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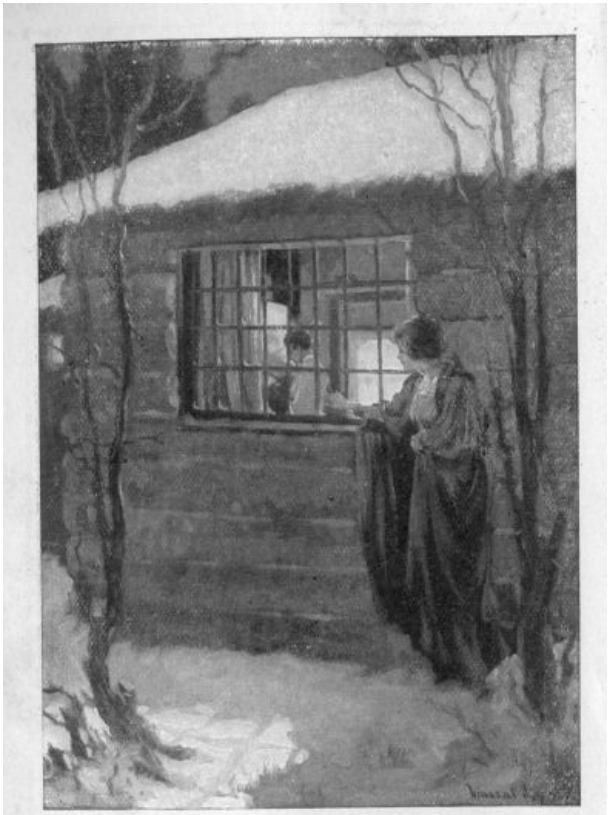

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A SON OF THE HILLS

BY

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JOYCE OF THE NORTH WOODS,
JANET OF THE DUNES, ETC.

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A Son of the Hills

CHAPTER I

Lost Hollow lies close at the foot of the mountain which gives it its name. The height of neither is great, geographically considered; the peak is perhaps eighteen hundred feet above sea level: The Hollow, a thousand, and from that down to The Forge there is a gradual descent by several trails and one road, a very deplorable one, known as The Appointed Way, but abbreviated into—The Way.

There are a few wretched cabins in Lost Hollow, detached and dreary; between The Hollow and The Forge are some farms showing more or less cultivation, and there is the Walden Place, known before the war—they still speak of that event among the southern hills as if Sheridan had ridden through in the morning and might be expected back at night—as the Great House.

Among the crevasses of the mountains there are Blind Tigers, or Speak Easies—as the stills are called—and, although there is little trading done with the whiskey outside the country side, there is much mischief achieved among the natives who have no pleasure of relaxation except such as is evolved from the delirium brought about by intoxication.

The time of this story is not to-day nor is it very many yesterdays ago; it was just before young

Sandy Morley had his final "call" and obeyed it; just after the Cup-of-Cold-Water Lady came to Trouble Neck—three miles from The Hollow—and while she was still distrusted and feared.

Away back in the days of the Revolution the people of the hills were of the best. All of them who could serve their country then, did it nobly and well. Some of them signed the Declaration of Independence and then returned to their homes with the dignity and courage of men in whose veins flowed aristocratic blood as well as that of adventurous freemen. There they waited for the recognition they expected and deserved. But the new-born republic was too busy and breathless to seek them out or pause to listen to their voices, which were softer, less insistent than others nearer by. In those far past times the Morleys and the Hertfords were equals and the Walden Place deserved its name of the Great House. The Appointed Way was the Big Road, and was kept in good order by well-fed and contented slaves who had not then dreamed of freedom.

The final acceptance of the hill people's fate came like a deadening shock to the men and women of the Lost Mountain district—they were forgotten in the new dispensation; in the readjustment they were overlooked! The Hertfords left the hills with uplifted and indignant heads—they had the courage of their convictions and meant to take what little was left to them and demand recognition elsewhere—they had always been rovers. Besides, just at that time Lansing Hertford and Sandford Morley, sworn friends and close comrades, had had that secret misunderstanding that was only whispered about then, and it made it easier for Hertford to turn his back upon his home lands and leave them to the gradual decay to which they were already doomed. The Waldens had retained enough of this world's goods to enable them to descend the social scale slower than their neighbours. Inch by inch they debated the ground, and it was only after the Civil War that Fate gripped them noticeably. Up to that time they had been able to hide, from the none too discriminating natives, the true state of affairs.

