rejoinder was characteristic. He thrust his tongue into his cheek, shut one eye very slowly, and nicking my glass with his, said, "Here's good luck, and bad 'cess to old Goldwin!"

Verily, we need never leave our own circle for evidences of the mysteries of Nature's complex mechanism, and what very odd errors we make in our estimate of them sometimes!

At length its heiress had been imperatively called back to "Shadynook." The unmated Argus would have her return for its Xmas dismalness, and when that spinster foot was

once put down, there it stayed. Exacting the promise of a speedy visit from Bettie, before Xmas if possible, and indulging in many mysterious whispers and a perfect fusilade of kisses that set me on pins and needles of envy, the white-mousey one wept herself into her sleigh and faded out into the snowy avenue.

Tom and I, as members of Bettie's personal staff, had, of course, been included in the invitation to "Shadynook," but no time was decided in our council, and weeks rolled by with no definite plans about it. Happy weeks they were to me—full of sunshine, with only such flecks of shadow as made me enjoy the more. I basked in the smiles of the only woman I had ever really cared for, and, whether they were all for me or not, I was inanely happy,

"For there's nothing half so sweet in life
As Love's young dream."





II.

OVER THE SNOW.

HOLIDAY week had set in heavy and threatening. It had opened with a promise of snow, and had closed with its verification so fast and furious that by Christmas eve the whole country for miles around Piketon was wrapped in one spotless and unbroken mantle. The sleighing was perfect. Never in the memory of that much-quoted oldest authority in Piketon had it been so good. Our metropolis was alive with excitement—like the classic city of Stoke-Pogis, it was “agitated to its centre.” The sudden furore for sleighing, added to the inevitable buzz of holiday preparation, drove the usually quiet population into a fever of action. Every available sleigh, however old, was rooted from its hiding-place;

horses accustomed only to the plough and the market-wagon pricked up their ears to the unwonted *hi-g' lang!* of excited drivers, and even crockery-crates and dry-goods boxes were put upon extemporized runners.

All Picketon, swathed in furs or blankets, was bundled into something that would slide; the road to the "Bull's Eye"—the sedate drovers' tavern five miles out—was resonant with the merry music of their bells and the rollicking laughter of their occupants, while its primitive bar-room and sanded parlor were alike crowded from nipping morn to frosty eve.

And how delicious is a sleigh-ride when all surroundings are propitious! Who that has ever wintered in a snow country but has a store of ready recollections that spring up at the first sound of the bells? Be he a serious, well-rounded bachelor of fifty, their lively jar shakes the cumulate dust from still crevices of memory, and long-slumbering reminiscences, unrolling themselves like marmots in the spring, crawl out to bask in the sunlight of that long ago. Perhaps they find the gleam but a deceptive

one now, and, after blinking at the present for a while, creep back again and curl themselves up for a longer nap.

No acrid and hopeless spinster walking regretfully on the shadowy side of maidenhood but straightens her back, drops her shoulders and smoothes out her wrinkles, as the music of the bells plays variations on a half-forgotten theme of cosy sleigh and comfortable wrappers, all winding up with a crashing *crescendo* of hot oysters and merry reel.

And to those young hearts, susceptible to frolic as to sentiment and throbbing for ever-changing excitement, what a delicious bound it sends!

“Oh the bells, sleighing bells,

What a world of merriment their melody foretells!”

Yes, sleighing *is* glorious. 'Tis the next best thing to flying to sit in the light strong cutter and glide over the smooth surface without noise or jar, seeming scarce to touch it. Your glossy black, catching the lively inspiration of his bells, shakes his head in huge frolic,

stretches out afresh and spurns the snow in lighter wreaths from his ever-quickenings heels. Now for a brush! See that yellow jumper just ahead. *Hu-y-a-ah!* and the reins tighten, the clean head goes straighter out, the snow-wreaths fly higher still behind the strong hoofs. We are off! We close the gap—the yellow sleigh gains once more—a length; two! Once more we close, and fly along neck and neck! How the bells peal and shriek! how the horses race now as if for their own honor! How the clear, keen wind whistles past the fur-tipped ears, exhilarating like huge bumpers of champagne, as we fly along side by side for three hundred yards! Just ahead looms a huge “pung” loaded down and creeping over the snow. Now is the time; now or never! Straighten back, brace knee! Down comes the lithe lash over the black’s flanks, and what a spurt we have! The brown mare strains every muscle; her driver lays flat back on the ribbons—now he plies his whip like mad! He laps us again; for a hundred yards you could cover them both with a blanket! once more we forge a length

ahead. We near the pung—we gain a length—two. *Hu-ya-a-ah!* and the brown is in the air! We feel her hot breath on our necks; we just graze the pung, fearfully close, and wind in just before her!

Oh, that *was* glorious!

And if anything can add to the fun, it is to have a particular somebody tucked in beside one, with a pair of bright eyes that dance to the merry music of the rich laugh; with a tiny hand that rests, in pretty fright, on the tense arm that guides the black a thought too near the scrapers of the yellow sleigh. And it is a problem of easy solution: given, a neat cutter and a fast horse, to find any unknown quantity of tender femininity alongside.

But haven't I forgotten my story?

I had just sprung the lock of my valise and wiped from my brow the drops that haste brought there even that bitter day, when Jones' *tally-ho!* rang through the frosty street. Giving a final caress to the *mouche* on the wounded chin reflected by my parting glance at the mirror, I rushed down with my baggage.

Tom sat with the reins twisted round his heavy gauntlets, beaming and triumphant, and his moustache one solid cake of ice. The horses stood stock still, covered with rapidly freezing foam, and blowing out volumes of mist that formed in delicate frostwork around their nostrils.

“What did I tell you? Look at the kittens,” was the driver’s salute; and as if to corroborate it, the gray mare made a terrific lunge forward, while “Jalap” stood straight up and pawed the air.

“So-ho! steady, boys!” and the lieutenant braced himself hard against the gray, while the flexible wrist brought the long lash over the sorrel’s neck. “So, there! steady now. Bundle in quick now, old boy, while they are quiet.”

In bumped my valise, a signal for the brutes to execute another war-dance. Over the back seat I tumbled, and, as two pairs of heels threw a blinding shower of snow and icicles into my eyes and down my back, I went headforemost into the folds of the buffalo. Before the con-

glomerate mass of valise and man was righted, we were off up the road in a full run, the sleigh jumping along like a football and Tom plying his whip like mad, keeping them at a full run while he yet had them well in hand.

“W-what do y-ou me-mean?” I gasped, bumping about the back seat in huge discomfort, as the biting wind, rushing down my throat with the force of a norther, nearly strangled me. “Wh-hy don’t you st-opp-’m?”

“All right, my boy,” Tom answered cheerily through his set teeth; and he braced every muscle afresh while the cruel lash descended on the flagging horses. “All right! you know I must bring ’em in quiet for Uncle Bob to see. So, lads, so-o-o! now steady.” One long sway of his broad back brought them down to a canter, then into a swinging trot, and turning into the mayor’s lane, we drew up at the door.

“There! hold the ribbons! I won’t be gone a second. Bet’s ready, I know;” and forcing the reins into my reluctant hands, Tom sprang out and disappeared in the doorway.

Now, after all my tirade about racing and sleighing and such stuff, one might reasonably suppose me a very Phaeton, or at least a Hiram Woodruff. But I was always strong in theories and—in confidence: that stuff was all talk—pure imagination. Practically, I never was the least bit horsey in my tastes, and always hated to drive unless I knew my beast to be perfectly harmless. In fact, I ever felt a tingle of brotherly sympathy for that bard of Cockaigne who sang—

“There’s something in a horse

That I can always *honor*, but never can *endorse*.”

Neither was I ambitious of the fate of Phaeton; so, keeping one eye fixed on the gray’s ears and the other on the sorrel’s heels, I went hand over hand up the taut reins until I felt safe to straddle the front seat, and finally brace myself against the dasher. The gray still kept his head out and bore steadily on the bit, but the sorrel seemed to have had enough go in the late scamper, and pulled dead against him. Congratulating myself that the doctor’s

horse acted as a counter-irritant on the drawing propensities of his mate, I began to be less entirely miserable in my new position. I tucked the buffalo carefully round my legs, and by the time Miss Bettie's laugh rang out from the doorway, I actually plucked up spirit to turn one eye upon her. But the other was fixed on the gray's ears like the optic of the Ancient Mariner, even while I nodded with a dismal affectation of jollity. And Mayor Blythe was saying:

"And you're quite sure they are safe, are you?"

"Gentle as lambs, sir, as far as I know," Tom answered, simply. "But ask the man that handles 'em. *He* drove them from the stable." Had that young officer been studying the "Ready Liar, or Perjurer's Companion"?

"Why, you can see they are, papa dear. I could drive them myself; couldn't I?" and Miss Bettie's eyes were turned on me.

When Tom had spoken, my inmost soul was torn with a burning desire to do my duty, to throw myself upon the mayor's breast and pour

out my passionate belief that it was felony, willful murder, suicide, to go! Now, had the reply jeopardized my immortal part for all eternity, I could not have answered that gurgling voice, thrilling through me like rich Burgundy, otherwise than by saying:

“Gentle as kittens, Miss Bettie; hardly fresh even, Mr. Blythe.” And I chuckled with rueful hilarity. Then that infernal gray, as if in judgment, nearly took my shoulder out of the socket.

