



The
LITTLE FIDDLER
of the
OZARKS



JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS



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THE LITTLE FIDDLER
OF THE OZARKS



SEATED ON THE LEDGE NEAR THIS ENTRANCE, WITH HER FEET IN THE SPLASHING WATER-FALL, WAS NORRIS.

✓

THE
LITTLE FIDDLER
OF THE OZARKS

A NOVEL

BY
JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS
Author of "Fran," "The Soul of a Serf," etc.

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ORIGINAL ILLUSTRATIONS BY H. S. DELAY ✓



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To
My Mother
In Memory of
Bright Ozark Days

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THE LITTLE FIDDLER OF THE OZARKS

CHAPTER I

IN THE WILDERNESS

WITH the murmur of the forest and the quick rush of a mountain stream, mingled the groaning of a heavy wagon, as it made its way through the solitudes of the Ozark Plateau. Sometimes when the vehicle with its burden of tent and camp-furniture began sliding down shelving ledges of rock, nothing saved it from being dashed into the valley but the catching of its massive wheels in age-worn ruts. When, at rare spaces, the horses traversed real earth, their hoofs left little more impression than upon the stones. Occasionally shallow pools extended across the road, but the driver, a native of the country, never paused, knowing they would find no mud.

After splashing through a body of water as extensive as a small lake, the young man, who was seated on the folded tent at the rear, called to the driver—"In my country, standing water means trouble."

"Yap," said the heavy-set and heavily-whiskered driver, "you gents come from the black lands, I reckon."

The young man's friend, who shared the driver's seat, nodded. This friend, Rodney Bates, was middle-aged, jolly of countenance, bronzed from much exposure, tall and broad-shouldered, with the faculty of quickly making friends and easily forgetting them.

Claude Walcott knew his friend's disposition so thoroughly, that he often wondered at Bates's persistent remembrance of the mysterious creature whom he called "the Beautiful Woman." Bates had seen her but once, two years ago, when on a hunting trip in the Ozarks; but the bachelor of forty never tired of describing her wondrous charms; the young man of twenty-four, who had never seen her at all, had formed a mental image sufficiently alluring to cause him to hope that she had not left the neighborhood.

The driver continued, chewing industriously, "Yap. When rain falls here, it's for keeps. It just stays like visitors I've knowed which they can't git away. I've saw a pool of water stand in the road—the same pool and the same road—from apple-blossoming to gethering-time. It may of went then, I quit noticing. Being ten mile from any railroad, I have got to be a considerable observer of Nature."

Rodney Bates inquired, "Aren't we near the place where Wolf Branch empties into Possum Creek? The wedge of land formed by the intersection, is where we

pitch camp. That young fellow—"nodding backwards at Claude Walcott—"bought up the wedge with a thousand acres around it, and he wants to take possession in the center of his domain."

"I ain't never saw that wedge of land for to regard it as property, but I know Wolf Branch and I know Possum Creek. Where they join forces ain't far from here, but it's like this: in the Ozarks you have to go a long ways to git anywheres. If I was a bird, it'd be different, but I ain't, and you neither. We'll have to pass through Ozarka—And speaking of Ozarka, ever hear of a fellow called Giles Gradley?"

"Sure!" Bates beamed jovially. "That's the man who has employed me to drill on his land for oil. I sent on my walking-beam, and so forth, a week ago. My young friend is going to camp out and play for a few weeks while I work myself to death. Do you know Mr. Gradley? Have a cigar!"

"Nuck, thanky. Keep your fire lit, but I stands by my pumps. Ever see him?"

"Giles Gradley? No—he saw a write-up about me, as an expert driller, and wired me in Kansas City—where this young friend of mine pretends to be busy in a real estate office. What sort of chap is your Mr. Gradley?"

"I don't know how to lay before you what is in my mind," was the slow response. "I ain't trained. I'm in a state of nature, having been to school not very fre-

quent, though you might not think it. My name is Peter Poff which you have neither one asked it, but the same is Peter Poff, most usually 'Pete.' Now I have a brother which *his* name is Bud—Bud Poff. You ask Bud about Giles Gradley. Bud, he don't like him—nor I—but who does?"

Claude Walcott, paying no attention to these words, gazed pensively into the dark recesses of the forest. "Rod," he shouted, to make himself heard above the groaning and straining of the wagon and the clatter of the horses' hoofs, "if we are getting near Ozarka, we must be near the spot where you were hunting, two years ago, when the bushes parted and you saw the most beautiful *dear—ahem!* I believe you said your gun was cocked and aimed, but you were too startled to fire. Do you suppose she—*it*—is still roaming the woods, and that we—"

Rodney raised his voice to drown out such indiscreet badinage: "Why don't you like Mr. Gradley?"

Peter Poff struggled painfully for adequate words. "I've never heard of his harming no one. He goes charging about at times, on a big black hoss, whooping and hollering like a crazy man. He keeps the store in Ozarka, but he's nobody's friend. Ain't that enough to say of any man, to place him in a niche to hisself? Now me, I'm like an appletree that ain't never been trimmed nor sprayed nor fertilized; nobody looks for a full crop out of me, but they knows that what fruit I does bear is of my own raising with a good sound core to it and

not much as to appearances. But Giles Gradley with all his education and advantages, sprayed and digged about as he is, bears fruit rotten to the heart."

Claude, still musing, called, "How big a town is Ozarka?"

"Just about as big as Giles Gradley," returned Peter. "Yonder's his store, now; and over there's the blacksmith shop; and that's *him*; and here we are, our own selves."

The road wrenched itself out of a tangled undergrowth and mounted to a small clearing. Only two buildings were visible, the blacksmith shop on one side, and across the way, the shanty of a single square room, built flat upon the ground, showing above its only doorway the red-lettered sign—

STORE

The attention of those in the wagon was at once caught by the slight form of a girl, or young woman, who had paused before the store entrance. Her head was concealed beneath a large sunbonnet, and as her face was turned from the wagon, Claude could not discern any of her features. Nevertheless, in spite of the plain homespun dress and the size of the bonnet which seemed preposterously out of proportion, Claude was struck by a certain grace in her manner of standing, which he had not expected to find in the wilderness. Her feet and hands were small and well-formed, and the shawl which

hung from her shoulders, was marked with red bars that gave a dull relief to the lonely picture. Near at hand stood a pecan-tree to which was fastened a large and powerfully-built black horse.

"That's his'n," muttered Peter, as he checked the wagon. "If you-all ever meet Giles Gradley on that there hoss, give him all the road he can cover."

"Is that his wife, in the doorway?" Claude inquired, staring curiously at the slender figure, and wishing he might see under the bonnet.

Peter did not heed the inquiry.

From the blacksmith shop came the sound of hammering. Just within the brooding gloom of the interior, the smith was shoeing a horse, his face painted in crimson hues from the flaring furnace. The owner of the horse waited outside, his legs slightly bent outward at the knees, his thin shoulders stooping forward, his jaws, like Peter's, ever at work.

"Hello, Bud," Peter called. "Anybody in town but you?"

The tall, lank man made no answer. Silently chewing, he stared at Rodney Bates and Claude Walcott with profound interest.

"Is he hard of hearing?" Claude suggested, as he leaped to the ground to stretch his cramped limbs.

"Nuck. He heerd all right," Peter answered, climbing slowly from the seat. "There ain't nobody else in

town, or he'd of answered. Bud, he don't never say nothing, when they ain't nothing to say."

Bates nodded toward the store, and said cautiously, "Let's have a peep at your terrible Giles Gradley."

While he was descending from the wagon, Claude stood looking at the motionless girl before the store, and beyond her, at the wild and solitary landscape which seemed a fit setting for her desolate figure. Beyond the rusty wheels and broken-down wagon-beds that were strewn on both sides of the road, a hill rose abruptly toward the south. The wagon-road they must soon take, wound cautiously back and forth across the face of its steep ascent, showing like a broad red scar across a background of green.

Far beyond the fringed edge of the hilltop, separated from it by fields of rarified air, was to be seen a faint blue wavering line like a careless circle drawn around a picture of the world. It was one of the ramparts of the Ozarks, barely touched into perception by the brilliancy of the setting sun.

Claude stood gazing at the lofty hill, wondering at its slim straight trees with their freedom from brushwood, and at the bold show of massy ledges with their black mouths of unexplored caves. He breathed deeply of the invigorating air. After cramped city life, his soul expanded momentarily. From all about, he derived a sense of freedom and of adventure.

He grasped Bates' arm, saying, "It means being away

from everything and everybody! It's goodby to collars and cuffs and all that they stand for. And while I'm camping out this summer, I don't want to meet a man or woman or child; I want to fish and rest up. Of course, if we should come across that Beautiful—"

Bates broke away, and started toward the store. Claude followed, exulting over prospects of a summer's wild liberty which might be terminated or prolonged at pleasure; thrilled with a sense of his nearness to the charm and mystery of an unknown world; ready to find adventure in the meeting of the first stranger, or romance under the first sunbonnet.

CHAPTER II

THE GIRL IN THE SUNBONNET

AS Claude and the expert driller followed Peter Poff to the little store, the girl who, up to that moment, had shown no sign of life, turned as if to depart. The young man looked eagerly to find if her face was such as her graceful bearing prompted him to hope; but the big sunbonnet was still in the way.

She had taken but a step when a man appeared in the doorway, his face in shadow. She paused, and the new-comers were able to catch some of the words that passed. Her voice sounded in earnest pleading—

“But he is only a boy—Jim is only a boy.”

The man in the doorway laughed harshly: “Time will cure that.”

“And he can’t know any better,” she went on with her entreaty. “He has never seen any other kind of life. His father is bad—bad at heart.”

The store-keeper’s laughter grew harsher. “So! He’s like your own father, hey? Good! Like your own father, girl, bad at heart!”

The young woman—for her voice and speech proved her not the child her slight form suggested, clasped her hands and uttered a smothered cry.

The man's manner changed. He spoke with cold authority, but not in anger—"Go home." Then to the new-comers, he added in the same uninviting voice, "Gentlemen, good evening."

Peter Poff and Rodney Bates went into the room, and Bates introduced himself as the expert driller employed by Giles Gradley.

"I am Giles Gradley," said the man, giving Bates a piercing look from under heavy brows. "You are in good time, sir."

Claude lingered just outside the door. The quality of the girl's voice, and her evident emotion, moved him deeply. He stood watching her dejected figure as it slowly passed along the road beyond the blacksmith shop. Though young, there was no elasticity of youth in her step, no girlhood in the bowed head and listless arms. Was she overwhelmed by the taunt of Giles Gradley—"Your own father . . . bad at heart!" What disgrace rested upon this young woman's father, that the cold-hearted merchant should cast it in her teeth? And what was the petition he had so roughly denied? When she had vanished among the dwarf pines of the hillside, he turned to study the other more attentively.

Giles Gradley was slightly built, rather below the average height. His appearance would have been insignificant but for the head, of great size, which, though too large for the slender frame, did not strike the observer as incongruous, because the face challenged atten-

tion with its impress of power and indefinable charm. In the beauty of the luminous, speaking eyes a magnetic appeal reached from the depths through a careful veil of mocking recklessness. The firm mouth concealed beneath its heavy brown mustache a hard line of defiant power. The brow was smooth, white, pulsating with intelligence, and that suggestion of power was found again in the heavy lines of the cheek, especially below the eye, and in the set of the jaw. Moreover, there was a mysterious hint of an unusual past in the shadowy smile which was always mocking, and in the gleam of the brown eyes which was sometimes a glare.

Claude's conclusion was embodied in a question, unspoken, "What has this man done, to exile himself from his kind?"

Rodney Bates asked himself, "Why has this rascal come to the wilderness to hide?" His mind was not complex, and recollections of the girl's pleading, and of Gradley's harsh rebuff were enough to furnish him with grounds for dislike of his employer. Business details respecting future drilling were quickly arranged, then Bates wanted to go.

He refused Gradley's proffered flask. "My young friend doesn't like the stuff," he said, waving his hand, "and I like it too well."

Gradley flushed, and Peter, fearing an outbreak of anger, exclaimed, "Gimme mine, Mr. Gradley, I'm always agreeable."

Gradley fixed Bates with a stern look. "I suppose you heard that girl begging me not to sell any more whisky to a boy who happens to be the son of a drunkard. But you are a man of the world, doubtless. How can one man ruin another? What nonsense! You might make me a pauper; you might kill me—bah! that's nothing. Ruin comes from disintegration—one falls to bits within—that's how a man's ruined—from within."

"Maybe so," returned Bates, with something like hostility, "but I guess other folks can help him along down hill."

"Good work, then!" said Gradley. "If a man *will* ruin himself, why delay the agony? If the story must end bad, one volume's better than three. The world is so crowded with good men that there's hardly enough air for them, as it is; yet they persist in trying to reform the weak rascals instead of getting them out of the way—fools!" He smiled with exceeding bitterness.

"Which are the fools?" inquired Claude, interestedly.

Gradley's smile deepened to a sneer. "Men are all alike. Some are bad for what they get out of being bad; the rest are good for what they get out of being good. There's a door in every man's soul that opens toward hell,—if you could find the key to fit the lock. I know men because I know myself. A fool can't know his inner self, and a hypocrite denies his knowledge. I'm not a fool, and I won't lie—that's a very unusual combination, you must admit! Well, because I know myself,

I know how any man will laugh if you can find the spot that tickles."

"Just so," Bates abruptly interposed. "And I'll be out to your place in the morning; if there's zinc, or lead, or oil, I'll find it."

Gradley who had been greatly moved, doubtless by his recent interview with the girl, instantly grew calm. "And would you like to stay at my house? We are prepared to entertain you there."

"Thanks, no. My friend Walcott has brought his tent, and as his land is near your place, I'll just bunk with him."

"As you please—but you'll find it more convenient to eat with me."

He escorted them to the wagon, with no return of his strange manner, but when they were in their places, he leaped upon his black horse, and shot like an arrow into the forest.

Claude watched him vanish, unconsciously frowning. "Who looks after the store while that creature is away?" he asked.

"Oh, the store's all right," said Peter, starting up his horses. "The fear of Giles Gradley takes care of it."

CHAPTER III

VOICES OF THE FOREST

LET'S get out of here as quick as we can," Rodney Bates urged. "I don't like Ozarka, just because Gradley lives in it."

Peter Poff clicked his tongue at the horses. "You've went and ruffled him, sure enough," he answered, "but I want to say that when you go to work on his place, if you've got sharp edges, better trim 'em off."

As they passed the blacksmith shop, Peter shouted to his brother, "Hi, Bud, we're all coming to the hop tomorrow night, the whole ship's crew of us. Does the Little Fiddler know the day and the hour?"

From the profusion of hair and whiskers which met and interlocked, Bud Poff's eyes shone like red suns. He vouchsafed no reply.

Peter drove on, chuckling. "The Little Fiddler will be there, all right, else Bud would of said something."

Claude was engrossed with the picturesque beauty of the scene. Slowly they wound their way up the road that cut across the face of the lofty hill, finding here and there, one-room cabins built upon piles with no fence to separate the habitations from the wilderness. The dwarf pines showed a vivid green above the darker hues of the



THE YOUNG WOMAN CLASPED HER HANDS AND UTTERED
A SMOTHERED CRY.— *Page 15.*

post oaks, and as they rose higher and higher, they left behind them the gathering shadows, as if pursuing the fugitive sun. At the top of the hill they came into the yellow light which cast shadows of gigantic size from the very weeds. Between them and the blue haze of far-away mountain peaks was a sea of clear radiance in which the world seemed submerged.

As they started down the other side of the hill, the sun-flash deserted them, and cool shadows came trooping up from the valley. Suddenly Bates gave expression to what had been brooding in his mind:

"I can't account for it. Seems that your Giles Gradley has stirred up all the evil of my nature. When I bored for oil in Pennsylvania and Kansas, I was thrown with tough customers; I've been a placer-miner out in California, and *that* was no angel's camp; but somehow Giles Gradley doesn't so much impress me with the thought that *he* is bad, as that I might be, on occasion, if, as he puts it, the key were found to unlock my door. You know I'm not a moralist. Whenever I find wickedness, I just go ahead and leave it there. I'm sorry I'm to work for a fellow that puts all the teeth of my nature on edge. Claude—does he haunt you?"

Claude reflected. "He's a very unusual-looking man. He treated that girl like a brute, and he sells whisky to minors, but he was pleasant enough to us."

"It wasn't about the girl or the whisky," Bates maintained. "My conscience is as seasoned as anybody's. No,

there's something about Gradley that makes me think less of myself. I can't shake off his influence."

"It's the darkness that's creeping about us," Claude suggested. "Poff, you know Gradley pretty well, don't you?"

"I don't know him a-tall," said Peter with a promptitude that showed him eager to enter the conversation. "Nor nobody else don't, I reckon. I was born and raised hereabouts, more I couldn't be; and Giles Gradley was never saw in these parts till about five year ago, and where he come from, who can tell? You'd have to get on the insides of Gradley to know what's there, and he don't let nobody in. There his mind sits, looking out of them big brown eyes, a-hiding secrets and keeping guard."

"What makes you think he has secrets to guard?"

"I don't know why I think nothing. When thoughts takes roots and gets to blossoming in my brain, I never digs down to find out why they's growing. Nothing ain't cultivated about me. Giles Gradley is hiding a secret that makes him a misery to hisself and a terror to the whole neighborhood. So I think; but I don't know why I think it, and dinged if I keer."

"Your brother spoke of a dance," murmured Claude, by way of diversion.

"They ain't no company," Peter persisted, "like a feller's thoughts. *But*—if I was to take up my stand at my mind's door, and say to every thought that drewed

near, 'Where did *you* come from, Sonny? Who was *your* daddy and mammy?'—pretty soon my brain would be as empty as a last-year's bird's nest."

"Where is that dance to be?"

"At my brother Bud's. How'd you like to come? He's due west of your land, and just four mile; you couldn't miss the barn; and if you're in the neighborhood at the hour, you'll sure hear the hollering. You hike out there tomorrow night, and if you beat me to the joint, tell 'em I give you a ticket."

"Thank you. The fact is, I've come down here, to get away from people and their balls and—society in general. Still, by tomorrow night I may be ready to vary my solitude. Who is the Little Fiddler?"

"City man," said Peter, briefly.

The steep descent called for heavy brakes with consequent hideous nerve-wracking screams so that conversation was necessarily suspended. Before they reached the bottom of the hill they crossed a foot-trail winding around the pyramid of rocks, trees and red earth.

Claude, eager for every glimpse of his new world, examined the narrow path attentively and was suddenly startled to find it swarming with mountain-folk, all young people, who must have leaped from overhanging cliffs, since they could not have risen, as they seemed to rise, from the very ground. Their backs were toward the wagon, and without looking around, though they must

have heard the groaning of the wheels, they darted away along the footpath, shouting at the top of their voices—

“The Green Witch! The Green Witch!”

“What in the name of all that’s wonderful!” ejaculated Rodney Bates. “Who is the Green Witch and where do you keep her?”

Peter Poff muttered something fiercely and releasing the brakes, let the horses plunge downward. As they jolted furiously along, he said audibly, “I don’t know nothing of it.”

“But what could all those boys and girls have meant?” demanded Claude. “They seemed to be chasing something through the pines. If you have witches in these parts, so much the better; they’ve all been expelled from my country.”

Peter did not open his mouth till the valley was reached. Then he resumed, as if no interruption had come.

“The Little Fiddler is as tony as I am un-tony. He comes down here, occasional, from Springfield, Missouri, and us boys that gets up the hop, chips in to foot the bill. There ain’t nobody in the Ozarks can lay over the Little Fiddler. He can hold that fiddle behind his back and shut his eyes and sorter go to sleep, like—and first thing you know, you hear the turkeys a-scratching in the straw, or the devil getting out his hornpipe, and all creation shutting up house and hitching up their canvas-top wagons for to be Arkansaw travelers. That’s *one* thing. But again, when he holds the fiddle to his

chin and humps hisself over it—him propped against it, and it propped against the heavenliest music that was ever tore from a fiddle's entrails—well sir, you'd give your best span of mules to be a woman, so's you could just sit down and cry. That's the Little Fiddler. They ain't much meat to his bones, and yet I do say that in that there puny body of his'n, there's enough condensed music to make soup for a thousand church-choirs."

Claude glanced at his friend, but Bates had not heard these enthusiastic words. Usually light-hearted, even noisily jolly, the expert driller was now silent, with an expression somewhat moody upon his dark face.

"Bates," Claude reproached him, "stop brooding over that Gradley of the black horse, and hear about our musical attractions. Open your eyes—who knows but that beautiful wild animal you've so often described may jump out of the brush just ahead? This is the scene of your romance of two years ago. Be alive—and be chummy. And don't let the Green Witch ride into your brain on her invisible broomstick!"

Rodney Bates shook himself. "Don't know what's come over me," he growled humorously. "That Gradley has set me thinking of all the meanness I ever committed. Bah!" Again he relapsed into frowning meditation.

It was intensely dark when the wagon stopped at the confluence of Wolf Branch and Possum Creek. Claude recalled the day when, standing before the court house steps in St. Louis with the noise of the city ringing in

his ears, he had bought these thousand acres for a thousand dollars. Now that he saw his land for the first time, there was nothing to indicate that the foot of man had ever disturbed its profound repose.

A huge bonfire presently distinguished the tall slender trees so closely set together that little space was left for undergrowth—post oaks, red oaks, blackjacks which had waited until high up in the world before reaching our ambitious arms. By aid of the roaring flames one could look far up the hill, for the smooth slim boles seemed to stand aside that the eye might travel at its ease; overhead was an almost unbroken ceiling of green—underfoot, a thick mouldy carpet of last year's leaves hid the naked earth. Here and there through the dead brown, pushed a tuft of wild grass, or gleamed a patch of vivid moss.

“Glorious!” Claude declared. “I take possession—we should have a flag, or a sword, or at least, firecrackers.”

“If we don't go to work in a jiffy,” returned Bates, “morning will overtake us.”

Halfway up the hill the tent was pitched upon a rounded promontory, that insured safety against down-rushing torrents. After the heavy boxes had been arranged along the sides, the canvas canoe was unfolded and anchored at the margin of Possum Creek which flowed at the foot of the hill, thirty steps away.

As they took their supper from tins, Claude exulted in the playing flames, in the dancing shadows. After a

hard year's battle in the city to save extensive property interests which had been seriously threatened, he found the darkness, the isolation, and the solemn grandeur of the hills as so many assets of his new possession—the interest on a good investment.

"I'm glad I'm here," he exclaimed expansively, when the meal was ended and they were stretching their legs before the fire. "It seems to me I'll never want to go back to my bachelor apartments or to the office. If there were near relatives to miss me, it would be different, perhaps, but I feel more like a brother to these forest trees than to the boys in Kansas City. Why not thrust our roots deep into the soil and let storms or birds come? Couldn't you sit here forever watching the flapping of the flames?"

"Nuck," spoke up Peter Poff, stiffly rising. "I'm so sleepy I don't believe there's a place flat enough for me to lay onto." He stumbled over to the wagon, wrapped himself in a blanket, and sought what flatness there might be under the wagon-bed. In the morning, he was to drive Bates over to Gradley's land for he had agreed to serve as the driller's assistant.

"I guess," Bates said, at last, "I'll have to take my meals at Gradley's, but I'll tramp back here to sleep. Seems that the food there would choke a fellow; but I know a night under his roof would smother me. I declare to you, Claude, the impression that man has made upon me is positively uncanny. I never realized the

possibilities of rascality that have been lurking under my skin since I was born! Do you know, I had the idea that I was a pretty good chap as chaps go!"

Claude, not heeding this nonsense, looked from the glowing embers to the shadowy shapes beyond the tent, and listened musingly to the voices of the forest as they mingled with the stamping of the tethered horses, the murmur of the stream, the crackling of the flames and an occasional gasp from the sleeping man. He exclaimed:

"It's all one big romance—one stupendous adventure! We've escaped the taxicabs, the bridges, the elevators, the syren whistles and, best of all, the people. The only way to find out what stuff is in you, is to be alone. Perhaps here in the Ozarks, we'll discover ourselves."

Bates with a last effort to rouse himself, launched for the hundredth time into a description of the "Beautiful Woman" whom he had narrowly missed firing upon, during a hunting expedition with some friends from Illinois, and it was while still sounding her praises in terms purposely exaggerated to hide a sincere interest, that he went to rest.

Early the next morning Claude was awakened by the sound of stumbling footsteps within the tent, and a man's loud shoutings addressed to the horses. He started up in dazed bewilderment at finding himself thus suddenly projected from absolute stillness into the heart of turmoil. Rodney Bates was groping here and there,

seeking the lantern; without, Peter Poff was harnessing the team.

Through a lifted flap, Claude saw the first gray light stealing its way among the black masses of the forest. The air was chill and damp. Over the surface of Possum Creek swung a fluttering vapor-curtain, hiding the ground-floor of his world. The sun had not risen when Bates and Peter Poff drove down stream to the ford.

Claude Walcott was now indeed alone. With undiminished enjoyment in his new-found liberty, and with keen alertness for any adventure, he leaped from his cot to face the dawning day.

CHAPTER IV

CLAUDE RESCUES THE GIRL IN THE SUNBONNET

WHEN Claude Walcott left his tent with gun, reel, minnow-trap, and book, he had no settled plan of hunting, fishing, or reading. That should be as chance decided, for at last he was in a world of freedom. He struck westward through the forest until he remembered that only a few miles in that direction lay Giles Gradley's land. As he did not want to come upon the scene of Bates' drilling, but rather to lose himself from all haunts of men, he turned southward.

Passing among slim post oaks, occasionally brushing against rough-barked blackjacks, he felt kinship with the little wild creatures that scurried out of his way. The boughs were heavy with green-globed walnuts and hickory-nuts. Among the leaves of sungold edging, flashed red-birds with their impudent inquiry, "What—what—what che-e-er?" The business-like call of "Bobolink;" the labored, hesitating "Bob-White?"—as if the quail were not quite sure about the last name; the mournful "Who-o-o?" of the distant dove who had caught the persistent question of the owl and could not rid his mind of it; the balanced cadence of the meadow-lark as he skimmed the

air with an eye for open fields—all these, with other sounds not so well known, chimed and clashed and quivered in broken, happy trills in the wilderness of the Ozarks.

Claude tramped on with no destination in mind, blissfully certain that his hunting-suit would find no critic more severe than a squirrel, more envious than a startled fox, or more treacherous than a skulking wolf. He had become a wild creature with the wildest of them—wild in his resolve to hide from society, to live close to earth, trees, and sky.

When he reached Wolf Branch, he did not set the minnow-trap, because a nook overhanging the water—a circle of straight oaks inclosing one of those grassy swells characteristic of that part of the Plateau,—invited him to musing. He threw himself upon the wiregrass and opened his volume—a book of poems by an unknown author. It seemed fitting that the very books in such a place should be by authors who had wandered, little noticed, in the world, and who, dying, left no name behind—only a faint fragrance in written words—words which would also presently fade from the brief memory of mankind.

Reared in hotels and apartment-houses, without influence of mother or sister, surrounded by the practical atmosphere of his father's real-estate world, Claude had, nevertheless, been something of a dreamer. Before his death, the rich man of business would have been amazed,

and possibly mortified, could he have known with what pleasure his son lingered in a literary world of azure tints and delicious harmonies, while the real world was black and silent after the day's rush.

It was several hours before the book was pocketed and stalwart legs resumed their exploration. The stream had not long been followed before a prostrate tree offered means of crossing. Claude drew off his hunting-boots and walked across, pressing his feet flat to the slender surface; he was drawing on his boots when he was startled by the distant ring of a hammer. At first he was inclined to turn in the opposite direction, but the slender tree across the stream was not inviting; besides, it might be well enough to find out where people lived, so he could avoid them.

It was not long before he saw a roof above the bushes, then another, while beyond them rose a precipitous hill. To his surprise, he found himself back at Ozarka. There stood the little square store from which Giles Gradley with his taunt about her father, had driven the unhappy girl of the large sunbonnet. The ring of the hammer came from the blacksmith shop. Beyond the broken wagons and discarded cart-wheels, rose the road which he and Bates had followed in Peter Poff's wagon.

On the present occasion, the big black horse of Gradley's was not the only animal tethered to the trees; several of the natives lounged before the smithy, and two were drinking at the store. All stared at Claude curiously.

They were tall, lean, and in another setting would have appeared awkward and ungainly; but in Ozarka their careless bearing had something akin to instinctive grace. Their faces were long and narrow, their hair was in great profusion and grew at perfect liberty. Those who were not drinking, were chewing tobacco, and all but two wore whiskers so dense and so untrammelled that there could be no question that they had been assumed for life.

The two young men who were clean-shaven, came out in the road, while Giles Gradley lingered in the doorway.

One of them addressed Claude affably—"Hello pard, I reckon you're the new man!" Every one looked at Claude as if wondering if his newness would rub off.

"To this country, I am," Claude answered, smiling good-naturedly. "I'm in a tent over yonder—" he nodded.

"Oh, yap, we know where you air. Say! There's going to be a hop at Bud Poff's tonight—ain't there, Bud?"

Bud, silently chewing, leaned against the worm-eaten wall of the shop, hands in pockets.

The other bronzed, slouched-hatted young man added, "And the Little Fiddler's going to be on deck. Pete Poff, he says he give you an invite. Now, we want you to come!"

"I think you'll find me there—thank you. My name's Walcott."

“Air it?” said the young man with much interest, while a bushy elder inquired, by way of helping along an agreeable conversation—

“And how old air you?”

“I can vote,” Claude smiled.

There was a strained silence while all present pondered upon what seemed an inadequate reply. Bud Poff, staring fixedly at the stranger, seemed to be wondering how politics had been dragged in.

“Which ticket?” inquired Giles Gradley with a malicious smile, just as one of the men with sudden illumination, asked—“Have a chaw?” while his hospitable hand invaded the hip-pocket of his jeans.

Claude ignored Gradley’s question. The silence grew so heavy, that the hammering of the smith became a shock to strained nerves; but the young man had not gone far before he heard behind him the noisy tongues which his departure had loosed.

He skirted the hill, regretful of the effect his presence had produced, but more than ever resolved to avoid such meetings in the future. As he passed isolated cabins each of a single room, the swarming half-clad children stared after him with devouring eyes, exclaiming over his discovery to one another; while young men and women, in almost every case bare-footed, stood stolidly at gaze, stricken dumb.

When the last cabin was passed, he plunged into the woods with a sense of relief, deeply inhaling the forest-

perfume with its tang of wild pines. The leaves and half-buried cones, long dead upon the ground, the aromatic scent of walnut-husks, resin and turpentine, the faint scent of wild flowers, the breath from grasses rustling along the stream, and the cool moisture from bubbling springs, all mingled in one delicious, invigorating odor that stirred the blood and gladdened the heart.

The sun was about to set, but Claude forgetting he had eaten nothing since morning; and not thinking of the vanished hours, pressed on and on, till he was startled, a second time, by a distant, ringing sound; it was not now the beat of a hammer, but the chopping blow of an ax. As he drew nearer, he could distinguish sounds of various woodmen at work, and at last voices came to his ears—the voices of perhaps a score of young people, vibrant with loud shouts of mocking merriment.

From among the trees a man was to be seen cutting down a tree—a great muscular fellow clad to his waist in an undershirt which gaped open from throat to belt, leaving exposed the hairy breast. Farther on, several other men, similarly attired, and, like him, barefooted, were felling trees. A clearing had already been made and the trees, lying where they had fallen, formed an intricate network with their interlocked branches.

At one side of this irregular circle, stood the young people whose voices had caused Claude's wonder. They were of both sexes, from ten to twenty years of age, barefooted and scantily clad, showing swarthy necks and

thick limbs; all were shouting in derision at a solitary figure standing in the very midst of the tangled and prostrate trees.

They were so deeply engrossed with their sport that Claude's approach was unobserved by them, while the woodmen, who saw everything, simply opened their mouths, as if to stare the better, and continued to swing their axes.

Claude recognized the figure standing in the midst of the fallen trees as that of the girl driven by Giles Gradley from his store. Evidently afraid of the youths who were shouting at her, she stood irresolute, her delicate form trembling. The enormous sunbonnet still shielded her face, and the clumsy shoes, formless dress, and shawl with its dull red bars, lent no touch of beauty to her appearance. Nevertheless, as on the former occasion, Claude was struck by the unstudied grace of her bearing, while an instinctive sympathy for one against whom all the world turns, caused him to pause abruptly.

"Now, jump!" called one of the oldest and sturdiest of the girls, at the same time casting a clod of red earth at the solitary figure. "You said you wanted to go home—why don't you go!"

She threw a second clod; it struck the victim in the back and a shout rose from the others of—"Good shot, Lindy Prebby, good shot!"

The girl was so penned in by the trunks and branches, that her only means of escape was to climb over them

toward the spot indicated by Lindy Prebby. She began to work her way toward freedom, never turning her face in the direction of her tormentors, never uttering a word of complaint.

Her movements were slow. As she drew herself over one trunk after another, sometimes crawling upon hands and knees, sometimes, where the opening was sufficient, slipping through interstices, the crowd watched in gloating silence. Once, she tried to leap from one branch to another, and, missing her footing, fell heavily, her outstretched arms just catching a bough in time to break the force of the fall. Then, indeed, the laughter was uproarious.

Claude presently understood the plot of those who were waiting; for when the object of their ridicule had almost reached the margin of the clearing, the line of young people broke, and those who had composed it, rushed around the circle, brandishing long poles.

"Now climb back again!" shouted Lindy Prebby, shaking her big stick in the other's face. "We'll let you go home this time. Jump, I say!"

And her companions cried derisively, "Jump! Jump! Jump!"

Lindy added, as the girl refused to move, "Cats ought to know how to climb. Jump, you cat!" She reached for a clod.

Claude looked to the woodchoppers for interference, but they returned his indignant gaze with stolid in-

difference. The young man's blood boiled. Evidently the slowness of the girl had been caused by great weariness. How long had the inhuman sport been in progress? As he stepped forward to interfere, the girl, whose voice showed neither anger nor entreaty, said,

"Let me go. Let me go."

"Jump, you ugly witch!" cried Lindy, the leader of the crowd, "jump lively, you poisoner, you murderer!"

At this accusation, Claude hesitated.

The helpless girl turned, slowly climbed over the nearest tree, and stumbled, to the delight of the spectators. It was then, as she drew herself upon weary knees, that she discovered Claude's presence. For an amazed moment she remained motionless, staring at him as at a visitor from some unknown world. The others, observing her attitude, looked also, and their voices died away.

Claude sprang forward. With agile leaps he cleared the barricade and was soon at the captive's side. He had seen little of her face, but from under the bonnet he had caught sight of a crimson glow on the cheek that spoke, no doubt, of shame. Now that he was within reach of her hand, he found her panting from exhaustion; her limbs were unsteady, her head fallen upon her breast.

"Have they kept you here a long time?" he asked, steadying her arms.

She said in a low voice, "Very long."

"You can go home, now; I'll see that no one prevents it."

As if to show her confidence in his power, she made a step or two in the direction of the scowling crowd; but the tree over which she had just climbed stood in the way, and her strength was spent.

"Please leave me here," she said, "I shall soon be able to climb out."

"Leave you? But *they* would stay, too. No—whatever your offense, you need protection, and I shall protect you."

"My offense!" she faltered, still hiding her face.

Claude could not believe that the woodmen would have stood looking on passively at her punishment, unless the girl had been guilty of some crime, and the accusation of "poisoner" and "murderer" had been sinister, indeed. All the same, she was weak and defenseless, and he lifted her not ungently over the barrier, and half-carried her to freedom.

"You're a good one, Mister!" sneered Linda Prebby. "Help the murderer, help the poisoner! Help the ugly wolf that tries to kill innocent women! Help the cat that tries to dabble her paws in blood!"

Claude turned to the mournful figure to ask, somewhat sternly, "Have you nothing to say?"

"Only that I thank you," she answered, and then walked swiftly down the forest path.

Claude addressed the crowd with friendly remonstrance. "But it wasn't fair sport, you know. If she's all you say, still—it wasn't fair sport. Don't you think she's

had a pretty hard time of it, anyway? Let her go home."

There was something in his pleasant face and frank, honest eyes that won them from their purpose, so they contented themselves with shouting after the retreating form—

"Go on, old poisoner! Good thing for you this gentleman happened along! But we'll git you next time. We're a-laying for you, you ugly old poison-sneak!" Those whose wits were not quick enough to form such taunts in words, contented themselves with inarticulate hootings until the last glimpse of the accused had disappeared.

Then Lindy Prebby turned to Claude with her friendliest smile. "You're my style, anyhow, Mister, and I hope you'll be to the hop tonight, at Bud Poff's. We can promise you one thing—old bloody-claws won't be on hands."

Claude remarked, as he turned to go, that he had been invited.

"Oh, yap, ever'body knows that," returned the girl, heartily. "Now, you come!"

CHAPTER V

RODNEY FINDS THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

CLAUDE escaped as soon as possible from the crowd, and held on his way in the same direction he had been following when the woodchoppers came in view; but as soon as the hills hid him from observation, he hastened off at a tangent, hoping to intercept the girl in the sunbonnet, or at least to get another glimpse of her.

His mind was filled with half-formed questions, some of which became clearly defined as he groped his way through an extensive thicket under tangled branches and matted leaves of pawpaws, chincapins, red haws, and black haws. Who was this girl that had pleaded with Gradley not to sell liquor to little Jim, and what authority had he over her that he could order her home? And who was her father whom Gradley had cruelly told her was "bad at heart?" She had not resented the accusation—it must be that Lindy Prebby had spoken truly in calling her a poisoner and in declaring that she had tried to commit murder.

But Claude was more impressed by the fact of the girl's unlikeness to her surroundings than by such sus-

pitions. In sudden anger she might be a violent, even a dangerous character; but it was certain that she was different from the native girls of the Ozark hills. He had heard her speak very few words, but they had been enough to distinguish her from the gaping, hooting crowd; and even if he had not heard her remarkably musical and tender voice, the poise of her body and the grace of her movements despite great weariness, would have set her apart.

Her singularity constituted a real mystery, and the young man tramped miles in trying to solve it; but though he was sure of the direction she had taken, his search was unrewarded. Of course he could find out easily enough all he wished to know, if he could bring himself to seek information from the girl's enemies, but something held him back from speaking of her to the few people he had met. Besides, there would be more interest in the affair if he sought and found his own clews.

Weary and half-famished, but comforted by the thought that the rest of summer was before him for the quest, he reached camp at nightfall, and set about preparing supper. It was well under way when Rodney Bates came over from his first day's work.

"Yes, I've had supper," Bates said, "I take my meals at Gradley's, all of them; but when I can't eat any more, I enjoy watching other people; it's one of the few pleasures of life that don't wear out, eating is." He brought

a campchair to the fire, and watched the fish frying over the rocks.

After awhile Claude missed the loud laughter that was wont to peal forth when they were together, and that drew his attention to his friend's silent and thoughtful attitude.

"What's the matter, Rod? I hope you and Giles Gradley haven't come to blows already?"

"Oh, as to Gradley," said Bates, lighting another cigarette—

Claude cooked on in silence, no more disposed than the other to conversation, his mind continually busy with recollections of the girl whom he had that afternoon rescued. He saw, as in the very embers of his fire, the slight, despondent figure in the shapeless dress which could neither hide the thinness, nor the grace, of the form. He saw her leaping and climbing, and stumbling among the trees, then rising upon her knees, a mournful picture certainly, and yet one not to be despised. He found himself once more lifting her, carrying her in his arms, wishing that he could see better the half-hidden face. What a strange creature of the wilderness, to be harried like a wild beast by those stalwart bare-limbed children of nature! She had not impressed him as vindictive, as a poisoner should be; or revengeful, as might be expected of a murderer.

As he ate, he recalled his impression of her face. From under the sunbonnet had appeared two bright sparks, and

a rosy glow—her eyes and a cheek—that was all. What had her steadfast gaze signified? And what, the crimson blush? Her voice sounded pathetically in his memory, it was so gentle, so sweet—“Only that I thank you!”—he had hardly noticed her tone, at the time.

Suddenly Rodney Bates, who had smoked several cigarettes in quick succession, left his chair to tramp up and down impetuously before the campfire. “I say, Claude, do you remember my telling you about a camping expedition down in this country two years ago when I came across—”

“Oh, yes, yes, yes, indeed! how you were looking for deer and suddenly the bushes parted and a miracle of a woman stepped out—”

“The most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my life!”

“Just so,” Claude agreed, drily. “Yes, you’ve told me all about it.”

“Well”—Bates flung away his cigarette, and mechanically fumbled in his case for another—“I’ve met her again.”

Claude, at this unexpected addition to the story, started abruptly. “No! Not down here—this time? Here, in the wilderness?”

“Exactly.”

Claude stared blankly. “Here, after two years? The same ‘Beautiful Woman?’ ”

“Yes, the very same.”



CLAUDE SPRANG FORWARD AND WAS SOON AT THE
CAPTIVE'S SIDE.—*Page 38.*

Claude forgot all about the hunted girl of the big sunbonnet. "Well? I venture you don't find her as pretty as you fancied, two years ago."

"That's where you lose your venture. She's prettier—she's a thousand times more my Beautiful Woman. Claude, she's a marvel—I never saw anything like it—the most exquisite form, full and rounded, and the most lovely face—"

"And *here*, in *these* hills?" Claude ejaculated, skeptically.