The Morleys and the Tabers, the Townleys and the Moores, once they recognized the true significance of what had happened, made no struggle; uttered no defiance. They slunk farther back into the hills; they shrank from observation and depended more and more upon themselves. They intermarried and reaped the results with sullen indifference. Their hopes and longings sank into voiceless silence. Now and then Inheritance, in one form or another, flared forth, but before it could form itself into expression it was stilled and forbidden, by circumstances, to assert itself.

Sad, depressed Lost Hollow! Over it loomed darkly the mountain whose peak was so often shrouded in clouds. The people loved the hills and the shadows; they glided like wan ghosts up and down The Way or took to the more sheltered trails. When they were sober they were gentle, harmless folk, but when whiskey overpowered them the men became dully brutal, the women wretchedly slavish, and the children what one might expect such sad little creatures to become! Lacking in intellect, misshapen and timid, they rustled among the underbrush like frightened animals; peered forth like uncanny gnomes, and ate and slept how and as they could.

After the Civil War these people became "poor whites" and were ground between the nether millstone of their more prosperous neighbours and that of the blacks, until they sank to the lowest level. Their voices were hushed and forgotten; their former estate blotted out in their present degradation, and just then Sandy Morley and Cynthia Walden were born and some high and just God seemed to strengthen their childish voices; vouchsafe to them a vision and give their Inheritance charge over them.

Marriage form was not largely in vogue among the Lost Hollow people; it was too expensive and unnecessary. The rector of the small church at The Forge looked upon the hill people as altogether beyond and below the need of any attention of his, and was genuinely surprised and annoyed when one of them called upon him for service. He had not come to The Forge from an ardour to save souls; he had been placed there because he had not been wanted elsewhere, and he was rebellious and bitter. Occasionally he was summoned to the mountain fastnesses for a burial or wedding, but he showed his disapproval of such interferences with his dignified rights, and was not imposed upon often. But Martin Morley, Sandy's father, had married Sandy's mother. She was a Forge girl who believed in Martin and loved him, so he took her boldly to the parsonage, paid for the service the rector performed, and went his way.

There was one happy year following in the Morley cabin under Lost Mountain. Martin worked as he never had before; the hut was mended without and made homelike within. The little wife sang at her tasks and inspired Martin to a degree of fervour that brought him to the conclusion that he must get away! Get away from the poverty and squalor of The Hollow; get away farther than The Forge—far, far away!

"After the baby comes!" the little wife whispered, "we'll take it to a better, sunnier place and—give it a chance!"

The baby came on a bad, stormy night. Sandford Morley they called him. The Forge doctor, travelling up The Way, stopped at the Morley cabin for a bite of supper and found how things were. Sally Taber was in command, and Martin, frightened and awed, crouched by the chimney corner in the living-room, while his girl-wife (she was much younger than he) made her desperate fight.

"There's only a broken head or two up at Teale's Blind Tiger," the doctor said grimly; "they can wait, I reckon, while I steer this youngster into port." The doctor had come from the coast on account of his lungs and his speech still held the flavour of the sea.

Sandy Morley made a difficult mooring with more vigour and determination than one would have expected, but the cost was great. All night the battle waged. The doctor, with coat off and haggard face, fought with the little mother inch by inch, but at sunrise, just two hours after Sandy lustily announced his arrival, she let go the hand of her husband who knelt by her hard, narrow bed, and whispered in the dialect of her hills, "Youcum!"—which meant that Morley must come to her some where, some how, some time, for she no longer could bide with him.

