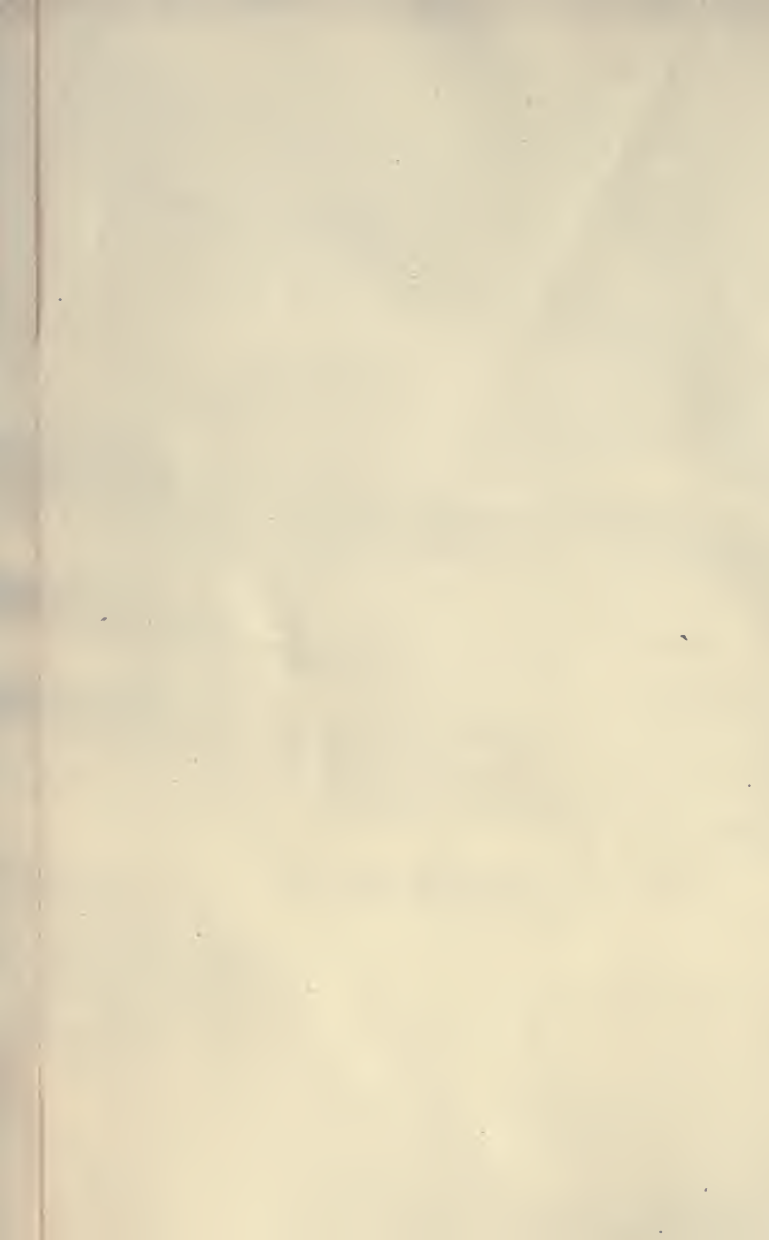


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THE COUNTY ROAD

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BY
ALICE BROWN



BOSTON AND NEW YORK
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REESE

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A DAY OFF



A DAY OFF

ABIGAIL BENNET stood by the kitchen table, her mixing-bowl before her. She hummed a little under her breath, as she paused, considering what to make. There were eggs on the table, in a round comfortable basket that had held successions of eggs for twenty years. There were flour and sugar in their respective boxes, and some butter in a plate. It was an April day, and Abigail's eyes wandered to the kitchen window at the sound of a bird-call from the elm. A smile lighted her worn face. The winter had been a hard one, and now it was over and gone. This, also, was a moment's peace in the midst of the day. Her husband was comfortably napping in the front room. He had broken his arm in midwinter, and that had temporarily disarranged the habit of his life. Abigail had not owned it, even to her most secret self, but she was tired of his innocent supervision of indoor affairs, the natural product of his idleness. Jonathan was a born meddler. He interfered for the general good, and usually it did no harm; for he was accustomed, in his best estate, to give minute orders at home, and then hurry

away to the hayfield or his fencing. Abigail scrupulously obeyed, but it was without the irritating consciousness of personal supervision. Now it was different.

As she felt the stillness of the day, and the warmth of the soft spring air blowing in at the window, she pushed back the bowl against her measuring-cup and made a little clink. Instantly, as if the sound had evoked it, a voice sprang from the sitting-room. Jonathan was awake.

“Nabby,” he called, “what you doin’?”

Abigail stood arrested for a moment, like a wood-creature startled on its way.

“My land!” she said, beneath her breath. Then she answered cheerfully, “I’m goin’ to stir up a mite o’ cake.”

“What kind?”

“Oh, I dunno’. One-two-three-four, mebbe.”

“Where’s that dried-apple pie we had yesterday?” inquired Jonathan, with the zest she knew. “Ain’t there enough for supper?”

“I dunno’ but there is.”

“Then what you makin’ cake for?”

“I dunno’. I thought mebbe we’d better have suthin’ on hand.”

“How many eggs is there in one-two-three-four?”

“Why, there’s two, when ye make half the

receipt." Abigail's tone was uniformly hearty and full of a zealous interest; but she shifted from one foot to the other, and made faces at the wall.

"Ain't there any kind o' cake you can stir up with one egg?"

"Why, there's cup cake; but it's terrible poor pickin', seems to me."

Jonathan rose and took his way to the kitchen. He appeared on the sill, tall and lank, his shrewd, bright-eyed face diversified by the long lines that creased the cheeks. Abigail stopped grimacing, and greeted him with woman's specious smile.

"Don't ye do it to-day," said Jonathan, not unkindly, but with the tone of an impeccable adviser. "You have the apple pie to-day, an' to-morrer you can stir up a cup cake. Eggs are scarce yit, an' they will be till the spring gits along a mite."

"Well," answered Abigail obediently.

She began setting away her cooking materials, and Jonathan, after smoothing his hair at the kitchen glass, put on his hat and went out. Presently she saw him, one foot on the stone wall, talking with a neighbor who had stopped his jogging horse on the way to market. There was a flurry of skirts on the stairs, and Claribel ran down, dressed in her blue cashmere, her

girdle in her hand. She had a wholesome, edible prettiness, all rounded contours and rich bloom.

"Here, mother," she called, and thrust the girdle at her. "This thing hooks behind. It's awful tight. You see if you can do it."

"You wait a minute," said Abigail. "I'll wash the flour off my hands." She went to the kitchen sink, and afterwards, standing at the roller-towel, she regarded Claribel with a fond delight that always amused the girl when she could stop to note it. Claribel had told her mother, before this, that she acted as if girls were worth a thousand dollars apiece. "My!" said Abigail, pulling discreetly at the hooks, "it is tight, ain't it? I'm afraid you'll feel all girted up."

"I'll hold my breath." She held it until her cheeks were bursting with bloom, and the girdle came together.

Abigail put up a tendril of hair in the girl's neck and smoothed a bit of lace.

"Now you hurry off," she said. "If I's you, I'd put on my things an' slip out the side door, whilst father 's out there talkin'."

Claribel was pinning on her hat at the glass. "What 's the matter of father?" she asked.

"Oh, nothin'! only he's got one o' his terrible times, — an' nobody to it, to-day. If he sees

you're goin' anywheres, like's not he'll set to an' plan it different."

"Well, he need n't," said Claribel. "I've got to have some Hamburg an' some number sixty cotton. I'll be back by noon."

"You don't want I should call out to Ebenezer an' ask him for a ride?" inquired her mother, at the window, a doubtful eye on the farmer still gossiping without.

"Now, mother!" Claribel laughed. "You know well enough what I'm goin' to do. I'm goin' to walk, an' Ballard 'll overtake me when he goes to get the mail. It's about time now."

"Well," said her mother, and she left the window and came to hold Claribel's jacket. "My soul!" she said despairingly. "There's your father now."

Jonathan's step was at the door. It was brisker than when it bore him forth. His face had lighted in new interest.

"Where you goin'?" he asked Claribel at once.

She was walking past him to the door.

"Oh, just up to the Corners," she answered casually. "I've got to have some things."

"You wait a spell," said Jonathan. He glanced into the glass, and decided he need not shave. "I'm goin' up along to git some onion-seed. Ebenezer says old Lang's got some, fust

quality, an' if we don't look out it'll all be gone."

"O father!" cried Abigail involuntarily.

"You come out an' help me git the bits in," said Jonathan to his wife. "I can manage the rest with one hand."

Claribel followed them hesitatingly out through the shed.

"Father," she began; but Jonathan never turned. "Father!"

"Well, what is it?" he called over his shoulder, and her mother dropped behind and walked with her.

"Don't you take on," urged Abigail. There were tears in her own eyes, and the warm air on her forehead made her think of youth as well as spring. "You know he can't drive very well, on'y one hand so. Don't you mind."

Claribel's tears also had sprung, and two big crystal globes ran out and splashed her cheeks.

"It was a kind of an agreement," she said passionately. "Ballard's got two watches picked out at Ferris's, and he wants me to see which one I like best. He'll be awful mad, and I shan't blame him."

"Father," called Abigail. "Father!" She ran on into the barn where he had the horse standing while he gave him an impatient one-handed brushing with a bundle of hay. "Father,

Claribel's made a kind of an agreement to go with Ballard. You wait a minute whilst I slip on my t'other dress, an' I'll go with ye."

"Here, you git in them bits," said Jonathan. "God sake! Don't you hender me when that onion-seed's goin' by the board. They'll be married in four weeks, won't they? Well, I guess Claribel can stan' it if she don't see him for twenty-four hours."

Abigail got the bits in, and went on deftly harnessing. She spoke but once. That was when Claribel came and began to fasten a trace.

"Go 'way, dear," said the mother, in an eloquent tenderness. "You'll git horse-hairs all over you."

Then Claribel stepped silently into the wagon; her father followed her, and they drove away.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when they came home. Jonathan was in high spirits. He had got his onion-seed; and then, having heard of an auction, five miles farther on, where there was a cultivator as good as new, he had bought some crackers and cheese at the grocery and driven there. He and Claribel had eaten their lunch in the wagon, and then Claribel had sat drearily by while her father bid and reft bargains away from other bidders. Now Claribel was heavy-eyed, and her mouth looked pitiful. She ate sparingly of the early supper her mother

set out for them, and then, after washing the dishes, sat awhile by the window in the dusk. Her mother knew she was watching; but Ballard did not come, and at nine o'clock the girl walked droopingly off to bed.

Abigail was late in going to sleep that night. She lay looking into the darkness, tears sometimes gathering in her eyes and then softly wiped away on a corner of the sheet. It was not that she failed to bear a little disappointment for Claribel; but, to her mind, youth was youth. There were times when one wanted things, and if they had to be put off, they were not the same. One bud could never open twice.

When breakfast was over, Jonathan settled himself in the sitting-room with the county paper, and Claribel slipped into the pantry and beckoned her mother. The girl spoke shyly:

"I don't know but I'll run over to Ballard's and ask his mother for that skirt pattern."

"So do," said Abigail, with understanding.

"You see"—Claribel went on. She bent her head, and the corners of her mouth trembled. "I don't want you should think I'm foolish; but yesterday was a kind of a particular day with us. 'T was a year ago yesterday we were engaged, and it was kind of understood we were going to look at the watch together. The reason I told Ballard I'd walk along and let

him overtake me — well, I did n't dare to have him come here, for fear father'd spoil it somehow. And then he saw me drive by with father, and not a word to say why, and father was in a hurry and would n't let me stop,—and if I was in Ballard's place I should be mad as fire."

"You go right over," responded Abigail, something throbbing in her voice. "Slip out the porch door, and clip it right along."

Again Abigail stood at the table, her mixing-bowl before her, and at the clink of her spoon Jonathan's voice came promptly from the other room:

"Nabby, what you doin' of?"

This time her muttered exclamation had the fierceness of accumulated wrongs, but she added cheerfully:

"I'm mixin' up a mite o' cake."

"What kind?"

For an instant Abigail compressed her lips, and then she added, desperately, as one whose resolve had hardened:

"Cup cake."

"How many eggs?"

"One." At the instant of speaking, she took two eggs from the basket and, one in either hand, broke them at the same instant upon the edge of the bowl. Jonathan's ears were keen, but they did not serve him against the testimony

of that one innocent crack. Abigail beat them hastily, and pouring them into her butter and sugar, breathed again.

“You call Claribel. I want her to help me a mite down sullar,” said Jonathan, on his way to the kitchen.

Abigail, at his step, crumpled one eggshell in her hand and hastily thrust it into the coals. She laid a light stick over it.

“I want to have her sprout some o’ them ’taters in the arch.”

“She can’t do it this forenoon,” said his wife glibly. “She’s gone out.”

“Where?”

“Down to Mis’ Towle’s. I sent her to carry back that peck measure you borrered last week.”

A strange exhilaration possessed her. Abigail did not remember to have lied willfully in all her life before. Her difficult way had been, against all temptation, to tell the bare truth and suffer for it; but now that she had begun to lie, she liked it. She looked at her husband, as he stood in the doorway gazing innocently over her head at the window where the spring made a misty picture, and wondered what he would say if he guessed what was in her heart. She hardly thought herself, save that it was something new and wild: the resolve to say anything that came

into her head, and take the consequences. Jonathan was pondering.

“Why,” said he slowly, at last, “seems to me I carried back that peck measure myself, day or two ago.”

Now Abigail remembered seeing him walk out of the yard with it in his hand; but she did not flinch.

“Oh, no, you did n’t! Claribel’s just took it.”

There was another pause, and Jonathan spoke again.

“Claribel asked me for some money t’other day. Said she wanted to git two more gowns. You think she needs ’em?”

“I know she does,” returned Abigail vigorously. “You don’t want she should walk out o’ this house without a stitch to her back, do ye, an’ have Ballard set to an’ clothe her?”

“You gi’n her any money this winter?”

Abigail remembered her hard-won store of butter-and-eggs money, put aside from the moment Ballard had begun his courting, and she remembered the day when she and Claribel had stolen off to the Corners to spend the precious store in fine cloth and trimming. But she looked her husband straight in the eye.

“Not a cent,” she answered, and liked the sound of it.

“Well,” concluded Jonathan, “I’ll hand her

some to-morrer. I'll make it what you think 's best."

For a moment her heart softened, but Jonathan spoke again:

"You ain't a-goin' to make weddin' cake, be ye?"

The strange part of her new communion with him was that, as her tongue formed the lie, her mind flashed a picture of the truth before her. Now she had a swift vision of the day when he had gone to town meeting, and she and Claribel had baked the wedding cake, in furious haste, and set it away to mellow.

"No," said she calmly; "I ain't a-goin' to make no cake. I got a little on hand."

"When 'd ye have it?"

"Oh, I dunno'! I got a loaf or two."

"Well," Jonathan ruminated, "I dunno's I remember your bakin' any."

"I did n't bake it. 'T was some Aunt Lucretia left in her crock when she moved out West." She thought with wonder of the ease with which new worlds could be created merely by the tongue. It gave her a sense of lightness and freedom. She could almost forgive Jonathan for meddling, since he had introduced her to these brilliant possibilities.

"That's terrible yeller for one egg," he commented, as she poured her cake into the pan.

“It had two yolks,” said Abigail calmly. She felt an easy mastery of him. Then she closed the oven door, cleared off her cooking table, and sat down to sew.

This was one of the days when Jonathan seemed possessed by the spirit of discovery. He took up a bit of edging from the window-sill, and held it in a clumsy hand.

“How much do ye pay for that trade?” he inquired.

“Two cents,” responded Abigail.

“Two cents! That’s more’n two cents a yard!”

“No. It’s a cent an’ a half a yard an’ five yards for two cents. We got five.”

“I never heerd o’ such carryin’s on.” Jonathan spoke helplessly. “They can’t do business that way.”

“They do.” She spoke conclusively.

He took up another wider remnant. This was a coarse lace.

“How much d’ye pay for that?” he asked.

“Nothin’,” said Abigail. “I made it.”

Jonathan ruminated. He felt exceedingly puzzled. It was not that he distrusted her. No moment of their life together had failed to convince him that she was honest as the day.

“I dunno’s I ever see you doin’ anything like

that," he commented. "How'd ye do it? Looks as if 't was wove."

"I done it on pins," said Abigail wildly.

"Common pins?"

"No. Clo'es-pins."

Jonathan frowned and gazed at her, still reflecting.

"Mebbe you could make some to sell," he ventured. "Looks as if there might be some profit in 't."

"I don't want no profit," returned his wife, unmoved, and Jonathan presently went out to the barn, ruminating by the way.

Then when his step had ceased on the shed floor, Abigail laid down her sewing. She looked briefly up to heaven, as if she interrogated the bolt that was presently to stun her; but the bolt did not fall, and she began to laugh. She laughed until the tears came, and her face, suffused with mirth, looked a dozen years to the good. She dried her eyes, but without wiping away any of that new emotion. She could not yet blame herself for anything so rare.

The noon dinner was on the table, and Claribel had not come. Her mother had set forth a goodly meal, and she talked cheerfully through it. But Jonathan was never to be quite distracted.

"Where's Claribel?" he asked, with his second piece of pie.

“She ain’t comin’,” answered her mother, at random. “I’ll set suthin’ out on the pantry-shelf, an’ she can have it when she wants.”

Jonathan paused, with a choice morsel on the way to his mouth.

“You don’t s’pose she’s fetched up at Ballard’s an’ stayed there to dinner, do ye?” he asked.

“Well, what if she has?”

“Nothin’, only I wanted to know. I’d step over there arter dinner an’ fetch her.”

Abigail laid down her fork. She spoke with the desperation of one already lost.

“Now, father, I’ll tell ye plainly, I ain’t goin’ to have Claribel disturbed. She’s up-chamber, layin’ down with a sick headache, an’ I’ve turned the key in the door.”

“Well, ye need n’t ha’ done that,” Jonathan wondered. “She might as well sleep it off.”

“I’ll sprout the ’taters,” she asserted vigorously, “but I ain’t a-goin’ to have her round with a headache an’ git all beat out so she don’t do a stitch o’ work to-morrer.”

Jonathan said nothing, and after dinner she sped upstairs, locked the door of Claribel’s room, and put the key in her pocket. Then, with a mind at ease, she washed her dinner dishes and went down cellar. There she sprouted potatoes with a swift dexterity and a

joyous heart. Claribel was abroad somewhere, she knew, roaming the free world. That was enough.

At five Jonathan finished his nap, and came heavily to the door above.

"Here, you," he called. "I've be'n up-chamber to find out how Claribel is. The door's locked an' there ain't no key inside. You got the key?"

Abigail rose and dusted the dirt from her hands. Her task was done.

"No," said she. "I ain't got no key."

"I thought you said you locked the door. Did n't you take the key?"

Abigail was mounting the cellar stairs. She faced him calmly.

"No, I never said any such thing," she returned, with an easy grace. "Clary's locked it, I s'pose. If she don't answer, she's asleep. You let her be, Jonathan. It's no way to go routin' anybody out when they've got a headache."

"Well," said Jonathan, and grumbled off to the barn.

Abigail felt more and more under the spell of her new system. It swept her like a mounting flood. She had lied all day. It was easy and she liked it. With a mirthful feeling that some compensation was due Jonathan, she made

cream-of-tartar biscuits and opened quince preserve. The one-two-three-four cake was golden within and sweetly brown on top; it had not suffered from the artifice that went to the making of it.

The door opened and Claribel came in. She had her jacket on her arm, and her cheeks were all a crimson bloom. A fine gold chain was about her neck, and immediately she drew a watch from her belt and opened it, with a child's delight.

"Look, mother, look!" she cried. The words followed one another in a rapid stream. "He wa'n't mad a mite. He said he knew 't was something I could n't help. And we went and got it, and had dinner at the hotel. I guess I shan't ever forget this day long's I live."

Abigail was holding the watch, spellbound over its beauty. But at that she broke into a laugh, wild and mirthless.

"No," said she, "no. I guess I shan't either."

"Mother, what you mean?" The girl was answering in a quick alarm. "Anything happened to you?"

Abigail quieted at once.

"No, dear, no," she said. "I've had a real nice day. On'y I've kinder worried for fear you would n't see Ballard, an' all. Now you take

off your things, an' father 'll be in, an' we 'll have supper."

But when they were sitting at the table, Jonathan kept glancing at Claribel, her red cheeks and brilliant eyes.

"Ain't you kinder feverish?" he asked, and Abigail answered:

"See here, father. Ballard's give her a watch. Ain't that handsome?"

Jonathan turned it over and over in his hand.

"I guess it cost him suthin'," he remarked. "Well, to-morrer we 'll see if we can't git together a little suthin' more for clo'es."

Claribel went to bed early, to dream, with her watch under her pillow, and the husband and wife sat together by the fire below. When the clock struck nine, they rose, in lingering unison, and made ready to go upstairs. Abigail cleared her sewing from the table, and Jonathan shut the stove dampers and wound the clock.

"They 've got that feller over to the Corners," he announced, as he waited for her to set back the chairs.

"What feller?"

"The one that stole Si Merrill's team. They clapped him into jail, an' I guess there 'll be consid'able of a time over it. He had n't a word to say."

Abigail was standing before him, her hands

clasped under her apron, as if they were cold. Her face looked tired and pale. She spoke with a passionate insistence.

“Jonathan, I’ve found out suthin’. It don’t do to do the leastest thing that’s wrong.”

“Why, no,” Jonathan acquiesced, getting a newspaper and laying it before the hearth for the morning’s kindling. “Anybody’s likely to git took up for it.”

“It ain’t that,” said Abigail. Her small face had grown tense from the extremity of terrible knowledge. “You might go along quite a spell an’ not git found out. It’s because” — She halted a moment, and her voice dropped a note — “it’s because wrong-doin’s so pleasant.”

“You take the lamp,” said Jonathan. Then he remembered that the argument should be clinched, and added, with his Sunday manner:

“The way o’ the transgressor is hard.”

“It ain’t,” asserted Abigail, at the stairs. “It’s elegant. It’s enough to scare ye to death, ye have such a good time in it, an’ ye go so fast. It’s like slidin’ down hill an’ the wind at your back. Mebbe the feller that stole Si’s team grabbed an apple off’n a tree once an’ that started him. I don’t blame him. I don’t blame nobody.”

Jonathan was beginning the ascent, and she paused and looked back at the kitchen, as if

there were the inanimate witnesses of her perfidy.

“I’ve had a splendid day,” she said aloud. “I’ve had the best time I’ve had for years. I ain’t ever goin’ to have another like it. I don’t dast to. ’T would n’t take much to land me in jail. But I ain’t sorry, an’ I ain’t a-goin’ to say I be.”

“What you doin’ of down there?” called Jonathan. “Who you talkin’ to?”

“I’m comin’,” said Abigail. “I’ll bring the light.”

OLD IMMORTALITY

OLD IMMORTALITY

OLD John Buckham stood at the kitchen door, watching his wife while she picked her way along the path between his house and the Fosters'. It was early spring, and there was still snow in crusty patches; but the path was kept open in all weather because Mrs. Buckham liked to take that way. She came slowly, her slender figure wrapped in its Irish cloak and her sweet winter-apple face looking out from the quilted hood.

"You be careful there!" shouted old John. "It's all of a glare of ice."

Mrs. Buckham reached the doorstone safely, and there she stamped her feet and shook her skirts free of fringing frost.

"No, 't ain't either," she said, in a pleasant treble. "You've laid so much ashes down it'll all spring up clover, come next May."

Her husband was a tall, clean-looking man with an aquiline nose, and whimsical lines about the firm-cut mouth. He put out a hand to help her into the kitchen, but she repulsed him with a little pat like the quick play of a cat's paw. She spoke in a merry tenderness:

"There! there! I ain't a hunderd."

She was taking off her hood by the kitchen stove, her husband standing by, when he remarked incidentally:

"Mr. Blaisdell 's in the fore-room."

"Mr. Blaisdell! Not our minister?"

"Yes."

"In the fore-room? He must be froze."

"No, he ain't. I blazed a fire. I should ha' set him down here by the kitchen sto', but I thought you 'd have a conniption fit."

"Well!" she smoothed her hair with both hands, and turned toward the parlor door. "What 's he want? Anything particular?" she asked, in a manner suited to ecclesiastical themes.

"Oh, jest a visitation, I guess," said old John. Then his jaw stiffened perceptibly, and he added, "He 's heerd 'em call me 'Old Immortality,' an' he wants to bring me to book for sayin' I expect to live forever."

"John!"

"There! there, Mary! don't you mind. You need n't go in if you don't want to. He can talk to me from now till cockcrow. Do him good."

"Well, I guess I shall go in," said Mrs. Buckham, and she lifted the latch and entered the parlor, her husband following.

The minister sat there by the air-tight stove,

in the guarded calm of an atmosphere not yet thawed beyond a short and torrid radius. He was a light, thick-set young man with an earnest look and no sign of humor yet developed in him. He rose to meet his hostess in her dignified approach, and listened to her "Pleased to see you," with some lessening of tension. John Buckham threatened to be a hard nut to crack, and the calm old woman seemed at once to promise some amelioration of the hour. She sat down within scorching distance of the stove; but old John took a chair by the window, and with a careful finger followed a line of frost upon the pane. To his wife's experienced eye he looked like a boy detected in misdoing, and bent on at least smudging the window while his guilt was being reckoned; but the minister's glance was on her, and she denied herself even a warning headshake. The young man made two or three conversational forays into fields bounded by the weather and the hygienic value of his own brisk walk from town. Then, with an unhappy haste, he caught up a thread of talk where it had been broken.

"Your husband and I, Mrs. Buckham, have been having a little discussion. Rather, I might say, I hope to lead him into one. Of course I was hardly settled here when they told me 'Old Immortality' does n't intend to die. I

was greatly interested. I felt that I ought to know the grounds of his assurance,— or, I might call it, his belief.”

Old John’s face lighted with an emotion desperately summoned.

“Ever hear,” he asked ingratiatingly, “of the man down by Peppermint Bridge that ’s tryin’ to invent a dog-barker?”

“No,” said the minister, with a hopeful courtesy. He did not know old John. He could believe, until the moment of enlightenment, that even theoretical dog-barkers had some bearing on a life beyond the grave.

Old John continued, with a false assurance, avoiding his wife’s eye:

“He ’s been to work a matter o’ ten year with two pieces o’ wood an’ a kind of a bellus he got out of an old melodeon. When it ’s done, he ’s goin’ to take out a patent on it. ‘Hendrick’s Dog-barker,’ that ’s what it ’s goin’ to be named — ‘Hendrick’s Dog-barker!’”

Mrs. Buckham sat straight and tall, as if chair-backs had no meaning. A tiny spot of red burned on each cheek; her hands were folded. She could not bring her mate to shame by public censure; he knew that, and he was trading on it.

The minister laughed briefly, following old John’s lead.

“I hardly see the utility of such a notion,” he hesitated.

“Great sale for a thing like that,” declared old John. “Give one o’ the handles a h’ist, fill up the bellus with air, an’ then let her go, an’ she barks out jes’ like a little yappin’ dog. A child could work it. Widders an’ old maids ’d buy ’em by the hunderd an’ keep ’em in the front entry to guard the premises. ‘Hendrick’s Dog-barker!’” He laughed softly to himself, yet his guilty eye wandered to avoid his wife.

“The man is undoubtedly insane,” said the minister sharply.

“Oh, no! Hendrick ain’t insane. He ’s got a kind of an ingenious turn o’ mind, that ’s all. But they ’re a queer set down there to Peppermint Bridge. Why, winter ’fore last, the night school meetin’ was app’inted it snowed great guns. Some o’ the young fellers got through the drifts an’ they hil’ the meetin’, an’ got a majority, an’ voted to build the new schoolhouse out o’ slippery-elm.”

Mrs. Buckham had not spoken, and for the moment old John felt the irresponsible joy of one escaping penalty.

“Peppermint Bridge!” he repeated, careering on. “I guess so! The things that go on there ’d fill a Bible. There was Deacon Bray; as soon as he moved into his new house he let the

old one to a couple o' school-teachers from Boston. Well, they come down along the last o' June an' settled themselves, an' the first Sunday over walks the deacon's two boys — reg'lar black sheep they be" —

"John," said Mrs. Buckham, "you put in another stick o' wood."

Old John brought his lean length upright and opened the stove door with a cheerful "Gee!" and a shake of his burned fingers. But he went on: "Over comes the two boys and says, 'Ain't there no jobs you 'd like to have done? We 'd be real pleased,' says they. The schoolma'ams let 'em split some kindlin' an' mow round under the apple-trees an' clean up the sullar, an' every Sunday they 'd come as reg'lar as a clock an' work like silkworms. The deacon he 'd gone off to meetin', ye see, so he never sensed what was goin' on. The boys never set foot inside the meetin'-house, an' he 'd give up expectin' it. They struck on that when they got their majority. Well, so 't went on. The schoolma'ams kinder set 'em off to the neighbors. 'Our admirers,' they called 'em. 'Our admirers!' Well, there 't was. The schoolma'ams had their summer, and went off in the fall. Next summer they took the house ag'in, but no boys! They saved up jobs an' done 'em themselves, an' then they curled their hair an' put up their

parasols an' walked over to deacon's to say how much they liked the place."

"John!" warned his mate.

"But them boys had slipped into the vast unknown. One day one o' the schoolma'ams could n't stan' it no longer, an' she says to old Elbridge Lane they 'd hired to do some o' the jobs the boys never applied for,—she says, 'Where's our two admirers?' says she. Elbridge leaned on his scythe an' begun to wheeze. He ain't got a tooth in his head except two in front, in the receipt o' custom, he keeps to stiddy his pipe an' whistle through. 'Well,' says Elbridge, 'did n't you know what they come for?' The schoolma'am bridled. She wa'n't any too young. 'They offered to do our work,' says she. 'Why,' says Elbridge, — 'why, last year Deacon Bray left his hard cider stored in your sullar, an' this summer 't ain't here.'" Old John was lying at ease in the great rocker, his legs outstretched, his doom for the moment forgotten. He opened his well-furnished mouth and roared; but in the midst the silence blighted him, and he looked from the minister to his wife with a relaxing jaw. "Well!" said he, — "well!"

No conversational tactics would serve his purpose. The minister was not diverted.

"Mr. Buckham," said he, rather sharply, "I

am told you made the statement at Friday evening meeting that you did n't expect to die."

Old John sat upright and put the tips of his fingers together. His face settled into an extreme seriousness. This was his look when matters were under discussion at town meeting and the issue was grave.

"Yes," he answered, "I said that."

"Did you refer to your immortality after death?"

"I referred," said old John, bringing his fist down on his knee, "to the life I'm livin' now right here in Rockin'ham County. I said I should n't die, an' I ain't a-goin' to."

"What basis have you for your belief? No doubt you can give me chapter and verse."

"I don't base it on chapters nor verses. I base it on what I know. There is no need o' my dyin', an' I ain't a-goin' to."

"Where do you get your assurance, Mr. Buckham?"

"I feel it. That's enough for me."

"Do you assume that others can taste of the same immortality?"

"I don't know anything about that," said old John obstinately. "That's their lookout. I only know I ain't a-goin' to die."

His wife began speaking in a tremulous key. Two tears were on her cheeks.

“He ain’t ever had a day’s sickness in his life. His teeth is as sound as a nut. They ain’t ever ached, an’ he ’s kep’ all his hair” —

“There, there, Mary!” said her husband, with a whimsical tenderness; “anybody ’d think you wanted to see me droppin’ to pieces like a feather duster.” But when she put her handkerchief to her eyes the sight enraged him, and he turned to the young man. “Now look here,” said he, “le’ ’s have it out here an’ now. I ain’t a-goin’ to have anybody comin’ into my house an’ stirrin’ up strife, let him be what he will. I don’t believe I ’m goin’ to die. There, now! put that in your pipe an’ smoke it. If you think I don’t believe the Bible, you can think so. If you think I ain’t fit to go to the communion table, you can say so an’ I ’ll keep out. But as for sayin’ I ’m goin’ to die an’ be buried underground, I won’t — for I know I ain’t. There! that ’s my last word.”

“Well!” said the minister, in his turn, — “well!” And he rose to go. He got out of the house in a dazed fashion, with a shake of the hand judiciously graduated to express sympathy with the wife and admonition to the husband. But at the door he paused.

“I should be extremely sorry, Mr. Buckham,” he said, with an awkward honesty, “if you should stay away from the communion table, or

if I have in any manner" — He turned to the wife with a boyish smile. "You bring him along, Mrs. Buckham," he ended. "Don't you let him stay out of the fold."

"There!" said old John, as he and his wife entered the house together, "he ain't a bad little chap." But his valiant demeanor had shrunk; he was a conciliatory figure casting droll, beseeching eyes at the woman he wished to please. His wife knew her power at such crises. She was sorry for him, but he had mixed his cup, and he must taste it. She went in with the step of a justly offended woman and took up her knitting by the kitchen fire. Old John fidgeted about the room and found himself perfunctory occupations. He opened the clock door and touched the pendulum stealthily, like an idle boy. Then he tore a strip of paper from the edge of the county "Star" and began to make a lamplighter; but his great fingers got in his way, and he gave it up.

"Oh, the dogs!" he said.

He looked at Mary. There was a little tremble at the corner of her mouth. He knew it well.

"You want I should put another stick o' wood in the fore-room sto'?" he asked hopefully.

"No, I guess not," she answered. Her tone

had a gentle neutrality most discouraging. Old John's temperature fell.

"Oh!" said he. He went to the window and stood drumming on the pane. He began watching the road, and contracted his gaze in the manner of one who sees unexpected succor. "Mary!" cried he joyously. "Here's doctor!"

"The land suz!" cried Mary, rising and rolling up her yarn. "He ain't goin' by, is he?"

"No, he's turnin' in. I'll go out an' see if he won't drive into the barn." He passed her to get his hat; but he laid a hand on her shoulder and said, "Darn the ministers!"

"There! there!" said Mary. They were friends again.

The old lady "clipped it" about the kitchen and set out a dish of red apples, and a pitcher for John to get the doctor a glass of cider, if he would. When the two men came in, she was waiting for them in a smiling expectation. The doctor was a young man with sandy hair and knowing spectacles.

"How's the nicest woman in the world?" he asked of Mrs. Buckham.

Her mouth relaxed, in spite of her.

"There! there!" she said. "You let me take your hat. John, you get his coat off. He's 'most froze."

"No, I'm not," said the doctor, standing in

front of the stove and regarding them as if they were "own folks" whom he had found after long absence. "I'm warm all through the minute I get in here. John, you old sinner, are you still going to live forever?"

Old John grinned at him, but he answered obstinately: "Yes, I be goin' to live forever, unless I miss my calculations, an' I don't see no signs on 't."

"Took out your patent yet?" asked the doctor.

Mrs. Buckham passed him the apples, and he split one with a twist of his strong hands.

"Going to keep the stock all to yourself, or do you think you could let the rest of us come in for a share or two?"

John stole a look at his wife.

"What's the matter, Buckham?" asked the doctor. "You look guilty; been stealing sheep?"

"I'll tell you what's the matter of him," said the wife. Yet old John was not afraid; fair-weather signals were in her look. "He's been talkin' to the minister about livin' forever, an' I had to set by an' hear it."

The doctor threw back his head and laughed.

"Talked to the minister, did you, John?" he asked. "Wouldn't back down a peg, would you?"

"I ain't a-goin' to back down when I'm in the right," said old John sulkily.

"I bet you ain't. Say, John, what you going

to do all the time you 're living forever? You don't s'pose it 'll kind of pall on you after a while, do you?"

"I ain't a-goin' to live forever all in one day," said old John scornfully, as if he accepted a trifling argument. "I ain't got to take it like a dose o' bitters. There'll be one day, an' then there'll be another day, an' that's all there is about it."

"And first you know, you'll find you've lived forever. Well, I hope it 'll turn out as pleasant as you think."

"I don't know whether it 's goin' to turn out pleasant or not," said John. "That ain't what I'm layin' my plans for. I'm jest goin' to do it, that's all — I'm goin' to be here. Some things about it are kinder pleasant. Last May I was over to Abel Tolman's when he was settin' out some young apple-trees. Abel's a year younger 'n I be. 'What's the use?' says he. 'They won't bear for three years, an' mebbe I shan't be alive to eat 'em.'"

"Yes, an' what did father do then?" said the old wife. There was a clinging fondness in her tone. "He came home an' brought up one o' them late russets out o' the sullar, an' eat it an' went out an' planted the seeds."

"Yes; I did," said John. "An' I says to myself, 'Them seeds 'll come up an' I 'll watch 'em

grow, an' when it comes time I'll graft 'em, an' I'll see 'em blow an' see 'em rot for all Abel Tolman.' An' Abel Tolman could do the same if he had any seem to him."

"Well," said the doctor, "I should n't wonder if you did, you're such an obstinate old dog. Now I must go along. Mrs. Buckham, I saw your niece this morning."

"She's sick!" said the old lady, in responsive fright.

"No, she's not. Her little girl's sick."

"There, there! Mary!" said old John. He put out a hand to her, and she drew a step nearer and rested her fingers on his arm.

"What is it?" she asked the doctor.

"Well, she's got a cold on her lungs."

"There's lots of lung fever 'round," trembled the old lady. "That little creatur'! John, you harness up an' take me right over there."

John sat down by the fire.

"I shan't harness up an' I shan't take you over there," said he. "Doctor, you look here. She's been up three nights this week with the Fosters, an' she's all beat out. If anybody's goin' to Mandy's, I will. I can wash dishes an' I can set up nights. Mary, you know I can. Did n't I do it that other winter John was down in Maine loggin', an' you was over to the Fosters' bringin' 'em through the measles?"

The old wife stood by the fire, her hands trembling and soft beseechment in her face. The doctor went up to her, and stroked her shoulder.

“Look here,” said he, “I guess he’s right for once. You’re pretty well run down with the Fosters” —

“She’s all beat out,” John growled.

“If you get over there you’ll have a fit of — homesickness. You just let your husband go and see how things are. I’ll take him over myself, this afternoon, and he can spend one night anyway. The big Foster boy’ll stay with you, won’t he? And I’ll drive round in the morning.”

The old wife cried briefly over the “little creatur’” sick without her, but she was curiously tired; so, with an abatement of spirit that affected her with a mild wonderment, as it did her husband, she yielded, and in half an hour the two men had driven away. As they were jingling out of the yard, old John laid his mitted hand on the reins. The doctor pulled up. The husband turned a troubled face back to the house, where the slender figure stood in the doorway, erect and purposeful, and yet somehow appealing.

“Say, Mary,” he called, “you’re goin’ to be all right, ain’t you?”

"Course I 'm all right," she answered, with the thin sweetness of her tender voice. "You won't get there 'fore dark."

That was a week of snow. John stayed at Mandy's and did chores, and the doctor brought him daily news of his wife. She was well. She was tired. Then she was ill. The baby was out of danger, but John ceased to think of the baby in that moment of alarm. He followed the doctor to the sleigh, and took the place beside him. For half the way neither of them spoke. Then, as they were flying along the Evergreen Mile, where woods darken the road on both sides, old John said, in an unmoved voice:

"I s'pose it 's on her lungs?"

"Yes," returned the doctor.

There was another space of hurrying flight, and then old John remarked:

"When the old parson had it, he was out of his head."

"Yes," said the doctor gently, flicking at the horse. "She won't know you."

"How long did he hold out?"

"Parson?"

"Yes."

"Three days."

Mrs. Foster was at the kitchen stove, when they went in, stirring something in a saucepan.

Her broad back, saluting old John, gave him that pang of distaste struck out in us when we find even a kindly alien inheriting our home. She turned on them her mild face, now creased with worryment.

“There ain’t any change,” she said to the doctor, briefly, in answer to his look. He nodded, walked into the bedroom, and closed the door behind him.

