

Blinded by Love

A Romance of Life

BY

F. W. WICKER

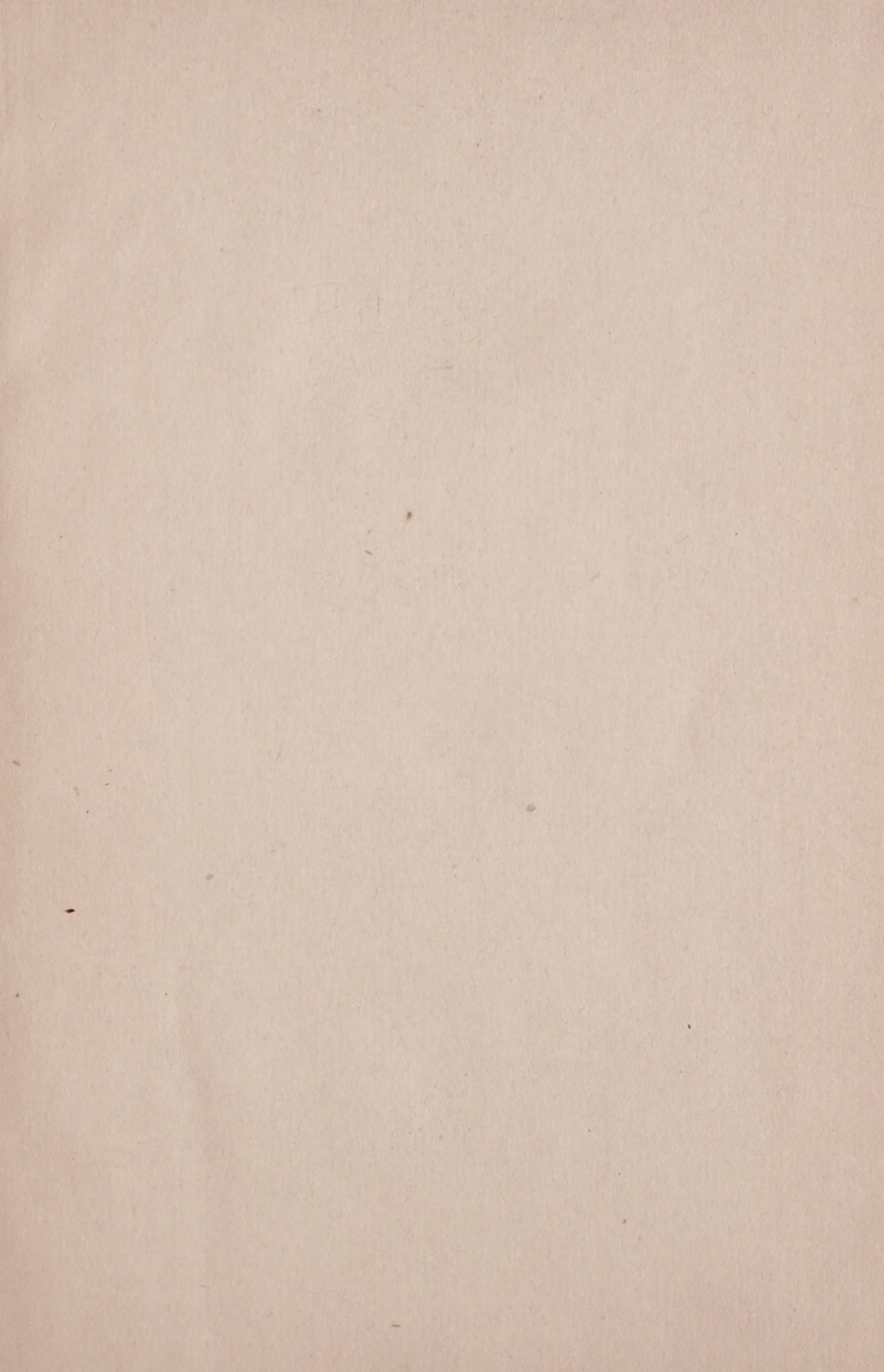


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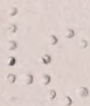


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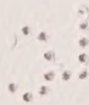


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BLINDED BY LOVE

A ROMANCE OF LIFE

ONE day in October the heavens were clouded all day long as if it were going to rain, but toward noon the clouds disappeared slowly one by one and the sun shone again. Through the wild grape vines, which were shedding their leaves, came a bright pathway of light and warmth on the veranda of Arthur Mackwell, minister in the village of Florenceville. Frank Mackwell carefully pushed his chair in the glow of light.

His face was suddenly earnest as if the harmless ambiguity through the whole year's time found observation, yet one scarcely knew him. For several long minutes he looked with gloomy eyes staring straight forward as if he saw something horrible, instead of the glimmering shadows of the last grape leaves that were shaking themselves over the glass roof in the light wind.

Then sighing deeply he said: "Oh, if Alma were only here! This moment of loneliness would then disappear. I can't go to work, and the Doctor forbids me to smoke. Romance? Alas, a person

has enough of his own romance. Who endures much more here than an odd fellow? I will have it better; after a few more days my fever will leave me. Therefore why shouldn't I get well again? I will be well," he called out in a raging voice, but at the same time it sounded heart-rending as from fright and weakness. At these words the door which led to the meadows was suddenly opened.

"What is the trouble, Frank, aren't you feeling well?" asked Arthur Mackwell in a frightened voice. "I heard you calling, therefore I came at once."

The young man laughed saying, "I feel good, Father, I was just talking to myself."

"So, so, I see; I am glad that it wasn't anything serious," answered Minister Mackwell while he was stepping out of his shoes and nearing Frank at this moment.

Frank looked around, then said in a low tone, "Truly it is a shame the way our house looks; the floor is never swept, the windows are never washed, and no matter what a person takes hold of, it is filled with dust."

Mackwell just nodded his head!

"Yes, and look at the big web hanging over there in the corner; it has been there for the last eight days," said Frank.

"It may be wrong to criticize the work of our Lord, but I can't help it; I ask you why you speak of such disorder, my son?" said Mackwell in a rather sad tone.

"However once more, you are the boss of the house and you are also well. If I only were well, I would quickly manage them all."

"You are entirely correct, my boy. Entirely correct, but what shall I do? Gertrude is a prickly off-shoot and if I don't want to hear any back talk I just have to keep my mouth shut. And furthermore if I had to recall, what on earth would I do? No girl will come to work here, because it is too lonely out here," said Mackwell in a pitiful tone.

"You ought to engage a younger coachman, Father, because Sam is too old and also too slow with his work," said Frank looking at his father.

"Yes, it is true, my son," answered Mackwell, "but who will come here and work for me? No young man will come because there is no way that he could enjoy himself."

Frank looked at his father half in amusement. His face, in spite of his age of sixty-five, looked as the face of a forsaken child. Half frightened, Frank shrugged his shoulders saying, "Father, you must do away with your old shirt and also put on a stand-up collar so you will look neat and clean when Alma comes."

Mackwell nodded his head saying, "I know it, my son, but I have taken off one already this week and you know that Gertrude always grumbles when she has too many clothes in the wash."

"Let her grumble. She does that often," an-

swered Frank. "It is hard to suffer at present, but nevertheless we do not have to tell Alma what to do. It is indeed enough when she stays with us," Mackwell shook his head slowly.

This is the way it goes; a person always thinks just as if it happened yesterday; I held you a small, screaming little silly on my knees and did everything I could for you when you were in need and before one realizes it such a young jackanapes comes forth and tells his old gray-haired father: 'you must do this, and leave that alone, and that simply won't do.' "

"Don't be angry, dear father," answered Frank.

"I am not angry; I just wished to say what it means when a person grows old or commences to look compassionate, as if he had nothing more to say or do. And still every one has his little bit of knowledge. Never mind now, my son. We didn't do anything better to our parents—we did the same, and you will commence to realize it, my son."

He stopped for a few minutes and grabbed hold of his son's wrist to feel his pulse.

"Normal, for the last three days," said Frank.

"It is really time. Now I can work again. I must attend examination Easter, for every term failed means unavoidable delay in the attainment of every appointment." His breath came fast, as always as soon as he commenced to get excited.

Mackwell nodded his head. "Just as the Lord desires, my son."

Frank pulled his hand away from his father in great excitement and threw himself back.

“Why shouldn’t the Lord permit it? The thing wasn’t situated in that way anyway. The judgment in this pitfall was fulfilled long ago even if it were not made public.” It was either to stay with the sickness now and then grow well and perhaps attend examination; or scorn the doctor and his creosote; yet once more he must trouble himself and go behind the church. Oh, the fright of this uncertainty whether one will have a future or not!

“Do you really think that Alma will like to stay with us? It is so lonesome here, and she is used to a different life,” said Mackwell.

Frank smiled in a proud and happy manner. “Do not worry about that, Father, Alma has the offer, and she can please herself in whatever way she wishes. When did Sam drive to the station?”

“At twelve o’clock,” answered Mackwell.

“One half hour ago, one hour’s rest for the old gray team, one half hour to come back,” counted Frank out loud. “Hurrah! She will be here at four o’clock.”

“My son, are you really so happy over her coming?”

“Furious.” The whole passionate young raging love lies in the call. And now: “Take a look at me, Father, am I dressed good enough for Alma? What do you say about my tie—is it clean enough?” Frank asked.

“Very neat, very good, my son,” bragged Mackwell. His own clothes were just like Frank’s, cut out by a tailor with an ax in the little village of Whitefield, but he wore them satisfied.

He did not care to dress up-to-date, as he looked at his son’s gray suit his heart was drawn together grievous. Turning around he walked silently to the door, while Frank stretched himself out on his stool again. His desire was to quiet down his impatience and to keep himself quiet in order to be happy when Alma came.

Everything was quiet just as if it were midnight. The sound of old Mage, the watch dog, snapping his teeth at the flies, was heard very plainly.

The old clock in the house seemed to be saying, “She is coming. She is coming.” All his thoughts and mind seemed to be of Alma, whom he loved dearly.

“When, oh, when, will the hour come when she will come to me, and I can greet her?” Mage commenced to bark loud and run up and back.

All at once Frank heard the sound of a wagon driving on the sand road, saying to himself, “Truly it must be Sam driving the old gray team, and Alma is in the wagon.” The respectable old gray team appeared near the hedge fence and old Sam, the coachman, drove in the gate.

“There, this is our young sir,—Madam.”

The young dame did not answer, but out of her dark blue eyes the breathless strain spoke just the

same as that of a person that awaits a decision. And before the wagon was brought to a stand-still, with an enforced jerk Alma tore the hard old stiff knee leather from the wagon.

“Frank.”

The voice rang like crushed sobbing, in the happiness of seeing one another again, so much earnestness mingled that no undefiled happiness could exist, and still they felt that in this direct silence was the confession of uneasiness that each other wished to hide.

While pressing her tight to his bosom he discovered that she shivered as if troubled. That touched his heart deeply, still he was weak and his eyes were soon filled with tears.

“Dearest, sweetheart.”

He bent her head back and kissed her with thirsty desire. “That you are here and that I can hold your hand,” said Frank slowly. “I have longed for you irrationally; this is more than I ever could explain to you in my letters.”

“And I? What should I say? I have been counting the days. It was frightful. I really don’t know how I ever lived those days past.”

He stroked her head lovingly. “Poor child, and father’s letters were insufficient. He never was a good hand at writing.”

“I don’t know,” answered Alma. “I was always glad to receive a letter, especially when I was always in anxiety and, therefore, my desire always

was to receive news from you every hour. Did you suffer great pain, Frank?" asked Alma in a pitiful tone.

"Well, the everlasting pleurisy, caused misery enough, but with all my longing I am glad that you did not see me in the condition I was in. Truly, entirely a clayworm."

"How do you feel now, anyway?" Her eyes looked straight at his face to inquire imploring about hope.

"Oh, much better. Why shouldn't I get well when you nurse me, my dear!" The happy sense of feeling at this hour left so suddenly that Frank didn't even realize it. Then all of a sudden an attack came again; he turned his head to one side and coughed so hard just as if his chest were tearing apart. But when Frank saw Alma's agitated face he braced himself up with all his strength in order not to show her his weakness.

"Don't worry, Alma," said Frank in a soft tone, trying to comfort her, "it isn't anything serious. A thing of that sort always comes back again, and it all belongs to my sickness. But while I will be under your care I will soon get rid of everything and be well and strong again."

Alma pressed her head close to his bosom then saying in a down-hearted tone, "Oh, Frank, if I only knew what to do for you to help you get well. I would do most anything just to have you stay with me."

He bent his head over her and pressed his lips on her wavy hair saying, "Love me, dearest, that is the best medicine on earth."

Minister Mackwell sat in his study reading. The floor was carpeted, lace curtains hung at the windows and an old book case stood in the corner full of old books and a few others, also different small pamphlets. He kept all of these since the time when he always studied and gave a sermon every Sunday morning at Whitefield. The only trouble was, that no one took care of his room, he himself was too old and Gertrude didn't have enough interest to clean the room, and, therefore, everything was filled with dust; the old writing table stood in a corner, a little prayer book, a song book and also an old worn-out Bible were on the table.

Mackwell put on a stand-up collar, just to please Frank, but it stuck him so hard that his intention was to take it off, but he knew that if Frank saw him without the collar he would be a little argry; it seemed to him just as if something strange was going to occur, because he had to clean and dress himself up; when he thought of Alma he became nervous and said to himself, "I wish I had left Florenceville for several days and left the little farm house to the betrothed couple. Oh, God; and here they are both," said Mackwell, astonished, when he saw Alma coming into his study leading Frank.

"Here, Father, this is my Alma, or shall I say your Alma also?" said Frank. Mackwell fought

very hard with embarrassment. He did not see any young dames around his place or at the parishioners so young and pretty as Alma was. He bowed awkwardly without putting his long pipe away.

"I am very thankful that I was allowed to come and nurse Frank, dear Father," said Alma when she took hold of Mackwell's hand.

Mackwell gazed at Alma's clear blue eyes; he was happy at last that a prospective daughter-in-law had entered the house; his heart was filled with joy. Thank God that she was none of those gossiping young dames.

"God bless you, my child, and may your blessings continue for ever." Just the same as ever; whenever he became excited the first thing in his thoughts was always to utter a short blessing.

His words gave her the sense of home feeling. Grabbing his hand quickly she kissed it. How sympathetic the good old face looked, and how well she understood his ways.

Here was one of the beings that was always standing ready and waiting for some one to come that would grant him something of love and care. Oh, therefore, her desire was not to let it be a failure.

The room was filled with Minister Mackwell's tobacco smoke from the pipe that he was smoking; this smoke fell on Frank's lungs and he commenced to cough hard again, and, therefore, they all entered the dining-room.

A genuine young lady in clog, and dressed in a

plain clean dress entered the room bringing in the coffee.

She criticized Alma worse than a reviewer with a crooked look. "If the coffee isn't steamed enough I can't help it. I had to roast it and then cook it in one half hour," said Gertrude in a rather rough voice.

"Oh, no, Gertrude, you aren't to blame," answered Mackwell, "we have neglected ourselves through chattering, but couldn't you take a different coffee pot instead of this old tin one?"

"You didn't leave me no order—how did I know?" answered Gertrude rather angrily. Now the relation between Alma and Gertrude, the housekeeper, commenced, or rather mysterious jealousy commenced.

In a short time Alma understood through friendly and good meeting in advance the peculiarity of the old girl, and tried to break her ill humor.