After that Martin stayed on in the cabin with the baby. One woman after another lent her aid in an hour of need, but on the whole Sandy and his father made it out together as best they could. The little, clinging fingers held Martin back for a time—the boy had his mother's fine, clear eyes and when he looked at Martin something commanded the man to stand firm. In those days Martin found comfort in religion and became a power at the camp meetings; his prayers were renowned far and near, but the evil clutched him in an unguarded hour and one bleak, dreary springtime he met the Woman Mary and —let go! That was when Sandy was seven. He brought Mary to the cabin and almost shamefacedly explained, to the wondering boy, his act.

"Son, she's come to take care of us—mind your ways, lad."

Sandy gave Mary's handsome smiling face one quick look, then fled down the hill, across the bottom pasture and Branch, up on the farther side to the woods—his sanctury and haven, and there, lifting his eyes and little clenched fists, he moaned over and over:

"Curse her! curse her! I hate her!"

He had never hated before; never cursed, but at that moment he cursed that which he hated.

It was early spring then, and under the tall, dark trees the dogwood bushes were in full bloom. Sandy was touched, always, by beauty, and in his excited state he thought in that desperate hour that the dogwood blossoms were like stars under a stormy cloud. Heaven seemed reaching down to him, and closing him in—his thoughts were tinged by Martin's religious outbursts and the native superstition of the hills. It was then and there that the child first knew he must go away! The call was distinct and compelling—he must go away! And from that hour he made preparation. At first the effort was small and pitiful. He began to gather whatever Nature provided freely, and turn it into money. With shrewd perception he realized he must overcome his deadly shyness and carry his wares farther than The Hollow if he wished to achieve that upon which he was bent. The Hollow people were poor; The Forge people would give food and clothing for berries and sassafras roots; but Sandy demanded money or that which could be exchanged for money, and so he travelled far with his basket of fragrant berries or shining nuts and in time he found himself at the Waldens' back door facing a tall black woman, in turban and kerchief, with the child Cynthia beside her.

"Do you-all want to buy eight quarts of wild strawberries?" he asked in that low fine voice of his.

"Buy?" demanded Lily Ivy scornfully. "Miss Cyn, honey, go fotch Miss Ann and tell her one ob dem Morleys is here axing us-all to buy his berries, and him in shreds and tatters!"

Presently Cynthia returned with her aunt. Miss Walden was then sixty, but she looked seventy-five at least; she was a stern, detached woman who dealt with things individually and as she could—she never sought to comprehend that which was not writ large and clear. She was not a dull nor an ignorant woman, but she had been carried on the sluggish current of life with small effort or resistance. She did her task and made no demands.

"So you're Morley's boy?" she asked curiously; she had still the interest of the great lady for her dependents. The Morleys had become long since "poor whites," but Ann Walden knew their traditions. The family had slunk into hiding ever since Martin had taken the Woman Mary into his cabin, and Miss Walden was surprised and aroused to find one of them coming to the surface at her back door with so unusual a request as Cynthia had repeated.

"Yes, ma'am;" Sandy replied, his strange eyes fixed upon the calm old face.

"And what do you want?"

"I want to sell eight quarts of strawberries, ma'am. They are five cents a quart; that's what they are giving down to The Forge."

"Then why don't you take them to The Forge?"

"The heat, ma'am, will wilt them. They are right fresh now—I thought I'd give you-all the first chance."

"And you want money for the berries—and you in rags and starved, I warrant?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Ann Walden grew more interested.

"Would you—take eggs for them?" she asked; "eggs are bringing twenty cents a dozen now."

"Yes, ma'am."

"How do I know you are honest? How do I know the basket isn't stuffed with leaves in the bottom? What's your name?"

"Sandy, ma'am. And please, ma'am, you can measure the berries."

"Ivy, bring the quart measure, and the earthen bowl."

When the implements were brought, Miss Walden took things in her own hands, while Ivy, with the disdain of the old family black servant for the poor white, stood by like an avenging Fate. The child Cynthia was all a-tremble. She was young, lovely, and vital. Youth took up arms for youth, and watched the outcome with jealous and anxious eyes.

"One, two, three——" the rich, fragrant fruit fell into the bowl with luscious, soft thuds; the red juice oozed out like fresh blood.

"Five, six, seven—eight, and——"

"A lot left over, Aunt Ann, counting dents in the measure and all."

It was Cynthia who spoke, and her big, gray eyes were dancing in triumph.