"Yes, right here. You've known me a good while. Have you ever known me to be a fool about any woman's looks?"

"Never but once."

"That's well answered; for I suppose I'm a fool about this one."

"My dear old man," said the other, uneasily, "don't you let yourself be fooled by sentimental coincidences. It was natural for you to admire the woman you came near shooting; and now that you see her again after so long a time, it's natural for you to look at her as you did then. Of course, if it's a real love-affair," he added, laughing, "you have my congratulations. But don't deceive yourself, that's all I ask. Your eyes are at least fifteen years older than mine—hadn't you better let me inspect the lady? I'll tell you if I find you've made no mistake."

"Certainly you shall judge for yourself," said Bates,

trying to speak lightly, but evidently too hard hit to disguise his true feeling. "You're to take supper there, tomorrow night."

"I take supper there? Oh, no! Look here, you rascal, what are you getting me into? Did I come to the Ozarks to take suppers? No, sir! I'm going to a big dance tonight, and I'll be too tired for any other function so soon as the next evening."

"That dance is put off till tomorrow night," Bates informed him. "Peter Poff charged me expressly to tell you so. You can kill two functions in the same evening. I don't know about the dance, but go to this supper you must. I'm determined for you to see the Beautiful Woman, and besides, she wishes it herself; and besides, it would have to come around sooner or later, anyhow."

"That's very mysterious. Who is your Beautiful Woman?"

"She's Giles Gradley's wife."

CHAPTER VI

THE GIRL AND THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN

WHEN Claude woke up, the next morning, Rodney Bates had already gone to breakfast at Giles Gradley's—that brought the disturbing remembrance of the invitation to supper. Claude with a discontented growl turned over, but in vain—sleep now claimed neither side. Before the sun had peered over the blue rim of the Ozarks, the young man was clearing away the cone of dead ashes where had been last night's fire. The air was cool and damp, the rustle of the leaves mournful.

He thought of the bewildering counter-rush of varied life-tides through which his motor-car was wont to cut its way from his apartment-house to the city office—from all this he had fled to the solitudes of the forest * * * and see what had come of Rodney's infatuation for a backwoods stranger!

It was late in the afternoon before he grudgingly turned his course westward. At last the walking-beam was silhouetted against the sky and a small pyramid of red earth and crushed rock told the story of the search for

oil. At sight of him, Rodney Bates quickly drew on his coat; his assistant, having none, was spared the exertion.

"I was afraid you'd be late," Bates reproached him; "it's about supper-time, now."

"After this test of my friendship," Claude drily responded, "I hope you'll take it for granted and not make another assay!"

Bates laughed heartily at the doleful face. "Bless your soul, *I* had nothing to do with getting you invited here, and I'm willing if you never come again—I reckon they thought they just naturally *had* to invite you once."

"Don't forget the dance," Peter Poff called, as he started briskly away. He continued to shout, raising his voice as he drew farther and farther till the last words became a shout—"The Little Fiddler's going to be there. Ever' time I meet Bud, I ask him the same question, and Bud, he ain't never said nothing yet, so I know it's all right."

As Claude felt himself unequal to the exertion of a response, considering his ill-humor, he contented himself with addressing Bates, as they crossed the road toward the Gradley home: "I suppose you sit down with your Beautiful Woman at every meal?"

"Yes."

"Still think her as fascinating as you fancied two years ago?"

"More so."

"It's too bad that you didn't meet her before Gradley," Claude said, banteringly.

"Here's the place," Bates returned, shortly. They had crossed a field salted with stones, to a rail fence dividing the scene of the drilling from a hilly meadowland. Along one side straggled a long uneven thatched shed about four feet high which was joined to a narrow barn. On the roof of the shed, which was perhaps forty or fifty feet in length, perched a great many turkeys while others carefully balanced themselves upon a fence at right angles to the one that had stopped the two friends. Still other turkeys were scattered over the meadowland, and the full-throated calls of the gobblers mingled with the ceaseless complaining cries of the young broods.

Bates said, as he climbed the fence, "They herd these turkeys as they do cattle farther north, and walk them all the way to Joplin or Springfield to market, camping out at night, and taking it slow and easy."

Beyond the barn stood Gradley's log cabin, the largest Claude had seen since coming to Ozarka; it boasted of two rooms, while back of it was a smaller shanty of clapboards, evidently used as a kitchen.

He murmured, "What style!"

As Bates did not respond to the pleasantry, Claude looked sharply and found the other unusually serious; his eyes were fastened upon a hammock swinging between

lofty forest trees such as any may afford in his front yard, in that country.

In the hammock lay a woman, her back turned toward them, her cheek resting upon an arm, and one hand idly swinging; her face was not to be seen, but there was something in the languorous ease of her position that helped to sooth Claude's discontent. The plainly defined outlines of the figure, the full sweeping curves of health and bounty, suggested a luxuriance of growth as of the heavy-sweet odors of Florida profusion. The brown of the hair was a living, glowing brown, a brown of silken sheen, of wavering, alluring lights and changing tints; the foot, in its black stocking and buckled slipper, was as small and shapely as that of a schoolgirl.

It occurred to Claude that she must have heard their approach and was therefore pretending unconsciousness for effect; but when she started up, the suspicion was forgotten in studying the woman who had so long haunted the prosaic old bachelor. Bates, also, gave all his thoughts to the hostess, and could look nowhere but in her direction.

"We do not need to be introduced, I suppose?" said Giles Gradley's wife, to Claude. "In the wilderness, there's no room for conventions."

"Oh—this young chap is my friend Walcott. I'd forgotten *him*."

Mrs. Gradley laughed—it was as if the breeze had caught and borne to them a sudden burst of silvery chimes.

"Are you so *very* young?" she asked Claude, giving her hand.

Her full lips, full throat, rounded cheeks, dark heavy eyebrows, low forehead, in brief, every feature, wrought its magic in calming his desire for freedom. With her hand in his, he was glad to be there.

"Of course," he answered, "I'm not so preposterously old a wayfarer as my friend Bates, still, I'm not so young as to be altogether ignored."

"To be young!" sighed Mrs. Gradley—"to be young again!"

Claude admired her so greatly that he felt a restless impulse to crowd Bates out of the conversation into the background. Trees and hills and streams and rocky ledges had in some mysterious manner lost their appeal. The charms of solitude might do for Bates; but Claude felt young and strong, quick-blooded and eager; all his senses were a-tingle with delight. As each strove to gain Mrs. Gradley's whole attention, the young man inwardly excused himself on the ground that, since circumstances forced him to an evening in society, he might as well get as much pleasure out of it as possible.

He did get much pleasure; and he could but regret the passing moments. He was glad she was Gradley's wife, or, at any rate, somebody's; as somebody's wife, he might, without fear of an interest too great, enjoy to the full her mellow voice, the radiance of her smile, the poetry of her motion. At the same time, she was nearer

Bate's age, and Claude looked upon his friend's desperate attempts to monopolize the lady's smiles with something of uneasiness. Suppose Bates should go too far—

In the midst of an animated discussion of the relative values of city and wilderness life, a shadowy form was seen passing from the kitchen to the rear of the cabin. Mrs. Gradley called, in a pleasant, even tone—

“Come here, Servant.”

A young girl of about eighteen came toward them, her head down, her eyes upon the ground. It was the girl whom Claude had rescued from the mob of young people in the forest. Since she did not once glance in his direction, he made no sign of recognition, but his face expressed his surprise.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Gradley, smiling at Claude, “she likes for me to call her ‘Servant,’ the only pleasure she has is in waiting on me. Servant, fetch me my black fan, and take this one away.”

The girl obeyed. Claude watched her hurrying over the plot of wiregrass, and, on her return, examined the face attentively. At another time he might have been pleased with her graceful step, but now her body seemed insignificant, such features as he could see, appeared plain, while the darkness of her skin was much too dark—for Mrs. Gradley's splendid body, ripe features, and dazzling complexion entirely eclipsed the young girl.

“You may stand there, Servant,” said Mrs. Gradley gently, as she languidly took the fan and handed the girl

the other. "I know you want me to tell these gentlemen your story, but I shall be very brief."

The girl gave her a look which neither Claude nor Bates could see, then stood with downcast head, her back turned toward all three.

Mrs. Gradley addressed Claude: "It's such a pity that it must be told, but really, it's necessary so everything will be clear and open between us, and besides, Servant always wants it explained to our guests. She feels whenever it is made public that she is atoning, in a way, for what she tried to do. But she is a very good girl, now. She is sorry, and we have forgiven her—Mr. Gradley and I. You will think more of her character because she wants her crime published."

Claude stared curiously at the girl, who remained as motionless as a statue, her face entirely hidden from his view. Surely he had never looked upon a picture of such abject guilt. As his eyes returned with relief to the other's charming face, and as the silvery voice filled his ears, he felt hot shame that he had even remotely fancied this creature of the humble garments and abject attitude to be above her station.

"I'll not go into details," said Mrs. Gradley, her voice trembling as with generous pity. "It's enough for you to know that in a fit of passion—for she is violent, sometimes—she tried to kill me. She wants you to know that she attempted murder, so you will not look upon her as an ordinary child. But she has repented. That will

do, poor Servant," she added, kindly. "Go back to your kitchen." Then to Bates—

"She can never forget my generosity in letting her stay, and there's nothing she wouldn't do for me to prove her remorse."

The girl hurried away, and Claude saw her form quiver convulsively.

"She is sobbing, poor thing," murmured Mrs. Gradley. "It's really distressing, but she insists upon this explanation and what can I do? She will have it. It's the workings of her conscience. We'll think no more about her."

Presently a horseman appeared galloping toward them—it was Giles Gradley on the powerful black horse. Claude was struck anew by the massive head with its magnificent impress of power and intelligence, coupled with the spare, restless form suggesting physical weakness. When he was seated beside his wife in the hammock, after quiet, restrained greetings, the young man watched them thoughtfully, seeking for any common tie that could bind together two people so seemingly unlike.

Mrs. Gradley asked, "Has it been a hard day with you?" in a voice so sweet and tender, so sensitively modulated in the pathetic cadences of childhood, that she seemed at the moment but a girl, young and artless.

Giles looked from under brooding brows, answering

in the deep voice one would not have expected from so slight a frame, "Every day is a hard day."

Her hand slipped impulsively toward his and closed upon it, while his own lay motionless in the meshes of the hammock. Already he had turned from her, his lips pursed in thought, a wrinkle forming across the broad, rounded temples. She was perhaps twenty years the younger, but her greater height and weight made her appear like a guardian angel seeking to protect an unhappy mortal from the punishment of his imaginings, as her glorious brown hair was lifted above his darkening face.

"Dear, I wish you would give up that store," Mrs. Gradley said, with girlish plaintiveness. "Mr. Prebby wants to buy it."

"Give it up!" he returned, harshly. "Give it up? And must I give up everything, then?" He drew his hand from hers, though the movement appeared unconscious. "It seems to me I have given up quite enough."

Mrs. Gradley paled, slightly. She sighed.

Gradley shook back his long hair which had fallen over the high forehead. "What do you think of the prospect?" he asked Bates, abruptly.

Bates nodded, unresponsively. "I'm coming on." He had seen that slender white hand cast carelessly aside, and for such a slight, would have been content to deal Gradley a sturdy blow.

Gradley struggled to his feet, not without effort, then leaned upon the rope which his wife's body held taut.

He addressed both men in a rapid voice, in which sounded fierce discontent:

"This wilderness life is maddening—maddening! Nothing to distract the attention—nothing to banish cursed thoughts—nothing but trivialities. What matters, out here? Trees put on leaves and put them off. Birds build and disperse—what's the use of an intellect? If it wasn't for that store, that dull, sordid, mean store, with its bargainings and its loafers—I'd go crazy. But can I exchange ideas with people who have none? This drilling will be another interest—heaven knows I need one! Whether there's oil or ore, there'll be the drilling. I can ride back and forth—bah! No wonder, is it, that every day is a hard day! You fellows haven't had to live on this, year in and year out—you taste of it, then go your way. If I could train my mind not to think, I might vegetate comfortably."

Bates shrugged his burly shoulders. Gradley, he could not endure, but for the wife's sake, he must be patient. He asked her—"Do you share Mr. Gradley's hatred of the Ozarks?"

"I?" she returned, looking at Bates with parted lips. "But it is nothing to me where I live. Life is all in the heart; what does the place matter?"

"I agree with you," said Bates, not without some antagonism in his manner, directed, in spite of himself, against Gradley. "The place is just the setting. Yes, we live in the heart. I could be happy here forever."

Gradley looked thoughtfully from one to the other. Then he began to laugh quietly. He turned to Claude and said,

“We are very spiritual—it is all soul, here!”

At that moment the shrinking form of the young girl came from around the cabin, to announce supper.

“Very well, Norris,” said Gradley, kindly. It did not escape Claude’s attention that his host’s gentlest tone had been for the girl, and that, instead of addressing her after his wife’s manner, he had called her by her name.

CHAPTER VII

THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN AT HOME

THE table was spread in the front room; on one side was a piano, on the other, a bookcase. When they were seated at the simple meal, Giles Gradley asked Claude where he lived.

“At present,” Claude smiled, “I’m enjoying my estate on Possum Creek; but my home address is Kansas City.”

“Kansas City!” Gradley’s splendid eyes flashed. “Have you lived there long? Do you know any of the politicians?”

Gradley immediately plunged into a sea of questions regarding men of prominence. “I never see a newspaper—they disquiet me, fill me with longings—I resist their temptation—they call, call . . .” He knew all the gang-leaders; the ward bosses, such as they were some years ago; the minutiae of civic affairs; the names, even ages, of the voters of different parties.

Claude, trying to remember if he had ever heard the name Giles Gradley, remarked, “You know much more about Kansas City than I, only your information isn’t quite up to date. How long has it been—”

“I’d rather not remember,” Gradley said, abruptly.

This conversation, animated on Gradley's part, lasted long past supper, but as his wife took no part in it, she was left in a manner alone with Rodney Bates.

Nothing could have suited Bates better. She had unerringly gauged his simple and rather superficial nature, and she appealed to it in a spirit of frank gaiety. At his jokes she laughed without restraint, and her own anecdotes were imparted confidentially as to an old friend, thus setting him entirely at ease.

At this rate, Claude reflected, his old friend and the Beautiful Woman would get on with phenomenal swiftness.

In the meantime, the girl who had announced supper came and went and came again, on menial services. She had cooked the meal in the detached kitchen and everything had to be carried to and from the cabin. When they rose from the table and retired to the end of the room that contained the piano, as if withdrawing to another apartment, the girl cleared away the dishes, removed the cloth, and converted the table to a discreet desk. No one paid her any attention.

To Claude, she was an unobtrusive shadow, flitting occasionally across a scene of brightness as if to suggest unseen clouds. Her cheap dress of an ugly blue shade was patched to betray her poverty; and her hair was cropped close to her head as if the very luxury of long hair which might have been pretty, could not be indulged, since the rest of her appearance was so subdued in tone.

When she had made her last disappearance, Claude grew restive under Gradley's questionings. He wished to forget the city and its political intrigues, and he felt it hard that his host should seek so determinedly to dispel the atmosphere of the wilderness.

He heard Mrs. Gradley singing for Bates—little songs that were lively and swinging—the popular ragtime airs of five or six years ago. Gradley raised his voice to be heard above the singing, but the young man heard rather the sweet melody that was charming his old friend, and saw not Gradley's earnest eyes, but the lustrous brown coils of hair over which Bates was bending low.

At last Gradley asked no more questions. As if the news given by Claude, had conjured up pictures of days dead and imperfectly buried, a sudden despondency chilled his manner, and the leaping fires of his eloquent eyes died down to somber coals; the large, thin-lipped mouth grew tight and the massive head leaned forward in dark thought.

Claude asked himself, "Why does he live here in the forest, since he is so in love with public affairs?"

That was, in truth a mystery; but a mystery much more appealing was that of Mrs. Gradley's charm, and, the young man at last finding himself at liberty, hastened to draw near.

Bates said abruptly, "Claude—time for us to go." His desire to absorb all of the lady's society was transparent.



IT WAS THE GIRL WHOM CLAUDE HAD RESCUED FROM THE MOB."— *Page 52.*

Claude smiled: "Yes—I'm afraid I've tired out Mr. Gradley."

Giles Gradley gave no sign that he heard. With eyes upon the floor, his brow looked dark and almost threatening, as if strange ghosts were flocking to the chambers of his mind.

"Come!" said Bates. But when he looked at Mrs. Gradley, he found himself unable to budge.

"I will sing for you," Mrs. Gradley told Claude—"something different—I imagine you don't care for what Mr. Bates and I like." Then she gave him a little classic, and Claude listened, warmed to the heart by her delicate compliment. She understood him, just as she understood Bates. It was a marvellous experience to both, to be understood by one so lovely.

When she had finished, the young man looked into her eyes with a quick breath—"You do indeed understand what I like!"

"Now me," observed Bates, jealously, "I like a tune you can take hold of with both hands. I've sat through whole operas thinking all the time something sort of human was coming my way; but it always turned the corner and got lost before it reached me."

She laughed charmingly, while Claude said, "Mrs. Gradley, that voice shouldn't be hidden down here among the forest trees."

Giles Gradley rose, with an inscrutable smile: "Is her voice sweeter than that of the birds? What a pity

that the birds are hidden down here among the post oaks and chincapins!"

She laughed and laid her hand upon her husband's arm. They made a handsome picture; on her part, perfection of form, magnetic beauty of face—on his, ruggedness of power and intellect.

With that picture stamped upon their minds, Bates and Claude left the cabin.

As they passed the barn on their return tramp, the twinkle of a candle showed through a crevice in the loft.

"I suppose," Claude observed, "that the servant stays up there."

But Bates could think of only one subject; "Claude, that's the woman!"

"Gradley's wife?"

"Call her that if you choose. It doesn't change her. Did you see the brute throw her hand from him, as they sat in the hammock? Did you hear him complain that he hasn't enough interests down here? Did you notice how homesick he is for the city? Great heavens! And with a wife like that!"

On they went through the thick woods. The moon rose and etherialized the red earth. As they came in sight of their tent, the stream was shimmering in its bright rays. The night-breath of wild weeds moistened by early dew, swept over their faces.

Bates built a fire in silence, not uttering a word till Claude remarked irrelevantly,

"She seems happy enough—and actually fond of that—"

"Just her woman's pride, hiding her woman's heart." Bates spoke so promptly that Claude knew their thoughts had been travelling the same road.

"We may conclude, then," said the young man slowly, "that both of them are unhappy."

"*He* doesn't count."

"Neither does she—so far as we are concerned."

"I know this," violently, "that if—if she—" He paused.

Claude looked at him curiously. Then he hazarded, "There can be no such '*If*,' old fellow."

"I can wait and see."

"Bates," said Claude presently, "yonder canoe is tempting me to a moonlight ride. And it's plain enough that you are not inclined to conversation—"

"Do go, Claude, that's a dear soul!" cried out Bates so heartily, that both of them laughed.

Claude added, "And, more than likely, I'll wind up by dropping in at Bud Poff's dance—so it may be a long time before I turn in."

"I hope it *will* be long!" Bates declared frankly. "In fact, I have a great deal to think over."

"It would be better for you to come with me, and do no thinking at all."

"Perhaps so; but I've ceased wanting to do what's better for me. So long, old chap! I'm fairly aching to hear the dip of your oars."

CHAPTER VIII

THE GIRL SAVES CLAUDE FROM THE PIT

AS Claude dipped the oars in the crystal clear water, sending strings of pearls glittering away beneath the moonlight, he was troubled about his friend. Without anticipating any untoward event to mar the outward prospects of his hunting vacation, he realized that Rodney Bates at the age of forty, was for the first time in his life, seriously interested in a woman; and that for two years he had dreamed about her, had expatiated upon her loveliness and had suffered himself perfect liberty in dwelling upon the recollection of her charms, before the discovery that she was Giles Gradley's wife.

It was no wonder that the simple-souled Bates had been susceptible to the exquisite loveliness of that full-blooded, Oriental type. Claude himself had tingled with sheer pleasure when in her presence; and now that he was alone, he still found himself under her haunting influence. It was impossible to escape the mellow voice, the sparkling glances, the dazzling whiteness of skin, the contour of rich and warm womanliness.

He seemed pursued not by memories, but by the visible woman, as if her spirit were materialized in stream and woods. She was another man's wife, hence Claude felt

himself safe; but what about Bates? And when Claude placed before him the attractions that were luring his friend, he fell into a deep study over those attractions, and forgot Bates in the contemplation.

When he had ascended the stream as far as his boat would go, he struck along the trail that led toward Ozarka, his mind still filled with pictures of the Beautiful Woman.

Under the bright moon, a desolate scene was presented by the closed store of Giles Gradley, and the rickety blacksmith shop with its gaping black wounds where the sword of time had cleaved away the clapboards. The silent road with its litter of broken wheels and scattered rusty horseshoes seemed lonelier than the untrodden mosslands of the virgin wilderness. As he skirted the hill beyond Ozarka, he noticed the desertion of the cabins. Had all gone to the dance?

The trail led him to the scene of the woodchopping where he had rescued the tormented girl—Mrs. Gradley's "Servant." He dismissed the young woman from his mind impatiently, conscious that she had more than once risen before his mental vision, against his will. Had she really tried to poison Mrs. Gradley? Then why did Mrs. Gradley still trust her with the food? No wonder she had been ashamed to raise her eyes, no wonder she had not dared to defend herself against her tormentors!

Beyond the clearing, there was a swift, shallow stream which he followed to the foot of a towering hill, the hill

must be climbed or circled, for not far beyond it was Bud Poff's cabin.

Claude hesitated.

He had never penetrated this part of the country, but the hill before him with its huge overhanging masses of rock, its bareness of grass, and its few scattered trees, answered Peter Poff's description of Baldhead Mountain. The stream issued from a spot about a third of the distance up the almost sheer face of the rock. It was one of those enormous springs which suddenly appear in the Ozarks and start forth in the world as a full-sized stream, large enough at the very beginning to float a light boat.

This ice-cold fountain was called "Cave Spring."

Claude decided to scale the precipitous heights rather than lose time and labor by going a mile or so out of his way. When he presently found himself, almost breathless, at the source of the spring, he greatly admired the opening in the hillside which was in the form of a stone arch, wonderfully symmetrical. This bow of stone, which at the middle was perhaps fifteen feet high, opened into a chamber large enough to accommodate a numerous company, and, indeed, a huge granite block—a natural table, at one side—showed where many a picnic party had spent their dinner-hour.

More than by the regularity of the arch, which suggested the chiselling of a giant's hand, and more than by the overhanging masses of rock which seemed threatening every moment to fall and block up the entrance to

the cave, Claude was struck by the cold breath of the stone chamber. It breathed out into the night an air so different from the surrounding atmosphere, that the young man had stood before it only a few moments before he felt himself shivering as if just emerging from a warm room, upon a wintry scene.

His climb up the steps along the bank of the sudden stream had without doubt heated his blood; and yet, at any time, he would have found the breath from the cavern at startling variance with the temperature of a summer night. The moonlight was so brilliant along the shelf that supported his feet, that it caused the interior of the subterranean retreat to appear almost black.

In order to examine it more closely, Claude stepped within, descending three or four feet to the level floor.

The room contained nothing but the natural table, and broken bits of rock; but at the side opposite the great opening, there was a space of a few inches between the wall and floor; this crevice extended the width of the chamber—about twenty feet; and through the narrow aperture poured a sheet of water—in short, the spring. After rippling over the floor several feet, it disappeared, to reappear outside the cave.

For a while, Claude forgot the magic charm which Mrs. Gradley had cast upon him; but as he grew colder and colder, he obeyed the impulse to escape into the open and balmy air of less inspiring but more comfortable

nature. He accordingly hurried out of the cave, and climbed the difficult trail to the top of the hill.

Here he found himself upon a plateau which descended by such insensible degrees that on the side toward Bud Poff's it seemed no hill at all; and had he not just ascended from the valley, he might have supposed himself upon fairly level ground. His exercise had already driven away the sense of chill, and his recollection of the dance caused him to quicken his pace with a real desire to find himself with men and women, that he might entirely dismiss the sinister and oppressive influence of the cave.

He was almost running from the brow of the hill over the loose stones, when a voice called in quick alarm, "Take care!"

Claude stopped so suddenly that he was thrown upon his knees. The unexpectedness of any human voice had caused him to look not for the voice, but at the ground before him. He crouched at the edge of a round hole, not more than three feet in diameter into which he must have fallen headlong but for the warning cry.

There was nothing to warn a stranger of the existence of this opening in the earth, this round, rock-rimmed circle with its circumference of silver and its heart of black—for though the moon was pouring into it a wealth of light, only darkness was painted within.

As the young man leaned over the unknown depths, he could feel the air being sucked in, as if the hole were

a great mouth feeding a monster's palpitating lungs; and he was very sensible of the indrawing force that caught at his face and hands.

He drew back with a shudder, and leaped to his feet.

The shout, the fall, the escape had taken but a moment, and even as Claude rose, he was examining the bushes whence the voice had issued. All had passed with such rapidity that the one who had called the warning had been unable to withdraw. A face looked from the bushes—a dark, young face, delicate, and yet firm. Its expression was that of intense relief. In the eyes was a glow, on the cheeks a color; the lips were parted as if they had been drawn in terror, and in relaxation were about to smile. Though it was the face of a woman, the hair was cut close—dark, fine hair on which the light rested lovingly.

Claude had scarcely discovered this watching face before it vanished; but he was sure he had been saved by the girl whom he had delivered from cruel mockery. It was very strange that she should be so far from home at an hour so late. Was she alone?

The young man called to her, and started toward the bushes.

He expected either to see her come forth, or to hear her retreat through the undergrowth. In both, he was disappointed. When he reached the spot, there was nothing to indicate that anyone had been there before him. He called several times, he searched the thickets,

but all in vain. The little wild creature knew the wilderness so well that she was entirely safe from pursuit.

This reflection calmed Claude; since safe from him, she must be safe from others. The next time he was at Gradley's, he would find occasion to thank the servant for her warning.

The next time he was at the Gradley's? Oh, yes, indeed, he expected to be there pretty often, after tonight. Rodney Bates sat down to the Gradley table thrice a day—he ought to be allowed to call there at least once.

CHAPTER IX

CLAUDE GOES TO THE DANCE

IT spoke well for Mrs. Gradley's influence that by the time Claude reached Bud Poff's rail fence, not only the "servant," but the narrow escape was forgotten, and he was thinking of exquisite curves and deliciously modulated tones, and heart-stirring glances, and above all, of the real necessity of making a "party call" after his dinner.

Along the fence were fastened many horses, to some of which carts were attached, but the greater number of the guests had walked, having donned their shoes for that purpose. Indeed, the company was rather elaborate in their attire. While the young men had not gone the tormenting length of wearing coats, they had, as it were, coralled their usually free necks in high fences of spotless linen, and their words and looks had the distinct effect of being cast over the collar. Bronzed, loose-jointed and rude of speech, they spread abroad an air of genial heartiness which included Claude without reserve.

The maidens not only wore bright-colored ribbons and gaudy-hued skirts, but had even put on their shoes and stockings; yet so far from being made stiff and artificial

by these unwonted elegancies, they proved themselves the souls of noisy good humor and giggling comradeship. The dancing was in the barn. The stamping of heavy feet and the shout of untrammelled laughter would have put any ordinary number of horses out of the contest.

All were disposed to treat Claude well—too well, indeed, for they felt him to be an outsider, and among themselves they called him “Boston,”—such being their symbol to express all that is useless in the ornamentation of mind and manners. He was content to remain an outsider, since this, after all, was his real attitude, and as an outsider, he was particularly interested in the Little Fiddler.

The musician was slightly built, apparently quite young, and certainly diffident. He wore a suit of decent black, oddly out of keeping with those for whom he played, yet in itself nothing noticeable. It seemed that the dancers looked upon him with awe which, however, did not silence their expressions of admiration—ejaculations of praise offered to each other rather than to the player.

The Little Fiddler stood upon an inverted wagon-bed at the extreme end of the barn, and, because he kept his cheek against the violin and bent over it as he played, his features were not discernible. Moreover, the slouched hat which he never laid aside, darkened his face still more. Claude was convinced that the retired platform upon which the lanterns, swinging from dusty beams,

cast very little light, had been chosen from a desire to escape attention. Doubtless, he thought, this is a music-teacher from the city who would not care to have his city friends know of such relaxations.

As Claude stood on the outskirts, amused occasionally by exceedingly broad-pointed witticisms bandied about indiscriminatingly, a heavy hand fell upon his shoulder.

"What do you think of the Little Fiddler?" asked Peter Poff, beaming through his whiskers.

"His playing acts upon every nerve in my legs," Claude laughed.

"Want to dance?" Peter inquired, hospitably. "I'll round up one of the buxomest lasses on the floor for you—yonder's Lindy Prebby." Peter drew forth his plug of tobacco and took a fresh chew. Thanks to the crevices in the barn-floor, there was no handicap in its enjoyment.

"Oh, no, much obliged," said Claude hastily, as, at that moment, Lindy Prebby slipped and sat down very suddenly and as hard as only a buxom lass can, amidst deafening roars of hilarity.

"That's what I call a *gal*," remarked Peter, nodding at Lindy who remained seated several moments, laughing boisterously at her own discomfiture. "She was telling me how you helped Norris that her and her pards was harrering amongst them, in the woods. That so?"

Claude bethought him. "Yes," he said, "her name is Norris, sure enough—I heard Giles Gradley call her so. Well—it was twenty against one."

"I'm glad you done it," emphatically. "Let people say what they will, for me, I believe her a good gal and no mistake."

Claude thought of the face in the bushes. "And yet—they accused her of trying to commit murder."

"Oh, yap, I know. It's a shame the way the young 'uns devil the life out of that kid when they catch her anywheres alone."

Claude looked about with sudden interest. "Will she be here, tonight?"

"Who—*Norris?*" Peter Poff tested the narrowest crack in the floor within possible range. "Not much she won't!"

The Little Fiddler shook out a cascade of silvery notes, and youths and maidens leaped in the joy of life. "I didn't know—I saw her on my way here."

Peter suddenly stopped chewing. "No! But did you? Where?"

Claude told about his narrow escape.

"I ought to of told you about Mad Man's Pit," exclaimed Peter, remorsefully. "Good thing somebody seed you and yelled out—couldn't have been Norris, though."

"It was the girl Mrs. Gradley calls 'Servant,' of that I am sure."

"Whoever it was, good thing you didn't fall into that hole. Did you come up by Cave Spring? See where the water comes out of the rock?"

“Yes—and the air is as cold as Christmas, in that big room.”

“Well sir, that hole that you about fell into, it goes down into the earth, and leads into that big room, or it did before we stopped up the opening. Yes-sir-ee! There was a man once, name of Woolcoat—I don’t know if he’s kin to you or not—”

“I am Claude Walcott.”

“You might of been Woolcoat a hundred years back, no knowing. Take Poff. Do you think my line was always called Poff? Don’t seem in nature. But this here Woolcoat, he fell into the hole, which it is so steep, he couldn’t stop hisself, I reckon, though some *do* say, he went in a-purpose to explore what had never been explored aforetime. Tenny-rate, they was people standing about when he went in. So they dove down the hill to Cave Spring for to see if he ever come out. They waited and waited; and after so long a time—how long, don’t ask *me*—he comes crawling out at the corner of that there narrow slit in the rock which it was big enough, *them* days, for him to get through. He come out with hisself soaked in that freezing water—and he was stark mad—never knowed nothing afterwards. So they calls it Mad Man’s Pit. Then the neighborhood went and hefted a big rock for to stop up where he come out, and now if you was to fall into the pit, in there you’d stay.”

“But you have wandered from the subject, Peter.”

"Like enough. I ain't never been taught books, nor subjects—"

"It was about Norris. I am sure it was she who called to me."

"You wouldn't know *her* again, I guess."

"I saw her at Gradley's; and while she wasn't introduced—"

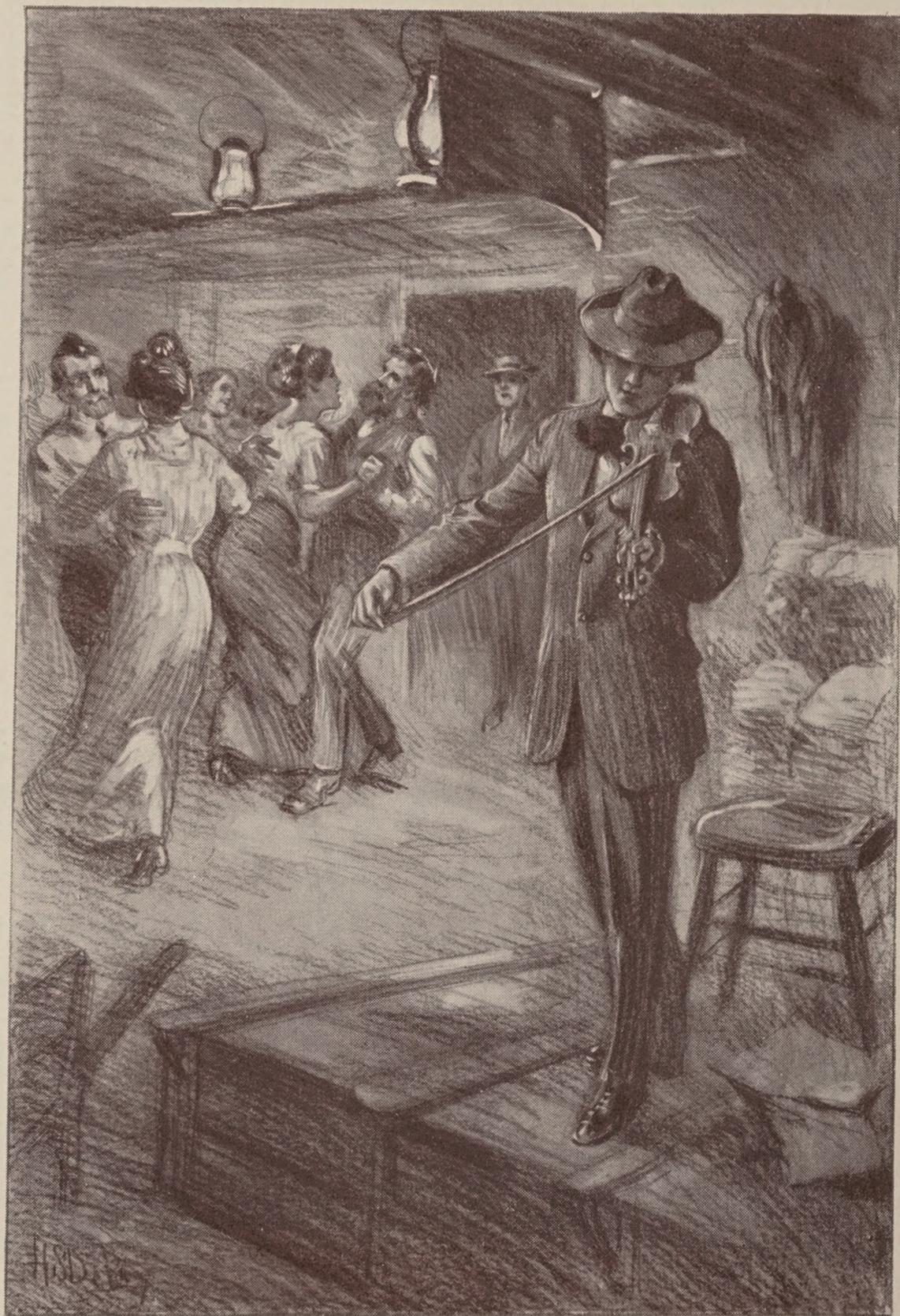
"Has brother Bud saw you here?"

"I'm sure he has, but he hasn't spoken to me."

"He'd have said something if you wasn't welcome, don't you fret about that! As long as he keeps still, everything's O. K. Now me, I am not like Bud, I enjoy speaking my thoughts, the more the merrier. Not that them thoughts is trained or pruned, for I am in a state of nature, I never having been to school but a very few days, and the more reproach to my pa and ma, say I, for they should have catched me up, and curried and rubbed me down, and drug me to my books."

At this moment an interruption came in the generous form of Lindy Prebby inviting Claude to lead her out upon the floor. He robbed his refusal of all sting by telling her how narrowly he had missed falling into the fatal pit; but remembering Lindy Prebby's hatred of the "little cat" he did not refer to the girl who had saved his life.

Lindy, meaning to be friendly, lingered with her open smile. "You better be keerful how you streak about in



THE LITTLE FIDDLER STOOD UPON AN INVERTED
WAGON-BED.— *Page 72.*

these parts by yourself, of nights," she laughed, "or the Green Witch'll git you shore!"

At sound of that mysterious name, Claude was suddenly all attention, and plied her with the questions he had found unavailing when addressed to Peter.

Lindy shook her head doubtfully. "Nobody don't know who the Green Witch is, or where her hole in the rocks is hid, but some of us have saw her, me for one. She just flits around. Time outer mind we've tried to ketch up with her, and our pains for nothing. Never mind—just let me lay hands on her once, I guess she'll not haunt the hills no more!"

"What sort of looking creature is she?"

"She don't dress in nothing but green leaves, setting herself up to be an Adam and Eve, I reckon. It ain't to the credit of Ozarka to have a mystery-woman living in the land for to haunt it, only seen of nights and vanishing like a ghost, green leaves and all." She shook her head emphatically: "Wait till I ketch up with her," she cried, as she went back to join her friends.

"What do you think of all that, Peter?" demanded Claude.

"Well sir, I don't set much store on any man's thoughts regarding sperrits. Thoughts ain't of no value except as measured by what they're sot on. If Solomon had sat hissself down to meditate on a weasel, it would have been naught but a weasel for all his cogitating. Likewise as to witches which is of another age and time. These chil-

dren imagines sounds and waving bushes is something living and palpable and they names it Green Witch and then goes about chasing their own fancies. Lord! when I make an idol out of my own brain, I know where it was whittled; let others fall down and worship it—but I got to have a religion that mystifies me, it being none of my own making. Wasn't we discoursing some sense before we taken up with this subject of Lindy Prebby's?"

"We were speaking of Norris—is she an orphan?"

"Not on one side of her house. Ain't Gradley her own pa?"

"Giles Gradley? Impossible!"

"Huh! Nothing ain't impossible with Giles Gradley."

Suddenly Claude's face burned. "Look here, Peter," he said with a curious sternness, "are you in earnest about that?"

"I'm in something," Peter responded, "and I reckon it's earnest. I tell you—but I thought you knowed it—Norris Gradley is Giles Gradley's darter."

"Then Mrs. Gradley is—is—?"

"Yap," Peter's jaws worked rapidly.

"She is Norris's step-mother?"

"She's *something*," Peter allowed.

"Is she Gradley's second wife?"

"Don't ask me how many wives Gradley's had."

Claude's heart throbbed tumultuously. "They accused Norris of trying to commit murder!"

"Mrs. Gradley spread it all over the neighborhood."

"Does she say that Norris tried to poison her?"

"Yap."

"Then—" Claude stared blankly at the other. The carressing smile of the Beautiful Woman, and the dark watchful face of the girl on the mountainside, rose before him simultaneously.

"I know Norris," Peter declared, "as good and sweet and innocent a gal as ever come to this quarter-section."

"But see how the young people feel about her!"

"Just because she's different. She won't run or mix with them, and they don't know what it is in her that's the matter. The world always wants to kill anybody that's different. It makes folks feel more comfortable to be all alike."

"But Mrs. Gradley—"

"When she give out that lie about the poison, everybody wanted to believe it, so they believed it, Giles too, and he made Norris move to the barn, because he *wanted* to believe his wife. Since they treat her like a slave at home, of course she's treated like a wild animal when she gets out."

"Why do you call it a lie, when her own father believes it?"

"Her own father! And what's *he*? I tell you, it's one of my thoughts and you can do with it what you please, that a feller believes what he wants to believe."

"I know Mrs. Gradley," Claude hotly exclaimed, "and

your suspicion does her a monstrous injustice. You make her out to be a—a villain.”

“I don’t make her out to be nothing. I don’t speak words against no woman. But I believe Norris, and I know she’s innocent. And if you’re right in thinking she saved your life tonight, it don’t come suitable from you to make her out a poisoner of people’s victuals. I got nothing to say of Mrs. Gradley. I leave her where I find her, and there may she lie unmolested of me. But you done a kind act to Norris that day of the woodchopping and for my part, I thank you.”

To the young man’s memory stole the childlike plain-tiveness of Mrs. Gradley’s voice, the delicate perfume of her luminous brown hair, the subtle appeal of her ripened charms.

“It is altogether impossible,” he exclaimed, turning away.

CHAPTER X

THE STORM

CLAUDE excused himself from the supper spread in bountiful profusion in a corner of Bud Poff's barn, and set out on his return tramp, much disquieted. The music of the Little Fiddler, gay and rollicking, pursued him, without relieving the mood induced by Peter's information.

He might have known, he told himself, from the disparity of their ages, that Mrs. Gradley was Giles's second wife, and his conduct in the hammock and in the cabin, suggesting an emotive nature deadened and forgotten, bore out the supposition. And now it appeared that if the step-daughter had not tried to poison Mrs. Gradley, then the step-mother was the cruelest of women. It was impossible to exonerate one without bitterly condemning the other.