“I knew they were, papa dear. *He* would never risk me with them else; and, you see, *he* is driving.” I was drunken, besotted, wild with the *haschish* of that emphasized pronoun. Those wondrous eyes shot me a glance of thanks; the tiny hands clapped in glee, and closing on each side the gray whiskers, drew the old man’s face down to the ripe lips. A clicking kiss, seemingly all around me in the sharp air, drove me perfectly drunk with envy. I was wild enough to seize the whip Tom had thrown carelessly on the back seat; but even in the madness of that supreme moment I had

method enough left to keep it far back out of the gray's sight.

"How impatient he looks, tucked up in his driver's perch!" Tom said, airily, to his uncle. "If the horses were only half as much so, we might have a lively ride."

I saw, out of the far corner of mine, Mr. Blythe's eyes travel rather hesitatingly over the tense muscles of the gray. Oh how my soul went out in wild yearning that he might insist on that beast being exchanged for his own easy-going horse! But just then the perverse brute of a sorrel stood stock still and hid the off-horse from his scrutiny. My hope went from out of me, and the blackness of despair settled down over me and that demon team.

"Well, well; you must be careful of your off-horse—"

"Of course he will, papa. And now, good-bye. Tom says we mustn't keep them standing longer in the cold."

In thumped Miss Bettie's bonnet-box, and both horses answered the shock with a simultaneous thrill; but I braced my back, and, though

my legs nearly went through the dasher, managed to keep that accursed gray still enough for Tom's officious leavetaking to hide it from his uncle.

"Oh yes, Uncle Bob, we'll be very careful and drive very slowly. Go on, old fellow; don't wait a second for me." And lifting Miss Bettie to her seat, Tom bounded over the scrapers like a cat. "Go on! Why in the devil's name don't you?" he whispered to me, pretending to arrange the robes. Then he called his uncle's attention to the new furs, and dug his elbow into my back.

Don't wait a second for me!

Ye gods! Did the insane wretch mean *me* to drive in reality? Was *I* to guide that chained thunderbolt and that kicking demon before me? Yes; Tom Jones evidently meant that. He had gone suddenly mad, beyond a doubt; but I was in for it, and what man dared I must. I took a long breath, let the whip fall well back out of the gray's sight, and, bracing my every muscle firmly, uttered the mystic monosyllable, "G'lang!"

It cut like a knife through the clear atmosphere, and the keen echo almost divided my tympana. The sorrel heard. He stretched himself, gathered and made a merry plunge forward; but that perverse brute of a gray only stuck his forelegs in the snow and sat down like a dog. Luckily, Miss Bettie managed to hold her father by such a string of prattle he noticed none of these circus-like proceedings.

“Mind, papa! don’t forget the flannel for old Mammy Watts; and be sure to send the pickles to Bowser; and have the presents on the Christmas tree, just as if I was at home—that’s a dear papa. And oh, be sure that Liza does the turkey to a turn for dinner to-morrow!”

“That was to have been your dinner,” the old gentleman said, turning to me. “That pleasure I must defer to please this small puss with her whims.”

The mayor seemed to me a great distance off. His words came to me through a sound in my ears like the boom of the sea, for that cursed gray still sat like a circus-horse and the sorrel pulled till his nose almost touched the snow.

“And oh, papa!” cried Miss Bettie with a timely little scream of recollection, “now don’t forget the red wrapper for old Patience—that’s a dear!”

“Give that gray devil the whip,” Jones growled to me in a savage whisper, rounded off with something very like an oath. “You’ll have all the fat in the fire with such — driving.”

Give him the whip!

I thought before Tom Jones of the Boomerangs had gone crazy. Now I knew, like all maniacs, he believed me as stark, staring mad as he was.

“And, papa dear, don’t forget the brandy peaches for Dr. Lindsay—*your* present, remember,” ran on that dear voice. Then it punctured through all my fear with the words, “Now *do* go on, *please*.”

Whether the electric spark that thrilled through me at that whisper ran down the reins and magnetized the gray, I never knew. Somehow we were in the road, the dasher full of snow, and that devil’s team going at a wild



“Tom had pulled off his gauntlet, and she—yes, she was chafing his purple, ugly hand between two bewitching fur gloves!”

stroke that sent acute agony to the marrow of my every bone.

“Splendid! Perfect! Bravo!” shouted Tom from the back seat. “Your start was a picture; and that run into the drift and barking the pear tree don’t count, as the bend hid them from Uncle Bob.”

I thought madly I heard a gurgling sound of female laughter. I was wrong, though, for that second she said to me,

“You do drive splendidly, indeed. And how good of you to rest Tom’s arms! Poor Tom! why, how the reins have cut your hands!”

“My arm is stiff as a poker, Bet. Ah, baby, that’s delicious!”

Had I been driving the horses of the Sun, with the pit of Acheron gaping before me, I must have turned at that exclamation. There was misery in my spine and torture in my legs, but I did turn a little. Tom had pulled off his gauntlet, and she—yes, she was chafing his purple, ugly hand between two bewitching fur gloves!

“See what a good cousin I am!” The black

eyes danced before me, and once more the musical laugh trilled out beautiful and birdlike. With agony in my back and bitterness in my soul, I tried to echo it, but the hollow mockery ended in a ghastly groan as the brutes gave an extra plunge that nearly carried me over the dasher.

The next twenty minutes were a nightmare. I hold in memory a vague jumble of blinding sunlight on the snow; a whirling rush of trees and houses on the hill-sides; a racking torment in back, knees and arms; a whizzing *whoo* of wind in my half-frozen ears. Twice I essayed to look around at the couple behind me, but the *commandante* in "Don Juan" was not more rigid than those strained leathers held me, while the molten fire rushing down my spine refused to let me bend my neck. I felt my hands must soon come off—my elbows and shoulder-blades pull clear from their sockets; but still I held on, madly, wildly, in a sort of dreadful trance, for those twenty minutes. Then remembrance vaguely paints a roadside inn; a collection of sleighs and men running

into the road and waving their hands; then a crash, a cutter flying wildly aside and a man in a somersault. Last came a grinding jar, and I awoke from my nightmare, half lying between Tom and his cousin on the back seat, the horses neck deep in a snow-drift and rough-coated men running for their heads.

“Splendid, by jingo!” yelled Tom to me as, hastily extricating himself from the buffalo, he ran to a man floundering in the road. “You’re not hurt, I hope? I’m deuced sorry for the foul, but young horses—hard mouths—couldn’t help it. Beasts all right, I see. Come in and have something to drink.”

I drew a long, deep, gasping breath. I tried to spring, but could only crawl, over the scraper, and helped Miss Bettie into the road. We were at the “Bull’s Eye” tavern, five good miles from Piketon!

“Awkward fellow that,” I said, very cheerily, all things considered. I was hugely elated at being once more on *terra firma*, notwithstanding strong proclivities displayed by my legs for shutting up like jackknives. And I could

scarcely resist pulling on the little white hand in mine, as though Miss Bettie were the gray. "Awkward fellow! Singular he couldn't take care of his trap when he saw me coming. But some people never will learn to drive."

"*Never!*" meekly responded the little lady; but the eyes that met mine for a single second literally played in flashes of luminous merriment. What could she mean?





III.

THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER.

I AM confident I am not at all of a jealous turn. *Othello* was ever my pet aversion among the creations of the "divine William," and he of the green eyes might have made his meat for ever before he should have fed on me. But then some things are too plain not to be seen by the plainest of men.

It soon became perfectly palpable that there was some strange understanding between Tom and his cousin. It was very odd, too. I never had such suspicion before, but now, clear as daylight, it appeared, and demanded recognition. There was no doubting it: there *was* an understanding. It was evidently an arrangement to make me drive at the risk of all our

necks that he might sit by her. That his whine about his hands was all stuff was proven by the confidential, smothered talk they had kept up all the way, and by the meaning glances they exchanged even now. Yes, I could see it all now as plain as day—see it by his ever-expressive gesture, by his tender devotion as he led her into the little parlor of the tavern. Yes! there *was* an understanding between those two too plain to be mistaken; and then—But I know I can understand some things as well as the next man! Had my eyes been blindfold heretofore? Had I been, like *Ford* in the “Merry Wives,” *a secure ass?*

Tom pacified the overturned one, and gave him hot flip. Then, to show his forgiveness, the overturned insisted on our having hot flip with him, by which time the fussy landlady appeared and beckoned mysteriously to Tom. I have confidence enough in myself to believe that, even then, I was not an eavesdropper, but I could not help hearing, “we might manage to send a boy on horseback,” and that “the dear young lady appeared so anxious and



“Perdition! What a sight was there!”

worrit in mind," at which Tom disappeared abruptly. What the deuce did it all mean? More mystery; so I took more hot flip with him of the tumble. After a time I heard Tom's voice in the parlor again. I know not why, but I gulped my flip scalding hot, and strode toward the sound.

Perdition! What a sight was there! Miss Blythe stood by the roaring grate; her hood had fallen back upon her sloping shoulders, one perfect little foot resting in graceful negligence upon the fender. Her eyes, filled with tears, were lifted pleadingly to Tom's, and her hands, yes, *both* her hands, clasped his shoulder so lovingly my teeth ground together before I heard her say,

"Right or wrong, Tom dear, I would do twice as much for you!" The room seemed going round with me. By heaven! I would that very moment— No, I wouldn't, either. What right had I to interfere?—and they didn't even see me, so engrossed were they with each other. So I fled in my wrath and took more hot flip with the overturned, and then the over-

turned took more hot flip with me. Had that yellow tippie been the hemlock potion, I would have drained it just as eagerly, perhaps.