When the first Sunday came, Minister Mackwell asked Alma to attend services and, therefore, Alma did not refuse her old kind father-in-law but attended church; the impression that she received in the small church, and the old-fashioned ceremonies she heard seemed almost to be referring to her. Alma felt just as if to drop down on her knees and pray to God in earnest for strength and comfort, but being a stranger there she felt embarrassed to kneel down and pray out loud among the other strangers.

With a sort of wonder she watched her father-in-law, who did not see all the unlovely manifestation around him.

His surroundings gave the sensation of the nearing of the Lord. Several hymns were sung by the few members that gathered in the church, then after the sermon, just as Minister Mackwell and Alma were leaving the church, Mr. Orville Godwin, who is the town mayor in the little village of Florenceville, and his wife stopped Minister Mackwell and Alma both inquiring about Frank, how he was getting along. Orville Godwin and his wife were glad to become acquainted with Alma; Godwin had a happy expression and talked friendly to Alma, asking her where her home town was, while Mrs. Godwin stood glancing at Alma with a sullen expression and did not care to talk to her and, therefore, paid as little attention to her as possible.

She seemed to Mrs. Godwin a lovely type of well-meaning youth, but the consciousness seemed as a fulfilled strong human being.

“She is really in mourning but still wears a checkered tie, but why should such a young dame wear black?”

“Not so loud, my son,” said Minister Mackwell.

“Why should I be quiet, Father? I didn’t confirm Orville Godwin as you did and I do not have a fatherly feeling for him; I could procure all that is his.”

“Very well, my son; but everybody must turn out

just as the Lord created him. I don't like to hear such opinions as that," said Mackwell, while getting up from his chair, then, going toward Frank, he said, "I must go to Whitefield to attend a funeral."

"Put a muffler around your neck," said Gertrude to Mackwell in a loud tone, "or else you will get the catarrh and then sore throat and then I will have to put cold applications to your throat and also cook tea for you, and I don't care to do it because I have enough work to do with Frank."

With the beginning of the week Alma helped Gertrude with all her work in the house and to prepare the meals from now on; she was very kind indeed.

Gertrude thought to herself, what do I care for help? I always did the work alone and now I should be bossed by a pair of strong and smart eyes that are of a disagreeable kind; what good will it do? Dirt and disorder will still be in the house. Gertrude never did let a person boss her, or even say anything to her; she was always her own boss. Her furious temper boiled up; she proceeded on the farm and around the house just the same as a storm cloud.

After a few days Mackwell noticed Alma's activity; the house was cleaned in all the corners; the foul odor soon left the rooms and a fresh odor filled them; the dust disappeared and also the cobwebs; order and clean livers entered the house as far as possible under the circumstances.

The beautiful summer weather had disappeared long ago; big storms came up one after another and shook off the rest of the leaves from the grapevine at the veranda. And when at last the storms came to an end the garden and graveyard were wintry bare, the fog crept up from the snow and placed itself around Mackwell's home like a thick cloak.

A person almost forgot that there was a world and also human beings. Alma often thought of it when she was alone in her room; it was rather lonesome for her to be away from town and she really didn't have to undertake the hardship, but her desire was to be with her Frank, so she could see him whenever she longed to; they were engaged and this was made known. Many evenings she sat by the window and thought to herself, "Is Frank ever going to be well? Will I ever be his wife?" But she really didn't have any hope; these questions were hard to answer; she saw that he wasn't as well as he tried to make her believe.

Would she ever marry Frank, her lover whom she dearly loved, and carry the Mackwell name?—her thoughts always seemed to tell her that she was never going to marry him.

Every morning when Alma came down stairs from her room the bright sun looked in through all of the windows; but what did she care; she was by Frank, the only happiness that she had in the wide world. She soon forgot the loneliness, it did not bother her in the least.

Mackwell never had any visitors to come to visit him; the only visitors that he had were Orville Godwin and an old colleague.

Truly why did she need strange people? She had Frank, the plenitude of life; it was joy for her to nurse her lover. She found disorder wherever it was; also in the room of Mackwell's wife; that room was locked and never opened from the day when she was laid to rest; but since Alma came Mackwell unlocked the room, then Alma went to work, swept the room, dusted, and then put scarfs on the dresser, small table and put all other things nicely in order.

Yes, indeed, it will prove to be a neater room for Frank than the dining-room.

When Mackwell entered the room and found things all straightened out and put in order, also the room was aired out, the picture of his wife which hung on the wall was neatly decorated with fresh magolia wreaths.

The strange thing is that he had not the feeling ready that he was expecting, but the practices from twenty years ago were still not rooted out. He moved out of his study and left the betrothed couple to themselves. Many an hour have both spent sitting together in the cozy room; Frank sat or was lying down in his chair while Alma sat beside him, reading a newspaper or some story, and whenever Frank was tired of listening to her read she would sew and do fancy work.

Frank always wished Alma to sit beside him, so

he could see her, and also talk a few words to her; if she hadn't done what he wished her to do he would become down-hearted.

Alma found such joy that she forgot about all her trouble and fright. She could tell by Frank's expression that he also was very happy. Could there be anything better in the world for them in their life? She often sat and looked at him, longing for him to be well again, and be up and about.

It seemed to him in the meantime as though he had a terrible burden to carry; he wished that his end would come to-day rather than to lie sick for several more weeks. When he looked at her, he could read in her expression that she suffered; she was sweet and loving just as a house-wife; it seemed to him as if the raving impatience of his twenty-six years would tear his heart to pieces.

"Oh, God, will she ever be mine? Oh, then, when? When? With increased strength he desired to work once more that he could marry her at once, but instead he had to lie—lie—sick and not able to do a thing; no, not even to get up.

Was it the result of a cold or only the natural development that came from the sickness? Right after New Year's Frank commenced to have fever.

Alma's heart stood still when she saw the condition Frank was in; had the time really come that he had to leave her for good? Her hopes still were that perhaps he would get better, but now she saw clearly that it was all in vain. With a shivering

hand she sat at the desk trying to write a few lines to Dr. Lee.

Dr. Lee didn't come to his patients very often—only when they were very sick, because it really was too far from town and of course his fee would be several dollars for one trip.

When Dr. Lee received Alma's letter he knew that Frank needed care, so he ordered his coachman to get the team ready at once so he could go to Florenceville. He had always taken care of Frank since an infant, and, therefore, he still wished to take care of him. When Dr. Lee arrived at Florenceville and went to see Frank, after examining him he said: "You still have a little fever, Frank, but don't worry, you'll be well soon again; try and be quiet as much as possible."

Frank's eyes and hands were burning with fever; he was restless and nervous. In irritated tone he said that he wished the eternal sickness would pass away once more, the whole medical science was in vain now; he wished to go to a warm climate, perhaps he would get well. He never thought of getting well in Florenceville.

Dr. Lee listened very carefully to Frank's talk; he really wasn't against Frank's intention to go away, but his desire was for him to stay just where he was in bed, and be very quiet, or else he would never get well; taking hold of Frank's hand he said, "Let this be forgotten; be convinced and have no more longing to leave Florenceville."

After a consultation Alma stepped into the other room; she heard the last words and she became pale.

Alma whispered to herself, "Dr. Lee has no hope for Frank's recovery."

After bidding Frank good-by the Dr. ordered his coach immediately, and then left. He was kind and had a sympathetic heart; his thoughts were of the poor bride-to-be that she would never marry Frank and, therefore, it seemed painful to him. But Alma did not go to the Dr. and even ask about Frank, it really wasn't necessary; she knew that he would last only a couple of more weeks; she went to her room and wept bitterly, thinking, "now I must give him up," and her soul hung on one thread, whose love was always as a costly present. Oh, if she could only die with him, or in his place.

When she thought of the long years that she would have to stay alone and carry life's heavy burdens, she almost cried aloud.

In the deep darkness of her soul a thought ran through her mind, whenever a person places something up, he must help to carry it. Give me patience in time of suffering.

She repeated these words over and over again; in her thoughts something came ready formulated to her help. All of a sudden she heard the sound of a wagon by the side of the house; she walked to the window and saw Dr. Lee driving off. She washed her eyes so that Frank could not tell that

she cried, and then with an iron courage born of love bestowed, she walked to the mirror and forced a smile upon her lips; she then walked into the room where Frank lay in his chair.

The strain that he saw on her face caused a question, but she laughed while standing by his side.

“Dearest.”

“What is it? What did Dr. Lee say?” asked Frank.

“I didn’t talk to him any more after that,” answered Alma.

Frank looked at Alma with an angry look, asking, “Where were you then so long?”

“Upstairs,” came the answer slowly, “but please don’t ask me anything more, you know what he said, ‘Rest.’”

“Entire rest—downright nonsense,” he raged for the first time since Alma knew him.

“Just to lie down here always, and think, think; who can stand it?” He threw himself back in his pillow.

“I feel so hot and so strange.” He never complained to her before, but he commenced saying, “Alma, do you think my end is near? I don’t believe I ever felt this way before.”

The unexpected question took all her courage; she dropped on her knees beside his chair. Putting her head on his cover she bit hard into it, in order not to cry out loud.

He saw what he had brought forth; when he looked

at her his eyes were filled with tears; he realized that he had caused her great pain. "My darling," he called aloud, stroking her hair. She raised up her head and looked into his face.

What the poor thing went through no one knows, and also what great pains she suffered in the few weeks she was with him; it certainly was a burden for her. He crushed the fright that was around his life, that which tried to take his courage.

Frank stroked her hair slowly and lovingly, then talking to her with his hot but soft voice, until she was comforted and finally rose to her feet.

"It happened once," said Alma, "but it will never happen again. I will try and help you in every way and also help you carry your burden, let it come however it may." And as the dark and sad weeks were passing by slowly, Alma kept her word and did all that she could for him.

Later she wondered how she ever came to live those sad and weary weeks through crushed from pain and still capable and overstrained to conceal from him. She took care of the household during the day, and at night she nursed the sick; the only sleep she got when nature insisted, and she was about exhausted and almost without strength; this wasn't for the first time; she watched over him every hour because he still belonged to her. "Oh, the years will be long without him," thought Alma to herself; she knew that death was at the door, but perhaps her indefatigable nursing could delay his entry yet for a

short time just as one would implore a cruel destroyer. To have patience, a little patience further more.

Frank did not suffer very much, however; he was scarcely clear over it himself how his strength checked itself. Absorbed in fever his youth shuddered for death with inexpressible horror. Alone now, sick and helpless as he was, all he could do was to wait for further results. Therefore one could be happy; every small matter seemed worthy-full and important at this moment.

But the greatest grief is situated, nevertheless, besides some one else. To die and leave everything behind, even his bride to be, whom he loved. Oh, how his whole soul beamed when he thought of everything.

One day in February the weather was clear, but at the same time it was cold. Alma sat beside Frank's bed. A sun ray began to build its golden reflexion in her pretty brown hair; the dark blue dress that she wore seemed as though it was made just to fit her beautiful form. A sweet suffering lay around her mouth; her eyes glittered from tears. Frank looked at her with a longing, thinking, "She will never be mine. No, never." Then suddenly a thought ran through his mind, just as the claws of a beast of prey, "That some day she will belong to some one else," after he was dead and gone. Years will pass indeed, I know that she is true and it will also be hard for her to forget, but still who knows?

“Some one else will hold her in his arms, and kiss her soft lips, and I will be dead and gone,” then sighing deeply he said, “Oh, God in heaven.” All of a sudden his face became red jealously which caused him a terrible pain and he groaned aloud.

Alma quickly jumped to his side, frightened half to death, saying, “Frank, what is the trouble?”

He motioned with his hand and said in a quiet tone, “Oh, nothing, nothing; I just felt a little queer.”

Perhaps he could tell her something about what he thought, but the jealousy raged in him further. When Alma bent down to him, he threw both arms around her neck, as if he were wild.

“She still is mine,” yet his words meant the whole world to her. His anxious wish came before him, to plead her somehow to fulfill his wish and to hide all views from her until her beauty that had gladdened him could unchain no more desire.

“Promise me,” he pleaded in a rough tone, “that when I die you will never leave Florenceville—never? Promise me.”

Alma saw his excitement in his eyes very plain; these words passed through her mind quickly, that she still could stay just as long as his father lived, but why should she worry a sick person?

Nothing of that sort came up. She felt that after Frank’s parting there would be entire indifference where she had passed her sunless life. She

pressed her face tight to his shoulder in order to hide the drawn sobbing from his sight.

“Indeed, dear, I will stay here,” answered Alma in a half-smothered voice.

The strain on his face relaxed, he grabbed after her hand and stroked and stroked it.

“It is very nice of you. It makes me feel happy when I think of your dear hands that will care of my grave. I wouldn’t like to be forsaken and lie there alone and forgotten as poor Henry Riggs. You know the cross that stands on his grave with the silly words printed? ‘A Hopeful Lad.’ I was one of them before; it happened just as I told you. The first day. A cross also for me,” he uttered sadly, then after a short stop he commenced to talk again, “It will also be a great favor for father if you stay here; he is a person that needs care and nursing. And if Lester comes will you tell him about me and make the parental roof cheerful? Tell him all you know about me—the dear old boy, it will be a shock for him; he certainly will miss me when he finds that I am gone. We both kept ourselves so close together, it really is too bad that you don’t know him, and as far as I can remember we didn’t talk to you very much about him. But at least I can repeat that to you again. Remind me of it to-morrow and I will tell you a little about him so when he comes you will know him.”

But in the night death came to Frank Mackwell so still and quiet that not a sound was even heard.

As if sleeping Frank lay in bed, with the same expression that he had for the last few weeks when he tried to be ready with his life and death secrets. He was found this way by Alma as she entered his room early the next morning with a cup of hot milk for him.

Alma cried saying, "Oh, that he died so peaceful without looking at me once more—even without a hard handshake. Oh, if he had only said a few words to me! Now I part from thee, but not even were these few words uttered. It is almost impossible to believe that Frank is really dead; only yesterday did these lips kiss me so hard, these big eyes followed every move of mine, and now this silent, eternal downright indifference to so much heart sorrow."

Death seemed to say, "Touch me not, because I do not belong to you, and I have nothing in general with you; you don't know what I know."

Chills ran through Alma's veins. Wasn't there anything better in the whole world than a colored shimmer and death and its consequences only real and important?

"If he had only looked at me once more, if he uttered only one word to me," said Alma, while she stood by his bedside, sobbing bitterly as if her heart was torn in two.

Frank Mackwell died on Tuesday and on Friday of the same week a heavy snow storm approached, and the strong wind rustled in the funeral wreaths.

The bitter necessity to work and put things to order helped Alma to hold herself upright, and the rôle of the representative housewife lasted until the day of the funeral.

Minister Mackwell intended to hold funeral services over his own son, but at the last moment his strength gave way.

Two or three strange ministers met at Mackwell's request, and one of them spoke at the grave of the pity he had for the father and also for the intended bride. But his words flowed unimpressively as strange talk past Alma. But still she wasn't in the condition to pick up a comforting word.

The Godwins and the strange ministers ordered their wagon immediately after the close of the funeral. But a cup of coffee had to be served because the weather was so cold, and while drinking a cup of warm coffee a person generally gets warm; again it seemed to Alma when she looked around to her right and while completing the work as a housewife feeling sure that the looks of the strangers followed her sympathetically and anxiously. It began to dawn when the last wagon drove away from the farm.