During the long moonlight walk back to camp, a walk which skirted Baldhead Mountain, thus avoiding Cave Spring and Mad Man's Pit, Claude viewed the matter from all sides, unable to reach any conclusion. In weighing motives and probabilities, he was surprised to find himself in the attitude of a partial judge, as if afraid to pro-

nounce disinterested judgment. He shrank from admitting the alternative that Mrs. Gradley might have accused Norris falsely in order to have her degraded by her father as a servant; but if this were not the truth, Norris had attempted assassination of the most hideous nature.

All that Claude knew of step-mothers had been learned from his black nurse. As a white-robed lad of five or six, he had been taught to pray, "Lord, deliver me from sin and a step-mother." Since that remote day, he had classed the superstition of the old negress regarding step-mothers, in a class with that of her ghosts and graveyards. He had known children blessed by the advent of a second mother, but now, in thinking over what Peter Poff had said, all the old legends of sitting in ashes, and hiding under juniper trees, were revived.

But hardly did he begin to suspect that there might be some truth in the story, when out of the moonlight seemed to rise the face and form of Gradley's wife. Could such an exquisite piece of nature's handiwork contain a dark and malicious heart? He remembered Norris crouching among the fallen trees, flitting to and fro about her menial tasks of the kitchen, hiding in the thicket near Mad Man's Pit. Always hiding—always slipping away—surely she was the criminal. Perhaps she had been furious at her father's second marriage; had fought against it in vain; had been sullen in her defeat; and in a moment of brooding vindictiveness had meditated revenge, even the death of the alien woman, by poison. The poison had been

detected—after that, Norris had been banished to the barn.

The explanation was simple, but the recollection of Norris's eyes seemed to contradict it. Consequently, he did not visit the Gradley cabin the next day, nor the day following; he desired to see Mrs. Gradley again; he desired to see Norris—but in his painful indecision he feared to encounter either.

Every night Bates came home from drilling, in an abstracted mood which hung often upon the edge of irritation—a mood so unlike his merry, boisterous self, that even he was keenly aware of his strangeness.

Sometimes as they sat by the camp fire, he would try to recapture his old manner, would plunge into a familiar anecdote along whose well-worn path he had been used to find bursts of laughter; but now there were no such blossoms, only thorns, and perhaps he would cease speaking before the end was reached.

“I can't help it,” he replied to Claude's raillery, “I seem to have fallen into myself and I can't climb out to meet you on the open—you don't know what it is, all of a sudden, to discover a big cave in your nature, eh? I'm exploring one I never knew was there—I'm getting lots of experience.”

“What will you do with it?”

“Do? That's what's driving me mad—there's nothing I can do.”

A long pause.

“Does Giles Gradley improve on acquaintance?”

Bates answered slowly, "I don't know him any better than the day we met."

"You see a good deal of him."

"I don't think much about the fellow."

From the nearby stream came conflicting choruses of frogs at practice. The locusts held their high note so long that it seemed a part of the sound-movement of the night. Overhead sounded the sudden wheezing inquiry of a screech-owl. A sudden splash at the margin of Possum Creek told that a muskrat was taking his bath, while occasionally a sharp slap at the water betrayed leaping fish.

Suddenly Claude—"Don't you think you'd better?"

Bates groped out of his cave, in which he had been seeking bright nuggets of fancy. "Eh? Oh, are you still there? Well, what was the latest?"

"I was hinting that perhaps you'd *better* think about him."

"About who? What do you mean? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about Giles Gradley, that's who I'm talking about."

"Confound Giles Gradley," exclaimed Bates starting up angrily, "and confound you and everybody else!—except the Beautiful Woman. Good night. There's no Giles Gradley in my dreams, at any rate."

On the third day after the dance at Bud Poff's, Claude's mind was made up—he would see Mrs. Gradley, talk to

her, look into her eyes, sound her innermost nature; and he would see Norris and, if possible, talk to her. He carried rod and reel to give an unpremeditated air to his visit, but when he reached the scene of the drilling, he found only Peter Poff, and an empty white duck campchair under the isolated persimmon tree from which Bates was wont to direct operations.

“He has went to the house, for a word with Mrs. Gradley,” said Peter, pausing to dash the sweat from his eyes. The sun was unmercifully hot, the air was close and oppressive from a gathering summer-storm, and the drill stood free of the woods. Peter had removed his outer shirt and was in all respects so lightly clad that he seemed about to make good his oft-asserted boast that he was in a state of nature.

Claude crossed the road to the rail fence, and, at the end of the straggling turkey shed discovered a moving form—it was Norris. She wore the same plain, patched dress, the same heavy shoes and big sunbonnet, and, as on the occasion of the wood-chopping, and on the day when her father had driven her from his store, her appearance would have been not only humble but commonplace, but for the grace of her movements. It seemed that despite any garb that might seek to commonize her, there was a fineness within that could not be disguised.

Her attitude could not have been more prosaic; she was upon her knees, pouring water into a shallow pan for the benefit of at least two hundred little turkeys. When

it was full, she pushed it under a huge latticed pen, while the turkey-hens stalked about on the outside, their long blue legs bent backward, their feathers ruffled with an effect of extreme skittishness.

It was not until Norris was about to rise, that she discovered Claude. He saw a flash of the eye, a flush of the cheek, and then the bonnet drooped and the dark slender face was hidden. She rose and with her back always toward him, passed into the shed. Did not her silence, her evasive looks, her flight, speak of conscious guilt? Would Mrs. Gradley shrink thus from his scrutinizing gaze?

Claude went back to Peter Poff, and was startled at finding the campchair occupied by Gradley's wife. He hastened to share with her the shade of the persimmon tree, wishing that Peter were more fully clothed, and trying to believe that the enormous amount of whiskers affected by the laborer did something toward hiding his nakedness.

Mrs. Gradley lent to the landscape a thousand suggestions of fairy charm. In the midst of heated light-waves that radiated from rock-bound earth and fast-clouding sky, she was cool. Against the red pyramid of earth, her white skin shimmered delicately. The rich luminous texture of her brown hair seen against the sky, made it a perfect sky.

She was so glad to see Claude that he reproached himself for having staid away so long, and especially for his

morbid imaginings. Of course she must get terribly lonesome, since her husband was at the store every day; she could not but crave the society of men—like himself—able to appreciate the finer qualities of her mind and heart. Just now she was especially glad to see him, for she feared a storm was on its way.

He told himself that henceforth he would be more sociable—he loved solitude, but, all the same, it would not do to despise humanity. Is it natural for a young man to shut himself up with rod and gun? A young man must mingle with his kind; a young man must expect to marry some day—his father had desired him to choose a wife even before Claude had been left fatherless. And there is no doubt that nothing makes a home like a pretty woman.

They had not talked long before interruption came in the stalwart form of Rodney Bates. As Mrs. Gradley had conveyed to Claude the delicate impression that his coming had been to her a pleasure, in the nature of an escape, so now she made it felt that Bates was the cause of her previous relief. At Claude's coming, she had remained in the chair, and he had cast himself at her feet; at Bates' coming she rose with a certain definiteness, saying,

“I must go now.”

Bates interposed eagerly—“But I've been to the house hunting you. Please stay, Mrs. Gradley—I wanted you.”

“Is anything the matter?”

"Oh, no—that is—but no, of course not."

"But I must go now, Mr. Walcott—" her eyes were bright—"you must come again—you must come often—when Mr. Gradley is at home."

Bates stood watching her till she had disappeared behind the shed, then sank upon the chair and took off coat, collar and tie. He shouted to Peter—

"About melted, Poff?"

"Not me; don't you be skeered of me." He slowly—very slowly—lowered the scraper into the hole. "Whenever I begins a day's work, I strikes a lasting gait that carries me to sundown. How long a man can go don't depend on his strength, or his willingness, or his wishes; there's everything in the gait."

"Claude—" Bates addressed the horizontal figure, "is it as romantic lying at the lady's feet, as near the toes of my boots? See here, young man—listen! Do you know why she was glad you came?"

"Don't compel me to compliment myself."

"You were a relief to her, Claude, a real relief."

"From what?" Claude demanded.

Bates lighted a cigarette, his eyes bright; he seemed greatly elated, repeating, "It was a relief to her!"

Claude started up, impatiently. "Rod, she hinted that you shouldn't go to the house while her husband's away."

"Sure. Quite correct."

"She was right, Rod."

"Sure. Very proper, too." Bates smiled.

Claude frowned at him with exaggerated fierceness—
“You villain, you seem positively happy!”

Bates laughed, not the old jolly, rather-loud laugh, but one of deep satisfaction. “Maybe I am—I never ask myself.”

“Old fellow—a man should always count the costs, you know.”

Bates flung away his cigarette which was not half-smoked, and lighted another. “Well, Claude, it doesn’t cost *you* anything.”

The other gave a short laugh: “Which means to mind my business? Thank you. And now—the storm will catch me before I get home.”

Peter had begun to put away his movable tools in great haste, but Bates was serene, remarking, “I know of a roof not very far away.”

The wind had sprung up with amazing swiftness and now it swept a stifling cloud of red dust along the road. Suddenly the forest groaned as in pain. In the midst of the cloud appeared Giles Gradley spurring on his black horse at a mad pace. Seeing the men he shouted—
“Come!”

Bates had already started for the cabin; Claude came after him on the run. Peter Poff was half down the hill in the opposite direction, on the way to one of his well-known haunts, possibly a cave.

“In with you—quick!” It was the authoritative voice

of Giles Gradley as Claude and Bates burst into the cabin. The door was flung shut.

Mrs. Gradley, pale and agitated, was wringing her hands, moaning, "it is such a storm—oh, it is such a storm!" If her manner had been affected on the evening of the supper, she was now sincere with all the world, for such fear is too sincere for artifice. "I am afraid—it is such a storm!"

"This wind will blow over in a few minutes," Bates assured her. "Don't you be scared, Mrs. Gradley." His soft tone in calling her name, his instinctive tenderness and air of protection, his bending toward her as he spoke, caused Claude to cast an uneasy glance toward the husband. He was much discomfited to find his covert glance caught and held by the deep penetrating eyes of the master of the cabin.

There was a curious expression on the large, strong face; the thin lips wreathed themselves in a subtle smile.

"Yes," he said, to Claude, exactly as if the young man had asked him a question, "I am taking lessons on the proper manner in which one should treat his wife."

A shriek from the storm flew by the window like a trumpet-blast. The cabin was violently shaken, and Mrs. Gradley, covering her face, uttered a despairing cry, adding, "I am so afraid—"

Rodney Bates stepped forward, his eyes furious—"Mr. Gradley, I do not understand you."

“Do you not?” Gradley looked at him fixedly; “very good, then; you are in the majority.”

Bates paused, white and savage, but his glance at the cowering woman softened him. She was so like a frightened child—a beautiful frightened little darling—some one should take those trembling hands from the terrified face, some one should smooth back the disordered hair to rest a protecting hand upon the lovely brow. It was Gradley’s right, and Bates would have been content to see that right exercised, since he might not dare.

The door was suddenly thrown open, letting in a violent gust which came as a relief to the tension of the inmates.

Mrs. Gradley screamed. A form darted in—that of Norris.

“What do you want?” Gradley asked, harshly. “Why are you here?”

Her voice came quick and pleading while Claude was setting his shoulder to the door, to close it against the wind. “Father! Jim is in the road under the big thorn-tree—lying there, his arm broken. Oh, come, help me carry him to the barn before the rain.”

“Drunk, is he?” growled Gradley.

“He had been drinking. I carried him from the foot of the hill.”

“*You?* Carried him up that hill? What are you saying!”

“But I was obliged to—he is all in pain, and can’t move. A big rock fell from the cliff and he was not quite

out of the way—” She caught her breath, and leaned heavily against the wall, eyes entreating, strength slowly returning.

Claude could not see her very distinctly for the room had grown ominously dark; but he fancied upon her features an expression of rare nobility as of the soul shining through the veil of flesh.

“I’ll go,” said Gradley, abruptly. “Walcott, will you come?—Bates had better remain to comfort my wife—he knows how.”

There came a blinding flash of lightning which brought out Gradley’s head in startling relief, and betrayed the grim smile of the compressed lips.

Bates spoke accusingly: “Is this Jim the young chap that the girl begged you not to sell whisky to—that first day I struck Ozarka?”

“The very same Jim,” was the cool retort. “Come, Walcott. Come, Norris.”

Bates called, with marked hostility, “And did you sell whisky to him today?”

“Mr. Bates!” murmured Mrs. Gradley, warningly.

“As it happened, I sold whisky to him today,” said Gradley, pausing before opening the door. “I did not make the whisky, however; and I did not make Jim’s appetite for it. Will you ask me something else? No? Then let me ask *you* a question, since you remember so well our first meeting. I said to you, on that interesting occasion, that all men have a door opening upon hell if

one could but find the right key to fit the lock. Have you found the key that opens your own door? Or is it possible that some one else has found it, and you don't know it?"

"But *father!*" interposed Norris, desperately, "the rain is coming, and poor Jim is suffering terribly."

"Yes, yes," muttered Gradley, drawing open the door, "come, then. Out in the storm, Norris, that's the place for you, anyhow—and it's the place for me. Out in the storm, Walcott, if you will lend a hand."

The three hurried away, bending against the blast. They had not reached the road when Claude suddenly exclaimed—

"Listen!"

At his startled voice, all stopped but Norris. Above the roar of the wind, as it surged through the forest, could be heard a far-off cry, scarcely to be distinguished from the moaning of the trees.

"Father!" called Norris, pleadingly, not looking back.

"Well?" demanded Gradley of the young man, "what do you hear?"

"Don't you hear it, also?"

"The wind. The storm—yes. Come, why do you delay us to listen to that? Doesn't it fill all the night?"

"But it's a cry—now—I can catch the words—don't you hear them?"

"No, no, no," exclaimed the other fiercely, "I hear nothing but our own voices."

The cry came again, but it was fainter. The wind bore it to Claude's straining ears like a sigh outriding the storm—"The Green Witch! The Green Witch!"

Then came voices nearer, but still far away, as if on another hilltop: "Which way did she go?"

"Ah," said Gradley, contemptuously, "now I understand. They are chasing the Green Witch."

"Yes, but what is that?"

"Only a delusion. Merely a fantasy."

"Father!" begged Norris from the middle of the dust-swept road.

Gradley ran to overtake her, and the other followed, bewildered by those far-off voices which floated toward him, now from one elevation, now from another—

"The Green Witch!"

"She passed this way!"

"No—she went toward the north. Hurry—hurry—Everybody come—"

The last faint cry died away, and nothing more was to be heard but the fury of the storm.

CHAPTER XI

THE GIRL AT HOME

IT was a strangely dark outdoors, after so brief an interval between summer brightness and the ominous gloom. They moved like fleeing figures driven along in dust-clouds, as if blown from the plateau down the hill. Only their heads and shoulders were at all times visible; occasionally their bodies emerged from the billowing dust; and when the lightning played, it revealed the slender form of Gradley's daughter in all its lithe, supple outlines—Claude kept his eyes upon her, struck by the beauty of her swift motion, and the "Green Witch" was forgotten.

When they turned from the road to enter the woods, the dust was dispelled, but leaves and bits of branches were lifted from the ground, filling the air. Norris found her bonnet disturbing, and soon snatched it from her head which, from the rear, thanks to its closely-cropped hair, looked something boyish. In spite of the skirts that were whipped about her and in spite of the heavy shoes, her descent was not only swift, but instinct with a wild grace. This girl, now so eager to relieve a half-drunken lad—had she indeed tried to poison her father's wife?

They left the woods to follow the road across a barren

field, and under a huge thorn tree that stood alone, lay a dark mass which the incessant lightning defined as Jim.

He was an ill-favored lad of fourteen, stunted in growth, thin, ragged and unkempt. His breath reeked with the whisky that had sent him homeward from Ozarka more than half drunk; the breaking of his arm had sobered him, and the long thin face was now twisted with pain.

Norris knelt and put her arms about the puny frame. The men stood looking down, the wind rushing overhead with whistled crescendo, the tree groaning and straining as if to cast aside its anchorage of roots, to sail away into the sky.

“Dear Jim, poor Jim—does it hurt so *very* bad?”

Her thought was only of him. In her voice was the magic of woman’s pity, on her thin face, despite its unfilled lines and troubled brow, was the loveliness of woman’s pure compassion.

Was the lightning playing false tricks with Claude, or was the countenance indeed lovely? How could innocence look from her black eyes, what place had purity upon the tremulous lips, if that rumor of attempted crime were based upon truth? And yet, he must not forget that it was Mrs. Gradley who had spread the report, and that Giles Gradley had confirmed it.

Claude was more troubled by the sight of Norris, than by the injured boy. Was it the sorrow of years, that her face expressed in answer to Jim’s anguish? Could such seeming sympathy be merely assumed?

"It hurts awful, just awful!" Jim gasped. "Oh, Norris—Norris! My arm!"

Gradley said to Claude, "Come—we must carry him."

They lifted the frail body, Claude instinctively receiving the greater part of the weight, for Gradley was panting from his recent exertions.

Norris walked by the lad's side. "I am here," she kept saying, "I am here."

Jim gasped, "Hold my hand."

Norris took his groping hand. In doing so her bare arm touched Claude's wrist, and he made an involuntary movement to draw away. She caught a sudden breath. Did she suffer, also?

Gradley addressed the child in a voice so tender that Claude who had felt a touch of remorse, forgot it in his amazement that the other could be so gentle—"I'll fix you, little chap; you'll stay right at my house till you're well, and Norris shall nurse you all the time—won't you, Norris?"

At hearing his voice so kind, a sob escaped her, "Oh, father!" she exclaimed, brokenly.

Jim forgot his suffering, for he thought her cry an expression of pain. "What's the matter, Norris—are you hurt, too?"

Norris could not answer.

Gradley spoke with the same tenderness as before—"Don't cry, little girl." Still holding the boy's limbs in one arm, he passed the other about his daughter.

Norris trembled with ecstatic happiness; it was much too wonderful to be hidden, and Claude was confused, as if he had been detected in a fault. Thus they made their way through the storm to the log cabin, entering as the big drops were beginning to fall.

It was dark enough to require a lamp, and by its rays, Rodney Bates was looking over a pile of music, while Mrs. Gradley, too frightened to play, sat idly at the piano. At sight of the injured boy, Bates started forward to help, but his companion shrank back with a cry.

"Don't bring him here," she exclaimed, impetuously, "don't bring him in here! There's no room—"

"Please let him stay with me in the barn," Norris interposed, looking only at her father.

Without a word, Giles nodded to Claude and they left the cabin. For a moment Bates hesitated, desiring to follow, that he might assist; but when he glanced at Mrs. Gradley, he lost the impulse, and closed the door against the first gusts of rain.

They made such haste across the lot, that Jim and his friends were not very wet when they reached the barn. A ladder nailed upright against the wall presented difficulties, but soon all four were in the loft.

Everything was indistinguishable until Norris lighted her candle; on one side, hay was heaped to the roof, at one corner, a partition of rude boards fenced off a narrow space which served as her bedroom. Here, Jim was stretched upon Norris's bed—a mattress upheld by two

goodsboxes,—and upon another box, the candle was placed.

“What will *you* do?” Norris’s father asked her.

“Oh, I’ll sleep on the hay,” she answered, eagerly. “It makes a very pleasant bed, and is so healthful and clean.”

Claude darted a glance at Giles Gradley.

The other returned it with an inscrutable smile, saying, “Oh, your friend Bates didn’t come?—quieting my wife, no doubt! She is terribly afraid of storms. Hold the candle, Norris, let’s see what has happened.”

After all, the arm was not broken. It had been wrenched from the socket and the flesh had been torn. The men pulled the bone back into place. There were a few screams, a sharp report, a good many tears, and all was done.

“You’ll be all right now, little man,” Gradley said, stroking the rough red hair as it rested against Norris’s bosom. His slim white fingers showed the gentleness of a woman, and his handsome face was marvellously softened. Claude was sensible of his strong magnetism; he felt drawn toward him—could Gradley be at heart a bad man? Yet if not bad, how account for his treatment of his daughter. If he was not bad, could Norris be innocent? It struck Claude with something like grim humor that he must make out everybody to be villains, in order to exonerate the girl.

He stood silently watching the massive head as the candle touched up its rugged beauty, suggesting more

power than it revealed. As the shapely hand stroked Jim's crash locks, it also smoothed the short dark hair of Norris. She, feeling that unaccustomed touch, looked up, her eyes shining at him from across the sobbing form of the boy.

She seemed to have forgotten Claude's presence; love for her father was a mighty passion of the inner soul that had no room for thought or self-consciousness. When he was unkind, when he mistrusted, when he was cruel, she loved him. And tonight, he was all sympathy. Out of the great eyes shone the unspeakable gratitude of a heart which when crushed, makes no reproach, which when smiled upon, enters its heaven.

And what was the cause of this sudden glory which made her face a new face, which transformed features ordinarily so melancholy as to be almost plain, with a lofty and noble bearing? Nothing but a kind tone, and a touch upon the head!

Gradley turned from her with sudden brusqueness, yet not in anger, as if he would have shielded his eyes from the brightness of her face.

"We will return to the cabin," he told Claude.

Norris said timidly, "It is raining very hard, father."

In truth, the downpour upon the roof forced them to speak in loud voices.

"Rain can only make us wet," Gradley called, as he went toward the head of the ladder. "Fire can only burn—such things are nothing to the real man. What does it matter what befalls these carcasses we drag about

with us?" He cast a brooding look at Claude, as if expecting him to answer.

However, they reached the cabin without another word.

Mrs. Gradley had her back to them, as she stared through the window, and Bates was at her side, pointing out the effect of wind and rain on the landscape.

She turned to her husband, quickly—"the storm is getting worse," she faltered.

"So much the better," he answered, shortly. "I love storms—terrible storms, such as drive all before them. If one could do that—sweep all before one—Ah that's power!" His face darkened.

Mrs. Gradley's lips parted in one of her delicious smiles that warmed the skin in the luminous beauty of the heart's sunshine, as if forgetting the storm in the recollection of other days. "You have done that," she exclaimed, as if Claude and Rodney Bates were not present. "Again and again! You *have* swept everything before you."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, drawing a quick breath as he stared at her. Then his face was swept by an illuminating smile.

Claude had the impression that husband and wife had been for a time estranged—possibly because of Rodney Bates—and that, by some subtle reminder, she had regained her ascendancy. At any rate, during the rest of the storm, which lasted several hours, Gradley treated both guests with marked consideration.

Rodney Bates was also aware of the change, since Grad-

ley no longer betrayed any sign of latent hostility; he felt himself a thousand leagues removed from Mrs. Gradley. There had been times, that afternoon, when he had felt much nearer.

CHAPTER XII

THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN GOES HUNTING

IT was night before Claude and his friend reached camp, a wet, clouded night with chill air and shuddering trees which flung after them cold raindrop-showers. Thanks to the good red earth ribbed with rock, their feet found solid support beneath slushy layers of last year's leaves. They did not converse, and Claude fancied that Bates was somewhat sulky because the invitation to stay all night at Gradley's had been refused by the young man.

The cabin with its two rooms was not large enough; and besides—

Claude had never known Bates so prone to fall into silences. The middle-aged bachelor was a changed man since coming to the Ozarks, and the change was not for the better, at least in the way of familiar intercourse.

When Possum Creek was reached, they found the tent blown down and everything soaked. Claude's shout at this discovery, while rueful, was shaded with the humorous aspect of affairs, but the other returned rather moodily—

“Well, see that! What's to be done?” He muttered other words such as suited his mood. “We ought to have

staid at Gradley's," he added reproachfully. "They wanted us."

"These things must be dried—we'll make a fire," was Claude's cheery response, thinking of the days when Bates would have laughed boisterously at such discomfiture. After various attempts, he induced a sickly blaze to lick tentatively at damp twigs as if to find if they were suited to the taste. Bates only looked on.

"Now," Claude cried, gaily, "let's get up the tent."

"Oh, damn everything!" growled Bates, glaring at the prostrate poles.

"And while you're doing that, I'll get supper. You look as glum as if you'd met the Green Witch. Luckily she hasn't sung any incantations over *me!*" And he went to work, whistling cheerfully.

Bates watched awhile, then kicked objects out of his way, and grappled with the canvas. "Claude, what's come over me? If there ever was a fool, his name's Bates."

"We're perfectly agreed on that. Wait, I'll help you with the rope."

Bates laughed, and they put up the tent, talking briskly about the work in hand. Presently a big fire was roaring; bedclothes slung upon damp stakes, lifted their ghostly forms about the circle of light; the odor of spitted bacon flavored the air with good cheer—but when Bates became inactive, his light flared out. He said solemnly—

"I suppose you've heard that the girl is Mrs. Gradley's step-daughter?"

"Yes."

"Yes," the other said, also.

They began to eat their supper—smoking bacon, corn-bread, warmed-over fish, coffee, with additions from canned foods.

"When you and Gradley carried Jim to the barn, you left me in the cabin with Mrs. Gradley."

"I know that well enough."

"Yes. And while you were gone, she told me all about that servant; it's Gradley's own daughter, Norris. Mrs. Gradley says she has tried by every means in her power to win over that girl. No use. Norris didn't want her father to marry again, and she's always hated Mrs. Gradley. Think to what lengths the little imp's hatred could go. Tried to poison Mrs. Gradley! What a devil! Ugly little vixen! I asked Mrs. Gradley why they didn't send the creature to a school of correction—they didn't think of it in time—she's of age, now. Doesn't it make your blood boil? Mrs. Gradley is an angel, to let the ugly wretch crawl at her feet—such slender little feet—"

"Rod!—Surely you're bewitched! Yes, sir, it's all the work of that Green Witch—she must slip here while we sleep with her spells. But I'll save you—"

"Oh, save yourself the trouble, *I'm* all right. I can admire a picture without wanting to steal it. Mrs. Gradley is nothing to me but a beautiful picture, hanging in somebody else's gallery. What are my eyes for, or my taste, if I'm not to admire? Do you think God made

her exquisitely beautiful for the sole benefit of Giles Gradley? And she is as sweet, modest, and humble as beautiful—she's a saint!"

"Must make you feel very unworthy to be near her!"

"Does. And it's good for a man to be made humble in that way. How can she endure that brute of a husband, if she's not an angel?—and that ugly little assassin! When I think of Mrs. Gradley in such surroundings, I feel that I could do—anything."

Claude felt chilled, as if his friend were drawing farther and farther away, as if soon a sea of dark mystery would widen its cold depths between their souls—a sea never to be recrossed.

"Ever notice how her brown hair glows? Believe I could see it in the dark. * * * Don't worry; nothing matters about *me*—I'm only a commonplace business man, there's no one to care what becomes of me—don't seem to care, myself! Suppose I *should* think too much of her—she'd never know, nor Gradley! Why may I not treat myself to the dissipation?"

He laughed and stirred the fire, causing the sparks to stream away far above the treetops.

It was impossible for Claude to banish from memory the face and form which the other's words conjured up. "Rod, I am not surprised that you have thought of her the past two years—but then, you didn't know of her husband—"

"Ever see a more beautiful woman?"

"Never."

"Think of her eyes and mouth and tell me if you believe she lied about that poisoning."

"But Rod, if what she said is true, if she is all you think, isn't that the more reason for you to come with me back to Kansas City?"

"With you? When?"

"The moment you say the word. Tomorrow, if you will."

"But I won't. My work is here—and so is my heart. There! But I'm aware that *I'm* wretched company—you get no good out of me, and I don't believe you're taking much interest in hunting—Claude, what makes you stay here, yourself?"

Claude threw back his head to laugh. "Upon my word, I don't know!"

Then Bates laughed, and at the moment they seemed oddly together.

If the Beautiful Woman had spoken the truth about Norris * * * And how could a woman so beautiful attribute to an innocent girl so hideous a crime as that of which Norris was accused? * * * On the other hand, how could such a girl with her devotion to her father, with her gift of tender sympathy for a child like Jim, have been guilty of an attempted deed so foul?

Claude did not know how to answer his friend's demand, so he said no more; he could not answer his self-questionings, so for days he avoided the Gradley cabin. He dreaded

meeting Mrs. Gradley, he dreaded seeing Norris. One of them must be innocent—but which one? And which one would he rather find innocent?

It was more than a week after the storm when the young man felt once more the irresistible desire to see the two women, or at least one of them—preferably Mrs. Gradley, that he might drink in her beauty as that of a “picture”—a living picture.

In one hand, he carried his book of poems, in the other his rod, as he followed a faintly-marked cowpath rising from a rocky pasture through densely wooded hills. But he did not read poetry now, he was thinking poetry. It was late enough for the glorious sunshine to have absorbed the morning dew, and all was freshness and tender delight in the wilderness.

He did not intend to go to the Gradley cabin until several hours later, hence sought the skirting hills, from the summits of which he could look across at the scene of excavation where the red pyramid of earth and gravel stood out against the hazy blue of more distant mountains.

Claude was slowly making his way down a gradual slope when he heard a stir in the thicket on his right, and a form slipped into view.

It was Mrs. Gradley, dressed in hunting costume, gun in hand. At sight of Claude she started violently, uttering a slight exclamation, then turned as if to flee. Her face reddened, as if her short skirts had caused a blush of modesty.



“MRS. GRADLEY!” CLAUDE EXCLAIMED.— *Page 109.*

"Mrs. Gradley!" Claude exclaimed, in confused pleasure. "I am so glad . . . I'm afraid I startled you." He told himself it was no wonder such a sight as this had bewitched Rodney Bates on his first coming to the Ozarks. The yellow blouse and skirts, the leathern leggins, laced to perfect fit, the dainty moccasins, all lent charming picturesqueness to the effect, to charm not only the simplest, but the most critical eye.

"I often go hunting," she apologized, "because it's so lonely at home—but I never meet any one—I am so nervous . . ."

"But it is splendid!" Claude exclaimed, anxious to put her at her ease. "We are in the wilderness together, each dressed in keeping with surroundings. Have you killed any deer this morning?"

"I fired at one," she smiled, radiantly. "Promise you'll not follow me . . ."

"But why couldn't we hunt together?" he asked, urgently.

"No, no, my friend—let me go alone, or I shall be sorry we met."

"Sorry we met! Please don't say that. How could I displease you? It must be goodby, then, although I haven't seen you for so long."

"Is that my fault?" she smiled. "But yes, it is goodby. And thank you, Mr. Walcott." Her eyes were cast shyly down as, with sweet simplicity, she extended her hand.

He clasped it gratefully, then stood like a soldier on

guard until she had vanished among the trees. As he stood thus, looking after her, listening for the last soft footfall, he was so sure that he was alone, that he did not attempt to restrain a sigh, pensive, rather than fervent. He spoke aloud, whimsically—"O you Beautiful Woman!"

The last sound of Mrs. Gradley had vanished like the rustle of a falling leaf. Claude turned about to resume his progress toward the valley; it was then that he made a discovery—Some one was watching him; had evidently been watching him for a good while, for the eyes that were visible among the leaves of the bushes, did not show any surprise.

He could see nothing but the eyes, and as he looked they turned away. After an instant's hesitation, he darted toward the spot, more angry than astonished, and he had hardly entered the undergrowth before he had seen enough to tell him that it was Norris.

His first thought was, that she had been acting as a spy, and he wondered that she did not try to escape; but as he plunged through the barrier that surrounded a small clearing, the reason became apparent.

A rope, slender but strong, had been wrapped about her, pinning her arms immovably to her sides, and holding her body and limbs to a forest tree so securely that it was impossible for her to move.

CHAPTER XIII

LITTLE BRAVE HEART

NORRIS was, indeed, in most wretched plight. Her dress had been torn to strips which fluttered about her helpless form in the light breeze. Her shoes and stockings swung from a bough high above her head, but there was nobody in sight to betray the author of her misfortune.

As Claude stared at the girl so securely tied to the tree, his meeting with Mrs. Gradley was too recent to be altogether forgotten. The charm, the modesty, the shyness of the Beautiful Woman seemed still to linger on the air, casting, as it were, a darker shade upon Norris than that of the great tree. Why was the girl always running away, or being tormented? If she were innocent, why always appearing in the guise of a criminal? The winning eyes, the sweet smile of Mrs. Gradley, seemed to ask Claude if he could be a friend to the step-daughter.

"Who tied you to the tree?" he asked abruptly, as he drew his hunting knife. His perplexity brought a frown upon his brow as if really angry at himself, at Norris, at anybody but Mrs. Gradley.

"The girls," was her low-voiced reply. She did not look at him.

"The girls! And why did you let them?" He cut one of the coils.

"I was here alone—there were twelve of them."

There were many loops, and in cutting through one, he touched her warm skin and drew back involuntarily.—The poisoner, or the maligned,—which was it? To keep from inflicting a wound, he was forced to hold her arm firmly; he hesitated, then did so with set mouth, and she, divining his feeling and his doubts, trembled.

"Do I hurt you?"

"I am very tired," she murmured, trying to repress a sob.

He proceeded as quickly as he dared, but the rope had been coiled so intricately that the task was tedious, as well as dangerous.

He spoke with unconscious sharpness—"Don't bear so heavily upon the ropes, or I'll not be able to set you free."

It was when she tried desperately to straighten herself that he found the cause of her hanging upon the cords till they chafed the flesh; she was utterly exhausted.

With a hot wave of indignation against those who had thus mistreated her—"How long have you been here?"

"All morning," she answered, faintly.

Claude's mouth showed grim anger as he freed her limbs, then rose. Only one arm now remained securely bound in the network. As he pressed the edge of his

knife against the rope a sudden thought caused him to start with such agitation that his hand became unsteady—

“Does Mrs. Gradley know you are here?”

Norris cried out in pain.

“Now I have cut you!” he exclaimed, remorsefully.

Freed from the tree, she sank upon the ground. Across her bare arm trickled a tiny stream of blood; but however much he was moved by that sight, his suspicion was even more important and he persisted.

“Did she know? *Did* Mrs. Gradley know?”

The girl's head had fallen upon her breast, as in complete dejection. “I'll soon be able to go home,” she murmured.

“You can't walk, now?”

“Not yet. But please go away. I shall do much better alone.”

“And suppose the girls come again.”

“They won't come. Please go.

“You should bind up that cut—or will you allow me—”

“Please don't touch me again,” she said, not excitedly, but with desperate firmness.

“Oh, very well,” he was thrown out of sympathy by her repulsion. “But if you won't answer my question, you throw a very serious charge upon your mother.”

There was a quick rush of color to her face: “My step-mother!”

“I understand. But you intimate by your silence that

she knew of your condition, yet left you to suffer alone. Such a charge as that is dreadful—you make her more cruel than those who tied you here.”

“The girls said they would tell her,” Norris answered, in a low voice. “They knew she’d be pleased, and they supposed she’d come and set me free when she was ready. I think she did come to unfasten the rope, when she saw you in the path—so she had to go on without helping me—And I am in trouble, Mr. Walcott; won’t you leave me, please?”

“But that blood should be checked,” he said, bewildered by her quiet manner and by what she had said.

Norris made an impatient movement of her head.

He went on with sudden resolution, “No, I’ll not leave you here alone. And I want to urge you, Norris, to be more charitable toward your step-mother. Your morbid state of mind has led you to imagine all sorts of wild impossibilities—she is too kind and gentle to want to hurt you, and if you would be kind and gentle to her, you would completely win over your father; convince him that you mean to be friends with his wife, and he’ll very soon teach the mountain girls that they’re not to molest you.”

Norris slowly rose, but her hand quickly pressed against the tree, showing how unfit she was to make her way over the hills. Her eyes burned with neither defiance nor anger. He was strongly impressed by her mastery over emotions.

"I want to be your friend, Norris, and if I could make you see Mrs. Gradley as she really is—"

Norris literally stumbled as she began to make her way toward the path. Every step was an exertion, but her face was firmly set, and though her body swayed, her expression was dauntless.

After a brief hesitation, he hurried to her side—"Norris! You are unable. You can't reach home alone."

As she turned to look at him, her face suddenly quivered. "Huntsman!"—the note of desolation was in her tone—"Won't you let this poor wounded animal creep away to suffer in solitude?"

Some powerful influence overwhelmed Claude, as if there came to him in vivid enlightenment a sudden understanding of her heart which before, shadowy and dim, had been merged in the gloom of terrible suspicions. He caught, as it were, a sudden breath from her soul, fragrant with the innocence and pathos of crushed flowers.

"No," he cried so loudly that it came almost as a call, "no, Norris, I cannot leave you!" He grasped her hand, and holding it tightly, though she sought to wrench it away, he went on incoherently, "Look into my eyes—tell me, Norris, *tell* me!"

If there had been a time when the charms of Gradley's wife had been luring him toward jagged rocks, that current had lost its power, and yet, but a brief half-hour before, he had held her hand, with a thrilling heart. It was strange that the rush of new emotions seemed to have

removed Mrs. Gradley into the shadowy past of years forgotten, and stranger still, that he should not feel its strangeness.

Norris looked into his eyes long and questioningly. At last, "What shall I tell you?"

Claude exclaimed impulsively, "Nothing! Your eyes tell me all that I care to know—Norris! You are innocent!"

The tears flooded her eyes as she sank to the earth; her sobs were unrestrained.

"I know you are," Claude exclaimed, bending over her, "you must not tell me so, because I want to believe in you without words. I've wronged you with my horrid suspicions, and I'll repair the wrong as best I can, by perfect confidence—You need a friend, Norris—you must accept as a friend the man whose life you saved on the mountain."

Her head rested upon her arms. He bent lower, and tried to take one of her hands, to lift her up, but she drew away.

"Norris!"

The sobs ceased.

"Norris—why don't you let me take your hand? Am I not to be your friend?"

"Is it because I need you?" she asked, faintly.

Claude's face beamed, as he knelt beside her. "What a proud little Norris! Of course not—it's because I need *you*."

Norris said, almost in a whisper, "You always shudder when you touch me."

Claude spread his coat over her feet, then took both her hands, and held them firmly. "Do I shudder?" he asked.

Through her tears she looked up at him, then smiled, and as she smiled, the dark slender face was illumined in rarest beauty. No fairy could, with magic wand, have evoked for Norris a joy to be compared with that Claude had given, by the simple act of spreading his coat to hide her feet.

He said, rather boastfully, "You haven't many friends, Norris, who believe in you as I!"

"Only three others," she said sadly, then smiled at him with great sweetness.

"Three others?" He was almost sorry that there were three others.

Her lips trembled in another smile—all her smiles lay on the dark borderland of her life-sorrow. "Only Peter Poff, and Bud Poff—and poor Jim."

Claude was half-jealous of Peter, Bud, and Jim. "So everybody else believes—"

"That I tried to poison—"

"Hush, Norris, don't say that!"

Her grasp tightened upon his hand. "But of course *she* knows better."

"Then Mrs. Gradley—"

"—Invented it all, to make father hate me. They

found the bottle under my pillow—after that, I've slept in the barn."

Claude shuddered. "And you suspect that she—"

"Nobody else could have put it there."

"How could your father believe it!"

"He is not himself—Some day he'll know—I must wait. I plan and plan, but there's no other way. And I say to myself that only two know how to wait: A brave heart and God."

"Ah, Norris, you've given me my name for you—Little Brave Heart!"

She smiled. "Will you help Little Brave Heart down the hill? It's time to go home—*She* might come and—"

"Go? No, indeed—after it has taken so long for us to become acquainted! I must learn all about you—how you've spent your life here in the Ozarks, and what your life was before you came, and what were your thoughts when you were a child—but you are still just a child!" and he placed his hand gently upon the short locks.

"No," she answered, quietly removing his hand, "I am no longer a child."

"But dear, you are only a child to me."

"Then I must hurry home, for a little child has no business out on the hills—and if *she* sees us, she'll make it much harder for me."

"Harder for you, dear Brave Heart? Come, then, lean on me—but wait; I remember that a part of your wardrobe is in the oak closet—I'll go upstairs after it."

He climbed the tree for her shoes and stockings, and while she put them on, he examined the thickets to discover if any divine form in yellow suit and leathern leggins hovered near. His search might have been more thorough, for, indeed, he no longer had eyes to send on aimless pilgrimages.

“Lean as heavily as you can,” he told Norris, “for if I discover you’re not throwing half your weight upon my arm, I’ll pick you up and carry all of you! However old you fancy yourself, to me you are nothing on earth but just my dear little—my poor little mistreated friend.”

By the time they reached the foot of Gradley’s hill, more than half her weight was, in truth, cast upon him; and here, at the ford where crystal clear water rippled over smooth sand, Claude took her in his arms without a word. He stepped into the water, and she closed her eyes.

“Oh!” she whispered, resting her cheek against his shoulder, “my trust in you is as sweet as any thought of heaven.”

Claude said nothing; but after the passage, he continued carrying her till she opened her eyes, a third of the way up the hillside.

“You must let me down, please—” And he obeyed at once.

In doing so, her wounded arm brushed his hair, and he remembered with wonder that formerly he had shrunk from touching it. All that was different, now.

“Norris, I cut that arm, so I’m responsible—And you

are a mere child, you know—and it's a saying of childhood that to kiss a hurt place makes it well—”

Norris held out her arm, with a smile on her lips, and tears in her eyes—

“Oh,” she said softly, “it's as well now, as well can be!” Her face was rosy, not from sentiment, but from the dazzling wonder that any one should care to kiss her arm.