“Waiting, old boy!” And the perfidious friend’s hand was on my shoulder. Had Lieutenant Thomas Jones, U. S. Boomerangs, ever seen Iago, in his celebrated *rôle* of *Edwin Forrest*, glare superlatively at some supernumerary *Cassio*, then would that officer have understood the look with which I turned upon him. He had never seen the great artist in his great part, however, for he only looked very contented and very happy as he said,

“I think I wouldn’t drink any more flip if I were you,” and we were out on the snow again. “I’ll spell you at the reins a bit,” he added, with another queer look at me. “Your arms must be tired, and I’m fresh as a lark again. Are you sure you’re all right there, Bet?”

There was a tender intonation in the question that made me feel vicious, but the softened gurgle of her, “Yes, *dear* Cousin Tom,” set my very soul on fire.

Miss Blythe tucked the buffalo away, and made room for me on the back seat. Looking straight across country, and utterly ignoring her gesture, I clambered up beside my rival and tugged stolidly at the buffalo.

“All right, boys! Let go their heads—now!”

With a lurch and a swing we were off again. Once more we skimmed over hill and meadow; once more the wind whistled merrily past us, and our bells chased it in a musical peal. But the sunlight on the snow looked black to me now; the bells only tolled a requiem for my dead hopes, and the wind, in its backward rush, only hissed, “She *loves* him! She loves *him!*”

Though the horses were freshened by their rest and pulled like steam tugs, Tom still found a way to turn and keep up a running talk with his cousin. But as he turned on the side away from me, and the words were swept back on the wind, only a confused murmur and none of their sense reached me.

I don't imagine any tumbril passenger, tick-

eted through for the guillotine, ever jolted along more miserably than I did those six miles. That morning I had loved Tom Jones as a brother. I had worshiped the very ground on which his cousin's No. 13 slipper trod; I would have crawled on my knees to have her accept the heart that was hers in its every pulse! Now I hated that brevet second lieutenant with a mortal hate. I would sooner have mixed my heart in a hot flip, and proffered it to the bearded lip of the overturned, than have yielded it to the tenderest beseechings of the false, the perfidious, the shameless, Bettie Blythe.

All things, however, even tortures, have an end, and in course of time we reached "Shady-nook." The unmated mistress of the mansion was on the porch, in the primmest of caps and most blankety of shawls, as soon as our sleigh whirled into the circular drive. Miss Anna flew down the steps and twined herself around Miss Blythe, still implicated in the furs. They were wrapped in each other's arms I should calculate some twenty seconds—they seemed to

me as many minutes—and, as they uncoiled, I got the damaged remnant of a confidence. I distinctly caught the whispered words, “the *dearest* of fellows!” and “all fixed and ready,” from the perfidious lips of Miss Blythe. To me at that moment the Argus-eyed spinster, panned in immaculate cap and ditto virtue, seemed a pitiful fagot of weak precautions. I felt bitterly superior to her unworldliness, and thrilled with unholy satisfaction that under her so guarded roof was introduced a clandestine passion none dreamt of save myself.

As for Miss Anna, she seemed blonder and weaker and more white-mousey than ever in the reflection of the snow. I absolutely despised her as the symbol of fragility in her sex—as a phantom flower, without even the fibre, of womanhood. Tom seemed to share my feelings in this respect at least. He barely touched the tips of her fingers, and passed on to salute ancient Prudence in the porch. Who could wonder? The girl looked like bleached celery after the spice plant he had just left!

Dinner that day was a cheerful meal. The old lady sat grimly at the head of the table, with me on her right, Tom and his cousin opposite and the White Mouse at my side. Bettie, from wild exuberance of spirits, suddenly relapsed into deep quiet that was almost sadness. Tom, seeming frantically hungry and eating doggedly, said no word. Anna Belton never talked before her aunt, so the burden of conversation devolved on me. As I have said, the ancient unwedded was very deaf, and, like many deaf people, she had the special gift of yelling especially loud when she desired to be most confidential. Less for her convenience than to feed my new-born grudge, I enunciated most emphatically all I said to her, but at the guilty couple opposite.

I spoke most feelingly on the sin of deceiving doating parents—philosophically of the folly of impecunious marriages. This was a stirrup, and using it at once, the old lady mounted her hobby with agility surprising for her years, and jogged along till dessert. In common with every very crabbed spinster I ever met, she believed

herself specially *au fait* in the delicate intricacies of the married state. Had her threescore years and ten been passed with a succession of inhuman but rapidly-removed husbands, she could not have reposed more implicit confidence in her perfect knowledge of double infelicity. And however she might wander from it, she invariably came back to money as the sole pivot around which all happiness in married life revolved.

“Frightful indeed would it be,” was the peroration of her long lecture, “if young girls were permitted to choose for themselves without consulting the wisdom of their elders. What is the use of our experience, our sufferings, our martyrdom, if we may not point out to our children the true path to happiness?”

“What, indeed?” I assented in strident voice; and then I added as a spur, “Ah, how many a poor girl carves out for herself a miserable future by an inconsiderate choice and a hasty plunge into the dark gulf of married life!”

I looked full at Miss Blythe, who never colored at my words, nor even raised her eyes

from the pudding on her plate. As for Tom, he ate his in great, absent spoonfuls, and seemed to have joined Mrs. Jellyby in one of her rambles to Africa. But my shot was not wasted. It scattered, and one slug hit the spinster. "Dark gulf" was good, and she bridled up in unmated pride as she answered:

"How many, indeed! But I rejoice to believe that some husbands are so well regulated as to have the will of their head, both for their law and their delight." Here the old party raised her voice to the confidential pitch, somewhere at A above the line. "My own experience is a proof of my belief, for next month my niece will—"

Miss Belton turned scarlet, only to grow more white and limp than ever. I understood then that her engagement must have been arranged and affairs hastened since her return; but the allusion seemed peculiarly painful to her.

"Aunty! aunty!" she cried, rising, "shall we not order coffee in the parlor?"

As we rose from the table the old lady took my arm and led me to the post of honor, the

corner of her special sofa beside the great fireplace. The others grouped about the room, with the defiant purpose to be agreeable, but it was not written that the talk that night was to be pleasant to them. The aunt would give me, at her highest confidence pitch, the details of her strategy to surround Goldwin, the enemy, and of her campaign to crush incipient mutiny in the White Mouse contingent. That castigated branch would wince at each fresh sentence, while the conscious couple from Piketon quietly stole glances at each other and weakly strove to turn the right of our position. But I had taken a lesson from the team I had driven into the snow-bank that day. When the old lady's slackening pace gave symptoms of flagging, not the gray himself could have pulled more furiously forward than I; when she gave faint evidence of a bolt from the road, not sorrel Jalap could have pulled more sullenly backward. I felt vicious in that atmosphere of deception, as the beasts had in the cold air, and, reveling in a rhapsody of spite, I felt it delicious

to launch out stinging little sarcasms as they had their heels.

Coffee over, I became what would have been unendurable, only Tom and his lady-love seemed strangely unconscious of the force of what I said. When I was rather more spiteful than usual, my tone rather than the words made them look wonderingly at me with what I could not but feel a most criminal assumption of innocence. Finally, the hypocritical couple strolled to a portfolio of rare engravings; the White Mouse retreated behind the piano-top and played—very well, too—some of Mendelssohn's dreamy, moonlight-on-the-snow music. Still the grand-aunt droned her monotone about marriages, gave me minute narratives of all her family's in the past, and, when my jealous spite was rapidly yielding to sleepiness, came back to her pet theme of the White Mouse. I had gone through all the variations of the fact that she, yielding to the Ancient's will, had become contracted in formal engagement to the man of twenty thousand a year, but now I heard for the first time

that the marriage was to take place the week after Christmas!

“And there is serious reason, my dear sir, to outweigh all sentimental nonsense in Anna’s case. As you say, sir, so justly, there can be no happiness without an income—none, sir!” The old one laid her hand upon my arm; she was becoming so confidential she absolutely yelled, “What becomes of love and sentiment, and all that trash, I should like to know, when bakers’ and butchers’ bills begin to come in?”

“You are right, madam—a thousand times right!” I grew fervid; I glanced at Jones. The engravings had ceased to turn over now; his eyes were fixed full upon his cousin’s, and his lips moved, but inaudibly to me. His gesture, though, was strong and impassioned, and, even as I looked, those faces came very close together. At the moment his was turned from me, but hers assumed deep earnestness, the eyes filled and gazed beseechingly into his; then his hand pressed a moment the rose-tipped one that rested on the pictures.

God forgive me the bitterness that crept into

my heart then ; but it were hard to suffer more than I did at that glance. When I spoke my voice sounded, through the dead silence of the room, harsh and grating even to my own ears.

“Yes, it is more than madness, it is crime, for any man to drag a woman down to divide less than one could starve upon with decency.”

Tom had not one penny beyond his pay, and that stipend from the fostering government he was permitted to fight, bleed and die for amounted to nearly seventy dollars per month. I did not stop at the moment to consider that my income, from legal pursuits at the bar of Piketon, was an average of some sixty-five dollars less than his. But why should I? I could never have plead to the indictment as to any old man's daughter, as he and Othello might. But my shaft fell harmless. He did not even hear me, and, perdition ! the fellow-hand to the one he pressed came to the front and rested on top of his.