In the room where the casket stood the candles were still burning, and flickering in the draught. Gertrude sat beside the candles and watched them very carefully argus-eyed that no person might put them out. They had to go out by themselves or else after another year another dead body would be

carried out of the house; this was a thing that she believed in.

Alma went to the rooms once more which were cooled by the draught. In the study she found Frank's father sitting in a chair, his head sunk deep, his hands between his knees, a picture of desolation. When he heard Alma's footsteps he arose quickly and went to meet her.

"Now our dear Frank is laid to rest," said Mackwell in a sad tone. His look and tone unchained all the wild pain that the arrangement of the day had held in check.

"Father, help me. Oh, Father, please." She clung to him as if she was in despair. Wasn't Mackwell the only thing that was left for her now? Frank was gone and she promised him that she was never going to leave Florenceville. Life seemed so poor and miserable she dragged herself through the gray, sad days and also nights.

Alma put the question before herself what she really was going to do now; she wondered what work she should commence. She often sat thinking this or that; she would like to be a nurse and nurse sick patients; she thought about different things the whole month long, until all of a sudden a thought came to her mind just as a knife stab, that all of this was in vain.

Frank's room was now locked, the bed empty and the sick one was gone forever.

Then all at once the longing drove her where he

lay in eternal sleep. She passed between the house and the grave-yard at least ten times a day without paying any attention to the heavy wind, and when it commenced to storm hard Mackwell followed her to the grave. "Come home, child, to the living; don't make yourself sick," pleaded he. "Frank isn't here any more."

Oh, she had already had the old bitter experience that there is no relief at the grave of the loved one, but nevertheless she could not stay away; she always cleaned the snow away and straightened the wreaths.

Mackwell always pleaded with Alma to make her keep her health. What would he do without her if she would become sick and die? It is very nice that she takes care of him and always thinks of him. The winter showed itself different in this year with its unfriendly ways. It snowed one whole day and night, and would not cease; the roads and paths were drifted. And then the sun tried its best to shine again, every hedge and scanty sprout carried a glittering cap, and every fairy-like tree and bud sparkled.

The room of Mackwell's wife was locked again because it was hard enough to keep the other rooms warm.

John Davis, the schoolmaster of the village of Florenceville, could go to school alone and study, because not a scholar came to school. No, not a single child. No one ever came to church on a Sun-

day either. All a person ever used the calendar for was to tell Sunday from the other days. The mail carrier, who had the route where Mackwell lived, also stayed away for some time because the roads drifted too high for him to drive his team of horses. Every once in a while he had a paper for Mackwell.

Mrs. Lottie Dawson was Lottie Mackwell, daughter of Minister Mackwell. She wrote sad and real kind to her father, after the death of her brother Frank, and during the coming year she promised to pay her father a visit. But her father did not answer her letter, because he knew that she would cause them great trouble, because she had caused him trouble before. The lonely parent's house already seemed something to the daughter; she thought her father didn't have a home any more; his own child seemed a stranger to him, but he did not care because Alma had already stepped in her place; she always was around him; they both sat and talked of life and of Frank, his beloved son. All the small, amusing, touching stories that come up in every nursery, and oh, how she loved to listen to them!

Evening after evening passed for them both after a time; the minister's house almost snowed under but each tried to cheer the other by telling different stories and listening to them. Frank no longer belonged to the living creatures whose ways lie clear to-day. Up until to the last day a person always thought that Alma didn't have any feeling. But the trial itself was telling of the old complete picture

always of her engagement; her only joy was wasted in the long months. From Frank's books, letters, and also from his diary she figured in apprehension to strive to keep her task from temptation and worry, here and there speaking quietly she created for herself a world in which at least she found happiness. Her thoughts never left her, she wished and hoped nothing more of life. Deep loneliness and widowed sorrow surrounded her now as a stone wall.

The snow was on the ground long in that year, but at the end of March a person could see a little of the ground here and there. After a couple of weeks the sun shone bright and the snow melted away in a short time, and here and there green meadows could be seen; the air was filled with fresh green odor.

Poor Master Davis who did not teach his class for several months was not disturbed at all.

The first Sunday when the weather was fair the people all went to church, and Master Davis drove to church with Minister Mackwell. While they were driving to church they talked of different things; Master Davis said, "Perhaps we can hold Sunday sermons again," while Minister Mackwell shrugged his shoulders.

All at once they drove into a mud puddle and the mud splashed upon their blanket that they had on their lap. When the roads were good Mrs. Godwin went to church also for an hour. She spoke a few words in good humor that Alma had to go

among people and be comforted; she closed the sermon, therefore, with an urgent invitation, and Alma did not say anything because she did not care to make her cranky. The buds in the cemetery commenced to open up in the spring sunshine; finch and meadow larks warbled while the robin commenced to build her nest in an apple tree.

Toward Whitsunday, Alma received a letter from her Principal, Miss Watson, with whom Alma used to be a school teacher in a private school. Being a good teacher for many years Miss Watson wrote a dear and almost motherly letter.

“My cousin, who was a teacher here, is going to leave us now and I must engage another teacher—don’t you wish to come back? Della also yearns for you and I am sure we all will greet you with open arms. Don’t fear that the social tone of our home will harm you; I know that a good person like you is demanded at any time, and will take all imaginable respect; believe me after all that I have heard the minister’s will be no lasting stay for such a pretty young woman as you; if you can’t see into it and understand, please come at once, dear Alma.”

Alma smiled with a sad smile when she finished reading the letter. Her youth and happiness, where were they? she asked herself. A thought came to her and this made her study very deep for several days. The letter made her study deeply; in her deep pain it seemed to her as if she had to spend her

life so from day to day. For the first time the question came before her. Yes, would that happen? She was poor and parentless and her small amount that she had would not even buy her all the things that she would need as long as she would live. Must her life still be dark and dreary for the long gray years that still lay before her and still call themselves her future?

She would have to take the call good or bad; she taught strange children and warmed herself on strange herds; she had to try and forget at once the sweet hopes that have assigned themselves to her. But now she would have to go back to the people in whose house a thousand things come back to one's memory of the lost.

Miss Watson loved Alma so much that she could not wait until she received an answer from her.

Alma thought to herself, "How can I ever leave this place? I promised to stay, now what on earth shall I do? How could I ever stand all of this when I would be down-hearted?"

In her deep sadness she would have to stand alone among so many happy ones as a disturber, "and even when the warm-hearted Miss Watson has asked me to answer her in a short time, I must not cause delay, but answer her at once. Even those dear old friends that were so dear to me are nothing at all now." She made up her mind to look for a new position, but the first thing of all she had to talk to

Frank's father about it, even if he had no right to tell her what to do or say, but anyway she felt that it would be the proper thing.

At dinner time Alma gave the letter to him to read, and then she waited for his opinion to see what he would advise her to do. Her eyes were filled with tears now, when she thought how near the time was that she had to part and to her it seemed as though her heart clung to the lonely house and to the old man. Oh, if she could only stay with him were her thoughts; her desire was also to stay with him rather than to get used to some other new position.

Mackwell listened to her, frightened and sad, he never thought that she would leave him. Finally he said that she was correct, no one could live on five hundred dollars. That was indeed very clear before him.

He could live many more years yet, and he could keep her with him, but later if God took him then he would leave her and she would have to support herself. Perhaps it would be better for her to go away at once.

When Mackwell thought of her parting he said to himself, "No, I cannot let her go out among strange people in the wide world, amongst people with her wounded heart who really do not understand her, and perhaps they would take hold of her with their rough hands, and especially now when her nerves are shattered. That certainly won't do;

that will surely break her up." And she was the only thing that was left from his dear son.

Was there a way to hold Alma here? He didn't speak very much the whole evening long, because he was thinking the matter over deeply, but the next morning he appeared with a fairly jolly expression on his good old face. "Dearest child," he commenced, "I studied over your matter the whole night long and at last I prayed to God to help me in some way that I might persuade you to stay, and I do believe that he has answered my prayer, and I see a way now."

"How could that ever be possible?" asked Alma in a frightened tone.

"You see, my child, if you would marry me, then everything would be put in order and you could leave the school alone—alone because then you would not have to work to support yourself. You would be my sunshine, until it would be in the Lord's power to take me away, and you would be a widow, and still you would carry a minister's name, and your share to receive a good subsistence; everything indeed is so plain. Therefore, you have nothing to be frightened for." His whole manner spoke from these words and nothing in the world could have pleased Alma more than the words that he spoke.

She looked quietly at Mackwell with big sad eyes, thinking to herself, "The poor, dear, old soul."

"Are you frightened, Alma?" he asked her in a soft tone.

“Not exactly frightened, but I am afraid of Lottie,” she murmured.

“Oh, her! Oh, don’t worry yourself about her; she is much too bossy for me. Perhaps she will be happy when she will hear that I will have a support in my old days. And likewise when Lester will hear of it he also will be happy. Neither were satisfied long ago for me to stay here alone, both wished me to keep a housekeeper. But with you, my dear, it is something altogether a different proposition. The Lord desires us to be husband and wife so that we could carry the burden for each other. Isn’t it true, my dear?” he asked.

She leaned back in her chair, and by her expression it looked as if she was going to be blown down, but after a few moments she was quiet and satisfied. Never before did he seem so loving to her as at this time, and to him she never seemed so good.

Alma thought, “Why shouldn’t I marry him if it is his desire? Why not?” She would carry Frank’s name just the same even if not married to him, her name would always be Alma Mackwell. Oh, how dear the name sounded to her at this moment; she knew that she would not have to part from his grave, she realized even if she would leave Florenceville to-day, to-morrow it would call her back to his grave with a thousand different words. It was indeed Frank’s last desire for her to stay in Florenceville. Who can tell? Perhaps he thought of the same thing.

“A little selfishness stays by me yet,” said Mackwell, laughing, “but I really don’t mean no harm by saying that, Alma. You don’t know what it means to be old; in youth a person mourns not over loneliness so much; is ambitious to work, but when a person gets old he is different in every way; he looks for a dear face and also listens for dear and friendly words. The Lord is always free with us, but at the point of death a person wouldn’t like to be forsaken by his friends and also by people.”

That gave her a longing to stay; she wished to stay; she wished to make his life warm and happy for him, yes, for Frank’s father, and make his end happy for him. If he hadn’t thought of loving her, her life would have become content. The short sermon of their marriage seemed always longer and longer to her. She sighed deeply, then saying in a soft tone, “You will not be forsaken; I will stay by you just as you desire.”

Mackwell’s face glowed with happiness; he walked up to and stroked his hand over her hair softly, saying, “that is correct, it makes me very happy, darling, and Frank would also be happy if he knew you are going to marry me, but come now we will both go to him.”

In the evening both sat by the fireside and talked and made their wedding plans. Alma talked of her trousseau and Mackwell talked about the sermon in church. The church would have to be cleaned and

scrubbed, and he would engage the same minister that spoke at Frank's grave.

He knew that people would have a little to say about him because he was going to marry such a young woman, but why should he worry himself? Alma seemed to be satisfied.

Alma herself knew that some talk would be going on about her in the village of Florenceville, but it did not cause her grief and worry. She was willing to do her part and stay with him just to keep her former lover's wish. Alma went to New York to one of her friends, a Mrs. Lewis, to spend the few weeks before her marriage.

After one week at Mrs. Lewis's house she began to realize how far she was away and he was in Florenceville all alone; without a soul to cheer him.

"Alma, for heaven's sake, are you going to marry your father-in-law? Did you ever stop and think the matter over deep and realize that perhaps in a couple of years from now you may find some one that you will love?" said Mrs. Lewis

The unbelievable tone fell upon Alma's overworked nerves, and she broke out in tears. "Don't you really understand me? Can't you see that Florenceville is the only place for me to spend the rest of my life? My lover begged me when dying to stay and care for his father, and you see if I nurse and carry his name it will seem to me just as if something was binding me to Frank."

"Yes, my dear, that is true, but you could stay

with him and care for him just the same without marrying him; see here, it may not seem glorious for the human nature that sorrow will last a lifetime. As years pass by perhaps the time will come that you—”

“Do you intend to put the question before me that I did not love Frank?” asked Alma, almost angry.

Mrs. Lewis answered prudently, “I intend no judgment; I only spoke to you for your sake.”

Alma’s face already wore a tired expression; Mackwell had the interests of his position and his age. “He is a quiet person and that is what I like in him,” said Alma. “I simply could not carry the burden if some one tried to work upon me.”

Mrs. Lewis found these last statements only too much verified. She and her husband, who was a doctor, did not hold much conversation among themselves. Dr. Lewis was always busy attending to his patients, and, therefore, they very seldom had visitors; once in a while they had a couple of university friends and also several scholars and authors pay them a visit. The conversation was about different things and interesting, but Mrs. Lewis saw with homelike sympathy that Alma was real passive.

She listened to Alma and answered her whenever she asked a question, but a new thought stepped into her mind; she criticized everything with lusterless quiet glance of a human.

Alma wrote detailed long letters to Mackwell in

a way of a daughterly style. She did not receive much of an answer to the letters she wrote to him; from his letters the proper mixture spoke and a childish strangeness that longed for Alma to return home. His home seemed empty and desolate without his darling, and one day a letter arrived with the news that everything was prepared for the wedding.

Mrs. Godwin came over to Mackwell's home and straightened out the house very nicely, because Alma was gone four weeks, and when she would return Mackwell did not care to see her work the first thing. Minister Owen was engaged to perform the sermon. The wedding was to take place May the fifth.

Mrs. Lewis watched Alma very close to see if she was going to become excited, but she took the news with great joy and was quiet just as if a considerable call came to her; she already longed to be back in Florenceville. She sighed with a sigh of relief, and then got herself ready and left New York at once.

When the train neared the station Alma saw Mackwell standing and watching for her; the tall figure, the long gray hair and the quiet expression made him a cheerful person in the midst of a crowd. He looked down-hearted; the unpleasantness of the last few days made him unhappy.

"Thanks to the Almighty, that you are back here again," said he from the bottom of the heart. "Now we will never part again." His joy and happiness

touched Alma deeply and this meeting again made the home coming happy for her.

He rode direct to the registration office where two men, dressed in black robes, were awaiting both; these men were the two divines of the town and should act as witnesses.

Mackwell had himself entreated for this work, but he felt uncertain that they did not catch on to him or to Alma, and, therefore, he looked very strange at them. He thought generally by this occasion how surrounded he was with strangers; sighing he stepped into his old carriage to drive home where the people were awaiting Alma's return.

Sam stood between the two horses and looked pleased. Then turning to Alma he said, "I congratulate you, Mrs. Mackwell."

When Mackwell heard the words he said, "No, my servant, she will be Mrs. Mackwell in church, but I thank you very much for your congratulation."

Sam had a queer expression, looking half laughing and half earnest. How plain the words called Alma back that day, first she rode through the sunny harvest-land road of Florenceville; she was so impatient over the old slowness, the heart being torn here and there, for fright, waiting and hope. And then they stopped in front of the house, and by the door stood one whose heart pounded not a bit more. In longing she saw him plain before herself in the gray suit.

Everything was now past—everything out, at

least the hope, and also for the fright and waiting there was no more space.

There was nothing more left for her but nurse, and that would help her to carry out her life. Mackwell stroked Alma's hand several times as she lay asleep on the wagon-bolster.