“I'm going to tell your father how you were treated,” Claude's eyes flashed. “I'll open his eyes—”

Norris was terrified. “If you take my part, *she'll* mistreat me—Mr. Walcott, you could do no good—you'd do so much harm! No, we must wait. I'm sure she hasn't the control over him she once had. At first, she only had to look and he'd do all she wished. Now—it seems to me he's struggling to be free.”

“But I can't wait, Norris, *I'm* not Brave Heart! Every day of your waiting, your suffering grows more unendurable.”

“You must wait for my sake, Mr. Walcott. What could you do? Will my father listen to a stranger—”

“Norris!”

“But to him you are a stranger. We *must* wait till *her* influence is less and less—and then, at the right time—strike!”

“Norris, there's one thing you don't know.”

“What is it?”

“That it breaks my heart for you to suffer. Don't ask

me to wait. I want to go to your father this moment and tell him—”

She laid her hand upon his shoulder. “You must wait—for my sake—” Still he hesitated.

“*Claude!*”

When Norris climbed the hill, she was alone.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LOVE OF GILES GRADLEY

AS soon as Norris had assured herself that she was not followed, she sank upon the ground in the shelter of a nectarine tree, which grew at the rear of her father's place. Near at hand were the turkey-sheds and the barn where she slept since the day of her banishment from the log cabin. Across the mottled surface of the stone-strewn field she could see Rodney Bates tipped back in his campchair, watching Peter Poff at work.

This was Norris's world. She had spent two years in the cabin, before the Beautiful Woman found poison in the food, and the bottle under the girl's pillow—then three years in the barn. It had seemed to her a long existence, these five years in the Ozarks, at first only her father for intimate friend, and later, none. Her purpose to win back her father's love had been the one alleviation to her loneliness and sufferings—it was like a candle lighting her onward way.

The rocks and whispering trees and rugged hills had been stern realities to her mind, not unlike grim personalities; the wailing of cold winds and the blasts of August heat had found her out in her illy-protected bedroom; the

people of the scattered settlements had looked at her with dread and hate. This had meant almost more than she could bear—but for her love, it would have been too much.

And yet, as she lay under the tree gathering sufficient strength to carry her to the house, all this which had been so intensely real, seemed to fade and to be still fading in the brighter light of a deeper and most wonderful reality.

On the day of the wood-cutting, Claude had appeared to her as a hero, tall, commanding, strong, victorious. She had not dared to look him in the eyes, and yet she had scouted out, as it were, the grave kindliness and handsome outlines of his face. From under her sunbonnet, she had covertly dispatched toward him inquiring glances which hid themselves like cautious scouts slipping through prairie grass.

After that, she had found him coming under the influence of Mrs. Gradley, not so wholly or so abjectly as Rodney Bates, not so unreservedly as all the world seemed to come, but still, she thought, with a loss of something of his fine liberty. She had almost despaired at the fear that he was to be quite lost—but somehow he had struggled through the enmeshing net of falsehood—the danger was past—he was still her hero.

Had he not believed in her without a word? In this wilderness, out of the loneliness of years, she had come so suddenly upon flowers of faith, that her heart was still filled with a great joy, a great wonder. It made her feel strong; she thought perhaps power might be given her

to persuade even her father of her innocence. She would try once more—she started up, and, despite her fatigue, hurried toward the cabin.

She did not cross the field unobserved.

Mrs. Gradley, finding her freed from the tree to which she had been bound, had hurried homeward that she might speak to Giles Gradley before the girl's return. As she came over the brow of the plateau, she saw Norris at the other end of the level expanse. She quickened her steps—in vain; Norris vanished in the doorway.

At sight of Mrs. Gradley, Rodney Bates leaped to his feet—his listless air changed to one of eager alertness. He hastened forward.

She was impatient at being delayed, even angry, for she felt the need of striking the blow before Norris could make an impression; yet she hid her real feeling, and was so careful to show no sign of annoyance, that she appeared even more gracious than her wont.

He made excuses to delay her by his side, excuses so absurd that he knew she could not think them real; and he fancied that, because she pretended to believe, it proved them the better friends. When he was with her, his thoughts and desires did not extend beyond the problem of protracting that happiness—when they were apart, his speculation was bent upon bringing them together. As yet, he meant no harm, he did not fancy to himself any future; but the Beautiful Woman meant to him, all the warmth and light, all the flowers and music of life.

His undisguised admiration pleased her, and she found the simplicity of his devotion amusing, but this evening, his admiration of her hunting costume, and his reminiscences of their first meeting, fell upon unresponsive ears. He thought her weary, and begged her to take a good rest—

“Although,” he added, with a melancholy smile, “it is a terrible sacrifice to send you away from me.”

She flashed back an answering smile, but her brow was not serene.

As she passed on, Bates watched her hungrily. Sometimes, when the breeze was from the right quarter, the boughs of an intervening apple tree would dip, and he could have a last glimpse of her wonderful form, just as it vanished within the cabin. It had happened so, more than once; but now, the breeze denied him, and the apple tree held its boughs stiff, as in mockery. It meant so much to him to be given that last glimpse of fluttering skirts and twinkling feet! He sighed, and sank into his chair with darkened face, for the delight he had felt at her coming was not of that nature which finds a mellow aftermath in memory.

As Mrs. Gradley burst into the cabin, she supposed she would find Norris waiting there with a complaint to make to her father; the black horse was not in the yard, so it seemed certain that Giles had not yet come home. However, her swift glances in search of Norris found, instead, the motionless form of Norris's father.

He looked up quietly from the book in his hand.

"Giles!" She stopped short.

"You are surprised, I believe," he remarked, looking down, again.

"Then—you are at home!"

"Fortunately."

She came to him swiftly. "Has anything happened?"

He closed the book and replied in a thin, restrained voice: "Oh, no, nothing at all. Some girls tied my daughter to a tree and left her to stand there till nearly dead from weariness. Then they went to tell you, but you didn't free her. It was nothing. She deserves it all."

Fear showed in her eyes, as one hand unconsciously clenched itself against her bosom. "Then—then Norris has been talking to you?"

He did not answer.

She caught her breath, realizing that she faced a struggle. It was not the first time she had been forced to fight, as it were, for her very existence, since he seemed always ready to follow any avenue of escape back to Norris. Between the two women, alliance was impossible—the triumph of either meant the downfall of the other, but this, the man did not realize—he desired them both.

Presently he lifted his head to look at her from under heavy brows. "You came in a hurry. Must I flatter myself by supposing that you suspected you'd find me here?"

"You are usually at the store, at this time of day."

"After today, I may be anywhere, at any time. So be warned!"

"Be warned? *I?* What do you mean? Was there ever a time of any day when I was not glad to see you?"

"How can I tell, Kate? It is something I do not know." His massive head showed almost black against the waning window-light.

He added presently, "You thought you'd find Norris here. What did you mean to say to her?" He threw down the book with violence, and started up. "Why did you leave her fastened to that tree? Why do you hate her?"

"Giles!" she gasped, shrinking back, afraid.

"If she tried to kill you, you're still alive. If she had harmed you, I'm the one to inflict punishment." His voice rose threateningly; "I say, why did you leave her there?"

"Listen to me, Giles, I'll tell you—but listen!" Her voice was appealing like that of a child. Not formed in the depths of the woman's magnificent bust, the accents were high-timbred, leaping light-tired from the exquisite lips as if fresh-born from their moisture.

His disfiguring scowl faded away, but his face was still cold and set, as he grasped her wrist. "Well—I am listening."

She met his gaze unflinchingly. "Norris was tied to the tree—yes, she told the truth about that. The girls did come and tell me, and I went in a hurry to set her free—but I was more than a mile away. When I reached

the spot, some one was already there—Mr. Walcott. I looked for Norris, but the girls hadn't given precise directions, and she wasn't there. I left Mr. Walcott to hunt, and when I came to the tree, he had already found her in her disgrace."

"So she tells me."

"I didn't intrude upon them, as they seemed very well acquainted, with a great deal to say to each other. The last I saw, he was carrying her in his arms. I think they are lovers, for I know he kissed her bare arm—lovers like we used to be, Giles—"

"God forbid!" he cried out, and the words sounded like an oath.

She grew white and clenched her teeth to hold back a rush of words that would have angered him. By a terrible effort, she remained gentle and tenderly reproachful—"You can say that to me, Giles! You can say that even to yourself? Did I not give up everything for you, dear one? And didn't you give up everything for me?"

"Yes!" His whisper was a hiss. "Yes! And it was so much—Let me not think of what I have given up. Let us not think of it, Kate. Yes! We have both thrown ourselves away—my honor and position, also yours.—Kate, though we should have everything else on earth, there's one thing forever gone—honor!"

"Giles, dear, you and I care nothing for names. Honor is a word. You have me, I have you, and we are the world."

“But Kate—my God! this flesh crumbles to dust—then what remains but honor? Don’t you understand, child, that in this world, nothing is immortal but words! Honor is a word, indeed—but it can never be spoken of you and me.”

“And if we are not immortal, what then? We can only live one life at a time; if there’s another life, we shall live it when it comes.” She drew closer, speaking with great rapidity. “*This* is our life, Giles, I am the same you loved years ago. Why do you speak of death when the flesh has neither crumbled, nor shown signs of decay? Remember our first meeting in your office, you at your desk, I at my typewriter. You had a great speech to make—and just think! it didn’t matter to me at all! You were only my employer. I was to you only the girl to be paid wages. But after weeks passed, one day I noticed that when you handed me your briefs your hand had a strange way of lingering against mine—Giles this is the same hand—see how it nestles in yours!”

He did not draw away.

Her words seemed to catch fire, and rush forward to devour all obstacles: “One day, you asked for the rose from my hair—did I give it to you? Try to think—did I give it to you? No! and that hurt me worse than it did you, I am sure. Still, I didn’t know what it meant. Did you? No, you only knew that I was I, that was all. How interested I began to be in copying your articles, in going to hear your speeches—and how excited we were

at the primary—it was not only your one object in life, it was also my one object in life—for you to go to Congress!”

“Ah, Kate, if—”

“But wait. Then the morning you came into the office, when I heard you stop behind my chair, when I waited, trembling for I knew not what—why did I tremble? I felt your hand on my hair—this is the same hair, darling, lift your hand as you did that day—here, this place—now. Oh, I’ll not draw away as I did then—And the next day, for it was the next day—oh, you know very well it was the next day, the day before the Convention—yes, I see you are thinking of it! Giles, you can never forget that, you never can, you *never* can! I couldn’t draw away, that time, I was too happy, I could only quiver in your arms—these arms—hold me, Giles—while you kissed me—kiss me now, Giles, as you did then, so madly—like a storm all at once let loose. You told me—how you said it!—that you loved me—*loved*—as if you could kill me if I didn’t love in return—but oh, I did, I had before that. These are the same lips you kissed, sweetheart, this is the same voice telling you that Kate loves you with whatever soul she has, and would defy hell itself to go with you and be with you as long as there is life. I left God to go with you—Giles, Giles! will you ever shut me out of *your* heaven?”

“There, there, Kate, you mustn’t tremble so—”

“How can I but tremble? I am about to lose you, to be

cast into outer darkness because you are done with me—to be trampled under the mad rush of the world that never pities a woman like me.”

“But Kate, you know that I love you.”

“I know you loved me once,” she panted.

“No, *now!* I gave up all for you. I have buried myself here in this accursed wilderness for your sake.”

“Then if you love me, kiss me, and tell me so. I am yours.”

He kissed her with fierce intensity.

“Giles, if you could kill me loving me, that’s the way I’d want to die. My Giles—my husband!”

“Hush, Kate,” he whispered, bending over her.

“And why not? Whose husband are you, then? You belong to me—to me!”

“Yes,” he answered slowly, “Body and soul, Kate; *body and soul!*”

She pressed her cheek against his. “But why do you say that in so strange a tone?” she pleaded.

“It calls for strange tones, Kate, when a man gives his soul to a woman. Souls, you know, belong to Somebody-else.”

“We don’t believe all that, dear. My soul is myself, and myself does belong to you. My soul sees no farther, no deeper, than your love. When I die, you’ll have no further use for me, nor I for my soul, so it will be, Goodby, Soul, when we two part!”

“I told my soul goodby, five years ago,” remarked Giles.

Suddenly he pressed her, with almost cruel violence, to his heart. "You are so beautiful, Kate, so exquisitely formed, so divinely fashioned—and you are all mine, truly mine?"

"Giles!"

"Then let Rodney Bates crawl at these adorable, perfect little feet—let him crawl there, poor cur, since you are wholly mine!"

Her rippling mellow laugh was one of joyful relief. He, too, laughed, and looked younger than before their recent alienation. It was increasingly difficult to win him back from his gloomy moods, but each conquest seemed most complete. He resumed his chair by the window, and she sat upon his knee, her arms about him.

A shadowy form appeared at the inner door—Norris had come to spread the table. Mrs. Gradley looked, and while watching her, bent to imprint a lingering kiss upon Gradley's lips. When her beautiful head was proudly lifted, he put the clinging form from him, and rose.

"Norris—" he grasped her by the arm and drew her to the window that he might examine her face.

Out of the long darkness of her sorrow, shone the steady light of a daughter's fidelity. As he looked into the dark eyes, the flush left his thin cheeks, his lips grew thin, his form shrank slightly.

"Norris, you must never speak to young Walcott again, since he is a stranger—not, at least, until I introduce him."

"Yes, father," she answered in a low voice, her eyes steadfast.

He looked at her doubtfully, thinking that after the young man's act of mercy, she might find compliance difficult. "You understand?"

"Yes, father; it is your wish."

"It is my command."

"Your commands are my wishes," Norris said, simply.

He hesitated, then spoke with great gentleness: "My daughter, this is for your own sake."

Norris smiled, faintly.

Kate was watching them with burning eyes—her triumph would have been greater, had Norris staid away; there stood the ever-present menace to her happiness. She was chilled by her daily doubts and fears. One of them would, in the end, gain undisputed mastery over Giles Gradley. But which one? —the woman of great beauty and boundless love, or the ugly child—thus Kate thought of Norris—exiled to the outer confines of dreary servitude?

CHAPTER XV

WILL THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN GO TO THE DANCE?

IN the city, one's thoughts are touched with ever varying motion. The very succession of streetcars, each with its different picture of humanity, affects, however unconsciously, the hurried observer. Though engulfed in some slough of mental distress, he cannot but see the gay designs on the billboards, and though thrilling with supreme happiness, there are a thousand sights and sounds to offer annoyance. Thus the color of desire is rendered less intense, the crystal of the will is clouded; factory-life intrudes upon one's marriage, and the funeral procession is pursued by street-calls and careless laughter.

In the wilderness, it is far otherwise. Trees change so slowly from green to gold and brown, and then to black, that he who dwells among them, seems changing even more rapidly. All about suggest a lingering, a delay in thought and purpose. Why should one hurry? The streams of the Ozarks glide along with such transparency, that one's desires grow clear and deep, touched by a sense of repose. If a great emotion floats out of the cool mystery of the virgin forests, it lingers in the soul, there to grow and strengthen as if time were eternity. The birds sing the songs of one's childhood, and the leaves under foot are

those of past years, while the blue sky, created anew at every sunrise, promises eternal youth.

Days passed before Claude made his next attempt to see Norris. Her appeal to him had not been in vain; since he could not help, he was determined not to make her condition more miserable, and he felt that any show of friendliness on his part would incense Mrs. Gradley.

He thought of these two women day and night, but it was the younger who held over him the greater sway. Mrs. Gradley fulfilled, at least in a physical manner, his ideals of the perfect woman—ah, there was the superb form, well-rounded, there was the face to charm, there, in short, was sculptured perfection found in warm flesh; and it was this physical beauty that had attracted him with almost irresistible power. On the other hand, Norris was thin, so very thin—

“Poor Norris!” Claude said, aloud, a smile of tender recollection lighting his face. “Wish I could see her again—and I will, too, as soon as I dare.”

That is a good thing about the wilderness—one can talk to the trees; nobody would dream of vocalizing inmost aspiration to lampposts.

“Glad I’m not in Kansas City, now,” cried Claude, casting his fly and wading into the water. “Still, I’ll be going back there, one of these days—summer is nearly ended. Shall I leave Norris here?”

He fished impatiently.

“If I do—if I should never see her again, she’d haunt

me, thin, dark ghost with big black eyes all alight with— with something very pretty—the little spirit would be waving me back to the Ozarks, all the time. If there are illusions, I must brush them away. Best way to come to a friendly, matter-of-fact understanding with a girl, is to have a good long talk with her—alone.”

He reeled in the line without waiting for a bite—“She interests me,” he observed, reflectively.

He waded to shore, then looked at his rod—“Why, hello! Where are you going?” he addressed himself, “I thought you came here to fish!”

He laughed, and splashed back into the stream, remarking with a smile that he had never before forgotten the reason for standing in cold water with a rod in his hand.

A day or two later, he visited the scene of the boring, not that he cared about oil or minerals, but that he hoped to catch some fleeting glimpse of Norris from afar.

“Young man,” Rodney Bates said, that evening at the campfire—Claude had been disappointed in his expedition—“getting a little thin, eh? How’s housekeeping?”

“I threw something together for breakfast—put the scraps in my pocket for lunch—”

“No supper?”

“I’m tired of skillets and pans; I’m going to wait till I’m hungry.”

“Old fellow, that won’t do, you know. Come over to Gradley’s to eat your meals—they invite you there. You need a woman’s cooking.”

"Man cannot live by bread alone," observed Claude sententiously. He would never seat himself at the father's board, while the daughter served as a despised menial.

After a long silence, Bates said, "Man cannot live by bread alone—that's true enough; Shakespeare was a wise old guy, eh? Well, a man can't—not if he remains a *man*. And what's the use of you and me, if we're not men? We have the shape—shan't we be the real thing? Look here, Claude, if I spend my life pretending I'm something I'm not, is that manly? If I look through bars without trying to break them down, am I a man? Shall I sit in my penned-up corner of the universe, always wanting to get out, but quietly eating my bread? That saying is as true as life; no, a man cannot *live* by bread—that isn't what it means, to live. And I've made up my mind to drop hypocrisy."

Claude was startled by the other's vehemence. "What hypocrisy?"

"There are not different kinds of hypocrisy," returned Bates; "it's only one thing—pretending to be somebody else. I mean to be Rodney Bates, from this night."

"And why not? So far as my knowledge goes, Rodney Bates is a very fine fellow."

"Your knowledge doesn't go far enough. I'm a changed man, Claude—a changed man—Lord, what a change!" For an instant, a curious plaintiveness sounded in his tone, then his voice grew almost rough: "Be yourself—it's your only excuse for cumbering the ground; other people

are taking up the rest of the space. Claude, I have a desire so strong, that it has grown to be myself; if I deny it, I'm not myself. But I purpose to live, I tell you, and the only way to live is to carry your desire to its end."

"Our desires are not ourselves," Claude said, uneasily.

"Claude, if I want a thing till the want swallows up all other wants, why shouldn't I go after it? And if I'm stronger than others, why not take it? Isn't that the survivor's right? I don't mean by cunning, but by force. If the owner is stronger, let him kill you; but at all events, go to the combat."

"You don't believe all that, Rod."

"Don't I? Don't I?" He smoked in silence. "Well—perhaps I don't quite believe it—yet."

The next day Claude again sought Gradley's land, meaning to go every day until he found Norris. Luck was with him, this afternoon—Norris could be seen from across the plateau; she was passing in and out of the shed, picking her way among the little turkeys in her quest for fresh eggs.

He thought she saw him, but the sudden droop of her bonnet prevented certainty. He looked intently, finding a pleasing picture in her quick movements as she lightly flitted to and fro, her basket on her arm.

To explain his presence there, he went over to the drill, and watched the work a long time,—until Norris finally disappeared in the barn, to be seen no more.

"Say!" Peter Poff addressed him, almost at once,

there's to be another hop at Bud's, Friday after next. The Little Fiddler'll be there again; you seen him at work once, and you know how it is did. Better come—the young folks taken to you surprising, the last time. You too, Mr. Bates, you'd better come over, your *own* self."

Bates was abstracted in manner. "A hop, you say?"

"Yap. Now you be there, both gents, for neither of you has had any fun, since to the Ozarks here you come. And they's going to be such doings at this lark as scarcely ever was saw in the neighborhood. A medicine-man has got a date to reach Ozarka the day previous, and people will come in droves to buy of his liniments, he being a knowed character and his liniments inspiring, whether applied to hoss or man; and so far as that goes, to woman either."

"Liniment isn't what Mr. Bates needs," remarked Claude drily.

"Hold on, that liniment talk was just to lubricate the tale I got to tell. This here medicine-man, traveling about the country in a covered wagon, he's got a little organ with him, a real Sunday-school organ what he plays on and sings to, to cluster up his crowd before ready to advance his liniments for sale. Well, we've engaged that there organ and him to play it at the dance, the Little Fiddler to fiddle according. *Man*, but it'll be a time! Now you come, and get right in the thick of the doings. Don't come to look on critical, for you never get your money's worth on the outside of anything in this world.

I'm here to contend that fun ain't on the rim of nothing, like mire on a tire; fun is to be in it and of it and through it, which my never having been to school but a very few days and being as you would say in a state of nature, makes it of a hardship for me to put in words the ideas that's working in my brain. Which I mean is, the real fun is always at the hub."

Peter Poff could hardly have found two men less inclined at that moment for a social "hop." Nevertheless, the thought came to Rodney Bates, soon after Claude's departure, that it might afford an opportunity of keen enjoyment. The thought was suggested by seeing Mrs. Gradley approaching.

The young man who had no desire to meet her, had gone rather hurriedly and she had observed his quickened footsteps with slumberous distrust in her brown eyes.

In those brown eyes, however, Bates saw only beauty and tenderness, and as she rested upon his campchair, he beamed with happiness. He said rather abruptly—

"By the way, Mrs. Gradley, have you ever gone to a dance in this part of the country?"

She never had.

"Would you like it? Say, you'd like it! It would be unusual and queer—such an experience—it would be a change for you—*do* go! I am going, and if Mr. Gradley doesn't care for such things—I imagine he doesn't,—why might you not go with me? I'll try to show you a good time." He was as eager as a boy.

She looked at him with remote thoughtfulness.

He found her loveliness bewitching when she looked deep into his eyes, not seeming to see him at all, for while it put him far away, it seemed to remove him only that he might be drawn more irresistibly, to the breaking down of every barrier.

In truth, she hardly thought of Rodney Bates, as she gazed at him so intently; her mind was busy with her husband. No incident in life was of the slightest importance to her, except in so far as it might affect Giles. She was wondering if there was more danger than advantage in pursuing her friendship with Bates—whether the jealousy with which she might inspire her husband would swing him too far from her influence, or bind him to her irrevocably.

After some hesitation, she said, "I'm sure he'd not care to go."

"Then—but he couldn't object to my taking you. I shall be there—at the hop; but it'll be no good for me unless you go."

She flashed a smile at him. "You may ask," she agreed.

The first opportunity for asking came at the evening meal. Soon after Gradley had seated himself, his wife introduced the subject—

"There's to be a dance at Bud Poff's, Friday week, and Peter says the Little Fiddler is coming down from Joplin. Would you like to go, Giles?"

"Would *you* like to go?" he returned.

"Well—yes, I want to go."

Gradley turned to Bates: "And should you like it?"

"Immensely! From what Claude told me of the last one, I feel it's something not to be missed. And Peter says the Little Fiddler—"

"Would it be convenient for you to take Mrs. Gradley?"

"Perfectly convenient."

"Why, good! How lucky that you have no other engagement!"

A shadowy form paused at the inner door, as if listening.

Mrs. Gradley turned toward her contemptuously. "Well—what do *you* want, girl?" Before Giles, she never called Norris "servant."

Norris slipped away, without replying.

After silent brooding, Giles Gradley looked at his wife fixedly. "I never suspected your wanting to go to these affairs," he remarked.

She smiled demurely, knowing exactly how he felt. "I want to go, now," she said with admirable simplicity.

Gradley frowned thoughtfully.

Bates was overjoyed.

That night he communicated the news to Claude, but the latter only said, "Then I shall go, too."

"Weren't you going, anyway? If not, why on *my* account?"

"Bates, it's no pleasure to me, seeing others dance; and I don't want to dance. But if you take Mrs. Gradley to

that hop, do you suppose Giles Gradley is going to stay at home?"

"I don't care where Giles Gradley goes—"

"Which simply proves that you need me to look after you," observed the young man.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SHADOW IN THE POOL

The next day Claude was again hovering about Gradley's place, ostensibly fishing. Of course there was neither stream nor fish in the back pasture, and he could not have meant to angle for turkeys—but that is where he was, when he came face to face with Norris.

She had just come around a corner of the barn; taken completely by surprise, she stopped as if panic-stricken.

"Norris!" Claude exclaimed, hurrying forward—"Norris! What is it? Aren't you going to speak to me?"

She could only look at him with bated breath.

"Dear little Brave Heart—aren't we friends?"

Apparently not; for without a word she darted into the barn, closing the heavy door behind her. Evidently, then, she had really seen him, the day before, yet had refused to look.

For a moment he stood motionless, his cheeks burning with resentment, which passed swiftly to mere disappointment, as he left the plateau. Something in her eyes had told him she was glad to see him, and he persuaded himself that she had run away fearing her step-mother.

How was that obstacle ever to be avoided? He was

firmly resolved to see Norris, though what he should say when they met had not been determined.

He felt an intense longing to know Norris, to deepen their friendship; and as this desire strengthened, the difficulties in the way grew more apparent. Still, there must be some way to reach his purpose, and that night he gave himself up to the forming of plans, none of which proved of much value, on deliberate reflection.

In order to come to a definite course of action, he slipped from the tent, while Bates was asleep, and walked for miles in earnest thought.

It was at the margin of Glassy Pool that he was startled out of his abstraction by a rather extraordinary happening.

Glassy Pool was a circular lake of considerable extent, for the most part shallow, and always so clear that in daylight the sandy bottom could be distinctly seen. It was formed by a spring gushing from the foot of a perpendicular cliff along the brow of which grew tall straight post oaks. The shadow of the bluff was thrown upon the margin of the lake in so black a shadow that it was difficult to distinguish where land and water met, and fringing this black mark were the shadow-trees, their shadow-leaves quivering over the sheet of silver.

Claude had paused to admire the strikingly exact outlines of these reflections, when a strange shadow suddenly took its place among those of the post oaks.

It was just for a moment that the object which had produced this visiting shade, lingered at the brow of the

cliff; it must have seen Claude as soon as he saw the shadow, for when he looked up, it had already vanished. What it was, he could not imagine, though it had resembled a human form.

What puzzled him most was that, unlike the other shadows, it had been blurred in outline as if that which had produced it was a mingling of matter with something ethereal, impalpable. It could not have been a wild animal, for it had stood upright like a man. Yes, now that he reflected, it had resembled an Indian with feathered hair.

He gave a start as he remembered the rumors of the Green Witch. Could it have been that mysterious creature who was said to masquerade in a dress of leaves?

He waited a long time for the shadow to reappear, but it did not show itself again. The bluff was too steep to climb, and he was not sufficiently interested to make a detour in order to examine the heights. Whether the Green Witch was a mischievous girl trying to frighten her friends, or a mad woman who had as yet eluded pursuit, she had failed to take much hold upon Claude's imagination, crowded as it was with images of Norris.

Norris!—Ah, there was the cause of his midnight strollings, and as he finally made his way back to camp, his plan was formed. Despite Mrs. Gradley, he would go boldly to the cabin, he would ask to see the one who had saved his life and whom he had twice saved from the malicious sport of cruel enemies. At the same time he

would respect her entreaty not to make her life harder by useless interference.

"I must be discreet," he told himself, "but I mean to talk to Norris as a friend, face to face."

Accordingly, the next morning, after a very hurried breakfast, he set forth for Ozarka, meaning to go at once to Gradley's store. He would frankly ask the honor of a formal introduction to Norris. Of course, Mrs. Gradley would not be mentioned; Claude had been invited to take his meals at the cabin, and if he went home with Gradley to dinner, the father could not very well refuse his request, after the incident of the tree.

With these reflections, and with this hope, Claude followed the now familiar trail over the hills.

CHAPTER XVII

MYSTERY OF THE LITTE FIDDLER

HE had hardly left camp before Claude reflected that he was starting out at a preposterously early hour, in his eager desire to make Norris's acquaintance formally. There was no use to accost Giles Gradley until time for the merchant to leave the store for home, hence, when he reached Ozarka, he passed between its two buildings without a pause.

Five or six hours were upon his hands, and being unprovided with means of fishing or hunting, he wandered aimlessly among the hills till the recollection of Cave Spring gave him definite direction. He had not been in its vicinity since the night of the dance, and it suddenly attracted him as the place where Norris had saved him from a frightful catastrophe.

In the warm sunlight, the towering hill with its gushing spring, its giant arch supporting the stone chamber, and the rush of the stream as it dashed itself into the valley as if frightened at the sudden glare of open sky, lost something of the mysterious effect he had discovered in the moonlight. But as he climbed the slippery stones, the chill breath of the open mouth was weird in its suggestion of death.

From the heights, bright verdure already flecked with autumn colors, shone as a crown of beauty to offset the white face of the cliff. Far below, the trees were shaken in their leafy retreats by the coming and going of brilliantly colored birds. But where he stood, there was no suggestion of life save in the passionate hurry of the newborn mountain-stream; and as he stared into the cold recess, his eyes instinctively sought the spot where a huge stone had been rolled against the crevice, after the madman had made his escape.

The scene was such a one as fascinates without warming the heart. Claude remained a long time on the ledge before the cave, and at last he had a most singular impulse. Why should that stone have been rolled against the only part of the crevice in the wall that was wide enough to admit a human form? It was certain that no one would seek to explore behind the wall whence the stream issued, for even if the opening remained, one could not enter without crawling in the icy stream; on the other hand, should one accidentally fall into the pit from above, as he had almost fallen, the only hope of safety would be found here. The huge stone, therefore, could do no good, and might cause the death of some unfortunate creature.

Claude's impulse was to remove the stone; and as it rested in the water, he hoped to be able to dislodge it, aided by the stream. He made the attempt several times, but without success, and was obliged to return dripping

and chilled to the outer air. A few nights before, the first frost of autumn had invaded the rights of summer usually held sacred in that region—a frost so early and unexpected that in Ozarka one heard of nothing else; but already the balmy climate had resumed its sway, and the young man, though wet enough, was glowing with heat when he stood upon the brow of the hill.

Knowing so well the position of Mad Man's Pit, he went to it without fear, then threw himself upon the ground to stare over its edge. The round opening in the ground presented no alarming appearance in the daylight. One did not gaze down into black space, but on the contrary, upon a slanting rock, which looked like a path that might lead to some secure, subterranean retreat. Had he not been warned, the young man might have dropped himself through the opening, and, indeed, had he done so, he might have gained a footing at the start. The suction was strong, but assuredly could not have pulled him against his strength; at least, not at this point. It must be that farther down, the way grew steeper and the suction irresistible.

"What a pity," he thought, "that they didn't roll a stone over this pit, instead of into Cave Spring!"

As he stood musing, he was suddenly startled by a strange sweet sound—strange because heard here, so far from human habitation, sweet because produced by a practiced hand on an excellent violin.

He stared at the thicket from which Norris had called

to him on the night of his rescue. The sound came from the other side of that dense field of matted undergrowth. Had the Little Fiddler come down from Joplin, and was he practicing in the wilderness? Yes—those delicate shadings of liquid tones could come only from the fine discriminating touch of the musician of the Ozarks.

Claude had heard only a few measures when a rustling in the bushes attracted his attention, and almost immediately there was absolute silence. Had his presence been detected? There came the sound of hurrying footsteps—some one was fleeing toward the south. Well, musicians are queer fellows, he told himself, and certainly he had no right to complain. As he stared after the diminishing sounds, he caught sight presently of a man's hat, and one shoulder of the fugitive—a slender shoulder, slight as that of the Little Fiddler whom he had regarded curiously in Bud Poff's barn.

"There he goes," muttered Claude in disgust, "the Little Fiddler with his fiddle! He runs like a rabbit, as if he imagined I was out hunting, to catch his tunes! However, he has a right to keep away from me, but all the same, I have a right to explore these thickets."

It had occurred to him that behind the thorny wall which had once sheltered Norris, there must be some sort of clearing where the musician practiced his art. Claude started forward, half-resentful.

There was a quick movement in the bushes. Claude whistled below his voice—evidently the Little Fiddler

had been performing to an audience. A violinist may play as secretly as he pleases; but why should anybody come in secret to listen?

Claude called, and the rustling sounds grew louder—some one was trying to break away to freedom. “Who’s there?” he called, feeling his sportsmanship challenged, “what do you want? Wait!”

The sound resolved itself into that of running feet.

Claude burst into the thicket, careless of thorns, but failed to catch the slightest glimpse of the mysterious lover of music, a lover so fleet that in spite of grim resolution, the young man soon found himself being left behind.

About a hundred yards distant, the dense copse terminated at the foot of a hill which stood, as it were, upon the back of the hill he had climbed—it rose to a considerable height, then cut sheer against the sky in a broad tableland before it descended, without a break, to lowest valley, about a mile away. It was necessary for the fugitive to climb this hill and cross the skyline, or else double back into the thicket. Claude made so much noise in his running that escape in the thicket was plainly impossible, so the other ran on, and at last came into sight against the red background of the hill.

It was Norris.

For a moment Claude stopped in amazement, then rushed forward with no definite thought but that of overtaking her. The discovery of her identity was most unpleasant, and somehow added to his fleetness. She did

not look behind until the plateau was reached, when he was so close that it became a question of only a few moments before he would be able to reach out his hand and stop her. Then she stood still, facing him with glowing cheeks, her bosom heaving tumultuously, her eyes flashing—

“You mustn’t follow me—I’m going home—I must go alone!”

“But, Norris! Why do you run from *me*—I can see that you knew all the time who it was following!”

She started away, but finding him close behind, stopped abruptly. “Mr. Walcott, I want you to leave me.”

“And yet you trusted me, Norris.”

“No—I can’t discuss anything—there’s nothing; but you must let me go alone.”

“Then—I will not let you go alone!” He was very determined.

“But you wouldn’t force yourself upon me when you know you are—are—you are not wanted.”

“Yes, that is what I will do—force myself, if you call it so. For there are some questions that I must ask you; and when you have told me what I must know, you shall go alone, if you like.”

Her voice was piteous: “But you have no right to stop me.”

“I know that well enough; some things, it seems, must be accomplished by mere force.”

“And there is nothing for me to tell you. Please let me go.”

“Yes, you can tell me everything that I want to know; and Norris, you shall tell me!”

She looked at him with frightened eyes, for, unconsciously, his face had taken on a sternness, and his eyes a hardness, both menacing and relentless.”

“Then—what do you wish to know? Ask me quickly—I dare not stay here, Mr. Walcott. Even at this moment *she* may come—”

“In the first place—were you alone with the Little Fiddler, just now?”

“And what in the second place?” she asked, faintly.

“In the second place—” his face grew white—“why were you there, with him, alone?”

“And what else do you want to ask, Mr. Walcott?”

“That is all.”

“I cannot tell you what you ask. Goodby.”

“Stop!—then you *were* with him alone—quite alone?”

“Well?” Her cheeks suddenly burned, but her eyes were steadfast.

“When you heard me coming, why did he run in one direction, and you in another? Or rather, why did *you* run? What was there to hide?”

She said nothing.

“Do you know, Norris, what would be the effect, if I told your father or Mrs. Gradley what I have discovered?”

Her voice was hardly audible, "Yes, I know."

"Then what do you suppose is its effect on me? I ask nothing but your own explanation. I'll believe anything you tell me—but I *do* ask you to say a word—something to explain the presence of that man."

Norris groaned, speaking to herself—"He won't let me go . . . he will keep me here until it's too late!"

"Yes, I'll let you go in a moment—but wait; I must show you something down there—"

He made a sweeping movement with his hand to indicate the distant landscape.

They were at the margin of the plateau. Looking down and away, a great valley was to be seen, peacefully sleeping in the embrace of the Ozark hills whose surfaces were diversified by the oval swells peculiar to the region, each bearing a grove of slender and lofty trees. The succession of these mounds of vivid moss with their leafy branches of already-changing colors, presented an outlook of wonderfully varied and enchanting beauty. Above the treetops of each swell were to be seen the brown boles that supported the next terrace of leaves. The sunshine flooded each green knoll with radiant splendor, but between the curves nestled, like a substance, the cool fragrant gloom.

Claude and Norris stood upon the highest point of this vast amphitheatre, looking down upon an arena whose

tier above tier of giant seats descended to the remote grass-carpeted solitudes.

"That," Claude said, in a low voice, "is very beautiful, is it not? And sweet and pure; do you not find in it something divine?"

She turned from the panorama of green and brown and red and gold, to look into his face with sudden shyness.

"All that," he pointed vaguely, "tells much better than words can tell, what my thought of you has been. Do you understand?"

The earnest dark eyes were suddenly flooded with tears. "Yes," she whispered.

"You have nothing to say to me, Norris?"

"Nothing." The reply was as faint as the whisper from the valley.

"Very well," his voice was quiet and contained, "you may go now, Norris—you may go on, alone."

But as she obediently started down the hill, it seemed to him that all the beauty of that landscape was being withdrawn with her, wrapping her in its mantle, leaving him to stare out upon the bald, stark unloveliness of a future without Norris. With her back to him, he thought he had never so clearly before seen the steadfast light in her pure eyes—was it never to shine upon him again? Yes, once more, at least—he hurried after her.

She heard him coming, and turned with folded hands, as if waiting, submissive, for some tempest to pass.

"Norris—" his words flowed impetuously,—“You

shan't go till I tell you that—that I believe in you still. Perhaps you've been forbidden to talk to me—perhaps the Little Fiddler is your lover—but, anyway, I want you to know that my faith in you is still strong. I shall go away from the Ozarks because—because you already have your lover. I shall go as soon as I get used to the thought of never seeing you again. And remember, you'll always be to me like these sloping hills."

As she made no reply, he took her hand and pointed—"You see how the pure sweet air seems to lift them up out of solemn space—and those green earth-shields, touched with gold . . . your soul is something like that, I know. But it was so strange, finding you alone with that man . . . and it's so strange, now, when I think that I came too late, that I'm not to be the one to rescue you from this lonely existence."

"You don't understand," she faltered, her eyes full of tears. She pressed his hand, instinctively.

"I understand that you have not guided my faith one step by word or sign—that, indeed, Norris," he smiled affectionately, "you have always thrown obstacles in its path. But it's found its own way to you, it's not afraid of being lost. Do you like it?"

"Oh, Mr. Walcott!"—with a sob—"that is more to me than anything else in the world except—just one thing."

He smiled again, to banish her tears: "And the exception is bigger than the rule?"

"But you don't understand—and I can't tell you," she lamented.

"How long have you loved this violinist, Norris? Was it before I came?"

She hesitated. Then, faintly, "Does it matter?"

"I suppose not—such things are outside of time. Well, dear little Brave Heart, so ends my dream of rescuing you from the Ozarks—I hardly realized, myself, what an exceedingly life-like dream it was! But I'm awake now, oh, yes, quite broad-awake!" He laughed, for her melancholy face, saddened, as he supposed, by sympathy for his disappointment, moved him deeply, and the more deeply he was moved, the more anxious he was to hide his suffering.

He was still holding her hand, and before he released it, he patted her arm with something of brotherly affection—"That dear arm is well, isn't it? How clumsily I wounded it! But are you very sure it is healed? At any rate your dress prevents another application of the remedy—so I must treat your hand—" And he kissed her hand.

In her dark cheeks the slumbering roses stirred and fluttered their petals, and in her eyes the sparkle of youth's fountain of inexhaustible hope was caught in the light of his playful thought; the mouth was still sad, but it melted in sensitive response. And then, without saying goodby, she left him.

Claude returned to the plateau and for a long time

lay stretched upon the wild grass, staring fixedly into the valley.

A breeze arose. Sometimes a tree caught it and rustled with delight while all about, its less-favored brothers stood quite still in envy. Again, all the trees would bend at once and the rustle as of a waterfall would rush upward to his ears. Occasionally a more venturesome breeze would slip down into the amphitheatre of verdure and light-flecked shadows, and Claude could mark the passing of its invisible feet as it stepped from terrace to terrace of variegated leaves—at the foot of the descent it would toss and play among the surprised branches, while far above, on all sides, motionless trees looked down, wondering at such unseemly mirth.

But when Claude spoke aloud, it was not to comment upon nature—"It would appear, my dear boy, that the story of your vacation is closed!"

At last he started up. "However, I must have a closer look at this Little Fiddler. What sort of man does Norris love? Yes, I'll go to the dance." He called down to the rustling trees—"On with the dance!"

Then his face darkened. "Rodney Bates means to take Mrs. Gradley—I wonder if Giles will slip after them? If so . . . Yes, I must be there. And if everything comes to a crisis, Friday night—well—I'm very much afraid there'll be—the Little Fiddler to pay!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE GREEN WITCH

IT is sometimes in the exercise of faith that the soul attains sublimest self-consciousness, that egotism appears most like a virtue. "I believe in your innocence," Claude might have told Norris, "in spite of your own father's conviction of your attempted crime—in spite of your lonely wanderings in the forest whose object is evidently an association with a hidden lover. But I believe in you, by the sheer spiritual power to close my eyes against apparent proofs of evil."