Meanwhile, the ancient gal by me grew more and more concentrated from my sympathy, and

of course more and more hopeless in her effort to whisper.

“It is a priceless treasure,” she screamed, “to have a child like mine; a little self-willed sometimes, perhaps, but combining affection with prudence in a remarkable degree. She will be a picture of perfect happiness after her marriage with Mr. Goldwin”—the moonlight sonata stealing from behind the piano-top was cut short in mid-bar—“but I fear, I fear”—the eyes of the old Argus peered over her specs in the direction from which I could not draw mine—“my old friend Blythe is very imprudent, very, indeed. Those cousins, sir, are too much together.”

They heard this time. Dame Eleanor Spear-
ing would have heard.

Tom looked up. His face wore that expression of mixed feeling and anxiety his broken conference had left; but yet the eyes that shot a glance at mine were full of arch amusement. As I dropped my gaze and crimsoned to my eartips, they again sought his cousin's. That oval face was demure even to primness. Its

expression never changed, as Tom muttered something of which I only caught "deaf as a beetle," and "expect her to be blind as a bat!" The expression never changed, but the black eyes glittered and danced in that madness of merriment I had never seen in those of any one else.

"Anna dear," she said, moving quietly to the piano, "it is very late, and we are keeping aunty up."

Then, as it were, she extracted the blonde from behind the instrument and moved toward us as we stood around the fire. We all said good-night, but apparently in very different mood, and certainly in very different manner. Tom was peculiarly demure, but there was an odd twinkle in his eye as he wished the spinster pleasant dreams; I felt an awkward consciousness that I had not acted too handsomely, and Bettie Blythe, with what I considered palpable effrontery, offered me her hand. Had I been the Ice Fiend, she would have frozen at the touch of my fingers; but she only smiled and kissed the Ancient. Finally, the White

Mouse clung about the withered neck of her relative — who remained in blissful ignorance of having taken the whole party into her confidence—with what appeared to me most unnecessary fervor.





IV.

ODD CONFIDENCES.

PRESSED my forehead close against the diamond pane of the old-fashioned chamber allotted to Tom and myself, and tried hard to think. But cold as the glass was, my brow grew hotter and hotter; my brain refused to grasp but one idea, that I had been betrayed, that I was miserable!

As I had turned at the landing of the broad stairway, bed-candle in hand, I had looked back. The White Mouse had passed through the dim-lit hall with a quiet good-night to Tom; he had lingered; Bettie had returned, whispered two words so gently I could not distinguish their purport; he took her hand, and, distraction! her head dropped on his shoulder!

I heard his whisper as though Stentor the herald had shouted the words:

“And you will never doubt me, *dearest Bet?*”

The eyes she raised to his were full of tears—no merriment in them now—but the voice was firm and had a loyal ring that said :

“You may trust me, *dear Tom.*”

She was gone! But not before his lips were pressed to her brow; not before the sharp-edged certainty had severed from me my last shred of hope.

When Tom Jones entered our chamber he was whistling!

Great heavens! was she to link her fate with such a wretch? a hard, unsentimental animal? a thing who could receive a boon the gods might envy, and then—whistle? Was she to confide her future to a felon, who had forged a false key of friendship, had entered his uncle's sacred places, stolen his greatest treasure, and then—whistled?

I turned wrathfully. Reproof and the frost from the window-pane were on my brow. Murder was in my soul.

“Tom Jones,” I said, with that dignity for

which I am noted under trial—"Tom Jones, there are times when silence becomes—in fact, when silence cannot—"

"Come in!" cried Tom, cheerily; not in reply to me, however, but to a low tap at the door.

There was a mysterious pause, then a narrow chink opened, a shock head was inserted, a lank body followed it, and Bosley the groom entered the room.

The man of curry-combs wore a loose frock and a somewhat frightened aspect; but there was also an air of business and a strong odor of the stables about him as he closed the door after a wary backward glance through the hall.

"Yer wanted to see me, leftenant?" was his salutation as he fumbled in the pockets of his frock.

I looked from Tom Jones to the hostler in speechless rage. Would he never cease to deteriorate in my eyes? Was it not enough he had whistled after winning the love that would have glorified *my* life? But now he must leave

that ravishing creature and consort with a musty stable-boy, to talk horse—perhaps of terriers and rats! I could trust myself no longer. The spirit of Cain seemed descending upon me, and I rushed from the room and down the steps.

I found myself in the parlor.

The lights were out, but the fire still blazed up brightly in the ample grate. By its light I saw the misty outline of a white figure thrown full length upon the sofa. From the wavy outlines and the soft fleecy effect of the subdued light, it might have been an Undine, or some unsubstantial sprite.

I looked closely: it was only the White Mouse. Her face was buried in the cushion she clasped in her arms, and the fragile figure was swaying and racked with heavy sobs. The wavy masses of fair hair had fallen loose upon her shoulders, and the sleeve, carelessly drawn back, displayed an arm that matched Bettie Blythe's for roundness and symmetry.

As the fitful firelight rose and fell, seeming to

dilate and contract the contours of the delicate figure, I wondered why I never had noticed before how graceful and willowy it was.

She did not hear my abrupt entrance. Her sorrow had full possession of her, and she sobbed as if her heart would break. What the matter was I knew not. It might have been a tiff with the Ancient Griffin, the death of a pet poodle or the trouble about her auriferous affianced.

At all events, she had my perfect sympathy. She was miserable, and was not I likewise? Poor child! Every sob went straight to my heart; I really never before believed I could feel so kindly disposed toward her. But I felt my presence was an intrusion; I thought she did not see me, and I started out. Just then a heavier sob than ever seemed to rend the poor child, and a shiver ran through her from head to foot.

It was too much; the softness of my heart conquered. I could not go without one word to tell her how I pitied her grief.

In the tenderest manner I took her hand; in

the gentlest tone I said: "Do not be unhappy; do not weep so."

She started up with a stifled cry. On seeing me a vivid flush passed over her brow and neck, and she quickly withdrew her hand. Then the color fell out of her cheeks, leaving them deadlier white than ever, and she dropped her face in her hands as she murmured:

"Oh, *you* here! *You* to see me!"

I didn't understand the emphasis on the pronoun, but I only answered:

"Do not send me away before I tell you it was accident brought me here and sympathy detained me. You seem very miserable."

She glanced shyly at me from under the swollen lids.

"I *was* a little while ago. But I don't feel so now," she whispered.

The deuce! Here was an odd return for my sympathetic interference. I rather liked it, however, for I seemed to do the poor child good, and I felt so wretched and alone in the world.

"But oh what must you think of me?" she

cried, suddenly, and again the face went into the hands and again the blushes mounted up to the eartips.

“I think—I—that is—I am very, very sorry to see you suffer,” I answered, somewhat inconsequently.

“But to think *you* of all people— But you will never tell *him*?”

Why I, “of all people,” I couldn’t conceive; but it was very safe to promise about “him,” as I had never set eyes on the grief-producing Goldwin. Therefore I answered honestly:

“On my word, never.”

“But then you know all! Oh how forward, how unmaidenly, how bold you must think me!”

What in the deuce the girl meant, why I should think her bold for not wanting to marry her grandfather, I could not conceive. So I only shook my head sagely. *In medio tutissimus ibis.*

“But then this never has seemed like home,” she went on. “Aunty tries to be very good, but she doesn’t know how. And then a young

girl may have strong feelings, and oh, I *do love so utterly!*"

"Wh-at!" I gasped, surprised out of propriety. "The devil you do!" It was very improper; but then to think of her being sold to a man of sixty, and then "loving so utterly!" Wonderful creatures are women. My abruptness made her recoil, but it was only for a moment.

"Then you won't think me immodest—unwomanly? I could not bear it. *You*, of all people in the world!"

There it was again. Why in the deuce did she care for my opinion so much if she loved Goldwin "so utterly?"

"Unwomanly! never!" I said, vaguely.

"Oh, thank you! thank you!" She was beginning to get excited again. "I felt *you* would understand; *you* have seen more of me than any one else; you can make allowance for a young girl's feelings overstepping the bounds of prudishness."

I rose and walked to the mantel. I began to believe that the stone sphynx that upheld it had

turned suddenly soft and blonde and crept into the form of the White Mouse. She was surely talking in riddles of the deepest.

“Tell me once more,” she said, following me to the hearth, “that I lose nothing in your eyes by—by what you know.”

“Under any circumstances,” I began, warily, “real, deep love—”

“Oh, and how I *do* love! God knows how deep and pure is the passion that makes me forget all bonds and almost all proprieties! What else could excuse my being able to speak of it now—to you? You know I am pledged unwillingly to another—”

“To what!” I almost shrieked.

“To Mr. Goldwin, whom I—yes, whom I *hate!*” the girl answered, with ten times the spirit I thought in her.

“And you don’t—it isn’t—you don’t mean it’s Goldwin you care for?” I stammered in confusion.

“Goldwin! Oh how can *you* jest with me at such a moment? *You* know whom I—*you* have long guessed even before I confessed my love for—for—*another!*”



“‘To what!’ I almost shrieked.”

Again the purple flood dyed her brow and neck, and then died quickly out. I felt deuced queer. Here was I alone at midnight, with a timid White Mouse, who had suddenly asserted herself, and told me she did not love the man she was engaged to, and “did so” love somebody else. There was nobody else except Tom Jones, now talking terrier with the groom up stairs, and—*myself!* Great heavens! could the girl mean me? No, nonsense! I must be mistaken. I smiled a sickly smile to reassure myself. Then I said: “I don’t—that is, you know—I—could not—you would not suspect me of jesting about a—um—your sacred feelings.” She seized my hand impulsively and pressed it.