"More'n eight quarts, Aunt Ann."

"Umph!" ejaculated Ivy.

"Give the boy two dozen eggs and three over," commanded Miss Walden. "Take them to Tod Greeley at the post office and tell him they are Walden eggs."

After Sandy had departed Ivy aired her views.

"I reckon we-all better make jam of dem berries right soon. I clar I allers 'spect to find a yaller streak in dem Morleys."

Cynthia was leaning against the kitchen table, her eyes shining and her breath coming a bit quickly.

"Perhaps," she said, with the slow smile which curled the corners of her mouth so deliciously, "perhaps the yellow streak in Sandy Morley is—gold!"

That was the beginning of Sandy's first great inspiration. Again and again he went to the Walden place with his wares and exchanged them for things that could be readily turned into money. Then Cynthia, from out her own generous loveliness, offered to pass over the instruction Ann Walden imparted to her, to the boy; he had before that told her of his ambition and determination to go away, and her vivid imagination was stirred.

"It's not only money," Cynthia had astutely warned him—"not only money you must have, Sandy, but learning; no one can take that away from you!"

With a fine air of the benefactress, Cynthia Walden took Sandy Morley's dense ignorance in charge. It was quite in keeping with the girl's idea of things as they ought to be, that she should thus illumine and guide the boy's path.

She was charmingly firm but delightfully playful. She was a hard mistress but a lovely child, and the youth that was starving in her met Sandy on a level, untouched by conventions or traditions. Presently a palpitating sense of power and possession came to her. The creature who was at first but the recipient of her charity and nobility displayed traits that compelled respect and admiration. Sandy easily outstripped her after a time. His questions put her on her mettle. He never overstepped the bounds that she in her pretty childish fancy set, but he reached across them with pleading adoration and hungry mind. He seemed to urge her to get for him what he could not get for himself. And so, with the freedom of knowledge, Sandy, still keeping to his place, began to assume proportions and importance quite thrilling. Then it was that Cynthia Walden, with keenness and foresight, made her claims upon the boy.

With a pretty show of condescending kindness she clutched him to her with invisible ties. For *her* he must do thus and so! He must become a great—oh! a very great—man and give her all the credit! If he went away—*when* he went away—he must never, never, never forget her or what she had done for him! In short, he must be her abject slave and pay homage to her all the days of his life!

Sandy was quite willing to comply with all these demands; they were made in a spirit so sweet and winsome, and they were so obviously simple and just, that he rose to the call with grateful response, but with that strange something in reserve that Cynthia could not then understand or classify. It was as though Sandy had said to her: "Your slave? Yes, but no fetters or chains, thank you!"

Soon after Mary came to live in the Morley cabin Sandy was relegated to an old outhouse for sleeping quarters. The child had been horribly frightened at first, but, as the quarrels and disturbances grew in power between Martin and the woman, he was grateful for the quiet and detachment of his bed-chamber. A child was born to Mary and Martin during the year following the change in the family, but Sandy looked upon his half-sister with little interest. That the boy was not driven entirely from the

home place was due to the fact that through him came the only money available. Martin exchanged his spasmodic labour for clothing or food, but Sandy brought cash. Mary thought he gave her all, and because of that he was tolerated.

Sandy did not, however, give the woman all, or even half, of what he earned. He gave her one third; the rest was placed in a tin box and hidden under a rock in the woods beyond the Branch. The boy never counted the money, he could not put himself to that test of discouragement or elation. The time was not yet, and it was significant of him that he plodded along, doing the best that was in him, until the call came; the last final call to leave all and go forth.

Once, during the years between seven and fourteen, Sandy had had an awakening and a warning. Then it was that his half-sister, Molly, became a distinct and potent factor in his life; one with which he must reckon. Going to the rock on a certain evening to bury his share of the day's profit he wearily raised the stone, deposited the money and turned to go home, when he encountered Molly peering at him with elfish and menacing eyes from behind a bush.

"What you doing there, yo' Sandy?" she asked half coaxingly, half threateningly.

"Nothing."

"I seen you—a-hiding something. I'm going to look!" She made a movement forward.