But the atmosphere is too thin for a long continuance upon so lofty a peak. Now that Norris was not to be seen, nor her voice heard, now that her eyes could not shine with gladness because of his fidelity, Claude found himself dwelling persistently upon the wild flight of the Little Fiddler. Why should Norris's lover have shown a spirit so contemptible? However sincere Norris might be, was it not plain that she had chosen an unworthy lover?

Claude waited for the night of the dance with consuming impatience. Whatever happened, upon one thing he was resolved—he and the Little Fiddler should meet face to face; and if he found that the musician had taken

advantage of Norris's ignorance of the world, if he proved to be unworthy, insincere, a man of the world disguised in romance to capture a young girl's fancy, he should be stripped of his illusions, and driven from the Ozarks.

The more Claude reflected upon Norris's simplicity and impulsiveness, the more he was convinced that she had been taken advantage of, by this mysterious violinist. Friday night would disclose the truth.

But he could not wait patiently for that night to come. By day he found himself feverish with anxiety, disturbed by nameless forebodings; and at night he could not sleep. Besides, he had never fully sounded his own heart. Was he so resolute in his determination to learn the Little Fiddler's real character, for Norris's sake, or rather for his own? And suppose he should find that the musician was unworthy—was Claude prepared to take his place as a lover? In a word, did he love Norris?

This was the question that tormented him as, the night preceding that set for the dance, he wandered alone in the forest, having found his cot intolerable. Was it not mere sympathy for a poor girl in misfortune that made his heart grow tender when he thought of Gradley's daughter? He conjured up her image before him, and inevitably there was the ragged dress, the clumsy shoes, the ugly blue that showed her dark face to such disadvantage; and he could see the head cropped short like a boy's, and the shrinking attitude, the hands devoted to menial tasks.

If the musician proved the rascal his flight from the thickets had indicated, and if Norris's affections could be transferred from an unworthy lover to himself—still—was she the kind of wife to make him happy, the sort of girl to introduce to his friends? He was always disconcerted by memories of externals when he thought of Norris; why was it that when they were together, her dress, her heavy shoes, her short hair, her humble station were all forgotten, and he seemed to see only the beauty of her soul? He asked himself if it indeed required her very presence to efface the deep impression made by Mrs. Gradley's enchanting charms, and if it were true that when alone, that part of himself was strongest which still thrilled to the magic of the Beautiful Woman.

He knew that those two inner selves were respectively influenced by the girl and the woman; that the girl touched all that was highest within him, but that the woman reached deeper into his fundamental instincts. He knew, also, that the woman was cruel and vindictive while the girl was sweet and pure, and that the misery of one came from the tyranny of the other. In spite of this knowledge, Norris grew plainer and slighter of importance as the magnificent woman who had subdued Rodney Bates and who held Giles Gradley in her power, blossomed in his memory.

How far he had walked before he grew suddenly aware of his surroundings he did not know. Evidently he had skirted the hill of Cave Spring, and had followed the

ridge that slanted away at an acute angle from the highest plateau. He had circled round this ridge and was doubling back without having been in the least aware of his destination. He found himself where he had never been before, yet was not lost, since the moon showed, far away, as in a white hand with spreading fingers held against a darkened hillside, the mouth of Cave Spring.

Claude held his watch up to catch the light. It was twelve o'clock. "You must get some rest, my boy," he said, suddenly discovering that he was tired out from his long tramp. "Tomorrow night you are to go to the dance."

He struck out in the direction which he knew must finally bring him to his tent. Presently his ears were greeted by the murmur of a waterfall. It sounded louder than any hitherto discovered, and he was reminded that some one had referred to the Silver Waterfall as larger than any in the neighborhood of Cave Spring. Possibly the sound that had attracted his attention came from the Silver Waterfall. It was not far out of his course, and, wearied though he was, he turned aside.

"I'll have a look at it," he observed, "and then I'll never have to see it again. Nothing like doing up the natural sights as they fall in your way!"

When he saw a stream winding along the foot of the hill, he knew it must be on its way to the fall, and he followed it. The sound grew louder and strangely musical. At first he was reminded of tinkling silver, but when

the ledge of rock came in sight, over which the smooth stream poured, he stopped in amazement.

Suddenly the waterfall had found a voice—a human voice. Words came to him hardly distinguishable in tone from the music of the cascade, but words nevertheless.

Overcoming his first surprise, he advanced cautiously among the tall slim trees that grew to the very margin of the stream, and when the ledge was reached, he looked down with bated breath. Below him were the falls, dashing in white foam upon the rocks and scattering away in a wide shallow over the sand. Half-way up the hill that rose from the valley to the top of the waterfall one of the caves that honeycomb the Ozark hills opened its mouth in a dark yawn as if to swallow the moonlight flooding the scene.

Seated on the ledge near this entrance, with her feet in the flashing waterfall, was Norris.

But what a wonderful Norris it was! Claude who was directly above her could not at first see her face, but as she turned, not toward him, but toward the dancing sheet of quivering water, transformed by the moon to silver-gauze, he could examine her profile, and then her full face.

She was singing to the sound of the waterfall, and her words mingled magically with the musical splash and hurry of the stream. As it came rolling over the straight ledge, the stream sounded in ever changing melody, now

deep and solemn, and again as light and airy as its rainbow spray. And when it thundered on the rocks, or chattered among the pebbles, as it boomed with the note of tragedy, or laughed in froth, the girl's voice mingled with it, chanting to suit its mood, now tragic and full, now light and yet even when light, touched with sadness.

But at first Claude, though thrilled by the sound of her voice, gave no heed to the words, for it seemed as if they were of no real meaning, except as expressing the soul of the waterfall. It was the wild picture presented by Norris that absorbed his every thought. He had found the Green Witch.

That ugly blue dress, the only one in which he had ever seen her, had disappeared, patches and all, beneath a robe of rustling beauty. At first he thought her clothed only in leaves; but a moment's consideration showed him that she had fastened leaves upon her garments, hiding them completely. She had found other leaves of burning scarlet and had made of them a necklace which quivered about her smooth, dark neck like living flames. There was a crown of leaves on her head, hiding the short hair and giving to the face a new womanliness of rare simplicity and charm. This headdress was of different colors; but all the leaves fastened to her dress were of the deepest green set so thick that her form was undefined.

The heavy black eyebrows, the soft dark eyes, the thin cheeks, the sensitive red mouth, the rounded chin, were all touched by a grace, a sadness, an elusive mystery of

the moonlight, that made his heart throb with pain. The dark satin of the neck with its little tongues of flame where the scarlet edges of the leaves quivered, held his eyes as if fascinated. Beneath the green robe, her feet could not be clearly discerned for the water danced over them ceaselessly now in white foam, now in crystal clearness like molten silver running over bits of pearl.

As the stream frothed white upon the ledge and darkened at its base, she continued singing, always suiting her voice to its changing stress with such rare sympathy and art that one might very well have imagined her a witch learning one of nature's incantations.

The words were without measure, suited to the time of the stream, but always expressing the girl's inmost emotions, and her tones were so liquid, so hauntingly sweet, her voice was so unafraid of the heights to which it was cast, so sure of its power to hold a note or relinquish it at will, that Claude listened in breathless ecstasy, while the tears leaped to his eyes.

His sense of her loneliness was swallowed up in the larger impression of her wonderful voice. As one who rightly appreciates genius can, for a time, borrow of its power, so he was borne beyond himself out upon a sea of emotion which alone he could neither have fathomed nor traversed. But when one yields oneself to genius, he need not know the way, for, whatever depths may be traversed, while upheld by a master power, he breathes

the freedom and the strange delight of untrammelled thought and limitless emotion. So it is with a lover of music in the presence of a master-singer. He is inexpressibly thrilled while haunting dreams come to him, vague longings of ambition like the undeveloped etchings of passion, and a burning desire to be not only great but noble—dreams, longings, desires which do not always die away with the voice that gives them birth.

At first, Claude imagined that Norris was singing a real song. Then when he discovered there was neither stanza nor rhyme, he thought it some prose selection, made poetic by abrupt pauses, by prolonged notes, by the adaptation of her voice to the weird melody of the water. But it was not long before he divined the truth.

She was giving expression to her secret thoughts. She was telling how the Beautiful Woman compelled her to dress as a hireling, to keep her hair cut short that she might not have one attractive feature—and she was thanking the forest that lent her the green robes even though they had caused her to be known as the Green Witch. And here was the cave into which she could escape if the mob came to seize her. So she was all alone, she sang, all alone with the beautiful moon and the laughing waterfall. And being alone, all alone, she would not sing of her loneliness as in times past, she would not express her longings for a home, for a father's protection, for the place in life that was worthy of her—no, she would sing tonight only

of her love, she would tell the dancing waterfall how this love had grown and how it had come to mean more to her than her very life. Nobody would hear—nobody but the trees of the Ozarks, and they would never tell. Was she not their little daughter? See! they had given her this gay party-dress. She would never dance at the ball, never at any ball. But her voice would dance with the voice of the waterfall—just those two for partners, while she told of her love.

And because Claude's yearning desire to be not only great but noble was strong upon him, inspired by that voice, and sustained by his better nature, he softly left the brow of the descent, and found his way back to the trail, and back to camp, without once looking behind him, without once pausing to catch a word of that strange love-song.

But the vision beside the waterfall had taught him one thing—that the memory of the Beautiful Woman could never again obscure the image of the little Green Witch. For when his mind went out in thoughts of tender desires, in fancies of womanly loveliness it took the direction of his new found love.

For now that it seemed too late, he knew that he loved Norris. And he knew that if the Little Fiddler proved unworthy of her trust, and if it were possible for Norris to overcome her love for that disguised stranger and to forget her love song to the waterfall, he should present her to the world as his wife.

Never before had he waited so impatiently for the dawn of any day as of that fateful Friday which was to bring him and the Little Fiddler face to face.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PISTOL AND THE HANDKERCHIEF

IF Claude felt that the light of Friday would never come stealing over the hills of the Ozarks, certainly Rodney Bates, almost as wakeful, though not so restless, shared this feeling. Long before sunrise the expert driller was dressed, and at sunrise he was on his way to the mine, singing boyishly. He sang and whistled, whistled and sang as he and Peter Poff worked together. At last there was pretty good evidence that oil was to be found—but his sudden loud laughter, his gay songs were not inspired by the discovery.

No—the day of the dance had come, and that night he would hold in his arms the Beautiful Woman.

At the evening meal, he was unable to refrain from discussing the dance. And Giles Gradley who had taken the news of the oil with perfect indifference, turned to his wife with the same nonchalance—

“Are you still in the notion of going to Bud Poff’s?”

She knew she was putting his forbearance to the supreme test, and at that moment she felt a yearning desire to draw him to her, to whisper love in his ear; but her victory over him had always been incomplete.

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I want to go, and Mr. Bates will take me."

Even when his love for her rushed like lava over the doomed meadows of his better self, she had detected in his passionate eyes a look not all for her, not all of passion—a straining back of the vision, as if looking wildly upon that which was lost. It was because the flash of her smile had sometimes sunk in the dark depths of his meditation without finding an answering gleam of comradeship, that she had, on Bates's coming to the Ozarks, begun to play, very cautiously, upon an unused string in Gradley's nature—jealously. Had Gradley sometimes suspected that he had won her too easily? Then he might witness Bates's infatuation, and learn that other men were as ready as he had been, to give up all for her sake.

"After all," said Bates, overflowing with bright anticipations, "the hop is not to be at Bud Poff's barn. No—we've a perfect dream—I proposed the thing. You know Cave Spring?"

Gradley was watching the speaker with darkened brow, and to the degree that his unhappiness was made manifest, Mrs. Gradley's spirits rose. A woman's magic is all spent, when unable to touch a heart with pain. She pretended profound interest in the new arrangements.

"Yes," Bates went on, "these natives are so used to the wonders of nature around them, that it never occurs to them to use 'em in their festivities. Now there's Cave

Spring, a wonderful place, with a broad smooth space in front of it and on both sides, half-way up the mountain. We've laid a floor as smooth as wax can make it, right there by the entrance. The moon's full, tonight, and we'll dance to the sound of the fiddle—and, by the way, we've captured a small organ and a man to play it. Oh, there'll be great doings in the Ozarks tonight."

"It will be heavenly!" she murmured; then turning to her husband—"I hope you won't feel lonely while we're away."

"Do you think you'll like it, Kate?" he asked, sombrely.

"Oh, so much—you'll take good care of me, won't you, Mr. Bates?"

Rodney Bates could not hide the light of his eyes.

It was about nine o'clock when they mounted to ride away—Mrs. Gradley on her pony, Bates on the powerful black horse. She pretended to believe that Bates was afraid of the steed, that he would not be able to keep his saddle, and she taunted him, while he protested, and both laughed like children. Then, as they rode away, still laughing, she looked back to wave an airy goodby to her husband, and her triumph was great as she observed his lowering brow and cynical smile.

When they were gone, Giles paced the path before his cabin, staring fixedly in the direction of the vanished horses. A brilliant moon had obliterated the dividing line of day and night, and the forest trees in the yard whispered solemnly of forest secrets. Giles was thinking

of an evening, years ago, which had been lighted by just such a moon,—an evening when he and Kate sped in a touring-car from his home in a nearby town, to Kansas City. How sorry he had felt because she, so young and oh, so beautiful!—must win her daily bread as a stenographer. How modest, how sweet, how girlish and happy she had appeared that night—how grateful for the trip to the city, how enthusiastic over the river-lights and the twinkling castles that rose from lofty ridges—and, above all, how awed before his rising fame.

Yes, that night he was upon the eve of greatness; he had deserved so much from his party that there had developed little opposition to his candidacy—a seat in Congress was assured. But he had taken the moonlight ride with her. * * * And now, she was riding away just as gaily, with another man.

What could she find in this mere mechanic, this coarse-fibered, heavy-jawed Bates? And how dared he, a fellow hired to bore for oil, how dared he endeavor to worm himself into the good graces of the woman who had extended her hospitality!

“Curse him!” muttered Gradley. “He covets the hand that ministers to his necessity. Why—he is as great a villain as myself. Let us see, let us see; if he is my match in wickedness, will he prove my match in daring?”

He snatched a pistol from his pocket and examined it narrowly, then replaced it with a bitter laugh. He flung himself into the hammock, muttering incoherently. Pres-

ently he again drew the weapon, and pressed the cold muzzle to his forehead. If he felt any temptation to pull the trigger, it vanished, for he removed the iron, and held it to catch the moonlight. "Very pretty," he smiled, sardonically. "I really believe I'd prefer to kill another man. I can always have a shot at myself, if that seems the best ending."

An aimless hand came in contact with a handkerchief that had been left in the netting. He raised it to his face, and the well-known perfume stole upon his senses. He pressed the dainty fabric to his face, laughing—

"This wins! But who has the right to kiss it?" He flung it to the ground, as he rose. "That is to be seen."

He had made up his mind—he would go to the dance. If possible, he would look on, without being seen; if possible, he would study Bates and Mrs. Gradley in their association; and if he found anything hidden, anything sinister . . .

So it came to pass that Giles Gradley and Claude Walcott and Rodney Bates and Mrs. Gradley and the Little Fiddler, all met that night under the moonlight at Cave Spring.

CHAPTER XX

THE OZARK SONG

CLAUDE WALCOTT was one of the latest to arrive at Cave Spring, that night of the dance. Long before reaching the foot of the hill he heard shouts of laughter and echoing calls, and when he was climbing the steep, the dancing upon the improvised stage was plainly audible; by the time he had gained the ledge before the mouth of the stone cavern, the sound of the Little Fiddler's violin reached his ears.

The young men received him in bluff and hearty fashion, and even the girls who had mistreated Norris bestowed upon him broad, good-natured smiles. As for Peter Poff, he at once took charge of him with loud hospitality, explaining that the stage had not been set up in front of the cave—as Bates had suggested—because the cold air from the mysterious depths was not a good thing for heated bodies. Rodney Bates had wanted the musician to stand within the cave, on the natural table, with the dancers just outside.

“But it would of been too everlasting onhealthy,” Peter believed.

Hence the planks had been laid out of reach of the unnatural chilly breath at one side, and a little behind

the mouth of the hill—Claude thought of the gaping stone lips as the hill's mouth through which it exhaled a breath as of the tomb. In spite of this cold atmosphere, the huge block of stone denominated the "table" supported a great many baskets, which were presently to furnish the midnight repast; the convenience of the long smooth block outweighed considerations of the cold air—an atmosphere which was at first grateful, after the heated earth, and which became insupportable only by gradual degrees.

Claude did not give the supper preparations much attention, because his thoughts were bent upon one sole object—an interview with the Little Fiddler. He saw with disappointment that though the dancing-floor was exposed to the full beams of the moon, the shed at the farther margin of it, designed for the musician, was so situated that none but the faintest of reflected light could enter. Even the organ, hired from the traveling wagon was but vaguely outlined in the mellow gloom, and the face of the "medicine-man" though strongly marked, and adorned with whiskers intensely black from his own liniment, showed but indistinctly.

The Little Fiddler took advantage of the organ to obscure himself as far as possible from observation.

Peter Poff, following Claude to hold him as prey to his loquacity, explained that they had been obliged to build the shed in order to concentrate the sounds of the violin and throw them forward into the ears of the danc-

ers, otherwise they would have been scattered in all directions, "and thinned according."

Claude discontentedly observed that the shed not only served the purpose of sound-concentration, but of keeping the player concealed.

"Which that is one condition of his doing the work," Peter replied. "The Little Fiddler is my friend and that's why he's here; but he don't want to make no more friends than he has, now; some does; me, you might say. And I contend that when a man is satisfied with what friends he has gathered, why waste his time scraping up any more?"

Claude answered decidedly that he did not expect to leave the Ozarks without making the acquaintance of the mysterious musician. To himself he said with grim determination that the acquaintance should begin that night. He strove desperately to get a good look at the features hidden by the gloom of the roof and the shadow of the big hat, but even had the box-like room been less jealously guarded, the glare of the surrounding moonlight would have baffled his purpose.

He waited, therefore, till the musician should come forth and as he suspected this would not be until the close of the dance, he foresaw a long period of waiting.

Bud Poff, solemn as an owl, stood looking on at the noisy shuffling of feet, which was all the heartier and freer because it was presently to be succeeded by "city waltz-

ing." The big backwoodsman shot a glance at Claude, but offered no word of greeting, as he solemnly chewed.

Rodney Bates and Mrs. Gradley, standing at one side among those waiting for the first waltz, nodded gaily to the young man, then devoted their attention to each other. The hill people were not on easy terms with the lady, though regarding her with immense respect, not only on account of her beauty, but because of her courage in living at such close quarters with Giles Gradley; moreover, seeing her for the first time at one of their dances, and with a man who might possibly be her husband's rival, they felt a thrill of anticipatory excitement. As for the expert driller, his free and easy manner elicited the judgment of approval which was the last word in native eulogy—

"Ain't no airs about *him!*"

They looked upon Claude differently. Bates, they felt, was one of them, despite his better education; and Mrs. Gradley, though unmistakably of a different sphere, was accepted as a gracious loan from some higher treasury of society—but Claude, though he sought in all possible ways, except of intimate intercourse, to appear as one in the crowd, was hopelessly different. It was a difference they could not explain, but which they nevertheless resented. It had long ago been classified as "Boston."

"He can't help being hisself, I reckon," was the general pronouncement; "it won't rub off."

An old settler who was enjoying his Long Green and

leaving his whiskers to look out for themselves, drew near an animated crowd and nudged the biggest girl in the party, banteringly—

“Why don’t you gals catch that there tailor-made beau?”

The girl nudged,—it was Lindy Prebby—chewed her gum hard and fast.

Another maiden spoke up: “Don’t make Lindy die of shame, Stodge Blurbett, she tried it on once and got turned down to the foot of the spelling bee by Mr. White Shirt.”

Lindy Prebby was stung to renewed ambition. “Well, you just watch me now,” she boasted. “I’ll go over there this minute and catch him; you see if I don’t throw some salt on ’is tail!”

The buxom girl, loud-breathing, quivering with good-natured eagerness, and flushed with daring, came across to Claude and said, not without difficulty—still industriously chewing her gum—

“Come on, Mr. Walcott, we’re just getting ready to put the Ozark Song on the boards.”

“This is all new to me,” Claude explained, “and I’d rather look on.”

Lindy, conscious of her friends’ watching eyes, persevered. “Oh, you don’t have to know how. We’ll get Bud Poff to sing the verse, and all of us’ll take up the chorus and dance a hoe-down as hard as we can. Didn’t you never hear the Ozark Song? Us fellows made it

up amongst us, the words, I mean; it was the Little Fiddler that give us the air which it ain't like no other music in the world, I reckon. Come on and shake a foot with us. If you don't do nothing but hop up and down and shuffle, you can't make no mistake on the Ozark Song."

Claude smiled rather remotely, and shook his head. "Thank you, all the same . . ." His manner was quite detached. In fact, he could stare at the Little Fiddler, inwardly protesting against the great hat that hid the face, and the black shadows that almost hid the hat. The musician's slender form, delicate feet, thin arms and hands, inspired him with contemptuous pity for the man, and alarm for Norris's inexperience.

He wondered—"And she can admire a fellow like that!" and drew up his broad shoulders, feeling himself so much more a man. Would the dance never end? At the first cessation of the eternal bow, he would hurry to the rude structure, he would introduce himself, he would make the fellow talk about Norris . . .

Peter whispered hoarsely in his ear, "Say, Mister, you'd better of danced with Lindy. Do you know you've made her biling-hot mad? You'd better of went with her, let me tell you, she'll git even with you for turning her down!"

Claude, as in a dream, heard the words but dully; he hardly understood, and he did not at all care; nothing could distract his attention from the slight black figure of the musician.

Scarcely had the dance ended when voices from Lindy's crowd shouted, "The Ozark Song! The Ozark Song!" And this cry was taken up by the heated dancers who still held the floor. In opposition came a shout from Rodney Bates's group—"No, no! Let's have a waltz! We haven't had a waltz for half an hour."

The rival camps challenged each other with gay vociferous calls:

"The Ozark Song!"

"A waltz! A waltz!"

"No, the Ozark Song! Come on, Bud, get on your perch."

"Don't you sing, Bud, you stay where you are!"

Bud Poff, in the meanwhile, chewed and said nothing.

"Fellow citizens!" shouted Peter, holding up his hand, and thus obtaining something approaching silence, "Bud have gone to considerable trouble hauling the planks for that flooring from the sawmill, which they air to be returned in the morning, and it's eight mile, and him up be-times. And I contend that if he wants to sing he ought to be give free rein."

There seemed so much sound justice in this opinion that all looked to Bud to learn his pleasure.

"Which it ain't that I'm a honing to sing," said Bud in a rough hoarse voice, evidently habitual to him, "them being that can do it better, but such *as* being, wanting to dance and therefore unavailable. This here, as I sees it, is a matter of patriotism; and when it's the Ozark apple, or the Ozark springs, or the Ozark Song, I'll back it up

agin the world. Ever' thing takes second place to the Ozarks and we'll have the waltz later." So saying, he strode forward, hastily disembarassing himself, as he went along, of his tobacco, like a ship which, about to enter upon a perilous voyage, casts overboard its superfluous cargo.

Peter whispered to Claude, admiringly, "Ain't I told you that Bud is there with the words when the time's ripe?"

Claude watched in astonishment as Bud mounted a box just in front of the Little Fiddler, and opened his great mouth to sing. He confessed to his neighbor, "I should never have supposed your brother a singer."

"You can't never tell a singer from his outsides, except as so be you look for something curious and as I may say agin nature, singing not being a natural way of getting out what's in your mind. Don't say nothing—Bud's going to sing." And Peter listened with admiring, uplifted face.

The effect of Bud's singing on the young man was to cause him convulsive agony in his strivings not to burst out into unseemly merriment. The big uncouth fellow was so earnest, so hoarse and unmusical; and he was at such pains to make every word distinctly audible—accompanying them with a gesture to help each reach its mark, now of the hand, now of the head, now of a winking eye or even a tweak of the nose—Claude was at first conscious of nothing but being the witness of an amazing performance. During this singular solo, the dancers softly moved

about the floor with great swinging steps and waving arms and bending bodies, careful not to drown out the verse.

When the chorus was reached, everybody took it up as loudly as possible, and the scene became one of prodigious animation. The music was hurried in sympathy with the frantic gaiety, and was repeated several times before Bud was again given full sway. The Ozark Song had only one verse, it appeared, and Bud rendered it several times, in each case followed by enthusiastic repetitions of the chorus.

When Claude had grown accustomed to Bud Poff's eccentricities, and to the tumultuous antics of the hoe-down, he found himself listening to the air with keen attention, for it had suddenly occurred to him that it was the same the Green Witch had sung to the waterfall. Could he be mistaken? He sought desperately to banish the words from his attention, to follow only the half-drowned strains of the violin. If it were the same air, surely the Little Fiddler had taught it to Norris!

He felt an unreasonable pang of jealous anger at the suspicion. Of course Norris, dressed as the Green Witch, had sung to the waterfall of her love for the Little Fiddler. But that she should sing the very air he had composed, and now that he should play that air for the common public seemed more than he could bear. He listened, then, catching every note, hoping without hope that the melody was not Norris's song.

Yes, it was the same melody. Claude remembered how Norris's voice had seemed about to stop in the middle of the strain, then had slipped downward even as the water in little eddies came sparkling over the corner of the ledge and seemed for an instant to pause at her feet. She had altered the time to the music of the falls, but it had been the same air—and *he* had taught it to her, this little musician, so fond of shadow, and so afraid of meeting a stranger face to face!

Where had he found an opportunity to teach Norris his fantastic melodies? Could it be possible that she had dressed as the Green Witch in order to meet this man? But no, he could not believe that Norris would wander the hills at midnight in order to meet her lover.

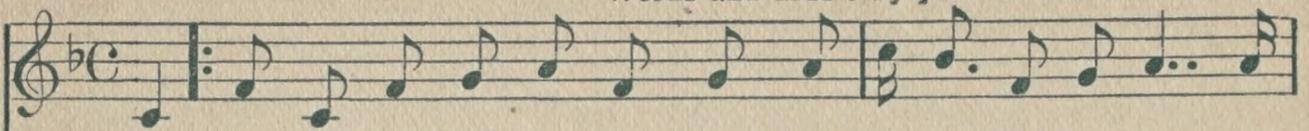


*The
Ozark
Song*

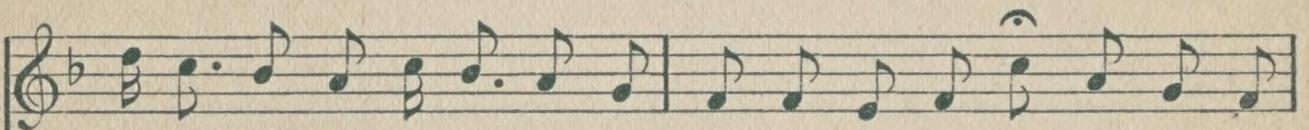
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The Ozark Song.

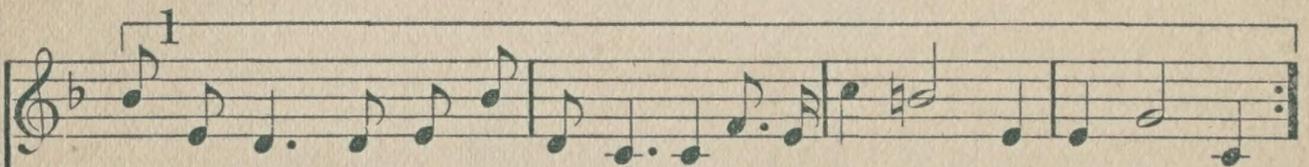
Words and Music by JOHN BRECKENRIDGE ELLIS



I loved a maid-en in the West, A maid-en in the East; The
fished a - long the mountain streams, A maid-en past me sped; I



troub-le was I didn't know Which one I loved the least, And so I
caught her heart, but I fell in—She pulled me o'er my head,—Oh, there are



said Good-by, and went a - fish - ing in the O-zarks, the O-zarks. I



2 *faster.*

dream-y days, just for the wish-ing, Skies blue,

faster.

Detailed description: This system contains the first two lines of music. The top line is a vocal melody starting with a '2' above a slur, indicating a second ending. The lyrics 'dream-y days, just for the wish-ing, Skies blue,' are written below. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves. The right-hand piano part has a 'faster.' marking. The left-hand piano part provides a steady accompaniment.

rit. . . .

Hearts true, I love,— I love you.

rit.

Detailed description: This system contains the next two lines of music. The vocal line continues with the lyrics 'Hearts true, I love,— I love you.' The piano accompaniment features a 'rit.' (ritardando) marking. The right-hand piano part has a 'rit.' marking. The left-hand piano part continues the accompaniment.

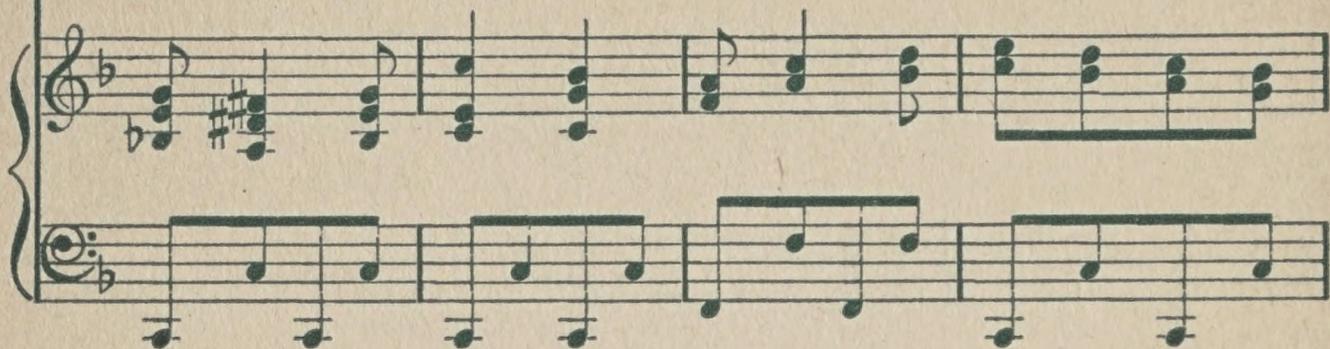
CHORUS.

Down in the O - zarks Just hear the laugh-ter ring-ing,

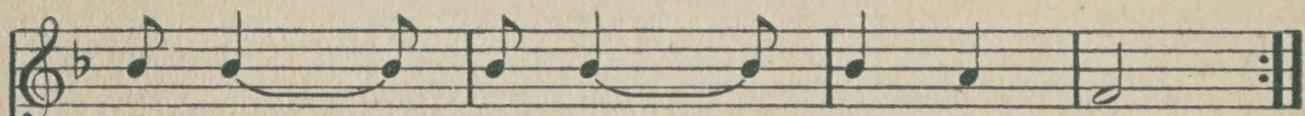
Detailed description: This system contains the chorus. It begins with a key signature change to B-flat major and a time signature change to 2/4. The lyrics are 'Down in the O - zarks Just hear the laugh-ter ring-ing,'. The piano accompaniment consists of two staves. The right-hand piano part has a key signature change to B-flat major and a time signature change to 2/4. The left-hand piano part continues the accompaniment.



Bright smiles are spark - ling, Oh, how the birds are sing - ing.



Down in the O - zarks Wild flow'rs are ev - er spring - ing,



Skies blue, Hearts true, I love you.



CHAPTER XXI

THE KISS IN THE MOONLIGHT

WHEN the dance gave place to the waltz, Claude was still standing like a statue, his eyes fixed in a fierce stare upon the shadowy figure with the violin. He hardly noticed Rodney Bates as he led Mrs. Gradley out upon the floor, but his brain seemed turning round with their whirling forms. When the waltz ended, and after Bates had led away his partner ostensibly to examine Cave Spring, Claude, as if startled from an ugly dream, started forward so abruptly that he ran into Lindy Prebby.

Claude with no thought but that of seizing the musician's arm, now that it was at rest, muttered an incoherent apology at which the girl, to hide her resentment, laughed rather shrilly. He noticed, as he stepped upon the flooring that in the back of the small enclosure was a little wooden door as at the rear of a stage.

He stopped abruptly, reflecting that if the musician was determined to escape him, he might slip through that door and plunge into the thicket that straggled all the way up to the brow of the plateau. He decided to go around the room and enter it through this wooden shutter.

He had gone only a few steps when Peter caught his arm.

"Which away and where to?" Peter inquired.

"I'm going to talk to that musician," Claude answered, impatiently.

"Well, now, I wouldn't," Peter's grasp grew rigid. "Ain't I done told you that he wouldn't come to play for us, if we didn't keep off the people? Being a city man, I reckon he looks on playing for these country dances as sorts of larks—them kinds of larks that's got money under their wings. We pay him noble, and he gives us what we want, and if I didn't make myself plain to you about this before, it must of been that I taken the wrong words which ain't no discredit to you, for I am in a state of—"

"Pete, I can't endure to have my arm held," said Claude, breaking away. "That musician can't object to my talking to him, for I don't live in this country, and I expect to go away, in a few days, forever. So you see, there's no danger of my telling about his larks."

In the meantime the musician who had kept his face against his instrument, walked to the rear of his retreat, to lean against the door, for a moment's rest. At the moment that Claude freed himself, he wheeled about, and now began a lively reel, which threw the crowd into laughing confusion, evoking noisy stamping of feet, wild brushing of skirts, and encouraging shouts from the spectators. Everywhere was violent motion and supreme good humor.

Claude, finding his purpose inopportune fell back a few

steps and discovered Giles Gradley looking on in grim silence, the moonlight defining his black figure with startling distinctness. Bud Poff also observed the sudden arrival and out of the forest of hair and whiskers his red eyes twinkled and shone; but no words escaped the bristling lips.

Giles remained but a moment, for his sweeping glance assured him that those whom he sought were not among the dancers. As he turned to depart, there was a grimness about the lips and a dangerous gleam in the eyes that suddenly roused Claude from his reveries.

Where were Rodney Bates and Mrs. Gradley? At any rate, they were not with the crowd, and possibly Giles would come upon them quite alone—such isolation was most imprudent and might prove dangerous. Claude's impulse was to warn his friend, but having no idea of his whereabouts, he decided to follow Giles in order to discover it. He left the stage with its noisy mirth, and Peter Poff made no effort to detain him—doubtless because he had not taken the direction of the Little Fiddler.

Suddenly he heard the unrestrained laughter of Rodney Bates—it guided both him and Giles Gradley to a spot where a swing had been fastened to a post oak. Here the girls were taking turns in being sent upon airy flights, and Mrs. Gradley was one of them, youthful, full of merry laughter. Bates, who had the special swinging of Mrs. Gradley, was so overflowing with high spirits that he kept the girls in shrieks of laughter by his robust mirth.

Claude had never seen Mrs. Gradley more beautiful. She was simply dressed, that she might seem in keeping with the girls of the wilderness, but her face set her apart from all, it was so soft, so pink, so exquisitely formed; and when Bates sent her far above his head, into a sea of moonbeams, the loveliness of her supple body was like some enchanting personification of beauty hovering in ethereal space. Giles watched her, his form seeming slighter than ever, his head more massive, more magnificent, his eyes as dark as night, his face full of a dark and haunting grandeur.

Bates helped Mrs. Gradley from the swing, and thus far, there was no harm. But now they strolled away and in leisurely fashion began to descend the hillside. Giles walked very slowly after them, Claude followed Giles.

For a few moments the moonlight was full upon Bates and his companion, then they entered a copse at first thin, then densely crowded with small pines through which the trail descended. As they vanished, Giles discovered Claude not far behind him. He stopped abruptly.

"Well, Walcott?" It was an inquiry.

"I am not dancing," Claude said, quietly.

"Oh, you are seeking your friend, no doubt—quite a coincidence, as I am seeking my wife. Wait—presently they will emerge—"

Rodney Bates and Mrs. Gradley reappeared, going down the path of silvery light. They were going very slowly, talking in low voices.

Gradley said, "One walks slowly when one is old."

Claude murmured politely that Mrs. Gradley was by no means old, but the other paid no attention to the words, for at that moment, Mrs. Gradley stumbled, and fell upon her knees. Bates, in painful apprehension, bent over her. Giles and Claude stood where they could look down upon them as upon a picture.

"I'm afraid she's hurt!" Claude exclaimed, as the lady did not rise. "She has stumbled over a stone."

Gradley responded calmly, "I do not think there was a stone."

In truth, Claude had his own doubts about the stone. Bates lifted her up, and as she stood unsteadily, he supported her with his arm about her waist. Her voice floated up to the watchers—

"No, no, Mr. Bates, you must not!"

"We in the shadow, they in the light," muttered Gradley. "Walcott, it is like a play—let us not interrupt."

They turned around to re-enter the copse, Bates still holding his arm about Mrs. Gradley. As they drew nearer, Claude determined to create a diversion. Of course Bates would do no harm * * * still, one might conduct oneself differently if aware of the steely gaze of a watchful husband.

As the trees grew thin, they saw that Mrs. Gradley did slightly limp as if the stumbling had not been altogether fictitious. Suddenly Bates bent over her swiftly, and she uttered a faint, sharp cry.

“Did you see?” Gradley asked Claude, in a thin, deadly tone. “You will admit there was no mistake that time?”

It was then that Claude perceived the pistol in Gradley’s hand.

The trees had again blotted out the approaching figures, and Giles observing where they must reappear, lifted his arm; the moonlight touched the barrel of the weapon in gleaming lines.

Claude laid his hand upon the arm that supported the leveled pistol—“Mr. Gradley, do you think she is worth it?”

He turned upon Claude with flashing eyes, and for an instant there was something terrible in his savage expression of power. He hissed, “What do you say?”

“I ask you if you think she is worth it?”

“Worth it?”

“Yes, assassination, murder—can she pay such a price? You know her better than I, that’s why I ask you if she is worth it.”

Gradley stared at him a moment, then dropped his arm. “Walcott, if I could be sure she’s worth it, I’d kill you for that question. But I don’t know—my God, I don’t know what she is worth!” He flung the weapon from him.

Mrs. Gradley came up the path alone, and her limp was hardly perceptible. Bates had remained in the wood.

“O Giles!” she exclaimed, discovering him. Her voice

sounded with a sob—"don't leave me, Giles, don't leave me!"

"Why, no," he said, in a restrained voice, "that is good advice, and I will *not* leave you! Come then, let us converse." He turned to Claude—"Tell your friend Bates I've left him my compliments," and he pointed toward the bushes into which he had hurled the pistol. He led away his wife; and Claude, now that Bates was out of danger, returned to the dance, quivering with excitement, muttering,

"And now for the Little Fiddler!"

CHAPTER XXII

LOST IN THE CAVE

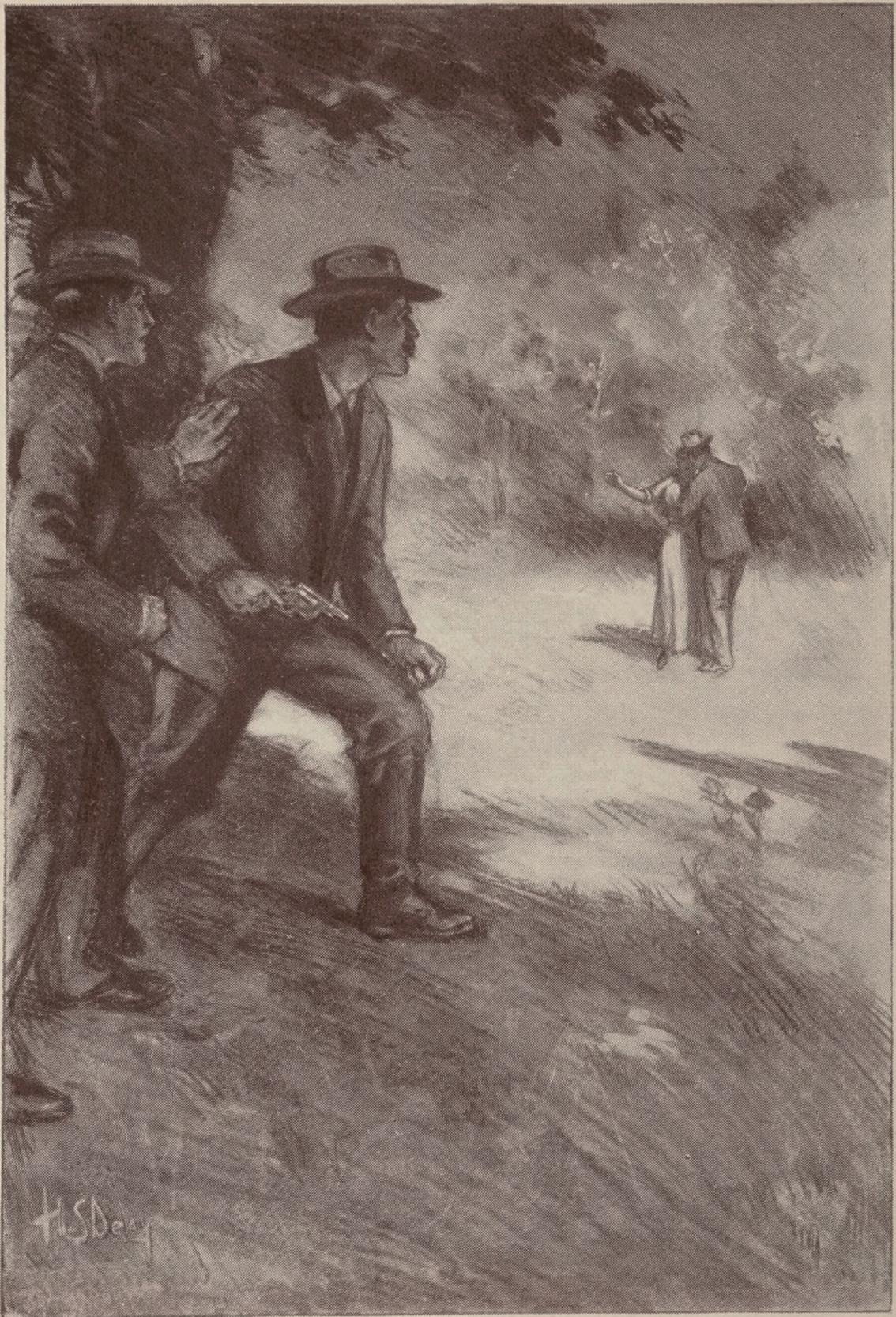
AS Claude returned to the scene of the dancing, there came a lull in the elephantine jollity, while fell the last pattering spray from the highest crest of E-string melody. It was the supreme effort before refreshments, and as Claude met those leaving the stage, he heard rumors on all sides that "the table was being set."