Old John took off his coat and hat, and hung them in their places with a dull remembrance of the old wife’s play at anger over his untidy ways. Then he waited by the stove, warming his cold hands; and Mrs. Foster, after another look at him, drew a chair toward him, but did not speak. The doctor came out, preoccupied and grim, and without a word to either of them, walked out of the house. The old man followed him to the sleigh, and stood there, his hair blowing in the wind. Tears were in his eyes. His mouth worked.

“God A’mighty!” he broke out, when the doctor gathered up the reins. “Ain’t you goin’ to speak?”

“I’ll be back by seven,” said the doctor.

Old John stood there for a moment watching him drive into the west, where there was a line of saffron light. It was an unfriendly world. Even the sky seemed strange. He stood there

with the cold aloofness of it pressing upon his heart, and rousing in him the sickness of accepted grief. Then he crept into the kitchen, where there was no sound but the humming of the kettle on the stove. He stole on tiptoe to the bedroom door. Mrs. Foster sat by the bedside, her kind eyes bent on the pathetic figure there, her hand on Mrs. Buckham's wrist. She looked up, at the creaking of a board, and rose responsive, with a motion bidding him take her place. He did it, terrified lest Mary should be roused and greet him with unrecognizing eyes. But she did not stir, and he sat there while the dusk fell and neighbors stole into the kitchen with cautious feet. The doctor came and went, and in the evening a watcher took Mrs. Foster's orders, and there was tea at midnight and food eaten with a hushed solemnity. The day dawned in a wintry glow, and she was no better. Old John stumbled to the kitchen lounge, and covering himself with his army overcoat, fell asleep. That forenoon the minister came. Old John was sitting over the fire, his hands hanging between his knees, his head drooped over them. He looked up and nodded, and the minister laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"I saw Doctor Braintree in the post-office," said the minister.

"Yes," said old John, "I think's likely."

The minister hesitated. "Shall I" — he said. "Could I see her?"

"No."

"I was afraid not. May I pray with you?"

"Do's ye like," said old John listlessly — "do's ye like."

When the prayer was over, the minister stood there unhappily drawing on his gloves and longing to comfort his poor flock. Old John looked at him with dull eyes.

"You need n't fret yourself about my livin' forever," he said bitterly. "Makes me laugh to think on't. It's all over an' done."

"What's over?" asked the minister.

"What I said about livin' forever. You can tell 'em all. You can git up in meetin' an' tell 'em if you want. Tell 'em old John's give it up."

"That is n't important," said the minister. "It does n't matter how long we live."

"It does, too," said old John fiercely. "Don't tell me it don't matter. Not when the only creatur's took away that made ye live? You look-a-here. She's goin' to die. If there's any place for her, there's a place for me, an' my place is there an' nowher's else."

"Living or dying," said the minister softly, "we are the Lord's."

"No wonder they hooted an' laughed," old

John went on, in the same tone of dull retrospection. "They said everything died an' was changed into suthin'. I never thought o' her dyin'. We've done everything together for over forty year. We've 'most breathed together. I s'pose I thought if I kep' alive it 'd keep her alive, too. But I can't. I ain't got no more power ag'inst the way things go than if I was a drop o' water in the sea."

"We shall be changed," said the minister.

"She's got to have her powder," said John, rising, and the minister went away.

Another day dragged by, and at dusk the doctor came on old John, with his milk pails, plodding in from the barn. This was the third visit for the day, and John had not expected him. It was the first time he had not waited outside the bedroom door to hear the verdict. When he saw the doctor the strength of his arms failed him. He set down his pails and waited. Again the west was yellow. To the doctor the light was lovely. He called out as he came:

"Well, Old Immortality, feel as if you were in the first quarter of eternity or 'long about the full?"

Old John's face had the immobility of wonted grief. "It's gone out o' me," he said. "The peth has all gone out o' me."

"No, it has n't, either," said the doctor.

“It’s only run down into your boots. See here; I did n’t tell you what I thought this morning. I know it now. She’s going to live.”

It seemed a long time before the old man could draw the world back into his vision.

“Live?” he repeated. “Is Mary goin’ to live?”

“Of course she is. You don’t suppose we’ve had this fight for nothing?”

Old John turned upon him a face exquisitely radiant of hope. His hand shook as he laid it upon his trembling mouth, and the doctor threw one arm about his shoulder.

“We’ll feed her up,” said he. “She’ll know you fast enough. To-morrow you can go on living forever.”

Old John took off his hat and stood there bareheaded to the sky. “I’m goin’ to do what the rest do,” he said. “It’s better. Stay a little while an’ then travel the same road. What if I’d lived to set under them apple-trees we talked about, an’ set there all alone? No. I’m goin’ the app’nted way.”

Three weeks after that the pale little old woman sat by the window, not near enough for any draught to strike her, but so that she could see old John tinkering the gate, and looking up to satisfy his eyes, from time to time, that she

was there. Young Tolman drove up for a moment's halt, and called to him:

"Father's got over that spell o' his. He wanted I should tell you he wa' n't goin' to hand in his checks yet a while."

Old John lifted himself from his labor, laid the hammer on the gate, took off his hat, and passed a hand over his forehead. "Well," he returned moderately, "you tell him it's the road we've all got to travel."

"That's new doctrine for you," said young Tolman. "I thought you're goin' to live forever. Could n't ye git your patent?"

"I ain't goin' to apply."

"Give it up? Can't ye resk it?"

The light of controversy lighted up John's face. "I could if I'd a mind to," said he. "All is, I've made up my mind to train with the company."

BACHELOR'S FANCY

BACHELOR'S FANCY

CYNTHIA GALE sat by the window in the long shed chamber, her hands at momentary ease. She was a slight, sweet creature, with a delicate skin, and hair etherealized by ashen coverts. Her eyes were dark, and beauty throbbled into them with drifting thoughts. Cynthia was tired. She had been at work at the loom since the first light of day, and now she had given up to the languor of completed effort, her head thrown back, her arms along the arms of the chair, in an attitude of calm. Her hair had slipped from its coil, and fallen at the sides of her face in gentle disarray. She was very lovely.

The room, the scene of her toil and resting, was dark with age and significant in tokens of a disused art. The loom stood well in the centre, its great upright beams obstructing the light from window to window. All about were the lesser implements of a weaver's trade: the linen wheel, the reels and swifts. On a chest were skeins of indigo-blue yarn Cynthia had dyed, and near by, the flaxen thread she had unearthed from an ancient hoard under the rafters.

At last, she knew how to weave. She had walked a weary way in the pursuit of her trade, and now she had reached the first of many goals.

The stillness of the autumn day made a great world about her where everything was happy because everything was busy. A woodpecker settled on the locust outside, and began drumming. She looked out at him from the idleness of a well-earned rest, and smiled. It seemed to her a wonderful earth where there was so much to do. From first to last, she saw, creation moved and toiled, and she, too, strove. Without conscious thought, she felt the strength and beauty of the twisting chain.

Cynthia had come to happiness by a long road. Her first memories were of the poorhouse near the sea, where her mother, a sad waif out of the drift of life, had been swept, to die. Cynthia knew nothing about her father, except that he drank and played the violin. People said he invented things: what things she never heard. He was clever with his hands and brain; but nothing he had was used to his own advantage. He was one of life's pensioners. Cynthia, growing up at the poorhouse, seemed to have no more to do with life as it is than he. She did the housework set her as her portion, with an absent care, and then escaped into the open for some mysterious sustenance that she

understood as little as the people who watched her ways. There were hours when, tramping inland, she lay prone under the pines in the pasture, smelling at life, and very happy. There were more when she sat looking at a great island of fern, entranced by something she could not apprehend, and had no need to, because feeling was enough. Though she did her tasks, she was called lazy, and she lived, in a sense, apart from people, until one day Andrew Gale, driving about to buy cattle, met her in the country road as she was coming home, like Ruth from her gleaning, only that Cynthia's arms were piled with golden-rod instead of grain. Her eyes were brimming with still happiness. Her cheeks had a bloom over their summer tan. Andrew caught his breath and stared again. The next day, after patient watching, he found her by the sea, and again he met her when she went to gather grapes. In a month he married her and took her home to the great house where he had lived alone since his mother's death, with only old Hannah to do the work in a perfect fashion that left him lonelier than before, in the solitude made by her deaf ears.

Cynthia blossomed like a flower, and from some inner secret of being she felt like one. This was like growing in a garden with fructifying soil, the sun upon her, and gentle rains, and

one great tree to shade her from too strong effulgence. Andrew was the tree. He was a silent creature, the emotion in him hidden by a fine reserve; but he tended and protected her until she grew worshipful of him in a way neither of them quite realized. All Cynthia's capacity for love bloomed out in a fervor that made her vivid, with a charm added to her beauty. When they had been married a few months, old Hannah died, and then Cynthia, shrinking from a new presence in their intimate solitude, did the work alone. She threw it off easily enough, without heart or fancy, and very swiftly, to give her time to be with Andrew in the fields or during his trips over the countryside. Housework, to her mind, was a dull means to life, only made tolerable because Andrew was satisfied with everything she did. It was devoid of grace, not, like weaving, a road to happy fantasy. In spite of it, she kept the purely untrammelled habit of life which lies in a perfect freedom, with love at the end of each day's work. Again her estate seemed to her like that of the flowers of the field. She had nothing to do but live and bloom.

When she had been married a year, her own individual passion came upon her. One day she went up into the shed chamber in search of an old saddle Andrew remembered as one of the

family holdings, and found herself in a mysterious workshop. This was the weaving room. It had a strange look of waiting, of holding secrets it was ready to divulge, of keeping a strange silence it might some time break. Instant recognition laid hold on her. At first it seemed curiosity; then it grew into something more piquing. Thrown upon a bench, as if the last weaver had left it there, was a book written in a delicate yet unformed hand, in faded ink upon a yellowed page. She turned it swiftly. There were the patterns for weaving the old blue coverlets of which the house already had a store. The names made her breathless with their sound of homely poesy: Bachelor's Fancy, Girl's Love, Primrose and Diamonds, Chariot Wheels and Church Windows, Pansies and Roses in the Wilderness. There were full directions in the faded hand, and the patterns had been made in the careful drawing of one who rules her lines and works from a pathetic ignorance. Cynthia ran downstairs tumultuously, and unfurled the book before Andrew where he sat mending the harness.

"See here!" she cried. "See what I've found."

Andrew looked up with an abstracted interest.

"Oh," said he, "that's Argentine's book."

"Who was Argentine?"

“She was great-grandmother Pyncheon’s sister. She was a great weaver. She stuck to it when everybody else had give it up. She was goin’ to be married, but he was lost at sea, an’ after that she never did much but weave. Them coverlets you set such store by were all hers.”

Cynthia had treasured the coverlets with an unreasoning love. Their pattern pleased her. The close firm weave awoke respect, beside more modern fabrics. New passion stirred in her from that first interest.

“O Andrew!” she breathed, “do you s’pose I could weave coverlets?”

It was not Andrew’s custom to deny anything in their little world.

“I guess so,” said he indulgently. “I guess you could do anything you set out to. Mebbe old Foss could put you on the road.”

Old Foss lived a mile away, in a little house filled with treasures of ancient usage which he seemed to prize only because collectors came at intervals and fixed a market value in his mind. Next day Andrew hitched up and went down to borrow him; but Foss clung to his hearthstone. He could weave, he said, but weaving had gone out. He guessed, with cotton cloth as cheap as it was now, there’s no need of wastin’ anybody’s time over a loom. Next day, Cynthia herself went down with her book of patterns, and he

gave her a few grudging rules. Then she started on her ignorant way, and to-day was the culmination of long desire. Bachelor's Fancy was in process of growth. It was only a question of time when she should have a coverlet of her own to hoard with Argentine's.

The silence in the shed chamber grew more drowsy with the mounting day. Suddenly Cynthia was aware that she was more than half asleep, nodding over the verge of something almost tangible, it was so deep and still. She was hungry, too, but that she scarcely knew. A slice of bread and a cup of milk had made her early breakfast, and since then this breathless achievement had lifted her outside the pale of daily needs. But now she rose and went swaying down the stairs, her eyelids heavy. The house below was empty. Andrew had been away a week with the threshing machine, leaving the next neighbor to milk and "feed the critters." Cynthia had half promised to go over to the neighbor's house to sleep, but the passion for weaving had so engrossed her that now she scarcely knew light from darkness, and the short intervals in her work it seemed foolish to spend away from home. Besides, she missed Andrew less if she stayed in their familiar places, where the walls were reminiscent of him. In the bottom of her heart was always a crying hunger

for him, an aching loneliness. But she could bear it. She had the weaving and a child's eager hope to bring him the work of her own hands.

Down there in the kitchen she looked about and smiled a sleepy smile at its disorder. Her plate and cup were on the table, and there was a pile of dishes in the sink. Even the milk pails were unwashed, and she did shrink momentarily under the guilt of that.

“O my soul!” said she.

Ashes had blown across the hearth, and the kitten had rolled an egg from the table to the rug. Through the open bedroom door her unmade bed was yawning. It was sweet and clean. The sun lay brightly on the tick, and the autumn breeze blew on snowy sheets. Yet it was disorder, and Cynthia knew it, as any housewife would know, or any man used to the rigor of routine. She was a slattern. Her house tattled the tale even to her own eyes. Nevertheless, she had achieved Bachelor's Fancy, and her mouth curled in a smile that widened to a pretty yawn. She stretched herself out on the lounge and went to sleep.

There was a step on the threshold, impatient, swift. Cynthia opened her eyes from deep beatitude to a flood of noon sunlight in the disordered room, and a figure standing in the midst

of it. She rose to her elbow, pushing back her hair. Then she gave a cry:

“Andrew! Andrew! O Andrew!” She was on her feet, on tiptoe to fly to him, but his face arrested her. “Andrew!” she called, “what is it?”

He had had a hard week. A man had failed them, and he had been doing double work, feeding the machine in dust and heat and for two days with a beard of barley in his eye. They had taken the threshing by the job, and he had put it through madly, to get home to Cynthia, spurred always by the certainty of her loneliness, and half ashamed of his childish worry over her. He was dead tired, he was hungry, dirty, hot. Even his face was blackened from the dust, and little moist runnels had streaked and whitened it. The sight of him amazed her, and she stood there a-wing, ready to go to him, her child's cheeks creased with drowsiness and her great eyes dark. But something about his set mouth and glowing eyes forbade her nearer greeting.

“O Andrew!” she breathed again, “I did n't think you 'd come.”

“You did n't think I 'd come? Why did n't you?”

Instantly there flashed into her mind a story she had heard about the Gale temper. Andrew was a slow man, the neighbors said, “till you got

him roused. Then you better stan' from under." Andrew had owned it to her once, with a shamefaced grin. But after his confession they had both laughed, and she had felt his arms about her in that mutual understanding which was more than human trust, but a something ineffable neither could define. Now for the first time in her life there was a barrier between them, invisible but potent. She did not dare approach him.

"Why did n't you think so?" he repeated.

She faltered in her answer. "You said 't would be a week."

"It's been a week. I said I'd be here Thursday noon."

"Yes" — she opened her mouth in futile protest and then closed it. But the truth came to her, and she told it with a childlike confidence that it would be the same to Andrew as to her. "I got weavin'. I forgot."

"You got weavin'!" he repeated. Then he looked about the room, and its disorder made satirical commentary on her words. But Cynthia had gained courage. The mention of her new triumph reminded her that she had a joy to bring him.

"O Andrew!" she breathed, "I've learned it. I've learned Bachelor's Fancy. Mine's as good as Argentine's."

Andrew stood looking at her for a moment, her distended eyes, her pretty mouth where the smile was just beginning, and would come if he invited it. But at that moment the smile was not for him. It meant a child's absorption in a foolish game, and oblivion of him for whom there were hard work and barley beards. He turned abruptly.

"Well," he announced, "I've got no more to say."

He had taken a step toward the open door, but her voice followed him. It was sharp with quick alarm.

"Andrew, where you goin'?"

He turned upon her.

"I'll tell you where I'm goin'. I'm goin' on to Trumbull's with the thrashers, an' git a meal o' victuals."

"But, Andrew, I'll git dinner. I can, in no time. There's eggs. You like eggs, Andrew."

"Mebbe you don't remember what we said that last mornin' I set off. I told ye I'd bring Miles an' t'other men to dinner. It ain't been out o' my mind a minute. For two days I've been houndin' 'em to finish up, so 's we could git here this noon. What do you s'pose I wanted to do it for? I wanted to show off. I wanted to let 'em see how well we were fixed. An' this kitchen don't look as if there'd been a

meal o' victuals cooked in it sence the time o' Noah. It ain't a kitchen; it 's a hurrah's nest."

"O Andrew!" She backed piteously away from him, with a sudden, alien sense of a house not her own. She seemed to herself in that instant to be not his wife, but a guest by whom his hospitality had been abused. Then again she trembled into speech. "Maybe you've done with me, Andrew. Maybe you don't want me to stay here any more."

"I don't care what ye do nor where ye go," said Andrew blindly. "I'm goin' to Trumbull's." He strode out and away down the path, and she heard him hailing the threshers at the gate. They answered jovially, and then the heavy team went grinding on.

She sat down upon the couch and looked about her. The sun came cruelly in at the window, and showed the room in all its dusty disarray. The dazed spot in her brain cleared, and left her vulnerable to pain. She saw his house as he had seen it, and for the instant felt how he had hated it and her. With that certainty she met also the ultimate pang of youth which knows when its hour is spoiled, and says, "This is the end." There was but one thing to do. She must take herself away. She went to the cupboard and reached to the upper shelf where old Hannah used to keep her toothache drops.

There was laudanum enough in them, Andrew had said, to kill an army. It would kill her. But as she stood there in the stillness with the bottle in her hand, distaste came upon her for the ugliness of such a death, and that moment, sounding in her ears, she heard the sea. Whether it was because she had begun her life by it, or through some quickness of the mind, running over the possibilities of a decent death, she remembered a little mate of hers who had been playing in a dory when the anchor slipped, and had drifted out, never to be seen again. And now the sea was calling her.

“You gi’ me a match, won’t ye?” called old Nancy Hutchens from the door. “I won’t come in. I’m all over muck from the swamp down there. I crossed by the willers, to save steps.”

Cynthia tucked the bottle back in its place and crossed the kitchen swiftly, taking a card of matches as she went. Old Nancy stood there on the door-stone, a squat figure with one shoulder higher than the other. She had the imposing equipment of an aquiline nose and sound white teeth at seventy. Her thick gray hair was drawn back into a knot, and the lines in her brown face were crisp and deep. A life, solitary in itself, and yet spent among people in a drifting way, had touched her face with little

quizzical shades of meaning. Her cold pipe was in her hand, waiting to be filled.

"Here 's the matches," said Cynthia.

Nancy took them with a mechanical touch, and remained looking at her.

"Law!" said she, "'t ain't wuth it."

"What ain't?" repeated Cynthia.

"What you 've got on your mind, whatever 't is. Wait a day an' it 'll be a thing o' the past. If 't ain't in a day, 't will be in a year, or ten year, or a lifetime. Wait long enough, an' the whole on us 'll be underground."

"Yes," said Cynthia, "we shall be underground." But her mind was not with the old woman, but on her own preparations for flight. The tawdry room still troubled her, the slatternly picture he must find when he came home. She would leave his house in order for him.

"Look here, Nancy," said she suddenly, "you stay the rest o' the day an' help me clean."

Nancy smiled satirically. She looked up at the blue sky, sown with flying white, and then over the line of upland where her fate, every day renewed, was waiting for her.

"I don't clean for myself," she said. "My bed ain't been made nor slep' in for a fortnight. I been trampin' the countryside."

"I 'll give you a dollar!"

"I ain't got much use for dollars till winter

time, an' then I guess I shall be provided for. I got a passel o' herbs to sell this fall." But she was searching Cynthia's face with her impersonal glance, and her mind altered. "Law, yes!" said she. "It's as good a way o' passin' time as any other. You let me pull off these muddy boots. You got a pair o' rubbers I can scuff round in? Where you goin' to begin?"

With the word, she had caught up an old pair of Andrew's shoes beside the shed door, and slipped her feet into them. Cynthia left her, and went flying upstairs with an unregarding haste. She went first to the shed chamber, and, without a glance at her precious handiwork, closed the door upon it. Then, running to the other rooms in turn, she breathed dull satisfaction at finding them in comfortable array. There was the west chamber; she had put that in order when Aunt Patten had been expected, a week before, to spend the night, and the other rooms had to match it because Aunt Patten would go mousing round. Cynthia had laughed with Andrew, in the doing, over so patently setting her scene for a meddler. But Aunt Patten had diverged, on her visiting way, and Cynthia's pains had seemed unnecessary.

At the foot of the stairs Nancy was awaiting her. She had an air of large leisure; yet in

some subtle fashion her man's attitude showed the reserve strength in her and inspired content.

"What be I goin' to fly at fust?" she asked indulgently, as at a madness not her own.

"You sweep the sittin'-room," returned Cynthia. "When the dust is settled, you can do the winders. I'll begin on the bedroom."

Cynthia did not, it seemed to her, think at all as she went about her work, doing it swiftly and still with the far-off sound of the sea in her ears. She was simply a different creature from that other happy woman who had been weaving coverlets that morning. She had brought upon herself a colossal punishment. She never stopped to wonder whether the punishment were just. It was simply there.

At one she and Nancy had some eggs and tea, and in mid afternoon they met in the kitchen, each about her task. Cynthia was baking now, cream-o'-tartar biscuits and custard pie, and Nancy was cleaning the woodwork with great sweeps of her lean arm.

"I did n't know you was such a driver," she said at length, as she sat on the top of the step-ladder, taking a pull at her pipe.

"I guess I ain't been," said Cynthia, her pretty brows in a painstaking frown over the scalloped edges of the pie. "I ain't done much housework."

"You like it?" asked Nancy.

A swift terror fled across Cynthia's face, like a beating wing. At that moment she liked housework better than anything on earth. It was not a cold routine. It had at last a poignant meaning. It meant Andrew and her home. But she answered stolidly, "I guess so."

"If you 've took it on yourself, you 've got to like it," said Nancy philosophically, rising and knocking the ashes from her pipe. "You hand me up that bar soap. That 's the wust o' men-folks. Once you 've got 'em, you got to slave for 'em. Lug 'em or leave 'em! But don't git 'em, I say. Look here, now! Fifty year ago come November, I said I 'd marry a man down Sudleigh way. I went to stay a spell with his mother. Well, sir! I come home an' I broke it off. 'I ain't a-goin' to spend my days makin' sugar gingerbread,' says I. 'No, sir! Nor cuttin' it out in an oak-leaf pattern,— not by a long chalk!' "

"He likes sugar gingerbread," said Cynthia to herself. "I guess I 've got time to make some."

"I warrant ye the colored pop'lotion never felt freer 'n I did when I see him walkin' away down the path arter I told him 't was broke off," chuckled Nancy, moving the step-ladder along. "I never had a minute's sorrer over it,— not a second."

“I guess I’ll put in a mite o’ ginger,” said Cynthia, stirring breathlessly. “Do you use ginger, Nancy?”

“Law! I dunno what ye do, it’s so long sence I’ve tried any. I don’t concern myself with sweet trade. I can make as good a meal as I want out o’ crackers an’ cheese an’ wash it down with a drink o’ water out o’ the well. Look here! did it ever come into your head that everybody ain’t called to preach, an’ everybody ain’t called to marry?”

“Some ain’t fit,” said Cynthia bitterly, her passionate mind on her own defects, “they ain’t fit to marry.”

“’T ain’t only that,— they’re like a bird in a cage. You look here! men folks think they’re dull sometimes, settled down in a pint measure with one woman. Lordymighty! the women’s dull, too, on’y they don’t let on. Pious little devils! they go round washin’ dishes an’ moppin’ up under the sto’, an’ half on ’em wants to be trampin’ like me, an’ t’ other half dunno what they want. Keep out on ’t, I say! keep out on ’t!”

Nancy lifted her voice in a tuneful stave, the words satirically fit, but Cynthia was not listening. The notes fell upon her like a patter of unregarded rain, as she creased her gingerbread and beat her mind back from futile won-

derment over her own plight when Andrew should be here alone.

"The house has got to be jes' so," pursued Nancy. "The woman's got to be jes' so. They can come home all over gurry, but she's got to have on a clean apron an' her hair slicked up to the nines. They can set all the evenin' huskin' together an' hootin' over old stories, an' come stumblin' in when they git ready, an' find doughnuts an' pie set out complete. What's fair for one's fair for another, I say."

"No, it ain't!" cried Cynthia, suddenly awakened. She stood straight and slender in the middle of her kitchen. Defensive fires burned hotly in her eyes. "Nancy, I ain't goin' to have such talk in here. I can't stand it. You think of him gettin' all over dust an' dirt workin' like a dog. You think of it, Nancy! It's his house. It's no more 'n right he should have it the way he wants it. I should like to know if he ain't goin' to have anything the way he wants it?" Her voice choked in passionate championship of the man whose pride was hurt.

But Nancy only gave a derisive chuckle. "Law!" said she. "You need n't worry. I guess they'll look out for themselves. I never see a man yet but had time enough for that."

At five o'clock the house was in order and Nancy had started on her homeward way, a

dollar in her pocket, and, despite some ruthless indifference on her part, a basket of food in her hand. Cynthia dismissed her with an unwitting solemnity.

“Good-by, Nancy,” said she. “You’ve been a real help to me. I don’t know how I should have got through it if it had n’t been for you.”

“It’s clean as a ribbin,” Nancy called back cheerfully. “But land! cleanin’ up’s nothin’. Trouble is to keep it so. Well, I’ll be pokin’ along.”

Cynthia stood and watched her well-knit figure swinging on between the willows that marked the road. Then she turned back to her clean house for a last look and the renewed certainty of its perfect state. She walked delicately about the kitchen, lest a grain of dust should mar the speckless floor. The food not yet cooled from the oven was in the pantry. All through the lower rooms there was the fragrance of cake and bread. It was a house set in order, and finding it perfect, she made herself sweet and clean, and changed her working dress for a crisper calico. In the doing, she thought solemnly how she had once helped bathe a child that had died at the poorhouse, and prepare it for burial. This body of hers was also being prepared, and though she had no words to say so, it seemed to her the body of her love. And

all the time the sea kept calling her, with its assurances of manifold and solemn refuge.

Presently she was ready to go. She had made the clothing she had slipped off into a little bundle, to leave none but fresh things behind her, and now she took it in her hand and stepped out at the front door. That she closed, but the windows were still open. It was better that storms should invade the house than that he should find it inhospitably shut. Day and night could be trusted with their welcome to him. But turning from the door, she smelled her garden, and its autumn bitterness of breath awoke in her a final pang of homesickness. She laid down her bundle and hurried round to the well, to draw bucket after bucket of water and drench the roots she had tended since the spring. It was a separate good-by to every one. Here were the delicate firstlings whose day had long been over, and the hollyhocks that had made the summer gay. Dahlias and asters were the ones to keep this later watch, but she sprinkled them impartially, whether they were to bloom again or wither till the winter's spell. The moon was rising behind the wooded hill, and there was suddenly a prophetic touch of frost in the air. She stood for a moment listening to the stillness, recognizing life as if it all came flooding in on her at once, only to retreat like a giant wave and

wash some farther shore. Her brain apprehended what her tongue could never say. She understood the meaning of service and harmonious living. It was no more dull to her now than daily sunrise. She looked at Andrew's house, builded by another Gale over a hundred years ago. It meant more than a shelter. It was the roof of love, the nest of springing hopes. Yet, being a child at heart, she could not stay after he had found her for one day unworthy, and she was too young to know how storms may pass.

The man came heavily along the darkened road and reached the gate as she did. She saw him and dropped her bundle in the shade of the lilac at the fence. Andrew did not speak. He threw open the gate, stepped in, and put his arms about her. He held her to him as we hold what is almost lost to us through our own lax grasp; but when he spoke to her, she did not hear, and when he loosed his clasp to look at her, she sank down and would have fallen.

"Cynthy, for God's sake!" he cried, and his voice recalled her. Then she gained her feet, he helping her. "What is it, dear? what is it, dear?" he kept saying, and she answered him with her tremulous breath upon his cheek. Presently they went up the path together, and in at the front door. "By George, don't it smell good!" said Andrew. His voice, in nervous

joviality, was shaking, like his hands. "Le' me git a light, honey. I've got to look at you. Got to make sure you 're here!"

The blaze from the shining lamp struck full on her, and Andrew caught his breath. Cynthia looked like the angel of herself. Her tired face, overlaid by joy, was like that of a child awakened from sleep to unexpected welcome. She seemed an adoring handmaid, incredulous of the beauty of her task. Andrew felt the wistfulness of her air, the presence of things unknown to him. He went over to her and drew her nearer.

"You knew I 'd come," he said. "You knew I could n't stan' it after I'd been ugly to you. Look at this house! You fixed all up, an' made it neat as wax. I started just as they set down to supper, an' put for home. I've been scairt 'most to death all the afternoon. I dunno what I thought would happen to you, but I had to come."

"I've cleaned the house," said Cynthia, like a child. "I got old Nancy."

"Yes, dear, yes," he soothed her. "You knew I'd come. You knew I would n't stay away a night after I broke your heart. You tell about your weavin', dear. I want to hear it now."

"My weavin'?" repeated Cynthia vaguely. The words roused her a little from her happy

dream, and for one luminous instant she felt the significance of all the threads that made the web of life. She laughed. "'T was only Bachelor's Fancy," she said. "I learned it, that's all. There's lots o' things I'd ruther do. You go in the pantry, dear, an' look."

Andrew left her with a kiss that was like meeting, not good-by. But as he took the lamp from the table, Cynthia slipped out at the front door.

"Where you goin'?" he called.

"Only out to the lilac," she answered throbbingly. "I dropped somethin' there."

While he lingered for her, she came back and, as she ran, tossed her little bundle into the closet under the stairs. The hues of youth were on her face. Her eyes were wet and glad.

"I'm terrible hungry, too," she told him. "Come! there's sugar gingerbread."

THE CAVE OF ADULLAM

THE CAVE OF ADULLAM

“I HAVE often thought,” said the young minister, “that your house might be called the Cave of Adullam.”

Miss Lucretia Blaine adjusted her glasses, as if they might help her to some mental insight, and then illogically directed her puzzled gaze at him over their top. She was short and plump, with brown eyes and an abundance of bright hair lapsing into dun maturity. There was so much of the hair that it was difficult to manage, and she had wound it in a sort of crown. So it happened that she carried her head in a fashion that looked like haughtiness and belied the patient seeking of her dove's eyes. She was not much given to reading, even Bible reading, and the minister's pictorial talk perplexed her. It was vaguely discomfiting, in a way, much like the minister himself. He was a short and muscular man, with a scholarly forehead, a firm mouth, and eyeglasses magnificently set in gold. He had always disturbed Miss Lucretia, coming as he did after a mild and fading pulpit dynasty. She could never understand how he knew so much, at his time of life, about human trials and

their antidotes; his autocracy over the moral world was even too bracing, too insistent. Now she took off her glasses and laid them down, regarding him with that blurred, softened look which is the gift of eyes unused to freedom.

"I don't know," said she, "as I rightly understand."

"The Cave of Adullam!" repeated the minister, in his pulpit manner. "David was there, if you remember, in the time of his banishment, 'and every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented gathered themselves unto him.' It was a refuge. Your house appeals to me, in a figurative sense, as being somewhat the same thing. The poor, the unfortunate, flee hither to you. This is the Cave of Adullam."

New trouble added itself to Miss Lucretia's look. This unnecessary classifying merely greatedened her accepted load. She only saw herself pottering about, doing her chores and serving the people who were mysteriously meted out to her. Life was very simple until it became complicated by words.

"Well," said she vaguely, "I guess there's a good many such places, if all was known."

"Yes," returned the minister, "we all have some earthly refuge."

“I should like to know what Cousin 'Cretia's got!” came a young voice from the doorway,— a woman's voice, melodious, full. There stood Lucrece, a distant relative defined within some limit of cousinship. She was tall and strenuous, a girl all life and the desire of life. Her pose had an unconsidered beauty; her muscles, whether in rest or action, obeyed according purposes and wrought out harmony. The minister caught his breath as her face flowered upon him like some exotic bloom. He had a young wife at home, and her he truly cherished; yet no one could look upon Lucrece and continue quite unmoved.

Miss Lucretia only smiled at her. She was used to the incursions of the young and passionate thing. Dealing with the hot moods Lucrece engendered seemed more or less like feeding a tame leopard in the kitchen.

“I'd like to know,” continued Lucrece rapidly, in her moving contralto, “what refuge Cousin 'Cretia's had! There's great-uncle Pike in the parlor chamber. He's got dropsy. He likes it. There's Cousin Mary Poole in the west room. She's got nerves. Cousin 'Cretia's had to hear her clack from sunrise to sunset for going on nine years. Mary Poole and Uncle Pike have got their refuge, both of 'em. Where's Cousin 'Cretia's?”

“There, there!” counseled Lucretia. “You come in, dear, an’ se’ down.”

The minister cleared his throat. He was momentarily dashed by this onslaught of the human, and the natural man in him agreed with Lucrece. Yet officially he could not concur.

“All these trials,” said he, with no abatement of his former emphasis, “will be stars in the crown of her rejoicing.”

“Oh!” returned the girl biting. She came in and stood by the mantel, her head held high, as if it carried a weight she scorned. “But what about now? They’re having their refuge now. What about Cousin ’Cretia’s?”

“Crechy!” came a wheezing voice from above. “Crechy, you step up here a minute!”

This might have been a signal for concerted effort. Another voice, dramatically muffled, issued from the west room.

“Crechy, you mind what I say! You come in here first! Crechy, you come!”

Lucretia rose in haste and made her capable way out of the room, fitting on her glasses as she went.

“There!” said Lucrece triumphantly, having seen the proving of her point, “they’re both calling on her at once. That’s what they do. They’re neck and neck when it comes to trouble. If one finds a feather endwise in the

bed, the other falls over a square in the carpet. And Cousin 'Cretia 's got to smooth it all out."

The minister felt his poverty of resource. The young creature interrogating him at white heat would have flouted his divine common-places. He knew that, and decided, with true humility, that he should only be able to meet her after a season of prayer.

"I cannot account for it," he said, rising with dignity. "I fear I must be going. Please say good-by to Miss Lucretia."

The girl accompanied him to the door with all the outward courtesy due him and his office; but her mind seemed suddenly to be elsewhere. She shook hands with him; and then, as he walked down the path between beds of velvet pinks, her fighting blood rose once more, and she called lightly after him, "What about Cousin 'Cretia?"

But he made no answer, nor did she wait for one. On the heels of her question she turned back into the sitting-room and flung herself at full length on the broad lounge, where she lay tapping the white line of her teeth with an impatient finger. Presently Lucretia came down the stairs and, entering the room, gave a quick look about. Her eyes interrogated Lucrece.

"Yes," said the girl carelessly, "he 's gone. He thinks I 'm awful."

Lucretia sat down again by the window and took up her work. There was an abiding stillness about her. She was very palpably a citizen of the world, and yet not of it, as if some film lay between her and the things that are.

"Have both of 'em had a drink of water?" asked the girl satirically.

"Yes, both of 'em!"

"Have they ordered what they want for supper?"

A slow smile indented the corners of Lucretia's mouth. "Well," said she indulgently, "I b'lieve they did mention it."

"I bet they did! And to-morrow it 'll be just the same, and to-morrow, and to-morrow. It 's all very well to talk about Caves of Adullam. Where 's your cave?"

Lucretia dropped her work and gazed at the girl with unseeing eyes. She had the remote look of one who conjures up visions at will. "Don't you worry," said she. "I don't mind them no more than the wind that blows."

"Well," said Lucrece moodily, "I suppose everybody 's got to have something. Only it seems as if you had everything. They all come and sponge on you. So do I. To-day I 'm madder 'n a hatter, and I put for you."

Lucretia's glance returned to a perception of tangible things.

“What is it, Lucrece?”

The girl spoke with the defiance of one who combats tears.

“I ’m not going to be married.”

“Why not?”

“All the money Tom saved he put in with his father. He wants it out now, to go into the lumber business, and his father won’t let him have it. And Tom’s got nothing to show for it.”

Lucretia sat motionless, a slow flush rising into her face. One might have said she looked ashamed. The room was very still. A bee buzzed into the entry, and described whorled circlets of flight. The sound of his wandering was loud, out of all proportion to its significance. “That means putting off our marrying for a year or two,” said Lucrece indifferently. Then having cried a few tears and angrily wiped them away with her hand, she crushed her pink cheek into the sofa pillow for a moment, and, as if she flung aside an unworthy mood, rose to her feet with a spring.

“Tom pretty much hates his father,” said she. “He’s ashamed to be the son of a miser. He’s afraid he might catch it. But he need n’t worry. Tom’s as good as they make ’em.” She walked to the door and then, returning, stooped over Miss Lucretia and kissed the top of her head. “Don’t you mind,” said she. “It’ll

all come out right. I'm just like them two upstairs, only mine's temper where they've got nerves and dropsy. Why, Cousin 'Cretia, what is it?"

Two tears were rolling down Lucretia's cheeks. They splashed upon her hand. Lucrece had never seen her look so moved and broken.

"Why," said the girl, "you taking it so hard as that, just my being married? It's only put off."

Lucretia rose and folded her work conclusively. Her cheeks were pink under their tears, and her voice trembled.

"Don't you worry, dear," said she, a humorous smile beginning to flicker on her lips. "I s'pose I can have my mad fit, too, can't I? There! you run along now. I've got to get in the clo'es."

It was a dismissal not to be gainsaid, and Lucrece went wonderingly away. At the door she hesitated.

"I guess I'll go across lots," said she. "There's old Armstrong coming up the road. I can't talk to him as I feel now." She took the narrow path skirting the house front, and stepped over the low stone wall into the orchard. There she walked away with a lilting motion, and still with the erect pose of one who carries a burden lightly.

Miss Lucretia stood in the middle of the sunny room, so still that all the little noises of the day seemed loud about her. There was the ticking of the clock, the booming of bees on the jessamine sprays, and chiefly the thickened beating of her heart. Suddenly, as if mounting thought had cast her forth on one great wave, she hurried out of doors and down the path to the gate. There, her hand on the palings, she waited for Dana Armstrong. Yet she did not glance at him, as he came striding along the road, but into the green field opposite, and again her eyes had the unseeing look of one to whom visions are more palpable than fact.

Dana Armstrong was over sixty, but he carried himself like a youth, with the free step and sinewy vigor of one whose time is yet to come. And still, in spite of that assertive strength, the years had marked him with their telltale tracery. His cheeks were deeply scored with long, crisp lines; his mouth dropped slightly at the corners. The gray eyes were cold, though a fanciful mind might have found in them some promise, however unfulfilled, some hint of blue.

“Dana Armstrong,” called Miss Lucretia, “you come here! I want to talk with you.”

He quickened his walk, his eyes warming a little at sight of her. She swung open the gate, and he stepped inside.

“Anything happened?” he asked concernedly.

“No. You come in a minute.”

She preceded him along the path, her short steps breaking in upon the time of his. They crossed the sun-lighted entry into her sitting-room, and there Dana took off his hat with a grave deliberation much like reverence. It had been years since he entered this room, and the memory of time past shook him a little, dulled as he was by the routine of life and its expediency.

“Be seated,” said Miss Lucretia, taking her accustomed place by the window. He laid his hand upon a chair, and then withdrew it. This had been Grandfather Blaine’s chosen spot, and he remembered how the old man used to sit there thumbing over his well-worn jokes when Dana Armstrong came courting the girl Lucretia, all those years ago. He could not have taken the chair without disturbing some harmony of remembrance; so he sat down on the sofa where Lucrece had lain, and held his hat before him in his stiff, half-bashful way.

“I hear Tom ain’t goin’ to be married this year,” said Miss Lucretia, “him and my Lucrece!” Her voice came from an aching throat. It sounded harsh and dry.

Armstrong started slightly.

“Well!” said he.

“I ’m told Tom’s money ’s in with yours, an’ you won’t give it up to him.”