"Hyar! you Molly!" Sandy clung to her. "If you raise that stone 'twill be the last of you. I've got a horned toad there and—a poison sarpint."

"Then I'll—I'll tell Dad." Molly shrank back, though not wholly convinced. It was time for compromise, and Sandy, with a sickening fear, recognized it and blindly fell upon the one thing that could have swayed the girl.

"I'm a-training and taming them," he lied desperately, "and when they are ready we-all can make money out of them, but if you tell—Dad will kill 'em! I tell you, Molly, if you don't say a single thing I'll—I'll give you a cent every week. A cent to buy candy with!"

The promise was given, and from that day Sandy paid his blood money, hoping that greed would hold the child to her bargain, but with always a feeling of insecurity. He changed his box to another rock, but a certain uncanniness about Molly gained a power over him and he never felt safe.

Things went rapidly from bad to worse in the Morley cabin. Martin forgot his prayers and ambitions; he grew subservient to Mary and never strove against her, even when her wrath and temper were directed toward him and Sandy. Discredited and disliked by his neighbours, flouted by the woman who had used him for her own gain, the man became a detestable and pitiable creature. Sandy endured the blows and ratings that became his portion, in the family disturbances, with proud silence. He was making ready and until the hour of his departure came he must bear his part.

It was during the probation and preparatory period that Marcia Lowe, the Cup-of-Cold-Water Lady, came up The Way one golden afternoon and stopped her horse before the post office, General Store and County Club of The Hollow, and, leaning out from the ramshackle buggy, gave a rather high, nasal call to whoever might be within.

CHAPTER II

Tod Greeley, the postmaster, was sitting on his cracker box contemplatively eying the rusty stove enthroned upon its sawdust platform, in the middle of the store. Every man in The Hollow had his own particular chair or box when the circle, known as the County Club, formed for recreation or business. No one presumed to occupy another's place: Tod Greeley's pedestal was a cracker box and its sides were well battered from the blows his heels gave it when emotions ran high or his sentiments differed from his neighbour's. Greeley was not a Hollow man; he had been selected by Providence, as he himself would have said, to perform a service for his country: namely, that of postmaster, storekeeper, and arbiter of things in general. He was a tall, lean man of forty, good looking, indolent, and with some force of character which was mainly evinced by his power of keeping his temper when he was facing a critical situation. While not of The Hollow, he was still *with* The Hollow on principle.

When Marcia Lowe paused before the store and emitted her call, which flavoured of friendliness and the North, Greeley was vacantly looking into space, hugging his bony knees, and listening to an indignant fly buzzing on the dirty glass of the back window, protesting against any exit being barred to its egress.

It was three o'clock of a late July day and, while the sun was hot, the breeze gave promise of a cool night.

"Ooh! ooh!"

Just at first Greeley thought the fly had adopted a more militant tone.

"Oooh—ooh!"

Greeley pulled himself together, mentally and physically, and stalked to the porch; there he encountered the very frank, smiling face of a rather attractive youngish woman who greeted him cordially with a high-pitched but sweet:

"Good afternoon."

"Good evening, ma'am," Tod returned.

"I just came up from The Forge; your roads are really scandalous, but the scenery is beautiful. I want to see if there is any place near here where I can get board? I've come to stay for a while, anyway; probably for years, at least."

The young person seemed so eager to share her confidence that Greeley was on his guard at once. He did not approve of the stills back among the hills, but he did not feel called upon to assist any government spy in her work, no matter how attractive and subtle the spy was.

It was two years now since a certain consumptive-looking young man had caused the upheaval of a private enterprise back of The Hollow and made so much unpleasantness, but Norman Teale had served his term in prison and had got on his feet once more, and Greeley had a momentary touch of sympathy for the Speak-Easy magnates as he glanced up at this new style of spy.

"Nobody stays on in The Hollow lest he has to," he said cautiously, "and as for boarding-places, there never was such a thing here, I reckon. I certainly don't expect they would take any one in at the Walden place, not if they-all was starving. Miss Ann Walden is quality from way back. The Morleys couldn't entertain, and what's true of the Morleys is true of all the others."