He then said, "My Alma, my good child." But Alma did not notice it; finally he leaned back in a corner and fell asleep also while the wagon rocked slowly through the deep sand. It was almost four o'clock when they arrived at Mackwell's home; while entering the home they caught a smell of the calf-roast.

Minister Owen, also Mr. Godwin and his wife who is supposed to help the bride with her toilette. The poor thing must have some one to help her on a hard day as this. Alma did not think far off there to put the sorrow away for this wedding day. She had a black silk dress which would do for her. She unpacked the veil and wreath which was packed in her trunk by Mrs. Lewis. So it did not take Alma fifteen minutes to get ready.

Mrs. Godwin was excited and had tears in her eyes. She always wished that something would happen so that Alma would not marry Mackwell. But no. The Lord wished to grant one poor creature to come into luck.

Merely when she felt the cool wreath on her forehead a quiver passed over her face just as if she was going to break out in tears. She stepped to the

window, and leaned her head on it for a few minutes until she became calm again and then with quick steps she walked into the living room; here in the room stood Mr. Godwin and Minister Owen; both shook hands with her, while their expression was earnest. The kind-hearted, red-cheeked landowner was excited; the sweat stood on his forehead; he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket and wiped off his forehead.

Mackwell was dressed in a black suit; when he saw Alma come in bridal attire his thoughts were confused in odd visions and ways.

Here is the bride—but where the bridegroom? He thought to himself, but he himself was the groom. And to him it seemed as if a knife was stuck in him, saying, “Are we really doing the correct thing?” He went to Alma and the others stepped back a little. “It is hard for you,” he whispered to her softly. “Try to bear it a little longer; it soon will be over with.”

It was moldy and moist in the church. In defiance of the summer-warmth it smelled of mildew, and as Mrs. Godwin looked up she saw that a large web broke loose from the ceiling and was coming down right over Minister Owen. “Will it fall on his head?” she thought to herself.

Master Davis called the choir children together for this occasion, which never happened before at a marriage, and to Mackwell it seemed a great honor, but the hard reciting of the eight thin voices

raised up only the ghost-like miserable festival instead of softening it.

Alma was the only one that wasn't touched by their singing; in her was a strange stiffness, over which the fantasia alone had no power. She did not cry at all as she knelt with Mackwell by the altar, while the binding formula was spoken over them. Where could her thoughts be wandering while she gazed up at the minister? As they stepped out of the church the whole population at least was standing by the door, but Alma did not notice them at all.

"Don't you want to go to him first?" asked Alma.

"Won't it be too much for you, my dear?" asked Mackwell.

And then at the grave-yard she stood by the stone stroking her hand over it several times, and looking at the name which read "Frank Mackwell."

"No, Mrs. Lewis can say whatever she wishes; this grave held me tight with cords." She could never part from him. Just now she felt how much she had longed after him in the last few weeks.

Both the Godwins and Minister Owen stood quietly in sympathy. They were entirely ready just as if they were going to attend a funeral. And this expression was impossible, yet stronger when they returned to the house and sat down to the table. Of all the recollection, was he who sat on the right side of the pale bride.

The sexton was also invited to sit at the table,

that no injustice might find itself among the neighbors. He was real quiet and devoted all his strength to the calf-roast. All of a sudden a thought ran through his mind that no one gave a toast at the wedding. He thought to himself, "A few kind words must be spoken." His unrest arose and he could stand it no longer, so he hit against his glass. "High-honored," he commenced with a tone of a brave man, "pardon me if I do not bring these words out correct. I just wanted to say—"

He stopped for a few seconds. The wedding wine had scattered his thoughts a little. "It seems it pleased the Lord to bring happiness in this house, therefore, High-honored, we all shall empty a glass of wine so that love and truth will reign in our Minister's house."

Master Davis hit his hand against his chest—saying, "Our old Minister. Our new Mrs. Mackwell—Live high." Alma turned her quiet and sad eyes quickly to the well-meant talk.

Mackwell was glad to be noticed. "Bravo," called the landowner and then hit Master Davis on his shoulder saying what a compliment he gave. At eight o'clock the guests started to part.

Minister Owen held Alma's hand for a short time while bidding her good-night. When he gave the funeral sermon for Frank, his heart was less filled with joy, but at that time it was much easier to find a few words of sympathy. The marriage was a closed deed, but God's sending.

“Good-night, Mrs. Mackwell—and may the Lord help you further.”

Alma did not understand him right. Indeed the wish had been granted. We need God’s help at all times and at all places, but see what lies here.

“What did Owen really mean?” thought Alma to herself. Now she did not think a word over it any more. The warm weeks came again; the so-called harvest time, specially in the small country, where strange help could not be found, not even for gold. It was then that Mr. Godwin, who didn’t need all of his men at the present time, let Mackwell have one of his men.

Here it was called to restrain oneself, in a way just as Alma did; she did not begin to realize it up to this time. Already early in the morning Gertrude had to go in the field also, even before the cows were milked, so then all the housework was left to Alma. She did everything with pleasure and patience, and, therefore, Mackwell did not spare himself; he worked just as hard as he could.

Poor old Sam became stiffer and older each year, he, therefore, needed help to load and unload the wagon. Boldly in his years he worked, but in the evening he was almost exhausted, and, therefore, he spent the remainder of his evening with painful limbs, lying on the sofa, even too tired to speak while Alma rubbed his limbs or else read to him. He was very thankful to Alma because she tried her best to comfort him in every way.

“How glad I am, Alma, that you stayed by me,” said Mackwell smiling. “When I often think how I used to suffer at harvest time it really makes me down-hearted; I hardly got anything to eat, and the whole house almost drowned in dirt and disorder. And in return now; the Lord truly made it well with me, from sadness to happiness.”

Then Alma stroked his hand and Mackwell’s heart became warm. No, she had her charge to make his evening happy for him, in case her life was hard and sad. Only to be happy! This is what Alma longed for, she often thought, Oh, if she had only died with Frank!

Now he was the master of the work; corn and potatoes were brought in, the potato crop was poor but they had to be dug just the same. The fruit was picked, some was dried while others were canned. Thanksgiving was celebrated in the church and on the farm.

“Now thank God we will have rest,” said Mackwell. And they sure had rest because the winter weather began; the storms began to tear the leaves from the trees and again the fog crept up from the snow, and lay around the house as a heavy white cloak. For the first time since Alma returned from New York she found the days long. Now the trouble of the summer months had passed by, and it seemed to Alma as if she had an exuberant free time, for by all means there was no hard work. She took the house washing that needed mending, and while

she sat and mended and darned, different earnest thoughts came to her mind that made her body tremble and still they could not be true. Then it would have been joy for both had he been interested in reading, but he was not, because Alma soon noticed that Mackwell did not pay much interest to her reading. He who had seen everything clear and solid long before himself did not feel the obscurity and inner need of a person.

“I am making him an unpleasant life,” thought Alma to herself, “but that must not happen; I must try and show more interest in him and his work that he will show more interest in me.” Now the evening was spent by a poor light; Mackwell sat in the sofa corner covered in tobacco smoke or else with a pamphlet trying to read to pass time; while Alma sat opposite him with her embroidery work; both sat so quiet that if strangers were there they would think that both were strangers.

“I think I do not amuse him enough; I must be more talkative,” said Alma to herself, and then indeed she commenced to speak out of her frightened mind of this and that small event. Hardly were a few questions asked and answered when the same quietness came up again. Finally she found out where all the fault lay. She had talked to her husband of herself—yes entirely—but she did not want to believe it at the beginning. The thought brought so much unquiet to Alma that she hardly knew what to do, but at last the realization came. The painful

dream-life that was hers up until the wedding day.

For the first time since the wedding Alma thought of the forty years difference between her and Mackwell. But nevertheless she felt herself a stranger unto this very day about care, about sadness, and also about interest; could that really be true? So wonderful, so earnest, couldn't the holy sensation be yet?

One day Mrs. Lewis sent Alma a large package of new books. As Alma looked over the books she found interest and happiness for the first time since Frank's death. But now she must share the happiness, she thought with her husband. Yes, she must read to him. And while Alma read, Mackwell listened with much interest. "If the child wishes me to listen I will listen." He began to realize and was thankful at the same time when he saw that Alma was going through all of the trouble for his sake.

He could just as well be satisfied, sit and listen and smoke his pipe. She commenced with the book "In the Palace of the King." She liked the book very much because it was interesting. After reading about half of the book she asked her husband with a smile, "Well, Father, what do you think of the book?" Mackwell didn't wish to hurt her feelings so he said, "It seems to be quite interesting, my dear, read on further."

But oh, dear, Alma soon realized that he had enough of the book. Everything seemed strange to

him, and while Alma read, he fell asleep. The esthetic sense failed him once now, and it would have failed him even if he wouldn't become old in the solitude of ministry. He missed the improving that should come to him at every reading. He drew his church pamphlet nearer to himself, yes his prayer book also. He brought full stories right between improbable repentances.

With quiet patience Alma changed the book and picked out another one, and commenced to read. The work was written better and Mackwell listened to the end, and this made Alma feel happy. With good taste Alma tried real hard and a plain feeling warned her thereof.

Either good or bad she had to make use of Mrs. Lewis' books; she really didn't care to alone. It seemed to her as if one hundred things were between her and Mackwell. All it meant for her was to live all alone. One year has passed since Frank died.

The pain for the lost one was still there, but he was no more one of the living. But what benefit can a living person have without some one to share his enjoyment?

Alma found the wants of her thoughts always more painful and filled with all sorts of respect and reserve she did not know just what to do. In the deep night, when everything was quiet in deep slumber, Alma cried and sobbed in her pillow and thought that the longing after Frank and his love would tear

her heart to pieces. She did not know that it was likewise youth that cried after youth.

With the beginning of spring the demand of the farm brought between the two much nearness; but this year's time picked even again the old man's difference in a new way.

"Don't you wish to go to the sea, Father? The evening is so pleasant, and the nightingales sing."

Mackwell laughed good naturedly, "Good moon, you are so quiet," he sang with his broken tenor voice. "No, child, moonshine sonatas are nothing for us. That only gives us rheumatism. I am also tired. But you can go if you wish, and you are also young," he said while sitting on the sofa corner.

Meanwhile Alma hurried alone to the sea; the evening glow faded, the tree sparrows ran around in the reed, and the evening shadow spread its fine veil around the seapoint. Under the big birch tree stood Frank's little board hut. Alma sat by it often a year before. Her heart was full of life's weariness and death's longing.

At that time the melancholy poetry of this soothing spot had caused her unrest; to-day one odd longing is awaking her. "Forward to the people." Frightened, the quietness lay on her heart. She thought of Mrs. Lewis and her friends. How many smart things and interested things were spoken there. She wasn't in the condition to study things

over at that time but now when it is too late everything came to her mind. Oh, only to hear once more of life, let it be laughing, let it be suffering. But also so—so lonesome—she was frightened herself. Did it really come so far? Was that her thanks for his goodness, for his attachment? When it was really clear for her for the first time that she had spoiled her life, that she must go to ruin when she thought about the frightful error of her wedding. She could not decide at that moment, but every worry had vanished. A following fright, the fright of the lifelong waiting rose up in her often, up to the throat.

Day and night a pierced longing worried her for freedom and self despoil. Oh to live alone in a garret and be mistress of her own work—what she had to do. Above all the storms that quaked Alma Mackwell stayed successful unsuspected. He did not think that she would ever miss something in her life. She had told him once that she had retired from life and the world. Here outside, while the quiet and friendly company with one another alone made him feel happy.

At this time Lester Mackwell wrote his father a letter that he was coming home sooner than he had expected. This made him happy when he thought of seeing one of his children. Oh the happy return of his son, it just seemed like a God-gift to him. Never before had Alma looked at him so excitedly as now.

“What room will we let Lester use when he comes, my child?” asked Mackwell looking at Alma smiling. “He and Frank always had the one room together, when Frank was alive.”

But Alma protested against this proposal to open Frank’s room for some one else. No, she would not have her lover’s room disturbed, she did not care if it was his twin brother.

“The paperhanger can come to-morrow and put Lottie’s room in order; it has never been touched since Lottie left, and Lester can use her room then. I do not like to have Frank’s room opened,” said Alma.

Little had she thought of her husband’s oldest son. He was just the same as the other Mackwells who were not very fond of writing, and in the last year Mackwell had heard very little from Lester. He always had a different excuse and therefore he got out of writing. But Alma never lost the suspicion that it was about his father’s second marriage in spite of all assurance of the old man as to what he was to inherit. So Alma saw his homecoming with unrest. Yes, it wasn’t easy for her, either for him.

He will step in the house, a thirty-year-old man and find a step-mother who was to be his sister-in-law, that certainly was a strange situation.

A fright ran through her mind, whether or not she would be able to meet this young man, and speak in the right tone to him. Her manner was

always somewhat strange and, therefore, caused her much trouble.

With her heart beating she saw the mail-carrier come driving on the road; she was anxious to see if he had a letter for them in his mail-bag, as it would tell the definite answer whether Lester was coming or not.

Through the harvest fog a wagon came riding to Florenceville from the station; the coachman wore a silk hat and was dressed well otherwise, looking irresolute and ill-humored from the carriage that seemed long itself through endless curves and over unplowed ground and pastures, between queer cut sod, and deepened tracks. Suddenly he turned himself around saying, "I have never been in this corner before; it just looks to me as if it were the end of the world. Are you sure that we are going the right direction?" The coachman sat up straight, and with sharp hawk-eyes in the white mist he spied here and there thick crippled meadows; they were visible just as gray shadows.

"Everything is in order. You can stop here, and I will walk the rest of the way," said Lester in a fresh pleasant voice.

By the light of the wagon lantern he paid the coachman, and then went quickly and sure of his own way, as a bold person in the darkness. With little trouble he found the backdoor of his father's garden; from there he saw the lighted kitchen windows and then he was sure that he was on the right road.

The cross divided door directly behind stood half open, leading into the house. The stranger put his suitcase down and neared cautiously in order to see better.

In the corner of the kitchen some one stood bending down, picking out the small potatoes, while Sam stood up waiting for his supper; he hid the third person with his broad shoulders, who was stirring something in a kettle which stood on the stove.

“As I say,” said Sam, “Old Dan Winters is very ill. They gave him medicine tablets and also sacrament, but nothing seems to help him.”

“The people would have done better if they had sent for Dr. Watson,” said a sympathetic soft voice.

“Yes, Mrs. Mackwell, don’t say that they are all spiritual works.” A soft laugh was heard just as a soft warbling of a tired bird.

Simultaneously Sam stepped a little to one side and the son saw the speaker. The black dress and the big white shoulder apron that she wore made her look good. “That must be she,” thought Lester. “My, but don’t she look good?”

Now with a graceful move she took the soup pot from the stove. The flames fluttered bright and shone over the oval face with delusive bright red color. The whole white front side of the body appeared in sudden glare. Involuntarily the stranger stepped forward and stood alone in the compass of the light.

Sam was the first one to see the stranger. "Hang it. Who stands there?"

Gertrude straightened herself up and looked at the stranger.

"A strange person at the back door at this time; it can't be any one at this time, but a vagabond."

All of a sudden Sam called, "Mrs. Mackwell, who ever thought of it? It is our Lester."

"It is too bad that I frightened you all so," said Lester smiling. "Have I the honor to speak to Mrs. Mackwell?" asked Lester. "It is my old boyhood habit to come through the back door; I always did it in order not to frighten father."

"Yes, that is true," said Sam himself in happy greeting. "Many a time we have been misled, Captain Mackwell."