The Little Fiddler had dropped wearily upon a stool placed behind a beam at the rear of his shed, and the upper part of his person was obscured by its tree-like forks. As Claude lightly crossed the platform and entered the alcove at one side, he was impressed by the other's despondent position from which all life seemed to have departed.

"I beg your pardon," he began abruptly, not without a touch of aggressiveness in his tone, "but you look lonesome. May I introduce myself?—Claude Walcott."

The musician started up in great agitation, but instead of looking at the intruder, stared about wildly as for some means of escape.

Claude observed the impulsive movement with grim relentlessness.



IT WAS THEN CLAUDE PERCEIVED THE PISTOL IN GRADLEY'S HAND.— *Page 194.*

He spoke more decidedly: "Will you honor me with your name, sir?"

Suddenly the violinist darted toward the little door, which was not swung upon hinges, but stood propped against the small square opening—the entire structure had been too hurriedly put up to admit of careful workmanship. The slight figure paused at the heavy door as if to summon sufficient strength—then the barricade was hurled to the floor with a loud crash, and the form leaped into the bushes which grew to the very opening.

"Stop!" called Claude commandingly, and he dashed after the fugitive, his face white with anger. He reached the opening in a moment and was darting through when a bulky body interposed itself.

"Don't try to stop me," Claude warned the apparition which seemed to have started up from the very ground—"I mean to talk to that fellow, I mean to find out all about him."

"No!" said the man in a voice so deep and hoarse that it shook his form. His red eyes glared fiercely—the man was Bud Poff.

Opposition swelled Claude's anger. Was Norris's lover a criminal that every one tried to shield him? He pushed the opposing body as violently as the narrow space permitted, and Bud staggered backward. But as the young man lowered his head to emerge, he was checked by a swift flash of steel. The moonlight gleamed upon a long bowie-knife held in the other's threatening grip.

Bud said nothing, only looked.

Then Peter Poff came up from behind, and laid his hand upon Claude's shoulder; and, although the latter shook it off violently, he made no further effort to pursue the musician, realizing his impotence. Though still furious, he had the sense to congratulate himself that this little scene had been unobserved by the picnic-crowd.

At the same time, a sudden idea suggested itself, doing much to cool his indignation,—the thought that possibly the musician was hiding in the thicket on the plateau where he had heard him playing for Norris; as soon as possible, he would climb thither and perhaps find him in hiding.

Peter looked at Claude reproachfully a moment, then said, solemnly, "Mr. Walcott, there is one right which it is every man's, and by that I mean the right to go and come. If you are a visiting-man, yourself, I contend you have to stand for it when people come to visit *you*; if you give, you must take; and the more you enjoy sitting down in other people's houses, the more you have your own chairs at home wore by sitters you have sat with. But if not, then not."

"Pete, I demand the name of that rascal who avoids recognition; and I demand to know where he hides, and why he hides."

"And if not, then not," Peter persisted, argumentatively. "If not of a visiting turn yourself—and the Little

Fiddler ain't—then what have you done to be inflicted? Ain't a man free? I contend he air."

Claude could not explain that his interest in Norris justified his resolution to sound the Little Fiddler to the bottom; Peter was a true friend to Norris—but it was not likely that he knew of her lover. He tried again:

"Pete, there's something about the Little Fiddler that's familiar to me—his way of moving, of walking—I don't know what, but I'm sure I've known that man; and since it couldn't have been in the Ozarks, it must have been in Kansas City. And evidently he knows who I am. Now, why should he run away, except to hide some guilty secret?"

"And if not," repeated Peter, "then not." He found infinite satisfaction in this new-found phrase, which seemed to surprise him as much as it mystified the watchful Bud. "If not, then *not!*"

It was no use. Claude made a pretense of giving up pursuit. He returned to the ledge, and for a while watched the busy young people unloading their hampers upon the stone table. But as soon as he found himself safe from the observation of the Poff brothers, he made a detour, slipped behind the platform, and ascended the hill by the same underbrush-trail which the Little Fiddler had followed. After all, he was not very long behind the fugitive, and it did not seem improbable that the search might prove successful.

When the plateau was gained, he went straight to the

thickets from which he had heard Norris and the Little Fiddler flee on the day of his discovery. Hitherto he had never penetrated their depths, but now he entered the brambles, feeling his former conviction that somewhere behind the green barricade must be some sort of clearing where the musician was accustomed to meet his sweetheart.

All at once, he uttered a low cry of amazement. Only a few steps had taken him past the thickets into a space that could not properly be called a clearing; but, at any rate, the vegetation was too thin to hide the yawning mouth of a cave—doubtless the same cave honeycombed the entire hill, and this was but one of its openings. At the entrance, as in a blackened doorway, stood the Little Fiddler, panting and fanning violently with the big felt hat—evidently the hurried ascent along the difficult trail had been a severe tax to strength nearly exhausted.

For a moment the moonlight was full upon the slender figure, but the next, evidently startled by the sound of approaching footsteps, there was a wild glance upward, and the black form darted into the cave. Claude leaped down from an overhanging rock and dashed into the entrance, shouting to the other to stop.

For some distance the moonbeams penetrated the cavern, lighting up a smooth stone floor and dimly revealing the narrow sides and low ceiling. It showed the black form of the musician running, the violin clutched in one hand, the other held extended; the big hat had been replaced.

"Stop! Stop!" called Claude, fiercely. He redoubled his speed.

The distance between them was sensibly lessened, when the pursued was suddenly swallowed up in darkness. The moonbeams no longer lighted the way, and Claude with both hands held out, was obliged to proceed with caution. He continued, however to run over the floor which had grown uneven, until, among loosened stones which had fallen from disintegrating walls, he stumbled severely.

He was up in a moment, furious with pain and a sense of indignity, and his calls were vibrant with anger but no sound answered save those unearthly echoes which rumble and beat back in hollow mockery from the recesses of subterranean channels.

Suddenly ahead of him, he saw a faint light and at first he fancied it was an exit—possibly one like that beside the Silver Waterfall; but as his hastened footsteps drew him nearer, he found that the feeble rays came from a candle. His heart leaped. At last the musician was about to capitulate.

"I'm coming!" he called. "Wait!"

The candle remained motionless and he darted on, although the increased roughness of the way brought him more than once to his knees.

At last he reached the candle. It had been fastened upon the floor in the crevice of a rock—doubtless the Little Fiddler had lighted it and left it there on his account; for just beyond it yawned a black pit in the

floor into which he must have fallen, had not the light warned him of its presence. His anger had been chilled by this time, even his fierce desire to confront the man whom he regarded as his enemy was subdued by the inscrutable mystery of the cave.

As he caught up the candle, the stone was rolled over the margin of the pit. It was so long before he heard it splash in some sunken stream, that his blood ran cold. At any rate his enemy had saved him from that awful fate. Completely unnerved, he faced about, wishing nothing better than to be once more in the open air.

He had not gone far when he came to a thin wall which split the darkness like a knife of stone. On either side of it were passages which the rays of the candle could not reach. One of these passages, he had traversed. But which one? Was it the rough stone-strewn floor on the right? He ventured that way, and presently came to another partition wall offering the choice of two different alleys.

When pursuing the musician in perfect darkness, there had seemed but one way. With the candle in his hand, he found so many paths opening out before him, only one of which led toward life, that he was completely baffled. It would be better to seek the pit again, then start afresh, trusting his instincts to guide him.

But he could not find the pit again. He wandered through passage after passage, all of them looking more or less alike, though some slanted downward with appall-

ing steepness, and others brought up suddenly against a dead wall.

As his candle grew smaller and smaller, hope died away. The last spark was extinguished. Hopelessly lost, he flung himself upon the ground to reflect. But reflection was impossible. To his disordered fancy he thought he could hear the pit calling, he imagined he could feel its breath seeking to draw him down to the black waters.

CHAPTER XXIII

CLAUDE MEETS THE LITTLE FIDDLER

IT was some time before Claude raised himself to a sitting posture. The sinister influence of the vast cavern with its black labyrinths had, on the flickering out of his candle, settled upon him with the oppressive sense of utter helplessness. Coming so suddenly from a world of brilliant moonlight and happy ringing voices into a region where life was not, it was as if he had lost himself in a sealed tomb. No amount of dauntless courage could avail against impenetrable walls and dreadful holes gaping, he knew not where, to plunge him into some abyss.

But after awhile, things seemed different, not because they were more hopeful, but because the heart within him recoiled with the strength of youth from despair. He had some matches in his pocket—twenty-two, as he found by careful count; and in his coat were several letters which fortunately he had preserved to start his camp-fire—the envelopes bearing one-cent stamps, and containing printed circulars of generous pages.

He began making torches of these leaves, rolling them very tight and dividing them into as many as he thought would last longest. Provided with these arms of explora-

tion he rose in a mood of grim resolution, fierce to foil the designs of his enemy—for in his present mood he regarded his misfortunes as all the work of that Little Fiddler.

Yes, it was certain that the Little Fiddler must know all about his friendship for Norris; Norris who loved the musician with a love so wild and tender that she even sang of it to the waterfall, would surely tell him how Claude had saved her from torments and how she had saved his life. The Little Fiddler would grow jealous—he must have seen while bending over his violin that Claude was different from the men of the hills. And so, he had run into the cave meaning to lose the man he refused to meet face to face.

True, a lighted signal had been placed at the mouth of the deadly pit; that showed that the Little Fiddler was not all bad; but if he had been all bad, Norris could never have loved him. Of course he would seek to save Claude from perishing in the bowels of the cave; nevertheless he had left him to lose himself with no probability of finding his way to freedom. Did his enemy expect him to die of a frightful fall, or of slow starvation? Or did he mean to come a few days later, with a searching party, to bring him forth, a weak, white-faced, pitiful creature, eager to flee from the Ozarks? That must be the explanation of the heartless desertion—the purpose to drive him from Norris.

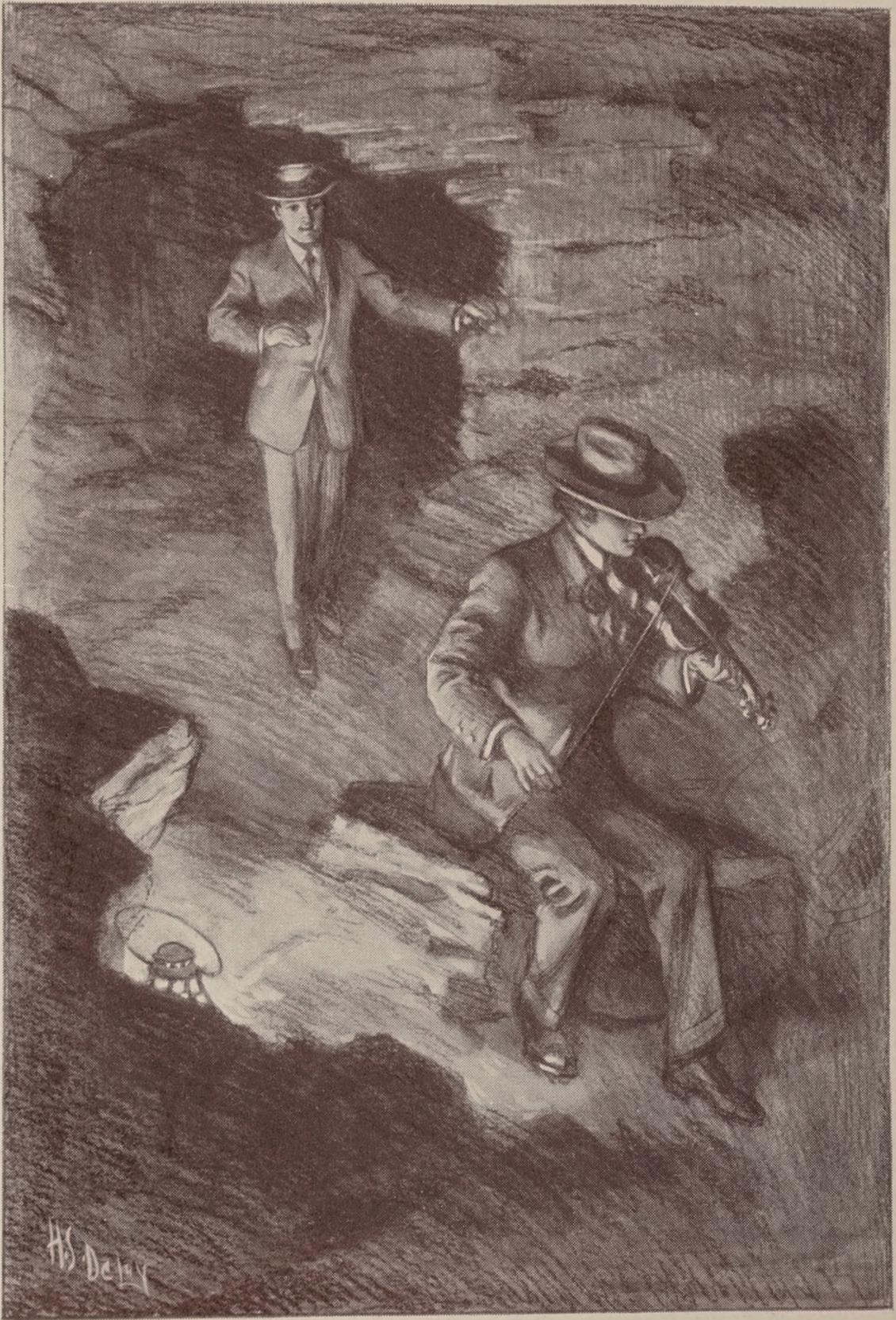
Claude's face was set in a cold smile, when he reached

this conclusion, a smile as hard and grim as the stone walls about him. The light of his improvised torches showed it in mocking flashings of pale reddish flames as he held the rolled leaves as far before him as he could reach, always watching the ground as if looking for footprints.

He had lighted his fourth roll, and its springing flame had just evoked his face from the gloom, when he stopped short, holding his breath. There came to him, from what direction he could not at first determine, a sound, whether that of rippling water, or of a breeze sighing in the leaves outside, it was impossible to tell. Whatever it was, it died away.

But in a moment it came again, not nearer, but more distinctly, from one of the passages upon which he had turned his back. He faced about and strained his ears to catch the mysterious murmur. It was like falling water or wandering breeze, but more like a human voice. Yet if it were a human voice, why did it not come in shouts, in calls of inquiry, or encouragement? Could it be that what he heard was the blending of voices in intimate conversation in a remote chamber of the cave? His heart stood still. Had Norris come to greet her lover?

But for that thought, Claude would have shouted for help. He imagined that if he made his presence known, the voices would cease, and acting upon this conviction, he pressed forward as noiselessly as possible, still hold-



HE COULD DISCERN THE FIGURE OF THE MUSICIAN
BENDING OVER THE VIOLIN.— *Page 207.*

ing his light toward the floor to avoid death-traps. As he went on, the noise grew plainer; it defined itself; it was the Ozark Song played on the violin, and played as it could only have been played by its composer—the Little Fiddler. So! And that was why Norris had come to the cave—just as she had come on a similar occasion—to hear the musician play her favorite air, to tell him, perhaps, how she had composed words of her own to it, words telling of her loneliness, of her sorrows, of her love. What would she say when she learned that the Little Fiddler had left Claude to perish in trackless windings of the cave? And if he, like the criminal his actions indicated, fled from before him, leaving Norris alone, what then would she think of her lover?

Claude had drawn near enough to discover a faint light stealing from the direction of the music. As his torch died away, he slipped forward, not lighting another, but, on that account, feeling every step of the way with cautious foot. At last he could discern the figure of the musician bending over the violin. A lantern stood on the floor, its light turned to crimson on the instrument and gleaming like snow on the small hand and shapely neck. The player's face, he could not see, because he was advancing from the rear. He looked about keenly for Norris, but if she was listening to the weird strains she must be crouching in one of the alley-ways that branched off from this main corridor.

Suddenly the player stopped in the midst of the air—

at that place which, during the dance, had reminded Claude of the water foaming over the ledge and seeming to pause before its downward plunge. Raising the bared head which all this time had been half-hidden by shadow, the Little Fiddler called wildly—

“Claude! Claude! Claude!”

Claude, who was not five yards away, did not need that voice to tell him the truth. Over the player’s face the light flashed, showing it bathed with tears and blanched in terror.

“Norris!” cried Claude, darting forward. “Norris!”
I am here!”

Norris was the Little Fiddler.

In the sudden realization of this fact came wonderful hopes, dazzling possibilities, doubts that faded into joy, comprehension of the past that made him gasp in breathless delight. *Norris was the Little Fiddler!*

At the sound of his voice she uttered a cry of joy and looked over her shoulder as if not daring to trust her ears, and when she saw him, the shining of her eyes told how great had been her anguish.

“Norris!” cried Claude, holding out his arms to embrace her, “my darling, my darling!”

But she snatched up the lantern and fled, calling in an uncertain voice, “Follow the light.”

He cried out in deep reproach—“Oh, Norris! Are you running away from me?” And he stopped short as if resolving to let himself be left behind in the darkness.

She slowed her feet, but did not stop. Her voice came to him tender but also reproachful. "Claude!" was all she said. But her face and neck were suddenly crimsoned, and her eyes burned like two stars showing in a rosy sky. The grace of her attitude, the charming quaintness of her figure which moved him to loving admiration, were to her something to be ashamed of because the male attire which had hitherto disguised her, now served only to betray.

Claude understood her maidenly shame, and answered—"Go on, Norris, I will always follow your light."

She paused to smile at him out of the gratitude of her heart though if she had known how that charming color in her face and that delicate etching of the slender form against the blackness stirred an ungenerous impulse to pursue and overtake her and crush her in longing arms—even with that violin against her heart—she might not have hesitated.

At any rate she did not linger again, and so loath was she for him to see her now that he knew her, that she ran swiftly over the well-known path and it was all he could do to follow her light.

At last that light began to dim in another radiance, for they had drawn near the mouth of the cave, and there was the dazzling moonlight bathing Norris's feet, and sending her shadow dancing along the stones. Suddenly Norris gave her lantern a quick jerk and it was extin-

guished. She dived into an opening at one side, and called from obscurity—

“I’ll be with you as soon as I can.”

Claude understood that she was about to change her dress from the simple but elegant attire of the Little Fiddler to the coarse unbecoming garb of the servant; he smiled with manly tenderness. He went out to the stone ledge in front of the cave and called back,

“I’ll wait for you, dear Little Fiddler. If need be, I’ll wait for you forever.”

He stepped down into the trail and took a long breath, so glad to see trees and rocks again that he overlooked Lindy Prebby loitering just below him.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, much disconcerted, and glancing uneasily at the opening of the cave. “I didn’t see you.”

Lindy laughed shrilly, the truth of his words was so evident. She gave him an odd look, one of veiled hostility.

“Supper’ll be ready in about half an hour,” she remarked, drily, and turning, hurried down the declivity, springing from rock to rock with a lightness and sure-footedness she had not shown in the dance.

Claude watched till she had disappeared, filled with a vague uneasiness. Could she have heard his call to Norris? And if so, could she possibly have suspected the identity of the Little Fiddler? But in a few moments, Lindy Prebby and all her world slipped from his mind. He could think only of Norris and her wonderful secret.

What had become of that image of Norris's lover which so long had haunted the young man? He could have laughed aloud. To the Silver Waterfall she had sung a song of her love—her love for whom? Must it not have been a song about himself? He walked rapidly up and down the ledge, wondering at Norris's delay—would she never come?

As he waited, he gazed away into the vast amphitheatre of rounded hills and his breath hung suspended at the lovely vision. The different hues of early autumn leaves had lost that vividness imparted by sunshine, and the life and the warmth of the day was long since gone—all was in slumber. If the softened reds and browns and the great masses of green stirred, it was as in their sleep. If there came to him from the depths, the rippling stream newborn from some great spring such as gushes forth in prodigal profusion in that region, the tinkle and plash of water was as drowsy voices murmuring in a dream. Every rounded boss of wooded hillside, swelling from one to the other, like scallops in green, painted from plateau to valley, now lay dark and still—little islands in winding riverbeds of moonbeams. That silver lacing of the descents trimmed in most fantastic fashion the solemn shadows—only the moonbeams seemed alive, running everywhere among mounds of stillness.

But when Norris came forth from the world of endless night dressed as he had always known her in the livery the Beautiful Woman compelled her to wear,

Claude turned away from his contemplation of the Ozark hills—it was like turning from the fairy thought of one's best beloved to that fairy, herself. In vain the scarlet leaves of premature beauty flashed their colors when her cheeks glowed with modest blushes; and in vain the moonlight showered its light on hillside and tumbling streams when Norris smiled.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE KISS IN THE SHADOW

NORRIS came to him very slowly, her smile succeeded by gravity so pronounced that it disturbed him.

“Norris!” he cried, clasping her hand. “We must go where I can talk to you—there is so much to be said—so much! But the people are coming and going along the trail—”

“I must hurry home before anybody finds me here,” she interrupted quickly. “It must never be known—what you have found out. I must go—please don’t try to prevent. And I must go alone. But oh, you will never know how I felt when you took the wrong passage in the cave!”

“Alone!” he repudiated the word with a laugh. “After all? No!”

“Yes. I am never afraid when I am alone. I know the hills and the hidden caves. And if you should leave with me, we might be seen—and even if we were not seen, you would be missed—Claude, Claude—when I found you didn’t hear my calls, and were going toward the pit . . . ”

"But I can't leave you until I tell you—and until you tell me—"

"Please don't ask me to tell you anything," she interposed, starting quickly toward the hill that must be traversed before she could reach her father's home. "Oh, I musn't be seen here—it would ruin everything. * * * And I couldn't tell which way you would go—so at last I played, hoping the music might reach you. Goodby—goodby."

"Well, dear, my going with you won't make you visible. And besides—"

She was greatly distressed. "They will know you followed the Little Fiddler and when you don't come back—"

"But they don't know that you are the Little Fiddler. Suppose I should go away from the Ozarks. Do you imagine I can leave without finding out the only thing that could give you happiness? No! Not until you tell me something—something more than I know already. You are the Little Fiddler, but you mustn't mind my knowing that, for I am just—*I!* You mustn't mind my knowing all about you; you mustn't shrink from me, we may so soon be parted . . . don't you care—*at all?*"

She looked at him, and her blushes deepened. "Oh, Mr. Walcott!" she exclaimed, putting her hands over her face.

He spoke gently—"Dear Norris, you are thinking

about how you looked, dressed as the Little Fiddler . . . and I had already forgotten! Do you think I remember how you looked dressed as a man, or that I care anything about these garments which certainly are not in the latest style, or of the prettiest color, or finest texture? My dear Norris, my love protects you and surrounds you with robes fit for any princess. If your sweet modesty would have hidden any detail of the picture you made with that violin against your cheek—believe me, my respect for you has hidden it already.”

She slipped her hand into his, and tried to smile.

“And now Norris, you shall tell me why you dressed as the Little Fiddler—”

“Don’t ask me.”

“—And why you play for these people at their dances—”

“I can’t tell you, oh, I can’t, indeed, Mr. Walcott.”

“—Because, Norris, it is so different from what I think of you, that I’m sure there’s some explanation; and you must tell me.”

“Please don’t ask—Claude! And oh, please, please let me go alone.”

“Very well—you shall have everything your own way, so long as you call me ‘Claude.’ And I am only going with you to yonder hill.”

“You have been ‘Claude’ to me since the day you freed me from the tree.”

“Norris, Norris! And don't you realize what it means for me to be just 'Claude' to you?”

“Yes!” The hill was now no longer distant, and she looked into his eyes bravely. “It means that you are my friend; a friend believes the best of one—he's not a juryman, listening to evidence. If you could help me, I'd call on you for help—and that's what it means for you to be 'just Claude' to me.”

He pressed her hand which did not seek to draw away; its very confiding gentleness was its best protection. He exclaimed abruptly, “And you let me imagine that the 'Little Fiddler' was your lover! You heard me say so, and didn't contradict. Oh, what a cruel, heartless little Norris—and how I hated that Little Fiddler! Who was it, dear, with you in the thicket that day?”

She smiled at the recollection—“Only little Jim.”

“Poor Jim—I could have murdered him! Listen to me, Norris, I shall never leave this wilderness without you.”

“But I cannot go with you, Claude.”

“This is no place for you,” he burst forth, desperately, seeing the hill only too near at hand, and wondering if he should persist in accompanying her. “But there *is* a place for you—I know of one—and you must make up your mind to be spirited away.”

She pressed his hand, and her dark eyes shone with happiness. “Thank you, Claude, you will never know what all this means to me.”

"You'll go, then? as soon as possible?"

She shook her head. "Never," she answered slowly, "never, never."

"Not even for somebody who loves you?"

"Claude, it is impossible."

"Doesn't love make all things possible?"

"Claude, the poorest creature you can imagine, has more than I."

"But *I* am not poor, dear."

"—And—and that's why I play the violin—for money; that's why I disguise myself to play at the dances—for money!"

"Norris, not even if you love me? For you do love me, I know. And loving each other means to go away together, don't you understand?—loving each other means living together, for ever and ever."

She did not speak. The scent of damp hollows under interlaced branches, the sharp tang of dwarf pines, the stinging fragrance of bursting walnut-rinds, the uplifting, permeating air of the Ozarks, the soft wide sky with its thousand subtle influences of the night, all made them feel and speak as in a strange world of truth and rarest purity.

"You do!" Claude said, laying his hand upon her shoulder as they halted at the foot of the last hill. "Norris, you do love me!"

She met his eyes bravely. "You must not think that, Claude. You must think of me as your friend. Because,

I can never be anything else. And since I can never be anything else, you must understand that you are not to imagine—that you are to go away, and be happy—and not deceive yourself with fancies—and—”

“Oh, Norris, Norris!” he exclaimed, smiling tenderly. “You don’t dare tell me you don’t love me! Look in my eyes. Who were you singing about when you sat beside the Silver Waterfall?”

She cried out in dismay, and searched his face.

“You are the little Green Witch who has bewitched my heart, Norris, as well as the Little Fiddler who has led me out of darkness by your music!”

“Then you saw me—you heard me?” she faltered.

“I saw you by chance, dear, but I wouldn’t stay to listen. You said you would sing a song about your love, and I thought you meant the Little Fiddler. But you meant me. Didn’t you mean me? *Didn’t* you, Norris?”

She looked up, blushing deeply, and a smile shone in her eyes.

“You meant me! You sang about me! You love me, Norris!”

“But if I do—Don’t you remember what you said, once?—that I am only a little girl—just a child!”

“You were a little girl when I carried you in my arms across the stream. But you are a woman when you love me. And do you think I’ll go away and leave the woman who loves me? Just a child, indeed!” He looked into her face with laughing tenderness. “I wish I could have

known you when you were just a child—oh, what great eyes you must have had, and what a beautiful, soft, trembling mouth—just as you have now. And your smile must have been something to see! Oh, Norris, how did it learn to be so sad?”

Norris exclaimed impulsively, her face glowing—“Mother used to say—” She stopped abruptly and the light vanished.

He asked tenderly, “What did your mother used to say?”

She tried desperately to finish the sentence with composure:—“Used to say that I was the—” Her courage failed her at last. “Oh, Claude, Claude!” She held out her hands blindly, as if groping for support.

“Norris! What is it?” he held her hands in a firm, reassuring clasp.

She cried again, now with a dry sob—“Claude!” Then she looked up, wild and pale, gasping—“Don’t you understand? * * * ‘The light of her eyes,’ mother said . . . mother—Oh, Claude, Claude!” She sobbed wildly.

“*Norris!*” he was mystified, but deeply touched.

“My mother—” She could not finish.

“Well, dear; your mother was—?”

“No,” she panted, clinging to him, “*is, Claude, is!*”

“Is—alive?”

“Yes, is alive, is alive!”

Their words came quick, short, hot, now in anger, now in despair—

“*Divorced?*”

“No.”

“*Deserted?*”

“Claude! Oh, Claude!”

“*Deserted?*”

“Yes!”

“Then—but—O Norris! And you can live with *him*.”

“Claude, he is my father.”

“And with that woman!” Perhaps the consciousness of how the Beautiful Lady had once stolen possession of his thoughts, gave to his tone its exceeding bitterness.

The moon had passed behind the hill, and all the upward sweep was in heavy shadow. He could no longer see the color in her face, or the deep lights in her eyes. Her form with his was merged into the general gloom of huge bowlders, jagged outcroppings of limestone and granite.

Suddenly up there, where the moonlight lingered, a figure appeared, its face startlingly illumined. It was Giles Gradley. He paused on the hilltop, looking into the sky. Though so far away, every line of his contour was sharply defined.

“Look,” Norris whispered—“all the shadows are below him—I wonder if he is seeking God. Claude, he is my father!”

“Yes—yet treats you as if you were his slave! Poor

Norris—darling Norris, I tell you, you *shall* go away with me.”

“I cannot leave him; sometimes *she* almost loses her power over him—I must be on the place—”

“Ah, yes—in a *barn!*” he muttered, groaning at the thought.

“Once, Claude, he came to that barn to hold me in his arms, weeping over me—suppose I hadn’t been there when he came! Once again he came to kiss me when he thought me asleep.”

Claude stared with hostile eyes at the motionless figure clear-cut against the sky.

“But Norris—your mother!”

“This is just as she would wish it, Claude. That is what has kept me strong for five years.”

“Norris!—strong? *You* strong, thin little bird!” He pressed her to his heart. “Dear fluttering bird—and will you stay here till you die, beating out your wings against these hideous bars?”

Norris rested her cheek against his shoulder. “Not till I die, I believe. She fights against me with her beauty, her winning ways, that smile and voice, yes,—and treachery! I have none of her weapons, but I am fighting for my father—that gives a strong arm. Claude, I’m steadily gaining. Every time she wins over me, she is obliged to do so by the evil there is in him; every time I win, it’s through his good.”

“Dear Norris”—he stroked the short hair which had

been sacrificed to the jealousy of the Beautiful Woman—"it isn't worth this pitiful sacrifice!"

"Worth it? But you don't know him. If you could have seen him in our home—mother's home; it was his delight when he discovered what we wanted to do or have—and in public meetings, how grand! He would throw back his great head, and cast that splendid voice, without the slightest effort, to the farthest corners of the auditorium—I was only a child, but the thrill comes back—if you could have seen the men leaping to their feet, shouting, even crying * * * But when he came home he was as affectionate and modest, as if only an ordinary man—"

She caught her breath. A woman was drawing near the statuesque figure of her father. When aware of her presence, the change in his position was startling. The heavy frown of anger was distinctly visible to both. He bent forward as if to strike her to the earth—her lips moved rapidly—Claude drew Norris closer, as if by the gesture he would insure protection. The form of Giles straightened. Anger changed to grief. He pointed upward.

"See!" whispered Norris, catching her breath, "he remembers God."

The woman turned away from Giles, as if definitely dismissed. But she had not gone far when she stopped suddenly.

In the meantime Giles shielded his face with his hands.

"Claude, Claude," Norris sobbed, "he is thinking of mother!"

Claude's lips found hers in their first kiss. Perhaps in no lover's kiss was there ever less of passion. When he looked up, he discovered the cause of Mrs. Gradley's halting near the trees—some one had suddenly appeared there, and Claude's first suspicion suggested that it was Rodney Bates; but a second glance corrected the impression.

The third figure on the hilltop, one which Giles had not observed, so absorbed was he with introspection, was that of a woman.

"Claude," Norris said, "I cannot go away; but I wish you could feel that I am right, and that my place is here."

"Dear little heroine, yes, your place is here."

"I couldn't desert him, could I, Claude?"

"You would not be Norris if you could; and my love will stay with you."

"It is the only way—" she nestled confidingly to his bosom—"the only possible hope for mother and for him. Will you ever feel hard with me, now, because I tell you I must stay—and must go on alone?"

"Norris! I will never feel but one way about you."

"I could be so happy with you, Claude, oh, so, so happy! But you see my life belongs to others. I love you, but to love doesn't mean to break other people's hearts."

"Do you ever see your mother? Doesn't she need you, Norris?"

"She needs me here. Do you think I love you less because I send you away?"

"Norris!"

"You know, Claude, love is greater than faith and hope. And why? Because love is the light that enables faith and hope to grow. I didn't mean to tell you anything, but you made me—it seems my very thoughts belong to you?—ah, look!—*she* is going back to him!"

Mrs. Gradley turned from the trees, and approached Giles.

At the same moment Claude got a brief look at the other woman's face. He whistled—"It's Lindy Prebby!" Then his voice grew troubled—

"Norris, that was Lindy Prebby talking to Mrs. Gradley—when I came out of the cave, she saw me—and I'm afraid she heard me call you 'Little Fiddler.'"

She started from his embrace. "Claude!" she exclaimed in terror.

"I'm afraid so. And I'm afraid she has told Mrs. Gradley. And now, possibly *she* is telling your father."

Norris wrung her hands. "If she has my secret—"

Claude exclaimed remorsefully—"See what trouble I have brought upon you!"

She answered briefly—"I must go to them at once. If she knows the truth, I might as well confess it, and be punished now; if she doesn't know, they can only be angry to find me here."

With a hurried entreaty to Claude to go back to the

merry-makers, that his presence with her might not make matters worse, she hurried up the trail toward the spot where her father and Mrs. Gradley were earnestly conversing. Half way up, she met Lindy Prebby coming down.

“Hello, Little Fiddler!” cried Lindy, maliciously, “where’s your fiddle?”

Norris went on her way without replying.

Lindy called after her—“And where’s your sweetheart?”

CHAPTER XXV

THE LITTLE FIDDLER'S VICTORY

AFTER her whispered conversation with Lindy Prebby, Mrs. Gradley moved from the trees, and went straight toward Giles, her manner timid, but her eyes shining strangely.

He seemed to have forgotten her; or rather—as she fancied—to be trying to banish her from his mind, to escape from her influence, to emancipate himself from all that had wrecked his former life.

She felt instinctively that the crisis in their relationship had come. The kiss which Rodney Bates had taken against her will, and which would have seemed nothing, had it not been observed by her husband, had changed Giles's attitude not only toward her but toward himself. She did not understand why, because she knew he must be convinced that she loved him wholly. Whatever the reason, Lindy had given her a new weapon against Norris, and she hastened to inflict the blow.

“Giles—”

He started, looked at her heavily, and muttered, “Shall we go home, now?”

“Giles, did you see me talking to Lindy? She has

just told me something that you must know—dear Giles, it will tear your heart . . . ”

Giles frowned, “In that case, it relates to Norris, I suppose?”

She came close, silently, letting the moonlight whiten her beautiful face and define the warm curves of her figure.

“Curse it!” he ground his teeth. “I never heard that there was discord in heaven because the angels were women! Well * * * And what has Norris done *now*? Has she tried to poison that mountain girl, too?”

“Giles, you are very cruel to me. She will never dare to look you in the face again—”

“Oh! Has she a conscience? Are you at last about to tell me something in my daughter’s favor?”

“I wish I could!” she cried out almost fiercely. Then clasping her hands—“Yes, as God is my witness, I’d speak kindly of the girl if I could.”

“Let us hope He is not witnessing, Kate! Go on—what has Norris done?”

She caught his arm and looked steadily into his eyes: “Giles, sometimes you speak as if you doubted that she put the poison in my food.” Her eyes grew hard, her mouth parted.

He met her look with a piercing, speculative gaze: “If she tried to kill you, it was because she loved me. If you invented the story to drive her away, it was because

you loved me. In either case—what a fortunate man!” He laughed ironically.

She turned very pale. “Why do you look so, and speak so, Giles? Remember our early love—am I not as beautiful as when you used to call me beautiful? I gave up all for you, not knowing what love meant; and now that I know, I am glad—You called me your ‘destiny.’ Do you never think of your Kate—the girl of your first kiss—as she was years ago?”

“Yes. And indeed you are more beautiful now than then. But yet—”

She cried out passionately, “Have mercy on me!”

“Yes—” He dropped his head.

Her hand was still upon his arm and now with sudden grip, she turned him to face the moonlight, as she asked in a low, concentrated voice—

“What were you about to say? ‘But yet,’ you began. Finish it, Giles.”

“I wish you could be that young Kate, that Kate of my first knowledge. That is what I was about to say. You see the folly of finishing.”

“Yes! But if I were that poor girl today, that colorless creature who didn’t know what it meant to live, if I could be *she*, I’d utter the wish—but it would be only that our love might be lived over, every hour of it lived over—is that what you meant?”

“God! No!” he muttered, trying to draw away.

A dangerous light flashed from her eyes as she still

bent over him, her fingers about his arm like steel bands. She whispered—"Then! is it all a regret?"

He resolutely put her from him. "I did you a cruel wrong. We can't be re-created, Kate, but if there were some power to change you back to the girl I first knew—"

"She was a fool! That girl has no pity from the woman. She cumbered the ground. I am alive—don't waste thought on her—"

"Hush, Kate, that girl was innocent! Don't scorn your better self, the sweet, heavenly part of you that we buried that night—let it, at least, remain in blessed memory. You and I, Kate, live our lives to suit our desires; but it is not without the marring of other hearts."

"You are thinking of the child Norris. I know what you mean! Giles,—you looked on, at the dance—did you notice the Little Fiddler?"

"I wonder that you care to revive the memory, Kate."

"Why shouldn't I? There was nothing for me to be ashamed of."

"Ashamed!" He laughed, then added, "Well, no, I did not so much as glance toward the musician. What a pity! But you and Bates were absent, and I seemed to be interested elsewhere."

By a great effort she controlled herself. "You know very well, Giles, that Mr. Bates had no encouragement from me; and that when he insulted me, I left him in the grove, never to speak to him again. * * * If you had looked at the Little Fiddler closely you would have

recognized your own daughter who loves you so devotedly! Dressed *as a man*, yes, there she was, masquerading *for hire!*"

Giles looked at her for a moment in silence, then spoke with quiet irony. "So that explains the mystery of the Little Fiddler! How simple! Of course—she tried to poison you, now she is resolved to disgrace me. These two fables keep each other in countenance; I'm glad you've learned the second one, for the first always seemed sadly lonesome." Then his voice trembled with sudden passion: "Kate, do you imagine another falsehood will drive Norris from my home, or from my heart?"

"But it is all true. Norris *is* the Little Fiddler. Ask *her*; let her be the only witness. Ask her if she hasn't a nook in the big cave above Cave Spring, where she changes her clothes for the dances. Why, Peter Poff knows it. Bud knows it. Jim, the boy whose arm you set, the boy you let stay on our place because he was in trouble—he knows it. Everybody knows it but you! Lindy Prebby laughed about it. Claude Walcott not only knows it, but goes to the cave with her, and stays in there with her. Whenever there's to be a dance, the Poffs hitch up and pretend to drive to Mizarkana to meet the Joplin train. It's all a farce. The Little Fiddler comes from no farther place than your own barn! You think Norris can't lie—ask her, and hear her deny it! But her blushes, her stammering words will betray her. Watch how she'll

change color. Why, this Norris of yours is no better than—There she comes, now. Ask her if—”

Norris was seen, drawing near the summit of the hill, her face turned toward them.

“I’ll call her,” muttered Gradley, his face purple as from suffocation.

“Yes, call her. You think I’ve invented this story. Well, ask *her* if she didn’t show Claude Walcott to the mouth of the cave with her torch and if he didn’t call her his ‘dear Little Fiddler.’ Ask her—”

Gradley turned upon her a look so deadly in its anger that the words died upon her crimson lips. “I will know what to ask.”

Norris slowly walked toward them, her hands hanging at her side.

“Come!” he called.

Her step was steady. There was neither look nor quiver of form to indicate consciousness of the other woman’s presence. She lifted her face that her father might gaze steadfastly into her eyes. Mrs. Gradley watched them, her hands clenching and unclenching, her eyes darkening from fear to hate.

It was Norris who broke the painful silence—a silence absolute but for the whispering night breezes, the murmur of a stream, and the faint sound of laughter floating up from the ledge before Cave Spring.

“Father, here I am.”

“I wonder,” said Gradley, “if you can imagine why

I have called you, and why something has quite driven from my mind such trivial matters as surprise at your being here when you should be at home?"

The purity of her eyes and the fearlessness of their gaze caused his heart to throb; nevertheless, Mrs. Gradley's positive manner had not been without its effect.