Dana’s eyes darkened. His forehead contracted into those lines she remembered from a vivid past, when his face made her one book of life, to be conned with loyal passion. Yet she was not looking at him now; there was no need. Only it was the young Dana, not the old one, who sat there. That gave her courage. She could throw herself back into that time when no mischance had come between them, and speak with the candor of youth itself, which scorns to compromise. Her eyes were fixed upon the square of sunlight on the floor. Little shadows were playing in it, and once the bulk of a humming bird swept past. The sunlight had a curious look, as if in that small compass lay the summer and all the summers she had lived, witnesses now to her true testimony. She began in an unmoved voice, and Dana listened. She seemed to be speaking from a dream, and inch by inch the dream crept nearer him, and gradually enfolded him without his will.

“When I heard that, not an hour ago, I says to myself, ‘Ain’t Dana Armstrong got over the love o’ money? Ain’t he killed that out of him yet?’ ”

“There, there!” said Dana hastily, exactly as he had used to check her years ago.

“No, it ain’t any use to say ‘There, there!’ ” But she was not speaking as the girl was wont to speak. The girl had been quick-tempered, full of beseechings, hot commendation, wild reproach. “We ’ve got to talk things over. It ’s a good many years, Dana, since you an’ I were goin’ to be married that fall, an’ you give me up because my sister was in consumption, an’ you would n’t have her live with us.”

He turned full upon her, and seemed to question her face, the stillness of her attitude. These were strange words to be spoken in the clear New England air. They shook him, not only from their present force, but because they held authority from what had been. They seemed to be joining it to what still was, and he felt the continuity of life in a way bewilderingly new. His voice trembled as he answered with some passion:

“I did n’t give you up!”

“No, not in so many words. You only said Lindy might live for years. You said there ’d be doctors’ bills, an’ my time all eat up waitin’ an’ tendin’— an’ so I told you we would n’t consider it any more. An’ you went an’ married Rhody Bond, an’ she helped you save — an’ you got rich.”

The words, meagre as they were, smote blighting upon him. He saw his life in all its bar-

renness. Yet he was not the poorer through that revelation. A window had been opened, disclosing a tract of land he had hitherto seen only by inches. It was hopelessly sterile,— but the window was wide and he could breathe, though chokingly. The woman's voice sounded thin and far away.

“I thought when I lost you my heart broke. I don't know now what happened. Somethin' did; for after that I was different. For I did set by you. I knew your faults, an' they 'most killed me: that is, one of 'em did,— your lovin' money so. But even that never 'd ha' separated us if it had n't bid fair to hurt somebody that could n't fight for herself. Nothin' could ever have separated us.” She spoke recklessly, as if none but the great emotions were worth her thought. In spite of outer differences, she was curiously like the young Lucrece. There was the same audacity, the courage strong enough to challenge life and all its austere ministrants. But still she did not look at him. If she had looked, it might have been impossible to go on.

“I did n't give you up, Dana Armstrong,” said she. “I never give you up one minute.”

The man leaned forward and bent his brows upon her, over burning eyes.

“What do you mean?” he asked, with the harshness of emotion leashed and held.

“I never give you up one minute. When Lindy died, I was here all alone. You were married then, but I set by you as much as ever. I did n’t even blame you for choosin’ money instead o’ me. I could n’t blame you for anything, any more ’n if you was my own child. You could hurt me. You could n’t make me blame you.” Her voice ended in one of those lingering falls that stir the heart. It was quite unconsidered. She had as yet no purpose in moving him, even by the simplest eloquence: only her own life was eloquent to her, and she could not voice it save with passion.

“I thought it all over,” she said rapidly, like one giving long considered testimony. “I thought it over that summer you an’ Rhody moved into the new house. I used to set here nights, with the moon streamin’ in through the elms, an’ consider it. I knew I could n’t give you up, an’ it come over me it wa’n’t needful I should. I prayed to God. I made a bargain with Him. I said, ‘If I won’t speak to him, nor look at him, nor sin in my thoughts, You let me have some part of him!’ An’ God was willin’. From that time on it was as if you an’ me lived here together: only it was our souls. I never touched your life with Rhody. I never wanted to. Only every day I talked to you. I told you how I wanted you to be good. I tried to be

good myself. I tried to do all I could for them that was in need. But I never lived my life with 'em, even when I was tendin' upon 'em an' gettin' kind of achey trottin' up an' down stairs. You an' me were always together, your soul an' mine. The minister says everybody has a refuge. I guess he 'd say that was my refuge. He 'd say 't was my cave." Her voice broke upon the word, and she laughed a little in a whimsical fashion.

He stretched out his hand, and his face softened in an uncomprehending sympathy. But she seemed not to see the movement, and went on.

"There was no harm in it. I 've come to the conclusion we can set by folks as much as we 've a mind to, so long as we don't clutch an' grab,—so long as it 's all spirit. I don't know what spirit is, but I know it 's suthin' we 've got to take account of in this world, same as any other. Well, I went with you, step an' step. When little Tom was born I could have eat him up, I loved him so."

Famished mother-longing had come into her voice, and thenceforward she spoke recklessly. Rehearsing her devotion to the man, she bound herself in stiffer phrasing; when it came to the child, she could name the great name and feel no shyness over it.

“Up to then, I’d said my prayers for you. Then I had the boy to pray for — him an’ you. When he went to school, he was stronger ’n’ heartier ’n any of ’em, an’ I was proud of him. When he begun to wait on my Lucrece, I got sort of acquainted with him, an’ I says to myself, ‘He don’t set by money the way his father did.’ An’ I thanked my God for that.”

Dana’s hands were trembling. He put up one of them to cover his betraying mouth.

“I kep’ near you every step o’ the way,” said Lucretia mercilessly. “When you got the better o’ yourself an’ give the town that school-house, I kneeled down an’ thanked God. When you done suthin’ mean, I tried to go through it with you an’ make you see how mean it was. I ain’t been away from you a minute, Dana Armstrong, not a minute all your life. I’ve tried to help you live it the best that ever I knew how.”

The man started up in irrepressible passion. “God!” he said brokenly. “If I’d only known!” But he could not have told what it was he should have known. This was only a blind arraignment of a sterile past.

“When Rhody died,” said the woman, with the least little break in her voice, “I guess I dropped away a mite. I could n’t do no less. Seemed as if ’t would be stretchin’ out my hand to you, an’ that I never did.”

"I come over here a year an' a day after she died," said Dana hotly. "You would n't so much as walk downstairs to see me!"

"No," answered Lucretia softly, "I would n't."

"You would n't take the gift of me!"

"Them things were past an' gone," she told him gently, as if she feared to bruise some piteous memory. "There 's a time for all things. The minister said so last Sunday. The time for some things ain't ever gone by; but for some it is. If you an' I could have grown old together"—A spasm contracted her face, and it was a moment before she could go on. "But we are old, an' we 've got there by different roads. 'T would be like strangers livin' together. But our souls ain't strangers. Mine has lived with you, day in, day out, for forty year."

Pure joy possessed her. She was transfigured. Her face flushed, her eyes shone, each with a spark in it, a look not altogether of this earth. She was radiant with some undefined hope: perhaps of that sort bred, not of circumstance, but out of things unseen. The man was chiefly puzzled, as if he had been called on to test an unsuspected bond. This plain speaking about the eternal was quite new to him. It had an echo of Sunday talk, and yet without that weariness attendant on stiff clothes and lulling

tunes. He seemed to be standing in a large place where there was great air to breathe. Hitherto he had been the servant of things palpable. Now it began to look as if things were but the tools of Life, and Life itself, august, serene, sat there in the heavens beside her master, God, in untouched sovereignty.

“There!” said Lucretia suddenly, as if she broke a common dream. “I only wanted to tell you how I’ve battled to have you do what’s right. I don’t know as I’ve earned anything of you by battlin’, for maybe you’d ha’ forbidden it if you’d had your way. But I wanted to tell you there’s things fightin’ for your soul, an’ you better think twice afore you kill out anything in them that’s young. Tom an’ Lucrece — they’ve got it all before ’em. You let ’em come together afore it’s any ways too late.” The note of pleading in her voice seemed as much for herself as for another. She might have been demanding compensation for her years. She had shown him the late blooming of her life, for him to justify. Something he mysteriously owed her, and, with that obedience men give to women when the cry is loud and clear, he knew it must be paid. He rose and stood regarding her. His face worked. His eyes held blue fire. He felt young again, invincible. But though thoughts were crowding

on him, he had only one word for them, and that her name.

“Lucretia!”

“What is it?” she asked quietly.

He hesitated and then broke forth blunderingly, like a boy. “Should you just as soon I ’d come in here, once a week or so?”

She answered as a mother might who refuses because she must, for hidden reasons.

“I don’t think we ’ve any call to see much of one another. We ’ve both got a good deal to think over, an’ if Tom an’ Lucrece should get them a house, you ’d want to run round often an’ set with them.”

He bent his head in an acquiescent courtliness, and went haltingly out at the door. Miss Lucretia sat there, her hands dropped loosely in her lap, not thinking, but aware of life, as if the years were leaves fluttering down about her in autumnal air. They prophesied no denial, nor hardly yet decay: only change, the prelude to winter and then again to spring. She sat there until a voice came querulously:

“Ain’t it ’most supper time? You come up here! I ’ll ventur’ you forgot to blaze the fire!”

Next morning, a little after ten, Miss Lucretia went into the garden, to do her weeding. The sun lay hotly on her hair and burnished it to gold. Her cheeks were warm with sunlight and

her hands thick coated with the soil. Life and the love of it were keen within her, strong enough to grip eternal things, sane, commonplace like these of earth, and make them hers forever.

The gate clanged, and then there came a rush of skirts. Lucrece was on her like a swooping wind.

“Cousin 'Cretia!” she cried. “Cousin 'Cretia! Get up here! I've got to speak to you.”

Miss Lucretia rose and found the throbbing creature ready to grasp and hold her. Young Lucrece was lovely, like the morning. The moodiness of yesterday had quite gone out of her. Sweet, quivering sentience animated her, obedient to the call of life. Her beauty clothed her like a veil: it seemed a wedding veil.

“What do you think?” she said rapidly, in a tone like the brooding note of birds. “Mr. Armstrong's paid over all Tom's money, every cent. And he's given him the deed of the house in the Hollow. And this morning he came over and kissed me — old Armstrong did! — and said he hoped we'd be married right away. I'm awful happy, Cousin 'Cretia!”

Lucretia stood there holding the trowel in her earthy hand. Her voice dropped liquidly.

“Did he?” she said, not looking at Lucrece at all. “Did he?”

The tension of her tone struck keenly on the girl and moved her to some wonder.

“What makes you so pretty, Cousin 'Cretia?” she asked, half timorous because the other woman seemed so far away. “What makes you speak so? Is it because I'm glad?”

“Yes,” answered Lucretia softly. “An' I'm glad, too!”

A WINTER'S COURTING



A WINTER'S COURTING

“KEEP the knittin’ for take-up work,” called Mrs. Bourne from the Sudleigh stage, where she sat regnant upon an underpinning of bags and packages. “Tack the spread as soon as ever you git round to it. Don’t you leave the cake jar open, an’ don’t you let the squashes freeze.”

“I’ll ’tend to everything,” cried Myra, with shrill sweetness. “Good-by, mother, good-by!”

Mrs. Bourne gave a stiff nod in return and the stage drove on. It was a three-seated vehicle, but she, the only passenger, seemed to overcrowd it by her portly presence. She wore the black clothes that had served her, since her husband’s death, for intermittent mourning, and now she had shrouded her face from the November wind in a blue barège veil. Mrs. Bourne was loyal in her widowhood, but she could not think the worse of herself for this trifling inconsistency. It argued a fault in the weather, not in her. Yet, though her face was hidden away, Myra knew what dominating power looked from the deep-set eyes, and what lines had been graven about the mouth by the lifelong habit of a woman sworn to rule.

Myra glanced about at the sear autumn landscape and up at the bright sky, as if, her mother being gone, she owned a heritage. Then she ran into the house and went at once to the glass between the kitchen windows, to settle her blown hair. It was long since she had taken a moment for leisurely acquaintance with herself — hardly, indeed, without guilt, since her mother, years before, had caught her, with the soft hair about her shoulders, interrogating her image in the glass. Mrs. Bourne had, without comment, taken the kitchen shears from the table and remarked:

“You set down in that chair.”

Myra obeyed her, wonderingly, and snip! snip! the golden locks were quivering on the floor. Myra remembered now that she had screamed aloud in the terror of it, this murdering of her beauty, as if a hand were at her throat. But her mother had said, not unkindly, “Beauty is a snare,” and set her to reading the verses in Proverbs commendatory of good women. The hair had grown again as thick and golden as before, but to this day Myra mourned that first lost mane, as if its preciousness in some way equaled the pang of parting from it. Since then, not daring to challenge a jealous eye, she had worn it braided in a hard, smooth knot, and her mother, seeing that, con-

cluded that vanity was dead in her. But now, in the wide sunny kitchen, humming with warmth, Myra snatched out the pins impetuously and let the glory tumble to her waist. Then she wreathed and twisted it in a fashion learned from passionate observation of summer visitors at church, and when she had finished, her delighted blue eyes met her enchantingly under the waving gold. She was smiling at herself in glad abandon when it suddenly came over her that her head befitted a holiday, and with a sudden daring, she ran upstairs to her little cold bedroom and there slipped off her working calico and put on the blue cashmere made for Sunday wear. It was high in the neck, with a plain binding; but madness was upon her and she stole in to the guest-room bureau and took out great-aunt Nancy's best fichu, turned in her dress, and fitted the lace about her sweet young throat. The vision smiled at her, and she caught her breath. It seemed well to sin for such an end as this.

It was the middle of the afternoon and she sat down by the kitchen window in the sun and felt her own delightfulness. At five she ate a light supper, and then settled herself by the hearth, holding a gift-book from the parlor table. It was bound in red morocco, and it gave her a sense of happy holiday. While she sat there in

her dream, there was a footstep on the path. The knocker fell. Myra started to her feet. She was not afraid. It had not occurred either to her or to her mother that it was unsafe to keep the house alone. Holding the lamp in one hand, the red book tucked under her arm, she opened the door and peered out into the moonlit dusk. A man stood there.

“Why!” trembled Myra, backing away from him, “when ’d you come back?”

“This mornin’,” said Ansel Forbes. “Ain’t you goin’ to ask me in?”

Myra, her cheeks aflame, stepped aside and he followed her into the room. He was a handsome fellow with an upright carriage, strong features, and the eagle’s glance.

“You ’ve been gone quite a spell,” said Myra, setting down the lamp.

“A year,” he answered, casting time behind him as of no account. He threw off his coat, walked up to her, and took her trembling hands. They stood together before the fire, and Myra feared his look and loved it.

“What made you dress up?” asked Ansel. “Did you know I ’d come?”

“No,” said Myra, her head drooping. “Mother’s gone away, an’ I never have a chance to wear my blue cashmere in the house.”

Ansel still held her hands. They struggled

then a little, to withdraw themselves, and in response he bent and kissed her on the lips.

"Oh!" cried Myra, flushing to the hair. "Let me go, Ansel! Let me go!"

The faint plea challenged him.

"I won't," he said quietly and kissed her again.

Myra stood trembling, but not with fear or anger or any emotion hostile to him.

"You like me," he said, "you know you do. We should be married now, if your mother had n't broke it off a year ago."

Myra's eyes were wet and pleading.

"You went away," she said irrelevantly.

"Course I went away. Do you s'pose I was goin' to stay here an' live 'longside o' you an' run the farm an' see you go nippin' by to meetin' with your mother an' never turn your head? No, sirree! I traveled up to Boston, an' I went into the express business an' I saved my money, an' when I heard your mother was goin' away to spend the winter with Lucy Ann, I threw up my business an' put for home."

"Lucy Ann 's sick. She 's got a bad knee," said Myra, waveringly, to gain time.

"Glad she has."

"Ansel!"

"Well, I am. One bad knee won't hurt her. She 's got a good one, ain't she? An' I *am* glad.

It's took your mother off the ground, an' I've got a chance to say my say."

"Mother thinks some of havin' Lucy Ann come home to live," said Myra, still shyly. "She got her lameness by bein' in the shoe-shop so long."

"Well, she better take her home to live. Lucy Ann's a widder, without chick nor child. Let her come home here, an' keep your mother company while you're livin' with me. Myra Bourne, you leave your hands where they be. If you don't, I'll kiss you again. Guess I will anyway." But in a moment he released her and pointed to a chair by the hearth. "You set down there," said he.

Myra did it, chiefly because her trembling would not let her stand. Then he stood before her and sometimes, in the stress of talk, turned away and walked back again.

"You stay there, Myra, while I expound the gospels. You've always minded, ain't you?"

"I've always minded mother."

"Yes. Well, that ain't turned out very well. Now you're goin' to mind me. An' you're goin' to keep on doin' it till I see you're a reformed character, an' then I'll mind you. After we've got settled down livin' together, we'll mind each other, turn an' turn about. But this is the way we're goin' to begin. I've got a horse out here.

Now you get up an' put on your things an' we 'll ride over to Parson True's an' get married."

Myra sprang to her feet. She looked the wild defensiveness of timid creatures.

"Why, Ansel Forbes!" she cried, "you 're crazy."

"No, I ain't. Put on your things."

"Why, I would n't do such a thing, not if the world was to stop to-morrow."

"Why would n't you?"

"Mother would n't want I should. She don't mean me to marry, ever. She ain't very strong."

"Your grandmother! She's stronger 'n you 'll be if you ain't looked out for."

"She has rheumatism," ended Myra weakly.

"Lucy Ann 's goin' to give up the factory an' come an' live with her, ain't she?"

"She may change her mind."

"Now, look here, Myra, I 'll make a bargain with you. A winter ain't much to give up out o' one lifetime, is it? You just give this winter up to me."

Myra forgot herself.

"I 'd give you all my lifetime if I could," she said.

"That's the talk. But s'pose you can't? S'pose your mother's comin' home along in March, an' you want to stay here with her?"

You just marry me now an' stay with me over 'n my house till then. Then come spring, you can trot back here, an' live with your mother, an' I 'll go back into the express business."

"But would n't you ever come home?" Myra asked incautiously.

"Not if you felt you 'd better be here with your mother. But we 'd have three months to look back on. That's a good deal, Myra, come to think of it. It 's better 'n growin' old alone an' wizenin' up an' thinkin' you ain't ever had your life as some folks have it."

"Yes," said Myra absently.

He took her hands and drew them up about his neck, and Myra let them stay, though she seemed unconscious of them.

"I never heard of such a thing in my life," she said at last.

"What?"

"Doin' that — marryin'" — she blushed — "in that kind of a hit or miss fashion."

"No, I never heard of it either, but there 's lots o' things we ain't heard on. We ain't so terrible knowin', if we were born in Sudleigh."

"Delia Mason was married last month. I stood up with her. It said 'for better, for worse.'"

"That 's it, you see. With some folks it 's all better. That means when they can keep right

along with nothin' to part 'em. We ain't so lucky. With us, it 's got to be 'worse.' Same thing, though."

"I don't know what Parson True 'd say."

"It 's all said. I see him on the way. He 's goin' to set up till 'leven to wait for us. I got the license in my pocket."

"Ansel! You must be crazy."

Her hands dropped from his neck, but he put them back again.

"Parson True 's been in it all along. He wrote to me off an' on. He promised he would. Little things, you know — whether you were sick, or dead, or takin' notice of anybody else."

"S'pose I had?"

"What?"

"S'pose there 'd been anybody else. What did you mean to do?"

"Come home an' bust him. It 's gettin' along in the evenin', Myra. I don't like to keep the old parson up."

"No! No!" said Myra, withdrawing herself. Her face had paled and the look of anticipation dulled out of her eyes. "Mother never 'd overlook it in this world."

"She won't know it. She 's forty miles away. Nobody writes to her from here. Like 's not nobody 'll find it out till she comes home. When she does, here you 'll be waitin' for her, fire all

built, supper on the table, an' you ready to fetch an' carry same as ever."

"But s'pose I should. Where" —

He interrupted her.

"Where we goin' to live? Right over in my house."

"It ain't been opened for a year."

"Well, it's open now. I brought along old Betsy from the Holler, an' she's cleanin' this minute, for all she's worth. There's a b'iler o' water on the stove an' Betsy's sluicin' down the walls. 'T ain't as if I had n't had it put in good repair that summer you said you'd marry me. Myra!" His voice compelled her. It was full of new, deep meanings. The woman in her leaped to meet that mastery.

"What is it, Ansel?" she asked timidly.

"Don't you like me?"

"Yes," she answered, so that he had to bend to hear. "Yes, I like you."

"How much? Well enough for that, if your mother'd let you?"

"Oh, yes! Yes!"

"Did n't you mind it when I went away?"

Myra answered with pathetic quiet, like a child.

"I 'most died."

Ansel spoke now with a grave assurance, as at something argued out and finished.

“Now, you get your hat, dear, an’ I’ll unblanket the horse.” He was throwing his coat on as he spoke. Myra clasped her hands and almost wrung them.

“But, Ansel!” she cried. “I can’t leave the house alone. Mother ’d kill me.”

“It ’s just to ride over to Parson True’s.”

“I don’t mean that. I mean all the time.”

“You won’t have to to-night. Betsy won’t be through cleanin’ for a couple o’ days. I’ll leave you here till then. I won’t stay here, dear, nor eat a meal o’ victuals. After we ’re settled down over to my place, we can run over two or three times a day an’ keep track o’ things. Get your hat, dear.”

Myra turned in pale obedience, and brought out her hat and jacket from the closet under the stairs. Ansel was waiting for her gravely, hat in hand.

“You better bundle up,” said he. “It ’s awful cold. I’ll unhitch the horse.”

When Myra ran down the walk to the gate, her breath came sharply and her throat was dry. It was like a dream and she would not have been surprised to find the “out-doors” empty and Ansel gone. But he was there. He lifted her into the wagon, sprang in beside her, and they drove away. Once or twice she opened her lips, to argue or remonstrate,

but he only answered from his muffling coat collar:

“You better not talk. It ’s terrible cold.”

Then she found herself listening to the horse’s hoofs, beating along with her tumultuous thought.

At the parson’s gate Myra stood trembling while the horse was blanketed, and when Ansel took her hand she shrank a little.

“Ansel,” she breathed, “let ’s go back.”

“You ’re cold, dear,” he answered tenderly. “Don’t you tremble so.”

Then suddenly, again like a dream, they were in the minister’s sitting-room, where the fire flickered behind great iron dogs, and Myra had taken her jacket off and was putting her hands to the blaze. She had resolved on the way to beseech Parson True to tell her all about this custom of marrying for a time, and undoing the habit of it when necessity should serve. But though she began with a trembling word, nobody seemed to notice her, save to be doing little cherishing things for her in an observant way, and she hardly knew how to speak.

“We ’re in a good deal of a hurry,” said Ansel, cutting short her frightened questioning, and then, still in a dream, she was trembling beside him, her hand in his, and Parson True’s grave daughter was standing in the background look-

ing at them in that comprehending way of hers, as if she understood the love she did not share, and Parson True was saying the words. There was cake and wine, and the parson blessed her in old-fashioned phrases, and she and Ansel were in the wagon again, whirling off toward home. Again there was silence between them, and even walking up the path with her Ansel did not speak. But at the door he kissed her.

“Don’t you cry, dear,” he said. “I don’t want you should ever cry. I shan’t come near till old Betsy’s cleaned the house. Then I’ll come. It’ll be a day or two. You be ready.” He strode back along the path, and Myra, waiting, heard his wheels upon the road and along the driveway to the house. She watched until she saw the lantern moving about while he unharnessed. Then she went in and, taking off her things, sat down by the dying fire. It was a dream still, beautiful but terrifying, and under it all was the sense of her own wrongdoing. She saw herself through her mother’s eyes, and her mind went back to the day when she had been guilty before, and all her golden hair lay scattered at her feet. But some infection rested on her from the man’s robustness and, with a daring recognition of life within her, she said aloud: “My hair grew again.” Then she rose and, with a thought of omen in a dying fire,

piled on wood and blew until it answered her.

Next morning she awoke with a throbbing consciousness of some new world about her, and all that day she hurried about the house, setting it in order and making her clothing into orderly piles, lest he should summon her away. She found herself referring the smallest questions to him, as if, in some quick transference of loyalty, she had merely bent her nature to new bonds. As she worked, the night before was vague and troubled to her, and still the sense of her wrongdoing grew and grew. If it had not been for the smoke from Ansel's chimney, she could have dismissed it all as some unproved imagining.

At the end of the second afternoon she sat by the fire, idle. The latch lifted, in neighborly fashion, and Ansel walked in.

"She 's gone," he said, warming his hands at the blaze.

"Who?"

"Old Betsy. The house is clean, all but the attic, an' we 'll leave that till spring. Come, dear, get your things."

"What for?" Myra managed to ask, trembling.

"Ain't you comin' home to get my supper? I'll cover up the fire." Then he laughed a

little. "You 've got to mind me now," he said, with a catch in his voice not quite like laughter. "You promised."

Myra brought out a shawl, a Rob Roy plaid she had worn skating when they were children, and put it over her head. Ansel had been covering the fire, and now he took her hand and led her down the path and along the road to his house, where all the curtains were hospitably up and lamps were lighted. He opened the door,

"You go in," he said, and Myra, in a trance of obedience, stepped across her sill into the great kitchen where the fire blazed and the table was set for two. She hung her shawl on a nail where Ansel's mother had used to hang hers.

"You want me to get supper?" she asked simply.

Ansel put his arms about her and held her to him.

"I 'll be good to you," he promised her. "I 'll be good to you."

"But it 's only for this winter," said Myra wistfully, and he answered:

"No, it 's only for this winter."

The strangest part of it all was its familiarity. In a week Myra went singing about her house, and it seemed to her that she had always sung and always lived with somebody who treated her like a beloved child and was pleased with all she

did. She tried new dishes out of old Mrs. Forbes's cookery book, and Ansel drove five miles to buy citron, with the unquestioning devotion of other lovers in riding for a flower. She wore her blue cashmere every afternoon now. Ansel had recommended it, in his unregarding way, and she had trembled out something about "mother" and the desirability of having it "for nice" another year. But that afternoon they drove to the "street" and, Ansel standing by, she picked out a red cashmere and a sweet delaine with forget-me-nots sown over it, and after they were made she felt less guilty about the blue. Yet none of their pastimes made her neglect the work her mother had laid out for her. She tacked the spread, and even quilted one pieced long ago and left in the attic for a leisure time; and Ansel sat by the quilting frame, rolling up the finished work, telling her stories, picking up her thimble for her, and bridging silences with laughter. They planned things, while they sat together, house-bound in winter days, always what they should do to make the place more gay and livable. It was Ansel who first touched upon the garden. He had always been, as his mother said, a great hand for flowers, and one day Myra found him by the window busy with pencil and paper.

"What are you doin'?" she asked.

“Plannin’ out the garden beds,” said Ansel absorbedly. “We ’ll move the pinies, so ’t you can see ’em from the kitchen winder when you ’re moldin’ bread. The hollyhocks, too. I never did like ’em out there in the open where they ’ll thrash and bang in a gale o’ wind. We ’ll put ’em down by the orchard wall.”

Myra leaned her head against his shoulder and thought how wonderful it was to live in a country where a great benevolent creature like this made all things bright. Suddenly she sat up and looked at him in swift remembrance.

“Ansel!” she cried, “that ’ll be in the spring.”

“Yes, so ’t will.”

“Well, in the spring, mother ’ll come home. I shan’t be here.”

Ansel laid down the pencil and folded the paper.

“No,” said he, in a sad abstractedness. “So you won’t.”

The tears brimmed her eyes and, seeing them, he took up the pencil again. “Well,” said he briskly, “we might as well do our plannin’, if it ain’t goin’ to come to pass. Them columbines now” — and the fairy tale went on.

The sun rose higher and brought a smiling March. There was a sound of moving water and the earth smelled good. One day Ansel was fencing, and Myra ran to him from the

kitchen, when she had a word to say, her bright hair blowing in the wind.

“Say,” he called after her, as she sped back after one such trip, “d’ you see that letter I laid on the end o’ the mantelpiece? I took it out o’ the office when I got the horse shod, an’ forgot to say so.”

Myra nodded, and her pace sagged to a leaden walk. Foreboding was at her heart, and she held the letter for a moment before tearing it open. It said exactly what she knew it would. She dropped it and went wavering to the door.

“Ansel!” she called weakly. “Ansel!”

He threw down his axe and came. Myra was sitting stolidly by the hearth, her great eyes dark with trouble.

“She ’s comin’ home,” she announced, without looking at him.

“Your mother?”

“Yes. She ’s comin’ home.”

“Lucy Ann with her?”

“She don’t say.”

There was a pause, while Ansel gravely looked at her. Suddenly Myra lifted her eyes to his and cried out harshly:

“You know what it means, Ansel? I ’ve got to go over there. I ’ve got to!”

Ansel put his hand gently on her hair.

"There, honey," said he, "don't you fret."

"We made the bargain, did n't we, Ansel? We said we 'd have three months together, an' then 't would be all over."

"We certain did. Now, don't you think about it. I'll go over an' open the winders an' start the fire."

If the first weeks of her marriage had been a dream of pleasure, this was a dream of pain. That day and the next Ansel was ever at her side. He helped her set her mother's house in order and carried over the food she had cooked for the home-coming supper. Myra worked with tears streaming down her cheeks, and always in sad silence. Her face had fallen into haggardness in those few hours. Her eyes looked from it woefully. On the afternoon of the second day her mother's house was warm and welcoming, and Myra, at her own window, stood with Ansel, waiting for the stage. When they should see it dip into the hollow beyond the barn it would be time enough to go.

"Ansel," she said, clinging to him, "I've tied up my clothes in a sheet. All but the dresses. Them I could hang over my arm. I don't want to jam my cashmeres, even if I never should wear 'em any more."

"You leave 'em here a spell," said Ansel softly, his cheek down on her hair. "They'll

be a kind of a comfort to me till I get used to it. I'll bring 'em over 'twixt daylight an' dark, some night soon, an' leave 'em. I need n't stop to speak to anybody."

"Ansel, what you goin' to do left here alone? You goin' back to Boston?"

"I don't know 's I rightly know yet," said Ansel gravely. "There! there 's the stage!" He seemed to be hurrying her out at the door, and that last touch of his hands was more than she could bear.

"O my soul!" she cried, "my soul!" stumbling along the road to her task. "Oh, I never can bear it in this world! I never can."

But when Mrs. Bourne and Lucy Ann, stiff but walking steadily, came in at the front door, Myra was there to meet them, a little flushed and trembling, though not quite in her old way, and no one saw the change in her. Lucy Ann was like her mother, strong-willed and resolute, though of a robust good-humor.

"Ain't you done your hair different?" she asked, when Mrs. Bourne had bestowed a meagre kiss on Myra, and it was her turn for greeting.

Myra put her hand dreamily to her head.

"I guess I have," said she. She seemed to herself so truly another creature that a change of fashion was less than nothing to her. In the hour before supper, she fell stolidly into her ac-

customed ways, stepping in and out from pantry to kitchen as if no other house had ever earned her love. Mrs. Bourne and Lucy Ann were busy unpacking the top layers of their trunks, to leave the balance of the work till morning, and at six Myra summoned them.

"Come," she called. Her voice rang sharply, and they came, vaguely alarmed by it.

The table was beautiful in the nicety of its array, and the fragrance of tea filled the air beguilingly. Mrs. Bourne assumed her place, and Lucy Ann, following Myra's motion to her, took the seat opposite. Myra was about to slip into the one between them, but midway she paused, straightened herself, and stood with her hands upon the chair.

"Mother!" she cried chokingly.

"The land!" ejaculated Mrs. Bourne, setting the teapot down in haste. "I 'most scalded me. Myra, what 's the matter?"

"Mother, I 've got to tell you something."

"Then for the land sake, out with it!" retorted Mrs. Bourne, alarm upon her face. "What have you been up to? You ain't burnt the house down. You lost the bank book? Myra, you 'd ought to be trounced, standin' there like a bump on a log. You speak up an' tell."

Myra spoke, and her voice sounded to her hollow and of no avail.

"I've got married. I've married Ansel Forbes."

Mrs. Bournesat wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Married Ansel Forbes?" she echoed.

"Yes, mother, I have. An' I ain't sorry. An' don't you try to make me sorry, for I shan't be."

"Well," said Mrs. Bourne irrelevantly; "you set down an' eat your supper."

It was what Myra had meant to do, now that her news had been told, but her voice went on in spite of her. A spark had sprung to either eye. Her cheeks burned hotly.

"I've got to get his supper," she said sharply. "I must go now. I must go home."

She had reached the door before the two women recovered themselves to any understanding.

"Wait a minute," called Lucy Ann. She rose stiffly and walked after her, moved by a sense of the joylessness of such leave-taking. She put a detaining hand upon her sister's arm.

"There, Myra," said she kindly, "like as not you've done real well. They say Ansel's been left something by his aunt up there in Boston, an' the express business an' all. Mother, you speak up, won't you?"

Mrs. Bourne opened her mouth, but no words came. Myra had been pinning the little Rob

Roy shawl over her head, and now she unlatched the door.

“Good-by, mother,” she said huskily. “I’ll be over after supper.”

At the gate she heard her mother calling her.

“Myra!” came the voice, in the old, quick tones. “Myra!”

A sob caught Myra in her throat, and she stood trembling. She did not answer; she only turned her face away and set her feet toward Ansel’s. And the voice absolved her.

“You tell Ansel to come over with ye!”

Myra threw open the gate and ran along the road. There were frogs peeping in the distance, and the west showed a ray of yellow light. She sped up the driveway and her heart failed her because the house was dark. She opened the door and hurried forward into the kitchen.

“Ansel!” she cried passionately. “O Ansel, you here?”

A fire was flickering on the hearth and Ansel rose slowly as she came to him. It was incredible to find him there, solid and warm and hers. She hid her face upon his arm.

“I can’t stay there,” she choked, between her sobs. “This is my home. I’ve got to live in it. Ansel, you had your supper?”

“No,” said Ansel, stroking her hair.

“Wa’n’t you goin’ to have any?”

“When you come an’ got it for me.”

“What made you think I ’d come?”

He laughed softly at her foolishness and, as she stood there quieting into peace, new wisdom broke upon her.

“May be you thought ’t would be this way, when you told me I could go back?” she said.

“May be I did.”

“May be Parson True thought so, too?”

“May be so, honey. Now, le’ ’s have our supper.”

ROSY BALM

ROSY BALM

MISS ARLETTA was seeing the minister out through the kitchen, because he had tied his horse at the barn, and it was easier to go that way. He was a tall, stooping man with thin gray hair and a long, benevolent face. Miss Arletta, behind him, looked very small; yet she was a woman of good height, though of exceptional thinness. Her little face showed all its bones pathetically, and a perpetual smile dwelt upon it and behind the glitter of her gold-bowed spectacles. People said she wore off her flesh by being spry.

Midway in the large kitchen, comfortably lighted by pale winter sunlight, the minister paused. He sniffed a little, and his mild face took on a look of pleasure.

“Why, Miss Arletta, I smell flowers.”

Miss Arletta laughed.

“No,” she said, “it’s rose-water. I’ve be’n fixin’ it up with glycerine an’ some other trade I know, to put on my hands. They git terrible chapped, this winter weather.”

“Yes,” the minister agreed, “so my wife says.”

“Why, look here!” called Miss Arletta, her hand upon the door. “You wait a minute, an’ I’ll fill a vial for her; I got some right here.”

“Well,” said the minister hesitatingly; but he threw back his coat again, and loosed his comforter, while Arletta ran to the cellar way for her bottle, and, after much rinsing and peering through it at the sun, proceeded to fill it from her larger store.

“You tell Mis’ Hardy to put it on nights, an’ after she’s washed her hands,” she counseled. “Tell her I’ll drop in an’ see how ’t works. Tell her I’ve enjoyed your call; but she must n’t leave off comin’ now it’s cold.”

“She would have come,” the minister explained again, “I have no doubt; but this question of the missionary fund keeps her much occupied.”

“Poor little creatur’s!” said Miss Arletta. Her mind had flown to the heathen on foreign shores. “Don’t seem ’s if there could be anybody these times without gospel privileges. Makes me terrible ashamed to think I ain’t got more ’n that poor miserable dollar to give.”

“The widow’s mite,” said the minister kindly. Miss Arletta was wrapping the bottle in a piece of newspaper. “It is not the size of the offering that renders it blessed, Miss Arletta. Remember the parable.”

“There!” said she. “Don’t ye tip it over in your pocket. That cork ain’t none too good. You tell Mis’ Hardy, if she likes it there ’ll be more where that come from.”

The minister spoke his gentle thanks, and now Miss Arletta opened the door. The December wind blew up an outer fringe of her thin hair, and the minister also bent his head to its inclemency.

“I am obliged, Miss Arletta,” he called back. “You ought not to be so generous with your recipe. You might sell it.”

Arletta, nodding and smiling, watched him out of the yard, and then shut the door and turned back to the warmth of her still house. She liked people. Visitors were like the wind itself: they brought vigor and tidings. But she was always glad when the wind was over and the visitors had gone. After she had tucked a stick of wood into the kitchen stove, and warmed her hands there, she went into the sitting-room and took her low rocker by the window. She was turning sheets that day. They were scarcely worn at all; but it was pretty work, and she did it more times a year than she would have liked to tell. Presently she dropped her sewing in her lap and began musing over unhappy India as the minister had described it. Miss Arletta would not have been altogether willing to tell the min-

ister how hard it was to keep from dwelling, in keen delight, on his picture of foreign lands, nor how easy to forget the pity of it that suffering should invade that paradise of bloom. She remembered the heathen's godless state, and said, "Poor creatur's!" But even at the utterance, she knew this was the guilty protest of a mind secretly in love with heathendom itself. She prized her gospel privileges, but she liked also to be warm, and her irrepressible fancy cast up before her the picture of wintry Sundays in church when hot soapstones cooled with the feet that sought them, and heaven itself was nothing but a sizzling coral strand. Yet that way stretched a dangerous latitude. She caught herself back to the old dutiful regret that she could give so little, and took up her sewing. But suddenly she dropped the work again into her lap, and spoke aloud:

"My land! mebbe that 's the way."

Immediately she saw herself making a lotion for the hands and selling it broadcast. Arletta's mind always moved by leaps, straight for the brightest goal. In that moment of conception, she saw her scheme full grown. She was making the lotion by quarts, by gallons, in vats and reservoirs. Her house, her clothes, were redolent of rose-water and sweet essences. Bottles with printed labels were on druggists' shelves all

over the country, and ladies with chapped hands were crowding counters in throngs, all asking, "Have you Rosy Balm?" That was to be its name. And all the profits that came flowing in would be put scrupulously into the bank, and, at the end of every month, sent off to India for the breaking of error's chain.

That night Miss Arletta slept intermittently; but she dreamed of rose-gardens and dusky maidens on sea-beaches where the pebbles were pink beads, and she awoke to action. When her breakfast dishes were done, she ran across the field and asked Tommy Beale to harness up and take her to town; and there she drew five dollars out of the savings-bank, and at the wondering druggist's stocked up with glycerine and rose-water and the rest.

For two days Miss Arletta's kitchen smelled divinely to her, as she mixed and measured. She seemed to be living in an enchanted spot, and doing something that was going to turn out very precious and wonderful. She had always made her lotion with a zealous care, but now she wrought with a nicety proportionate to the greatness of her task. She began to think of precious ointment, and got out the big picture Bible to read the story, as if her own little every-day Testament were not enough. And one morning, when the sun fell on the winter crust and turned

it into a dazzle, she started forth, carrying a bag filled with small bottles, all alike and neatly labeled in her fine old-fashioned hand. Arletta took the Lower Road because the houses there were nearer together, and she was impatient to begin to sell. She could not remember having felt so happy for years, nor so full of youth. She was on a track, she felt, that might lead anywhere.

The first place on the Lower Road was Lawrence Gilson's, a little one-story house, unpainted, but in summer a picture of beauty in the midst of vines and tangles. Now it was a part of the cold rigor of the time, and when Mrs. Gilson came to the door, Miss Arletta was ready to say, with a shiver:

"My! ain't this winter weather?"