It really was good that Sam spoke because Alma found no word to utter; she was speechless; she walked to the cupboard and leaned back against it. Her gray eyes stared from the pale face, but Lester never saw it before on a woman. "What in the world is the matter with her?" he thought. Was this awkwardness or foolishness?

She had a chill which ran through her back. He who came out of the dark from the garden, "Great God that surely is Frank, every move, almost perfect resemblance only that the figure was a little stouter, and not so big." The impression vanquished. Her white lips spoke the dear name. Here

he extended his hand and his cool strange features were friendlier.

"I should have thought myself that my looks would cause you pain, the great resemblance."

"Pardon, this is a cold reception after so long a parting," said Alma with a tired voice. "Beg pardon." She passed by him slowly and opened the door that led to the study.

In the room a small lamp stood on the table burning, by the light of which both boys once studied their lessons, and the old well-known household furniture, also the tobacco smell that to Lester Mackwell was inseparable from all country remembrance. He pulled off his overcoat and put it down on a chair; then sat down on a chair that Alma gave him.

"We did not expect you so soon," said Alma in her excitement hardly knowing what to say.

"I should have waited until next week," said Captain Mackwell, "but it just happened that the weather was real bad when we landed at the pier, so I came home for a short stay."

There, that was also the cadence in which Frank spoke before the sickness had made him warm. That really was too much; not to be stopped, the tears flowed down her cheeks. Surprised he looked before himself. What should he do? Where shall he go. All of a sudden he felt himself as a stranger in his father's house, and it was all her fault. What a soft natured child.

Poor Frank had always talked about her enthusi-

astic expression but what judgment could he give of one that he loved? In his few letters to his father Lester could not say anything about Alma, all he could do was just think of her always with a strong dislike.

For her way of acting, every explanation failed him. Yes, she hit his feeling exactly in his face. Would personal acquaintance change his judgment, or render her evident lack of self-restraint irritate him? At the same time she felt sorry for him, for he belonged to the men who never did like to see a woman cry.

My heaven her whole body shivered from sobbing and not a sound was heard thereby.

He sprang up involuntarily and walked up to the window and looked out into the darkness. Then a chair was pushed aside, and Alma walked up to him.

"Pardon me," she began.

"Either she has a bad conscience or she must have loved Frank very much, but that my look convulses her so I really can't understand it. But why in all the world did she trust herself with my old father?" thought he. "It seems to me as if I should ask to be excused," he interrupted her. "I am innocent; I suppose the time will come when you will get used to my looks. Until then I beg you please carry it all with patience." She held her hand out to him, and forced herself to look up at him.

"It is all over with," said she softly, "and it will never occur again."

"Hang it, she certainly has a pair of eyes. I will have to own up to that." This thought ran through his mind.

"Father is not home at the present time," she began. It seemed queer to him that she did not say my husband, so he laughed.

"Something serious in Whitefield?" Lester asked.

"No, he just went to visit a sick person, I expect him at any minute."

"So, so. How is he getting along anyway?" Lester asked.

"I find him unchanged," said Alma.

"It seemed to me that way also, according to his letters."

Then both ceased talking. The air seemed to be filled with oppression. He was surprised himself that this meeting with his father's second wife fell upon his nerves. He longed to ask after Frank from the last days of his brother's life, but he did not care to hear the sobbing again. All of a sudden the farm-door rattled, and steps were heard nearing the house.

"That is father."

With inner sighing they called it simultaneously. With one big leap Lester was outside. Laughing, happy, but excited outcalls. Mage's welcome howling caused Alma confusion. She was almost fright-

ened and she seemed as a stranger in her own home.

A foreboding came upon her that the heaviest part of her heavier problem commenced with to-day.

It was a long time before father and son entered the house again. In the veranda they were heard talking. Mr. Mackwell quiet and then Lester's sharp and loud voice. "I beg you I leave it to you to judge." "They both talked about me," said Alma. Frightened and painful were her thoughts. Now both came in; it really was an uneven pair, Lester tall and his father short. They looked at one another, as the awakening from daydream.

"Alma, my child, this is my son Lester. But I suppose you both know one another already," began Mackwell. "And here, my dear—the best remembrance of our dear Frank. Oh that he can't celebrate this meeting again with us." He sighed deeply while the tears filled his eyes. From the excitement and happiness something deadened the mind at that moment, and it came right to conviction that if Frank had lived the situation would have been a different one.

Alma stood real quiet; in her lay so much soft dignity and deep sadness.

He stepped up to her and bowed over her hand.

"Frank often wrote to me that you were his sun and life's happiness," said he. "You must tell me about him, but not to-day. I have caused you enough sadness for to-night."

She hung down her head; again for a few mo-

ments she had to struggle for breath, then she said quietly: "Please come to supper. I suppose you are hungry, according to the long trip you made. I am sorry but have nothing but milk soup, butter and bread with sausage," said Alma.

It pleased him that she wasn't like other women in excuses, or in details. If a person only knew—and so forth.

"Oh, I thank you. I know your politeness and kindness. I know the historic Florenceville milk soup and I like it very well."

The whole evening was spent in talking on indifferent things as happens so frequently between people that after being parted for so many years, have a great deal to tell about.

Lester carried the conversation most of the time alone. That was also necessary. He knew his father's quietness and he felt real sure how the pale young creature—yes, that the heaven only knows, she was his step-mother, still always fought with warring bias. "I am only eager to know how we will place ourselves after a time," thought he.

"Winning the household, through herself, but nevertheless, I do not know whether I should thank her, or should find fault that she had attached herself to my old father in this way."

It was still a lonely feeling to return in the old home; the home where his brother was missing forever. But a person dared not think about that, especially to-day.

"Would you show me Frank's grave?" he asked Alma in the morning, the next day when Mackwell went to his confirmation class.

Indeed Lester could have found the grave himself, but he hardly knew why he had asked her. Perhaps it was the double feeling, mixed with disapproval and sympathy. She was frightened—a shyness, to lead him there on his first visit. "Indeed, perhaps, you would like to go there alone," she uttered.

"No, not exactly alone. I find it self-evident that we both go together," he said. Then finally Alma stepped forward without saying a word, through high wet grass, and wild rustling leaves, and then she stood by his side at the grave, without saying a word; Lester stood also with his forehead wrinkled, and his lips closed tight together. He had to undergo the whole bitterness of that very hour, which really could have made him happy. The sight of the grave shook him violently.

Alma saw him suffer but she did not cry; this was pleasing to Lester. He still did not know what to do; whether to utter a word or just go back home. "She is tactful," thought he. Suddenly he turned to go, while a heavy sigh raised his chest. His glance fell upon her face. Right here in broad daylight he himself saw how nice she could be, as Frank was, full of pleasant things, because Frank wrote to him that she was still full of love and life.

He held his hand out to her. "You have suffered

so much trouble in Florenceville," said he kindly.

"Yes," she answered. But Lester did not have the heart to tell her some different things of better days to come that surely would comfort her. He did not know that this perhaps would make her happy. Mackwell could not understand how it ever happened that they knew each other already.

After eating Alma had to go to the kitchen for a second, and while coming back she heard Mackwell talking earnestly to the young man. "But it is impossible for me to make her such an offer. I cannot tell her, Father, it is your matter," Lester's voice rang.

"No, you must; you understand it better. I am an awkward old person. Please do me this one favor, my boy." Then when he noticed Alma he quickly left the room. Lester looked uncomfortable.

"That is just the way father is; there he goes now and leaves me. I suppose you know that we were talking about you," said Lester.

She laughed weakly. "Pardon me, that is indeed conceivable."

"You must let me explain to you; you know father and his ways; he finds it remarkable that we still have stiff intercourse, as he calls it, therefore he wishes that we would change and be more talkative."

"It is true that we haven't found anything much to talk about to this day, and this we must do. How is it?"

“Do you wish to do as he requires?” asked Lester friendly. “I beg you for Father’s sake.”

She looked down on the floor; all of a sudden a thought passed through her mind. “Yes, he was right; something must be found to talk about.”

“For me to be your son that would be nothing; it would seem queer for us both. But will you let me be just what I was when Frank lived.” He spoke a little different than Frank. The younger had a louder voice than the other.

But Alma only saw the resemblance in his face, and his voice and, therefore, she always spoke about his impression. “Yes, if you wish it.”

When she spoke the first it seemed to him as if it were right and natural and as with the strange stiffness everything strange and painful had vanished from her. It did not seem so easy for him. It took a great while before he could shade off a strange feeling.

The next day he saw Alma working around in the garret. He walked to the door and stood watching her. His glance happened to see a big flat chest that stood against the wall.

“What have you hid there in the chest?” asked Lester.

She was just moving several old boxes and a trunk into their places. “A picture,” she said indifferently. “A picture that Mrs. Lewis sent to me for a wedding present, but father did not like it. That is why it stands here.”

“Then it surely must be a Madonna or a Venus?” laughing he said, “am I allowed to see the Madonna?”

“Yes,” answered Alma, looking at Lester. He pushed the lid back and he happened to see a big fine copper plate engraved. “And this stands in the garret? Yes; are then all entire—”

“Pardon me,” she interrupted. “It is really too bad that it must stand here. Did you wish to hang it in your room?” she asked.

“Yes, with great pleasure.” He quickly ran down the steps, got the hammer and several nails; a few minutes later the picture hung over the sofa in his room. He noticed it was a little too big for the wall, but otherwise it was famous.

“I will present it to you for your home when you get married,” said Alma, smiling.

“Many thousand thanks. That lies in the wide world yet hidden; I haven’t studied over that matter yet. But as time passes by I suppose I will get married, because I don’t intend to stay single all my life. I can’t understand why a person wouldn’t find a picture like this pretty; I never thought that of father; was the picture too heathen for him?”

“Yes, that is just what he meant, but that wasn’t the only reason why I didn’t unpack it; I, myself, felt that I could not stand to have it before my eyes daily.”

Lester looked at Alma astonished. It awoke too much sympathy in him. “Florenceville is a death is-

land for me." She talked to him without excitement or bitterness.

A person can always hide fate whenever it must be done. But it is much harder to carry it for some one else. The self-evidence in her tone seized him more. How the pity of life had hammered itself upon her, until she became the quiet and oppressed creature; the pretty dark eyes had to cry before she had learned this glance of soft despair.

These questions kept him busy often. He studied deeply over them, how should he commence to investigate her sorrow without making her shy through questions? He commenced to speak to her about Frank; he had the right to ask about the last days of his brother's life. And then he saw how sorrowful it was for her to grieve herself in this recollection; oh, how her eyes shone through tears! How she must have loved the dead one! "Don't you get excited? Don't I hurt your feeling with my questions?" he asked in a pitiful tone.

"Oh, no! When I talk about him and when I look at you it always seems to me just as if he were here with me again. It is rather strange, but still so pleasant. It makes me very happy," she said with a genuine laugh, while she looked up at him.

"Poor sister." Actuated by sympathy he put his arms around her and she let her tired head sink down on his shoulder. He then bent over her and kissed her white forehead.

Happily she uttered "Frank," then raising up

her eyes she looked up at him as a child. Then she quickly straightened herself and stroked herself over her forehead. "This is how a person makes a mistake," she said, sighing deeply. "The resemblance is even so big that I cannot help it."

He held her hand tight. "If I am supposed to be your brother, you must trust me then as your brother also," he pleaded. "Please tell me how it ever happened that you married my father. I can't really understand it, it worries me."

"Frank's desire."

"What?" he asked.

"He pleaded me to stay in Florenceville. It was the last thing I could do to make him happy." Lester wrinkled his forehead. He as a man understood it, and he also knew his brother's jealousy and his hot temper better than she did. "Thereby he did a great wrong. No dying person dares to bind the living."

"No. No," she cried out. "Upon the dear picture the smallest shadow should not rest. That was why I stayed with father. Only I ought not to have married him, but that was my mistake; everything was so indifferent after Frank's death."

"Such a person as father should not have made your indecision a useful plea."

"How can you say anything like that? Nothing of the kind. It was only his love and kindness that wanted to protect me, and also to provide."

"Then he should at least have had some personal

knowledge of the world," said Lester, vexed. Even though he foresaw the iniquity of such demand, in the same moment. He forced his revolt back so hard it went. What good did it do to talk here? All sort of plans shot through his mind. He wanted to persuade his father to leave Florenceville and move to H— to the women who were his comrades; that Alma would become acquainted with them then she would not be so lonesome. He thought he would try his best and talk to his father. Life could always bring poor Alma something even when only from the second rank. "Do not give up hope, dear sister," he said.

She laughed at him just as if he were a small child. "Hope for what?" Even if Alma did cry hard that all of her friends had died. The effect of the presence of a young, energetic and lively creature to exercise in the house made it impossible to withdraw herself.

A mighty breeze from the outside came to him in the old house. Thousand things that a person would never think of in the lonely minister's home usually busy in the circle of talk.

They raised Mackwell up from the dream situation in which he had almost sunk, and opened the pain of the young woman almost to her world. Then finally Lester's chest and trunk came and both unpacked them happily; all the different things a traveler loves to bring with him, such as mussels, foreign ornaments and different photographs. All of these

had to be looked at, and most of the things were set around in the house, and Alma helped to arrange them; she was very zealous; she talked and laughed just the same as in her earlier years.

This was a surprise for Lester. The laughing was so good to see; it looked just like a small stray sunbeam that hushed around her soft lips. When he bought his presents he hardly thought of Alma, but whatever he gave her she accepted with pleasure, especially when he gave her a magnificent library table cover which was made of leather. This was supposed to be for his sister.

"I rob you of everything you have. What will your sister Lottie say when you go to her with empty hands?"

"Oh, it is all the same to her. Her husband provides her sufficient. And I always can buy her a ring or something of that sort."

"It wouldn't even be right," she continued.

"We will see first. Come with me." He snatched up the immense leather cover laughing, and then went over to his mother's room and spread it over the old-fashioned lounge. "Now that don't fit at all. It would fit much better the magnificent brown table. Now lie down upon it so I can see how you make yourself comfortable."

Laughing she listened and made herself comfortable. From the light yellow cover she raised her dark head.

As he was fixing her she quickly jumped up.

“Where do you want to go, Alma?” said he.
“Haven’t you any rest?”

The minister’s wife had no spare time to lie upon the bear skin.

Lester laughed, saying, “Perhaps you have time to lie upon lamb’s skin then. Ah what? Hide is hide. Why are you staring at me so?” Lester made a few steps through the room then walking up to the window, he stood looking out at the lonely farm.

From the woodshed came the crackling sound from Sam’s saw. On the other side of the paling, the minister’s farm lay lonely in the harvest fog. If she was only so happy. My God what a happy home she would make for a man. I at least would not dare to part myself. They were together so much the whole day long.

Before dinner, Lester didn’t have something to read or write at present, so he sat in his father’s study at least one long hour; his father talked to him for a short time, then all of a sudden he became quiet just the same as ever; and finally it was too lonesome for Lester; he walked silently out of the room and looked around for Alma. Naturally at this time of the day she was busy, but it didn’t matter to him. He stood chattering to her between the hearth, or else he visited the barn with her, and made himself useful, thereby he had the opportunity to tease Sam.

“It is a different life all together when our young

master is here, isn't it, Mrs. Mackwell," said Sam, smiling.

"Yes, truly the old coachman was right," she thought. I alone and the old house and the entire life seemed changed to her. Light and warmth and interests had again entered the house. She could laugh and talk now again, yes even at her work, she could sing rag-time songs.