“They are sacred!” she cried—“sacred as the first worship of a pure girl’s heart must ever be. Oh, *you* know, you *must* feel how strong and all-absorbing is the passion that can change *me* into a self-asserting woman! that can make me defy prejudice and custom, as you see I do, when I say that I will give up home and friends—that I will face all the world and tell them

boldly, as I now do you, that from the bottom of my heart *I love!*"

She dropped her face into her hands as she spoke the last word, but all the rest she had said with her eye fixed unswervingly upon mine and looking down into my very soul. I am considered by most of my friends to be rather a modest man. On this particular occasion, I must confess that I was rather taken aback and became rather misty in the mind. But there could be no doubt as to what the girl meant. Driven to desperation by her forced engagement, feeling the unbearable grasp of a hated fate tightening on her, she was—yes, there was no room for doubt—she *was making love to me!*

For a second the base idea crept into my mind: Revenge! Bettie Blythe, the jilt, the shameless flirt, cannot triumph over me if I marry the heiress of "Shadynook" instead of the poor lawyer's daughter! For a second I was on the eve of clasping the White Mouse in my arms, and blackening my soul with the per-

jury that I adored her—that I never had loved but her!

Thank heaven! it was only for a second, when the unnatural, the frightful want of modesty stood naked in my sight. Much as I had despised the girl before, I actually loathed her now. But to tell her so? There was the rub. I appeal to any young lawyer who has had an heiress make love to him at midnight if it isn't a little awkward to refuse her?

“Miss Belton,” I said, at last, looking into the fire, “I make every allowance for your trials—for your unusual excitement that has driven you to say things to me you may wish unsaid to-morrow—”

“To-morrow I shall glory in them even more than now!”

“To-morrow you may regret,” I continued, heedless of the interruption, “that you said them to me.”

“You are the sole man on earth to whom I would ever dream of speaking so!” she broke in hastily; “to no one else could I be so immodest as to—to—”

Here she melted into a perfect cataract of tears. I don't like tears. They wash all the manhood out of me; they dissolve me as if I were beet-root sugar. I began at once to regret the accident that had made the young woman care for me; and, to try and be a little more gentle, I put myself through a strict cross-examination as to whether I had ever given her any cause to believe I cared for her, any encouragement, any reason. But a hastily empaneled jury of Conscience, Habit and Memory acquitted me *nem. con.*

Then, panoplied in the triple consciousness of right, I turned once more upon the young woman before me.

"Miss Belton," I said, with an Arctic frigidity in my tone, "you will permit me to say that I am astonished and—"

"Astonished! *You!*"

The invariable recurrence of that pronoun and the dreadful emphasis upon it were beginning to wear my patience out. I continued rather hastily:

"Astonished, surely; and I may say pained

at the—a—the confession of what I cannot but consider a passing—a—caprice.”

The White Mouse flashed round at me. She seemed to expand and dilate in the flickering light, and her lips were compressed till they seemed very white in the reflection.

“May I remind you such a suspicion is injurious to my modesty?” she said, coldly; “but I know in my heart I will prove to you by my whole future that my love is a part of my being—will end only with my life!”

Did ever a modest man meet such persistence? I could not strike that girl and crush her where she stood. Oh how I longed for a man in her place! for had he been the Benicia Boy I should have pounded him then and there. Morally certain that the white-haired young creature was dying of love for me, half persuaded that she was going to marry me then and there by force, what could I say? I stared blankly at her, while a smile of wonderful sweetness stole round her lips as she murmured, half to herself,

“Let the world say what it will; love like

mine purifies all. We will be very, very happy."

Tender of heart, I began to pity the young woman. Laboring under a terrible hallucination about the future as she was, there was still something almost sublime in the faith she held in the power of her love. Its spell began to work on me. Rapidly I ran over my chances for the future if I fell into her views. I almost began to waver, though half unconsciously, as I said,

"You would be sacrificing everything. Mr. Goldwin's fortune is immense, and—"

"Goldwin's fortune! I had rather love another with the coat upon his back unpaid for than that creature in an emperor's robes."

By Venus! she seemed in earnest. There was that in her eye I could not disbelieve. But how in the world did she know that my coat was not paid for? That it was a fact did not make it a subject to dwell on; and then it was so deucedly unsentimental! Still the girl's sincerity and evident truth so touched me that it was very meekly I returned to the charge, and

then I only set up objections for her to knock down.

“But in throwing over Goldwin,” I said, more gently, “you do not reflect how you risk your own fortune—”

“My own fortune! Oh you have never loved as I do, or you would see that could not weigh one grain of sand. My fortune! Can you think me selfish, base enough, to set that trash for one moment against one single look, one single word, of love?”

Now that was no doubt very noble, very heroic, but then it was also decidedly indiscreet. It might have done on the stage, but hardly here. I had not a dollar, as she well knew; and yet this inscrutable young female could not only make love to me off-hand, but could talk of her fortune whistled down the wind as if it were not ten cents in stamps.

“But there is no danger of that,” she added, carelessly, “for my aunt could not be angry with me a week. She would forget her disappointment—we should both be equally dear to her.”

Here was balm in Gilead; for the Ancient Griffin, besides the Grove estate, was reputed "very warm." I looked thoughtfully into the fire, and the words fell upon my shocked modesty and sore wonderment like soothing balsam. Railroad shares—bank shares—corners in Erie—brown front on the Avenue,—all passed in rapid panorama between my eyes and the glowing coals. There was a half relenting in my voice as I said, "Are you very sure of that?"

"Very sure. But what of that? He whom I love"—and the girl fixed her eyes full upon mine with never a blink nor a tremor—"he whom I love would value it all as trash."

The deuce he would! Then I little knew myself. But the information just given was sufficient, and I began to see daylight. I actually believe for the last ten minutes I had forgotten the very existence of Bettie Blythe. I had not even remembered the little shock to my pride at finding out her duplicity—had lost even my ire at Tom Jones' perfidy. I was doing a little sum in mental arithmetic, in which the

White Mouse was the exponent of an unknown power of farm, manor-house and woodland.

But I could not restrain my desire to speak at least part of the truth. She was leaning now upon the mantel, her pale forehead resting upon her right hand and her left hanging carelessly by her side. I took that left hand in my own, not without a twinge of conscience.

“You and I have long been friends,” I said. “We are sympathetic, perhaps, but we hardly know each other well enough yet to speak surely of certain things.”

She withdrew her hand very gently.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because it may be—that is —” (it was horribly embarrassing to explain)—“are you very sure that you love—a—that you know your own mind?”

“As sure as that I live!” She spoke earnestly and absently, but looked straight into the fire and never once at me.

“And you do—you think—that is you have—in your own mind you have reason to trust that—”

“Had I not a certainty beyond trust—beyond reason,” she broke in—“I had been false to my sex to speak to-night to you.”

Wonderful power of love! Wonderful confidence of passion!

But where in the deuce had I ever given her one reason to believe I cared for her? Once more the triple jury held a hasty session over me; once more I was triumphantly acquitted.

“Anna,” I said—very gently now—“perhaps your aunt would not forgive. Would you be willing to sacrifice everything, to endure poverty even, for the sake of your love!” The girl only looked at me for answer, but that strange smile flickered once more around her lips. “And suppose you do another more than justice—suppose your loss of fortune should change feelings you now believe—”

“Never!” she said. “My love is too secure for that.”

“And would it override all obstacles? Would it forgive a recent rivalry, and the love that is even now scarcely driven from the heart you would make your own?”

Anna Belton, the White Mouse, turned short upon me. Something in my words transfigured her. She was a very Pythoness, and her eyes flashed fire as she drew her slender height up before me.

“Silence, sir!” she cried. “Perhaps I am rightly punished for forgetting I was still a maiden who should not speak. When you spoke of money, you merely injured me. To intimate the possibility of a rival is insult! After all I have said to you, after all you know, it is bitter insult, which I will not listen to.”

And the young person swept out of the room, utterly ignoring the hand I stretched out to detain her.

I looked stupidly into the fire. No bank stocks, no Erie, no brown stone there now—only a charred and fast-blackening mass of coal, typical of my own desolation and pitiable plight.

And even as I gazed the face that rose before me was not Anna’s, but Bettie Blythe’s.



V.

IN THE DEPTHS.

HOW long I gazed stupidly into the fire I know not, but the shadow of the past rose out of it, shutting out the present utterly. No sooner was the pressure of her presence taken off than my mind rebounded from the White Mouse. I forgot her very existence, and my whole soul, as if in punishment for my momentary desertion, went forth in bitter yearning after my lost darling.

Black and blacker grew the coals, and with them the gloom of my thoughts grew deeper and deeper; but, bitter as they were, the cold became more bitter still, and I was literally driven by it to seek my own room.

As I entered the door I almost ran over the hostler, who was still engaged in his mysterious interview with Tom.

"And you are sure you understand perfectly, Bosley?" the latter was saying. "We must have no risk of a mistake this trip."

"I got it all yere, plain as writin'," responded sagely he of the stables as he tapped his forehead. "Let 'un zee: moon rises at three, starts at four, drives nineteen miles in two hours and a half, and feeds light on cut feed and looks out for Jalap's kickin' of he near fore leg."