Seeing him wait, as if for reply, Norris said, "I think I know."

"What!" he burst forth. "You think you know? *You* have heard these foolish rumors circulated about you and that fiddler?"

Norris looked at him beseechingly.

His voice was harsh, "You do not answer!"

Norris answered, timidly, "I am the Little Fiddler."

Mrs. Gradley laughed out, somewhat shrilly.

He turned upon her—"At least, madam, she tells the truth."

"Oh, but how could she deny it? Everybody knows!"

"Norris, is it a fact that Claude Walcott knows this thing?"

"Yes, he knows it."

"Yet I told you never to speak to him again, did I not? And so *he* knows it—everybody but your father knows it!

* * * My God—this is a judgment sent upon me!"

Mrs. Gradley's voice was hard, almost a sneer:

"What did you expect of her, Giles?"

The thrust roused Giles to fury. He turned upon Norris as if to strike her down. "You shall tell me why

you have brought this upon me—" he snatched her by the arm, and almost brought her to her knees. "Quick—why—why—why? Speak your own shame. Put it into words. Let *her* fatten upon your disgrace. Why, that is what keeps her soul alive, seeing you degraded. How conveniently you have played into her hands! Now tell her. Let her enjoy herself to the full—why have you dressed as a man to play for these dances—you in your cave, with your torch and your lover?"

"Father, don't ask me to tell," Norris supplicated, deathly pale.

"Not ask you to tell? You shall not only tell at once, but you shall confess to *her* all your crimes. Here—face her, look her in the eyes—now, tell it all, tell everything or, although I am your father, and God knows vile enough—I'll—I'll add some new crime to my long list."

He was in such a frenzy of ungovernable passion, that, as he sought to drag her up to Mrs. Gradley, he threw her to the ground.

"Get up!" He drew her roughly to her feet. "You don't want to tell me—very good!—tell *her*. She will know what you mean. She is able to understand. Glut her revenge to the full—here—speak out the truth, at her feet!" And again his violent hand pushed her to the ground.

As he released her arm, Norris struggled upright, and faced Mrs. Gradley, disheveled, panting, staggering. "I must tell you, since it is my father's command."

“And mine, too,” said the woman who was suddenly without beauty.

“But oh, father,” cried Norris, looking around, “I would never speak these words if—”

“Don’t look at me, Norris, address her. Quick! For if you delay until the merry-makers have left their supper you shall still tell it all, even if before them.”

Norris turned to Mrs. Gradley and spoke in an even voice: “To explain everything, as my father commands, I must go back to the day before the time of the election that would have sent him to Congress. Father came home that day, and told mother that he didn’t care for her any longer, because he had fallen in love with you—that he hadn’t known what love meant, before. So mother told him if he felt so, he must not stay; and he went away with you. He left us—mother and me—the house and all his property, he said; but when everything was sold to pay the debts there was nothing. Whenever father was from home—it was pretty often during the electioneering—I would sleep with mother. The night of the day he went away, it was very late—I was sound asleep; when I woke up—it was very sudden * * * Mother had gone mad.”

“Why do you tell us these things?” cried out Mrs. Gradley. “We want to know about that cave and why you dress as a man to disgrace—”

“Tell everything, Norris,” interposed Giles, “you are doing very well.”

“Mother hadn’t said much, that evening—just cried over me—I was thirteen. And suddenly, there, in the bed, we together—it was like a storm that comes and blows out the light. . . . Mother seemed lost, groping in such darkness—she didn’t even know me. She didn’t know anything.”

“Which was merciful,” muttered Giles, his face dark.

“She was sent to the asylum and they said there was no hope for her unless she could see somebody she was always trying to remember. She would sit by the hour saying over and over, ‘But why can’t I see his face? Why can’t I see his face? I would be all right, if I could see his face!’ So I knew that if father would only go back, and if she could see him, it would be all right. I wrote and asked if I might come to live here, and he let me come. He didn’t want me, but he let me come. There was *no* other place for me. And so I came and I said to myself that I would win back father’s love, and persuade him to visit mother. I thought maybe, you would leave father some day, as you had led him to leave mother, and then he would listen to me.”

“Go on, Norris,” muttered Giles, “tell her—she wants to hear it all.”

“But I found out that mother wasn’t taken care of as she should be, in that asylum; paupers were crowded together in miserable rooms, and they were scolded and even struck; and there was a state investigation even then going on about what had been done to a poor imbecile—

but nobody could find out anything except that the imbecile was dead. And when I thought of my own mother, so refined and tender, at the mercy of coarse men, I couldn't bear it. Peter and Bud Poff I could trust, so I wrote a letter through them, to mother's old minister—"

Mrs. Gradley interposed excitedly—"You wrote to ask about that woman, while living with *us*? Giles, it was an insult!"

"He answered that the condition of the asylum was very bad. Then I wrote to ask if he could take mother away and have her kept in a decent place, if I paid the board, and he answered that he knew of a good woman who needed the money and would be glad to take care of mother. And wouldn't I have worked my fingers to the bone to earn that money? But the only way I could think of was playing the violin. That's why I could disguise myself and determine not to think of myself, but of my mother. And when I stood there, tonight, dressed, as you say, like a man, I knew that every time I moved the bow, I was weaving a protection about my dear mother. Don't you think that was enough to make the music sweet?"

"I won't hear any more," Kate interposed violently. "Turn away your yellow ugly face. Quit looking at me—turn away, I say. And never speak to me of this as long as you live."

"What!" exclaimed Giles. "Wasn't it your wish that she tell all? Let her go on."

She wheeled upon him: "You want to humiliate me—inſult me, before this would-be murderer. She has bewitched you, but I have *my* senses. What! If her mother's mind is gone, isn't it better for all concerned? She knows nothing. Ah, Giles, I can see you are wearying of me already. Send away the girl—why rake among the ashes of the past for ugly skeletons? Send her away!"

He stared at her face, so near his own, with doubting eyes. Her hot breath was upon his cheek.

"Giles, do you know you are killing me? Well, you are armed—your pistol is always in that pocket—finish the work; kill me! And then let the girl go back to the mad woman; and go yourself, if you dare. Bring her back to reason—how happy she'll be! She doesn't suffer now—drag her back into real life. Tell her you loved Kate five years with all the passion of your being—five glorious, full years, half-delirious with joy—then tell her that your love for Kate burnt out, and you've come back, a man that thinks he knows his mind at last. How grateful she will be! * * * Giles, should you desert *me* for five years, then come back because you had suddenly taken pity on my madness—do you know what I would do? I'd kill you!"

Norris stood motionless, arms at her side, face uplifted, waiting. No one could have looked upon that serenity of innocence with suspicion. Kate, indeed, had never doubted; but she no longer looked, save in covert, shrinking glances.

"Kate—let her finish!" Giles spoke roughly. "Let her finish! If she has done wrong, I'll punish her; didn't I punish her when she tried to poison you? But if she's blameless about playing the violin, why blame her? You, Kate, are the last woman in the world to want her punished when she's innocent!" He looked at her under gloomy brows, his mouth closing in rigid lines.

Kate Gradley forgot the presence of Norris in a burst of despair—"You've turned against me, against me! Giles, I've lost you—after all I've given you, after all I've given up for your sake—I've lost you!"

His face was unyielding. "If the truth has lost you anything—the truth which you insisted should be spoken here—"

"The truth! And what is this truth—any truth to us, except our love? My God, Giles, there was a time when all truth in heaven and earth was a lie to us, because we loved each other."

"Continue, Norris."

"But that is all, father. I couldn't have gone to play at the dances without a disguise, because everybody in the neighborhood despises me—except two or three—they are even afraid, because they believe I tried to poison . . . so they hate me, and do all they can to make me unhappy. I haven't minded much. When the winter nights are cold, I lie awake in the barn—the walls seem almost as thin as paper when it is *very* cold!—and I think how mother is well-cared for and warmed, with that

good woman—no longer huddled with all those paupers as if there were no one in the world to love her. Then I think—‘*These* hands keep her warm,’ and it doesn’t matter if they are a little cold, themselves. When I am called ‘Servant’ and banished from the light, and from you, father, it keeps me brave to know *why* I serve. I am always thinking maybe you will go back some day—go back, at last, and let her see you so she will know us both. Sometimes when I am playing, standing there before all those men and women, the music seems making itself—it isn’t anything I ever heard, and I wonder where it came from—heaven, maybe.”

Giles groaned and covered his face.

A horror settled grayly upon Kate’s features. She saw herself forever deposed. But a sudden flash darted athwart this despair—“Well, Norris, you are posing finely! But since your father demands that you tell everything, don’t stop there. Don’t leave out Claude Walcott, let’s have something about *him*—let’s have everything!”

Gradley dropped his hands from before his quivering face, and looked at Norris wildly. “Yes,” he gasped, “do you hesitate? Oh, Norris, my child, do you shrink from telling *all*?”

“No, father, since you ask it. When he freed me from the crowd that was driving me over the felled trees, he thought me guilty of trying to poison you—” She looked at Mrs. Gradley; she never called her by name. “Then

he freed me from a tree to which they had bound me, and somehow, I don't know why, he believed in me. But I didn't tell him a word, not a word. I didn't deny the poison, I didn't tell him about mother, or anything—yet he believed in me! Wasn't it wonderful! Tonight, he was lost in the cave—trying to find the 'Little Fiddler,' and, oh, he might have perished—it is certain he could never alone have found his way out. I was obliged to hunt for him, to show him my light, to lead him to the opening. I couldn't prevent his knowing about the 'Little Fiddler,' since he'd found me there alone, but I explained that I did it because I wanted the money. Father, he wouldn't think it was just because I wanted money, that I'd do that! He *couldn't* think ill of me—I didn't tell him differently, then, but no matter, he *knew* there was some other reason, because—he loves me!"

Norris's face was crimson, her eyes alight, her lips trembling as with the memory of a smile.

Kate Gradley left her former position, and passed behind Giles, as if meaning to leave them alone, and he did not turn to look at her. Instead, he had eyes only for his daughter.

"Well?" he asked, breathlessly.

"He *couldn't* believe I'd go about the country like—that—just for wages; we kept on talking, but I kept my secret, and told him he must go away, and he said, then he would take me with him. But you know I couldn't leave you, father, and at last, without meaning

to, I mentioned mother, and as soon as I heard the word on my lips I saw her sitting yonder in her room waiting—waiting for *you*. And my heart just broke and—and—and then he knew all about it. And he asked if you are worth the sacrifice of my staying here, and I told him, you are worth the giving of my life; and he said, 'Well.' And he told me that his love for me was such that he could go away and leave me here to do my duty. So we said goodbye forever, and as soon as he can, he is to leave the Ozarks."

"Norris," Gradley said, brokenly, "do you love that man?"

Norris looked into his eyes—"Oh, *yes!*"

Giles looked over his shoulder—"Kate, what do you think of the sort of love that can go away forever because it is worthy? Don't you think that these two stand upon higher ground than our feet have ever trod?"

Then he held out his arms, calling with infinite tenderness, "Norris."

Norris sprang forward and nestled against his bosom.

She had won. Into the eyes of the Beautiful Woman glared the ferocity of an intellect which fury has crowded beyond the border-line of reason. She uttered a piercing shriek as she leaped upon Giles, whose arms were about his daughter.

"I love you," she panted, "that's why I kill you

. . ."

Her hand tore at an empty pocket.

Gradley gently put Norris from him saying with a return of his mocking cynicism, "Too bad it wasn't there, Kate! I rather wish, myself, that you could have made an end of me—but I'm afraid you'd have finished both of us."

She leaped away, looking wildly about her, like a hunted animal.

"The fact is, Kate, I had the pistol down yonder below Cave Spring; I was about to put a bullet into your friend Bates when I saw him kiss you, but Walcott persuaded me that you weren't worth it. I threw the pistol on the ground, and if Bates didn't get it, perhaps it's there now."

Without a word, she rushed along the hilltop, and then continued, stumblingly, down the slope toward the plateau.

Giles followed to the brow of the hill, then stood watching the retreating figure, as it swayed along the red trail. In the soft dusk, the exquisitely curved outlines of her form were easily discernible. When the path twisted, he had her in profile—the tiny ear, the sensitive nostril, the full, crimson lips, the rounded cheek—she had never looked more beautiful. He stood there in the moonlight watching with his inscrutable eyes until she had almost gained the plateau.

Then he looked at Norris. Not for the Beautiful Lady was the bitter cry wrung from his heart. At that moment the burden of his sin which he had crowded from

consciousness for so long a time, fell with its accumulated weight upon his heart. His cleared vision looked back upon the past as upon five phantom years that might have been filled with happiness for his daughter, love and peace for his wife, and the fruits of ambition for himself. Norris seeing him about to fall, rushed forward with outstretched arms, forgetful of all she had suffered. Before she could reach the spot, he was prone upon the ground, shaken by terrible sobs.

Norris knelt beside him, but waited—always waited—waited with that patience which partakes of the divine. She knew that there is a bridge which every one must cross before he can pass from the shadows of evil into the light—a bridge arched by repentance through mists of tears.

CHAPTER XXVI

MYSTERY OF CAVE SPRING

CLAUDE had obeyed Norris's wish that he join the merry makers on the ledge in front of Cave Spring. He did not remain long, however, for he had been too deeply moved by the relation of her life-story, to feel any disposition toward merriment; he was, in fact, too much engrossed by what he had heard, to observe the changed attitude toward him, on the part of the mountaineers. Lindy Prebby had spread the news that the Little Fiddler was Norris Gradley, and she had not failed to connect with that unpopular girl, the name of this stranger, this interloper, this "Boston."

It might have been supposed, when he strolled away, that he felt the wave of antipathy, and was thereby banished, but, in truth, he sought the loneliness of the straggling woods that he might decide definitely about leaving the Ozarks.

He had been alone about half-an-hour when footsteps advised him of the impatient approach of Rodney Bates. They looked at each other in silence for a brief moment, then Rodney asked abruptly,

"Do you know which way she went?"



NORRIS SPRANG FORWARD AND NESTLED AGAINST HIS BOSOM. SHE HAD WON.— *Page 241.*

"Do you mean the woman you kissed down there on the hillside?"

"It doesn't matter *where* I kissed her, does it?"

"No—except that her husband saw you."

"Very good. Then he'll be prepared. I'm going, Claude."

"Where are you going?"

"God knows—wherever she is!"

"Wait. My dear friend, have you forgotten your plans, your work, your friends—"

"All that—Lord! If you could know how unimportant they seem."

"But stop, just a moment—is friendship so unimportant, then?"

"I guess I'm crazy—when a fellow lets himself loose, he doesn't feel any lines pulling at the bit. I've got to find her, and right now. I'm going to bring this thing to a finish. She seemed very angry with me, but I've been thinking it over—I don't believe she minded. I can't think she cares for that brute of a Gradley. Friendship? It just doesn't count, when friends have to go different ways."

Claude fastened steady gray eyes upon the flushed face—"We must not go different ways, Rod. You are going from this place with me!"

"Oh, no, don't believe it! Look here—I'm Rodney Bates. You are Claude Walcott. Don't let's pretend to be each other. You hold to the old ideas of morality,

the old ideas of man and woman and marriage—all your thoughts and feelings are the old ones. Claude, you're living in a dead age. But I've not tied my arms and legs with decayed principles, pretending I can't break free. You still believe in the devil which is a satisfaction when you are blessed with enemies to consign to him. But I believe that when we die we are all going to—Molecules. Have you seen the Beautiful Woman, lately?"

"I don't understand you, Rod. I know you were my friend, not long ago, and I am your friend, now. I beg you not to go up that hill—"

"Oh, then she is up that hill, eh? And thank you kindly!" Rodney smiled at Claude in uncertain fashion, but his eyes were fierce and intent, even while his mouth relaxed. He did not hesitate a moment, but darted toward the steep trail and began its difficult ascent.

Claude, filled with vague forebodings, called after him in a voice of entreaty, but, not being heeded, resolved to follow; for it seemed to him that if there should be a meeting of Bates and Gradley that night, the result must be most tragic.

Bates had not much the start of him, but he seemed inspired by a sort of frenzy that gave him prodigious strength and activity. He disappeared over the brow of the plateau before Claude could reach the summit.

When the young man stood upon level ground, he stopped suddenly, his face pale, his muscles tense with surprise and dread. All the plateau was immersed in

the heavy shadow of the distant ascent which rose from out the semi-gloom like a hill starting up from the summit of a range. On that remote elevation the moonlight, lingering in all its glory, revealed one slight black figure. Giles Gradley was looking down upon the plateau, even as Claude, at the other extremity of it, was looking—they were the two witnesses, so far apart, of the scene now being enacted.

A darkened figure was running from the foot of the ascent toward Claude; another figure less obscured because nearer the light that still bathed Cave Spring, was moving with his face toward the ever watchful Gradley. These two figures were presently to meet in the plateau; they were Mrs. Gradley who had fled from her husband, and Rodney Bates who had already escaped his friend.

Mrs. Gradley was running, urged by the fury of despair, ready to commit any deed in the madness of that hour that might strike upon the heart of Giles. Her one definite thought was to find the pistol and kill him; but when she suddenly discovered and recognized Rodney Bates, a new thought struck her. She paused in her swift course, and looked back. Having assured herself that Giles was watching, she opened her arms and rushed forward, crying, loudly,

“Rodney, Rodney! I am coming to you!”

Bates sped to meet her, his voice quivering with excited passion—“Kate!” He, also, knew that Giles Gradley was watching; and as he came almost within reach

of the on-rushing figure, he shouted, as in mad defiance, "Beautiful Woman! You are mine!"

In another moment they would have been in each other's arms. Both Gradley and Claude Walcott expected to witness the fierce embrace. Even when they did not see what they had expected, they could not, for the moment, understand.

The reality was too astounding, its explanation too terrible, to be instantaneously grasped. There stood Bates with arms extended, motionless, petrified.

Kate Gradley had disappeared. She had vanished as swiftly, as completely, as if the earth had opened to engulf her.

And that is what had happened. In what past age the earth had opened, no one might know; but certainly it had received the Beautiful Woman in its dark and terrible depths. Suddenly the three men, as if touched by a common impulse, moved at the same time. Bates fell upon his knees to stare into the opening, to shout, to stretch down impotent hands. Gradley came rushing down to the plateau, while Claude hurried forward, thinking of the frightful history of Mad Man's Pit. There the three men met, as if they were neither enemies nor friends.

Bates glared at them, his eyes red, horrified—"What can be done?"

"Nothing," Gradley answered.

"But we must try," Bates exclaimed, starting to precipitate himself into the narrow space.

It was a curious thing that Claude should seize him by one arm, Gradley by the other.

"It's death," Gradley muttered, as if to explain his gesture.

"And madness!" Claude added.

Bates hesitated. He felt the chill air sweeping through his hair as if to draw him down—down into the unexpected world of death and madness.

"There's one chance!" Claude exclaimed, the next instant. "Quick—hurry to Cave Springs! They say this pit goes down into it, or at least finds an exit there."

Gradley asked, as he shook his head, "Have you forgotten the stone these people rolled against the only possible exit?"

Bates leaped to his feet—"We'll roll it away!"

"Quick!" cried Claude, who was already at the brow of the hill.

Gradley and Bates ran after him.

They came down the hillside with such celerity that they seemed falling.

At sight of their white faces, their burning eyes, a cry arose from the ledge in front of the natural stone chamber.

"Men!" shouted Bates—"the stone! Help us roll away the stone!"

Within the cavern, the confusion was great. Supper

was almost over, and the table of a single block of stone was strewn with all sorts of provisions. Men and women were standing about it, eating, laughing, shouting to those who occasionally went outside to warm themselves. Some were jesting about the Little Fiddler, others were building fantastic air-castles from the rumor that oil had been found on Gradley's land.

It was difficult for so many to realize, at once, what had happened. The sight of Gradley terrified them with the thought that having penetrated the mystery of the Little Fiddler he was bent upon her punishment. When the truth was grasped, the women fled from the chamber with screams, with hysterical sobs.

There was a rush toward the enormous stone which stood in the crystal water at the widest corner of the gap in the solid wall. Gradley and Bates and Claude worked together. Peter and Bud added their strength, and all others who could find a place to rest their hands, assisted. The difficulty was, that only a few could direct their strength to any advantage. Many had rolled the stone into place; but only four or five could find a position even partially practicable for their purpose. The splashing of their feet in the water, the shout of command now from Gradley, now from Bates—"Altogether!" then the vain struggle—this, in rapid succession, took place again and again.

Suddenly Stodge Blurbett who, not finding room at the stone, was merely looking on, called out, "Look there!"

pointing at the crevice in the wall perhaps twenty feet from the barricading stone. The workers stopped suddenly to look but saw only the sheet of water issuing from the black interior.

"What was it?" Bates demanded feverishly. "What was it, man?"

"Wait," said Blurbett, his face ashen. "Watch—*now!*"

Then in the moonlight, which flooded the place, they saw something white slip through the crevice and move slowly back and forth in the water, with a weak, hesitating, indefinite turn and twist, with a tremulousness as if in this white thing, which was a woman's arm, there was no reaching out for safety, no feminine appeal, nothing but purposeless motion.

"My God!" groaned Bates, "it is Mrs. Gradley!"

The arm disappeared, and the men stood as if rooted to the spot.

Bates was rushing toward the stone with the fury of a man bereft of his senses, when the cry again came—"Watch! * * * *Now!*"

Again that white arm with its sickening impression of helplessness divorced from reason, floated under the relentless wall, and wavered here and there in the icy stream. Then a voice came to them, a voice laughing foolishly, low, broken, without consciousness. Then they heard her say in the slender-throated tones of a child, without in-

tonation, apparently without meaning—"Giles . . . Giles . . . Giles—"

The arm floated back into darkness. It did not reappear, and the voice was heard no more.

When, by means of a rope, and Gradley's powerful horse, and the assistance of all who could find a footing about the stone, it was removed, several ventured through the crevices to look for the body—among them the three who had last seen the Beautiful Woman. Crawling on hands and knees in the water—for the space beyond the wall was only a few feet from floor to roof—they crept here and there, holding a torch in one hand, dragging themselves along by the other, till cramped and stiffened with the cold.

They found, at the farther margin of the watery expanse, a narrow space through which a human body might have slipped after falling through the pit; but it would have been impossible to ascend by its slippery and almost perpendicular walls. They found, also, at another corner of this low-compressed space—in which it seemed impossible to take a deep breath—a place where the water whirled about in an eddy, of unknown depth. Doubtless down there, at the bottom of that ceaseless pool whose water had never known the light of day, the body of the Beautiful Woman was slowly turning round and round.

CHAPTER XXVII

GIVEN IN TRUST

MIDNIGHT found Claude and Rodney Bates sitting before their campfire. The sting of autumnal frost was in the air and occasionally the younger man rose and threw brushwood upon the flames, but the other never moved. With elbows upon his knees, and chin buried in his hands, the expert driller stared into the night. The glare of the fire whitened one side of his body, one side of his face, and touched one arm and leg as with silver braid; the rest of him was in shadow. Sometimes his form gave a slight shudder, sometimes a spasmodic start, but he uttered no word.

Claude had brought a book from the tent, his book of poems which long, long ago—it seemed to him—he had read aloud to the accompaniment of bird-songs. He tried to read it, now, but he seemed staring at the words through a great horror. There were lines about a woman's loveliness, and the description of her eyes and lips, her little feet, her voluptuous form made him feel that he was breathing the miasmatic perfume of some splendid but poisonous tropical flower. The poet seemed obsessed with the magic of feminine charms, and every glowing adjective brought back the Beautiful Woman.

It was in order to forget the Beautiful Woman that he had turned to the book. He threw it down, and a sudden white streamer curling from the rosy heart of glowing embers reminded him of that wavering arm, so dreadfully, yet exquisitely, lovely—floating an instant out of darkness and madness.

He turned desperately toward his friend, and called his name.

The other sat as motionless as the leg that supported him.

“Bates!” repeated Claude, loudly. “Rodney!”

Then, without movement, the other said dully, “Leave me alone.”

“Rodney—” Claude stood up and spoke with swift resolution. “You must go away from here, tomorrow. You must go back to town—back to civilization—anywhere! If you stay here—”

Bates was not listening.

Claude strode to him, and shook his shoulder.

“Claude,” muttered the other, not looking up, “what do you want? Can’t you leave me alone?”

“I say, you must leave the Ozarks in the morning. I’ll have Peter drive over for you. You’ll go to Kansas City and wait for me. I’ll come as soon as I have settled everything here.”

“Go?” echoed Bates, uncomprehendingly. “I? Wait for you?”

“Yes—you mustn’t stay down here a day longer.”

Suddenly Bates gave a convulsive shiver. Reaching up he grasped Claude's arm with both hands, and stared at him with red eyes. "I can't go away," he said in a half-whisper. "My God! I can't go away from—from—*it*."

Claude gazed down upon the agonized face dumb with nameless foreboding.

Bates, still clinging to his arm, repeated, "You understand? I can't go away, *it—it* holds me here."

The next moment he started up wildly, crying in a suffocating voice, "Listen—it's in the wind—it's coming!"

The sound of feet approaching over the rustling leaves that carpeted the stones, was heard by both. Bates seemed prompted to flee away in the darkness, but Claude, fearful for his reason, clutched his arm.

Out of the gloom of the forest into the light of the campfire emerged the slight form and massive head of Giles Gradley. For a moment no one spoke. Then the newcomer, in whose flexible voice there was something searchingly appealing, said, "May I sit by your fire?"

Bates sank down upon the log as he had been before, and became a brooding statue. Claude made a place for Gradley, marvelling at the change in him.

Since coming to the Ozarks, Claude had witnessed at least two miracles—for he had seen both Gradley and Bates become different men. It was as hard to bring back his first impression of the saloon-keeper, as it was to revive his old memory of Bates's boisterous cheerfulness. Cer-

tainly Bates had steadily deteriorated in moral fibre, and Gradley had as surely regained some of the finer qualities which his life with Kate had obscured. Looking at them now, noting Bates's sullen, downcast face, his shifting red eyes, his inert helplessness, then turning to confront Gradley's steadfast gaze and erect form, Claude was convinced that the ascendancy of Kate's influence in his friend's life, and her lessened hold on him who had been his enemy, accounted for all.

Gradley's eye was caught by the open page of the book lying on the ground, and after a period of perfect silence, he read aloud with something of his old cynical smile—

“As beautiful as an angel's heaven,
As lovely as a thought of thee—”

He turned to Claude: “I should say, ‘as beautiful as hell.’ You'll agree with me, for I've known what it is to love a woman solely for her beauty, and you know what it is to love a woman who is plain.”

“I never thought Norris plain,” said Claude, simply. “Have you ever seen her face lighted up from within? A sort of radiance from her innocent heart makes everything so wonderful—eyes and lips and all.”

There was another long silence. It struck Claude as a most singular thing that these three men, of all the world, should be sitting so quietly about one fire, as if they had always been comrades. Presently Gradley spoke above the continuous murmur of the wind in the leaves—

"And she loves you, Claude."

"Yes," Claude answered, steadily, "she loves me."

Gradley resumed, evidently speaking with great effort: "Norris has told me everything. That girl has the ideas and purposes of a mere child. She asks nothing but to sacrifice her life on my account—she insists on going with me—living with me—trying to lead me back into old paths. But you, who are experienced in the world, must know very well that when a man throws away his better self he never finds it again. The part of me that was worth while is lost forever. Imagine a man like *me* going back into the world and trying to climb up where I was before my fall. My life on the Ozark Plateau with the woman who was not my wife—"

Rodney Bates leaped to his feet, stared a moment in a dazed way at Gradley, as if wondering how he had come there, then plunged blindly into the woods.

Gradley waited until his footsteps were drowned by the mellow ripple of Possum Creek at the foot of the hill, then continued as if there had been no interruption:

"And as for my wife—she is better as she is, though Norris can't understand this. Suppose, as Norris believes, I *could* bring her back to reason by going there—showing her my face—speaking her name. Could reason give her anything but misery? She would spurn me, and rightly; I couldn't protest against her righteous anger, I am too unworthy. No, no, no, the old life is not to be worn again; why, Claude, it's worn out, I tell you! Obscurity

for me, that's all—forgetfulness for my very own sake and most of all for Norris. I know you love her, Claude, as she loves you.”

“But she is sending me away, Mr. Gradley;” Claude did not think it worth while to answer for his love. “What must I do? She made it so plain that I was a hindrance to her that I was obliged to consent to leave.”

Gradley stood up with his old energy. “This is what you are to do: When I vanish from the earth, as I shall do this very night, she will be left behind. You see? Go to her in the morning. I have come to you from a long blessed talk with my darling. I've told her what I've told you, that I can't take up my old life, I won't ruin her young life. And I've told her that I trust you and am leaving her in your care.”

“I accept the trust.”

“That is what I am here to find out. It must be without hesitation, and without a sense of wounded pride. You must remember that her father is a villain who broke her mother's heart and destroyed her reason. You must remember that I shall always be a disgrace to my family, a blot on my daughter's name. It is no light thing to marry a girl of whose parentage you must always be ashamed, and I tell you frankly, that in spite of my degradation, there was never a time when *I* would have married a woman whom I could not have presented to society! Perhaps you are stronger than I.”

“I have accepted the trust.”

“Not yet. I want you to understand to the full what you are about to do. Let everything be bared between us. Norris tells me you found out that she was what the natives called the ‘Green Witch.’ Of course, I knew nothing of the matter except the rumors, which I treated with contempt. I no more believed there was anybody wandering about the hills at night in green leaves than I believed in witches. Do you understand why Norris did that?”

“I think I do.”

“Still, let me put it in words. It was because Kate let her see no beauty in her life, made her dress so she would look as ugly as possible—”

“Oh, but that was never possible!”

—“Gave her nothing but the meanest clothes, and cut off her beautiful hair and kept it short for the same reason. And poor Norris, loving what is beautiful and clean and pure and sweet, and not finding it at home, sometimes dressed up in that fantastic fashion to hide her rags and squalor—one might have fancied her a wild creature gone quite mad, if one had not known that her father was a monster and her home a prison! As the Green Witch, she stole from midnight hours a little of the beauty of life, and as the Little Fiddler, she toiled for her mother’s sake. I have allowed Norris to live under hideous suspicions which I myself shared so that she was compelled to work like a slave, and sleep in my barn. Also, you must remember that I was the saloon-

keeper with heart of stone who did his best to send little Jim, and others like him, to the devil."

"Mr. Gradley, I have thought over all this many times. I have weighed the attitude of my acquaintances and my friends, and the probability of any damage to my career from the connection. These are heavy burdens and I shall not pretend to underestimate them. But there is something that has more weight with me than all else. You must know what I mean. Did you ever see a tear in Norris's eye?"

Gradley stretched out his arm impulsively, saying in a broken voice. "She has seen tears in mine this day."

"Where will you go?"

"Ah, no one is to know that. And no one need know. To your guardianship I trust the only valuable thing left in my life—Norris, in all the fresh dewy sweetness of her soul. God knows how hard it is to acknowledge the truth, but I tell you heart to heart, that you are more fit to be her guardian than is her own father. Goodby. In the morning you will go to the cabin and tell Norris that you have come for her. And now this ghost vanishes—"

And without finishing the sentence, Gradley walked rapidly away into the darkness. He had been gone more than an hour when Rodney Bates slowly dragged his feet up the hill, and sank in his former apathetic posture before the campfire. When Claude went to bed, he was unable to rouse him from his stupor, and it was not until the

fire had died down and the cool breath of approaching day chilled him, that the bent figure stumbled to the tent to throw itself upon the cot.

The sun rose without a cloud, and Claude, finding Bates heavily sleeping, slipped away without waking him.

"That's for good luck!" Claude said to himself, looking at the unclouded sky. He hastened through the forest. Never so soon had he reached the foot of the hill that sloped upward to the abandoned mine.

Here he forcibly restrained himself. "She mustn't be bothered until she's had breakfast," he reflected; he had forgotten his own. His heart stood at the cabin door while his feet were still at the base of the declivity. Had he come too soon? Would she think him too indiscreet, in too big a hurry to assert his guardianship?

Finally he climbed the rough hillside and traversed the field of pebbles and jagged boulders. In the shadows cast by the pyramids of debris from the mine, the dew was not yet dried from the few coarse tufts of Bermuda grass.

He entered the back pasture, and as he skirted the string of thatched sheds, a gathering flock of turkeys came piping after him hungrily. How strangely deserted the barn seemed! Nothing was alive about the place but the turkeys.

He went on to the yard. Here again, he was oppressed by silence and motionless tranquility which seemed oddly unnatural. There swung the hammock between the trees

where he had first seen the Beautiful Woman—at the remembrance, his footsteps quickened. No smoke issued from the kitchen chimney. Every door and window was closed.

Claude knocked, and the hollow reverberation seemed to mock him. Again and again he awoke the echoes but the door remained motionless. Then he turned the knob and found the door unfastened. He entered with a rapidly beating heart.

He could see nothing in the room but a white folded note lying on the table. In a mysterious way it seemed leaping toward his eyes as if endowed with the power of motion, though at the same time it was unstirred by the breeze that had followed him into the room.

He snatched it up, ran with it to the door, and held it to the light, for suddenly he had found his mouth dry, his bosom heaving, his lips gasping, as if there were not sufficient air in the room to support one's breath.

“Dear Claude:—

“I know you will come, but you will find me gone. You remember how I said once that your faith in me was more than anything else in the world except one thing; I meant my father. He comes first, dear. I love you with all my heart, but he is first. That ought to make you think well of him, that I love him so devotedly. He told me he was going to lose himself from everybody, and that you would come for me. He meant it for the best, I know. But that was not best, indeed, it was not

best. If there was ever a time when he needed me—and he has always needed me—the time is now.

“I am going to find him. I know a place where I think he must have gone. I know his life so well, that I think I can guess the city he would most likely try to hide in, there to take up his new life. I am going to that city. I do not want you to follow me, because if you found me, it would hinder. I cannot let anything—not even your love—hinder me. There is just one object in my life, just one purpose, just one will: it is to find father, and bring him to mother. Anything that could just give *me* happiness, would not stand in my way one second. I try to make what I feel strong to you, so you will know that it is not to be changed. If it were not for this one thing, there is nothing you could ask me to do, that I wouldn't do. If you were at the end of the world, and should ask me to come to you and if I had no other way, I would start to you walking; and if I lived, I would reach you, and I would say, 'Here I am; I belong to you.'

“But this one thing is as fixed as the sky. It stands between us. I feel as if God has laid this burden upon my heart and is saying to me, 'Do not lay it down just yet, my daughter; carry it a little while longer.' And Claude, all of life is *just a little while*.

“You will say, How can I go alone? How can I support myself? How can I find my way? It will come right. You trusted me in the past. Trust me still. I do not ask you to believe in me as one who can make no

mistakes, or do no wrong; but trust me as one who tries to do her best.

“When I think that your eyes will be looking at these lines, my hand trembles—see?—and I cover the page with kisses. I wonder if you will find them? Good-by ‘Brave Heart,’—that is what you called me! Good-by, Only-One-I-Ever-Loved, you will be Only-One-I-Ever-Loved, to the end of time. But Claude—my sweetheart,— I am

Father's Norris.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE SEARCH

CLAUDE at first read the letter left him by Norris, with desperate haste, then again, with studious care. He was profoundly touched by her spirit of devotion and self-sacrifice, but not for a moment did it occur to him to relinquish his purpose of taking her with him from the Ozarks. His second reading of the letter was in order to discover therein some hint of her probable destination.

In this, however, he was disappointed; the letter did not even suggest that Norris herself knew whither she would direct her feet. One thing was clear—she would do her utmost to find her father. From the midnight interview with Giles Gradley, Claude was sure he would elude his daughter if possible. And if Gradley succeeded in this, if he hid himself so successfully that no clew to his whereabouts should be left, what would become of Norris, hopelessly searching, and never finding the object of her search?

Claude, feeling the need of immediate action, thrust the letter into his bosom and set forth to interview the only ones in the neighborhood who had shown a kindly feeling toward Norris. He first sought the cottage in

which Jim had lived before the death of his drunkard father, and in which he still slept when not visiting around among his relations.

The cabin, as might be supposed, was in the last condition of decay. One wall had fallen in, and the roof at that end sagged threateningly as if about to come down upon the empty room. At the back, however, where Jim slept when at home, the roof, though leaky, was tolerably secure. No trace of the boy was to be found, which was the more surprising as Claude was assured by the family living within sight of the place, that Jim had certainly slept at home last night, and was never known to come forth from his hole until a late hour; yet nobody had seen him that morning.

There remained to be questioned the Poff brothers, and Claude struck out across the hills animated by the hope that Pete, at least, would know something of his favorite. The path led directly through Ozarka, and when he came in sight of the hamlet he was surprised at the crowd that thronged the one short street. Apparently every man of the settlement had come to the blacksmith-shop to talk over the tragedy of Cave Spring. Giles Gradley's "Store" was closed and the solid wooden shutters were sinister reminders of the strange master.

At sight of Claude, several came forward to greet him heartily and to express regret over the course of events that had cast a shadow on all hearts. Claude's quick eye signalled out Pete Poff, and he went to him at once,

at the same time observing Bud Poff in his accustomed cloak of silence, leaning against the doorpost of the blacksmith-shop. Whatever had become of Norris, the Poff brothers betrayed no look of secret knowledge.

Claude was obliged to lead Pete far up the mountain trail before he could feel safe from being overheard by the restless crowd, and Pete nothing loath for a conversational opening, followed contentedly, chewing tobacco and whittling with nervous energy. At last a secure nook was found and Pete at once seated himself on a stump as if expecting to stay there a long time.

In a few words Claude told how Giles Gradley had left Norris in his care, but how, on going to find her that morning, Norris was gone. "Now," said Claude in conclusion, "I know you are a true friend of Norris's, and I believe you are my friend, too. You must feel that it is to her advantage for me to take her from these forests and hills, and protect her. So if you can give me an idea of her hiding-place—"

Pete shook his head with evident regret. "Nux," he said, "I haven't the slightest notion what has become of her, but you are sure right in saying that wherever she air, she is on the way to her daddy if so be as she can find the way. You may of thought and you may yet be thinking, that me'n Bud knows of her being and seeming, that is to say her location, but in that you have wandered afield. You're mighty right in thinking I'm a friend to Norris, and so I am to you. As long as she

was hiding as the 'Little Fiddler,' it was my duty to keep you two apart; but now as there ain't no more 'Little Fiddler' I'd do what I could to bring you together."

"But what do you think has become of her? You must know her habits better than I. Which way would she be most likely to go?"

"It all depending, as aforetime said, on which way her daddy put out, she also according," responded Pete, with earnest conviction.

"You see the necessity of my finding her, don't you, Pete?"

"Mr. Walcott, I do."

"But where can she be now—this moment—while looking for her father?"

"That is to say, Mr. Walcott, and laying aside all matters that are not strictly to the point to be elucidated, if you can show me her daddy's trail I will show you Norris's footsteps."

"Knowing Norris as you do—"

"Quite correct, and from years back when she was but a child."

"Knowing her as you do, what would you advise, as the step for me to take?"

"Well, sir, I would despise to send you off on a wild-goose chase; but it is for you to say whether you'd rather take up a wild-goose chase as no chase at all, a goose not being the last bird in creation, after *all* is said and done. As I made plain, to find Norris, you'll have to first find

her daddy. Now this I know and so I puts it: Giles Gradley has one indimit friend, the only indimit friend, to my knowledge, which he has in the world, a man that was so faithful to him from first to last that he didn't even balk at Mrs. Gradley. The name of this friend which I have had it from Norris herself is Williams, and his home, it is St. Louis. Air you following me, Mr. Walcott, or have you got lost in your own mazes?"

"Well?" returned Claude, impatiently; "Mr. Gradley has a friend in St. Louis named Williams. Go on."

"I admire, sir, the way you can, as it were, take a bushel of my apples and reduce 'em to a few drops of cider. You certainly squeezed all the juice out of my remarks! Well, this here Williams come to the Gradley-place one time last year, and it was the subject of the negotiation of the buying of a house which Mr. Gradley has in Hannibal, Williams wanting the same but not willing to pay the price, therefore going back home and no title-deeds signed and delivered. You see which way I'm pointing my footsteps?"

"Well?"

"That's all."

"But what has this to do with Norris?"

"It ain't but natural to suppose that Giles Gradley will hunt up his indimit friend at St. Louis, them being so thick, and if in need of money as now, more than likely as he's going to roam the world, why not sell that Hannibal house to Williams? So as I puts it to my-

self, Gradley goes to St. Louis to see Williams. Well, and if so be, then so be that Norris follows her daddy to St. Louis."

"Do you know the address of that Williams? What part of St. Louis does he live in?"

"That I don't know, and neither does Norris, as I have heard her say. But there's St. Louis, big enough to speak for itself, and in it is Williams; and in my opinion there you'll find Giles Gradley, with his daughter a-coming."

Claude mused over this slender thread which might lead to something tangible. "How does one get to St. Louis from here?"

"One goes to Mizarkana as being the nearest station and there one gets a ticket for Monette; and from Monette the coast is clear any way you want to travel."

"I remember you told me once that the 'Little Fiddler' lived in Springfield; and later, it was always Joplin. Was there any reason to suppose that Norris was acquainted in the least degree with either city?"