"I guess 't is," said Mrs. Gilson, "an' we've all been down sick with colds. Come right in. I'm terrible glad to see ye."

There was no one in the kitchen but little Anna May, and she sat in a high chair at the table, packing six raisins into a small round box and then taking them out and packing them over again. There was a clove apple before her, and an Infant Samuel in plaster.

"I let her have 'em out o' the best room," Mrs. Gilson explained, as Miss Arletta paused to admire these trophies. "She's jest gettin'

over her cold, an' much as she can do to find anything to take up her mind." She was tucking a stick of wood into the stove, and now she turned to Miss Arletta with a newly welcoming smile. "Take your things right off," she bade her. "Now, don't you say you ain't come to pass the day."

"I'll unpin my shawl," said Arletta. "No, I can't stop more 'n a minute. I was only goin' by, an' I thought I'd drop in. She's be'n real sick, ain't she?"

They exchanged a sympathetic glance over Anna May. She was a pathetic little picture, with her wan face, her flaxen pigtails, and her painstaking intentness over the raisins. Mrs. Gilson nodded.

"Her cough's be'n the worst of any of us," she said proudly. "'Most tore her to pieces. I thought one time 't was whoopin'-cough, but the doctor says it's spasmodic."

They talked on for a time, while the wood blazed and the stove reddened, and finally Miss Arletta pinned her shawl and rose to go. Then she opened her bag. Anna May was looking at her for the first time. Her blue eyes glistened with something like expectation. In spite of herself, Miss Arletta spoke and said the word she had not premeditated.

"What you s'pose I got in this bag?" she

asked softly. Her own eyes gleamed as brightly as the child's.

Anna May shook her head.

"Well," said Miss Arletta, "I got a little bottle o' suthin' I fixed up to rub on folks' hands. I'm goin' to give it to you. Mebbe you 'll let mother have a mite 'fore she goes to bed, an' when you git out slidin', it 'll be nice for you, too. It smells real good." She set the bottle on the table beside the Infant Samuel, and hurried out.

"Now, ain't you kind!" Mrs. Gilson was calling after her, down the path; but Miss Arletta only waved her mittened hand and hurried on. She was muttering to herself:

"If I ain't a fool! Poor little creatur', though! Well, it's only one bottle anyways. I've got plenty left." She put up her head again and quickened her steps.

Old Rhody came next. She lived alone in another little house, one that was adorned neither by summer nor winter. There was no answer to Miss Arletta's knock, and she went in. Old Rhody sat by the fire, gaunt and gray.

She began at once, in her high voice full of wailing circumflexes:

"I says to myself, there won't be a soul come into the house this day. I dunno' what possessed you to start out this weather, but now you 're here, Arletta Black, you jest set down

there in that chair an' tell me what 's goin' on in the world. I dunno' no more 'n if this was the tomb an' I was walled up in it."

Miss Arletta threw off her shawl at once and put down her bag.

"You pretty lame, Rhody?" she inquired warmly.

"Pretty lame? I guess I be. I'm so lame I can't git from kitchen to pantry without hollerin' right out, as if somebody 's jabbin' a knife into me. Took me two hours by the clock this mornin' to git my work done up, an' you can guess how much I have, livin' alone so."

Miss Arletta was beaming through her glasses.

"Ain't there suthin' I can do, now I 'm here?" she inquired. "Stir up some biscuits or a batch o' pies?"

"No! no! makes me nervous as a witch to have anybody messin' round amongst my things. No, you se' down an' tell me what 's goin' on in the world. I might as well be dead, for all I hear."

Miss Arletta began with the upper end of the town, and took the houses in turn. She told about Jabez Lane's steer, and Mary Dwight's new melodeon. She had plenty of news, for her own house was a center of social intercourse. Rhody listened greedily. No one came to see her, as she said, and she was too poor to take the

county paper. At the end of an hour Miss Arletta rose and threw on her shawl.

“Mebbe I’ll be in again next week,” she said. “You heard from Lucy lately?”

“She writes pretty reg’lar,” said Rhody gloomily. “But I dunno’ when ’t ’ll stop. She ’s nothin’ but a niece by marriage, an’ you can’t expect folks to act as if they were your own. Last Christmas she sent me a half a dozen handkerchers, as nice as ever you see, with a letter worked in the corner. I don’t look for nothin’ this year. Don’t expect nothin’, I say, an’ ye won’t be disappointed.”

Miss Arletta opened her bag with a snap. Her mouth curled scornfully, but that was for her own infirmity of purpose.

“’T ain’t quite Christmas,” she said rapidly, as if she were ashamed, “but mebbe I should n’t git round jest then. So I brought you this little vial, Rhody. Mebbe ’t’ll keep your hands kinder nice an’ smooth, doin’ your housework an’ all.”

Rhody took the neat bottle and looked at it with a softened gaze.

“Well, if that ain’t complete!” she said. “You ’re real good, Arletta. What made you think on ’t?”

Miss Arletta was getting out at the door as fast as possible.

“I ’ll be over next week,” she called. “I ’ll bring my knittin’ an’ we ’ll have a dish o’ discourse.”

This section of the Lower Road was familiarly known as Lonesome Hill, because each of the four houses had but one inmate. The next was Uncle Blake’s, and there Miss Arletta was sure of a response. Uncle Blake came at once to the door, and she hesitated, seeing his white shirt-front and scrupulous silk stock.

“You got company?” she asked.

Uncle Blake laughed, a little dry note. He was a tall old man with a noble profile.

“No, no,” he answered. “Walk right in. You see I was dressed up, did n’t ye? Well, so I be. Se’ down, an’ I ’ll tell ye what put it into my head.”

She took the Boston rocker by the hearth, and Uncle Blake sank into his own armchair. The room was beautiful in its cleanliness and order.

“Ye see,” he continued, “passon asked me to come over to dinner to-day; but that wa’n’t why I dressed up. I done it the minute I got my chores done up. I kinder wanted to. Arletta Black,”— he rose, and looked down upon her in a proud dignity,—“Arletta Black, I ’m eighty-five year old to-day.”

Miss Arletta also rose. She put out her

hand, and he shook it solemnly. Then, having pledged the day, they sat gravely down again.

"Eighty-five!" repeated the old man. His face took on the musing look, reflected from his meditations of the hour before. "I've seen a good deal, Arletta."

"I guess you have." Miss Arletta's eyes were wet. She thought of the dead days she had loved, and knew that he also had been a neighborly witness of them. "Well, I hope you'll have a good spell yet."

"I dunno' why I should n't," said the old man. "I'm as lively as a cricket. I fried me some cakes this mornin', for my breakfast, an' I eat 'em, too. Mebbe I shall see a good many more winters. Mebbe I shan't. I'm livin' on borrowed time. But I'm thankful for 't, Arletta. I'm thankful."

"You remember grandsir, don't you?" asked Miss Arletta. "He was older 'n you be, by a good ten year, as I remember him. He'd kep' everything but his hearin'."

Uncle Blake's face creased into a reminiscent smile.

"'T was he that used to set up 'most all night to see what time I went home from Adelaide True's," he rejoined. "I used to do 'most every which way to outwit him. Well, he need n't ha' troubled himself. I never got her."

“She married Elder Hale, did n’t she?” asked Miss Arletta, swaying back and forth, in a pleasant muse of recollection. “’T was her grandson that preached down to Sudleigh, t’ other Sunday.”

“Yes,” agreed the old man,—“yes. There ain’t nobody to carry on my name. But I’ll carry it myself,” he added presently, looking up with his warm smile. “I ain’t hurt it much yet, an’ I don’t believe I shall now. It’ll last as long as my headstone does, an’ mebbe somebody’ll be glad to hear it in the next world.”

They went hand in hand over the backward track of the town life. Miss Arletta had heard so many stories of the olden time that it seemed to her as if she were of an equal age with him, and that they were walking along a pleasant road among shadowy scenes, unchanging now forever, and so incapable of hurting them any more. For they could reject the ill of those ultimate times and revive only the good. The clock struck, and Miss Arletta rose.

“If you’re goin’ to passon’s,” she said, “you’ll have to be gittin’ along. So must I, too. See here, Uncle Blake, I dunno’s you care anything about birthday presents. I never had but one in my life. That’s when I was seventeen, an’ I set the world by it. Here, you take this. It’s a kind of a lotion for your hands.

I gi'n Mis' Hardy some jest like it, t' other day. You tell her you 've got some, too."

"Well," said Uncle Blake, "I never!" He stood there in the middle of the room, the bottle in his hand. Miss Arletta, who had meant only to be kind, was amazed at finding that she had been something more to a degree she could not understand. "I don't know," continued Uncle Blake slowly, "as I 've had such a present sence I was twenty-one. I had one then. Adelaide True was out by the wall that day, when I went by, an' she reached over an' gi'n me a Provence rose. This — I believe to my soul, Arletta, you 've put rose into this, too."

The tears were in Arletta's eyes.

"It's Rosy Balm," she said, with a brisk cheerfulness. "That's what I call it — Rosy Balm. You use it, Uncle Blake. Good-by. Le's shake hands once more, for sake of old times. Good-by."

Hurrying along the road, with her head down, she took up a corner of her shawl and wiped her eyes.

"Law!" she said, smiling and crying at once. "I should think I wa'n't more 'n two year old. — Why, Jane Dunham, that you?"

Jane lived in the next house, but she was speeding along in her best bonnet and shawl, a small neat woman with a round face and young,

pathetic eyes. Jane caught Arletta's hand, as it lay under her shawl, and held it. She was all sensibility, and quick tears came into her eyes. Why she did not know, nor did Arletta: but every one was used to Jane Dunham's kindly tears.

"You comin' to pass the day, 'Letta?" she asked. "I was goin' on down to the Corners to git me some samples, but I'd ruther by half turn back home an' set with you."

"No, no, I'm full o' business. I've talked away most o' the mornin' a'ready. Look-a-here, Jane. I got suthin' here in my bag." She made her way out into the snow by the side of the road, and set her bag on a stump, to open it. Jane was instantly by her side, her bright eyes questioning.

"Rosy Balm!" she read, taking the bottle and holding it at a comfortable distance. "Land sakes, 'Letta! what 's that?"

Arletta's eyes were shining. Now at last she seemed to have entered on the fruitage of her plan.

"It's some trade I mixed up for chapped hands," she explained. "It's got glycerine in it an' rose-water" —

"'T ain't that old receipt Aunt Silvy used to be so private about!"

"Yes, 't is. I found it in her desk, arter she

died. Did n't I tell you that? Well, I found it, an' I used it, an' mine 's jest as good as her'n."

They looked at each other in a knowing triumph. They had both had long experience of Aunt Silvy. It had not seemed that the cleverest could outwit her, even after death.

"You remember how we used to go there to tea?" asked Jane. "Little mites we were, an' scared eenamost to death, she was so toppin' with us. There was one arternoon we made poppy dolls an' tea sets in the gardin an' she ketched us —"

"An' said them were the very poppies she was savin' for seed!"

Their faces creased into a wrinkled mirth. They were two staid elderly women lingering by a snow-bank, with the mind's eye fixed upon a sunny past.

"You remember the time when she told you to git me a cooky out o' the parlor cluset" —

"An' I went in an' sliced us both off a junk o' fruit cake an' hid it under my tyer! I guess I do."

"If ever there was two tykes, 'Letta," said Jane, with relish, "'t was you an' me. To think you 've got that receipt, too, arter all these years."

Arletta spoke immediately, and it seemed to her that her voice came forth without her will:

“You take it, Jane. You take this vial. ’T will kinder bring back old times, an’ it ’ll keep your hands good, too.” She shut her bag, and strode out in the road again.

Jane followed. Her eyes were wet with tears.

“You did n’t come ’way up here to give this to me, ’Letta?” she asked meltingly.

“You keep it,” Arletta counseled, moving on her way. “It ’s got a real good smell. I guess ’t will bring back some o’ them old times.”

“Come down next week,” Jane was calling, and Arletta nodded and waved her hand.

At this point Arletta omitted to scorn herself. She tried to act as if she had meant to do nothing in the world but come out and give away bottles that were made to sell. Arrived at the Veaseys’ house, she passed it with a fleeting glance. They were old-maid sisters who would skin a flint or split a shilling. Then there was Miss Susannah Means, who lived alone with her brother and did good works. She was sitting by the window, a faded little woman with an eager glance, and all one sandy color from hair to skin. Arletta opened the side door and walked in upon her, and Susannah glanced up warmly without moving otherwise.

“Set right down,” she said, in her high treble. “Lay off your things. I ain’t got a minute to give, or I ’d take ’em for ye.”

“For the land sake, Susannah,” said Arletta, advancing upon her, “what you doin’?”

Scraps of coarse lace lay in Susannah’s lap, with knots of bright-red worsted.

“I ’m runnin’ up some candy-bags for the tree,” she explained, stabbing her needle in and out. “Do lay off your things. I ’m worried to death, too. They say there ’s two families — them miserable Hendersons landed at the poor-farm this week, an’ six child’en between ’em, an’ if they go to the tree like ’s not there won’t be a present for ’em, less’n we can scrape up suthin’.”

Miss Arletta’s mittened hand was at her bag. Her eyes gleamed defiantly behind their glasses.

“Law, Susannah, don’t you be concerned,” she said. “Here ’s suthin’. You look-a-here.” One after another she took out six bottles, and pushing back the worsted on the table, ranged them there in a soldierly row. Susannah looked up over her glasses, and then took one of them in her hand.

“Rosy Balm,” she read. “What kind o’ trade is that, Arletta?”

“It ’s a nice scented wash to put on your hands,” returned Arletta proudly. “You can tie some slips o’ paper on ’em an’ mark ’em for them poor little creatur’s that ain’t got nothin’ else. Mebbe they ’d like a jumpin’-jack or a doll; but ye have to give what ye can, an’ I made

this, an' I can't make nothin' else. Good day, Susannah."

But Susannah was sitting in a pleasant dream, holding the bottle in her hand and saying to herself:

"Rosy Balm! Forever! Rosy Balm!"

Arletta saw that there were visions before her of little paupers in winter quarters, soothing rough hands and smelling at the bottles. She had done well. Yet again she tried not to jeer at herself, though her bag was very light. Arletta stopped at the fence on the way out, and rested the bag there while she sought within it.

"One bottle!" she ejaculated. "Well, if I'd ha' known" — but if she had known, would it have been different? Her mouth widened in a whimsical smile, and again she spoke: "I might as well give this away, quick 's ever I can, so 's not to break my record. No, I won't, either. I'll be whipped if I will. I'll sell it, or I'll die for 't."

"Ride?" called Cap'n Tom.

He pulled up at the gate, in his shabby old wagon, and waited for her. The cap'n was a thin man with a lean face, a satirical mouth, and about his eyes certain lines that nobody liked. Yet they liked the cap'n. He had a great fund of dry humor; but he was a stingy man. He owned it frankly.

"I set the world by money," he often said. "I like to see it roll up same 's a boy loves to roll a snowball. 'T ain't much importance, snow nor money neither, but it 's terrible excitin' to see 'em grow." His title came from that, and clung to him. He was a captain of swift enterprise.

"I 'm goin' along home," said Arletta, pausing with her foot on the step.

"So 'm I. Git in. How are ye, 'Letta?" he asked, when they were jogging along.

"I dunno'," returned Arletta recklessly. "I 'm pretty well in health, but I 've got reason to think my mind 's affected. I guess I 'm a born fool."

The cap'n flicked his horse and chuckled.

"Common complaint," said he.

"Cap'n," began Arletta, out of the fullness of experience, "I 'm goin' to tell you suthin', an' if you ever pass it on to anybody else, I 'll set your barn afire. My brother Tom used to say you was the closest-mouthed feller in the county."

"I guess that 's right," said the cap'n, with pride. "Close-fisted an' close-mouthed. That 's right."

Then Miss Arletta began and told him the story of her day. He did not speak, and she turned and looked at him. The cap'n was shaking silently.

“I s’pose you think it ’s funny,” said Arletta, smiling herself unwillingly. “Well, mebbe ’t is; but if you was the one to do it, you ’d laugh out o’ t’ other side o’ your mouth.”

“Took ’em out to sell, did ye?” asked the cap’n.

“Yes, I took ’em out to sell.”

“An’ gi’n ’em all away?”

“All but one bottle. You need n’t ask for ’t, cap’n. I would n’t give it away for love nor money.”

The cap’n was silent for a moment. Then he said: “You take the reins, Arletta.” He unbuttoned his coat, thrust a hand deep into his pocket, and brought out a roll of bills. “Arletta,” said the cap’n slowly, “last week I sold a yoke of oxen. To-day I driv’ over to git my pay. You pass me out that trade.”

He took the reins, and Arletta sought within her bag and gave him her last vial. The cap’n took it gravely, held it far off and read the title, “Rosy Balm.” Then he put it in his pocket, pulled a bank-note from his roll, and passed it to her. After that he tucked the money into his pocket and buttoned it up again. “I dunno’, Arletta,” said he, “as I ever give any money to foreign missions; but if you want to turn that in, you can. I dunno ’s ever I heerd anything that pleased me more ’n your goin’ out peddlin’;

I'm a close man, but it's wuth that amount o' money to me."

Arletta sat looking at the bill, in bright amaze.

"My land, cap'n," she said at length, "you know what you've gi'n me? It's a five-dollar bill."

Instinctively he turned to look at it, and Arletta laid her hand upon the reins.

"Here," she called, in high excitement, "you le' me git right out an' go in an' hand it over to passon." She was out over the wheel before the horse had stopped. There she faced the cap'n, flushed and smiling. "I dunno's I could ha' trusted ye through that strip o' woods, cap'n," she called. "You might ha' repented an' ketched it away from me. Much obleeged to ye. Good-by."

She sped up the path to the minister's door, and the cap'n drove on chuckling. He was the poorer by five dollars, and there was a small sore spot in his heart. But he reflected on the story, and laughed again.

"Rosy Balm!" he wheezed, and pondered. "Rosy Balm!"

A SEA CHANGE



A SEA CHANGE

THE day was an April one, full of light from the nearer leaves and the green mist of their assembling where woods are deep. All the atoms were in motion, and a harmony of swelling buds lay, ready to be guessed, under the rhythm of running water. A thousand little streams broke from the mountain, and played the game of follow-my-fancy down the valleys and into the arms of the big water courses which knew all about it. Birds, in an ecstasy for nesting, juggled wildly with melodic phrases, and tried the trick of keeping three notes in the air at once; sound grew into substance and dripped delight. The whole bare page of early spring lay illumined, like a delicate green window with the sun upon it. Even Elephantis, the mountain, turned into a purple majesty cut out of air and fervent for the day.

In the little dark house under the very shadow of the mountain, on the side where firs grow close, there had been all the morning a clatter of brisk workmanship, the noise of mop and broom. Cynthia Miller was cleaning, with the passionate ardor of one who either loves her task

or strides through it to some desired goal. Now she threw braided rugs out of the window upon the bank, pierced only lately by needles of new grass, and, pulling out a drawer from her bedroom bureau, carried it into the parlor to pick over. Such haste impelled her that she tried to do everything at once, and tripped herself up in the snare of her own eagerness. This was the last room to be set in order; to-morrow the house would be clean. Thinking that, she passed an unsteady hand over her forehead, smoothed out the rough hair above it, and sighed in extremity of desire. Standing there over the drawer, she abandoned herself to work again, with a speed so quickened that it seemed as if her hands darted and pounced in their assorting. Sometimes she held up an article to the light to note whether it needed darn or patch. Her frowning scrutiny looked like the hysteria of labor, neither supported by physical strength, nor clad in the armor of an enforced control. She had been pretty once, of a brown type with a flush under the skin and smooth, plump outlines. Now she looked a haggard sprite, old too soon: her eyes seeking some remedy for perplexing ills, and the intention of the piquant nose quite spoiled by two transverse wrinkles at the base. A lumbering step sounded in the kitchen, and she stood arrested, listening. The lines in her forehead

multiplied; anxious care was enhanced by an added inscription of annoyance, anger even.

“Ain’t you gone yet?” she muttered, and then, as if some tormented spirit cried for its own relief and urged her on, “My soul! can’t I have a minute’s peace in this house?”

“Cynthy!” called her husband from the kitchen. The voice was dulled, not by intention, but the lack of it. “Cynthy, where be you?”

She stood as still as one of those little brown creatures on the trees, when they straighten themselves into twigs at the approach of other life. Her eyes narrowed. She looked not so much frightened as immovably perverse. If he wanted her, he should not have her, only because he wanted. Then he called again, and she heard his step coming her way. It sounded blundering, as it always did in the house: an inexact step not quite conscious whither it was bound, in these strange latitudes of wall and window, and better adapted to wide barns or the uncertainties of ploughed fields.

“Well,” called Cynthia sharply from her trap, “what ’s wanted?”

At that instant he appeared in the doorway, and filled it with the effect of brawn and vigor. He was a son of the soil, made out of earth, and not many generations removed from that maternity. His thick hair and bristling brown beard

gave his head a fictitious size, and his calm brown eyes showed only an honest and quite unconscious acquiescence in the lot of man. Even here, within four walls, the outdoor world claimed him for its own with crude assertiveness. Straws clung to him. Dark loam caked his furrowed boots, and the smell of animal life flew before him like a proclaiming aura. Cynthia could not look at him. She bent over the drawer and assorted swiftly, turning the clothes as if she sought a corner for hiding.

“Well,” she repeated, with the same challenging sharpness, “what ’s wanted?”

But if her voice bore any new meaning that day, Timothy was deaf to it.

“I ’ve greased my t’ other pair o’ boots,” he announced, in that throaty rumble calculated to leave the tongue an idle life. “I shall want ’em this arternoon, when I go down along, fencin’. I set ’em by the oven door. I thought I’d tell ye.”

“Well.”

“We might as well have dinner by ’leven. I want to make a long arternoon on ’t.”

“I ’ll see to it.”

Amply satisfied, he turned about and went plodding out of doors. She drew her breath sharply, and listened. Those steps had two meanings for her nowadays. When they ap-

proached, she shuddered, and her flesh crawled. At their withdrawal, she found it possible to keep half alive. But when she heard his guiding remarks addressed to the oxen, while the old cart went creaking out of the yard, at a measured pace, she gave way to an impulse likely to afford her infinite relief for the moment, even if it had to be repented. She flashed into the kitchen with the unerring step of the housewife made to carry domestic business through triumphant crises, and swooped down upon the heavy boots standing, redolent of grease, by the oven door. Her nervous hands fell upon them murderously, as if they represented a misery borne to the last gasp, and, taking them out into the yard, she threw them as far as her strength would serve.

“There!” said she, with a flash of obstinate malice, nodding at the mountain, “I’ve done so much. I wish I could throw ’em over you. I wonder what you’d say to that!” Then she went back again, and with some temporary composure addressed herself to work. A victory over the boots showed some tangible advancement; it promised more.

The mountain had made an intimate part of all Cynthia’s married life. When she came up here from the plains to settle, it seemed to her, without much difficult thought on the matter,

as if there were something unlike other weddings in this pilgrimage uphill to live under the shadow of Elephantis. From her old home, sold now into the hands of strangers, it uplifted a mystical outline, to be grasped only in the clearest weather. Here it seemed to be a part of her freeholding. Then the attitude of the world unconsciously swayed her mind and roused in her the pride of place. Year after year, with the quickening of summer, crowds of people sought out Elephantis and grew voluble in wonder before its purple glories. In the winter, there were sometimes paragraphs in the local paper relative to daring ones who had "gone up" the season before, and the county was never tired of talking about the party which had got lost there and, straying into Dutchman's Gulf, suffered two nights of hunger and fear. All these dramas, inspired by an adventurous world, were played on the other side of the mountain: yet Cynthia felt them to be hers alone. It was her mountain; and for many years she studied its varying aspects under sun and snow, and even, one spring when her husband was logging, cut herself a little path through the bushes, fantastically hoping to reach the top, as we plan for what can never happen. But all this had belonged to her youth. She was forty years old now, and the mountain seemed too near. Yet

still it remained the unmoved witness of her actions, a hateful censor as unyielding as if it had been appointed by God himself. She was bitterly angry with it, as she was with her husband; but in her anger against the mountain was mingled the alloy of fear.

When Timothy came home to dinner at eleven, there were no outer signs of homely tragedy. The house wore a beautiful order, and his boots stood by the oven door as he had left them, their toes pointing rigorously. A whirlwind of passion had swept them forth, and expediency, not in the least tempered by repentance, had brought them in again. Cynthia's dinner table shone with care. The white cloth was ironed so smooth and glossy, the glasses gleamed so bright, that one looked about for the story of such serving,— to find it either in love or in that dull habit made to break the spirit and drive women early to old age. Timothy was conscious of having a good dinner, but not so keenly as if he did not have one every day. Yet even to him the house wore an odd aspect of Sabbath calm.

“Got your spring cleanin' done?” he asked Cynthia, upon a mouthful of potato and fried apple. She nodded, sitting opposite him and not looking up, even when she passed him food and drink. Her own plate was bare, and she

swallowed her strong tea thirstily and with a greedy purpose.

“I finished this forenoon,” she said, and, without her wish, some exultation cried out in her voice. It had not seemed possible that desire could ripen so.

Timothy glanced at her from time to time. Usually he only looked at her as he did at the clock, when he wanted to know something; but now the restlessness in her atmosphere challenged and piqued him. So he became aware of her empty plate.

“You ain’t eat a mouthful,” he announced, in more wonder than concern, and Cynthia’s forehead contracted a little closer.

“I ’m more dry than hungry,” she answered evasively; and he pushed the sausage nearer her, saying, with a neutral kindness which she had once known to be his equivalent for affection, “Help yourself!”

But she only shook her head and poured more tea. Presently he rose, took down his pipe from the mantel, lighted it luxuriously, and drew on his waiting boots, — the boots which could have told a story. When he held them up for scrutiny, Cynthia had a tempting toward hysterical laughter. She wondered what he would say if he knew they had spent most of their morning lying out in the old cabbage bed. Then he

poked his way out of the house, and presently she saw him striding off to the pasture whither he had drawn his fencing stuff that morning. She did not stay to do her dishes; other things were betiding. From the best bedroom she dragged out the hair trunk which had held her wedding things when she came up to live with the mountain, and tugged it through the shed to the barn, where she managed to lift it into the back of the wagon. She propped up the lid, and ran back into the house for the bundles of clothing which had lain ready for many days. So the trunk was packed, and the key triumphantly turned. Then Cynthia, breathless, but, she was sure, possessed of strength equivalent to all demands, led out old John, the horse of many summers, and harnessed him, praying Heaven the breeching might not have been shortened for Doll. John showed no wonderment while she threw a shawl over her calico dress and tied on her bonnet and veil. When she climbed into the wagon, he pricked his ears a little, but it was only as the whip fell upon him, going down the rough mountain road, that he betrayed any personal responsibility in the affair. A winter of oats and idleness had left him well equipped for one so far within the vale of years, and a remnant of his old spirit served him. So he put his feet down creditably, and Cynthia drove, looking

neither upon field nor sky, and mindful of her road. The April day was dulling under a hue of gray, not rain, nor even mist. It was only a color come with the waxing hour, and full of sadness. It fitted her mood more closely than the bold radiance of morning; all the tender shades of loam and springing leaf seemed to fall in with her expectations, and show her how soon youth may be over. We do not need to formulate these things, and chant antiphonal responses of nature to the human mind. The heart perceives them, and as we live, we know.

All winter long she had not driven these eight miles down to the village where her errand lay. Once it had seemed a festival like the breaking of icy bonds; but now, with all her thoughts turned inward upon one numbing point, she got what she could out of the horse, and thought only of time. The village stores were not for her that afternoon. She drove straight to the little station, and called the lank and introspective station master, loitering in idleness between his two trains a day.

“Here, you!” cried Cynthia, “should you jest as soon lift out this trunk?”

No men folks being with her, of whom to exact the toll of a helping hand, he let down the tailpiece of the wagon and dragged her treasure forth, impersonally and with no concern.

Cynthia wrinkled her brows.

“He need n’t ha’ slat it so,” she murmured to herself, and then remembering that he must help her further, she smoothed her feelings and continued, “I ain’t goin’ to-day. Can’t you keep it som’er’s till to-morrer — till I come?”

He shouldered it, still dumbly, and watching him to the door of the baggage room, she wondered whether it was well to trust an unknown man so far.

“You keep an eye on it,” she besought him. “I’ll be here to-morrer — not a day later.”

But his heights of contemplation included nothing near, and she turned about under her first actual sense of the lions in an unfamiliar way.

Their homeward progress had to be longer, because it was over rising ground, and John could not be urged. Still, though it was late afternoon before they reached the little house, they were in time. The barn door was closed. Timothy had not appeared. When he did come, more of the toiling earth than ever after his hours of work, John was in the stall, and Cynthia stood at the sink washing dishes. The unique nature of her occupation at that hour in the day struck upon Timothy, as he came through for the milk pail. So methodical was their life that even so slight a deviation was like a heartbeat dropped, to be accounted for.

“Ain’t you done your dinner dishes?” he asked, in self-evident statement.

“I ’m doin’ ’em now,” said Cynthia briefly.

“What d’ ye wait for?”

“I got hendered.” He inquired no further, and when he came in again supper was ready, a delicate supper with hot biscuits and quince preserve. Cynthia was doing her duty artistically to the last.

That night she lay awake, and tried to keep her eyes from the window, where the mountain hung like a pall. Timothy was sleeping vocally, but even through that droning note she heard the beating of her heart. It seemed to shake the bed and her with it, like some terrible agent outside herself. She held her hand upon her breast and tried to breathe serenely. But that grim quickstep gave her comfort, after all. She felt no need of forgiveness; she told herself that when Timothy heard she had died of heart disease, he could not blame her for whatever she had done.

Next morning breakfast was early, and Cynthia, clearing it away, spoke but once, — to the mountain. She had kept her back to it as much as possible of late, but somehow it filled her vision all the more; and now, when she went out to spread her dish towels on the brush, it grew and grew, as if it would engulf her.

“Why don’t you get into the winder, if you

want to?" she inquired, scorning it at last. "I would, if I 's you."

Very soon the kitchen, like the whole house, was beautifully in order, and Cynthia, her hair smooth and her pathetic little hands very red, had put on her best dress — an alpaca of great age and worth — and laid her bonnet and shawl on the table. Then she stepped to the door and called to Timothy, chopping limbs at the pile:

"You come in here. I want to speak to you."

He dropped his axe, and came, stepping a little more hastily than usual. But he was not used to being summoned.

"You cut you?" he asked. "You fell?"

She was standing near the kitchen table, one stark hand upon it. That and the rigid arm upheld her.

"There 's bread in the stone jar," said she. "I made three loaves, all I da'st, for fear 't would spile. I b'iled a leg o' bacon, an' the blue chist 's full o' mince pies. The 'taters are sprouted, all but what you set by to plant."

He stared at her in a wondering concern. She looked unfamiliar to him; and then he felt a little relief, knowing why.

"You got on your best dress," said he.

Cynthia went on with the inventory of her preparations.

"The house 's as clean as a ribbin. I've

swop the cellar, too. I dunno' what more I could ha' done."

"Why, no," agreed Timothy from his bewilderment. "I dunno' what more ye could."

"An' now I 'm goin' down to Sister Frances'."

He looked upon her as though she were demented.

"Not 'way down to Penrith?"

"Yes."

"What for?"

"To make 'em a visit." That did not seem to her a lie. He would know the rest later.

"How long you goin' to stay?"

She hesitated. "I 'll let ye know," said she.

"When ye goin'?" His eyes traveled from her black gown to the shabby little bonnet on the table, and he read his answer before her voice confirmed it.

"Now!"

Timothy turned vaguely toward the door. "Well," said he, "I 'll harness up. You git out my t'other weskit."

"I 'm goin' now, now this instant!" cried Cynthia, stepping before him and reaching the door first. The folded shawl was on her arm. She tied her bonnet rapidly in speaking.

"How ye goin' to ge' down there to the railroad?"

"I 'm goin' to walk."

“You wait a minute.”

He went back into the sitting-room, and Cynthia halted just outside the door, because she did not mean to leave her duty at loose ends. Obedience was owing him until she turned her back on him and on the mountain. Timothy had gone to find the broken-nosed teapot where their little store of money lay; but at the cupboard his wits deserted him, and he took one of the sprigged china cups from its place, went to the kitchen sink and filled it from the pail. When he appeared at the door again, he was drinking the water, and Cynthia opened her lips to challenge the use of that china. But she shut them firmly. It was his china. He could do what he chose with it.

“That all?” she asked.

Timothy came forward and mechanically putting out his hand, took up a dish towel from the brush. He wiped the cup with it, hard and fast. In both their minds rose a hasty simile that this stood for the housewifery he was thenceforth to do. She almost gave a little cry, for he had wiped off the delicate handle, and it fell at his feet. But Timothy was unconscious of it. Cups might easily fall when worlds were falling too.

“Well,” said Cynthia, “I’m goin’.” She turned about and walked away, her meagre back instinct with purpose. It was some seconds be-

fore her husband recovered his wits and voice; but he did recover them.

“Here, you!” he called. “You got any change?”

She nodded, without turning. “I got my butter money!” she cried into the distance; and Timothy heard. Then she stepped the faster, and when the road dipped into shadow, took the side that would hide her soonest from his eyes.

The morning was still young and very full of grace. Flocks of blackbirds were flying over, grinding out their dissonant melody, more piquing to the lover of New England springs than any nightingale beside his rose. The world had burgeoned since yesterday. There was a miraculous gloss upon the leaves, a thought larger than they had been twenty-four hours before. The roadsides were lined with beauties Cynthia had known well in the first years of her married life, when wandering was not a burden: hardy lady’s slipper in great patches, soon to be pink with puffy bloom, clintonia springing in polished green, and the clustering leaf of fringed polygala. All these things she knew by sight, though not by name, as she knew their happy haunts; yet she went along in haste, seeing the world, yet not seeing it, and wondering how she could ever have found the summer time so bright. Her eyes threw her the sheen and glory of things,

but her dull brain made no record. Yet not because it failed to act, for thought was racing hotly, and she planned how she should meet her sister and tell why she had come. All winter long she had brooded upon that opening speech, but now the long catalogue had resolved itself into one last irritation, and she could go only thus far:

“I can’t live with him no longer. I ’m goin’ to support myself.” Then Frances would ask why, and she would say, “He greases his boots so much. He leaves ’em by the oven door.” That seemed to be all she could remember, and quite enough. Any woman would know.

Now, as her impatient feet went beating along the road, it grew to be incredible that she had not seen Frances in all these years. Yet there had been reasons. She and Timothy never went from home, and Frances had her one child, deformed or sickly, Cynthia vaguely knew. But whatever the affliction was, it made a reason why the father and mother could not “go abroad,” even to so near a port. Now, within two years, the child had died and they were free. Through her hours of walking, at the moment when she inquired for her friendly little trunk and found it safe, through the terrible railway journey with adventurers and worldly folk who would as soon pick your pocket as not, Cynthia was conscious

of two things: that her heart was beating its way out of her body, and that she must tell Frances at once about Timothy's boots. Not a moment must be lost. She sat with her eyes closed, flying and jolting through an alien world. And when the train stopped at Penrith, in the warm dusk of evening, she was first upon the platform. The air tasted salt in her nostrils, and she noted through her desolation the tangible signs of an unfamiliar spot; it meant distance, freedom, and relief from fear. Fresh from her mountain solitude, the platform with its scattering loungers seemed to her tumultuous; all the men were tanned, and they talked in uncouth fashion quite unlike her own, and so amazing. She fastened upon one, because his beard was gray, and asked him chokingly:

“Can you tell me where Cap'n Pritchard lives?”

“Goin' over?”

“Yes.”

“Better take the 'commodation. Set ye right down at the door.”

“How much do you charge?”

“Ten cents.”

She nodded, and stood guard over her little trunk until he was ready to take it; then she followed it to the covered wagon. They jolted away into the darkness, and again she counted

her pulse and thought about Timothy's boots until they drew up at a house on what seemed a lonely road.

"Hullo the house!" whooped the graybeard. He shouldered the trunk, and Cynthia, before him at the door, found the knocker and beat a summons.

There was a gleam of coming light, and the door was opened by a tall woman with peaceful eyes and smooth white hair.

"I'm all beat out," gasped Cynthia; and as she would have fallen, Frances set the lamp down with one motion, and caught her on the other arm. The boots were not mentioned.

Next morning, when Cynthia waked, she was lying in a soft bed, and the eastern light lay warm upon the coverlet. The chamber was not very large, and the roof sloped a little on one side. She lay looking idly at the paper, thinking that it was "sweet pretty," all over roses and buds. Presently there was a stir from a neighboring room, and Frances stood in the doorway, as welcoming and tall as she had stood in the outer one the night before. Cynthia gazed at her hungrily.

"Why," she said, at last, "you ain't got a line in your face!"

Frances smiled and made some. She disappeared and came back with a tray of breakfast.

“Be I goin’ to eat in bed?” asked Cynthia wonderingly. “I ain’t so sick as that.”

Frances smiled again, and patted her hand. Then she sugared the coffee in a motherly way, and coaxed her to drink. Cynthia believed she was not hungry, but she managed to eat a little; and after a while, Frances still sitting by her, she thought she would tell why she had come. But when she would have done it, her heart began beating, and beat so fast that it turned her sick. So she only said again, like a child, “I don’t mean to make you trouble. You must n’t do for me.”

“You ’re all beat out,” said Mrs. Pritchard, recurring to Cynthia’s own pathetic phrasing.

There was a long silence, Cynthia studying her own face meanwhile in the little glass over the mantel, and then coming back to her sister’s.

“You ’re ten years older ’n I be,” she said at last, in that same wondering voice. “You ain’t got hardly a line in your face, an’ only look at mine! How ’d you know me?”

Quick tears sprang into the other woman’s eyes. Her voice choked upon the words: “I knew mother’s cameo pin.”

Then Cynthia bethought her that, although there seemed to be a stir of passing in the road, the house was quiet. “Where’s *he*?” she asked. “Cap’n Pritchard?”

“Gone clammin’. They have to go when the tide serves.”

“If I tell you suthin’, do you feel obleeged to tell him?”

“Not if it don’t anyways concern him.”

“Then — no, no, I can’t tell it. You jest feel how my heart beats!”

Frances put her hand over the fluttering thing, and her eyes were troubled.

“I sent over for doctor,” she said. “I guess that ’s his tread now. Doctor, that you?”

He came through the sitting-room and up the narrow stairs. A head covered with thick white hair appeared in the doorway. The face befitted a jolly clergyman of many years ago, a hunting parson. Cynthia drew the sheet to her chin, and shook. Suddenly she was afraid, not so much of him, as of returning life. It had been easy enough, a moment ago, to die here in peace, at the heels of that runaway heart; but they were going to drag her to her feet again, and she felt tired. The doctor sat down beside the bed, and took her hand. He looked at it, the little red palm, seamed and wrinkled, and the crooked fingers beckoning for some obstinate good. Then he looked at her.

“How long have you lived up there by the mountain?” he asked.

Cynthia choked. She could not remember. It seemed far away, yet the later terror of it was flaming still in sight. “Some years,” she said. “Years an’ years.”

“Been there all winter?”

“Yes.”

“Had any company? Been away anywhere?”

She shook her head.

“Busy all day?”

“’Most all.”

“What at?”

“Doin’ up the work. Sewin’.”

The doctor nodded. Then he listened at her heart and her lungs, and nodded again. “There ’s nothing the matter with you,” he said, “except you ’re tired out. Don’t you get up out of that bed till I tell you to.”

He went downstairs, Mrs. Pritchard following. Cynthia smiled bitterly to herself, and thought they would both find out some day. He was either a very poor doctor, or else he was deceiving her for a childish good. So she did get out of bed, and dropped on the floor in a little miserable heap; and there Frances found her, shaking and crying pitifully.

“I ’ve got spinal trouble, too,” sobbed Cynthia, “besides my heart. I dunno’ what under the heavens you ’ll do with me. I ’ve got to be a burden on somebody, now, as long as I live. Oh, I wisht I ’d died on the way down!”