"Right as a trivet, Bosley! You're a trump and this is yours;" and Tom chucked the fellow a bright half eagle as he left the room. Then he jerked off his coat, and lighting a Havana, blew great clouds of smoke as he threw himself on the bed.

I could stand it no longer.

As the grinning groom left the room I turned upon Tom and prepared to charge. But he was ahead of me.

"Hold a bit, old boy," he said. "I have treated you badly, I know."

A fierce snort was the only response I deigned to give.

"Yes, I know it, but prudence was essential. You're not riled?"

"Riled!" I answered, with forced calmness. "I can't see how you have used *me* badly, but you must permit me to say you have done *yourself* great injustice."

Tom looked gravely at me. He seemed a little puzzled.

"And you have done a palpable, a gross injustice"—I was grand now, doing the outraged virtuous—"to an old person who—"

"Oh, bother the old person!" he interrupted, carelessly. "But then you have really twigged what I am up to in the morning?"

"In the morning!" A ray of light began to dawn upon me.

"Yes, in the morning. I'm going to—now, old boy, don't look scared—I'm going to run away and be married!"

To be married! And in the morning! The ray of light was a blinding gleam now. I was literally staggered. I dropped into a chair with a big lump in my throat and a potsherd in the roof of my mouth.

“Yes, my boy, I’m to be married in the morning. You know I’d have told you before, but Bet and I only fixed it yesterday. She arranged it all in the sleigh as we came along; and, for reasons you know so well, we must be quick; I’m done for if the old party suspects. But it’s all fixed—you’re to help me.”

“*I* help you!” I gasped, faintly.

“Certainly. Who else? *You* must come with us; *you* must be best man; *you* must go with us to Uncle Bob and help Bet explain all about the—”

“Lieutenant Jones!”—I rose stiffly and stood at attention as Tom’s eyes opened very wide—
“Lieutenant Jones, I have no criticisms to make on your cousin’s course. If she desires to—”

“Desires! the devil! why, man, *she* planned the whole thing—arranged the Christmas frolic, suggested all the details of the elopement, and *she* specially insisted *you* should aid us.”

“She did?”

“Yes; she said you were so fond of us both you’d be glad to do it.”

Oh the cruel girl! the hardened, ingrained

flirt! This was why she had led me on then. This was why she let me wander on in a fool's paradise, only to be used as a cat's paw. But had she led me on after all? That was the question that even in this bitter moment would force itself upon me. Tom kept on, speaking rapidly, but with no sense to me in the sound till I caught:

“So you see, my dear boy, it was she originated the affair; she planned every detail, not I.”

“Stop, sir!” I cried, hoarsely—my face must have been purple; it *felt* black—“you have a right to run away, perhaps—to stoop to anything you please—the lady is to be your *wife*. But, by heaven! you have no right to compromise your *cousin* by saying these things.”

“There's something in that,” Tom muttered, thoughtfully; “I mustn't let Bet's name get out, of course. I only told you, you know.” I gave a grunt that was meant for scolding sarcasm. “Bet will tell you all about it herself.”

“Oh, she will,” I panted.

“To be sure. She told me she could make it all right with you. That’s what we were talking about when you drove over the cad to-day.”

Oh the cold-blooded, heartless coquette! To deliberately plan a torment for me thus! And he, my old schoolmate, my bosom friend! If the soft answer that turneth away wrath had been a deadly weapon, I should have used it then. But it wasn’t, so I said no word, only strode about the room, loosening my neckcloth by fierce and sudden tugs.

Tom, lying flat on his back and puffing little wreaths into the air, eyed me with some wonderment. At last he said, cheerily:

“Well, old boy, don’t take on so. It’s as sudden for me as it is for you, and a deuced sight more serious to boot. So I’ll count on you, of course, in the morning.”

“Count on me! I tell you I’ll have nothing to do with it. Your uncle Blythe would never—”

“Popcorn! I say, Bet will make it all right with Uncle Bob. I verily believe he’d

have helped us if we had dared to trust our secret."

"Helped you! Mr. Blythe not object! And still you are mad enough to risk letting the tongue of gossip soil the name of the woman you love! You plan this mad escapade far away from his roof when he might have consented—

"To what?" Tom sat bolt upright on the bed, resting on his hands, behind him. A strange, fitful contraction swept over his face, followed by a very grin of agony. I was merciless.

"To your union with his daughter," I said, sternly.

My words struck him like a bullet. He clenched his teeth until the cigar dropped in two from them; his face grew crimson, its muscles twitched convulsively and his chest heaved with a desperate struggle for breath. Then, with a gasping sob, he buried his face in the pillow, while his whole frame shook and trembled like an aspen.

I was pained, shocked. The sight of "the

tears of bearded men" is always touching beyond expression; and besides, I was at a loss to account for the great violence of his sudden emotion. Had my words, harsh and bitter as they were, waked him to a keen if tardy sense of his wrong-doing? Or had the strain of continued excitement, the near success of his sudden plan and the shock of my refusal to aid it been too much for his overwrought nerves?

I became more puzzled as I looked, for he still sobbed and shook with the weakness of a child.

I walked up and down the room, and tried to think more calmly. After all, I had no real claim on Miss Bettie. She had refused me once and never allowed me to address her again; I could not but confess that. True, she had let me think there was hope; but what woman is strong enough to refuse to sniff the incense burnt upon the altar of her vanity? Then Tom, too, was an old and tried friend. Poor fellow! how he shook and groaned in his great agony! and if a vicious flirt had cruelly

played upon my feelings through him, why should I let that react upon his head?

No! I would be a Roman! a very Pythias! I would crush down my own feelings into my heart; I would brave the mayor's anger; I would die of smothered rage; but *her* feline triumph should be cheated of the prey it would-tease and torture!

Yes, I would do as she had planned for me. I would see her wed another, would give her away at the altar, and not one of the thousand torments that were rending me should give her the expected pleasure of its evidence.

Twice Tom had raised his head and moved his lips in a fruitless essay to speak; twice a torrent of mixed passions had swept over him,

“And then a moment o'er his face
A tablet of unutterable thought was traced,
And then—”

he buried it in the pillow again. There was something in his eyes that made me shudder with a shapeless, undefined dread that his reason might give way.

Now he lay quiet. He had ceased to sob, but his face was still buried in the pillow, while ever and again a quick, hysteric shudder ran through him.

I laid my hand kindly on his shoulder: "Tom, old fellow, I was hasty."

He slipped away from my touch like a hurt child, and again the shudder, longer and more marked than before, thrilled through him. After a moment he lay still; then slowly he raised his face to mine. It was marked and drawn from the intensity of the inward struggle. Ever and anon a sharp spasm of acute agony shot across it, only controlled by his sharp teeth gnawing the yellow beard.

I respected his feelings too much to look upon his suffering; I blew out the candle.

"My dear old boy!" he muttered hoarsely. The voice was still much broken, with a hysteric catch in it. I only pressed his hand for answer, but I felt the bed shake under me with the effort he made to control himself. It was a mighty one. Then he spoke again.

"We have been friends for years," he said.

“You know me for a man of honor, and I pledge you that honor my—my uncle will be fully and entirely satisfied when—when he learns—that—*that I have married his daughter!*”

Once more his feelings overcame him; once more he crushed his face into the pillow while the gust of passion rent and shook him.

I was more mystified than ever. My head ached again as I thought over the whole affair and tried to reconcile its opposite bearings. If Mayor Blythe did not object to Bettie’s marriage with her pauper cousin, where was the need for this clandestine frolic? And if he did object, how could Tom satisfy him afterward so surely?

Was he deceiving me? No, he was a man of honor; he would never stoop to that. But, then, why this terrible emotion he could not control?

A startling thought leapt into my brain. Great heavens! was Tom drunk? Had he gotten liquor from Bosley, the hostler? No, that was too absurd.

I gave it up; I was dead beat.

Still wondering, I threw myself ready dressed upon the bed. Tom lay quiet now, but I intended to watch him by the fitful firelight, lest his intense excitement should make him really ill.

But the narcotic administered by the ancient spinster, added to my unwonted exertions behind those demon horses in the frosty air, were too much for me.

I slept profoundly.





VI.

THE DARK HOUR BEFORE DAY.

HOW long I slept I know not, but I was lying only half wakened when I heard a very gentle tap at the door.

The moon had risen, and her great white disc shone clear over the trees, throwing a broad light into the room. Tom heard the tap and sprang up on the instant. By the moonlight I saw that he was dressed as when he first threw himself down, and could not have been to bed. As he opened the door gently,

“Sh—h, dear Tom!” said a soft voice in the hall.

I recognized the voice, and was wide awake instantly, every sense acutely active.

“The moon is up, and I heard Bosley take

the sleigh over the snow about ten minutes since," the voice said.

"I'm all ready, Bet dear; won't be a minute."

"I couldn't trust the servants, of course, and fearing you'd be too late, I thought I'd call you myself," Bettie answered.

Great heavens! what an escape I had made! How had I misunderstood that girl! Here was a bride elect on the very verge of a runaway waking her lover herself, urging haste in his movements, and generally being as cool as a cucumber. Yesterday had shown Miss Blythe to me as utterly without heart; to-day proved her equally wanting in delicacy.

"That's right," she added, coolly. "Anna's all ready, and the old lady sleeps like William Tell; so hurry, dear."

I breathed a fraction more freely. At all events, she was to have another female in the escapade. That would be more respectable, perhaps, when the affair came to be talked of. But how had she persuaded that little milk-and-water thing to brave her Argus and the proprieties at such an hour and for such a purpose?