Entirely unknown it came out from the happiness of her heart. Sam roved for Mrs. Mackwell, so much. He busied himself in his heavy thoughts very much with her, and when he saw her coming with Lester over the farm he followed the two handsome figures with a deep profound glance. And what he had gathered in his head came out of his mouth one day by accident. Lester stood right by Sam's side and he saw him cleaning the horse.

"Darn it, I suppose you were too old; otherwise you would have married Alma before your father."

And as Lester did not answer Sam at once, Sam said, "Captain Mackwell, do you know what I have on my mind often?"

"Well, old Sam, what is it?"

"I had thought," said Sam in a soft tone, "it is too bad that you did not come home a year ago; you would have known Mrs. Mackwell sooner. That would have been a much better match." He looked at the young man. But he became frightened over the sudden change in Lester. He grew dark red in his face, and his eyes sparkled.

"Be quiet," he called out so loud that Sam became frightened and stepped backward a few steps.

"Captain Mackwell," he pleaded, "I didn't mean no harm by the words I spoke, I only thought that—"

Lester studied deep—and then thought himself foolish to become excited so quick. "That is good, Sam; I know it myself, but a person must not say a thing of this kind even in a joke, do you hear? Promise me that you will never say it again about any one, especially about my step-mother." He emphasized the word real sharp. "Never," and then raised his hand.

Sam did not understand why his master became so excited. Here the snow still waited, and the roads stayed hard and dry, so that Mackwell still could hold sermons. There were always three or four persons who attended church, but still it wasn't necessary for the church to stand vacant perhaps for several weeks. He was glad and contented over it.

The village women utilized the opportunity at once to come in the parsonage in order to solve a problem that was necessary at this time. Lester knew all the deliverers and utilized the opportunity to entertain himself with them. Alma amused herself over how wise he was in all her family affairs, and how well he understood it; she disdained her weakness and heaviness. Frank did not know this.

"He is blithe to the people," said several of them. At this time stories were started in Florenceville,

even if it didn't give any evidence thereof, everybody was convinced unshakable from the truth, and gossip was busy in all spinning rooms, and, therefore, new stories were always found. Mrs. Parker was the first one to tell a story and she commenced. "Mother Freeman died and holy sacrament was administered to her, but it was no wonder that this had to be done; she stood in the truss of the bad."

Lester led two women in the room where Alma and the other sat, Alma proud and perplexed.

"Have you ever heard of Mrs. Freeman?" said Lester Mackwell. Mrs. Parker shook her head after old custom with her three-cornered cap on her head.

"That is what you always say, Captain Mackwell, I never thought such a thing, but now that she is dead—that is indeed good because she would have the devil in her house."

"Well. Well," said Captain Mackwell.

"Mr. Parker was always good to me; he is dead now and we all regret it; poor thing when he used to go on long trips he always filled his trunks with bolts of linen, fancy dresses, jackets and other fancy things on his return home." Mrs. Parker slid around on her chair so that she could look at Lester's tired face. "And how it ever happened I really don't know; the little devil broke up everything she had."

"Where did she have the little devil hid?" asked Lester.

"I don't know, Captain Mackwell; he ran around

during the day, and then made himself so little, so little that he was hardly visible, and then during the night he would sing songs."

"What? Sing songs? What songs did he sing, anyway?"

"That I could not tell you because they weren't familiar to me."

Lester propped his elbow upon the table and put his hand to his mouth for a second, then asking again, "Now, Mrs. Parker, tell me where you got all these foolish things from."

"From everyday life, Captain Mackwell," answered the old woman. "Such a devil I would be afraid of him, he comes here all the way, runs into the chimney, then runs out again." She was silent for a while then took a big swallow of coffee.

"And where is the little devil now?"

"Yes, Captain Mackwell, that is just it; no person in Florenceville would want him." Lester laughed out loud. He tried his utmost to be quiet but it was impossible.

"Who saw him then, where you said?" asked Lester.

"Oh he sang many a song in church, but no person would be allowed to go into the church; I passed by there one day and became frightened when I looked in and saw a big dragon who sat in front on the floor. My God, the old dragon sat and looked at me."

Now, Alma could listen to the foolish talk no

longer; saying, "Dear Mrs. Parker, there are no such things. They are just old sayings of the heathen people in olden times. If we believe in God and Christ from the bottom of our heart we need not be afraid of such a dragon and of no little devil."

"Yes, yes, that may be true—but," she twisted a little on her apron string, then got up and commenced to talk; she bid Alma and Lester good-day and then left.

"That is just the form; the unbelief of the supernatural world by people just as Mrs. Parker takes it," said Lester, amused.

"Unbelief is a part of her ways."

"It is really impossible to entirely understand her, sweet sister," he uttered. The caressing softness of his tone pleased her as spring air.

"Perhaps, but a person can not. It sounds a little too heathenish." She pulled her workbasket nearer to her and took out a pair of socks; she put one over her hand and examined it carefully.

He looked up, entirely amazed. "I hope that you aren't patching and darning for me."

"Aren't you satisfied? Don't I do it orderly?" she asked rougishly.

"Foolishness; but you shall not do it. I don't want you to," he said. "As if you haven't enough work to do without that."

She laughed. "Do you want me to cry? Foolishness. No it makes me happy when I can do

something for you. Do you know the little verse, which reads:

“Who patches and darns
Is often more happy,
Than he who draws the spirit’s sword!”

He sat down alongside of her and watched her pick up another pair of socks out of her basket; then she began to darn skillfully.

“Isn’t there anything going on in town?” he asked suddenly. “No concert or anything of that sort so a person could amuse himself? I would like to drive to town to-night.”

“I don’t know of anything, but I will glance at the paper and see; I know that you would like to go because it is too lonesome for you here.”

“I don’t want to go. I really don’t care for any music, but you must have some enjoyment at least once in a while. You have nothing here but to cook, patch and fill father’s pipe. I really don’t understand how on earth you can stand it,” said Lester.

Alma put her work aside. “It was hard for me for a long time,” said she. “I had such trouble, such loneliness and still I didn’t care for enjoyment. But now it is all past. I really don’t know how it happened; now I feel satisfied and happy. You know, attending concerts or something of that sort is no enjoyment for father any more.”

"He can stay at home, but you are too young to stay home; something must be done for you for a little sport."

"You are a fine man," she said, "trying to be a boss in your father's home."

"He surely can't demand that of you that you would sacrifice yourself and stay home with him day and night."

"You forget that I am his wife," said Alma in a quiet tone.

He quickly jumped up from the chair and left the room, and shut the door hard after him.

At Christmas time a tree was burning again in the lonely minister's home at Lester's wish. Just as he had said, he did not see a tree for several years, and, therefore, he asked to help decorate the tree. He fastened the tinsel and fancy ornaments that Alma handed him, and he did good work for a man.

It was a very happy evening, full of poetry and charm, and still Lester felt a slight excitement in the bottom of his heart. "If it could have happened that she was not as quiet as she is, who knows if I could have worked here with her in this way?" he thought to himself.

Alma was afraid of this Christmas evening. The last time when the candles were burning some one lay on the sofa and with life's hungry eyes he looked and a silent voice whispered soft, loving words to her. "Will the remembrance thereof be too powerful?" She knew that another one suffered in her

place. Mackwell was indeed well disposed, and he spoke orderly. He felt himself extraordinarily comfortable. Indeed his thoughts were of the grave that was behind the church, but the sadness for the young son hadn't the power to ruin the happiness for his older son. When the people left Mackwell put his hand around Alma contented.

"You have done well to-day, my child. The ginger bread was fine and the punch." He took his long pipe from his mouth and kissed Alma. The sunburned face of his son distorted itself nervously.

"This really didn't have to happen in the eyes of grown up children," thought he, vexed.

Now Alma came to him; her cheeks were red and radiant. "But Lester, you spendthrift. Why did you give me this expensive brooch? It is too pretty for me. When shall I wear it really?"

"Always," came the answer back, "and think of me when I go on sea again. It is nothing but selfishness in me. I wouldn't want to be forgotten."

She laughed brightly. "You needn't be afraid of that; we will miss you very much—but don't let us talk about parting to-night."

Just then Gertrude came in the room and called her. So Lester became interested in a map that Alma had cut out neatly in leather; he stroked over the small back and hollow of the pattern. "I suppose she did this work at night," because he knew her daily work. And wonder what thoughts passed

her mind. Were her thoughts of him just the same as his were of her?

His heart commenced to beat hard. The following day after church Mr. and Mrs. Godwin paid Mackwell's a visit in old-fashioned full dress, to invite them to dinner on the so-called third holiday. Before leaving they invited them to coffee but otherwise it wasn't of any use to invite other guests, because they lived too far away.

An invitation; Mackwell was astonished, to sit in a room then lead a strange woman to table, and he didn't know of anything to speak about. "You will have to excuse me, dear friends," he said in a kindly tone. "When I have walked around to visit sick people two days, I feel tired and my limbs ache; I am also old, you all know that. But my son and my wife will come."

"When a person marries a young woman he must try and take her to places where there is amusement," said Mr. Goodwin, laughing.

"Indeed I do that," said Mackwell in his quiet manner. Alma did not have any desire to drive to Godwins, but she knew that the invitation could not be put off now. Lester listened to the talk with real mixed feeling. Something raged in him and warned him at the same time. On the way to Godwins he was very quiet; then it seemed entirely strange to him because he was alone with Alma. It seemed as if every word had a single intimate meaning, as if the natural topic always became tight. He only talked

to her when she attracted his attention about this or that thing. To her it was only the impression of the deep inner understanding that raged between them. Later when she was present by the side of Mrs. Godwin in the drawing-room Lester could hardly trust his eyes. Was that really Alma? My, how pretty she looked, among the robust farm women. Inquisitively the women put their heads together and whispering, asked, "Who is she? Do any of you know her?"

Lester heard the words plainly, oh if he only could say she is mine, mine alone. Then he walked to the men's room in which a sure blueish fume hung, and where they greeted him with annoyance but respect for his uniform. While he talked and answered questions with mechanical politeness he noticed Alma through the open double door. She sat there strange and quiet, just as a Camellia under the black head thought he scornfully. The women talked about the good and bad character of their domestic servants and governesses. The voices perhaps didn't sound very loud and hard around her, but to Alma the voices seemed deep after what she was accustomed to.

How rich and many-sided was the entertainment with Lester. Alma looked around after him involuntarily and then laughed when he nodded his head to her. As something stirred up amongst the guests Alma made use of her opportunity willingly in order to part from her talkative neighbors. She walked

to the writing desk and saw a slab hanging over the desk "Philadelphia," the barge of her father leading through the seething waves. She became frightened. Oh how long yet, and every stormy night will cause her sorrow, whether or not also a dark seething sea was trying to grab her friend with greedy arms. A great pain arose in her, now with this happiness she has to pay for the last weeks. All of a sudden some one stepped by her side.

"Lester."

He looked at her astonished; he never saw her dressed in white, but always in black. "You have done very well to-day," he spoke half loud and half silent, pointing to her white dress. But Alma did not utter a word she looked down on the floor.

"I don't know what to do I feel so queer. Entirely different. I would like to ask some one am I myself or not?"

Lester laughed saying, "Yes, you are; and I am very proud of you. Now I see you at last just the way Frank saw you often—the lucky one."

Alma nodded her head. "I wore this same dress when we were engaged. It was at a party at Costello's," she said earnestly and quietly. Lester was astonished that the remembrance thereof did not cause her to cry; then Minister Owen and his wife joined them, who inquired after Mackwell and looked approvingly at Alma.

She felt he wondered at seeing her in this dress, and indeed she was not mistaken. "Minister Owen

married father and me." Then turning to Lester she explained to him. Captain Mackwell bowed, speechless, the thought raged, "Yes, he deserved to have his neck twisted for such a work." Soon thereafter came the call "To table." It was nothing but happiness from now on. No person in this vicinity ever thought to restrain his voice, at least Mr. and Mrs. Godwin. Lester's deep bass voice and Alma's somewhat sharp one announced themselves victorious in the bustle and gave the remaining bass voices and sopranos time and pace along. While the guests shook hands together after the meal just as if a person had to wish happiness to a victorious run off charge. Dishes, silverware, tablecloth and table disappeared all of a sudden and the chairs were set by the wall. Then the town-clerk appeared in his Sunday frock with his harmonica.

"What on earth does this mean?" asked Alma.

Lester answered, "This is the fiddle; they will start to dance in a few minutes."

"Let us go home, because it is late now and father will be frightened."

Lester said, "Father will be frightened? Do you think that I have waited so long and now I should drive home when the best part is coming? I will dance with you some first."

"I beg you—I cannot dance; I forgot everything."

"Foolishness! You can and you must."

"Stop," commenced the fiddler and then an old-fashioned polka was played. This went through the

young people just like lightning, already the first couple turned. Wine vapor was smelled in all the rooms, and thereby the excited melodies rang.

Lester put his arm around Alma saying, "May I ask you to dance?"

Uncertainly she made the first few steps well with his leading, but soon she made the repeated practice just the same as in earlier years. When she danced the last time Frank held her in his arms; she knew it and thought now thereof, but still she had no pain. Quite the reverse, only a feeling of satisfaction. Then the face that bowed over her was the dear known. Involuntarily she raised her eyes and caught his glance.

The blood rushed to his forehead. He murmured, "Dear sister." But in the deep simple words lay deep tenderness.

"Later on they will dance a quadrille; we will both dance it together," said he in a tone that emphasized every word. The quadrille was to-day in favor, the wilderness granted family fathers this, they seemed stirred up by the melody of the old farmers' dance. Many of them clapped their hands, others stamped their feet on the floor. Always wilder and wilder was the quadrille; always wilder the waltz step until at last the dancing was seen only through fluttering of dresses and inflamed faces.

Alma was very glad when the dance was over. "Now let us go home, Lester," she pleaded, "because it is midnight." A curious thought rushed

through his mind. If she was only his wife! Now they had to leave when they were having a good time because she had a husband who was home. It seemed right, so exceeding natural, yes, but that was all just foolishness. As they drove out of the village the wind began to blow strong, heavy clouds drove in forms and then covered the moon over and over again.

"He would like to be out shining instead of covered," said Alma, "but he can't, because the clouds keep passing over him. Did something put you into a bad temper, Lester?" she asked suddenly with her fine womanly instinct.

"No," he answered. "But still it was so inconsistent and excited."

Sam's wagon lantern did not do much good because the wagon turned in this, then again in that deep wagon track and it was hard driving because they could not see.

"Horrible roads," cried Lester. "Out side with wealth something like this would never happen." The wagon jarred so that Alma was thrown against Lester's shoulder. He quickly grabbed hold of her with his hand.

"Aren't you frightened?"

"Oh, no," answered Alma.

"Lean against my shoulder then you will not feel the bumps." From a distance a light glittered. It came from the bedroom of Minister Mackwell's house. The way they had to drive had different curves and

jags. How strange that none of them ever thought of pulling down the side curtains; had they thought of it, it wouldn't have been half so cold.

"Just imagine to be on the open sea," she murmured, "and as dark as it is to-night; see over there the shore lights are visible."

"Why then the shore alone?" he asked. "Couldn't it be something else beside the shore?"

She realized indeed that he was altogether different to-day, but still she did not understand the bitterness of his tone.