"Couldn't you folks take me?"

At this Greeley collapsed on the one chair of the porch, and actually gasped.

"I ain't got what you might call folks," he managed to say, "unless you call a brace of dogs, folks."

"Oh! I beg your pardon." Miss Lowe flushed and gave a nervous laugh. "You see I just must manage to find a home here, and—and I've heard so much of Southern chivalry and hospitality I rather hoped some one would take me in until I could look around. The place at The Forge, where I've been for two nights is—impossible, and the darkies have their hands stretched out for tips until I feel like a palmist, and a bankrupt one at that!"

A merry laugh rang out and in spite of himself and his grave doubts Greeley relaxed.

"If you don't mind doing for yourself," he ventured, "there's a cabin over to Trouble Neck that you might get."

"Do for myself?" Miss Lowe cried energetically. "I'd just favour that plan, I can tell you! I could get all the furniture I need at The Forge, I am sure. The name of the place isn't exactly cheering, but then I've waded through trouble and got on top all my life long. Who owns the cabin over at Trouble Neck?"

Property rights in and around The Hollow were rarely discussed; it was a delicate question, but what was not actually held down by another generally was conceded to a certain Smith Crothers and to his credit Tod Greeley now put the Trouble Neck cabin.

"Oh! He's the man who owns the factory a few miles from The Forge? I drove past it yesterday at noon time. I thought it was an orphan asylum at first. I never saw such babies put to work before. It's monstrous and the law ought to shut down on your Smith Crothers!"

At this Greeley had a distinct sensation of pain in the region known as the pit of his stomach. That Smith Crothers should fall under any law had never been dreamed of by mortal man or woman in Greeley's presence before. The right of free whiskey was one thing; the right of a man to utilize the children of the district was another!

"He ain't my Smith Crothers!" Greeley inanely returned, feeling in a dazed way that he did not want to put in any claim for Crothers with those apparently innocent eyes upon him.

"Well, I'll try to buy the Trouble Neck place from Smith Crothers at once. You see I've been very sick; they said I'd lost my health, but I know I've only misplaced it."

Again the cheerful laugh set Greeley's nerves tingling.

"They-all say that when they-all come up here."

Greeley felt in honour bound to give the young woman a hint as to his reading of her and her mission.

"It's a good spot, then, for weak lungs?"

"None better," Tod nodded sagely, "but they don't last long."

"What? The weak lungs? That's splendid! And now would you mind giving my horse a drink? Isn't it funny what nice horses they manage to evolve in the South on food that would end a cart-horse's existence up North? But such vehicles! Do look at this buggy! And no springs to mention. My! but my back will ache to-morrow."

By this time Greeley had procured a pail of water and was courteously holding it to the nose of the very grateful horse.

"I wonder," Miss Lowe casually remarked, as she let the reins fall in lap and looked about, "if you happen to have known a Theodore Starr who once lived here?"

"I've heard of him," Tod returned; "I ain't a Hollow man. I only came here on business six years ago, but the memory of Starr sort of clings like it was a good thing to keep alive."

"How beautifully you put it!"

Greeley was thinking how well the government had stocked this dangerous spy with facts, and so he did not observe the tears in her eyes.

"There was a little church he built himself—is it still standing? You may not have heard, but he had a very simple little religion quite his own. He thought the people up here were more in need of help than foreign folks, but no regular sect would—would handle him. So he came up a road he used to call The Appointed Way and just settled down and learned to love all—the people and the work!"

Greeley was so utterly amazed that the hands which held the pail shook with excitement.

"That road what you came up is called The Way—short for Appointed Way. Yon is the little church."

Marcia Lowe raised up and through the thicket behind her she saw the deserted structure, which still bore the outlines of a church.

"Why, it's all boarded up!" she exclaimed. "Who owns it now?"

The exacting nature of the stranger's questions was unsettling to Greeley. She seemed determined to tag and classify all the real estate in the county.

"No one ain't damaged the building," he said drawlingly; "some of the folks think it is han'ted. I reckon Smith Crothers owns it."