“O you dear creatur’!” cried Frances, and she lifted her into bed, and then sat there mo-

thering her. Cynthia clung passionately to those enfolding arms; she cried harsh sobs which gave her bitter solace. Exhaustion came, and then she began to wonder a little over this human shelter where she felt so safe. Nobody had put warmly affectionate arms about her for a long time. Even her mother had not been used to wasteful caresses. They came of a stock which lived and died quite properly. But this was all she could say: "Should you jest as soon keep hold o' me a minute more?"

"Dear creatur'!" said Frances again, and then she shook her head in a whimsical way, knowing how "shaller" she might seem in reasoning eyes. She too had a bed rock of reserve, a rock which had been smitten long ago.

"I dunno' but I act kind o' silly," she said, "a woman o' my age; but I've got so used to babyin' little Cynthy — we both did, cap'n an' me — that I can't feel as if I was doin' enough unless I ketch hold o' people somehow."

"Cynthy wa'n't well, was she?" ventured the other Cynthia.

"She wa'n't quite right, dear," said Frances tenderly. "There! I'll tell ye all about it some time. Now you take these drops. Doctor left 'em for ye."

All that day Cynthia slept, and was quite content; for in her brief wakings she always saw

Frances, and remembered that the doctor said she was not to move. So there was no need of mentioning the boots, and making her heart beat again; because nothing could be done about them unless she were on her feet and able to talk to lawyers. And she should never be on her feet again. That night she looked up pitifully while Frances smoothed her down for the last time, and whispered:

“Do you think I shall pass away before mornin’?”

“O you lamb of love!” murmured Frances, in the drone of a splendid bee over honey. “You ain’t goin’ to pass away at all, not from anything you ’ve got now. Doctor says so.”

“He thinks I ’m spleeny; but I ain’t,” said Cynthia, with acquiescent gravity. “I ’m goin’, an’ I ’m willin’ to go; but he ain’t no kind of a doctor, or he ’d be the first to see it.”

“Want I should stay right here in this room?”

Cynthia shook her head. Nevertheless she knew, all through that strange and dreamless night, that Frances was at hand.

For a week or more Cynthia lay between sleeping and waking, expectant of the end, and only mildly curious about the manner of its coming. When her heart beat hard, she felt a temporary fright because those wings of terror shook her so. The doctor came, and seeing, after the

first time, how she shrank from him, would not have her told. Sometimes he stood behind the headboard, and looked down upon her. Often he placed a gentle hand upon her wrist; and always he had long talks with Frances, on his way out, and gave her counsel.

The Pritchards lived in a yellow, gambrel-roofed house on the great highway between Penrith and Brighton Sands. Penrith used to be a whaling port, and lies now in deserted honor, hands folded upon the majestic past. At Brighton Sands, visitors fill the air with laughter two months in the year, and go driving along the county road to explore dull Penrith, so quaint, so picturesque, and yet so to be eschewed in favor of boxlike cottages and bare hotels. Penrith knows but two centres of action, itself and the Banks; and who would spend a browsing day there, making the tour of crooked streets, may chance to learn more than he likes to remember of widows keeping lookout still, and fishermen's children orphaned by the snatching sea. But the wide white highway to the Sands lies in the light of a later founding, and holds a brighter prospect than that upon the harbor and the outer blue. It has but one row of houses, facing toward the east; for on the other side runs by the river to its outlet at the Sands. The river has its tide, and it is a chance whether you would find it

more companionable lapping the stone sea wall and pricked by tops of sedge, or withdrawn, leaving the sedges plentiful, green in summer, and, through the autumn, chestnut brown. All the houses are held by seafaring folk devoted now to 'longshore industry, clamming, eeling, and setting lobster pots; so when the tide serves, you see giants in sou'wester and oilskin, pushing out their boats, hoisting an ancient sail mellowed by weather, and gliding away into the east. Or they come creeping home again, and a fishy odor rises pleasantly. That same sea smell troubled Cynthia, used to the clear mountain air.

"Seems to me I smell suthin'," she remarked doubtfully, in her first moment of sane waking. "'T ain't nothin' b'ilin' over, is it?"

Mrs. Pritchard laughed till the tears came.

"It 's all that gurry over by the clamhouses," she said, wiping her eyes. "I admire to smell it, but I 'm so used to it 't ain't once in a dog's age I can. If ever I git a real good whiff, I feel as if I was made." Then she brought in a cup of clam broth, and Cynthia, privately thinking it "real poor stuff," sacrificed to hospitality and drank.

She lay there that afternoon high on her pillows, and surveyed the little room with some new interest.

"Frances," she said suddenly, "I don't know

no more 'n the dead what 's outside the house; I wisht I could jest glimpse out o' that winder."

"Cap'n!" called Mrs. Pritchard, at the door, "cap'n, you come up here!"

"O land!" breathed Cynthia, for in all these days she had not seen him, and it remained evident to her that, when they met, she must tell him things. He must be made to realize that although she had spinal trouble and heart disease, she did not mean to stay and be a burden on him. What she could do was not yet apparent; but there must be ways. So when a step came stealing up the stairs, she lay with brighter cheeks and waited for him, feverishly. The captain came in like a conciliatory cat. He was very big, and tall enough to stoop under the slanting roof. He had a good deal of yellow-gray beard and a proud aquiline nose; his eyes were very calm and steady, in the way of eyes used to looking on blue water. Instead of speaking to Cynthia, he gave her a queer little oblique nod, and then turned to his wife for orders.

"I want to kind o' pull this bed 'round," said Frances, "so 't she can look out a spell."

The cap'n laid hold. He spoke but once, and then Cynthia marveled at his voice, soft and lingering like an unusual kind of purr.

"A leetle mite more to the no'theast," he coun-

seled, pulling as Frances pushed. And the bed being turned, he disappeared with the same considered silence, as if it were a velvet habit worn to meet the world.

The window framed an exquisite picture, and beguiled the eye into far-reaching glimpses more bewildering still. There was the river; Cynthia thought it was the sea. Beyond ran a shadowy line of land, with one white tower, and over the curdling water between, little sailboats were winging, and dories went back and forth unhurried.

"My, ain't it complete!" she breathed. "Well, I don't wonder folks carry on so over the beach."

"We think it 's pretty nice," said Mrs. Pritchard sedately, yet with pride. "There 's Fastnet Island, an' that 's the light — revolvin'. I should n't wonder if you 'd kind o' like to lay an' watch it a spell arter dark. Cynthy used to; sometimes I 'd hold her by the winder till she dropped off to sleep." An old sadness tinged her voice, or, perhaps, not so much sadness as the sense of serious things.

Cynthia turned impulsively from her lookout.

"Yes, dear, yes," said Frances. "I 've meant to tell you about her for quite a spell. It 's real providential for me you took it into your head to come down here, for I dunno' how I could ha'

wrote it, an' mebbe cap'n an' me never 'd ha' got started for such a jaunt. Well, you see, dear, Cynthy wa'n't quite like other child'en from the minute she was born. She did have suthin' the matter with her back, an' we thought that was all; but doctor, he knew better. One day he told me. 'She ain't goin' to be like other child'en, Mis' Pritchard,' says he. 'She don't take notice. I don't presume she ever will.'"

Cynthia nodded. She kept her eyes on the river now, and either that outer paradise or the sorrow of life began to invade her eyes, and urge forth willing tears.

"She was a handsome little creatur'," said Frances proudly. "Hair like corn silk, an' skin as white an' pink as ever you see. She favored cap'n's family. The Pritchards are all light. Sometimes it did n't seem as if we 'd be able to bring her up, she used to get so hurt. 'T wa'n't so much that she was ailin', but she seemed too kind o' delicate to stan' this kind of a world. Noises put her out, an' a cross look 'd make her cry. Cap'n an' I 'd been through a good deal 'fore we met one another, married late in life, so. He 'd had a tempestuous kind of a time, an' you know I got 'most beat out with all the sickness we went through, 'fore the home was broke up. We set terribly by one another, but we had our failin's, an' sometimes I 'd flare out an' he 'd

swear. When Cynthy come, that tried her 'most to death—I dunno' why, when she did n't sense it — an' we sort o' quieted down, an' let every-thing go but her. I could n't begin to tell you the beautiful time we had with that child. I can't explain how it was, but she more 'n filled up our lives, an' yet we prized one another till it seemed as if 't was Beulah Land, an' all the promises come true. We had n't a thing to ask for, an' as soon as ever a shadder passed over her face, we 'd seek about for suthin' to drive it away; an' cap'n's voice would fall lower 'n' lower an' he 'd smile all by himself to git into the habit on 't. We took up singin' a little. That pleased her, an' we conjured up all the old tunes we knew. We ain't gi'n that up, either, an' we ain't a-goin' to. We 've laid it aside till you git your bearin's, but as soon as ever you can stan' it, we 'll take our harps down off the willer, an' glad enough to do it, too. Perhaps you 'll jine in. You used to sing the air."

Cynthia nodded again. The story gripped her heart; listening to it, she forgot her own past martyrdom.

Mrs. Pritchard went on, passing a hand over her eyes when a thought touched her too keenly.

"She was terrible cunnin', too, about the things she liked. There 's one pinky kind of a

shade in the water out there,— the west sort o' throws it over when there 's a great sunset,— an' whenever she set eyes on that, she 'd clap her hands an' laugh. An' she al'ays did see it when cap'n was to home, for he 'd come in an' call: 'Quick,' he 'd say, 'there 's Cynthy's red!' That 's the reason, too, that cap'n give up goin' to the Banks. We talked it over pretty serious, him an' me, an' we concluded it wa'n't no kind of a resk for a man to take with a little creatur' like that missin' him if he 's out o' the house an hour over time. 'Besides,' says cap'n, 'I should n't see nothin' but them eyes through the fog. It kind of undoes a man to be so called upon.' Well, so 't went on, an' we were proper well contented. The only thing that unstiddied us a little was suthin' doctor wanted we should do."

"Do you think he 's much of a doctor?" interrupted Cynthia impulsively.

Mrs. Pritchard smiled.

"We think he is," she said quietly. "He 's brought us through consid'able, fust an' last. Well, he said there were schools where them kind o' child'en could be helped, an' mebbe we 'd find it our duty to send Cynthy off. It sort o' loomed up before us like a cloud in the west, but it never had to be. Two year ago, doctor says, 'I guess you need n't worry about that no more. She ain't long for this life.' An'

come a year last December, she passed away. . . . I wish you could ha' seen her in her little bed. Never was anything like it on this earth. Cap'n could n't keep out o' the room. He 'd set an' watch her jest like a waitin' dog."

The quick tears sprang to Cynthia's eyes, but Frances, seeing them, smiled.

"Now you may know," she said, rousing herself, "how 't is you 're a kind of a godsend to us. I could n't wish sickness to nobody, especially my own sister; but I can't tell ye how it warms me up to have suthin' helpless to do for. An' cap'n! first minute I told him you 'd gi'n out, he says, 'Better keep pretty quiet, had n't I?' 'Yes,' says I. I see it pleased him; seemed like old times."

Then they held a long silence, Cynthia watching the changing wonder of the water, but thinking of other things.

"I wrote to Timothy last week," said Frances suddenly.

It seemed to Cynthia as if an inky cloud descended with the name. All her troubles returned to her, and she wondered if this might be the time to tell why she had come.

"Oh, I wish you had n't!" she moaned. "Did you say anything about my bein' sick?"

"No; I said you seemed tol'able tired with the journey, an' so I wrote for ye."

Cynthia had lost all the pretty color, born in her face only that afternoon. She spoke in gasps:

“Frances, if I ’d got suthin’ to tell you, should you think I ’d ought to do it now?”

“I should n’t open my head about anything till I was up an’ round, an’ strong enough to do a week’s washin’. Now you jest observe that little Pemberton imp, rowin’ over to the bar. Them Pembertons were born web-footed.” So they sat and watched the adventurer until Cynthia was at ease again under the spell of common things.

But when Frances rose to go down and get supper, she stood smoothing her apron a moment before she said:

“I ’d be happy to have Timothy make us a visit, too. We both should; cap’n an’ I ’ve often spoke on ’t. He ’s had a hard life up there, tryin’ to wring a livin’ out o’ the rocks. Cap’n says ’t is an unthankful land; not like rowin’ out overnight an’ comin’ in with your boat full to the gunnel.”

“It ’s real green up there,” responded Cynthia quickly. “Our land ’s richer ’n some.”

“Timothy was a likely young feller when you was married. I s’pose he ’s changed, like the rest of us.”

“Yes, I guess he ’s some changed.” Cynthia

closed her eyes, not so much in weariness as to shut her thoughts away.

The bed was never turned again, for she was too fascinated by her window to forego an instant of it. There she lay, hour by hour, and watched the drama played by moving water: the ripples under a breeze, the miracle of the tide, with flooded or waving sedge, the sentient boats, the gulls. Then at dusk there was the light, gone and resurrected in a breath. As soon as she got used to cap'n, which really was the moment when he moved the bed, she hungered for him, childishly; so every night he came up and sat on the stairs, because the room was small, and told stories or sang tunes. Frances helped him at both, and the wan little onlooker could see that they had much ado to show, in quiet ways, how much they loved each other. "I dunno' 's I've got a thing to wish for, now little Cynthy's well on 't," said the tranquil wife, "on'y, when our time comes, to have cap'n go fust. It's a terrible thing to think of a man left all alone."

The weeks went on, and Cynthia, lying there in bed, grew plump and pretty. Her hair took on a gloss from many brushings, and with that mantling redness of the cheek, she looked the younger sister of her old sad self. Yet still care sat upon her breast, a double weight. There

was the haunting spectre of her divorce; but how could she get it now, a helpless invalid? What was to be done with a woman felled by spinal trouble? So she lay very still and tried to get well, not because life looked in the least desirable, but that she might rise up and take herself away from these kind souls.

One day in July, Frances came up the stairs laughing. Her sides shook, her face was crimson; it seemed to be from no fictitious mirth.

“I ’m possessed to do it!” she cried recklessly. “You know doctor said you was to lay abed as long as ever you could? Well, cap’n ’s up town, an’ doctor ’s rode by to Brighton, an’ I ’m goin’ to see if I can’t git you downstairs to see my jell. It ’s all set out on the table, an’ a beautiful sight, if I do say it.”

Cynthia stared at her, aghast. “Why, you could n’t no more git me down there! You ’d break your back, an’ then where ’d you be?”

Frances seemed simply to put out her great arms, and Cynthia touched the floor.

“O my soul an’ body!” she cried, “you ’ll kill me! you ’ll kill yourself! O my soul!”

Frances, puffing tempestuously, lifted her and bore her to the stairs. Cynthia thought she was carried all the way down, but she remembered afterwards the touch of the carpet on her feet. In some fashion or other, they accomplished the

passage from sitting-room to kitchen, and there Frances endowed her with stockings and a wrapper miraculously ready. Cynthia stood bewildered, and Mrs. Pritchard left her standing; as for her, she seemed to have no eyes but for the table, red with jelly tumblers.

“Ain’t that a handsome color?” she asked hurriedly. “Seems if it jelled ’most as quick as it touched the glass. I thought that was as pretty a sight as ever I see. O Cynthy! you jest peek in here. I’ve got the parlor cupboard all fixed to set it in, scalloped papers an’ all. Yes, I don’t wonder you observe the what-not. That’s some coral cap’n’s father brought home, from ‘the strand,’ he used to say. I guess ’t would tell tales if it could only speak.” Mrs. Pritchard had always talked with great sedateness; now she chattered like a showman, bound to please. Cynthia stood by, wondering. “I declare,” said Frances, at last, “if it ain’t five o’clock! Cap’n won’t be back ’fore dusk, What if you an’ me should have an early bite, right off now?”

Cynthia, pushed out of the nest, felt a little hurt resistance rising in her. Yet pride sustained her, and she sat stiffly by, while Frances talked. It was more or less pleasant to watch the machinery of life going on once more, if only one were strong enough to bear it; but, she told

herself, she was not strong. When the twilight came, she had grown tired, and, still a little sore within her mind, she crept upstairs alone, wondering and afraid to wonder.

Next morning, Mrs. Pritchard's voice came cheerfully from below:

"Cynthy, don't you be put out if I ain't round quite so early this mornin'. I've got a kind of a stitch in my side, an' breakfast 'll be later 'n common."

"O my soul!" responded Cynthia. On the instant she was at the closet, searching for her clothes. "Don't you come up here with that heavy waiter. It's tendin' on me that 's wore you out. I'd ought to be trounced." She dressed herself with eager fingers, and felt her way downstairs. Breakfast was nearly ready, and though Frances complained of her side, she seemed to bear it beautifully. In a couple of hours the stitch was knitted up again.

But Cynthia did not go back to bed, and nobody seemed to wonder. When cap'n came, he only told her, in the softest possible voice, about the good haul he had; and the doctor, stopping at the gate on his way home, called to her that he had something for her: bayberry and green beach plums. She'd better can up some of the plums, when they were ripe, to take home, and show the mountain what 's what.

One August day Cynthia, in a calico gown and sunbonnet, her arms bare to the elbow, was considering the hollyhocks in the front yard. She thought they needed more foot room; so she got the spade and began an onslaught on the bordering turf. As she set her foot upon the spade, life rioted within her, and she sang, in breathless jerks:

“There was a youth,
And a well-beloved youth” —

Hope and joy were stirring as the sap mantles upward in the spring, and for as plain a reason. She was well now, and the earth was hers again. If battles were to be fought, she could fight them. It need not be long before she left this refuge, and went out to earn her living in the world.

A man was halting at the open gate. He looked unfamiliar and yet, at sight of him, her flesh awoke under a strange responsive thrill. Her eyes fell upon his boots, furrowed with dust, and she thought of Timothy's. A little laugh broke from her at the shadow of those former fears; she felt a happy scorn of them.

“Is there anybody 'round here by the name of Pritchard?” asked the man; and Cynthia, throwing down her spade and tossing away her sunbonnet, ran out and hung upon him. Frances, at the window, saw the sight and turned away, with an aching throat. Cynthia seemed to her

now not so much her sister, as a child, miraculously bestowed; but she knew which path was best. Timothy put his arms about the clinging figure, knowing it to be his, and yet unaware of ever having owned anything so precious. She was like the angel of her youth; he was afraid of her, she looked so pretty. She rubbed her face against his coat.

“Oh, how good it is!” she was sobbing wildly. “You smell jest like home. Oh, can’t you kiss me?”

Timothy found he could, and liked the taste exceedingly.

“You’ve had your hair cut,” laughed Cynthia, brushing her eyes with the back of a gritty hand. “An’ your beard’s trimmed. That’s why I did n’t know you.”

Timothy looked self-conscious. Yet he held himself with some just pride.

“Well,” he said, “I thought I’d have ’em thinned out a little, if I was goin’ down among the quality.”

Later that day, when the Pritchards were upstairs hunting for an old suit for Timothy to wear clamming, Cynthia came and perched upon his knee. She had seen her sister in that position relative to the cap’n, and found, with great surprise, that Timothy seemed to adapt himself to it quite cleverly.

“Is the mountain all purple?” she asked, from the keenness of her new home hunger, “an’ mists runnin’ over the side? Oh, seems if I could n’t wait to see it! I dunno’ how I’ve lived till now.”

“We could go straight back to-morrer,” said Timothy, regarding her with his good brown eyes. She could not understand them. They were his eyes, indeed, yet they had never been so soft and shining. She shook her head.

“No, you’ve got to stay them two weeks. I’ve had my change; I’m goin’ to see to ’t you have yours. An’ company! I want Frances an’ the cap’n should come up an’ make us a nice long visit, an’ find out we’ve got suthin’ to show off on, too.”

“Well,” said Timothy slowly, “I told the Taylors I might come back right off, or it might be a fortnight. They’re nice help to leave as ever you see. I told her to clean up the house as you’d like to have it, in case you went up along with me. Seemed one time as if you never meant to come home. Say, Cynthia, that wa’n’t so when you went away, was it?”

Cynthia trembled a little. She glanced at his betraying eyes, and they were wet. He looked like an unreasoning creature which has suffered pain, and gained a lifetime at a bound.

“I meant to stay till I was good an’ strong,” she said firmly; and he believed her.

Announcing garments came flying down the stairs, and steps would follow. Cynthia, rising, paused for one hasty question:

“Timothy, what ’d you do with that little cup you broke, the mornin’ I went away?”

He opened his mouth wide, in the horror of the careless steward.

“Hove it under the barn,” he owned guiltily. “Had I ought to ha’ kep’ it?”

Cynthia laughed, with the tears coming. “No, no!” she cried. “I could n’t ever bear to see it ag’in. There they are — dear!”

THE TREE OF A THOUSAND LEAVES

THE TREE OF A THOUSAND LEAVES

“You give me that serpentine braid,” said Aunt Ellen Temple to her niece, Myra. “My! ain’t there a lot of it! You must ha’ be’n crocheting nigh about all winter. It’s real tight an’ firm, too.”

They were sitting in the west chamber, each at a window, rocking and sewing as they talked. Myra was a thin, straight girl, with reproving eyes and an axiomatic mouth. She was extremely pretty, in an irreproachable way. Her complexion was faultless; the pink of her cheeks looked as if it had been tinted there by some designer of beauty for the world’s great fashion-plate. All her features would pass muster: yet they left the onlooker cold. Aunt Ellen, who had come on from the West to mother the girl in her wedding preparations, took the liberty of wondering why the young minister should have been drawn to Myra. Aunt Ellen, in her secret mind, decided that she would sooner wed with the poker. She herself was of another stamp even from her dead sister, Myra’s mother, whom Myra so much resembled. She was a generous type of woman, with brown eyes and a mobile

mouth. Though she was long over forty, she knew her small beauties, and smiled at them in the glass. Her elbows had dimples in them; and when her sleeves were stripped up for bread-making, the casual eye was welcome to linger on those decorative indentations. Myra's mother had used to say that Ellen was bewitched over men folks. That was not true. Ellen knew what bewitched them, and she liked to answer in key.

"I was terrible pleased when I got your letter," she said incidentally, as she set her quick, careful stitches. She always used a short thread, and drew it back and forth with a capable speed. "I'd be'n sort o' makin' up my mind to come on East, an' the minute you wrote 'weddin',' I says to myself, 'Now 's my time.'"

"I knew you had n't any ties to prevent you," said Myra, with the air of keeping funeral state over cold memories, "since Uncle Hiram died."

Aunt Ellen laughed, a rich little gurgle.

"Law, yes, I have," she said. "I've got ties everywhere I've ever be'n. I know every man, woman, and child in town out there, an' when I come away they were all grabbin' at my petticoats an' holdin' me back. Ties! I guess I have. But I thought there would n't be no harm in makin' a few new ones."

Myra was frowning over her work.

"I had a kind of a plan," she said. "I thought may be you 'd fall in with it. I don't know as you 've noticed it — but father's a great trial to us." She looked up challengingly, and her blue eyes were honest, though cold.

Aunt Ellen did not trouble herself to meet them. She had "sized up" her niece in childhood, and that record was lasting very well.

"What's the matter of him?" she inquired easily.

Myra launched into a confidence likely, she fancied, to be understood.

"Father's terrible queer. He always was, but he's queerer 'n ever. He's been a dreadful trial all winter. Elbert sees it. He recognized it, he said, when he asked me to marry him. He recognized the fact that father would be a great responsibility to us." Her voice had taken on the tone of her lover's speech. It had a pulpit flavor, adapted to the household.

Aunt Ellen rocked and sewed.

"Ain't your father well in health?" she asked casually. "Seems so to me."

"Yes, oh, yes!" returned Myra, with a neutral emphasis extreme in her; it made her top-note of passion. "Father's young for his age. It's his mind. I'm going to tell you the whole: all last winter from Thanksgiving on, he spent the

greater part of the day doing sums. He 'd make 'em up out of his head, and then he 'd try to prove 'em."

"Well," said Aunt Ellen, "I don't see 's that troubled anybody."

"Why, he was set on it!" cried Myra. "That cold storm, he stayed out in the shed and ciphered on the boards with a piece o' chalk. And Elbert lent him books, and he would n't read 'em. And he 'd pray with him, and father 'd sit and keep his pencil down hard on the place where he was in his figuring, and when Elbert stopped, he 'd go right on adding up."

Aunt Ellen laid down her work. She spoke slowly, with an emphasis unusual in her.

"I don't know 's anybody 's ever told you, Myra, that your father 's always had that bent? When he was quite a young man — I was a little girl then — he run through all the cipherin' books he could git, an' the old minister that was — Parson True — he bought him some more, an' he run through them."

"Oh, I know that!" said Myra. "Mother told me. It always worried mother. It tried her 'most to death."

"What made it?" asked Aunt Ellen. "Now what do you s'pose made it?"

Myra opened her mouth to speak, and then closed it again. Her neat intelligence felt itself

rebuffed. "Why," she said, "why, it did! 'T would worry anybody."

"You see," said Aunt Ellen, ignoring the conclusion, "your mother knew all about that beforehand. When she married him, she married his cipherin' too. That 's the long an' short on 't."

"You don't mean to say you stand up for him?" asked Myra, her blue eyes widening.

Aunt Ellen laughed. She had gone back to her air of irresponsible good-humor.

"I stan' up for 'most everybody, Myra," said she. "Law! the minute you git inside their skins you can't help it. Now you look here! ain't your father contented when he 's cipherin'?"

"Yes, he 's contented enough."

"Ain't he real pleasant company when he ain't interfered with?"

"Why, yes, Aunt Ellen! It takes up his mind. He ain't got eyes nor ears for anybody."

"Well, then, let him cipher, an' you do your serpentine, an' Elbert can do his preachin'. That 's all there is to it."

Myra set her mouth in the lines bequeathed her by her mother.

"Father 's my responsibility," said she. "Besides — Aunt Ellen, you just cast your eye out there!" She rose and pointed from the window. The orchard lay in that direction, and the May

sun was warm on petals flushed with pink. Aunt Ellen also rose, obeying with a mild regard. Nothing that Myra had to offer need, she judged, stir her to keen emotion.

“Where?” she asked.

“In the gillyflower tree. Don’t you see him?”

“Who?”

“Father. There ’s his legs.”

A blue overalled leg was depending from a bough.

“Where ’s t’other one?” asked Aunt Ellen, as if it were a question of legs.

“T’ other one?” repeated Myra impatiently. “T’ other leg? why, he ’s sitting on it. See the leaves!” A green shower fell from the tree. “He ’s picking off leaves. He ’s be’n doing that for a week. Now if you don’t call that being out of anybody’s head, what do you call it?”

A slight shade passed over Aunt Ellen’s face.

“Have you spoke to him about it?” she asked.

“Of course I have. So ’s Elbert. Elbert told him he should make it a subject of prayer.”

“What ’d your father say?”

“Why, he was up in the Hubbardston when we found it out, and he just got down out of it and walked away. ’T was only this morning I see he ’d took to the gillyflower.”

Aunt Ellen rolled up her work, in her quick way, and caught the scissors from the table.

“Where you going?” asked Myra.

“I thought I ’d take my sewin’ out an’ set with your father a spell. I ’ll borry that little rocker out o’ the kitchen.” She was walking toward the door, but Myra stepped hastily after.

“You wait a minute, Aunt Ellen,” said she. “Let me finish up. I told you I ’d got a plan. Elbert and I think it ’s best for father to live with us, and he won’t. Father just won’t.”

“No,” said Aunt Ellen smoothly; “I think ’s likely ’s not.”

“But it ’s best for father. Father ’s our responsibility. Elbert says we must n’t shirk it. Now father never seems to think you own half of this place, and always have, ever since ’t was left to you and mother together. But if you should say you ’d made up your mind to come East to live, it would drive him right out of here, and there ’d be nothing for it but to have him go with us. And it ’s a real mercy we ’re going to live in a town. He could n’t go climbing trees and sitting there picking off leaves. I ’m worried to death about father. If he ain’t crazy, nobody ever was; and unless something ’s done where ’s it all going to end?”

“Well,” said Aunt Ellen thoughtfully, “I guess I ’ll go out an’ set a spell.”

Ellen walked slowly through the orchard, her sewing in one hand and the rocking-chair, held

by the top, bumping along behind. It was high summer-time in the midst of spring. The birds were loud in a wild and never dissonant chorus sung to different keys, and the green was brilliant under a fervid sky. Ellen smelled the apple blossoms, sweet with their tang of bitter, before she came under the trees, and reflected that if it were not for that blossomy index of time, she might almost have thought it the last of June. She put her chair down under the gillyflower, and seated herself. She spread out her apron and took her work in hand. Only then did she lift a glance to the overalled leg.

“You up there, William?” called she. “Ain’t this day the crowner?”

William swung himself into range. He was gazing down upon her. He was a lightly built man who looked something less than his age. His brown hair was still thick. His blue eyes were gentle, and the great forehead overtopped his face. But there was something childlike and sweet about his mouth and chin. Even at sixty, he looked as if the world might fret him into a perplexed discomfort from which he could see no escape.

“That you, Ellen?” he responded shyly.

“Yes, it ’s me. I thought I ’d bring my sewin’ out a spell, an’ we ’d have a dish o’ discourse. It ’s an elegant day to set up there amongst the

branches. I wisht I could. But my! I ain't clipper-built like some."

William was silent for a moment, and then he opened his hand and let loose a fluttering of leaves. Some of them fell in Ellen's lap, but she did not seem to notice them. Finally he spoke, with a difficult candor.

"Myra thinks I'm crazed, settin' up here."

Ellen laughed richly.

"Law!" said she, "fur's I can make out everybody thinks everybody's crazed, all exceptin' themselves. I dunno' what difference it makes what we do, so's we don't interfere with other folks."

"Nor I neither!" replied William explosively. "Nor I neither. Ellen, what should you say if I told you I was numberin' off the leaves o' this tree?" He spoke with a keen anxiety, as if the words held more than common value. Ellen dropped her spool, and there was silence while she stooped for it. Then she answered:

"Why, I dunno' exactly what I should say! Yes, I do, too. I guess I should ask ye how fur you'd got. How fur have you got, William?"

William kicked his legs forward with a haste that looked like jubilation. They dangled from the limb, and in a moment his feet were on the ground. His face had flushed with something more than the exertion. It looked like pleasure

or some tremulous expectancy. Ellen glanced up with a frank smile.

“My!” said she composedly. “You come down like a cat.”

There was an old milking-stool under the apple-tree. He had put it there to reach the branches, not being able to “shinny” as in early youth. Now he took the stool and set it in front of Ellen, and there he placed himself. He was a well-made man, with firm, strong hands. He was noticeably clean in his workaday clothes, and his face looked very honest.

“Ellen,” said he, “seems if you had more sense ’n the common run o’ women. Now you look here. Don’t you think ’t would be sort of interestin’ to know how many leaves there was on a tree?”

Ellen’s gaze met his in an untroubled candor.

“I think ’t would be terrible interestin’,” she said. “I don’t believe anybody ever did afore.”

“I don’t believe they ever did,” said William, in a painful earnestness. “It come over me last winter when that poor tool of a minister was readin’ a chapter, an’ I was cipherin’, how kind of interestin’ it was for the Lord to keep numberin’ things. The hairs of our head, they ’re all numbered, so we ’re told. Then there ’s the fishes in the sea an’ the birds o’ the air. They ’re numbered, too. An’ it come over me when the

leaves was out an' before the canker worms come, I 'd number me jest one tree an' know how many leaves there was. So I began on the old Hubbardston" — A sinister recollection darkened his brow.

"Well, what made ye stop?"

"Myra 'n' that young Nimshi made me so tarnal mad I lost count. Dum fools!" But as Ellen laughed, a slow gleam overspread his face, and he, too, laughed.

"How fur ye got on the gillyflower?" she asked, as if it were a desirable secret.

William looked whimsically disconcerted.

"I got up to three hunderd an' nine," said he; "but when you come out, I picked off three or four together, an' that way I kinder lost count."

"You don't say!" commented Ellen, in a warm excess of sympathy. "William, I tell you what: you move up into that sweet-bough an' begin over, an' I tell you what you do. You pick the leaves into a basket, an' when you've got as much done as you feel like doin', I 'll number 'em over after ye, an' see 'f we agree."

Tears stood in William's eyes.

"Ellen," he said, "Ellen" — Then he stopped.

"Not but what I think your account 'll come out right," said Ellen hastily. "I guess 't will, an' you with your head full o' figgers. Parson

True used to say you was a very gifted man, doin' sums an' all."

"Did he?" asked William, in a hushed voice. His face had the unbelieving joy of one arrived at last. "Did Parson True say that?"

"Yes, he did. I heard it with my own ears. I wa'n't nothin' but a little tot, but 't was the year you an' Myra was married. Myra was there, too. Did n't she never tell ye?"

His face darkened. "No," he said, "no. She 'd ha' be'n afraid 't would encourage me. She thought 't was all foolishness, my cipherin'."

"You an' Myra was a handsome couple," said Ellen irrelevantly.

"She was a pretty girl," returned William with indifference, as if he made his dead mate a just concession.

"A terrible handsome couple," repeated Ellen. Then she laughed. "Law, William," said she, "there wa'n't a girl in town but what would ha' jumped mast-high to git ye. I was nothin' but a mite then. I did n't grow up till later. But I remember, as if 't was yesterday, jest how you looked."

The dinner horn, in meagre volume, broke upon the air. Ellen gathered up her work.

"Seems to me she 's be'n terrible spry with her dinner," was her smiling comment. "But there! time flies swift in pleasant company."

William straightened his broad shoulders.

“Don’t you go to tuggin’ along that rocker,” said he, with a conscious gallantry. “That’s my job.”

The next morning, after breakfast, William looked remindingly at Ellen, and she answered by a confirming nod. Myra was there, clearing the table, and William, after one glance at her, as if to assure himself of her topography, went out into the shed. Ellen followed him. He jerked his thumb toward the kitchen.

“Don’t say one word,” he began, in a beseeching undertone, “or she’ll git up on her high hoss. You ain’t forgot that numberin’?”

“Law, no!” said Ellen cheerfully. “I should admire to do it. I’m ready when you be. I’ve got a pencil an’ paper in my pocket, an’ my head’s as clear as a bell.”

“That’s jest the question.” His tone was one of deep dejection. “The mornin’ ’s the best time o’ day; but I’ve got to do my hoein’ fust, whether or no. That’s one rule I made, Ellen. I made it when *she* was alive. I says, I won’t let my figgerin’ prevent me from doin’ what other folks do. I said that, Ellen, an’ I’ll hold to it. This farm’s as good a farm as there is east o’ the Connecticut River.”

He was regarding her with a wistful anxiety. Ellen knew he longed to please.

“Don’t you worry, William,” said she, from her all-embracing kindliness. “You’ve done well by the farm. Nobody’s ever denied that. Now I’ll tell you what: long about three o’clock Myra’s goin’ to ride with that infant Samwel o’ hers, an’ soon as they’re fairly down the road you an’ I’ll slip out an’ begin our numberin’.”

“Father!” called Myra, from the kitchen. “Father, you there?”

William turned with the speed of one accustomed to count that summons a dismissal, and loped away in tiptoeing strides, as if he trod uncertain ground.

In a moment Ellen was back in the kitchen, humming a cheerful stave.

“You seen father?” inquired Myra, with the sharpness of the true home ruler.

“Your father?” inquired Aunt Ellen pleasantly. “Le’ me see. Oh, yes! there he is now, goin’ out towards the corn-house.”

Myra took a brief glance from the window and returned to her dishes, mollified.

“Yes,” said she, “he’s got his hoe. He’s off my mind till dinner-time. Well,” she went on presently, as she put the hot tumblers in their draining pan, “what did father have to say for himself?”

“Say for himself?” repeated Aunt Ellen vaguely. “When?”

"Yesterday, out under the gillyflower tree. I have n't had a minute to ask."

"Oh, not much of anything!"

"Did n't he speak about the numbering?"

"Well, he kind o' beat 'round it. I should n't worry about that, if I's you. He don't mean any harm."

"There 's a good many folks that don't mean any harm," said Myra, with a judicial comprehensiveness.

That afternoon, when the young preacher stopped at the gate, Aunt Ellen was taking a nap, and she continued it until he and Myra drove away. Then, peering at them through the blinds, she laughed, and presently sped down the stairs as lightly as a girl to some tryst, half humorous, half loving. Under the sweet-bough tree she halted and looked up. There was a shape in the branches, and a sound. William was laughing. Immediately she was aware that he cared more about their conclave than for the number of the leaves.

"You ain't brought your chair," said he, with chivalrous concern.

"No. I'll take this stool. I may want to clip it into the house, if they should turn 'round an' come back. Now you go ahead, William. How you goin' to manage? You got anything up there to pick into?"

“Yes,” said William absorbedly. “When I git a certain number, I’ll pass it down to you.”

Ellen sat there in the sweet spring weather, and looked away beyond the orchard reaches. She was delightfully content. For the last twenty years she had lived a life of experience and action such as these men and women could scarcely understand; yet here her being had its root, and it had never really been uprooted. The fibres had spread over a wide surface, but from this New England soil she drew true nourishment.

“There!” said William. “You put up your hand, an’ I’ll pass ye down the basket.”

“Yes,” said Ellen. “Now I’ll count.”

She went back to the stool and sat there buried in her task. William, for the moment, was not counting. He was dangling idly in the branches, pondering over a ray of sunlight on the bright thickness of her hair.

“Ellen,” said he irrepressibly, “I don’t believe you’ve got a gray hair in your head!”

“Seventy-three — seventy-four,” said Ellen. There was a bubble of fun in her voice. “Don’t you interrupt my countin’.”

William kicked his heels against a bough. For the first time in his life he felt the stimulus of a nature to which counting seemed, for some reason, as important as it did to him.

“Two hunderd an’ seventy-three!” said Ellen.

“Correct!” He came to the ground with an elastic speed. “Say,” said he, “I guess we’ve counted enough for one day.”

“Law, William, we ain’t half begun!”

“No, but there’s other days comin’. I was thinkin’ last night, when you an’ Myra was settin’ out on the front steps, that I ain’t asked sca’cely anything to speak of about your livin’ out West.”

“’T was proper hard, the fust years of it,” said Ellen, falling at once into a sweet-toned confidingness. “We lived pretty nigh the wind. The worst days we had was in Montana.”

“’T was there Hiram was taken away, as I remember.”

“Yes. You let me put down this number. Two hunderd an’ seventy-three! That’s what we both made it. Now I’ll keep that paper right in my pocketbook, an’ whenever you say to go on, it’ll be all ready to add to.” She folded her plump hands in her lap, and looked up smilingly at William, where he stood leaning against the tree.

“Well, all I can say is, you don’t look as if you’d passed through any hardships,” said he, with the honesty of one unused to compliment.

Ellen smiled at him and shook her head.

"I don't dwell on things," said she. "What 's the use when they 're over an' done? Yes, we had a pretty tough time; but Hiram left me some real estate, an' I sold out, an' there I was."

"'T was said Hiram was a real driver, as a young man."

"Yes, Hiram would ha' made money if he 'd be'n spared. He set a good deal by money: too much, I thought sometimes. He never knew what 't was to live."

"So!" said William musingly. "Well, he was a good deal of a man an' a good deal of a loss."

"He *was* a good deal of a man," owned Ellen seriously. "Yes, that 's so. But, I don't know how 't was, William, I felt as if I knew him better when we met fust than I did after we 'd lived together."

William gave a confirming nod.

"Yes," said he, "you need n't tell *me!*"

"You see, Hiram was terrible busy. His mind was on the future, an' I always liked to live from day to day. There! le''s not dwell on them things. William, when I stopped in Chicago, on my way through, they showed me a kind of a machine for addin' up figgers, an' I thought of you, an' how you 'd admire to see it work."

"Do tell!" said William.

“Yes, it adds up figgers faster ’n the mind o’ man. I dunno’ how it ’s done, an’ the clerk said he did n’t either; but this was the way it acted.” She began the fairy tale of her hour at the bank, and William sat entranced.