She did not know that even the sight of this light had helped him; yes the temptation to press her tight in his arms and whisper the words of wild tenderness in her ear, those which were pressing with force on his lips. Now the clouds parted and a bright star was visible.

"See here, the bright and beautiful star," she called out, "the dearest of all the stars."

He answered her in a soft tone and thought again to himself, if she were only his. Yes, his alone then he would not have to bear the heavy burden.

What he felt in himself appeared only for the eyes of the Almighty. Now he was entirely helpless; nothing more helped now, not even the heartless shivering. To-day's evening had pulled and torn everything in him as with a hook. He loved his father's wife and he could not help it, but there was no use talking, she was his father's. Was there something more foolish or natural than this? If

any one had told him several weeks ago that he would fall in love with his father's wife he would not have believed it. But he sees it to-day himself; she was the one woman that he himself desired to have.

As the ground had thawed out, Lester said, "I suppose I will try and fulfill Lottie's wishes." In the rustling of the storm Alma did not hear how rude and pressed his voice rang. "She wrote to me several times that I must spend part of my vacation with her, and she is waiting every day to see me."

It seemed to Alma as if her limbs became ice cold suddenly and heavy, her tongue also suffered for a few moments. "You want to go away?" she uttered at last.

"I am afraid I must."

"You dare not go away, Lester, Lottie has so many friends, and lives so happy. But I? What on earth shall I do without you in the dark and long days? Oh, Lester."

The frightened pleading tone went through his nerves. He jumped up suddenly and opened the wagon door. "Hold the horses, Sam, I will open the gate."

"That is open, Captain Mackwell, just stay in the wagon."

"Well, all right, it is all the same to me," said Lester, "go ahead then." Sam drove the team in the yard and stopped the horses. Lester jumped out quickly and then helped Alma to get out. He unlocked the door in the deep quiet and the key

seemed to squeak. After entering the room he looked for the lamp that stood on the table ready fixed for them; he struck a match and then lit the lamp. In the shine of the pitiful little flames which threw big reflections of the two figures upon the gray wall Alma looked pale and disturbed.

“At least it has made something clear to me; I never knew it until this day.”

“I do not understand you,” said Alma.

“Now good-night, dear sister.”

Alma shivered from cold and weariness, “Good-night and sleep well,” she said softly.

He held the hall door open for her, because she had on her heavy cloak and could not open it very well; she disappeared in her room and shut the door while Lester stood looking. He sighed deeply and went to his room.

The next morning broke gray and troubled. Gray and discouraged were the voices of the household when they all gathered to breakfast.

Mackwell suffered terrible pain during the night and not a soul to take care of him. By his good condition bodily pain was quite unusual and like all men he was in bad humor. For the first time he talked sharp and sullen with Alma, even if he did not mean it in earnest. “Such a drive is shocking. A person lies half of the night awake, listens, waits, and worries himself and can’t fall asleep. I hope you both have not more wrong still in mind.”

Lester bit into his lips. The best and softest

seemed only good enough for her, and here his father spoke to her as a schoolmaster.

"Father, you should not object to the only enjoyment that Alma has had during the time she was here; she did everything and did not see anything but trouble and sadness." Lester spoke in a sharp tone to his father.

"That isn't all, my son; Sam told me that you both danced in town," said Mackwell. "I do not like that at all. To think that a minister's wife would do a thing of that sort."

"I did not know it was wrong, dear father."

"But Lester knew it."

Lester shoved his cup back and knocked on the table with his fingers.

Alma bowed involuntarily and threw Lester a pleading look.

"Just look at yourself, my boy, and see how you look," said Mackwell, "all tired out."

Lester straightened himself up to his full height. He did not close his eyes all night but that was his private business. He felt enraged and unkind toward his father. Who indeed had caused the unpardonable realization? Lester now blamed himself and was helpless in yearning torture.

Later on during the day when Alma was dusting the living-room, Lester followed her. "Does father have such moods often?" he asked excitedly.

"Never. Never. He is purity himself. When they are sick every man gets out of his mind a lit-

tle. A person never takes it so tragically. But your wife will also find out," said she as a joke.

"If I loved her with all my soul, sweetheart," he said. He stopped quickly. He threw himself down on the sofa; his glance followed Alma who was willingly dusting with a feather duster and also a cloth.

"I have made up my mind," he commenced, "to stay here. Lottie can wait until my next visit home again. I cannot leave you here alone." A bright red color shot into his face.

"Lester! Oh, really! That is more than I ever expected, how did it ever happen that you made up your mind to stay? Are you staying with pleasure? Or perhaps from sympathy?" she questioned.

"Perhaps just from sympathy with myself," said he, laughing. "I cannot part from you yet for some time."

"Many, many thousand thanks. Now I have still a few more happy weeks before me."

Lester took hold of her hands which she stretched out to him, and pulled her close to himself.

"And I know father will also be happy. It is so dear of you that you are going to stay here longer. We certainly are glad to have you."

Lester laughed so strangely.

"You do not give me very much now either; do I really only get a hand, dear sister?" he asked half aloud.

She looked up at him innocently with glittering eyes and half-opened lips. Boundless pleading spoke

from her lips. And before she could answer him he put his arms around her and found her lips. Her lips burned long and warm upon his lips for several minutes. No brother kisses his sister in such a manner.

In wild fright her heart almost stopped beating, so that she held her hand to her heart for a while. Startled over himself he let her go out of his arms.

"Forgive me," he murmured. "Why did you have to tempt me?" He felt that his words made the situation worse. Silent he sat and tore on his watch chain. Alma walked around in the room, moved the chairs in their places, she then walked to the table and pulled on the table cover until it lay crooked. Her hand shivered, her breath flew. Suddenly he could not stand the look on her face longer. He jumped up, but at his approach she switched to the door involuntarily.

"Are you sore at me?" he whispered. What shall she answer him now? Oh, God, what? Both stood close to each other. One kiss was indeed nothing between them both, what wrong could that be, touching their lips. Yea, just as a snake from the deceit in her sleep, she knew it—from now on by his look. Alma became pale as death.

"Are you still sore at me?" he asked again.

"No; that means—I believe not—. But let me alone now, please—please—I will—"

She murmured, confused, about her housework and

then disappeared. They did not see each other until at the supper table.

Mackwell made a joke at the supper table between them and through that he found his accustomed good spirits.

"What have you been driving at, my boy, the whole morning long?" asked Mackwell friendly.

Lester became frightened a little.

"What do you mean? I have spent the day loafing around."

The father took it for the truth and laughed. "That seems to be exhausting. You never looked better in your life than you did this morning. And you, Alma; you do not suit me either. That came from being out late at night. Well, you both better take a good rest after supper."

When Lester asked Alma to go out for a walk with him after supper as usual she hesitated. She became red in her face and tried in vain to raise her eyes up toward him. It happened to him likewise. Like two guilty ones they stood opposite each other.

"And you are still sore at me. I see it plainly," he said in an excited way. "I will give you my honor, Alma, that it will never occur again. I will feel awfully if you are afraid of me."

"I am not sore. I really haven't time to-day. And I am still tired from yesterday," she said while she forced herself to look at him. "Pardon me," she said in a tone that could hardly be heard, he then turned away and disappeared. In deep thought he

went his own way. Pain and sympathy took him away. Poor, poor Alma, what a strange thing, only the deep sorrow always grew. And this second sorrow will be a thousand times bitterer than the first, because he always remembered the heart going astray; it was an old truth, that often bitter sadness conceals itself deeper in the heart than that that lies buried in the cemetery. He could do nothing more for her. Therein lay a thorn for his strong nature.

He was one of the men that could not do enough for the woman he loved; he would have brought the stars down from heaven for her because he loved her and still more.

He saw her before him in the sleepy life of the lonely home that disregards all hearts; nothing could be done but drag herself along from year to year through a weary existence.

She was innocent and yet she was to be guilty. He could do nothing but free her from his presence before the misfortune still would be greater.

When he returned home at sunset, he met Alma in the corridor.

"Dearest." The word slipped from his mouth, and before he realized he spoke it and still he came with a heroic resolution. "I would like to ask you one question."

"Well." She stood and leaned against the wall shivering.

"Wouldn't it be better if I should go?" he said softly.

"Yes, yes," it seemed to whisper in her mind, but she looked at his eyes and she did not find the strength to hurt his feelings.

"I don't know," she said in a very quiet tone. "It is up to you."

Lester took hold of her hand. "I can still stand the burden," he murmured; "when I won't be able to stand it, I know that I must leave."

But also the best, the dearest will showed the heaviness itself.

Bad days came full of heart throbbing, full of unknown freedom, in all corners and ends of the village.

Days came in which a person tired himself out, and tried to observe the old sun shine, and saw over all dangerous opportunities.

"She weakens me out," thought Lester bitterly. It was really only the truth. She did not trust herself to be with him alone any more. So she always found different excuses while the hours that otherwise he was allowed to pass with her to work in the kitchen or cellar. Oh, and still it pulled her so close to him she had to take her entire strength to help herself to bite her teeth together, in order not to leave her work, and run to him.

Strange, painful feelings that were not guilty but sinful at the same time. It was nothing but merely

love. But Lester could not help it, he never did see Alma, his twin brother's sweetheart, and then his own old father's wife; all he got was letters from brother and father telling about her, and now that he saw her, he yearned for her.

And self-evident at present lies the force and danger of this feeling. It wasn't anything new that could be exterminated. It had already settled part of her way several years ago. If she already loved the living one while yet mourning for the dead one.

Alma knelt beside her bed crying and saying, "How shall I commence? Oh, God, help me; what shall I do?"

Yes, where was there an issue from the horrible confusion. The longing after the dead one, the love for the living brother, were inseparable, yes, even the figures, both whom she loved. She could not soften Lester without the feeling that she grieved Frank; she could not think at that time of her bride-ship, with all her gracious hopes without herself in her spirit in Lester's arms. How could she overcome the might that was pulling her to Lester?

Will not the hour come some day that she will become weak? "If he still wishes to go," thought she often in her bitter need, but then never to see him again—will it not seem to her just as if they were burying her Frank again?

"Both of you are so quiet together, what does this mean? Have you quarreled?" Mackwell asked one day in innocence.

Lester's face became red while he said, "Not exactly, father."

"Well, I hope not," Mackwell joked good-natured. "Understand yourself and do something for the child; she has enough heavy burdens to carry in her life, my son."

Several weeks later a letter arrived from Minister Owen; he wrote to Mackwell that they were talking over some church affairs and they wished him to come to Owen's home.

Alma did not think of anything until she helped Mackwell put on his cloak then all of a sudden a thought entered her mind, "What would this trip mean for her alone?"

"Can't you take me with you, father? I can be ready in ten minutes, the horses will stand quiet that long. Oh, please take me, please, father."

He studied for a few seconds; he would be very glad to take her with him, but not in a place where all ministers meet.

"Alma, I cannot take you with me to-day, and another thing, what do you want with us old men? You and Lester can entertain each other better. Enjoy yourself with him, because he is going to leave us soon."

Alma became pale. "It is better to be alone with Lester." Her whole soul shivered; yes, because she had to stay alone with him.

When the wagon turned the corner a fright took hold of Alma. She could have called after Mack-

well; she could have run after him; she could have begged him to take her with him. She could not stay here, this way alone without the pilot of her life's little ship. Oh, such weak hands! And now to-day the dignity was justice. With heavy steps she dragged herself into her room, locked the door and threw herself upon her bed. Here she could stay till at least five o'clock, she could let the supper hour pass on, but then it meant to appear in the dining-room, to fill the coffee cup, to pass the pastry to him just as if nothing ever happened, and two creatures will sit opposite one another.

When she unlocked the door to go downstairs it was dark already. Lester lit the lamp that stood on the dining-room table, then he stood by the window and looked out in the darkness.

"I kept you waiting so long, forgive me," she said faintly.

"Oh, that is the same to me," said he, while he pushed the coffee pot nearer to her. When she sat down in reach of the lamp, the blaze fell upon her.

"You don't look very good to-night; is there anything wrong?"

She held her hand on her forehead.

"Headache, then please don't talk," he said. He did not know how soft and tender his voice rang. No, she really did not have a headache, it was only the fright for her own weakness, that warble of the thoughts that this terrible feeling provoked. But Alma could not be quiet. "Father must be in C—

by this time." "Yes." Then the talk ceased again.

"Have you an idea how long he expects to stay?" he asked.

"No, but I think just as long as his strength allows him to."

"Florenceville don't require much strength, and we Mackwells are a long lived family."

"Frank," she called softly.

"Frank never was very strong, and the exception proved the rule. Do you think of him very much?" asked he.

Alma's head sank down. What shall a person answer such a question? Yes seemed just as well as no, and no seemed just as well as yes.

"I believe," came the answer finally. "You both seem to me as one; when I see you it seems to me as if I see Frank."

"So, so."

She looked at him and her thoughts entangled themselves as in a dream.

Why did she sit opposite from him? Her place was next to him.

She stroked herself over her eyes; this terrible resemblance will yet bring her sense.

"Poor Frank, he must have suffered terribly," said Lester.

"I do not know; the doctor hardly believed it himself; it also seemed to father and me that he did not suffer much pain."

Alma gathered the dishes from the table and car-

ried them out in the kitchen, and then took up some work, an everyday shirt for Mackwell; she held her eyes stern so that Lester could watch her secret from behind the lamp. Oh, how he loved her, if only he could whisper it in her ear. But it was all too late, she belonged to some one else. Oh, the pain for the pleasure that they could receive through each other!

"I did not mean it that way. Now he is near the goal, that is also something nice."

"Y-es, worse things happen than to be buried; a spoiled life is worse than that."

She became frightened. "In every orchard, and on every tree there are some branches that must be right, while others cannot grow just as they wish to."

"Alma—please don't cause me any more pain. I cannot listen to it any more," he called out; "you are too young," he said after a short pause.

"What is young?" she asked.

He laughed, but did not utter a word.

"Then according to your question I could ask what is old? When does old age commence?"

She looked down on the floor in front of herself.

"Perhaps when the heart will be quiet, when not disturbed so much, and not found happiness, and when wishes cease."

"Are you that far already?" he asked slowly.

She softened at his glance.

"I—don't know sometime—I think—"

"What?"

She did not answer him. She traced the further danger of every word. He felt himself powerless; oh, he understood her ways so well; she suffered for him and also through him and he could not touch one finger to help her out. He could only when his self possession let him; perhaps he would make her unhappier than she was.

How could it also be other wise, when all thoughts revolved on one point only? It also happened likewise to Alma. The quietness pressed upon her like a ban which she still did not know how to break. Whenever Lester started to talk she always shrugged herself together thinking what is he going to say next? A noise is heard now.

“Is some one coming?” Lester asked. The door rattled. “I know; it is Gertrude, I allowed her to go to her sick aunt.”

“Oh, that’s it.”

It always seemed quieter and quieter in the house and also around the house. The cuckoo clock ticked loud and hard; time passes—passes—passes. Lester jumped up and commenced to pace the floor. A thought ran through his mind just like a sharp knife. “You are alone, yes, entirely alone.”

When he now realized that the violent longing of his heart yielded, it rose to his head, he pulled out his handkerchief from his pocket; the sweat stood on his forehead in big drops; his phantasy became dangerous; he indeed felt that she loved him.

Oh, if the time would only come that he could hold

her in his arms and kiss from her lips the sweet painful confession that they then had to part for all time, yes, for all time.