"That man owns too much!" Marcia Lowe gave again her penetrating laugh. "And I should think the place would be haunted. Just think of boarding Uncle Theodore up! He who loved sunshine and air and sweetness so much!"

At this Greeley dropped the pail to the ground, and the indignant horse reared angrily. This was carrying things too far, and the man's eyes flashed.

"Uncle?" he gasped sternly.

"Yes, Uncle Theodore Starr. He was my mother's brother. I have no one to keep me away now—and I loved him so when I was a little child. They say I am much like him—but then you never saw him. Lately I've been real homesick for him. He seemed to be calling me from the hills. I'm going to get your Smith Crothers to let me open up the little church. I want the sunshine to get in and—and Uncle Theodore to—get out! I'm going to find where they buried him, and make that a beautiful place too. You see I've a good deal to do up here! Besides," and now the cheerful face beamed radiantly on the gaping postmaster, "I'm like Uncle Starr in more ways than one. He learned to mend men's souls and I have learned to mend their bodies—it's much the same, you know—when you love it. I'm—well, I'm an M. D., a medical doctor—Doctor Marcia Lowe!"

At this Greeley dropped on the bottom step of the porch, wiped the perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand, and emitted one word.

"Gawd!" He was not a profane man, but the audacity of this stranger who was about to settle down among them for purposes best known to herself, and them who sent her, quite overcame him. Marcia Lowe gave a hearty laugh and gathered the reins.

"I suppose you never heard of such a thing up here?" she asked amusedly, "but they are getting commoner down where I hail from. It's all very foolish—the restrictions about a woman, you know. She can nurse a body up to the doors of death, but it's taken a good while to bring people around to seeing that she can mend a body as well, just as well as a man. You will let me stay among you anyway, I am sure. I do not want to physic you. It is so much more interesting to live close and help along. Good-bye, Mr. Greeley—you see your name is over the door! I am, do not forget"—the woman's eyes twinkled mischievously—"Doctor Marcia Lowe of Torrance, Mass. Good-bye! You have been very kind and helpful. I feel that you and I will be good friends. Get-up, pony!"

She flapped the reins in the most unprofessional manner, and the horse turned to The Appointed Way with briskness that bespoke his impatience and a desire for more familiar scenes.

With curious eyes Greeley watched the ramshackle buggy bounce up and down over the rutty road; he saw the small, slight figure bob about uncomfortably on the uneven seat, and when the conveyance was lost behind the trees he went inside with a sure sense that something was going to happen in The Hollow.

Once again within his own domain he sought his cracker box as if it were his sanctuary. The fly was still protesting against the dirty window, and the stillness, except for the buzzing, was unbroken.

Presently, from out the nowhere apparently, old Andrew Townley came in and shuffled across the floor to the armchair by the stove. Then Mason Hope appeared, hands in pockets and lank hair falling on his shoulders. Norman Teale came next, with Tansey Moore in tow.

"Howdy, Tod?" was the universal greeting as the County Club took its place. The chair of Smith Crothers, and two or three overturned potato baskets—seats of the junior members of the club—were empty. It was beneath the dignity of any man present to question what had just occurred, but every son of them had witnessed it and in due time would touch upon the subject.

The stove, summer and winter, focussed their wandering eyes and acted as a stimulus to their dormant faculties. From long practice and inheritance every man could aim and hit the sawdust under the stove when he expectorated. Even old Andrew Townley had never been known to fail.

"There be some right good horses down to The Forge," Tansey Moore ventured after a while.

"It's a blamed risky thing, though," said Mason Hope, "to let a—lady drive 'em. I've allus noticed that a woman is more sot on gittin' where she wants to git—than to considering *how* to git there. It's mighty risky to trust horseflesh to a female. They seem to reckon all horses is machines."

"I've seen men as didn't know a hoss from a steam engine," Norman Teale broke in, glancing sharply at Moore. "Times is when a hoss has to be sacrificed to man—but I reckon The Forge folks was taking some risks when they-all hired out a team to a stranger."

"That stranger," said Greeley, hitting the nail on the head with a violence that brought his audience to an upright position, "ain't nothing short of, to my mind, than"—he glanced at Teale—"well, she ain't, and that's my opinion! She comes loaded with facts up to her teeth. Knows all the names, and says she's going to settle down over to Trouble Neck and—live along with us-all quite a spell. Weak lungs and all, but she's a right new brand."