I actually pinched myself to see if I was really awake. The whole thing seemed like an ugly dream, and I could scarcely realize that a single day could have crowded into it the overturn of all my hopes that had almost grown to certainties; the substitution of so unexpected a rival; and, more than all, the unheard-of fact of Anna Belton stepping so far out of her modesty as to make me a formal declaration of love!

No! I was wide awake; the whole series was only too real, and there was Bettie Blythe standing at our door in the gray dawning. She was really going to run away with her cousin; she had in very fact driven me to desperation, and she had actually persuaded the White Mouse to rebellion.

It was really remarkable what wonderful sway she could exert over all who came within her influence. And yet there was no tremor in her voice to show the slightest agitation. By George! she was going to clandestine matrimony as she would to her breakfast!

“He’s ready? He’s going with us, of

course," Miss Blythe definitely said. "You told him I would settle that?"

An irrepressible groan of rage and despair burst from me. They did not notice it as Tom answered:

"Oh yes. But you must be careful to explain fully as soon as you can."

"Leave him to me," was the short answer. "Now wake him."

"In one minute; he's all dressed," Tom replied, cheerily. "But you ought to know that he thinks—" He stepped into the hall and drew the door gently behind him.

He was only gone a moment. A sound of whispering and a half-smothered sob came over the transom; a light step tripped up the hall, and Tom re-entered with his hands pressed over his face.

Then I knew he had told her how I had spoken. I felt a thrill of triumph that she heard I had borne the news so calmly.

"Wake up, old fellow."

Tom stood by my bedside, and I saw in the moonlight something of the expression on his

face it had worn the night before. It died out, however, as I spoke.

“I am awake. I have no dressing to do,” I said, gloomily; and getting up, I plunged my face into the icy water until it was nearly numb.

We were soon ready. Walking stealthily as burglars, Jones and I reached the foot of the broad stairway. The back door stood wide open, and the moonlight, faintly reflected from the dark panels, showed two muffled and veiled figures waiting us. Was it a wonder that my heart fluttered and pounded against my ribs? The very novelty of the position would have excused that, for I had never been engaged in a runaway until the day previous, and this was one of such a different nature!

But my mind was fully made up; my resolution as inflexible as granite. I *would* bear me like a man. One of the veiled figures approached; a whispered word in Tom's ear and a gasping sound, half sob, half laugh, burst from him. The finger of the veiled figure raised itself in warning; he buried his mous-

tache in his fur collar and was silent. Even in that uncertain light I recognized the finger as the taper one I was determined should never point in scornful triumph to my weakness, and I braced myself afresh.

“You’ll take Bet,” Tom whispered hoarsely in my ear. Once more he pressed both hands against his face as if to repress his feelings.

Like an animated statue I advanced and offered my arm to the veiled figure nearest me. For I was resolved! She should never have one ray of triumph over me to brighten the blackness of the wrong she was about to do her doting father.

I noticed the little hand she rested on my arm trembled slightly. She *had* some feeling, then? It was more than I had suspected, but I only grew stonier and stonier. I set my face like a flint. Tom approached her companion very quietly, drew her arm through his with more deference than I thought necessary with such a weak, inane little bridesmaid, and led the way out of the hall on tiptoe. Silent as the grave, we followed.

As we stepped out into the moonlight, I felt rather than saw the veiled face by me turn up to mine. I shivered from head to foot, but that, perhaps, was partly owing to the bitter cold of the dawn, and looked straight ahead. Then, once more, I heard that bursting but repressed sigh; once more the tremor of her frame was so painfully evident that I almost wavered in my belief of her heartlessness. Did she at last repent? Did she really feel the heavy crime she was committing toward her father? Or, great Heaven! could there be the barest possibility that she had awakened? *Could* she feel that even now it was not too late—that she had not utterly thrown away a heart she could never replace? There was such delirium in the bare idea I almost framed the wild hope into words. But pride as much as honor came to my rescue. I was pledged to Tom, and I was silent.

Softly and swiftly we followed the other couple over the crisp, crackling surface of the snow; down the broad lane, under arching trees that sifted the moonlight through them in

silver spangles; through snow-clad hedgerows standing like an army of spectres at present arms.

Here we found the sleigh, the impatient horses blowing out great clouds of mist, and the more impatient groom blowing out greater clouds of smoke from his black pipe as he stood at their heads and wrestled with them for the bits.

“Well, leftenant, we’s pretty nigh a-freezed,” was his salutation. “All ready, sir, and un’s in fust-rate trim: do the nineteen miles in two hours sure!”

Tom answered never a word. He almost lifted the light form of his bridesmaid into the back seat, and as he tucked the buffalo around her with most unnecessary care, I saw she had pressed her handkerchief to her eyes and was sobbing bitterly. Poor fragile child! I thought. To feel thus for the folly of another, and that other— I cast one glance, my first, at the still figure on my arm. Not a sign was there of any emotion, not a single ray of feeling, not a spark of repentance, only a show of impatience as the

lithe ankle tapped the small boot sharply against the ringing crust of the snow. I was steel again. Pshaw! she was a doll. She might have been stuffed with bran for all the heart she had!

“I’ll drive,” Tom said to me shortly.

He looked very grave and pale now as he bundled his bride into the front seat with much less ceremony than he had used to her bridesmaid. Then he gathered up the reins as I stepped in beside the still weeping blonde.

The imperturbable Bosley released the bits and stepped aside. The horses reared and plunged furiously before they settled down to their stroke, and in the pause the stolid groom raised one corner of his fur cap, scratched his shock with one finger and muttered to himself:

“Jest as ef marryin’ warn’t bad enough no-how! And to git up afore day and friz themselves this way! Well, I’m sorry for them horses, that’s all!”

We were off, and this our *bon voyage*.



VII.

VICTORY!

WE took a road utterly unknown to me—
up hill and down, now winding between
low hedgerows or under high, aisle-like
trees; again cutting through stretches of level
snow undotted by house or bush.

No one spoke a word. I had plenty of time to think, but somehow my ideas refused to come in any sort of order. Events had followed each other with such rapidity in the last twenty hours that they made me feel, in my first moment of perfect rest, much as a gymnast must after having made a flying wheel of himself. Then it was so bitterly cold, and Tom kept the horses at top speed, sometimes in a swinging trot, sometimes in a full gallop, till the keen wind sung past my ears with a sharpness that

threatened to take them off. One thought, however, kept rolling uppermost in the surging stream of ideas—to be true to my proud resolve not to aid *her* triumph by one weak look even! And there she sat, crouched up in the buffalo, holding her muff before her face, and seemingly more anxious about the tip of her nose than about her future state. Once she turned, looked pityingly at her weeping friend.

“*Don't* cry so, Anna darling. It will soon be over.”

Ye gods! Here was coolness for you! But the tender one, far from seeming comforted, only bowed her head still lower, while she ceased to sob.

At last the moonlight waned. A pale, sickly flush rose over the face of the east, and as we reached the crest of the next hill the day broke.

Tom turned two or three times in the next mile and glanced uneasily at the still, bent figure beside me. It seemed to me he took very unnecessary interest in that young person's crying. Perhaps, however, her evident reluc-

tance to aid in his disgraceful proceeding raised remorse in his bosom. Still, I rather respected the White Mouse for her sympathy in her friend's unwomanly position; and as we passed the next heavy shadow of trees I tried my hand at consolation. Stooping toward her, I said very gently:

“Pray be comforted. A foolish girl *will* throw herself away sooner or later, you know. Believe me, if my opinion is of any value to you, I feel that none of the sin, little of the folly, of to-day is at your door. I know you were entrapped into it; I know you wouldn't do it if you could help yourself.”

The others had failed, but I was successful. The weeping White Mouse stared at me a moment, straightened herself up, and the same flash she had left me with the night before came into her eyes. Then she dried them, stuffed handkerchief and hands into her muff and looked dead at the gray's ears.

At first I hardly understood that look; then I was fully satisfied. She really did love me then, after all, and my ire at the perfidy of the

pair before us woke a sympathetic flash in her. I said nothing now. I felt she would be comforted by the commendation of the man she loved so strangely.

Up the steep we rattled, and straight ahead of us, at the base of the winding hill, stood a little country church, its graceful spire and old-time mouldings standing out in clear cut silhouette against the white-clad hill behind it. Tom straightened himself up, pointed to the church with his whip, and then, without a word, let it fall on the sorrel's flanks. The steaming horses answered with a rush down the hill, whirled us past the white-railed church-yard and drew up at the door of the old parsonage, lying almost within it. As we stopped, the sleigh bells shook out a merry marriage chime that called a gentleman into the porch. He was a tall, handsome old man, with a forest of gray beard framing a ruddy face, and a sparkle in his clear eye that showed him not all saint.

"You are prompt as welcome, my dear children," he said as he lifted Miss Blythe from

the sleigh and bent down to kiss her forehead. "All is ready, Tom. I got your letter and the license just in time, and your courier's zeal was proven by the foam that covered his horse."

"It was a tough ride over country from the Bull's Eye," Miss Bettie chirped out with perfect composure, while the still silent Tom helped the blonde to alight, "and you may be sure we managed it in a hurry, Mr. Lindsay. I had to make frightful love to the old clerk—almost kiss him—before I could get the paper."