But dare not a person snatch one hour of happiness, when remembrance comes back to him of his weary years past? and now he would have to part from her; the clock ticks, the time passes—passes—passes.

Why not make use of the hour that will never come again? who will know it? no one sees. Alma lay in her sofa corner very pale; she put her work away, and, frightened, she followed his motions. She knew what his intentions were; oh, she felt also the unutterable pain. It seemed to her as if she stood on a narrow dam, and nearer and nearer the flume hummed. If only the dam would tear and the upright will of a man too would break down.

“Lester, what have you there?” She did not know her own voice, it rang so strange and shaking. He stood by the book shelf and then pulled out a small volume, then another, then put it back again. Upon her call he came to the table and she saw what he really had in his hand. “Wouldn’t you like to read a little to me?” she said.

He threw himself speechless on a chair; yes, he wished to read to her then the terrible evening would pass. Finally he commenced to read.

My heart is wasted with my woe,
There is no rest for me below.

When the ground is covered with snow
And loud the north winds blow
Alone I wander to and fro.
I cry aloud, none hear my cries,
Thou comest between me and the skies!
I feel the tears of my blood arise
Up from my heart into my eyes
Within thy heart my arrow lies.

He stopped and looked at her with flaming eyes.

Beneath his look weakness and weariness crept through all of her veins; both arms dropped down on each side, but with a last straining she quickly collected herself and stood up and then looked at the clock.

"Pardon me that I have disturbed you, I must go into the kitchen." "Why?" "It is supper time." "Are you hungry?" he asked. "No, but it must be done." Then with unsteady steps just as a sleep walker she left the room and went into the kitchen; then in the kitchen she stood by the table cleaning dishes and jars with trembling hands.

"Oh, God, what will happen?" The impression of this fighting was indeed dangerous as the desire itself. She stayed in the kitchen just as long as possible, but as the soup was already cooked at dinner time, all that was necessary was for it to be warmed up. Then when she had the table set, she had nothing more to do but go in the living-room to Lester. She stood in the door for a second with her hands

pressed upon her lips. After gasping she then called out: "Lester."

He sat at the table, his face buried in his hands; he turned his head slowly, asking, "What is it?"

"Please come to supper."

He got up and walked to his place at the table without looking at her, his face pale and disturbed.

Alma offered prayer. It rang almost like the cry of terror of a heart that pleads from the depth of temptation to the nearness of the beloved. But she was not at all conscious of her tone and expression. With shivering hands she took hold of the soup-ladle.

"Not so much please?"

He ate without uttering a word, but Alma hardly ate a spoonful. He leaned himself back in his chair, his hand that lay flat on the table, pushed the knife rest mechanically and nervously to and fro.

And around the house not a sound was heard, but the calmness of the winter-night, and this frightful stay at home.

Suddenly she looked at him, and he understood her glance, with that she pleaded. "Do not use your might this way," she pleaded, "for faithfulness and honor." He jumped up, pushed his chair aside and left the room immediately. Alma dragged herself back into the dark living-room; there she sank down upon the sofa and pressed her face upon her arms. She felt that her last strength was wasted. Lester stayed away long, endlessly long as it seemed to her.

“What is he doing?” She began to get excited; listen, just now his door made a squeak and it rang through the quiet house, and now the well-known steps came down the stairs. He stood before the dining-room for a few seconds. Alma’s heart commenced to hammer hard, and she almost vanished. It seemed to her as if her hearing ceased, and yet every organ was awake. She heard every move of the one that stood by the door. But what does this mean? The steps went further over the floor, then through the veranda, and the door on the outside rattled very hard. The door seemed to say everything is done for now. As Alma came to his knowledge and realized what had happened she jumped up and went to the window, and looked out. In the light that shone from the dining-room upon the farm, she recognized Lester. He carried a traveling grip in his hand; now he was at the gate; he opened it and went out without looking around once. How he turned around the corner; the bare elderberry bush by him took away his glance. Involuntarily she stretched her arms forth; never before did he seem so dear to her, as now when he found strength to go, to be true to himself and to her also; now she realized and thought of the words that he spoke one day. “If he could stand the burden no longer he would leave.”

Then she sank her head on her chest; the white face twisted itself painfully. “Now I will never see him again,” she murmured; she stepped a few more

steps forward; it became dark before her eyes and she fell unconscious to the floor.

This is just how Mackwell found her when he returned home early the next morning; he entered his son's room to tell him that Alma was going to clean his room, he found a letter on the table which Lester wrote and it read as follows:

“MY DEAR FATHER,

Forgive me that I left your home without bidding you good-by. I had to go to Lottie next week, so I looked into the matter and made up my mind to leave at once, that was the best for us all. There are many things that come over a person in everyday life, therefore I knew that I could not face you without blushing so I had to go at once. Perhaps you will not quite understand me, but don't worry yourself with thoughts and suspicion, but if you have understood me I beg you from my whole heart, forgive me, and be assured that no one is guilty but myself.

“YOUR LESTER.”

Mackwell's hand sank down and the letter fell to the floor. What had happened then? What does Lester mean? It was impossible. His spirit was oppressed with unbelief and helpless against the dawning knowledge. Following the long custom, instinct, he hunted up Alma. Just the same as ever when he

became frightened or troubled, she would help him solve.

She had forced herself to get up and sat by the window white as a sheet, her heart so full of fright-end grief just as much for the father as for the son.

“Dear Alma, please look at this letter. Do you understand it?”

She did not stretch forth her hand to take the letter, she only looked at him with a glance because she knew what was up. But her glance told him everything. He stood motionless for several seconds. Was it really true?

She dragged herself to him, and put her arms around his neck. “Father; dear father, please don’t be angry.” Mackwell shook his head sadly saying, “I ought to have known this beforehand, but how could I?” And then with a shattered voice he said, “How could I?” Really he belonged to the creatures that became old, without ever being young. The need and temptation of hearts he only knew from books that he read.

“Don’t be angry,” she pleaded again; and he saw her clean pleading, and it almost felt as that of a child, almost overcome in anguish of soul and self-confession here in his arms. How nice and natural everything would have been; how happy he alone would have greeted them. But now he stood in her way to happiness. “Poor thing,” he said, “poor thing, it won’t help now; we must carry the burden, you and I.”

She cried loud and disconcerted. He stroked her hair, "just cry and when you are finished I hope you will feel better, my child; did you love him so much?"

"Yes; I really don't know how it happened, the resemblance to Frank," she sobbed.

"That is just what I thought. Yes, but don't hide anything from me any more," he uttered. "Always tell me how you feel and what you think."

"I will try and God will help me," she sobbed.

"You know that no one means as well by you as I," he said. "Do you believe it?" Did she really believe it? With her quiet life she had the understanding that he might thank her. He pulled her to his side upon the sofa and he let her cry with her head on his chest until her tears dried up, but then he got the pain.

"We both were so happy together," said he sadly and quietly. She found nothing but the passionate wish to comfort him.

"You have been very good to me," she whispered. "I will be good again, and all will be well and good."

"So, not yet, my child, that is why he left, he will never come back to me again. My last son." His words seemed to be on Alma's mind day and night and therefore did not leave her any rest. Finally it drove her forcibly to the writing desk. Quick before it would be too late. It should happen just what a heart desires.

“MY DEAR BROTHER,

“It must not happen that you leave your old father without a parting word; let this omission be no barrier between you both. There are things that a person must arrange at once, or they would entangle themselves always more.

“Life is too short—so uncertain should it be father’s last remembrance of you, that his own son, a captain, would flee from his own home? You dare not do this to him. And for his sake I beg you to come back. Even if your time is so short, do not let us part as two torn apart by the storm. Let us shake hands together once more as two friends when the evening and time comes to depart. My pleading is great, but I also have a great support, I trust you therefore, my brother.”

The letter arrived at his Sister Lottie’s address, but the answer never came back. Mrs. Dawson wrote a letter at once that her brother visited them for a few hours, and that was all she saw of him. Mackwell did not mention Lester’s name but he grieved and worried himself without saying a word to Alma. “If I could only see him once more that I knew how he stands.” He often sighed while he sat in his study, but Alma knew what he suffered and the realization was that he did not say anything just to spare her.

Alma brought a warm thankful touch in her;

yes an entire new feeling for him that it made it possible to command her own longing and her good humor. Whether in our sorrow, yet in our happiness we ourselves belong so long only.

One day along in March, just when Mackwell returned from a little village, he saw a coach driving along the road. He paid little attention to it until the coach stopped and a man got out and started to walk to the house. He recognized his son, calling out, "My son, Lester."

"Father!"

Alma had not noted it, being together daily, but the son saw it on the first glance, how pale the old face became, how bent the figure. It humbled him so deeply. The old man looked straight in his eyes. For several minutes man stood against man. Then the father conquered in him the over hand entirely and forever. He opened his arms just the same as before when little Lester had done wrong. "That is all right, my son, don't think about me. You were temptation's master. That is enough for men," he murmured. But he could not yet crush a reproach. "You have caused the child much pain. Couldn't you spare the heart's sadness for her?" Lester did not answer at once. Where in this world of error it gave the clear-sighted eye to realize in one moment, where passion would have barred the door.

"You can believe me that I carry my punishment,"

said he. Mackwell took hold of Lester's arm without uttering a word; this way both walked toward the house. "I just came to take," Lester commenced after a short while. "I must go right after the horses get a little rest. Now do not be frightened, it is not as serious as you take it to be. I hope that I have not been so unsteady that I could not stay one day by you, but I pushed this trip away always longer, in order to be more quiet. Now the weather is fair so I must go back on sea. And to-morrow morning I leave to arrange things and get my crew again."

Mackwell sighed deeply. "A thing cannot be done against your going; I suppose it can't be helped."

"Perhaps not. But isn't this all right when I allow myself to be told that everything is all right between us all again? Am I going to go with your blessing, father?"

Mackwell stood still. "The Lord bless you and protect you," he commenced then all of a sudden his voice ceased, and he could not bring the accustomed words to an end. It really wasn't necessary.

"Where is Alma?" Lester asked, when they entered the veranda. "I would like to see her again, but you must be with us, father."

Mackwell shook his head. "No, you can be alone. I trust you, my son."

"I thank you, father."

And then he stood opposite Alma. How she had

tried to make herself to lie, but all was in vain, whatever she wished to say; now all of a sudden it seemed to her as if everything was quiet around her heart, as if all fright and unrest fell away from her at his look, and nothing is left but the wish to help him away in this hour. He was real pale and earnest; his voice ceased. "I came because it was your desire, when I looked into the matter I saw that you were correct," he commenced.

She looked at him with a quiet glance. "I thank you from my whole heart; I could have never thought of you again; this would have stayed between us. Thank God that I dare think of you again," she said.

She gave him her hand and he pulled her close to him and kissed her. "I can now be happy again upon meeting with my brother. See, all of this have you given me back to-day," she said.

"You won," he said softly, "but I still stand in the center of the fight." Her laughing under tears tore his heart, but he felt that there was nothing more to say. Give me at least one of your pictures before we part," he asked. "If only one of them that belonged to Frank."

She hesitated. "I think I better not," she said, "what we should be to one another can stay without such a remembrance." He stood still.

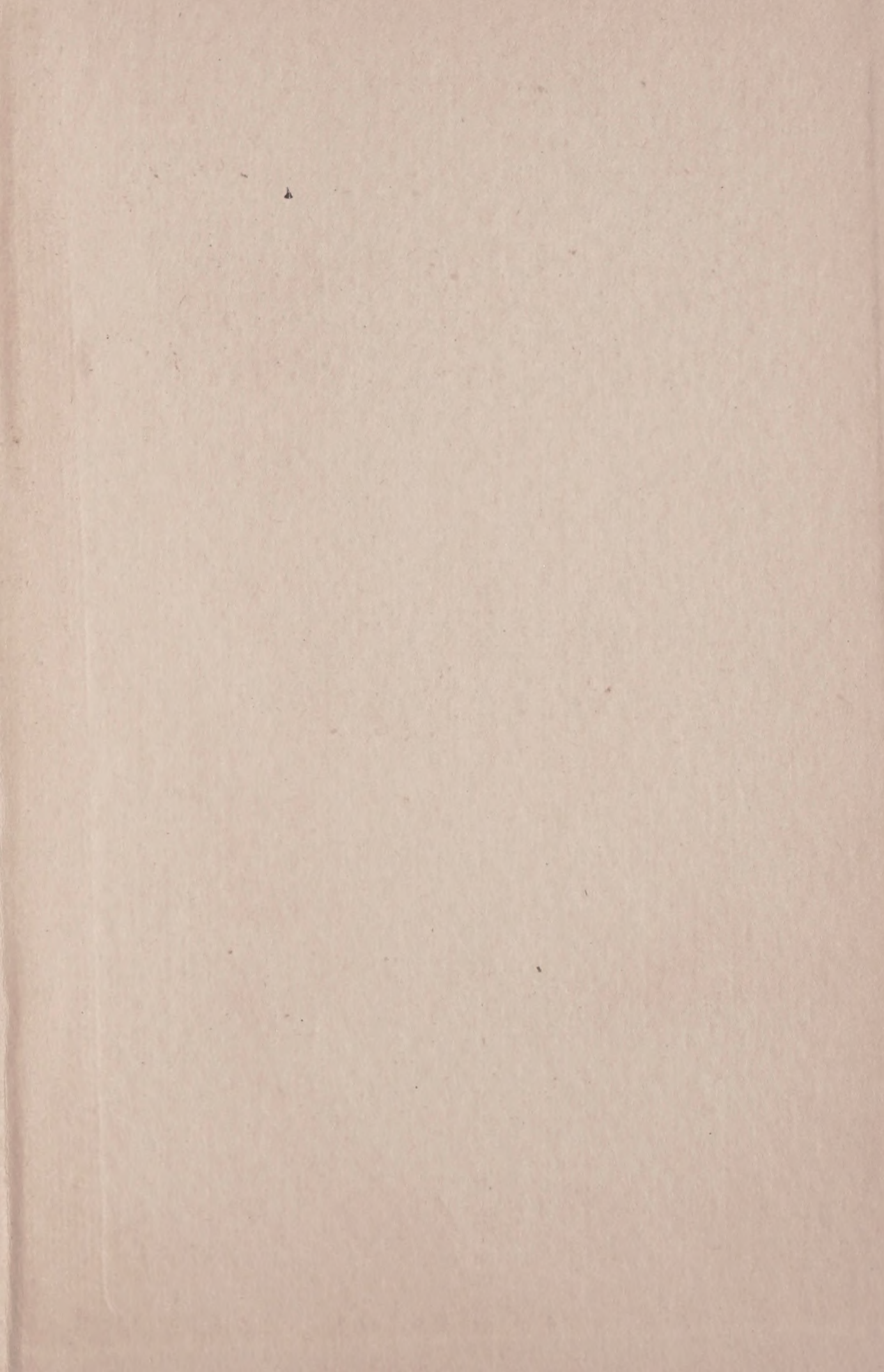
"When you bring me your little wife, some day, I will then have a new picture made for my new sister," she said, smiling.

He shook his head. "That will never occur."

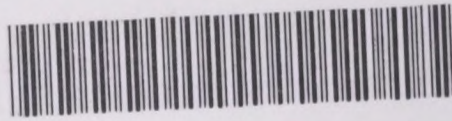
Here she held his hand tightly with both of hers, "still I hope, I hope my prayer will be answered for you every day," said Alma softly.

END.





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