"Nux. It was needed to place the 'Little Fiddler' at a base removed from Ozarka, and Springfield and Joplin both seemed so likely that I wavered between first one and then the other. True it is that when Norris was a kid, they made her walk all the way to Springfield for to drive her flock of turkeys, and me and my wife went along at the same time, and some days we spent on the way, with campfires at night, and plenty of good fat bacon

a-dripping and a-frizzling over the coals. That was when I first got to feeling for Norris as if she was my own gal, so sweet and pitiful she was, and so timid and thankful for a kind word. Which goes to show that Norris ain't no novice in tramping the hills; but as for being acquainted in Springfield, nux."

"Then this is what I will do—go to Mizarkana, and try to find out whether or not Mr. Gradley or Norris bought a ticket there this morning."

"O. K. And I'll drive you there right now, if you say the word—but what about your tent, and your trunk, and so on?"

"Mr. Bates is going to stay longer in the tent; he'll look after everything . . . I'll go with you."

Pete struck off briskly across the hill and Claude kept at his side. At his cabin, Pete briefly told his wife to "look for him when she saw him," then hitched up the same wagon which had brought Claude and Rodney Bates to Possum Creek. As they jolted along, the young man was a prey to melancholy thoughts, remembering that first ride through an unknown land, fraught with such pleasing expectations. The events of the past summer rose in review before him, but in spite of all the disappointments, the suspicions, the hardships, and above all the fearful tragedy of the night before, the face of Norris seemed to cast a sort of blessing upon all that had happened. Whatever had come to pass, he had found Norris—and that was reward sufficient for all else.

They had jolted along perhaps five miles, when a rumbling in the forest told of an approaching wagon. The two wagons met at the crossing of a shallow and exceedingly clear stream.

"Hi, there, Dobe Sprockitt!" cried Pete. "Which away and where, to?"

"Hi, Pete! I been travelling *some* this morning."

"Ain't been to Mizarkana, I reckon?"

"Yap, been to Mizarkana; if ever'body *must* know, that's where I been!"

"Well, Dobe Sprockitt, you needn't get so biggitty about it if you *have* been to Mizarkana, and as to 'ever'body-must-knowing,' I don't claim to be the whole earth."

"You ain't the first," cried the driver, gruffly, "who have held me up with 'Been to Mizarkana this morning, been to Mizarkana this morning?' Can't a gentleman go to Mizarkana for the early train without arousing all the natives?"

"Oh, ho! so you taken Giles Gradley to Mizarkana, did you? And he told you not to tell nobody and that's why you're so chesty, trying to throw dust in the air; for as to going to Mizarkana, they ain't nothing in that to make a man act as if he was trying to smuggle whisky into the hills."

"Mr. Sprockitt," interposed Claude, "You say some one has already been asking you about your trip; did

you meet Norris Gradley, and did she ask you what Pete has just asked?"

"I ain't seen Norris Gradley since I don't know when," said Dobe, clucking at his horses. "Sure thing, I ain't seen her this day nor yesterday, nor have she asked me any questions. So long, Pete!"

When they had driven across the wide, sandy bed, Pete remarked, "Dobe was always and yet is, of an aggravated and aggravating temper. It was a birth-mark, I reckon. If you speak him kind he tears up the ground, but if you insult him he does no more, for fight he never would."

"He spoke of other people questioning him," Claude said, thoughtfully, "and he must have meant Norris. In looking for her father, she would go to Mizarkana to ask if he had bought a ticket, just as we are doing."

When they reached the town which was built half in Arkansas and half in Missouri, they at once sought the small station. There they learned that at least half a dozen had bought tickets that morning to take the early train, and all of these travelers had come from the out-lying district. The agent remembered Giles Gradley very well; Gradley was a man who never failed to impress any one having dealings with him, and in this neighborhood he was an object of especial curiosity. The news about his wife's awful death had reached Mizarkana, and this had given additional romance to the slight figure with the massive head. The agent remembered that Gradley had bought a ticket to Bentonville, Arkansas.

"I had a chat with him," said the agent, who seemed glad to have his solitude relieved by his guests as they sat on boxes in his little office. "I said something about Mrs. Gradley, but he cut me short there. And then he told me that he was going to dispose of his property here and he knew of a real-estate agent who would trade for it. The agent lives in a town over on the highest part of the Ozark plateau—name of it, Bentonville. That's where he's gone, to do business with that real-estate fellow. Hold on—he had a circular he was showing me, and I think he dropped it behind yonder box—he was in here; we had quite a talk; he wanted to find out if I knew anything about his agent, which I didn't."

The station-agent searched behind the box and brought forth a crumpled prospectus of Benton County lands, extolling the valuable tracts suitable for orchards. It had been printed by "G. M. Ross, Real-Estate Agent, Bentonville, Ark."

Pete laid his hand on Claude's shoulder. "That's the place for you!" he declared with conviction.

Claude nodded assent, then asked the agent, "Has any one been here this morning since the train left, asking about Giles Gradley's destination?"

"Oh, yap, as soon as it got out that Gradley had gone away, lots of folks inquired which way he'd gone. You see he's what you may call our Local Interest."

"I should like to learn if any inquiries were made of

you by a young lady of about eighteen—slight, medium-height, rather dark—”

“No lady, old or young, has been here this morning,” the agent interrupted.

Claude was disappointed. “When does the next train leave for Bentonville?”

“Not till tomorrow morning.”

“But I could reach it in a round-about way?”

“Yes, if you took the train for Monette, due in about an hour, you could go there—about forty miles clear out of your way—then come back to Rogers, and change cars there for Bentonville, and get there this evening at about six—that is, if you want to put in the whole day travelling up and down.”

“It would save twelve hours, as I’d have all night in Bentonville,” Claude told Pete, as they left the office. “I don’t know whether to go or not. If I stay here all day and night, there’s the possibility that Norris may come to make inquiries. But if she has already gone some other way, it would be all lost time.”

“I’ll tell you what I’ll do,” said Pete. “I’ll stay right here on the grounds and if Norris shows up, I’ll send you a telegraph to Bentonville, and in the meantime you can be travelling that direction.”

This suggestion Claude adopted. An hour later, he boarded the train for Monette, leaving Pete Poff to stand guard for the possible appearance of Norris. That evening at six, he stepped off the short-line car at Benton-

ville, and accosted the driver of the only hack. Describing Gradley, he inquired if such a man had come to town that morning. If so, the driver did not know; however, he added that that morning he had not driven the hack, and it was possible.

The station was at the foot of Main Street. Looking up the street, Claude saw three real-estate offices, all frame buildings of a single room, and all close together. He went from one to the other, but nobody had seen a man answering Gradley's description. Having learned that G. M. Ross, the real-estate agent, whose circular Gradley had possessed, lived farther uptown, the young man decided to go straight to his residence, since business hours were over.

Although it did not seem probable, it occurred to him that by this time, Pete Poff might have made some discovery respecting Norris. Accordingly he stepped into the station and inquired if a telegram had come for Claude Walcott.

To his surprise and joy, a yellow envelope was handed him. Tearing it open he read as follows:

"Mizarkana, Mo., 3 p. m.

"Claude Walcott,

Bentonville, Ark.

"Jim went to Bentonville this morning around by Gravette I reckon he didn't go alone.

"PETE."

CHAPTER XXIX

A TOWN IN THE OZARKS

AS Claude walked briskly up Main Street, he thought intently upon the telegram just received from Pete Poff. On reading it, he had asked at what time the train from Graveate reached Bentonville, and had found that if Pete had made no mistake, orphan Jim had been in town half the day. By the words, "I reckon he didn't go alone," Pete had evidently meant to imply that Norris was with Jim. Indeed, the fact that Jim had come to Bentonville on the track of Giles Gradley could only be explained by the fact that Norris had brought him, possibly for protection in her travels.

Claude's heart beat high as he reflected that Norris and Jim and Giles Gradley were all in this town of some three or four thousand inhabitants, and it did not occur to him that he could fail to discover the stopping-places of all three. As he looked about him he was struck by the width and beauty of the street, the granitoid pavements, the pretty cottages with their well-kept lawns, and above all, the people whom he encountered, whether afoot, in buggies, or in numerous automobiles. At first it did not seem possible that he was still in the heart of the Ozarks, but he had already observed that the towns offered a

marked contrast to the people living back in the hills. Among the pretty girls, well dressed women, and carefully groomed men there was no suggestion of Lindy Prebby's type, or that of the Poffs.

When he inquired the way to the residence of G. M. Ross, the real-estate agent, he was answered and directed with so much courtesy and friendliness that he had an odd feeling of being made at home; and the looks he received as he turned the corner in the heart of the town to follow West Spring Street, were those of cheerful greeting, as if he had already aroused a personal interest in the inhabitants, and was being invited to make his home among them. It made him think, he did not know why, of Norris.

She was constantly flashing across his mind as he met the young girls in their white dresses, white slippers and stockings, and noted with appreciation the pretty Southern faces touched to gaiety by the bright ribbons in their bare hair. Norris who had always been sadly out of keeping with the wilderness-life would have been in her proper setting in the larger towns of the Ozarks.

Claude hurried past the postoffice, and, crossing the street at the corner where a large hotel had been newly erected, followed the pavement on the farther side, as he had been directed. Yes, there stood the large white house of a city physician, and next door to it was the tall frame residence with the wooden swing in the front yard. Claude's heart beat rapidly; in the next cottage

he recognized the home of G. M. Ross as it had been described to him. He eagerly passed through the gate in the wire-and-picket fence, traversed the narrow yard breathlessly, and gained the steps with the conviction that in a very few moments, he and Norris and Norris's father would be face to face.

Stepping upon the broad porch that extended the entire width of the house, he rang the bell which was answered by the wife of the real-estate agent.

"Mr. Ross isn't at home," she said regretfully, her tone and eyes and manner expressive of the same hospitable friendliness which had permeated the casual crowds encountered on the street-corners. It was the same spirit of generous comradeship which he had discovered in the wilderness surrounding Ozarka, but here it was touched by refinement, while the voice melted in that indescribable modulation of Southern cadences common to the speech of the town.

Claude inquired when Mr. Ross might be expected to return.

The lady smiled. "He will be sure to come home about eight o'clock," she said, "for he makes it a point never, if possible, to miss the moving-picture shows. He has taken a gentleman out to show him some land about seven miles from here; but they went soon after dinner and will have time enough to get back by eight."

"I think," Claude said, "that the gentleman he took with him must be the one I have come to town to see."

Did you happen to see him? I can describe just how he looks."

"No," said the lady, with another friendly smile, "I was away until about two hours ago, helping with a dinner which our church was giving downtown. But I know the gentleman's name, for he has been writing to Mr. Ross about trading, a good while—it is Mr. Giles Gradley."

"The very man!" Claude exclaimed, trying to conceal his triumph. "And he will be here at about eight o'clock?"

"My husband will be; but possibly he may leave Mr. Gradley at his hotel since it is on the way."

"Oh—and where is he staying?"

"We have a big hotel built out at the edge of town at our springs. He stays there. It is called—" The lady paused and then laughed. "The fact is, it was built for a hotel for people who wanted a summer resort, but was so large and costly it hardly paid; so it has been sold as a sanitarium and then again as a hotel and then again as a hospital, and it is hard to keep up with its name; but I remember, now, that it is called the Tourists' Hotel, since its last transfer."

Claude, on leaving West Spring Street next devoted his time to visiting every hotel in town with the exception of the one just described. He was searching for Jim and Norris. In the town there were five hotels but at none of these could he find the slightest clew to the

two wanderers, and at last having convinced himself that they were not in the main part of Bentonville, he set forth to walk to the Tourists' Hotel.

A granitoid walk led out to the park, in the midst of which it was situated, and having arrived at about half-past seven, and nothing having been heard of Giles Gradley since his departure with the real-estate agent, Claude took supper in the vast and almost empty dining-room. On the front porch he waited till darkness crept over the surrounding woods and descended upon the winding walks of the park—but still Giles Gradley did not return.

One thing he had learned; some one had come to the hotel about noon, and had examined the register, then had asked the clerk where Mr. Giles Gradley had gone; but the description of this inquirer did not answer that of Jim, and as it was a man dressed in the rude garments of the hills, Claude could not imagine who it could be. As for Jim and Norris, he felt almost sure that they were hiding somewhere in the woods that lay on the west and north, densely covering the rolling hills and coming up to the very road that surrounded the park. Somewhere in those hollows he believed they were awaiting the return of Giles Gradley.

At half-past eight, he called up the Ross residence by telephone, but could get no answer. After several futile efforts, the girl at "central" kindly offered the information, "Mrs. Ross is generally at the moving-picture show at this hour."

Claude was divided between the expediency of staying at the Tourists' Hotel for the probable return of Gradley, or seeking Mrs. Ross to discover whether or not her husband had returned. After waiting till nine, growing more and more restless with the passing minutes, he at last hurried back to town. He met a brilliant throng of men and women, the latter dressed as for the opera, streaming out of the moving-picture show, and among these was Mrs. Ross.

He learned that the real-estate agent had not driven home from his day's outing with Mr. Gradley.

"If you will come to the house," suggested Mrs. Ross, "you may find that a message is there telling me when he will drive in."

Grateful for the invitation, the young man once more went to the cottage on West Spring Street. Sure enough, a long-distance message had come during the absence of the mistress of the house, which the central office now delivered, to the effect that Mr. Gradley had decided to go on to St. Louis to learn if his friend Williams would enter on the Benton County deal, and Mr. Ross had driven him over to Gravette to take the train there; Mr. Ross would stay all night at Gravette and come back in the morning; Mr. Gradley would leave for St. Louis that night. As Gravette was eighteen miles away and was not to be reached by rail till the next day, Claude left the Ross cottage in disappointment and perplexity. To be sure, he might hire an automobile to take him to

Gravette; but he could not reach that town in time to catch the train that would hurry Gradley away to St. Louis.

Might he not be able to get Gradley by telephone? He darted back to the Ross cottage and learned that when G. M. Ross stayed all night at Gravette, he usually put up at the Hotel Ben Davis. On the chance of catching him there, Claude hurried to the central office, and was soon closeted in the long-distance booth. After considerable delay he got the landlord of the Hotel Ben Davis, but was informed that G. M. Ross was out, having gone to the installation ceremonies of the masonic lodge.

Was the gentleman there whom Mr. Ross had driven across country—a gentleman named Giles Gradley?

Yes; did he wish to speak to Mr. Gradley?

Claude did, most earnestly. There was a pause during which Claude listened to the doleful whining of the long-distance wire. At last a voice came to his ear so rounded, so distinct, so familiar that his blood tingled:

“Hello!”

The speaker was Giles Gradley.

Claude was about to address him with the information that Jim was in town, and doubtless Norris herself, when a report sounded in the receiver that almost deafened him. Something had gone wrong somewhere. After that, the line was lost. It was not until more than half an hour later that he was able to get Gravette, and then the hotel, and at last the landlord.

"Oh," said the landlord, "are you the man that wanted Gradley? Well, Gradley has just left on the train for St. Louis."

After this failure, Claude went to the five hotels in town, then to the Tourists' Hotel, and at each left a detailed description of both Jim and Norris with directions—enforced by liberal payment—that he be called at once, should either answering the description make an appearance. As for himself, he lodged at a small hotel near the station, for he was resolved to carefully examine every man, woman or child who boarded the train at the single station.

After a troubled and almost sleepless night, he made an early morning tour of the different hotels, as well as various investigations among those who would be apt to observe any strangers entering town. These efforts were fruitless save in one particular.

There was a man who kept a peanut-and-popcorn wagon, enclosed like a glass house which afforded a stool on which he rested, read his papers, and conducted spasmodic trade, and this wagon stood at the curb just across the street from the city park. No one could come up or down Main Street without being visible from this glass wagon-house, and Claude learned from the proprietor—who showed the same genial courtesy and friendliness as that of the other citizens—that he had seen a youth answering to Jim's description yesterday afternoon.

"Was he alone?"

"Now, let me see; no, I believe there was a man with him yes, I am pretty sure he was walking along with some one, but what kind of a man or boy it was, I can't say. Jim had red hair, did he?"

"Yes, and is thin and awkward and freckled, dressed in a ragged dark brown suit, in a white shapeless felt hat."

The peanut vendor nodded. "That's Jim? Yes, I saw him, and he was with a man. Or was it a boy? Man or boy it certainly was, but now that I try to recollect, everything gets blurred except that it was a male. I can answer for Jim having red hair, and that uncommon violent. But that's all I can tell you."

When the train for Rogers stopped at the station, Claude was on the gravel platform, looking keenly into any face that approached the car-steps. When the train pulled out, he dejectedly walked beside it till he came to an open space past the corner of the next street, where the railroad, the high road, and the front fence of a yard, formed a large triangle of public land, grass-grown and shaded by tall forest trees. For some reason the train had slowed down after pulling out from the station, and Claude seated himself on a stump in the verdant triangular park, to see that no belated passenger hurried to board it. From his position he had a clean sweep of his eye to the station; nobody approached the train, which at last stopped just before it reached the cleared ground.

Suddenly a figure in blue overalls, carrying a large tin lunchbox, hurried out of the house that overlooked the

triangle, and this man climbed hastily into the engine-room. The train started forward as if to make up for lost time. As the last passenger-coach passed the stump on which Claude rested, a face at one of the windows caused him to start up with a cry.

It was Norris, and the glance that revealed her personality told him that she was dressed in male attire. She was therefore the "man" who had been seen in Jim's company. She was evidently travelling as the "Little Fiddler." Claude waved and shouted, but the face did not turn in his direction and, stare as he might, he could not discover Jim in the coach.

The fireman—the one in blue overalls who had darted across the grassplot to the engine—noticed Claude's excitement, and, looking back, said something to the engineer who thrust his head out of the window. Their impression was that Claude wished to come aboard, and for a moment there seemed to be a consultation about stopping to let him do so. The young man was now on his feet, and finding that he could not catch Norris's eye, he waved his arms, and began running along the footpath beside the track. Ordinarily, the train would perhaps have slowed down to permit him to catch up with it, but on account of loss of time, the engineer and fireman apparently argued that further delay might cause them to miss connection with the Rogers passenger for St. Louis.

Accordingly, instead of slowing down, the engine rapidly gained in speed, and when Claude reached the spot where

the path crossed the track to wander toward the upward slopes of Bentonville Heights, the last coach, that containing Norris, was hopelessly beyond his reach.

Breathing violently from his fruitless race, Claude staggered back, half-dazed, to the stump, and sank upon it trying to understand how Norris could be upon that train when he knew she could not have boarded it at the station. For awhile, the vision of her face dancing past the little park, and his amazement over having beheld it, occupied all his mind. But it was not long before this wonder gave way to immediate plans of action.

Since Norris had gone to Rogers, presumably on her way to St. Louis, he must follow; and possibly an automobile might convey him from Bentonville in time to intercept Norris. If he found that impossible, he would learn, from the real-estate agent, Giles Gradley's St. Louis address, and go thither in the reasonable expectation of thus finding Norris.

CHAPTER XXX

IN THE CITY STREETS

CLAUDE darted to the station and learned that the Rogers train made close connection with the St. Louis train. It was evident that Norris had learned of her father's destination, had boarded the train at the station above Bentonville, and was on her way to the big city on the Mississippi.

As nothing but the merest chance could have thrown Norris in his way, so it would have been impossible, save by chance, to have prevented the series of failures that had attended him since his parting from Giles Gradley. Although it seemed fully as useless to go to St. Louis as to stay at Bentonville, he thought it possible that the very law of chances might at last alter the run of successive failures. When the real-estate agent drove up to his residence, he found Claude in waiting; but he could give the young man no definite address in St. Louis. He believed he had heard Mr. Gradley say that his friend Williams lived on Washington Avenue, but of this he was not sure. If Williams agreed to the Benton County orchard deal, he and Gradley would come to Bentonville in a week's time; if not, they would probably not even write to call the deal off.

The next morning found Claude in St. Louis, where, after the night spent on the train, he devoted his time and energies to an exploration of all the Williamses on Washington Avenue. At the end of two weeks of indefatigable labor, he found himself utterly disheartened. Not the remotest clew had he been able to find connected with Giles Gradley, Norris or orphan Jim.

One morning after breakfasting at a hotel about two blocks from the Union Station, he sat dejectedly at his window in the second story, his head buried in his hands, motionless and inert. He had definitely resolved to return to Kansas City, which meant a relinquishment of his endeavors to find Norris. The roar of the city was in his ears. Below, whither, however, he did not direct his gaze, three lines of streetcars passed, forming as it were, a duplication of the triangular park beside the Bentonville railroad—but a triangle not of grass or forest trees.

Suddenly out of the gloom of his mood, an idea took form, at first hazily, then, as he meditated upon it, with clearer and clearer outlines. It seemed useless to search for Norris, and equally hopeless to try to discover Giles Gradley. But there was Norris's mother; it would be easy to find her, or at least the minister who could direct him to her lodging-place. Some day Norris must come to her mother—and if Claude should take the unfortunate woman under his own care and protection, Norris, in finding her, would find him as well.

There was something sweet and ennobling in the very

idea. It gained upon him, passing from a pleasing fancy to a definite resolve. As he meditated, it seemed to him that the beautiful harmony of a deed of rare and disinterested kindness to the helpless, was mingling with his thoughts and with his love. This harmony, this music of generous impulse was not however, purely imaginary. He did not know how long he had remained immovable before it dawned upon him that there was really some wild sweet music rising above the roar of the streetcars and the ceaseless trampling of feet and calling of voices. Scarcely had he roused to the fact that the music was external to his consciousness, before, with a violent start, he recognized the strains—they were those of the Ozark Song.

He started up and peered down into the street. Standing in the central space between the streetcar-tracks was a policeman, waving first to one car, then to another, thus signalling which should move forward across the intersecting lines, and appearing, by his regular movements, to be beating time to the music of a violin. Yes, there was a violin—beside the policeman stood the slight, erect form of Norris—Norris dressed as the "Little Fiddler;" and beside her was Jim. Norris was playing the Ozark Song. Her hat was thrown back, and her face was turning now to one side, now to another, now directly toward the hotel entrance.

"*Norris!*" shouted Claude, impulsively. The roar of

the street seemed to carry his voice back into his room—Norris did not look upward.

Claude dashed to the door, and hurried down stairs. Out in the street he found the same restless throngs, the same rattle and grind of heavy wagons, the same clanging and shrieking of streetcars, punctuated by automobile warnings. But Norris and Jim were gone. Claude accosted the policeman who still beat time, but now, to imaginary music.

“Yes,” said the policeman, “it’s a chap that’s hunting his father, and he says he’s made up a tune that his father knows, so I let him play out here whenever he wants to—he has a notion his father is hiding in this neighborhood and in a busy spot like this, is liable to show up at any time. But he hopped a streetcar a minute or two ago—I guess it was just when you started downstairs. There’s a chap with him for company. I feel sorry for the kid—he comes here at least three or four times every day and always plays that same air; then he goes to another part of town. He’s a quiet and peaceable chap, as delicate as a woman, and this kind of life he won’t be able to stand very long, so I’m hoping his father will show up before he gives out.”

Claude eagerly sought all possible information regarding the other quarter of St. Louis in which the musician had been seen.

“Pretty tough neighborhood,” the officer said—“over on Chestnut, not far from Seventeenth Street. You see,

when the chap followed his father to town, he had reason to think he might either put up at your hotel and live in style, or hide away over yonder amongst the riffraff. I think he said his father lived on Chestnut when a boy,—a different set of people lived there then,—a big convent just across the street, and a church on Seventeenth and Olive where his parents used to take him to Sunday-school. This strolling chap fancies he may have gone back to get in touch with the associations of his childhood. Here—I'll give you a line to the officer on that beat."

In the dingy street thus described, Claude presently found himself walking impatiently up and down, but it was a good while before he saw any policeman. The convent with its great wall had been torn away; and the row of houses which Giles Gradley, as a boy, had looked upon as home, were now discolored with the buffetings of wind and rain, and incalculable layers of sooty grime. From the windows of the narrow three-story brick buildings looked out, here and there, a painted face or frowsy head that made Claude shudder at the thought of unprotected Norris among such surroundings.

"Yes," said the officer on the beat, when at last found, "that fellow gave me a terrible lot of trouble a few days ago. He came here playing his fiddle, and it looked like every house on the street emptied itself out on the pavement to vie with each other in trying to drag him into its particular parlor. The girls danced around him and

sang and laughed and talked in a way to make an old policeman blush for his kind, especially his female kind. As soon as I was on to the disturbance, I had my young chap by the collar, dragging him through a circle of dancing, shouting women and, 'You come with me,' says I, brief.

"'Let me explain,' says he, pointed.

"'No nonsense,' says I, fierce. And yet, he was such a delicate, puny-looking sort of fellow, I hadn't the heart to treat him rough. In just about a minute, he had told me what he was after, and it struck me as reasonable. He said his father had deserted his mother and now was ashamed to go back, though ready; and that his mother's reason depends on his showing up. And he said that his father had got fond of a tune played in the Ozarks, and often went about humming it when in good humor, which wasn't any too frequent, I judge. And only the night of his going away, he had learned that his own child—this boy with the fiddle—had composed that air.

"'And so,' says the boy, 'if father ever hears me playing this tune he'll know who it is and come to me,' says he, reasonable.

"I thought awhile, and then I turned to that crowd of degenerate sinners and I puts the whole case before them. They listened at first with gigglings, and then with soberness, and then with pity; and the saint that lines the inwards of the blackest soul, showed right through; and one by one they went back to their holes. And

after that, the boy comes every day, morning and night, and plays and plays, and nobody looks out, and nobody disturbs him or the kid that always tags along behind him.

“This morning he comes and plays as usual, only longer and more persistent, looking so pitiful and weak that I doved around the corner to get a bracing at the saloon. It wasn’t in nature, at least not in man’s, to hear that music and look at that unhappy face and not be braced. By nature I’m a man fitted for the temperance cause, strong.

“Well, at last he puts his fiddle under his arm, and he calls out penetrating, ‘Father! Father!’ There was windows raised, but no heads out. Then he speaks again, and says, concise, ‘I leave St. Louis this afternoon—I don’t believe father is in the city!’

“No sooner heard, than some doors opened, and out steps several of those painted women and wise girls, walking timid, and they comes up to him, and says they hope his father will bob up, and if he does according to description, they’ll get him to his wife in Kansas City or know the reason why. And they shakes hands with the fiddler, sort of shamefaced and yet determined, and blessed if they didn’t go with him to the head of the street, and wish him luck and not one word, or one look, to make any one feel that gentlemen shouldn’t be present.”

Claude returned to his hotel in a spirit of deep dejection. It is true that the policeman of Seventeenth and

Chestnut had promised to get word to him should the fiddler appear again, and the officer who directed the movements of the streetcars on Washington Avenue was to call him, should the player appear on the street at such moments as the young man might not be looking from his window.

But Claude was convinced that Norris had spoken her matured determination when declaring that she would leave the city that afternoon. Now, she was gone, and it would be impossible to find her by means of the police, without betraying the secret of her sex.

That night he could not sleep. From across the way, incandescent advertisements, flashing on and off in various colors to exploit the merits of rival shoes, sent white, red and green shafts across his pillow in a maddening procession of glaring lights. At midnight he gave up the attempt to find repose, dressed himself, and sat at the open window.

The policeman no longer stood in the middle of the triangle, waving his gloved hands to watchful conductors, but the streetcars still glided into view from three directions, gleaming with lights. The watcher imagined that the spirit of the Little Fiddler hovered below, and in his ears sounded unceasingly the inaudible notes of the Ozark Song, verse following chorus, chorus pursuing verse, in an eternal circle. In what other town or city would Norris be playing that air on the morrow? On what strange streets would she be sounding forth—

“In the Ozarks, the Ozarks * * *

Oh, there are happy days, just for the wishing!”

And in the ceaseless round of that strange inner melody, Claude was singing—

“Skies blue,
Hearts true,
I love you, . . .”

He recalled the idea which perhaps had been given birth by the music in the street when Norris had played below his window without his being aware of her presence. The idea crystallized to definite resolve, while that same melody, now but a ghost-dance of liquid notes haunted his soul. For a time, at least, he would give up all efforts to find Norris or her father. He would search out Norris's mother, and, as far as possible, bring comfort and peace into her broken life.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN A STATE OF NATURE

I am in a state of nature," said Peter Poff, "which my thoughts, so to speak, they are growing wild. They've never, as Scriptures puts it, been digged and dinged; but such fruit as they brings forth is my own, and I know my own. That's how I put it to Bud, here, and Bud, he ain't said nothing."

This oracle was delivered before the shanty in Ozarka, once the property of Giles Gradley, but now known as "Pete Poff's Store." Peter was perched upon an empty goodsbox facing a circle of loafers, occasionally turning his head impartially from side to side in the open-mouthed enjoyment of his tobacco. In the crowd lounged Bud, his back against the wall, hands in trousers-pockets, jaws steadily moving, bushy whiskers quivering from this exercise, twinkling red eyes glowing upon his brother.

There was also present a native who, for the past few months, had gone to Southern Arkansas in his covered wagon then returned to a cooler climate, to be posted up on the doings of the neighborhood. It was for his benefit that Peter offered his elaborate introduction. He now continued with accustomed briskness, "AND—" This

having been given the time allotted to the longest and most impressive of sentences, he went on: "If . . . anybody knows the ins and outs of this story, I do. So neighbor, if you'll come with me into this matter, I'll warrant ye that you'll come out of it with both pockets full."

"As to coming out with you," said the prodigal, "it depends on how brisk you are, for I must be driving home; it's getting late. But I put out of the Ozarks the day of that happening at Cave Spring, and I ain't heard nothing since except that she was drowned—and hadn't never been married in no sort of way you can take hold of."

"Pard, don't say anything against her. When Death crosses out a name, there's no more against it, this side the grave, for a person that dies, has done all a person can do."

"And what became of Rodney Bates?"

"It's like this, pard; if you know the end of the story, are you going to follow all its winds and bends? Would you sit there patient and dumb-like listening to me, if so be you knowed the outcome, whilst I was worming myself gradual to the conclusion?"

"Not me—and I ain't a-going to sit long whether the outcome is knowed or unknowed. If you can't put it over in about five minutes, what become of all the parties, just tell it to the others, I'll be gone."

"What we all hated worse," spoke up Hiram Prebby, "was the way we treated Norris. Had my darter of

knowed what Mrs. Gradley was, she'd never of believed about that poisoning. She was a ring-leader, my darter was, howbeit they never meant Norris no real harm, but was full-blooded, just full of life as young folks must needs be (for they're empty of anything else), and Norris, you know yourself, could play the fiddle like an angel. And glad am I Lindy never come up with her when she was rigged out as the Green Witch. She got to enjoy *them* lonesomenesses, anyhow!"

Stodge Blurbett spoke sternly: "They's no fiddles in heaven, nor organs nuther. Angels is otherwise employed."

"Well then," growled the traveler, "what become of Norris? Maybe she ain't so complicated as Rodney Bates."

"Gentlemen," cried Peter, "*there's* a girl which her soul ain't one color on the outside and another in the lining! Let me tell you what her father done. After that awful time at Cave Springs, he hunted up Claude Walcott at his tent and says he, 'I'm going to slip away tonight, and lose myself and never show up again, but Norris don't know it. You love her, she loves you—in the morning come to my cabin; I'll be gone—she'll be there; make her happy,' says he. May be you think Walcott didn't tread on air the next morning when he set out bright and early for Gradley's place!"

"And so he takes her away, did he?"

"Who?"

"Why who you was a-saying. Pete, you vex me! That Boston feller."

"No, he never took her away. When he got to the cabin, Norris was already gone. Her father hadn't been so sly but what she'd found out his intentions. So she left a note for Claude, telling him that her father was hiding because he felt himself unworthy, but she'd search all creation till she found him. That's about what she done, too."

"Alone?"

"She taken little Jim with her—remember that kid whose father died a drunkard four or five months ago? He went along for company."

"How'd she get along?"

"She went dressed like a man. Yes sir, she went like the Little Fiddler. Nobody knowed the difference, seeing her come and go. She knowed her father once had an indimit friend, name of Williams, in St. Louis, and she taken the idea that he might of gone to him. After she got there, she hunted up about a million Williamses but none of 'em the right brand, and she wandered about the streets playing and playing on her fiddle, not no fancy jigs, but the old toons that her pa and ma used to sing together—always hoping her father might be happening along. But first and foremost she always played the Ozark Song, it being a tune she had made up her own self, as her daddy knowed."

"And did he ever happen along?"

“Well, sir, and then she remembered that her father owned a property in Hannibal, Mizzoury—a big house on the river, and there had been some talk of him selling the same to this Williams. She taken the idea that they might be there together. And . . . after working with her music along the road, she gits to Hannibal and there she played the old toons in the street and looked everywhere, but no use, and there she taken sick and written to me, asking me to come which I had always been her friend. You bet I went, and found she and Jim; she was pretty bad off and scared she’d be worse, and that they’d find out she was a woman. It was pitiful. Fellers, if you’ve ever saw me when I was riled, you may of thought me a rough and tough customer and I guess my legs and hands is awkward, yap, I reckon so, for I have been to school but a very few days. But when a man like me has had six chillun of his own, if he ain’t *plumb* no account, he has just naturally got hisself a little mellered. Well, I went into that sick room and I was doctor and nurse, yes and woman, too, though not dressed contrary to nature, and Norris was just my little gal. I brung her out of a terrible fever, dinged if I didn’t, though she like to of died. When she could sit up, nothing but skin and bones, what do you reckon she begun talking about?”

“Where was Claude Walcott all this time?” demanded the traveler, somewhat angrily.

“—Talking about her father, yap. Wanted to go

right off after him—had another idea. It made me feel like taking him by the throat, him dodging and dooking in the four corders of the globe, and her sitting propped up on her pillers, her big black eyes all full of wishes, and her pale face so pitiful—” Peter began to cough hoarsely, muttering, “I orter never of began this tale.”

Bud growled as he winked his red eyes very fast, and chewed with amazing rapidity, “Skip that there discriptive work, Pete, or I’ll jolt you one, side the head.”

After an ominous pause, Peter resumed. “Her idea was that her daddy might be in Joplin working in the mines, because she had always gave out that the ‘Little Fiddler’ come from Joplin, and he might feel he was atoning if he went there and worked hisself to death. Do you know what *atoning* means?”

“Not me, I don’t.”

“Means getting in the same tone as something else, for to be harmonious. Well, while she was a-talking all day long about that idea, one day I bought a newspaper, ’cause when I go to the city I always act the fool. The kid says to me, ‘Paper, mister?’—with a sorter grin as if he knowed I was from the backwoods, and thought I might skeer at his paper, same’s a hoss. So I bought it to bluff ’im, and taken it up to Norris for to pass her time away. Fust thing she seen was that they was a great big gospel-meeting going on in Joplin—hundreds was j’ining the church; the town was being turned inside out and all the sinners shaked loose, and being ran in, in

droves. Nothing wouldn't do her but what we must hike out for Joplin at once, though she so puny. And I was willing, for I knowed if her daddy wasn't j'ining some church or other, he had orter."

"Same of you, Pete," remarked Prebby.

Peter blushed sheepishly.

"See here, Pete," cried the returned exile, "have *you* went and got religion over yander?"

"Well—"

There was a shout.

"Well then, I *did*," Peter said defiantly. "It made me feel mighty noble at the time and it ain't something that can't be shook off. Well, we attended that meeting, and when the sinners went forward we looked for Giles Gradley but we couldn't find him."

"You'd better find him quick," cried the man from South Arkansas, starting up, "for I'm putting out for my shack."

"Wait—wait—I'll find him in a minute! We kept going, and one night there was an awful moving sermon, and the first time we knowed Giles was in the house, there he stood, down front, his hand in the preacher's! When Norris see him—you'll understand she never dressed no more like the 'Little Fiddler' after I got her out of Hannibal—she riz right up, then staggered as if about to fall
* * * So I puts my arm about her and helps her along up the aisle till she could put her arms about her father. And when he saw her * * * both of 'em

sobbing and sort of calling each other's names in low voices, like doves—well, sir, a thankfulness riz right up in me, and something told me that such troubles as they'd had couldn't never in the world come right unless God made 'em right. And I want to say that religion is all O. K. There's more to it than the graveyard. You see, Gradley had alltime thought Claude Walcott was taking care of Norris. And when he heard about that fiddling from city to city * * * But he ain't the same Gradley *you-all* knowed."

"And where was that Walcott feller all that time?"

"Well, religion made Gradley see everything different, and he listened to Norris, and agreed to go with her to see his wife. You see, while you're feeling religious—which is generally at the first,—you ain't caring about what *you* like, but what you orter *do*. So they begged me to go along. Norris couldn't think more of me than she does, and her daddy was proud the way I'd stood by her, and Jim, he ain't got much sense, you know. So we went north, and hunted up the preacher what had put the true Mrs. Gradley into a private home. He preached for a Kansas City church when Norris knowed him, but he was gone—he'd lost his job 'cause he couldn't sees as his Bible was changing as fast as the religion of his flock which is strictly up-to-date. We traced him to a little village where he's hired for two Sunday in the month but ain't paid punctual because it's so little, it don't seem important."

"Was Mrs. Gradley there?"

"Nux. But what do you reckon the parson said?—that Claude Walcott had taken her to Kansas City where he lives, and was living in the same house with her, seeing that she was as comfortable as could be! Man! I wish you could of saw Norris's face when she found that out about Claude! Come to think of it, I never thought Norris so terribly pretty, did you? But her face just then made me feel like I orter had a veil over my eyes, likes as if she had just been talking in the burning bush. As the preacher told about the lovely room where her ma is kept, and how Claude takes her out to drive, and how he sits with her in the garden where I reckon every spear of grass is worth half a dollar (such is the value of the earth that bears the same) Norris kept getting more wonderful, and Gradley more moved, and me more aggravated that at last I had to go away—didn't want to hear no more, yet I liked it, too. We pretty soon hiked for the city. We taken a taxicab which it is one of them wagons that moves by a clock, and when we got to the stone house, it wasn't nobody but Claude hisself that come out to meet us, he having saw us from the window; and when Norris * * * "

Peter swallowed hard and was silent.

The exile suggested sympathetically, "Norris was glad, I guess."

"Oh, shut ūp!" snapped Peter. "Well, we went in. I staid in the hall when they went into the room where

Mrs. Gradley was kept. And I heard her voice, slow and lifeless saying over and over, as if to herself, 'Why can't I see his face? Why can't I see his face? It would be all right if I could see his face'—same as if she was some blind person. Norris went in first. The voice stopped of a sudden, then it goes on louder and louder, as if about to scream, saying the same thing—'Why *can't* I see his face?' Then Giles Gradley went in. And when she saw him * * * well, nobody didn't have to tell her whose face it was, all a-streaming with tears. I tell you boys, it was too much for me—I left."

"If I was a woman," spoke up Prebby, "I'd never live with that man after what had happened, as I hear Mrs. Gradley's a-doing; not if I had my right mind, I wouldn't."

"Not for Norris's sake?"

"Not for nobody. And lots and piles of women wouldn't, either."

"Well, *this* woman would, and did. And as she's the only woman we've got in this tale, try to be satisfied. I ain't saying her and him can be happy same as if there hadn't been that other one; that's for *them* to say. But they seemed sorter peaceful, last time I see 'em, and no question about Claude and Norris being joyful!"

"Seems to me," Prebby persisted, "It'd been better even if *they* hadn't married, with that blot on their ancestry to be telling their children."

"Well, Lord! I ain't saying this mightn't of ended

better, but that it ended just *so*. As for me, living folks interests me, I ain't losing no sleep over posterity. Posterity is going to turn very few of their hairs gray on my account. As to Rodney Bates, they's nothing to tell; he just went off and kept at his work and never made no figger like folks does in plays. I think he understands now that the woman we called Mrs. Gradley never loved anybody but Giles—"

"Pshaw! You don't think she really cared for Giles do you, when she was fixing to put out with Bates?"

"Yap, that's what I think. And when I get to remembering how angel-lovely that woman was, how—but I can't find no words for it."

"Then Pete," said Bud, reprovngly, "let them speak as can."

"I was just going to say that the way she lived, it sorter shakes faith in human nature. But again, I get to thinking of Norris with her heart warm toward us folks living down here in the valley, and her face lifted up—you know what I mean—to the stars. Her face reminds me of them stars, always bright, twinkling with joy, whether we're watching 'em or not, because they're so much closer to God than we are, I reckon."

Silence fell upon the rough men of the hills and Peter's meaning, though rudely expressed, softened their grave faces. Nature, too, was in sympathy with their solemn mood. The sunlight had long since been withdrawn, leaving the world cool and plaintive.

Along the upward sweep of the hills, the rocks had lost their jagged edges; the mouths of the caves had become black and brooding. Post oaks and dwarf pines seemed holding their heads close together as in counsel against the approaching darkness, their common enemy. Over the rounded swells of the dark-green world stole a delicate mist as if to hide its last deformity.

Far away, a redbird, not yet hushed to silence, shook out his wondrous melody upon the still air. So distant was the tree which seemed suddenly to have found a voice, that his notes came faint and fine, as if the "Little Fiddler" were tuning for the dance.

A timid breeze wandered here and there, as if in cautious search, stirring first one clump of trees and then the next, leaving behind its fairy feet a little wave of disappointment that soon faded away to silent forgetfulness. The breeze, as if still bent upon its mysterious quest, slipped, at last, away—for the "Little Fiddler" was no longer there—and passed over the wavering blue line of the Ozarks.

THE END

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