And Miss Bettie actually laughed softly while the wicked black eyes rested for a single second upon my own. I was absolutely struck dumb—motionless—with one leg over the scraper and one to the knee in a snow drift. The coolness of that young woman paralyzed me. The old gentleman laughed.

"You are a woman of business, Bet," he said.

Woman of business! Did ever bride before run away with lieutenant of Boomerangs and

then boast her prowess to the parson? Woman of brass, he meant. But he only added:

“The paper is a little irregular, after all, but I’ll make it do. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do for the daughter of my dear old friend.”

Phœbus and Cupid! He’d even help her to an elopement with a penniless boy! Some brilliant reflections upon the corruption of the Church popped into my mind, but before I could frame them into portable shape they were cut off by the clear, sharp voice of that inscrutable bride-elect:

“And this, *of course*, is Miss Belton, and this our first and only groomsman.” So was I introduced to the Rev. Dr. Lindsay.

I shook hands very mistily and uttered something unintelligible. Then before the awkward boy from the rectory stables had persuaded himself to take the horses’ heads in charge, the doctor’s wife appeared on the steps in the neatest of morning toilettes. She kissed Tom and the girls with the most motherly *empressment*.

“I have often heard of *you* from Bettie,” she

said pointedly to me, and then glanced at that wicked young person.

Once more the dark eyes flashed into mine for a second, and they so magnetized me I could scarce resist knocking the head that contained them against that of the rector's wife. By a huge effort, however, I mastered the impulse, and left that lady free to say:

"Do take a cup of coffee, my dears. It is hot and ready. You will wait breakfast till after the ceremony, but you really need something hot after your long ride."

Bettie looked at Tom. Tom, who by this time was very white and immensely solemn, only shook his head shortly. Then he drew the arm of that blonde water-spout—her eyes were running like a mill-race again—tenderly within his own. As for me, I stood knee-deep in the snow where I had alighted. My head seemed whirling round, and the people near me looked dim and misty. Tom turned shortly to me.

"You take Bet," he said in a hoarse whisper.

Before I could recover from the strangeness of the arrangement, and obey, that wonderful young person had slipped her arm quietly into mine and said, with not a tremor in her voice :

“ Thanks, dear Mrs. Lindsay, but we prefer the marriage first, and then we’ll all feel more comfortable to enjoy your nice things.”

Feel more comfortable! *Could* she feel more comfortable? I didn’t wonder any longer that Tom had yielded when “ she planned the whole affair.” Such coolness would overcome any man. But I couldn’t but admire her pluck, though!

The rector tucked his wife under his arm and led the way over the crisp path. We followed into the side door of the church, where two candles blinked upon the reading-desk and threw the rest of the building into still more dismal darkness.

Just before we reached the door, Miss Blythe pressed my arm half nervously, and looked into my face with more of hesitation than she had yet shown at anything.

“I ought to explain,” she said, softly. “Tom told me how you—”

I looked at that girl. There was no need for speech—that look was enough! With a sort of half sob, her face dropped in her hands in what I could only feel was becoming shame.

In the aisle Tom stopped, turned a ghastly face to me, while his white lips moved in a soundless effort at speech. He extended something in a hand that shook plainly. Miss Blythe held out hers—it was steady as that of a practiced duelist—took the something, and pressed it into my fingers.

“The ring,” she whispered.

I took it passively. By this time I was completely conquered. A young person who could plan an elopement, arrange every detail herself, choose her avowed lover for sole witness, and finally wake the groom at midnight, had power to startle me no further. She might even have made the change for the parson’s fee and kissed the pew-opener without exciting further surprise in the heart that, spite of myself,

would stick in my throat and threaten to choke me.

As we approached the chancel, I let go the bride's arm mechanically and ranged up at Tom's right side. Forbearance was leaving me fast. My boasted strength had all gone long ago; I was wandering in my mind and weak in my knees. I was dead beat. But for pure shame I should have rushed from the church and wallowed abjectly in the snow without. When we all dropped on our knees, I could not strangle down the sob that burst from my heart, and the bitterness of my spirit found vent in anything but the utterance of the prayer the time and place called for. How long we knelt I have no idea. It might have been seconds, it might have been hours. Somehow, I found myself again standing up, clutching the chancel-rail for support, while the tall form of the rector seemed miles away, and his words came dulled to my ears through a boom in them like that of angry surf.

I could think, hear, feel nothing. I had but one consciousness, that I was wretched—*wretched!*

Toni's tremulous responses fell meaningless upon my ear, and yet, through all my agony, I listened with strained intensity for the words in which *she* was to speak herself his.

Those words never came—only a soft, low murmur, as of the spring breeze. Even in that supreme moment of agony, I felt a tender, yearning pride that *all* the woman in her was not dead—that it had at last been touched, even in the depths, by the solemnity of the sacrifice at which she held a part.

The doctor's hands were laid upon the wedded pair.

It was done!

I staggered alone into the glaring sunlight on the church-yard snow.

* * * * *

As we dashed down the main street of Picketon, at ten A. M. that day, our sleigh bells screamed with a rollicking jollity that brought many a face to door and window.

Mrs. Lindsay's wedding breakfast had been of the very best, and the bridal party, plucking appetite out of the inevitable, enjoyed it hugely.

Even after the clear coffee and feathery waffles could tempt no longer, they had lingered to listen to the rector's genial flow of talk.

Mayor Blythe was just mounting his sober old horse as we dashed into his avenue at a slashing trot.

"Hello!" he cried, arresting one foot half-way over the beast. "Back so soon? And you, too, Anna? Why, we will have our Christmas dinner here, after all, then!"

"Oh, darling papa! You'll forgive us? Now promise you will!" and Bettie bounded from my side and threw her arms round the chief magistrate of Piketon.

"Forgive you, puss! why, of course I will. But for what?"

"Oh, papa, he's just the dearest fellow in the world! And he couldn't help it. 'Twas all my fault, wasn't it, now?" She turned to me.

"Not for the life of him!" I cried, slapping Tom on the back with wild hilarity. "He deserves the very best wife in the land, Mr. Blythe, and I'm sure he's found her!" Here I kissed

the bride's hand with a fervor that smacked again in the frosty air.

"*Wife!* what do you mean?" cried the mayor, descending rapidly from his saddle.

"Now, papa, don't be impatient—"

"Impatient! the devil! You'll drive me wild. Here"—this to me—"you seem to have your wits left: what does the girl mean?"

"But you forgive us? You promised to forgive us all, that's a darling old papa!" and throwing her arms round the bewildered mayor, she led him into the snug little parlor. Then she shut the door carefully after we had filed guiltily in.

"Now, you dear old papa, we all ran away, that is, Tom and I ran away—"

"*Ran away!*" roared the mayor, very red in the face.

"Yes, but it was my fault, wasn't it, Tom? and oh, papa, I'm so glad we did, and we married—"

"**MARRIED!**" The old gentleman's face was purple now.

"Yes, papa. At Dr. Lindsay's church, at

six o'clock. Now *don't* be angry, you dear, dear papa! And we married, that is, Tom married—Anna Belton!”

“Oh—oh!” whistled the mayor. “So *that's* the secret, is it? So you ran away with the golden fleece, you little Jason in petticoats!” and the old gentleman laid his hand kindly upon the golden locks of the blushing Mrs. Tom. “Well, I will promise not to be angry. Ah, Tom, boy, you are a lucky dog.”

“But—my aunt?” Mrs. Tom blushed and glanced slyly at her husband. “How can I tell *her*?”

“How she will rave! Why, I had quite forgotten her,” cried Mr. Blythe, with a furious fit of laughter. “To sleep with one eye open for ten years, and lose her treasure after all! Bad children! bad children! But I see I must be peace-maker; so I'll put off business to-day, and drive over to ‘Shadynook’ on that mission.”

“And, papa, you *must* make our peace with Aunt Belton, and you must bring her back to eat her Christmas dinner in forgiveness. Tell

her it is too late now, and she has nothing for it but forgiveness. And she can ride over, too, papa," added Miss Bettie, saucily, "for we left *her* horses and ran away with our own."

"She *shall* come, puss, even if I have to elope with her myself. But you can't tell what a shock you gave me, my baby, by your mystery, for you know, you rogue, I never mean to give *you* up!"

"Then, sir," I said, quietly, "after what she has told me this morning, we will have to come and live with you. For *I* never mean to give *her* up!"

It was Bettie's turn to blush now, down to the snowy ruffle against her delicate throat; but she put her loyal hand in mine and murmured, very gently:

"He loves me *so well*, papa!"





EPILOGUE.

F PAUSED. The liquid black eyes were raised quietly, and a rapid glance from mine flashed into them. They were subdued, brimming over now; and even as I looked, the oval face, crowned with its wealth of glossy hair—not a white thread marking it for all those eleven years—went down into the lace handkerchief on Bettie's lap. Something like a sob caused a shiver of the sloping shoulders.

No one spoke.

I glanced at the sofa. Mayor Blythe's head rested composedly upon his broad chest; the aged Cerberus of "Shadynook" leaned back in her corner, emitting nasal sounds that could not have been bettered by passage through the trumpet now lying useless at her feet. Mrs. Captain

Thomas Jones, U. S. A., had crept up to the gallant and bearded son of Mars whose name she bore, and her little white hand now rested gently against his ruddy cheek. But no one spoke.

I moved over to the table, and once more took a deep draught of recollection and egg-nogg, when suddenly little Blythe, raising his glorious eyes to those of the portly gentleman, said :

“ Papa, does he mean mamma ? ”

THE END.

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