“The land!” she cried in the midst, when the five o’clock stillness had fallen and shadows were long upon the grass. “Don’t you hear wheels? You clip it one way, an’ I will t’ other.”

The two elderly playmates sped in different directions, and when Myra entered the kitchen she found Aunt Ellen “blazing a fire” for tea.

“You seen father?” asked Myra, taking off her hat, and smoothing her careful braids. “He said anything about what he means to do?”

“Not a word,” Ellen assured her pleasantly. “Your young man ’s goin’ to stay to supper, ain’t he? Don’t you want I should stir up cream-o’-tartar biscuits?”

For the next week, Myra seemed to be perpetually on the spot, and there was little numbering. Yet there were stolen moments in the shed or the barn, and, even once, driving the cows together through the dewy lane. William felt that he was getting extraordinarily well acquainted with Ellen. No one in his life, save his own mother, had ever seemed so familiar to him. And he had no experience of any one

who was such excellent company. She had tales innumerable to tell of wild adventure, most of it hearsay, or, where it touched herself, keen human happenings. But, whenever she approached the sadder side of life, she would say, in that sweet voice of hers, enriched by tolerant memories:

“But le’'s not dwell on them things!” So she would turn aside like a river bent on flowing through flower-bordered banks. Life began to seem to him not like a task to be endured, snatching some willful pleasure by the way, but as something to be cherished. He thought of her more than of his ciphering. She had the appearance of making herself an adjunct only to his native tendency; but that, in turn, had become tributary to her, a ministrant and meeting-ground to both of them.

One afternoon, when the air had the still foreknowledge of later summer, Ellen saw him from her window, walking up and down the orchard from the sweet-bough to the Hubbardston. He moved with the desperate stride of a man stung by harsh discovery, and turned upon his track like an unhappy prisoner. Myra was in the dairy straining milk, and Ellen, as she passed the door, wondered how long the task would keep her. The cat was lapping from a foamy saucer. Ellen caught her up and dropping her in the

sitting-room with a thud of four stiff feet, shut the door upon her. Then she overturned the milk. Myra, if she appeared untimely, would find provision for another five minutes in clearing up that havoc.

Ellen sped to the orchard.

“William,” she called, before she reached him, “William, what’s the matter?”

He turned upon her a face all flushed and seamy with its grief.

“She’s be’n layin’ down the law. She says I’ve got to live with them.”

“Well,” said Ellen, “that don’t make it so.”

He scarcely heard her.

“As true as I stand here, Ellen,” said he, “I never’ve thought a thing about your ownin’ half the place. I suppose if I’d be’n more of a man I should.”

“Well,” said Ellen brightly, “if I own one half, you own t’ other. Myra’s mother left it to you, fair an’ square. I never had no great of an opinion of her, if she was my sister, but she done well there. She mistrusted Myra’d cut up some kind of a dido.”

William stood gazing at her with a new look on his face. It held some bitterness, some reproach of the pilfering years.

“Ellen,” said he, “anybody but you’d laugh at me. I ain’t had a thing as I’ve wanted it.”

“That ’s the more reason for havin’ it now,” said Ellen.

“I never took any notice of you when you was a girl growin’ up,” he went on, with the angry passion of middle age.

“Well,” said Ellen, “I took notice of you, William. You were the likeliest man I ever see.” A flush was on her cheek. Her eyes were wet.

“An’ here I be, a man along in years ” —
Ellen thought she heard the dairy door.

“William,” said she firmly, as a mother recalls a grieving child, “you hear to me. There ’s a good many years gone by, but there ’s a good many left — three hunderd an’ sixty-five days in every one of ’em. You begin to multiply them days, an’ you ’ll feel more or less well off. I guess we ’ll begin to live by days now, William. We won’t reckon by years.”

William was looking at her in a strange passion unknown to him, mingled of hope and wonder.

“Ellen, should you be willin’ to stay here with me?”

“I should be pleased to, William,” said Ellen, as if she accepted an invitation to singing-school.

William took a step nearer. A shining gratitude was on his face, and perhaps, too, some wondering sense of life’s mobility.

“There ’s plenty of better men you might marry now, Ellen,” said he, in wholesale tribute to her. “What I ’ve said this day I wish I ’d said thirty year ago” —

“Well, you did n’t,” said Ellen practically. “All you ’ve got to do is to number on from now. Speakin’ o’ numberin’, William, we did n’t get along very fur with our tree.”

They were smiling into each other’s eyes. There was trust between them, and happy fellowship.

“I guess I kind o’ forgot about it,” said he, in frank avowal. “I guess I ’ve thought more about you lately, Ellen, than I have about the leaves. An’ that was a kind of a makeshift, anyway. It give me an interest where I had n’t none.”

“Le’ ’s see, how fur ’d we git?” said Ellen, a smiling abstraction in her eyes. “I know. ’T was nine hunderd an’ ninety-eight. I told you to break off another couple, but she ketched us so quick you could n’t. Here, William, you pull off a leaf. Now I will. There, that ’s it. That ’s a thousand!”





THE PILGRIM CHAMBER

THE PILGRIM CHAMBER

“The Pilgrim they laid in a large upper chamber, whose window opened towards the sun-rising: the name of the chamber was Peace.”

THE old gray house stood in the midst of lavish greenery. There were great lilac bushes crowning the bank wall at the east, and on the west an orchard carried the eye through intimate reaches of gnarled wood and drooping branches. In front was the garden, a survival of ancient bloom, chiefly green now in its budding richness, but smelling of leaf-mould and the May. Zilpha Blake had no time to attend to it; but she did dig a little in a hasty fashion when her household would allow it, and ran out there for a momentary solace if circumstance harried her, to pluck a bit of sweet herb or a sprig of blue. Now, in the flush of the spring morning, she was following her nephew, her dead brother's son, as he lingered along the road on his homeward way. Her sympathetic hand was on his arm, and she seemed to be detaining him, to coax out the full flood of his exasperated story. Zilpha was a slender, flaxen-haired woman, with eager blue eyes and a childish mouth. She was not pretty, simply capable, and adapted, through an ac-

quired patience, to much "flying 'round." Daniel stopped when he felt that he was taking her too far, and began to lash the roadside bushes with the switch he had cut to drive the cows. His brown face was suffused with color, and in spite of his stature, in spite of his commanding profile, he looked as if he were going to cry. Zilpha suddenly thought that.

"Don't you feel bad, Dan'el," she said indignantly, as if she were reproaching an absent enemy. "Now don't you take on."

"I ain't takin' on. You see, Aunt Zil, she's such a little thing."

"Yes, Dan'el, yes, I know it." Her tone persuaded, as her hand detained him. He looked down at the wet grass of the pathway, and destroyed a cobweb or two with a wandering foot. Then his words came rushingly.

"Mother treated her well enough till I told her we meant to get married."

"What she say then?"

"She turned right ag'inst her. Never said a word to her, but she says to me, 'You remember, don't you, where we got Annie Rowe? We took her right off the town farm, straight as she could come.'"

"Well!" said Zilpha deprecatingly.

"Yes, that's what she said. An' I says, 'Mother, she's been here five years, an' you

know her as well as you do me. You know there ain't a lazy bone in her, nor an ugly thread.' I said that to mother," he added hastily, as if to excuse an economic argument, "because mother 's such a driver. I knew 't would n't cut no ice with her if I told her Annie suited me to a T, an' I was goin' to marry her whether or no."

"So do, Dan'el, if you feel to, so do!"

"Well, I reckoned wrong. Nothin' I could say done a mite o' good. Mother she turned right ag'inst her. She 's put the heft o' the work on her now, an' she don't give her a good word from mornin' till night."

A shrill, high-keyed voice came from the direction of the house. It seemed to fly over the orchard trees like an insect, its song piercing as it came.

"Zilpha! Zilpha! where be you?"

Zilpha heard, but she only cast a glance in its direction, and stepped nearer a shielding barberry bush.

"That Hetty Ann?" asked Daniel, accompanying her look with a frown of his own.

"Yes, it 's Hetty Ann. She expects me to come up, the minute she 's awake, an' bring her a cup o' hot water."

"I 'd bring her a cup o' cold p'ison," said Daniel moodily.

"Law, no! hot water 's good for her. Keeps

her still, anyways. Now, Dan'el," again she touched him with a reminding hand, "you must n't forgit your mother's terrible obstinate."

"I guess I know that. She won't have anybody do more for folks than she does. If I got set ag'inst Annie, she'd cocker her up. Mother's got to be on the wrong side o' the fence anyways."

"It's a terrible hard place to be in." She stood wrinkling her brows in the face of the morning sun, considering, in the midst of that effulgence, the resources of her world. Suddenly her face cleared, with the brightening of her eyes. She laughed a little, in a shamefaced deprecation. "I dunno' but you'll think it's pretty queer, Dan'el," she said, "but I've a good mind to ask you suthin'."

"Ask away, Aunt Zil," he said, softening appreciably as the talk touched her. "There's nothin' I would n't tell you."

"Well" — She paused a moment, her gaze traveling over the rolling fields to the far horizon. Then it returned to him. "Well, Dan'el, it's this: you want Annie terrible bad. Why don't you kinder pray a little, an' see if you can't git her that way?"

He laughed outright, and patted her shoulder with a gentle hand.

"You don't get that bee out o' your bunnit, do you, Aunt Zil? S'pose I should ask you how

much you 'd ever got yourself by prayin', what 'd you say then?"

A look of fear flitted into her face, and her eyes grew big.

"Don't you say one word, Dan'el," she implored him. "I don't dast to pray."

"Why not?"

"I dunno' 's I can tell ye, Dan'el. Yes, I guess I can, too. It 's kinder dangerous. If I prayed for what I want, I 'm afraid I 'd git it."

He looked at her with the frown summoned to men's brows by woman's tortuous logic of the soul. She went swiftly on, not for his enlightenment, but concerned, suddenly and for the moment, with a rare interest in herself.

"Dan'el, there 's suthin' I 've thought out, an' I dunno' 's I should dast to mention it, even to the minister. It ain't in the Bible. Leastways I ain't ever seen it there. But I know it 's true. Dan'el, did it ever come over you God ain't got everything to do with, more 'n we have? Did it ever come into your head He 's kind o' poor, so 's He 's got to contrive an' plan when He does anything out o' the common, same 's the rest?" She was looking at him in a bright and eager questioning, and Daniel shook his head. "You see," she put the tips of her small fingers together in unconscious imitation of the minister when he was proving a point in meeting, "He 's

terrible indulgent. When we ask for anything, He wants to give it to us. But mebbe He can't! The thing ain't there. There ain't such a thing, mebbe, in the whole world. S'pose Hetty Ann had prayed she might marry that good-for-nothin' that flung her off. Why, God could n't ha' give her that, because there wa'n't no such man as Hetty Ann thought he was, nor ever had be'n. All she could have was a kind of a play housekeepin' here with me. Now, take me. What do you s'pose I want more 'n anythin' else under the sun?"

"You tell, Aunt Zil," said the young man warmly.

"Law, Dan'el, you could n't git it for me. I want a spare room — a spare chamber."

"Why, you 've got four chambers, now." He read her face, creasing into its pucker of shrewd good-will. "You don't mean to tell me you want one o' them chambers for yourself an' yet you won't turn out some o' them old pirates an' take it?"

"Now, Dan'el, you consider. Uncle Timmie 's got one chamber, an' he 's bedrid, now ain't he? An' Hetty Ann 's kinder touched in her head, an' she 's as contented as a kitten if she can play she 's got a parlor an' a bedroom. So she takes two. An' there 's Aunt Joyce in the fourth. An' she 's got to have it, Dan'el,

she 's got to have it. There ain't a soul on earth would board her for two dollars a week, an' let her set by the winder muddlin' over them law papers an' thinkin' she 's goin' to win her case an' git the heft o' the state of Illinois. So that 's the reason I can't pray for a spare room. My chambers are all took up."

"Zilpha!" came the voice over the tree tops. "Zilpha! where be you?"

"I 'll scooch down here a minute," said Zilpha, huddling up on a stone by the barberry bush. "Mebbe they 'll think I 've gone to drive the cow." She sat there like an elf, her arms folded, and her bright gaze challenging his. "You see," she went on, reviewing her argument for the first time before another mind, "if I should pray for the spare chamber, I should git it. I make no doubt I 'd git it. But mebbe somebody 'd have to be swep' away to give it to me. Or mebbe the Lord would harden my heart, an' make me put Hetty Ann into one room an' take t' other for myself."

"What 's she want two rooms for, anyways?" said Daniel, returning to an irrelevant issue.

Zilpha's face grew quite eager in its wistful sympathy.

"Why, don't you know, Dan'el?" she asked, in the hushed voice of one who rehearses a solemn story. "You 'd ought to know that. He

was goin' to marry her, an' everything was all ready, even to her rollin' pin, and then he wrote her he did n't prize her no more, an' he went off out West. So now she kinder plays house up there. She 'll do it by the hour, jest like a child. She ain't a mite o' trouble, Dan'el, not a mite." Her eyes were shining with the look of earnest care evoked by all maimed creatures as she saw them.

Again the voice came shrilling over the trees. There was a new, insistent note in it, and Zilpha got up quickly.

"Now I must be goin' back," she said, shaking out her dew-wet skirt. "But if I was you, Dan'el, I should kinder make it a subject o' prayer about Annie. I should say, 'If I can have her without hurtin' anybody;' because you would n't want to do that, now should you, Dan'el?"

He turned heavily on his way.

"I guess I 'll leave the prayin' to you, Aunt Zil," he said. "As to hurtin' anybody, I dunno' whether I would or not. Anyway, I know this: if you need a spare chamber, I 'd like mighty well to clear out the whole b'ilin' of 'em in there, an' fix you up the way you want. I will, too, some fine day, 'fore you know it."

They smiled back at each other with the understanding of mates who have weathered other

gales, and took their different ways. Daniel walked with head bent, still debating the problem of his love; but Zilpha sped on light-heartedly. Inside her own gate, she paused to give the garden a warm look. It was full of buds, and so many summers had she known it in its fullness that it seemed, to her impetuous mind, to be already in flower. It was her unconscious habit to dwell gratefully upon the inventory of the beautiful earth, and in spite of her fifty years and the trials they had brought her, she felt only good fortune as she ran into her kitchen and set back the neglected kettle, boiling on the stove. Then she stepped about the room singing in an underbreath and turning the hymn into a pæan, with its rich invitation to the Beloved, "Over the hills where spices grow."

It was a part of her routine upstairs that she should be the maid and Hetty Ann the mistress. So she placed the cup of hot water on a tray, and ran up to the east chamber where Hetty Ann sat in bed, her yellow hair streaming about her, like sunlight, and served her with the traditional manners of hired help. Great-uncle Timmie was not awake, but Aunt Joyce was already upon the stairs. Zilpha followed that broad back covered by a wrapper with a palm leaf figure, and moderated her own steps in time to

the ponderous thud of large feet in carpet slippers. Aunt Joyce had the blackest of thin hair braided in little braids by her ears and looped back to the knob behind. Her eyes were black and sharp under broad splashes of brow, and her cheeks were of a hard red, veined by a network of darker hue, like an unskilled painting upon wood. At the bottom of the stairs, she spoke without turning:

“That you, Zilpha? I guess I ’ll have a cup o’ tea this mornin’. Coffee kinder goes ag’inst me somehow.”

“Green tea or black?” asked Zilpha blithely, at the kitchen door. She was unreasonably pleased. The mere talk of satisfied wishes had given her a lilting sense of something wonderful quite near. Aunt Joyce turned and interrogated her with a judicial though not an unkindly eye.

“You ain’t be’n an’ bought two kinds?” she asked.

Zilpha laughed.

“No, I ain’t. I had black on hand. T’ other ’s the sample the grocery give out last week.”

Half an hour later, sitting at the kitchen table, drinking tea, and forgetting how Aunt Joyce’s girth shut out the lilacs and the sun, she listened with half a mind to the other woman’s meanderings in the old channel of the dragging lawsuit

and the land. With the rest of her intelligence she was running about the earth, picking up pleasures here and there, trifles nobody wanted, and ranging them in order in her spare room.

“Zilpha, what you thinkin’ about?” inquired Aunt Joyce suddenly. “You ain’t heard a word I said.”

Zilpha guessed at random.

“You said if you could only come on that deed from Uncle Samwel to Aunt Mirandy, your title ’d be complete.”

“Yes, that was what I said,” owned Aunt Joyce mollified. “I thought you was dreamin’, that way you ’ve got.”

But Zilpha had heard the lamentation over the deed for many years, and her own mind responded to an echo.

“That deed wa’n’t ever recorded,” Aunt Joyce continued, pounding out her words with an irritating beat of emphasis. “The very day he died, Uncle Samwel set out to git it put on record, an’ he dropped down right in front o’ the courthouse, an’ nothin’ s ever be’n heard o’ that paper from that day to this. An’ whether ’t was stole out o’ his pocket, or whether he lost it on the road” — But no one, save newcomers in the town, ever heard Aunt Joyce’s stories to the end.

All that day Zilpha went about her work to

the rhythm of an invocation made to suit her needs. It was that Daniel should be given his Annie, if it could be managed "without hurtin' anybody." And then, in a guilty whisper, as if other than beneficent powers might hear, she added, with the same qualifying phrase, "I wisht I could have a spare room." The habit of petition became pleasant to her, and at the end of a week the spare room seemed quite near. This was one of her hard weeks. Hetty Ann took down her curtains, with a housewifely impulse, and tried to wash them in a bowl. Uncle Timmie, who had the quietude of a gentle animal trained to habit, owned that he was "kinder tired o' layin' still," and Aunt Joyce, according to the family phrase dedicated to her since she was a girl, "reigned supreme." In the early morning she was at Zilpha's door, propounding new hypotheses touching the stolen deed; and one afternoon, when Zilpha had betaken herself to the sitting-room lounge to rest her tired feet, she felt a presence through her closed eyelids, and opened them, with a snap, to find Aunt Joyce looming before her like a cloud. She wore her black alpaca and her bonnet trimmed with ancient crape. She had thrown back her bonnet strings, and stood fanning her face with the county paper.

"I be'n to the post-office," she volunteered.

“I walked all that two mile, hopin’ to ketch a ride, an’ then I walked back ag’in. Zilpha, I got a letter from the lawyer. What you s’pose he said?”

“I dunno’,” returned Zilpha wearily.

“He said if I’s to find that deed, it would clinch the whole thing.”

“What deed?” asked Zilpha, from her dream.

“My soul an’ body! ain’t you heard a word I said? That deed Uncle Samwel gi’n Aunt Mirandy. Zilpha, you wake up! Ain’t you got no seem to ye?”

Zilpha rose to her feet. She felt called by another than Aunt Joyce. Something within her raised an imperious note and bade her save her soul alive. She stood still for a moment rubbing her dazed eyes, and then in the full flood of Aunt Joyce’s adjurations, she turned about and sped out of the room, through the kitchen, and into the shed. There she paused, her eyes fixed upon the distance, an old phrase starting up in her memory:

“Over the hills and far away,”

it sang itself, and her lips formed the words aloud:

“I wisht I could run off!”

But at that instant Hetty Ann, at a window above, raised her thin voice in a crooning song,

as it might have been to a child. At the first note Zilpha straightened, and she turned about soberly, all the myriad calls of other souls in unison against her. At the kitchen door she paused again, remembering the bright world without, and it was then that her eyes fell upon the rough stairs in the corner of the shed.

“My soul!” cried Zilpha. “O my soul!”

She ran up the stairs and into the brown-raftered room packed with the litter of old years, and known and forgotten as the “shed chamber.” She stood for a moment in the one vacant floor space, and looked about her at the broken chairs, the chests and tables of a bygone time. The worm-eaten walls were low, but there was a window opening through grapevine leaves and tendrils to the east. The place exhaled an atmosphere of calm. No human moods had left their invisible arras upon its walls. No one had slept there, nor talked out the trials of the day. From time to time through the year some one had come, with unrecognizing glance, to cast a broken bit of household goods into the corner and go again. The room had lived its life alone, accumulating no memories. It had been a sleeping possibility, and Zilpha, with a catch in her throat, knew it had waked for her. She drew out an old flag-bottomed rocking-chair, and placed it by the window. There she sat down,

and looked, in measureless content, through the grape leaves at the sky. She had her spare chamber. All that afternoon she sat in a dream, not of any conscious well-being, but of rest. It seemed as if the loads of life were floating to some unknown shore upon a tide of peace, and when she met Aunt Joyce at the supper table, her old cheerfulness had come back, throbbing with a fuller note out of her certainty that now there was something to justify it.

“You be’n asleep?” asked Aunt Joyce, noting her pink flush and dewy eyes.

“No, I guess not,” said Zilpha vaguely.

“Where you be’n all the arternoon?”

“Oh, ’round!”

The next day Zilpha finished her housework in haste, and set about cleaning the shed chamber. She moved softly lest Aunt Joyce should hear, and every nerve and muscle trembled with the excitement of dragging down the litter of furniture to pile it in a corner of the shed. In due time the chamber was sweet and clean; it smelled of soap instead of its own delicious mustiness, and Zilpha felt in it a double charm, responsive to her hand. She had with infinite pains set up an old bedstead, and laid on it an extra husk bed from her own room. There was the chair by the window, and a table near the stairs. Looking about, she could not see that it

might have been bettered for her purposes. She could lie down upon the bed, she could rest in the chair, and she could set a glass of water on the table. It was enough. Thereafter, for a week or more she gave her charges a zealous tendance all the forenoon, to slip away from them with a clear mind at two o'clock, and spend an hour in her retreat. But one day she caught herself back out of her dream, and sat there, still with fear. Aunt Joyce's heavy step had entered the shed. She was looking about in one of her familiar missions of inquiry, and presently Zilpha heard her overhauling the pile of furniture. There was a rattle and a pause while Aunt Joyce pondered over what she had found. Then her voice arose commandingly through its veiling huskiness.

“Zilpha!”

But Zilpha did not move.

The rummaging and clattering went on, and by and by Aunt Joyce took her heavy progress toward the sitting-room, calling Zilpha as she went. Then the little guest of the upper chamber slipped downstairs and into the kitchen, and there Aunt Joyce, returning, met her.

“Where you be'n?” queried Aunt Joyce, though in an absent questioning.

“Oh, 'round!” said Zilpha, with the ease of one who has found a phrase to serve. Aunt

Joyce hardly heeded. Her black eyes were piercing with the wonder of discovery.

"Zilpha," said she, "I never set eyes afore on that old truck in the corner o' the shed."

"Did n't you?" asked Zilpha trembling.

"Never, long as I 've be'n in an' out. Did n't there use to be a pile o' wood there?"

"I guess so," said Zilpha, in a faltering voice.

"Was the wood piled in front on 't?"

"I guess not."

"Zilpha, don't you be so numb. Do you know what 's out there in that pile? There 's Aunt Mirandy's hair chist with a lot o' her things in it. There 's Uncle Samwel's leg boots, the ones he had on when he died. I know, for they had to cut the legs to git 'em off. I 've stood 'em up there on the hair trunk. You go look at 'em."

Zilpha hurried into the shed, but not to interrogate Uncle Samwel's boots. She went to the shed door, and stood there gazing at the sky, blurred now by her rebellious tears. Her citadel was in danger. Aunt Joyce had begun exploration, and, fired by the treasures before her, she would keep on. One sight of the shed chamber stairs, and she would go toiling up in search of unknown stores above. For a moment Zilpha stood there rigid with intensity of thought, and then a purpose leaped into her brain and strengthened her to meet the fray. Five o'clock

struck, and she turned soberly about to get supper, and listen to Aunt Joyce in her excited monologue wherein Uncle Samwel's boots came like a recurring beat.

Aunt Joyce was in high feather that evening. She sat in the kitchen in the dusk, and, inspired by her afternoon's feast upon the relics of the past, told interminable stories of the family, all feuds and warfare. Zilpha hardly answered her. She sat there, looking straight in front of her, with eyes that seemed to pierce the dark.

"You 'sleep, Zilpha?" Aunt Joyce asked suddenly, breaking her stream of reminiscence.

Zilpha did not answer.

"You 'sleep? My soul! You ain't a mite o' company. I'll go to bed."

She stalked grumbling up the stairs, and Zilpha listened. The heavy steps moved intermittently about the room above, and then they ceased. There was a creaking of the bed. Aunt Joyce was set in bounds for one night more. Zilpha rose, and, light-footed as an intruder moved to some guilty task, stole out into the shed, and began to pile cord-wood sticks in front of the shed chamber stairs. For an hour she worked passionately, like some fierce little animal barricading its home. Then she stopped and wiped her forehead with one trembling hand. Triumph was in her heart.

“Zilpha!” came a soft voice from the door.
 “Zilpha, you here?”

“That you, Annie? What is it? Anybody sick?” She hurried to the door and laid her hand on the shoulder of the young girl standing there. It was moonlight, and Annie’s face looked pure and pale in the beguiling beams. She began to sob, with sudden violence.

“Oh, my, Zilpha!” she kept repeating. “Oh, my!”

“There, there, don’t you take on!” urged Zilpha, in alarm. “Ain’t anything happened to Dan’el, has there? Annie, you speak. You scare me ’most to death.”

“It ain’t Dan’el. He ’s gone off to buy some cattle. He ’s goin’ to be gone four or five days. She ’s been awful to me. She begun soon as he was off.”

“His mother?”

“Yes. I don’t blame her. She can’t bear me, because she wants him to look higher, an’ to-night she got mad an’ did n’t know what she was sayin’, an’ she twitted me about the poor-farm, an’ I pretended to go upstairs to my chamber; but I ’ve run away, Zilpha, I ’ve run away.”

“There, there, dear,” said Zilpha crooningly, in the tone she had for hushing Hetty Ann. “Don’t you take on. You ’re goin’ to stay right here with me.”

“Oh, no, I ain’t! Your house is all took up. Dan’el said you had n’t a place to lay your head but what somebody could walk in an’ rout you out like a dog.”

“Yes, I have, dear, yes, I have!” said Zilpha excitedly, in a rush of ardent thought. “I got a spare chamber. Annie, you wait a minute. You stan’ right there, an’ don’t you stir.”

She brushed past the girl and ran with eager footsteps to the barn. In a moment she was back, staggering breathless under a short ladder.

“You help me a mite,” she whispered. “There. We ’ll set it here, so-fashion. Never mind the vine. There ’s enough on ’t, if we do break it. Now you go up. Step right into the winder. I ’ll be up there in a minute.”

Annie was used to acting under orders. She climbed deftly, and when Zilpha followed her, a little later, with bedclothes and a candle, the girl was standing in the middle of the room, in lax and patient wonderment. She looked about her when Zilpha had lighted the candle and its gleam brought straggling shadows into life.

“Why, Zilpha,” she said. “I did n’t know you had this room.”

“Nobody knew it,” said Zilpha hilariously, intoxicated by the drama. “I did n’t hardly know it myself. I dunno’ ’s ’t was here till t’ other day. I guess ’t was kinder created an’

give to me. But it 's my spare room. Now you go round on t' other side there, an' we 'll put on some sheets."

When Annie was in bed, quieted and almost content, Zilpha straightened the coverlet, in a cozy way she had, and turned to go. But Annie caught her skirt with a detaining hand.

"O Zilpha," she said, "you 're real good! I only come to leave word how 't was, so you could tell Dan'el; an' I had n't a spot to call my own, an' now here I am."

"You 're goin' to stay," whispered Zilpha, in a tone of ardent confidence. "I 've piled the stairs up so 's Aunt Joyce won't think o' mount-in' 'em; but I can move some o' the sticks an' kinder pick my way. I'll bring ye your breakfast all complete, an' don't you show your head to the winder."

"O Zilpha," breathed the girl again, "you 're dretful good."

That night Zilpha could hardly sleep for the excitement of the time; and at six o'clock she was at the shed chamber door with Annie's breakfast, hot corn-cake, coffee, and an egg. The girl was sitting up in bed, eager as a child and as innocently fair. Her curling locks were all about her, and she was rubbing her eyes awake. She laughed, and the dimples sprang about her mouth.

“You pretty creatur’!” cried Zilpha, in the delight she always had in a beauty never hers, and so as mysterious to her as the dawn. “I never knew you was so well-favored, seein’ ye round the kitchen in that old choc’late print.”

“I can’t have you waitin’ on me, Zilpha. I truly can’t.”

“We ’ll see. You keep still a day or two, till Dan’el gits home. You can come down into the shed, an’ mebbe you could slip into the kitchen when Aunt Joyce ain’t ’round. Tell ye what I ’ll do. When the coast is clear, I ’ll sing,

“ ‘Come, my Beloved.’

I ’ll sing it real loud.”

So for three days the idyl went on, and on the morning of the fourth, Zilpha, holding a bowl of beaten egg, was standing at the foot of the shed chamber stairs, singing,

“Come, my Beloved,”

and beating as she sang. She was making custard, and she wanted to ask Annie whether to put nutmeg on the top. She heard a sound above, and Annie’s foot, she knew, was on the sill, and then, like a ghost in carpet slippers, Aunt Joyce appeared, standing in the kitchen door. Zilpha screamed, and the hinges overhead creaked in turning.

“What under the sun’s the matter?” de-

manded Aunt Joyce testily. "You 're as nervous as a witch."

"I guess anybody 'd be nervous to see you pokin' over them old things in the corner there," said Zilpha, with a new asperity, summoned to hide her nest. "For mercy sake, Aunt Joyce, you let me burn up that old truck" —

Something clattered in the room above. Aunt Joyce cocked her head.

"What 's that?" she demanded. "Did n't you hear suthin' overhead?"

"As for them old boots, they 'd ought to gone into the fire long ago."

Still Aunt Joyce was listening, and Zilpha, in a wild defense, caught up the boots.

"I 'll burn 'em up this minute," she avowed.

"Zilpha," cried Aunt Joyce, "don't you do no such a thing. Them were Uncle Samwel's boots. He died in 'em. You leave them boots to me."

She laid a hand upon one, and Zilpha, with a nervous passion that seemed to her like madness, tossed the other out of the shed door. Something within detached itself, and fell. Then Aunt Joyce began screaming in a hoarse volume of sound, uncouth and dreadful, and the door above creaked open.

"Zilpha Blake, I 've got my deed! I 've got my deed!" She plunged out through the door-

way, and opened the paper with a quivering hand. "My deed! my deed!" she cried, in the same ungoverned voice, and Zilpha sat down on the step of the shed door and laughed and sobbed. When she came to a sense of the outer world, Aunt Joyce, on one side, was shaking her and calling, "Zilpha Blake, you git up here, an' help me pack my things. I've got my deed, an' I'm goin' to Illinois this arternoon!" and Daniel had a hand upon her other shoulder. He was saying heavily, at intervals, like a machine made to work that way:

"Aunt Zilpha, where 's Annie? Aunt Zilpha, where 's Annie?" Then, as Zilpha turned a mirthful face from one to the other, he took his hand from her shoulder and laid it on Aunt Joyce's wrist.

"If you 're goin' to Illinois," said Daniel plainly, "you march in an' pack up your things, an' I'll take ye to the Junction."

He turned her about, and Aunt Joyce, her face streaked with the wonder of the event, went in to pack her trunk.

"Aunt Zilpha," said Daniel gently, "where 's Annie?"

Zilpha rose to her feet. Until this moment, one thought had moved her: Aunt Joyce was going away. Now she laid hold of Daniel's coat, and gripped it with both trembling hands.

She was quite aware that a woman stood behind him like a fate, his mother, hot-blooded, warm-hearted, jealous, and above all, obstinate, and bearing in her seamed face and piercing eyes traces of emotions that had fought in her for seventy years. That morning she had told him Annie was gone, and met his anger with hot words. Yet she had followed him, afraid that he, too, might disappear or rashly do himself some harm. All this Zilpha, seeing her, seemed to know by old experience; but she could not stop to weigh the outcome of it. One thought possessed her, and she was holding Daniel's coat that she might tell him.

“Dan’el, Dan’el,” she urged brokenly, “don’t you see how it ’s come out? Aunt Joyce ’s goin’ to Illinois. Her chamber ’ll be empty, an’ you an’ Annie can git married an’ come right here. You can carry on your farm work jest the same. Annie ’n’ I can git along complete. You come, Dan’el, you come.”

“Zilpha Blake,” said Daniel’s mother, in the voice of one who, from an untouched height, is dealing out calm justice to the world, “I should be obliged to you if you would keep your hands off’n Dan’el long enough for me to have a few words with him. He ’s be’n off some days, an’ when I do git a chance to speak, I should like to say Annie ’s be’n called away, but she ’ll be

home all right. If she ain't, we shall look her up, Dan'el an' me. I'll tell you, Zilpha, though I ain't spoke of it to anybody else, Dan'el 's thinkin' of gittin' married in a few weeks, an' he'll move into t' other part o' the house."

"Aunt Zilpha," said Daniel, giving her shoulder a little shake, "where 's Annie?"

"O Dan'el, here I am," came a voice from the window above. There was the young face, framed in quivering vine leaves.

Zilpha felt something mounting in her throat, and Daniel involuntarily held out both hands. His mother spoke, and her voice shook a little.

"You be home to dinner, both on ye. There 's tongues an' sounds. Annie, you be sure to come."

"O mother!" said Daniel, in quick compunction, starting after her.

"You come home, Dan'el," she counseled him, in a persuasive voice. "You take half the house, Dan'el, you take half the house. 'T ain't fittin' for young folks to live with old folks, anyways. But don't you go to snappin' up offers from folks that don't concern ye. Don't ye do it. You come home, an' bring Annie."

Zilpha was not listening. She had heard Aunt Joyce above, dragging about a trunk, and sped to help her. Annie, radiant in her youth and the bloom of joy, was coming out of the shed

chamber, and Zilpha, seeing how these days of rest and calm had changed her, reflected that no one had ever seen her as she was to be, shielded and secure.

“You shet the door, Annie,” she called happily, waving a hand to her. “You go with Dan’el. Leave the room as ’t is, an’ this arternoon I ’ll slip up an’ put it all to rights.”

THE TWISTED TREE



THE TWISTED TREE

SYLVIA MEDWAY was sitting by the north window, gazing out into the back yard. She was young, and all a sweet pathos from her pallor and the hopeless look of her blue eyes. A comforter had been spread over the big rocking-chair where she sat, and she leaned back against it wearily, her hands in her lap. Her fair hair had been braided in two braids that hung almost to her waist, and her delicate chin looked sharp in its outline above her bare white throat.

“Sylvy,” called her mother from the kitchen.

“What is it?” answered Sylvia. Her voice had a depth that had once been rich and wonderful; now it was only tired.

“Haven ’s goin’,” continued her mother urgently. “Don’t you want I should knock for him to come in?”

“No,” said Sylvia. It was indifference that dulled her voice anew. “He ’ll come if he ’s got anything to say.”

Her mother bustled in from the kitchen, and pulled out the table with a jerk. She put up its leaves, and spread the cloth like magic. Once

Sylvia had excelled even her in flying dexterity. Now it seemed to her, as she looked on at it, nothing more than the beating of a fly against the pane. Mrs. Medway went on setting the table. She was a tall woman, with a long nose, and smooth black hair parted and brought down in a glossy coat. Her cheeks were a wintry red, and she wore long gold pendants in her ears.

“There he ’s be’n to work over here every minute from ’leven o’clock on,” she argued, “settin’ out laylocks an’ syringas. Where he got ’em I dunno’; but if you wanted a slice o’ the moon for breakfast he ’d find it for ye.”

“He sent to the nursery for ’em,” said Sylvia indifferently. “I did n’t ask him to, mother. I ain’t to blame.”

“To blame! Who said you was to blame?” Mrs. Medway was still juggling with the dishes, and coming out triumphantly. “Only I say if a man ’s be’n off an’ spent consid’able in bushes for ye, an’ then took four-five hours to set ’em out, you might say you ’re obleeged to him.”

“The tree has n’t started,” said Sylvia irrelevantly. Her musing gaze was upon one spot in the yard.

“What tree?” asked her mother perversely.

“The twisted tree.”

When it had become apparent in Sylvia’s illness that her mind and eyes dwelt altogether

upon the twisted tree in the back yard, the doctor had advised the family not to combat her. Up to this moment Mrs. Medway had understood the fiat and observed it. Now, without warning, she lost faith in it. There were spring sounds and smells out of doors, and all day long the blackbirds had been creaking about on the wing, like machinery scantily oiled. Perhaps it was because the earth-life was stirring; but Mrs. Medway grew suddenly impatient of illness and the restraints that hedged its borders. She felt for the moment as if she could catch Sylvia up in her arms and run with her to some healing spring, or at least as if she might keep her from sitting there in that sad docility, staring at a tree. She stopped before the girl, a preserve dish in her hand.

“Sylvy,” she said, “you make me as nervous as a witch. There you set by that north winder the whole ’durin’ time. It ’s ’most sunset. You le’ me move your chair into the kitchen, an’ you look out towards the west.”

Sylvia did not answer.

“Come, dear,” her mother urged, with a rare tenderness. “You let mother take the chair.”

Then the girl’s eyes filled with tears.

“I can’t, mother,” she said. “I’ve got to set right here.”

“You le’ me put my arm round you, an’

kinder carry you into the settin'-room, Sylvy. You look once out o' that south winder, an' when you see them laylock bushes, an' all, an' think how good Haven 's be'n to ye, an' kind an' thoughtful, I can't help feelin' you can git along without that twisted tree."

"No, mother," said Sylvia gently. "You must n't ask me."

Mrs. Medway lost the hope so suddenly attained.

"Well!" she remarked flatly, and went down cellar after the preserves.

Presently her husband came in, — a soft-spoken man, with a long beard and mild eyes, — and they ate their supper. Sylvia had hers on a little table by the window; and as she broke her biscuit delicately and without interest she looked out, from time to time, and always at the twisted tree.

At dusk, when Mrs. Medway was in the kitchen washing the dishes, and her husband sat by the stove in his worn chair and talked to her, chiefly through unclassified monosyllables they both understood, Haven came in at the door, and, with a nod at them, took his way, as a matter of course, into the next room. Sylvia glanced up at him, and smiled briefly. He looked as if he had just scrubbed and shaved, and his day in the outer air had left him glowing

with youth and comeliness. He was an earth creature, all brown of hair and skin, and with shy, kind eyes and a swift red in the cheeks. He walked softly, as large creatures are apt to do.

“You did n’t look out to see the bushes, did you, Sylvy?” he asked, almost beseechingly.

She shook her head.

“You were real good to set ’em out,” she told him wanly.

At that moment her mother appeared from the kitchen, rolling down her sleeves.

“Father ’n’ I are goin’ to take a ride down the road an’ find out about them seed potatoes,” she said. “Haven, you keep Sylvy company till we come back, won’t ye?”

He nodded assuringly. Mrs. Medway turned back, as she was leaving the room. Her face had flushed from an excess of resolution. She spoke with a hard insistence proportioned to the doubt she felt.

“Haven, you’ve be’n workin’ all day for Sylvy. To-morrer I want you should do suthin’ for me.”

“I’ll be glad to, Mis’ Medway,” he answered honestly.

“I want,” — her eyes avoided Sylvia, and dwelt upon him with a frightened protest, — “I want you should cut down that tree out in the back yard.”

“Which one?”

“The twisted tree,” said Mrs. Medway, and left the room.

Sylvia sat quite silent while her mother was moving about in the chamber overhead putting on her bonnet and shawl. Then Mrs. Medway's steps came down the stairs, the door closed behind her, and the horse's hoofs clattered out of the barn and sounded spongily upon the drive. Sylvia looked up, and Haven was aware, in the gathering dusk, that tears were running down her face.

“Sylvy, don't,” he cried. “Don't you take on. What is it, Sylvy?”

She began speaking wildly, as he had never heard her. It moved him beyond all possible expression, and he sat and gripped his hands and listened.

“They want to cut it down. They think it 's bad for me. Maybe it'll be just as well. Twisted things like that better be cut down, an' have an end of 'em.”

It had all been a mystery to him for many months, why she looked at the tree, and at nothing else with any willingness.

“How was it, Sylvy?” he asked, to begin speech about it. “What happened to 't?”

“You know as well as I do,” she cried passionately, amid her sobs. “'T was the time

the old henhouse burned, an' much as ever we saved the house an' barn. 'T was a nice round little tree — nothin' but a Bald'in; but father meant to have it grafted. 'T was goin' to be a Hubbardston. That's what I picked out. The fire scorched it on one side, an' it ain't ever bore any since. You knew that, Haven."

"Well, yes," mused Haven. "I don't know but I did."

"It's like me," the girl burst out. "It's just like me. I'm scorched so 't I shan't ever be the same again. Everybody else 'round here's well an' strong, all except the tree an' me. But you can cut it down, if you want to."

"No," responded Haven; "I don't know 's I want to." He sat for a time in silence, and Sylvia dried her eyes. He had never seen her break into emotion in all these months of wasting illness, and it was terrible to him. Now that she had begun, it seemed easy to her to go on. She looked at him recklessly. A red of excitement had come into her cheeks, and her eyes burned hotly.

"You know what's the matter of me, Haven?" she asked.

He answered slowly:

"No, I don't know 's I do."

"Yes, you do. You know, Haven Terrill. I don't know whether mother does or not — or father. I'm goin' to tell you, anyways. I

thought I was goin' to be married, Haven. Then — he got tired of me." Her head had sunk until her chin was on her breast.

He could not answer.

"I won't tell you his name," she faltered.

"No," he said, "I would n't."

"That 's why" — her voice fell lower and lower, in little gasps born agonizingly — "that 's why I am sick, an' why I can't eat nor sleep. They think I 've gone into a decline. I — I kissed him, Haven, an' he did n't care, after all. I 'm all twisted, like that tree. I 'm all burnt an' scorched, an' there 's the end of it." She rocked back and forth in her chair, and involuntarily he put out his hands to draw her toward him.

"Well," he said, at last, "we 'll see what we can do about the tree."

It was a wild relief now to unburden herself.

"I can't tell you anything about how I feel. It ain't that I want him back. It 's somethin' else. I want to be as I was before I ever see him. An' I can't! I can't! I can't!"

"Well," said Haven musingly. He sat looking straight before him, his hands on his knees. He was thinking. "You don't feel 's if you could give up settin' by this winder, do ye?" he hinted.

She shook her head.

"To please your mother, mebbe?"

“Where can I go?” she burst out wildly. “If I sit in the kitchen I shall see his house, an’ if I sit in the front room I shall see him go by. This is the only place I’ve got, Haven. It’s the only place I’m safe.”

“Mebbe you could have your chair moved up to that south winder in the sittin’-room?” he pursued. “You could see the laylocks when they bud out. You try it, Sylvy. Your mother’d be proper glad.”

Her passion had deserted her as quickly as it came. She looked dispirited.

“Maybe I will,” she said. “Seems as if ’t would kill me; but mother’s gettin’ all wore out seein’ me sit here. Maybe I will.”

“I kinder want you to see the laylocks,” he soothed her. “There’s a clump o’ three, an’ then one syringa by itself. I like a great syringa all alone, full o’ bloom, an’ bees hummin’ over it. Sylvy,” his voice deepened as it dropped, “I’ve set out much as a dozen over to the old place.”

“Have you?” she asked indifferently.

“All them old-fashioned kinds you set by, an’ thirty fruit trees in the back lot. Mother walked over there with me, t’other arternoon. ‘Haven,’ says she, ‘what you goin’ in so steep for?’ ‘I dunno’, mother,’ says I; ‘mebbe along towards fall I may build.’”

Sylvia at that moment began to look a little more like a human thing and less like a wraith born to blight and pain. A delicate flush had crept into her cheeks, and she clasped her hands in her lap and then loosed them willfully, as if their tension betrayed something that must not be known.

Haven spoke again, and with a deeper shyness. His voice thrilled passionately.

“‘Sylvy sets the world by laylocks an’ syringas,’ I says to mother. ‘Yes,’ says she, ‘I know she does.’”

Sylvia had closed her eyes, and the rose in her cheeks had faded.

“I’m pretty tired,” she said, at length. “Maybe I’ll go to bed. You don’t care, do you?”

“No, I’ll set here till they come home. Hark!”

She was standing in a drooping grace, one hand upon the window-ledge. Her eyes interrogated him.

“Hark!” he said again. “Hear the frogs. Some folks think it’s mournful. It’s the best kind o’ music to me. It’s the beginnin’ o’ the year.”

The continuous rhythm of spring was thrilling in through the closed window, the sound of little instruments all attuned to expectation and desire. Suddenly Sylvia bent her head upon her

hands and began sobbing, while her body shook. Haven had risen, and he stood by her in a piteous distress, saying at intervals:

“Don’t take on, Sylvy. Don’t take on.”

A wave of her new outspokenness had overtaken her, and flung her toward him in intemperate confidence.

“It was the spring o’ the year then,” she whispered. “Everything comes in the spring o’ the year, trouble an’ all. I heard Lame Lois say that once, — she that was crazed, — an’ we used to run over from school an’ look at her where she sat with her feet in the ashes. All the sounds are awful to me, Haven, one as bad as another. Last week I thought the frogs were the worst, but now it ’s the robins. They ’ll be the worst, too. I s’pose I ’m crazed, Haven, just like Lame Lois. She was love-cracked. So am I. An’ I ’m worse, for she wanted to hide herself away, an’, now I ’ve begun to talk to you, I see I ain’t got any shame.” She lifted her head and looked at him, a wild-eyed creature with sodden cheeks and a quivering mouth. His eyes also were wet, but he stretched out his hand and laid it on her chair.

“I ’m goin’ to take this into t’ other room,” he said, “an’ set it by the south winder. Then when you come down in the mornin’ you can slip into ’t, an’ not have no talk about it.”

“No, no,” she besought him, “I don’t believe I can.”

But he had lifted the chair, and was carrying it over the sill.

“There!” he called to her from the next room, “when you git up in the mornin’, you run right down the front stairs, an’ se’ down here, an’ cast your eyes over the laylocks an’ that nice syringa.”

Sylvia caught her breath in dying sobs, but when he came back, talking about plants and the kindliness of a south exposure, and wondering when her father and mother would be home, she was ashamed of her emotion, and bade him a shy good-night and went upstairs. Haven stood listening until her hesitating step had reached the upper floor; then he sat down by the window and looked through the dusk at the twisted tree. By and by the wagon drove into the yard, and Mrs. Medway, leaving her husband to unharness, came in, all redoubled cheer and freshness, from the damp spring air.

“Where ’s Sylvy?” she inquired, throwing off her shawl.

Haven had risen.

“She ’s gone to bed,” he answered. “I guess she was pretty tired. See here, Mis’ Medway, don’t you speak to her no more about that

twisted tree, nor don't you let nobody else. It ain't best."

Mrs. Medway was folding up her shawl.

"Well," she answered, frowning over the pin in her mouth, "so doctor said. I dunno' 's 't was exactly right to bring it in, but my tongue got ahead o' me. For mercy sake! where 's Sylvy's chair?"

"It 's in t' other room. I carried it in by the south winder. To-morrer she 's goin' to try to set there. An' don't you speak o' that, neither."

He towered there, still and tall, the man in authority, and Mrs. Medway looked up at him in a puzzled acquiescence.

"Well!" she remarked, from the depths of her perplexity; but when he had said good-night and shut the outer door behind him, she sped after him a step. "Haven," she called, "you 're real good."

The next morning Sylvia came downstairs earlier than usual. Her mother heard her light, hesitating step in the sitting-room, and presently bustled in with a breakfast tray. Sylvia sat by the south window, but she was not looking out. Her head was bent so that her eyes rested on the clasped hands in her lap, and there were tears upon her cheeks. Her mother did remorseful, tender things about her, and then, as the girl could not eat, hesitated there beside her.

“You want to go back, Sylvy?” she asked compassionately. “You want to set by the north winder? Mother ’ll move your chair for you.”

Sylvia shook her head, and by and by she ate a little bread and milk, and after that closed her eyes and seemed to withdraw into some solitude of her own. Haven went past the window and smiled at her. She had waked at the sound of his step, and she returned his smile wanly. But he did not come in.

“Mother,” she called presently, “is Haven out there in the yard?”

“I guess so.”

“Don’t you see him?”

“Why, yes, Sylvy, I s’pose I see him.”

“What ’s he doin’?”

“Well”—her mother hesitated. Then she added in some confusion, “I guess he ’s goin’ to do suthin’ to that old tree in the yard.”

Sylvia bowed her head as if a wind had struck her. It was impossible to think Haven could cut down the twisted tree. But if it must happen, at least she need not hear the blows. She put her hands to her ears; and when she took them away her mother was standing by her, looking sorrowful, and Haven had gone home. She asked no more questions; but she crouched all day by the south window, and ached over her lost tree.

The south window was a large one, built for the plants in winter; and as Sylvia sat there, day by day, the sun poured on her in a flood. It made her feel as if the world were very large, with no cool corners in it. One morning, because Haven asked her, in his slow, kind fashion, she did look at the budding lilac bushes; and that was the very moment that her mother called from the kitchen:

“Sylvy, you glance out an’ see Lorin’ Pratt. Who’s that he’s got with him?”

Sylvia started back, and gasped with the surprise of it. The color rushed into her face, as if a hand had smitten her. The window was wide open, and a warm breeze was coming in. She heard the quick beat of the horse’s hoofs on the road, but she could not look. Haven’s voice, with that note of calm in it, came from the other side of the window, where he stood on the springing grass.

“It’s nobody but old Aunt Nancy. She’s goin’ to stay a spell.”

Sylvia felt the generous kindness of his tone. It was as if he begged her to be comforted, remembering that, if Loring had cast her off, at least her place had not been taken by another girl. She tried to thank him, and, as that was impossible, she looked at the lilacs again, and told him he had set them in exactly the right place.

It was the next week that, as she sat there by the open window, a shadow fell upon her closed eyelids, and she opened them, smiling a little, knowing who had come. But it was not Haven. Loring Pratt himself stood there, a little flushed with the awkwardness of meeting, yet vividly excited in a way she knew. This was the look in his eyes when he had told her, in old days, how pretty she was, and planned their life together. Loring was a handsome creature, of a gypsy cast, with a swarthy skin and dark, soft hair. To-day he had been hurrying, and a deep red had settled in his cheeks. Sylvia could not take her eyes away. She looked at him curiously, as if he had once been familiar to her, and now the sight of him gave her a vague pain that she could neither conquer nor resist.

“Sylvy!” he hesitated. “Sylvy!” Then he added, “You better, Sylvy?”

Her lips parted slightly, as if for breath; but it was an instant before she could answer, and then almost inaudibly:

“I guess so.”

“Mother said you was in a decline,” he went on eagerly, in the manner of those who, because they have begun speaking, rush on and say what they would not. “She said you set there by the north winder, lookin’ out into the yard, an’ would n’t see nobody. But t’ other day I was

goin' by, an' I see you by this winder, an' — so I come over, Sylvy."

His voice had softened wonderfully. That note, also, she knew. A strange triumph swelled within her. The outward effect of it was immediately upon her like a wreath of loveliness, and he saw it. Her eyes had brightened into liquid glory. Her head lifted, and the red poured into her cheeks.

"Sylvy," he said, with the beseeching of a lover, "I'll come 'round this afternoon. We'll go to ride." But his glance followed hers over his shoulder to the road. "Who you lookin' at?" he asked.

Haven was going by with a basket of plants, their green tops showing above the brim. She knew what they were, — larkspur and monkshood from his mother's garden, to set out at the old place where he meant to build. Involuntarily she leaned forward in her chair and waved her hand at him; but Haven only nodded and strode on. She thought his shoulders settled together a little, as if he were tired, though the basket, she knew, was light for strength like his. Loring laughed.

"You can't stop him when he's got any kind of a withe to set out," he said. "He's as crazy's a loon over anything that's got leaves to it. Why, the day he grafted that old tree in your

yard, I wanted him to go to stockholders' meetin' on some stock I had, but he would n't hear to 't."

"What tree?" Sylvia was sitting straight in her chair, gazing at him.

"Why, that tree in your back yard, the old twisted tree. I told him he 's a fool to tackle it. When a thing 's gone, it 's gone."

Sylvia was on her feet. She stood superbly, like a lithe goddess.

"I 'm much obliged, Loring," she said, in a clear voice. "No, I can't go to ride. I 'm too busy." She left him standing there, and walked out through the kitchen, where her mother was beating eggs, and into the back yard. There was her tree, strangely altered and yet familiar. The top had been cut off, and new grafts were in it. At its foot the land had been spaded up in a great circling space. She smelled the earth and the enrichment of it, and life was good to her.

"Law, Sylvy, what you doin'?" called her mother from the doorway.

Sylvia turned about and walked back to the house.

"Give me them eggs, mother," she said calmly. "I 'll beat 'em for you."

Haven was at the old place all day. He had his dinner there with Aunt Betsy next door, and

came home at dusk, his feet dragging a little with the weariness of an accepted loss. He did not look up at Sylvia's window, but Sylvia herself, a shawl about her, stood at the gate. He saw her and stopped, staring as if she had been a ghost. She was the Sylvia he had been used to know, sweet-colored, and all a wistful pathos that was not grief, but youth.

"Haven," she called, her voice vibrating in some mysterious accord with the spring twilight, "what made you graft my tree?"

He took off his hat, and passed a hand wearily over his forehead.

"Oh," he said, smiling faintly, "I thought we might as well give it a chance."

"Do you think the grafts 'll live?" she asked breathlessly, like one who had news to tell.

"Oh, yes!" he answered. "I know they will." He gave her a little good-night nod, and was moving on; but she called to him.

"Haven, I've seen him. It's all right."

He paused then, and looked down through the dusk at the ground.

"I know it," he said presently. "I see ye there. I thought maybe 't was goin' to be — all right."

"No! no!" — she stretched a swift hand to him across the fence, and then withdrew it. "It's just as if he was a stranger. When I

looked at him — an' see you goin' by — an' you grafted my tree an' all — O Haven, somethin' 's come back to me. I 'm goin' to live."

He stooped to her then, and she put up her lips, cool with the sweet spring air, and kissed him.

THE LOOKING-GLASS

THE LOOKING-GLASS

DORINDA LAKE stood before her glass in the sitting-room and tied a blue ribbon at her throat, singing as she did it. She loved this glass, with its gilded basket of fruit and the peacock feathers above, because it held a flood of sunlight, and reminded her anew how well her beauty could bear it. After the ribbon was tied she laid her hands on the table in front of her, and bent forward, smiling into the glass with a gay recognition. The girl she saw there, crisp in muslin, was untouched, like the morning, and, like the morning, lovely. Her cheeks had the inexpressible freshness of rose petals, her hair was flooding gold bound about her head in fine-spun coils. Her eyes — the old simile of violets failed here, even of violets wet with dew, for they had depth as well as lustre. At this moment they were dark with pleasure, a pleasure in themselves. As she looked, there was a thudding step at the door, and Aunt Dorindy came looming through the entry. She moved like a heavy craft, pitching a little from unfavorable seas; then she stood there a moment to recover her balance before making another essay. She was no taller than

Dorinda, but her breadth outran proportion. She had the quivering bulk of excessive flesh, and her double chin hung in a shining fold. The faded blue eyes were merry, and neighboring the good, motherly mouth lurked a dimple or two. She gave a little unctuous laugh, which seemed to have resided no lower than her throat.

“The land, Dorindy!” said she, “you standin’ there worshipin’ your good looks? I don’t blame ye. I’ve done it myself, more ’n once, times gone by.”

Dorinda blushed, and made herself the prettier. She had been worshiping the works of the Lord in herself, and she was fairly caught. But looking at Aunt Dorindy, seated now by the window in the big rocking-chair, she smiled. It occurred to her for the first time that this older woman had once been young, and that the hues of springtime had lain upon her also like a veil.

“You come here a minute,” said Aunt Dorindy suddenly, pitching to her feet. “Stan’ right where ye be. Now turn ’round. I want to measure.” She backed about ponderously, and, when they were matched, put up a hand to find the level of their heads. “Jest as I thought,” said she. “We ’re the same height. I knew we were.” She sank into her chair again, and kept a swaying rhythm while she talked. Young Dorinda meantime sat down

by one of the front windows, and began binding shoes.

“We’re the same height to an inch,” said Aunt Dorindy. “I’m a leetle heavier, but I started with the same kind of a figger you’ve got. You jest reflect on it, Dorindy. Forty years ago I looked for all the world jest as you’re lookin’ now. In forty years’ time you’ll be lookin’ jest like me. Don’t this world beat all?”

Dorinda laid down her work for a moment, and stared at her in an irrepressible wonder. She had never thought of youth, save as it belonged to her inalienably, or of age, the strange decaying state presaging death. But at that moment, as if a rough hand tore the comfortable film wherein she lived, she saw a brutal truth. Aunt Dorindy was right; they were alike. She met in the other woman an overgrown caricature of herself, and the prophecy appalled her.

“Aunt Dorindy,” she said, with the directness of a child, “do I look like you? Do I?”

Aunt Dorindy was fanning herself with her sunbonnet, ingeniously disposed. She yielded herself now to reminiscence.

“I guess you do! Your mother see it when you wa’n’t more’n a week old. ‘Dorindy,’ says she, ‘this child favors you. Same colorin’, same everything.’”

“Was that why I was named for you?”

“Yes, I guess as much that’s anything. Mebbe they would anyway. Well, you were as likely a leetle creatur’ as ever I see. Some folks say pretty young ones grow up homely; but you were pretty all through. I was married when I was your age. I wore a white spotted muslin, an’ when I come in jest now you give me a kind of a turn. I’ll be whipped if I should ha’ known the difference.”

“Yes,” said Dorinda, absently; “yes, Aunt Dorindy.”

“Well, I guess I’ll be gittin’ along home,” said Aunt Dorindy, rising. “I only stepped in a minute in passin’. I be’n down to the Talbots’. Old Mis’ Talbot’s on her high hoss to-day. Wanted to know if you knew how to make a batch o’ bread. ‘Law,’ says I, ‘don’t talk that way! Ain’t she lived alone ever sence her mother died? Do you s’pose she eats baker’s stuff an’ sweet trade? She’s as good a house-keeper as ever I see. Don’t you worry,’ says I. ‘Martin ain’t made no mistake.’ She’s terrible tried because you bind shoes, an’ put all the money onto your back. Seems as if you did spend a good deal that way, Dorindy.”

“It’s my own money,” said Dorinda hotly. “I like to look nice.” A blush engulfed her. She was thinking of a day two years ago when, in this very room, Martin Talbot had told her

she was the prettiest thing God ever made, and so stamped her beauty with a new significance.

“Well! well!” said Aunt Dorindy comfortably, “I dunno’ ’s I blame ye. Say, Dorindy, when you an’ Martin goin’ to be married?”

Dorinda rose, and dropped her work on the table. She wore a look of haughtiness, but that was only because the question stirred her, and she charged herself to seem unmoved.

“We have n’t made up our minds,” said she.

“I hate this everlastin’ hangin’ on,” continued Aunt Dorindy ruthlessly. “Young folks think life’s terrible long. It ain’t. It’s short. It don’t seem more ’n yesterday I walked out a bride, an’ here I be with the spring halt, an’ I dunno’ what all. Live while ye can! Live while ye can!”

She moved out, a ponderous figure under the cape of her great sunbonnet, and Dorinda looked after her with the distaste springing from a premonition of the sorry jokes life is capable of playing. The blossomy day was hurt. Some taint of mortality had crept into it. Involuntarily she shrank back to the mirror to face inexorable change; but one glance summoned her young bravado. She was a little paler than in the care-free moment gone, but that was all. Youth sprang up, like a challenging knight, and cleared the lists of doubt. She smiled into her own face,

and at that instant the gate clanged, and she heard Martin's hurrying step along the walk. The scarlet flushed into her cheeks, and her eyes widened. In the untroubled estate of their courtship the outward calmness had all been hers; but now she met him with outstretched hands. She seemed a woman, not a girl: a wife who welcomed love she knew by heart.

"Martin! Martin!" she whispered.

He was taller than she, and his brown face showed marks of patience threading its great kindness. He thought he knew Dorinda well, yet at that moment she seemed to envelop them both in the veil of a marvel making all things new. He drew her to him, hands and mouth. A second, and she swayed back again, and, flooded in her blushes, retreated from him. She laughed a little, and put up her hands to her shining hair.

"No," she said, "no!" when he would have touched her. "Aunt Dorindy's just gone out."

That seemed to be no reason why a man should not kiss his sweetheart, but it served. Martin, confronted with the vision of Aunt Dorindy, also laughed a little. But the spell of the moment was still upon them, and Dorinda asked him, in spite of herself:

"Martin, do you like me?"

"Like you!" He was silent, looking down at

his hands. They were ready to work for her and fight for her, those brown hands. The blood in them answered when she breathed upon them.

A shade of thought lay upon her face, and veiled its radiance. She hesitated a little in her speech.

“Do you think I ’m — pretty?”

“I think you ’re the prettiest creatur’ God Almighty ever made.”

She thought of Aunt Dorindy and the dark coverts of sixty years, and dared her test. “Should you like me if I was n’t pretty at all?”

“No,” said the man, “no, I guess not. I like you jest as you are.”

As he looked at her, in his adoring madness, he could not conceive of her as changed. If his halting mind had been hunted into corners with more questioning, he must have said that time and loss had power over maids and men alike; yet he would have owned it simply, not defying them, but childlike in his ignorance that such things mattered. Whatever she might be, she was Dorinda.

The words had stung her, and she started, but a step brought her in front of the glass; the pictured eyes met hers again, and her head went up triumphantly. She could dare her destiny. Life scoffed at Aunt Dorindy.

Martin moved toward her in his big, soft way, and laid a hand upon her shoulder.

“Dorinda,” said he, “I guess we might be married in the fall.” There was a still solemnity about him; it moved Dorinda greatly. At such moments he seemed to be hers, and yet set apart from her in a strange inviolability. “I spoke to mother again. We had quite a talk last night. I guess I did most o’ the talkin’.”

“What did she say?”

“She had a kind of a faintin’ spell, but she come out of it quicker ’n usual. She ’s all right to-day.”

“Did n’t she say what she thought?”

“No, not really.”

“She said something! Martin Talbot, you tell me what it was.”

He laughed a little, as if he passed the matter by.

“Why, ’t was no great matter. Fact is, mother thinks you set by dress, an’ not much else. She thinks you ’re no kind of a housekeeper. I told her she ’d find out. I told her she ’d ha’ found out long before if she ’d only come up here to tea.” He looked at her in happy pride, the triumph of the man who trusts his mate.

Dorinda had no resentments where his mother was concerned.

“You tell her, Martin,” she began. “No,

don't you tell her anything. But I guess you ain't afraid."

They stood there in the sweet spring weather, and talked a little in the indeterminate snatches of youth, the broken words helped out by keen foreshadowings. Martin recalled himself first, or the old clock roused him with its stroke of noon. He turned to its dial, and found there some reproach.

"Gee!" said he, "I've got to go. I promised mother I'd be home by 'leven to dig 'round the sage an' wormwood. Well!" The word held a meaning not quite clear to him, yet strong enough to stir his pulses. It was born of the certainty that before snow fell it would be his wife to whom he went home at noon. He parted from Dorinda with a sober kiss, and when she had watched him down the garden walk, she sat still for an hour's luxurious dreaming, regardless of her dinner and the crisp dandelions ready to be boiled. They must wait for supper time; bread and milk were quite enough for her this noon. She was very happy. Life stretched before her in an endless way, all sunshine and spring weather. She had forgotten Aunt Dorindy.

But Martin's mother could not be forgotten. There was something of the child in Dorinda to feel a pang of grief because old lady Talbot would not quite accept her. She must become

Martin's wife on sufferance; and afterwards win her way by thrift and homely zeal. Was it possible she spent too much on dress? Aunt Dorindy's clumsy shaft had hurt; yet, looking down on the sprigged muslin, her lips curved into a smile. It was too pretty for any woman really to decry it in her heart. So she ate her dinner in a happy dream, and sang while she set the things away. In the pantry a thought came tapping at her elbow, and she laughed. There sat a round sponge cake, baked that morning in the scalloped pan with a hole in the middle. It was a perfect cake, risen to the highest point of excellence, the crust dotted with candied freckles. Dorinda was afraid of old lady Talbot; but surely the cake would speak for her. She set it in a large sprigged plate from the parlor cupboard, and laid a glossy napkin over it. Then she settled the blue ribbon at her throat, and went bareheaded into the road, carrying the plate before her as if it held some sacrificial emblem, and she were the moment's chosen ministrant. Little flecks of shadow danced over the ground from budding leaves, and a light wind came up in a whiff to make them move the faster. All the touches of nature held a mystery that day. Dorinda's face wore a look of serious calm, as if wifeness and motherhood stirred within her, unrecognized, yet potent. So she went along

the country road, and up the path to Martin Talbot's house, and there she heard a woman crying. Old lady Talbot was having a "spell." Dorinda stood there by the sweet clove bush at the corner of the house, and waited. Her hands were eager with desire of service. If Martin were away, perhaps she might go in. But Martin was there. The old woman's voice, fierce with a nervous agony, besought him:

"Martin, don't you marry her. Martin, don't you do it. You tell me now you won't. You promise me."

Martin's voice broke soothingly on hers:

"There, there, mother! Don't you mind. There! there!"

"She's a pink an' white flippertigibbet! She's dead in love with her own face!" shrieked the old woman. "Look at them blue ribbins she ties on. Pink one day, an' blue the next! She looks like a doll. If you'd ha' picked out a good, sensible girl with suthin' to her, I would n't ha' cared. You promise you won't have her."

"Mother! mother!" entreated Martin.

"You promise me! O Martin, my heart! I'm scairt. Oh, my heart! Oh, you promise me!"

"Yes, mother, yes, I'll promise," groaned the man. He was dropping medicine with a trembling hand, when a quick step sounded on the

kitchen floor. It was Dorinda. She held the plate before her with a mechanical care, but she had forgotten it. Her blue eyes were dulled. Her cheeks looked faded. But her voice held firm.

“You need n’t take it out of Martin that way, Mrs. Talbot,” said she, with an imperative clearness. “He don’t need to promise. I’ll promise for him. I won’t marry him. You need n’t mind about my face. I guess it’ll fade fast enough. You need n’t mind about my clothes, either. I shan’t spend any more on clothes. Good-by, Martin. It’s over. Good-by.” She walked out of the room while he was holding the cup to his mother’s lips, and went, in some poor panoply of pride, back through the smiling day to her own house.

All that afternoon Mrs. Talbot lay quite still, and Martin, after he had sent the hired man for the doctor, sat beside her. He thought she was nearer death than she had been before; but, though her heart beat low, Mrs. Talbot was thinking very little about that. She was wondering what she had done, and counseling herself not to be glad too soon.

Dorinda walked into her own silent house, and set the cake back on the pantry shelf. It was all over. She knew it from some inner conviction rather than the facts themselves. Life,

too, was over, as she conceived it. A curious scorn of herself was reigning in her, since women who are slighted slight themselves. Her ill luck seemed to go back to her pink and white face. If it had been ugly, she might not have been condemned.

“Well,” she said aloud, “it’ll fade fast enough. She need n’t worry herself. It’ll fade.”

And she wished it. She longed to be old and ugly, like Aunt Dorindy, and so the nearer to her journey’s end. But though her loveliness must go, she could not bear to stand by at such a death; and with a sudden purpose she went up to the mirror, and sought herself once more. The face she saw there was wan with grief, without, as yet, any of grief’s veiling beauty. The lightning stroke of life had smitten it. Dorinda looked into the flower-blue eyes. “Good-by,” said she, to something precious. “Good-by.”

She took the looking-glass from its nail and carried it up into the attic. There she set it under the rafters, its face turned toward the wall. After that she went through the house in haste, collecting all the other glasses, to pile them there beside it. Then she went down calmly to her work, and to grow old like Aunt Dorindy.

Next day at dusk Aunt Dorindy came stumbling over.

“The land, Dorindy!” said she, entering the sitting-room, “you ain’t be’n an’ broke that old glass?”

Dorinda was sitting by the window, sewing fast. She looked up and smiled. There were brilliant spots of color in her cheeks, and her voice rang hard. “I guess I cracked it, lookin’ so,” she said. “I carried it off upstairs.”

“Why don’t ye fetch down that old Constitution out o’ the west chamber?”

“I don’t know. I don’t believe I will.”

“Ain’t you done your hair a mite on one side?”

“Maybe I have. I ain’t looked at it.”

“What you got on that old choc’late calico for? You don’t look nat’ral.”

“I don’t care how I look,” said Dorinda.

Aunt Dorindy opened her mouth in an ineffectual gasp, closed it, and went home.

But the space left vacant on the wall was vacant still. Dorinda, dressed in sober calico, sat by the window and bound a marvelous quantity of shoes. She hardly looked up from her work, even when Aunt Dorindy brought tidings that old lady Talbot was still in bed with a prolonged “heart spell.” Martin was staying at home with her. He was not allowed to leave his mother’s sight. At the end of the week Dorinda went out to the front gate and looked

wistfully up and down the road, recognizing her own loneliness, and wondering why it should seem so dull to think of visiting the neighbors. She leaned on the gate and mused blankly over her desolation, and there Eli Morse saw her, as he walked by with a basket full of young tomato plants. He was a tall, loosely jointed man, with the absorbed look of one who has some gentle passion and tends it by himself. Years ago he had raised the laughter of the neighborhood by starting a market garden, though this was thirty miles from town and three miles from a railroad. But strawberries and spring greens repaid his fostering. He lived alone, in a sweet intimacy with his garden, and put away the money it brought him, not from niggardliness, but because it made an alien element in his simple ways. When he looked at Dorinda, the clouded loveliness of her face besought him, like a flower drenched in storm. He stopped, and spoke with a faltering pity.

“You look all beat out.”

Dorinda smiled.

“I’ve been sewin’,” said she.

“What makes you?”

“I don’t know. It’s as good as anything.”

While he was standing there before her, Martin Talbot passed. For a moment, relying on the habit of old days, Dorinda thought he meant

to stop; but he only gave her a brief good-evening, and hurried on. He looked wan and sorry.

“Old Mis’ Talbot’s pretty low,” said Eli. “Guess he’s puttin’ for the doctor.”

The breath of evening touched Dorinda’s cheek, and made her sigh in answer. Her muscles ached from the cramping day, and she longed to taste the air that made this man so calm. Hot cravings seemed afar from him; with his still face and gentle eyes he might have been a part of the earth, risen up out of it for a moment’s activity, then to return gladly to some deep covert.

“I wish I could work outdoors,” said she unthinkingly. “I’m sick and tired of the house.”

A new light shot into his face.

“You can,” said he. “It’s complete. There’s nothin’ like it.”

“Could I have a garden?”

“I guess you could. You could sell things. I’d carry your stuff with mine.”

“It’s too late for this year, though.”

“No, it ain’t: not for everything. You could sow some lettuce an’ some redishes, an’ plant late corn. You could have tomatoes. Look a’ here! I’ll leave these plants.”

He went in and sat on the steps with her until late in the evening, while they talked of gar-

dens; and next day, almost before the dawn, he and his man were planting for her.

Then Dorinda began her new life. She gave up her housework, and lived out of doors. She and Eli drifted into an odd, unspoken partnership. He carried her produce to market and worked for her, as she, when lighter tasks were urgent, worked for him. The neighbors wagged their heads and prophesied, and Aunt Dorinda clucked like a hen because Dorinda would not talk of sheets and tablecloths. Mrs. Talbot kept her bed, not so much because her state demanded it as that the pathos of persistent illness was an iron finger on her son. Martin's shoulders bent under the weight of life. Once within the first month he met Dorinda face to face by her own gate.

"Did you mean that, Dorinda," he asked, "what you said?"

She looked at him in a kindliness that left him chilled.

"Yes," she said; "I meant it."

When he spoke again, the words were like a sob.

"Dorinda, I don't know whether I done right or wrong. But I could n't kill her."

"Of course you could n't," said Dorinda, with the same decisive clearness. "I don't expect you to."

She walked inside her gate alone, and all that afternoon she hoed potatoes in the sun, and took a fierce delight in thinking how the dirt was sifting into her shoes, and how coarse her hands would look. That night at supper time came Aunt Dorindy.

“Ain’t you got a coat o’ tan!” said she. “You ’ll be as black as an Injun ’fore summer ’s over.”

It was like the verdict of the world on a lost cause. Dorinda washed her hands mechanically at the sink, and thought her pang was over. There would not be the agony of growing old. She had bought at one purchase what Aunt Dorindy was accepting from the niggard years. She wondered, with a dull curiosity that held no bitterness, how her skin looked now it was getting black, and how long it would be before the sun made wrinkles under her eyes. After that day she withdrew more and more into a silence of her own, and the neighbors ceased to question her. She had turned queer, they said, takin’ up man’s work, an’ all.

The progress of the years began, the years that make up life. The man and woman continued their tacit partnership, like two earth spirits born to toil for some compelling reason they could not understand. The neighbors wondered whether they would marry when

they had laid by enough; but between themselves there was no talk of marriage. Eli instructed Dorinda in crops and all the ancient lore of earth. Sometimes he told her about the woods and herbs that grow in hidden places, and more than once he led her to the spot where a partridge had hidden the treasure of her nest. Dorinda learned from him in some strange way, as if she breathed it in, the patience of the seasons and the soil. Spring found her out of doors, and in the winter, unless the snow lay deep, she went, with some unformed purpose, tramping over the hills. In years she had not seen her own face. When she combed her long hair she would not look at the sweeping mane, lest it had grown dull, like Aunt Dorindy's. Sometimes, when she went into a neighbor's, her reflection, as she passed a mirror, waved and beckoned to her; but she never turned. It was as if the ghost of her repudiated youth held out a hand in vain. In the seventh winter Eli died, after a short sickness, and she sat beside him in the dawn and tended him. He turned loving eyes upon her.

"I've prized you more 'n ever you knew, Dorindy," said he. "Seems sometimes as if a piece was cut right out o' your life and gi'n to me. I've had good days with you. Well, he need n't begrutch 'em to me. Good-by, Dorindy."

Then he closed his eyes, and there was no more talking.

When the will was found, Dorinda had his land. This was in December; and with a strange new patience she made her plans for more gardening, and for hiring two men instead of one.

On a spring day, when the plow was set into the first furrow, Aunt Dorindy came and said:

“Old Mis’ Talbot’s goin’ at last. High time, too! Martin sets there in the kitchen. He won’t take bite nor sup. She don’t know him, neither. Some say he’s begun to mourn; but I say his mother’s be’n the death of him.”

Dorinda went swiftly out of the house and down the road. She turned in at the Talbots’ gate, and smelled the sweet clove long before she came to it. A light wind wafted it to meet her. She went in at the kitchen door, and there she found him sitting by the window, his head sunken between his shoulders. His face was scarred by lines of grief and age, but it looked withered, as if no tear had touched it. The house was very still, all but the buzzing of one fly upon an upper pane. Mrs. Talbot was asleep, and the nurse, lying on the lounge beside her, slept, too. Dorinda walked up to Martin, and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

“Martin!” said she, speaking softly, but as if she called one from the dead. “Martin!”

He looked at her in a dull wonderment.

“Dorinda,” said he. “Is that you, Dorinda?”

She seated herself beside him, and drew his head down to her breast. She was strong with the vigor built up through hardy years lived near the earth; and he, shrunken and weak with grief, seemed like a child beside her. The denied motherhood in her rose with an enfolding tenderness, and she touched his hair.

“You stay here a minute, dear,” she whispered him. “I’ll make a cup o’ tea.”

Martin lay down, and watched her from the pillow, with the gaze of hungry souls new come to heaven. The nurse appeared, and looked her wonder; but the tea was made, and when Dorinda poured it, with a sweet composure, they drank together.

“I would n’t go far away,” said the nurse to Martin, in a tone of prophecy; and he nodded. He was another man. He had quaffed some great assurance from Dorinda’s eyes, and life flowed in on him.

Dorinda stepped about, doing little neighborly deeds, and once she stopped near him to say haltingly, with some shyness at essaying comfort:

“Don’t take it so. You must n’t.”

“It ain’t that,” labored the man. “It ain’t now. It’s what we’ve undergone so long.” The slow tears trickled down his cheeks.

After that the sick woman moaned a little, and Dorinda said no more, lest the dying ears should catch some hint of her. Seven years ago she could not have stolen into that house to guide its currents; but now life seemed larger to her, and the living more to be considered than the dead. At sunset old lady Talbot spoke out clearly to her son:

“You call her in here. Dorindy! You call Dorindy!”

He spoke the name like an echo, and Dorinda answered it. The woman turned beseeching eyes upon her.

“That’s a good girl,” said she, and died.

Dorinda went quietly out of the house; and next day she watched her plowing, and sowed early peas. She was the only one of the neighbors who did not go to old lady Talbot’s funeral. Instead she sat at home, and thought of life in a strange equable musing, like one for whom the keenness of the struggle is quite over, while sweetness still remains. She thought of young Dorinda with a tender smile, as of some one who had died, a creature all frailties, yet with one desire,—to be beloved. The creature had been

beautiful. The woman who mused about her had ceased thinking of her own face, worn as it must be, and scarred by careless usage.

The next day she took up her work again, and at twilight Martin came. She heard his step on the walk, and it all seemed a part of a dream. She had been in the vestibule of the dream before. He came into the sitting-room, where she had risen to meet him, and Dorinda, in a strange acquiescence, let him take her to his heart.

"There!" she said gently, stepping apart from him. "There, Martin, we must n't call things back."

He looked like the ghost of his youth.

"Don't you care about me?" he asked, like a child. "I ain't wuth it, Dorinda. I never knew how to fix things when they got so tangled, but I thought that day — I thought you cared."

"Oh, yes, I care," said Dorinda. She realized in that flash how patient she had grown. "I care. But things are over when a woman's got to be — like me. It's all gone, Martin, what you liked — all gone."

"What I liked, Dorinda. What did I like?"

"My looks are gone," said Dorinda simply.

The man in him awoke; it was the man that had hungered for her in silence under an unworthy fetter. He took her strong wrists and drew her toward him.

“Dorinda,” he whispered, “you ’re the prettiest thing God ever made; but if you wa’n’t — if you was homely, if you was old — O Dorinda, don’t you know?”

She knew, and life returned upon her like a flood.

When he was gone, she ran upstairs in the daring of great joy, and out of the blackness of the attic took the looking-glass. She carried it down, catching strange fragments of reflection as she went, and hung it in its place. Then she lighted two candles, and, holding one in either hand, looked at herself. The face that met her was a loving stranger. It was like the mother of the girl who bade herself good-by so long ago. This was a daughter of the earth, a child of wind and sun. The eyes were deep and patient; the hair had darkened, but it held glints of gold. Here and there were little characters set down; yet life had only touched her to new bloom and ripening. While she mused the eyes began to smile, the mouth took on a curving grace, and three dimples she had quite forgotten came out and danced before her.

“Oh!” said Dorinda. “Oh!” and understood the resurrection.

A HERMIT IN ARCADIA

A HERMIT IN ARCADIA

IT was a pulsating noon in the spring of the year. Adam Field dusted the flour from his hands, and came to the door of his little house to salute the weather. He was the hermit of the Tristram Woods, and this was his baking-day. Four pies, desirably browned, stood on the kitchen table, and the dough he had given its second moulding was set in the pans to rise. These were duties past; but his pleasures lay out of doors, and he came forth to seek them. He was a tall, great-shouldered creature, with bronze-red hair and a freckled face. The line of his profile swept nobly from brow to chin, and at first sight he justified the exactions of beauty as applied to men.

But looking longer at him, it would be found that all this strength of moulding and outline was pathetically softened by his eyes. They were dog's eyes, brown and seeking, and by no means knowing what they sought. He was dressed in a gingham shirt and gray trousers, and he wore a blue checked apron. The apron he untied, and, turning, hung it on a nail by the door, moving with the air of one who does an

accustomed act with an added precision because he hates it. Returned to man's estate by the removal of the belittling garment, he seemed to free his soul and let it rove abroad among the riches of the day.

His house, gray-lichened in its ancients, stood on the shore of Tristram Pond, and the little clearing about it was fringed by trees, now lustily pricking into green. So lucent was the green, and yet so pervasive, that it held every coign of the forest like an ardent mist. It seemed to rise and waver before Adam's vision, and his responsive senses told him he might almost bathe in it. He was at one with the woods, not even owning in his heart that he loved them, but yet absorbed into their thrilling life. Suddenly, while his eyes were fixed on a group of birches marking out the path about the pond, they parted, and a girl stood there, framed in green.

"Gee!" said Adam Field. It was the old situation, a man and a maid; but he found himself as disturbed by it as if the one of them had been Adam the First, and the other, Eve. The day and the season smelt so new that the girl seemed new also.

Yet she was not in any sense remarkable to the generalizing glance, — a slight thing, with a brown face and brown hair growing in a one-

sided peak on her forehead. Her eyes only were unusual. They were large and dark, and at this moment they held the gypsy glint. The hermit met them, and could not look away. Their gleam bewitched him. He had an impulse to walk forward in response, but as he laid a hand upon the casing of the door, to be assured of something solid, the girl smiled. Her face crinkled up; the brown pool of the eyes broke, and Adam was released. He drew a quick breath, and passed a hand before his eyes. The girl came lightly forward. She held a withe, and stripped it as she walked.

“Are you the hermit?” she inquired.

Adam frowned. “I should like to know,” said he fractiously, “if a chap can’t go off and live by himself without being called names!”

“What’s anybody want to go off by themselves for?” asked the girl, with an outward indifference and yet some keenness of veiled interest.

“Because they’re sick of the whole damned show!”

She looked at him in a fashion so gravely indulgent that Adam’s heart gave one quick throb: for he thought of his apron. Then he remembered having taken it off, and he blessed his stars.

“She said you had a lovely voice,” remarked the girl, with a smooth irrelevance.

“Who?”

“Melissa Beane. She that was Melissa Hawkins.”

The slow red crept into his face and suffused it. Many thoughts were surging within him, but none such as he could utter. For certain reasons he felt that Melissa Hawkins had the sorry right to say anything she pleased about him.

“She told me how you looked,” continued the girl dispassionately, “but you ain’t half so freckled as I expected.”

The pinprick hurt. His mates at school had taunted him with freckles, and that old nerve had life enough to thrill.

“I ain’t the only one in the world that’s freckled,” said he; but the girl interrupted him sweetly:

“Do you mean me? Oh, no! I ain’t freckled. I’m tanned, that’s all. You’d better see to your oven. Something’s burning.”

Adam could never explain why he felt so hopelessly at her mercy. She seemed to possess an infinite power of deriding him, and he was the more undone because he felt, at the bottom of his soul, that she could soothe with an equal potency. She hurt him, and undoubtedly wished to hurt; yet mingled with his inner protest

against the injustice of that onslaught was an unreasoning desire to go to her for comfort. But the girl, as if she knew nothing about these warring subtleties, looked at him with satirical eyes. Within the man waves of resolution were mounting high. No power on earth should force him to acknowledge before his arch tormentor that ovens and other household gear were not things afar from him.

“There ’s nothing to burn,” said he firmly.

She swept the words aside in wholesale scorn. “I guess I know!” said she. “You just let me look!” She brushed past him, crossed the kitchen, and opened the oven door. Burned pastry and trickling juices met her in a steaming cloud, and she spoke warmly, yet with some indulgence, as one to an inferior in a kindred art: “I ’d be ashamed! They were elegant pies, and you ’ve let ’em run all to waste.”

Deft as some trained ministrant, she caught a dish-towel from the nail and took out the pies. She set them on the table beside the others, and regarded them with true sorrow.

“The crust is as flaky as ever I see,” she remarked, as if confiding in some sympathetic deity. “And you ’ve let it burn to a crisp.” Then she turned upon him with a hateful smile, and asked insinuatingly, “You fond of cooking?”

“No!” thundered the hermit. But he was

breathlessly content, seeing her inside his door. Keen desire flashed up in him to keep her there.

“What makes you do it, then?” She seated herself, like a bad fairy, on a stool in the chimney corner, and looked at him with impudent eyes. Instantly Adam Field judged and classified his deftness about the house. He had always hated woman’s work, though he gave it great attention because it was his religion to do all things well. Now it seemed to him not merely dull, but most unmanly.

“Somebody’s got to do it,” he returned lamely.

“If you ’d married Melissa, she ’d have done it for you.”

He made no answer, even to voice a sudden inward relief that he had not married Melissa, with her yellow hair and her look of eternal Sabbaths.

“If you ’d married Melissa,” continued his tormentor calmly, “I should be visiting you both. I’m staying with her mother; but your house is bigger than the one Melissa lives in now, so she ’d have had me there.”

His doglike eyes besought her not to play with such fine ironies; but she sparkled back an answer, and went on:

“Don’t you want to know what I’m down here for?”

He answered eagerly, her cruelties forgotten, "Yes, I do."

"Well, Melissa told me you 'd jilted her" —

"I did n't jilt her," he continued in haste. The words tumbled tumultuously. Though she jeered at him, he had a pathetic certainty that, after all, she would understand. It was an almost poignant relief, too; for never before had he been able, in speech, to touch upon that mortifying time. "You don't see how it was. She did n't. Nobody does. We were going to be married. I liked her real well, and I wanted her to be happy."

A curious expression came over the girl's face. It was that quick, wounded look which betrays a jealous mind.

"I 'm a queer chap," Adam went on, in that rush of confidence. "So how was I going to know whether I could make her happy or not? Still, I liked her, and I meant to chance it. But when it was 'most time for us to be married, I got scared. I got so scared I told her so. I bet, if the truth was known, every man jack of 'em 's scared before he 's married. You ask 'em, and if there 's any man in 'em, they 'll own it. Well, I owned it to her, and she cried, and Silas Beane he up and married her."

"And you locked your door and came traipsing off down here to make town talk of yourself

over all this hermit business," said the girl sharply. Her eyes were full of angry tears. She felt that unreasoning bitterness from which we wound our beloved when they put themselves in the wrong.

"It wa'n't what you think. I could bear to see her, but I could n't face being a coward. I could n't live with other folks. You can't see. You could n't if you tried a year." Yet at the same instant he was conscious of a warming hopefulness that she could unriddle all the problems likely to concern him.

The girl put out her hand, and then withdrew it before he could guess whether it was for him. "Well," she said, "I must go."

Adam felt himself thrown, with a shock, out of accustomed musings, to face this quick reverse. "No!" he cried, appealingly — "no! you ain't going?"

She was making her way toward the door. He looked at her sharply, in the keenness of his questioning, and he could see that this was quite a different girl from the one who had parted the bushes with that witchlike mien. She was a little pale under her brown skin. Her eyes held something like a troubled tenderness.

"I help Aunt Sarah get the dinner," said she.

"But I don't know what your name is," blundered Adam.

Again she sparkled. Her spirits returned with a dash. "That 's no consequence," said she. "You won't have to use it."

He looked at her helplessly, and she laughed. He was so big, so soft and sorry, so like an elephantine puppy lost in the snow.

"What a goose you were," she said irrelevantly, "to give up Melissa!"

"I did n't give her up!"

"Well, make her give you up. You were a goose. You 'd have been living in that nice big house, and Melissa 'd have made your pies."

"I don't want her to make my pies!"

"Well," she returned, with her diabolic precision, "I don't know 's they 'd have been so flaky."

In that instant he resolved that thenceforward this should be a pieless house.

She had stepped out of the door, and the spring sunshine fell upon her hair and set a shimmer on every curly crest. "Well," she said meditatively, "I'm sorry you have n't got Melissa!"

"I would n't take the gift of her!" The passion of this defiance he understood as little as the former disquiet the creature had aroused; but he sent it hurtling after her. She was walking away lightly and very rapidly. In an instant

the bushes would close upon her. Adam started after, and reached her in a series of strides.

"Say," he began violently, "you tell me what your name is!"

"Angelica Payne," said she, still walking away. He remembered then. She had been a visitor here before, an ugly, elfin sort of child, and he had strangely forgotten her.

"Angelica Payne!" said he wonderingly, as he followed her. She was more and also less miraculous now that she had a name. But with a twist of his will he broke the spell, though for an instant only.

"Well," said he roughly, "what you down here on my land for, anyways?"

She confronted him, and, to keep her composure, called up some weak defiance. But the sparkle had gone out of it. "I wanted to see a man that was afraid to marry a girl," she said, in a poor simulation of scorn.

This time Adam hardly winced. He was going to lose her, and the prospect held something incomprehensibly poignant. "Angelica!" he called after her, "shan't you come down here again?"

She cast a flashing look over her shoulder. Her face was dimpled with fun, but he read also some fine scorn of him. "You're real kind," said she. "Of course I'll come. A man that

was afraid to marry a girl would expect other girls to come and call."

Adam groaned in his inability to cope with her, and she went rustling on through the bushes. When the path turned she stopped an instant, and again looked back. "Oh, I'll come!" said she softly. "I'll bring you a receipt for cake!" And he had lost her.

He walked heavily back to the house, and sat down upon the step. There he stayed for perhaps an hour, his eyes fixed on a little weed at his feet. He seemed to be learning it by heart, the leaves and the horseshoe shadow on them. But chiefly he mused upon his visitor, and gave some vague cognizance to the strange self she had liberated within him. He thought he knew his own nature to the root, after days of introspection down here alone, and nights of reverie; yet all this formulating turned upon his faults. He had a curious scorn of himself, of his great strength, and the softness of heart that made him a child whenever it came to action. He could not even "go gunning" as other fellows did; he was afraid of hitting some warm and palpitating mark, some winged timidity. He could not speak in town-meeting for fear of "hard feelings" somewhere.

The extremity of bathos had come in his hesitating at the altar because he liked Melissa too

well to marry her; and, following on that, an overkeen sensitiveness brought echoing to his ears those hoots of derision certain to attend his name. So he had shut up his house, sent off old Betsy, who had worked for him ever since his mother's death, and betaken himself to the woods. As a citizen and a man he had become, in his own estimating, a being of no account; and he proposed to spend the rest of these hateful years removed from the men with whom he could not cope, and who must perpetually judge him. But Angelica Payne had arrived. Things were at once different. He pulled out the scroll of his past life, as a man must do for at least one woman, and groaned over its futility. All the day's routine took part in his changed mood. He did not set his orderly dinner-table as usual, but stood at the cupboard and ate savagely, showering the floor with crumbs. Nor would he sweep the crumbs away; and at nightfall, when the kitchen, like himself, betrayed some signs of being out of joint, he appraised the confusion and exulted in it. It was a betrayal of man's housekeeping, and that suited him. When she came again she should not flout him.

But she did not come again. The days lagged, while Adam stayed religiously by his own doorstep lest he should miss her. He made curious compromises in his indoor work,

striving to earn her approval of man's house-keeping, and yet guessing how she must loathe untidiness. Sometimes he left the floor unswept, and then brushed it up in fevered haste, lest she come and find him doing it. But he made himself fastidiously clean in his own person, since that at least was due her. Toward the end of the third day he had an ache in his throat, the kind from which he had dumbly suffered in childhood when his mother used to go away, at rare intervals, to spend the night. Later it came again when she died; but he could not remember anybody else who had the power to summon it.

At five o'clock on the afternoon of the fourth day it suddenly occurred to him that Angelica did not mean to come back at all. That certainty was like a blow in the face from a beloved hand. A great reproach welled up in him. It seemed incredible that any human being should treat another with such cruelty. He was standing by his doorstone when that conclusion struck him, and without a second's delay he got his hat and went striding toward the county road. No definite purpose moved his mind. He could hardly seek out the Hawkins family in pursuit of their alluring guest; but he was drawn magnetically toward even the airs enfolding her. He went straight across lots and over a swampy tract spanned by a little bridge; and there she

was. It was like a miracle. She was sitting on a bank, staring into a pool of black water, her chin on her hand, her elbow on her knee. The pang in his heart saluted her, and then kept beating on in a sickening joy and pain. Fear it held also, the delicious fear that threatens and denies. She was not in the least like the creature who had baited him that other day. Her face had fallen into musing; the red mouth looked sad. The world was bourgeoning about her, but he could see, through that involuntary comprehension of her which was a part of his nature, that her own thoughts had shut her away even from the springtime. He had not paused in his swift progress, and these impressions flashed across his mind like the pageant from a moving train. At one plunging step she looked up, and the quiet of her attitude broke, as a ripple stirs within a stream. She did not utter a sound, but her eyes dilated, and she grew a little paler. Adam stood before her, breathing hard. He took off his hat, and passed his fingers through his moistened hair. He spoke with bitterness:

“You never meant to come!”

Angelica had in that moment been summoning new forces. Her cheeks grew warmer. Her eyes were suddenly alive with something bound to mock at him. “Come where?” she asked.

Instantly he remembered the taunt she had tossed him in farewell, and he could not run the risk of hearing it again. "You said a lot of things to me the other day," he began, shifting his ground.

"Did I?" answered the girl innocently. "Did I talk too much?"

"You said a lot about my going with Melissa!"

"Oh, no! I guess I did n't do that. I don't care anything about your going with Melissa."

"I do!" He was passionately desirous of proving his point. He would protest, explain. She must believe him.

"Oh, do you? I'm real sorry. But it's too late now. She's married to Silas Beane, and he ain't the kind of man to give her up."

Again she was trying to hurt him. He knew that, and looked at her in an acquiescent helplessness. She seemed to be equipped at every point with stings warranted to wound.

"I swear!" he cried. And then some strange impulse made him add, "If you ain't a little devil!"

Her face crinkled up into a bewilderment of fun. If she was a little devil, it was plain she liked to be. She rose and patted her hair into place. A shower of green things had fallen on it from above. They were the drift of the grow-

ing year, and somehow, seeing them so tangled there, the spring choked Adam, and he felt the foolishness of talk. This woman creature had turned him into a mass of quivering sensations. She hurt; she delighted. She was his tormentor, his angel, his heart's darling and his foe. Great burning tears came into his eyes. The impossibility of her understanding at this point — nay, the impossibility of quite understanding himself — kept him silent, and made his bruised heart doubly sore.

“You're real polite,” remarked Angelica. “I guess I'll be going.”

She turned demurely and walked away from him. Adam walked after. He could not call to her as he had the other day, because that somehow seemed to belong to the man he was, and was no longer. He could only endure these queer feelings within, and march along, fitting his stride to her irregular pace. They kept the black cart-path, enlaced above and fringed with ferns below; but when they neared the border of the bushes where the open meadow lay beyond, the girl stopped. Her voice quivered a little, as if she felt some new mastery; but she chose her words from the same mocking vocabulary.

“You better not go any further,” she said.

“Why?” Question and answer seemed to him significant. His voice was trembling.

"Somebody might see you!"

"What 's the harm in that?"

"Ain't you hiding?" she asked innocently.

"If you come out among folks, you won't be a hermit any more. Good-by." She walked a step without looking at him, and Adam overtook her.

"Stop!" he said; and she stopped, though she did murmur to herself:

"The idea!"

"You seem to think I 'm no kind of a man because I said that to Melissa," he began. "Perhaps I ain't. I don't lay claim to much. I want to ask you this: What would you say if a man said it to you?"

The girl turned, in a quick access of feeling. She looked straight into his face, and her eyes were burning. "I should say," she flashed, "that I did n't care whether I was happy or not, — if I liked him."

The landscape seemed to engulf her, she was so swiftly gone. The fringing birches closed as she melted into them, and the air betrayed no echo of her step. Adam did not follow. He turned about as quickly, and went back to his lake. It was without conscious resolution that he strode into the little house; yet there was no shade of indecision in what he did. He opened the cupboard door and took out the scanty relics

left from food which had of late contented him, and piled them in a milk pan. These he carried out of doors and dumped in a hollow where the birds were accustomed to find provender. The water thrown from his pail, he gave one swift glance about him for anything perishable that might not be left behind. There was a blue apron hanging by the door. His eye fell upon it, and he flushed deeply, with rage at his heart. It was the insignia of disgrace, and he seized it in his hands as if to tear it. That instant he remembered that it was his mother's apron, and he rolled it, with a remorseful tenderness, and thrust it on a cupboard shelf. Then he went out, shut the door upon the life he had been living, and walked away without one look behind. Neither had he apprehending eyes for the woods where such months of seclusion had been passed, though now they were full of a great significance. Twilight was coming, and peace enwrapped them like a garment. There were little rustlings and stirrings among green leaves, although the breeze had fallen. The sharp, liquid peep of frogs came from the distance, and a nearer shrilling kept the measure.

Adam had at one time felt that he was as much a part of this elemental harmony as he could be of anything. He had learned unformulated things out of it, out of the look of the

sky and the way the wind blew, out of long, level reaches of land. He had not been happy, because with his strange, tumultuous nature he was not happy anywhere; but here at least there was peace, and he had not meant to be drawn from it into that turmoil tolerated by other men. But now some note had sounded, clear and compelling, out of the myriad noises of the moving world. It was for him. The imagined sound of rushing sap and the greatening of leaves, that universal movement of the growing year, had seemed to him the most significant thing created; but suddenly its potency yielded, as an army parts for a chieftain with banners, and he must answer. He had withdrawn from life. He must return. But this was not thought within him: only a resistless impulse that sent him, with a whirring in his head, straight back to his old home. There, arriving after six o'clock, he opened the house to the renewing air. A man on a passing team gave him a cordial, "H' are ye?" and that night the news spread that Adam had come back.

Melissa Beane, straining the milk in the dairy, heard it from her husband, and her meek face flushed a little.

"Now," said she, in her tepid way, "I hope folks 'll give up talkin'."

Her husband, scented from the barn and ox-

like in good-humor, set down the last milk pail and took a spear of hay from his trousers. He pulled it absorbedly through his fingers, and fell into the process serving him for thought. Silas was a clumsily chiseled figure, all honesty and good-will. "Might as well," said he. "I never knew what all this hurrah-boys was about, anyhow." He lounged away to wash his hands, vaguely soothed by Adam's return to life. A certain disquieting feeling had hung over him that he was in some fashion responsible for this hermit business, and he had an impression that the sooner everybody settled down to their farming the better.

Melissa drew a sigh over the milk. She, too, had been more or less puzzled by the little drama where she had played so dazed a part. Adam had always embarrassed her by his queer ways and panics over nothing; but she had a kindly feeling for him, and she was easier in her mind now that he had assumed the ways of men.

That night Adam went to bed without any supper, and next morning he tramped to Sudleigh, five miles away, took some money out of the bank, and bought a horse and wagon. Then he drove five miles farther, and asked old Betsy Norcross to come and live with him. Betsy was overjoyed. She had known him from a baby, and she was used to all his ways. Nothing

he did· was comprehensible, and nothing was wrong. She hastily packed her little hair trunk and dressed herself in her best. She was a slender creature, with a peaked face, most loving eyes, and a quizzical mouth; and she wore a rusty crape shawl and a bonnet that looked as if it had been built by some eccentric and untidy bird. Now she mounted the wagon in a state as exalted as a bride's. Adam took his place beside her, and they drove away. Betsy was thinking how well Adam had suited her, and he suddenly remembered how perfectly she had suited him.

“Say, Betsy,” he began, as they drove under the quickening elms, “could you stay right along?”

Betsy nodded, brimful of happiness. Because she was silent, Adam looked at her, and she nodded again.

“Would you stay if there was somebody at the head of the house?”

Betsy darted a look at him. “You goin’ to git married?” she asked.

“Would you stay?” repeated Adam.

“Law, bless you, yes!” said Betsy. “I’m real glad. That’ll be complete.”

Betsy cleaned the house, and she and Adam set about the business of life. He bought cows and a yoke of oxen, and, though late, began his

planting. The neighbors dropped in at odd times, and one after another they got used to his return. The women would borrow a cup of yeast from Betsy and ask a careless question, and they found her loquacious on every topic save what concerned Adam. When he met them, men or women, he was so commonplace that his "crazed spell" dropped into abeyance. It seemed like the vanity which is less than nothing in the face of this great creature who walked about his farm doing deeds with an unerring hand.

But Adam hardly knew what he was thinking in those days while he harnessed himself to the needs of earth. He was perhaps not thinking at all. Only he was throbbingly conscious of the spring life about him, like the god Pan set to plow furrows, feeling the earth riot and surge and tremble, and yet plowing, and plowing for a purpose, and not even willing to escape. He said very little to old Betsy; but she set his food before him, and made the house a miracle of neatness. Nobody told her when the bride would come. Nobody had told Adam either, even his own hot purpose; but the old woman and the young man worked together with equal paces and according aim.

All this time Angelica Payne, growing a little paler hour by hour, sat within doors, sewing.

Her aunt wondered at her, because an errant will had always taken her out into the woods and fields at any interval of the day or night. Melissa was worried, and begged her to drive or walk; but Angelica denied them gently, and sat by the window with head bowed over her seam.

“Now what you want to make so many things for?” said her comfortable aunt. “Trimmed to the nines, too! Anybody ’d think ’t was your settin’ out.”

One night, when the planting was all done, and the year was still between promise and its bloom, Adam made himself very clean, and started out along the county road. Old Betsy watched him away. She made fantastic gestures at his back, translating her good-will; then she sat down on the steps and thought of life, — chiefly what a big baby Adam had been, and what a freckled boy. Betsy was happy. She often said she had better luck than most, because she had always lived with her own kind of folks.

Adam walked along, neither fast nor slow; and in the darkening turn of the road where the pines meet and there is the sound of running water, he saw Angelica Payne. She was dressed in white, and her face was very pale. The dusk was thin enough for him to see how black and soft her eyes were, and how still she carried her-

self. She looked like a bride, and a great tenderness calmed his manner toward her. She seemed very little and very young, something miraculously accorded him to protect as well as to adore. She walked up to him, and he took her hands.

“Did you come to meet me?” he asked her gently.

“I don’t know,” said Angelica. “I came.”

Their hearts beat quickly, but they beat with an according measure.

“Should you be ready to marry me by tomorrow?” asked Adam, as if he inquired about the weather.

“Yes,” said Angelica, like one speaking out of a dream.

“Should you rather I’d come and see you at the house a few times first?”

“Oh, no!” said Angelica, “not unless you’d rather.”

“You know what folks’ll say about me! They’ll always remember I was queer, and went off into the woods!”

“Yes,” said Angelica. She was leaning her head against his arm, and thinking his coat smelled of the earth, the spring earth with its imperious promises.

“They may say I could n’t get Melissa after all! Can you put up with that?”

“Not get Melissa?” she repeated absently.
“Poor Melissa!”

They stood silent, the dusk sifting down about them. Angelica, in a flash, recovered her old fire.

“Do you s’pose you ’re going to make me happy?” she asked audaciously.

The silence thrilled like unknown, poignant speech. Adam was meeting his hunger for her, his certainty of having found something which was all his own.

“I don’t believe I care,” said he, “whether I do or not.”

Then he lifted her until her eyes were level with his, and kissed her on the mouth.

A CROWN OF GOLD

УДК 62-50

A CROWN OF GOLD

MIRABEL stood in the kitchen door, on an April day, waiting for her husband to come in from the barn, where he had been unharnessing after his trip to town. It was noon, and her dinner-table, in exquisite order, stood waiting for them. A beef soup of the old-fashioned kind, with onions and dumplings, bubbled on the stove. Mirabel knew he would be content. Pleasure was too strong a word for anything Harrison might feel. He had no commendations to express, more than a sober certainty that she would do things as perfectly as they could be done. He thought exceedingly well of Mirabel, but there was no throb of surprise over any miracle she could offer him from time to time. She stood there on the doorsill, swaying from one foot to the other, in a childish way she had, her face half smiling in a quivering response to the bright spring weather. It made her feel quite strangely, as if she were a little girl, with no tasks, only to laugh and sit in the sun. Yet she liked her work. Only there was a part of her that seemed to be always flying abroad over the boughs, or singing irresponsible things, like the

bluebirds, now in their nesting fervor. From the sky she looked down at her blue calico, and wondered if it were becoming, and then sighed impatiently because there was no way to find out. Mirabel looked quite unlike any of the girls in the neighborhood, or any girl she had ever seen. She had a skin so delicate that the sun seemed to scorch it, and a fine drooping profile. But what puzzled her most was that there were freckles on her nose, and that she had thick, heavy hair, bright bronze-red and curling passionately, and that to her husband none of these things seemed to matter. Sometimes when she went into a room all by herself, and stood in front of the glass in wild self-scrutiny, it seemed to her that she had the prettiest neck and chin a girl ever had, and her hair was so glorious to her that she caught her breath. After such a meeting with herself she would look at Harrison when he came in from the barn, and, flushing all over her delicate face, wonder if he would tell her how pretty she was. But he never told her. Not once in all their courting days had he mentioned how she looked to him; and they had begun their love-making so early that there had been hardly time for other men to speak of it. Sometimes Mirabel wondered if he took her looks for granted. Sometimes, with a sorry laugh, she wondered if he thought she was

really too hideous, with her red hair, for anything but the homely uses of life, and if it was his kindness that made him keep that silence toward her. He was coming now from the barn, a straight, tall-fellow with good brown eyes and a square chin. Mirabel sped in to the stove, and had the steaming dinner dished up before his feet could touch the sill. Harrison had an armful of packages. He laid them down on the kitchen lounge, swept off his hat with one motion of his hand, and with the other began to pump into the basin in the sink. He soused his head and face, and came up dripping. After a scrub at the towel by the door, he turned to Mirabel, waiting beside her plate.

"Well," said he, "you all right?"

That was deep affection. Mirabel knew it, and her eyes glowed. But she answered soberly, because that contented him; and they sat down to eat. When Harrison had dulled the edge of appetite, he sat back and sighed with satisfaction.

"Well," he said, "who do you s'pose I see in the post office waitin' for the mail?"

"I don't know."

"Lucy Miles."

In spite of her the color flew up into Mirabel's telltale skin. She felt it there, and chided herself for it.

“How ’s she look?” she asked, with a careful interest.

“Young’ as ever. Pretty, too.”

“How ’s she look, Harrison?” said Mirabel. “You know I never really see her.”

“No, she was visitin’ here when I used to see so much of her. That ’s what she ’s doin’ now. Goin’ to-morrer, she said.”

“How ’s she look?” Mirabel repeated the question clearly, and turned candid eyes on him. She had no reason for being jealous over Lucy Miles. If Harrison had wanted her, she had many a time assured herself, he might have had her. But Harrison always called her pretty, and hearing that, Mirabel’s heart ached and her lips grew mutinous.

Harrison was speculating over her question.

“Yes,” he said, at length, “I guess Lucy ’s a mighty pretty girl, fur as looks go. She ’s got black eyes an’ black hair an’ a good skin, an’ she ’s straight as an arrer. Yes, I guess there ’s no doubt but what Lucy ’s pretty. Got any pie?”

There was a custard pie, warm from the oven, and Harrison addressed himself to it with a fervor feminine beauty had not challenged in him. Mirabel ate a little of the brown skin on the top of her piece.

“You sick?” inquired Harrison, seeing it unfinished on her plate.

“No,” she answered. “I ain’t very hungry.”

“Give it to me, then.” He ate both pieces, and rose with another sigh. But he came back from the door, on his way out again, hearing how Mirabel’s step lagged, beating back and forth from table to pantry. “I guess you ain’t very rugged to-day,” said Harrison. He put a big hand on her shoulder, and Mirabel brightened. “I’d lay down a spell.”

Her spirits came back in a dancing troop. Her face dimpled delightfully. She bent her head, and dropped a kiss on his sleeve.

“No,” she said, “no. I ain’t tired. I ain’t ever tired, this weather. Only I got thinkin’.”

“Well,” said Harrison kindly, and went on to the barn.

The days when Mirabel got thinking were not very frequent; but she was conscious all the time that she did want Harrison to like her looks. At least, she longed to know whether he did or not. It was partly hunger and partly curiosity, but between them they consumed her.

The next day the fever was still upon her, and when, in the morning, he told her he was going to the river pasture, fencing, to be gone all day, she was glad. She could wash her long red hair, and then coil it up decently, and by the time he came home be ready to forget it and shake herself down into a new calmness. It

was a sweet April morning with the warmth of May. Harrison looked at her almost regretfully as she ran out to give him his little packet of lunch, where he sat in the dingle cart, ready to go.

"I 'most wish you was comin', too," he mused. "Mebbe 't would be kinder damp, though, settin' round outdoors all day long."

"I've got lots to do," said Mirabel gayly. "Good-by. I'll have somethin' for supper 'long about six."

When the blue cart was bobbing away down under the old elm, she ceased to watch it, and ran indoors, because she meant to be so busy, and the outside sweetness tempted her. She hurried through her tasks, with a lick and a promise, as old Aunt Mag used to say, the vagabond aunt who had named her, and then got out the little keeler, and into a bath of warm suds let down her long, thick hair. It was a hard task for one pair of hands, but in half an hour she was sitting out in the yard in the full flood of sunlight, with the hair streaming over her shoulders, drying, and curling as it dried. She rubbed it, and played with it, and tossed it up to let the air blow through it; and when the bronze-red kinks, like growing things all alive, were clustering over her head, she still sat there, holding up the ends of it to let the sunlight in again.

“Good-morning,” said a voice.

Mirabel gave a little cry. She dropped her hair, and parted the golden fleece to look at him. She knew him at once. He was the man who boarded two miles away on the Sudleigh road, and put up his great umbrella in the midst of meadows, and sat there painting all day long. He was a short, stout man, with a grayish, pointed beard, and eyes set very far under straggly brows. He carried the umbrella, closed, and other things she did not understand.

“Good-morning,” said he again. “I want to paint your hair.”

Mirabel gathered it about her, this time like a mantle. She said nothing.

He was opening a camp-stool, and, without looking at her, he kept on talking.

“I guess you can give me a sitting, can’t you? Give me all the time you’ve got to-day. I’m going away to-morrow. Wish I could stay longer, but I sail Saturday. I did n’t know there was such hair within a hundred miles.”

She half rose from her seat. He seemed kind, and also irresistible, but she felt like flying into the house, and doing up her hair tight and firm, and not looking at it all day long.

“Come! come!” said he. “I can’t waste a minute. Infernal fools, not to tell me there was

hair like that" — He stopped his grumbling, and smiled at her.

At once Mirabel sat down in her chair, and timidly returned the smile.

"Why," said he, "you must n't be afraid. You would n't be afraid to have your photograph taken, now would you?"

"No," said Mirabel, almost inaudibly.

"Well, then! I only want to make a picture of your hair. Sit still, like a good girl, and let me do it." He had unstrapped other things. He was seated before her. She could not flee. But her face quivered a little. She felt as if she were going to cry. He had been dabbing colors on his palette, and now he leaned back and looked at her, his head on one side. She felt her chin trembling.

"That's right," he said. "Part it a little more away from your face. That's good. I want you to seem to be looking through it. There, that's exactly right." Then he began to work.

Mirabel's chin shook more and more, but he either did not see it or he did not seem to mind. Suddenly he began talking. It might have been to himself, though it sounded partly as if he were reading from a book.

"Once upon a time there was a little girl, and she had red hair. Why!" — he glanced at her

with a queer surprise in his lifted eyebrows, — “it was just like yours. Is n’t that odd? Well, she went to school with other girls, and none of them had red hair. None of the boys had, except one, and his was a real carrotty red, and he was all freckles. On his hands, too.”

“Lester Pritchard!” called Mirabel. “How’d you know?” Her voice surprised her, it was so sharp and loud.

“There’s always one like that,” he said. “Well, the girl kept on growing and growing and growing, till she could n’t grow any longer, because she was grown up. And her hair kept growing and growing and growing, too, and it could always grow longer if it wanted to; but when it got the right length it stopped. But it was always red hair.”

Mirabel was watching him keenly from her glistening covert.

“And,” he said abruptly, “red hair’s the prettiest hair there is. So that’s all there is to that story. What’s your name?”

She could answer now, though she would rather have stopped to think over the conclusion of the story.

“Mirabel May,” she said. “My husband’s name is Harrison May.”

“Mirabel May! Who gave you such a pretty name?”

Mirabel jumped in her chair, and her eyes gleamed out at him. She began to talk tumultuously. The barriers were down.

“Do you think it ’s a pretty name? My aunt gave it to me. She used to read story papers, an’ lay ’round outdoors, mother said, an’ she died as poor as a rat. Mother said they all said she would if she carried on so, but nothin’ would stop her. I thought maybe ’t was a funny name. I thought maybe my hair was funny, too.” She ceased, aghast at her own boldness, and gathered her hair again under her chin. The stranger was smiling at her kindly, and pausing with his brush in air.

“Sit still,” he said, as if he were gentling a horse. “I ’ll tell you another story. This is the story of the picture they made out of the red hair. Once upon a time there was a grown-up girl that had red hair. She looked just like you. Maybe it was you. One day an old man came limping along to her gate. He looked just like me. Maybe he was me. ‘Hullo!’ says he to himself. ‘Here ’s a girl with red hair.’ So he sat down and painted all day long, and the girl sat still, very still — don’t wiggle ’round so. You ’ll hear the story if it ’s ever finished, and I guess it will be. — And he painted all he could that day, and took the picture away with him, and painted some more as he remembered it,

and he called the picture 'A Study in Red.' And everybody came to see it, and they all said 'Oh, my!' And all over the city they said 'Oh, my!' for two weeks by the clock, till the painter had to pack up his umbrella and his canvas and his camp-stool and run away, because he was so deafened by hearing them say 'Oh, my!' "

Mirabel's cheeks were blooming rose with the wonder of the hour. She forgot Harrison. She forgot her bread rising. She forgot everything that had once belonged to her; so that now when the cat came and rubbed against her skirt, purring and setting a waving tail in air, she looked down as if it were an alien cat. It seemed as if this April day had been the one she had waited for, and the stranger was an old friend come back from somewhere to talk things over. She began to talk herself, but she could think of only two things to say, though she had said them once already.

"I thought maybe my name was funny."

"Mirabel May," he repeated. "No! no! That is n't funny. It's nice. Mistress Mirabel May!"

"I thought maybe my hair was homely, too."

He smiled at her, and shook his head over his painting.

"No! no!" he said. "No! no! You sit still,

and maybe I 'll tell you another story about that. Do you mind the sun on your head?"

"No, oh, no," said Mirabel, in a vague happiness. "I like it."

There were soft, flying clouds in the sky. They dappled the grass with shade. The birds were very busy that morning, singing and weaving. The road was quite deserted. Nobody went to market, and nobody came to spend the day. More and more it seemed to Mirabel that she and the stranger were in a new place, where she had never set foot before, and where she liked to be.

At noon he laid down his brush. He knew it was twelve o'clock by his hunger, and she knew it by the shadows on the grass.

"Well!" he said, in a tone of satisfaction.

"I 'll run in an' cook some eggs," said Mirabel. "Do you like milk?"

He did. His smile told her. At the door she paused and looked back at him timidly. "Won't you come in," she asked, "and rest?"

"In a minute," said the stranger; and while she cooked the eggs he walked about and stretched himself, smoking a short black pipe. When the meal was set out, she called him. She had put up her hair, and it crowned her heavily, so that she carried her small head with what looked like pride, to balance it. She had spread

her table in the sitting-room, with the best pink lustre and the big cut-glass preserve dish Aunt Mag had bought once with money she had taken to town to get shoes. The stranger was very hungry, and he liked everything; but Mirabel ate only a little bread and milk, perhaps because she felt so solemn. After it was over and he had gone out to smoke another pipe, she left her dishes standing, and hastily let down her hair. Like a modest handmaid, she appeared before him in the yard.

“You want me to sit down again?” she asked, in a fervent faithfulness.

He nodded, and they took their places, and that afternoon he worked in silence. When the sun was low he looked up at her with a different smile, as if they had both been in the picture together, and now they had come out of it.

“There, child,” he said, “that ’ll do. We’ve done all we can.”

“Have you finished it?” asked Mirabel. Her eyes were large and seeking. She was very pale. At last she began to feel how stiff she was.

“Come and look at it,” said the stranger.

She went timidly round to his side and looked. She gazed at it a long time, and then she took up a strand of her hair and studied that.

“You think it’s pretty?” she asked him.

He answered gravely.

"It's very pretty, Mirabel. We've done a good day's work."

"You satisfied?" She interrogated him like a child.

He nodded, again gravely.

"Yes, I'm satisfied. Now I must pack up my traps."

While he did it with deft hands, she stood absently watching him. She still looked pale, and her eyes were tired. Glancing at her, he hesitated. His hand sought his pocket.

"I want" — he began. "I know you'll let me give you a little remembrance to" —

"No! no!" she cried. Her voice was sharp with protest. "No, I could n't."

"You would n't" — he lifted a little charm on his watch chain and looked at it.

"No, no," said Mirabel again. She did not know how to tell him that he had given her already everything he had to give.

"Well." He considered a moment. Then he smiled at her as he had when he told the stories. "I know what I'll do," he said comfortably. "I've got a little picture of the Long Meadows down below here, — with the willows by the edge. You'd like that. Yes, I know you would. I'll send it to you to-morrow when I go. And thank you, Mirabel. Thank you." He took off his hat and stretched out his hand.

She laid hers in it, and smiled gratefully at him. Then he picked up all his traps, and she walked with him to the gate, and stood there watching him as he went away. Once he turned and smiled at her.

“Good-by!” she called. “Good-by!”

When Harrison came home from the river pasture, the supper-table was ready in the sitting-room, and there were ham and eggs. Mirabel, her hair done tidily and her face a little pale but very happy, was ready to pour his tea and listen to his story of the day. It was not until he had finished that he looked about him and realized the festival aspect of the best china and the table spread in the “company room.”

“What makes ye eat in here?” he asked, not complainingly, but with an acquiescent interest.

Mirabel did not answer directly. She pushed back her plate, and leaned her white arms on the table.

“Harrison,” said she, “there was somebody here to-day. He wanted to make a picture of my hair. He said ’t was no worse than sittin’ for a photograph.”

“Sho!” said Harrison. “Where is it?”

“The picture? He took it away with him.”

“Was it that feller that ’s be’n paintin’ down in the medder?”

“Yes.”

“How was it? Anything like?”

A blush burned her cheek.

“I don’t know,” she said humbly. “I don’t know’s we can tell how we look ourselves.”

Harrison chuckled.

“Some on us can,” he rejoined. “There’s Lucy Miles. She’s peekin’ all over herself every minute, jes’ like a rooster afore he crows. Jote Freeman spoke on ’t last town-meetin’ day. We passed her when we were drivin’ along to the schoolhouse. ‘Look there,’ says he. ‘See her crook her neck an’ ile her feathers. Now, there’s your woman, Harrison,’ says he; ‘a handsomer woman never stepped, an’ she don’t know it no more’n the dead.’”

Mirabel was leaning forward over her plate. The red had come into her cheeks, and her eyes were shining.

“Who did he mean, Harrison?” she trembled. “Who’d he mean?”

Harrison gazed at her in slow wonder.

“Why, I told ye,” he returned.

“Was it me, Harrison?”

“Why, yes. Who’d ye think it was?”

“What did you say to him, Harrison?” she breathed. “You tell me what you said.”

“Why, I don’t rightly remember what I did say. Come to think of it, yes I do, too. ‘That’s

the way with them real high-steppers,' says I. 'They don't know there's any odds between them an' anybody else!' Seems queer." He was lighting his pipe on the way to the kitchen, and he paused to laugh a little.

"What seems queer?" she reminded him, still breathlessly.

"The way things go. When I fust begun to shine up to you, mother she warned me. 'Harrison,' says she, 'she's a handsome creatur'. You dunno' how she'll turn out.' 'Yes,' says I, 'she's the handsomest creatur' in this county, but she don't care no more about it'n I do.' She lived to see I was right, too. Where's the strainer pail?"

Mirabel flew out of her chair, and brought the pail to him. He took it, and she clung to his arm a minute, laughing and crying together.

"O Harrison," she said, "ain't it wonderful?"

He stayed a moment, to stroke her hair with his clumsy hand.

"There," he said tenderly, "I guess you've done too much. You're all beat out."



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