"Hell!" ejaculated Teale, springing to his feet. "If the government has got so low that it has to trifle with ladies—it's in a bad way. I reckon I better git a-moving. Any mail, Tod? I take it right friendly that you give me this hint. A lady may be hard to handle in some ways, but we-all can at least know where she is—that's something."

After the departure of Teale the club fell into moody gloom. It was always upsetting to have outside interference with their affairs. Even if Teale wasn't arrested the whiskey would be limited for a time, and that was a drawback to manly rights.

Andrew Townley fell into an audible doze; he was the oldest inhabitant and a respected citizen. He was given to periods of senile dementia preceded or followed by flashes of almost superhuman intelligence. There were times when, arousing suddenly from sleep, he would bring some startling memory with him that would electrify his hearers. He was an institution and a relic—every one revered him and looked to his simple comfort. Suddenly now, as the dense silence enveloped the club, old Andrew awoke and remarked vividly:

"I was a-dreaming of Theodore Starr!"

"Now what in thunder!" cried Tod Greeley, who had purposely refrained from mentioning some part of his late visitor's conversation,—"what made you think of—Theodore Starr?"

"I reckon," whined the trembling old voice, "that it was 'long o' Liza Hope. I was a-passing by and I heard her calling on God-a'mighty to stand by her in her hour. Theodore Starr was mighty pitiful of women in their hours."

Mason Hope felt called upon, at this, to explain and apologize. He did so with the patient air of one detached and disdainful.

"Liza do make a powerful scene when she is called to pass through her trial. This is her ninth, and I done urged her to act sensible, but when I saw how it was going with her, I just left her to reason it out along her own lines. Sally Taber is sitting 'long of her ready to help when the time comes. I done all I could." Tansey Moore nodded significantly. He had an unreasonable wife of his own, and he had no sympathy with women in their "hours."

"Theodore Starr, he done say," Townley was becoming lachrymose, "that women got mighty nigh to God when they reached up to Him in their trial and offered life for a life. He done say if God didn't forgive a woman every earthly thing for such suffering, he was no good God. He done say that to me onct."

"That be plain blasphemy," Tansey Moore remarked. "I reckon he was a right poor parson. The

religion he doctored with was all soothin' syrup and mighty diluted at that, where women was concerned. I never trusted that Yankee."

"The women, children, and old folks counted some on him in his day." Greeley was getting interested in this heretofore myth. Moore nodded his head suspiciously.

"They sho' did, and a mess they made of it. Did you ever hear 'bout his mix-up with the Walden girls?"

Greeley never had and, as the last Walden "girl" was a woman of sixty and over, he looked puzzled.

"Miss Ann, her as *is* now, was considerable older than Theodore Starr, but she shined up to him and let him lead her about considerable—some said him and her was—engaged to marry. Then there was the Walden girl as *isn't* now, her they called Queenie. She was a right pert little thing what growed into a woman like a Jonas gourd, sudden and startling! That was the summer that young Lansing Hertford came back to the old home place of his forebears to look about—there was a general mess of things up to Stoneledge those days, and all I know is that Starr he went up into the hills to nurse a fever plague and there he died. Lansing Hertford went off like a shot—but them Hertfords allus lit out like they was chased—never could stand loneliness and lack of luxury. Queenie, she done died the winter following that summer; died of lung trouble off to some hospital way off somewhere, and Miss Ann she settled down—an old woman from that time on! You can't get her to speak Starr's name. You never could. Us-all tried. When things got too hard for Miss Ann she done adopt little Miss Cyn—that chile has considerable brightened up Miss Ann, but Lord! she never was the same after that summer, and I hold, and allus shall, that Starr wasn't what we-all thought him at first. A man don't go dying off in the hills for folks what hadn't any call upon him, lest he has a reason for doing so."

Moore loved to talk. Some one always has to be the orator of a club, and Tansey, self-elected, filled this position in the circle around the old stove. Greeley was bored. Past history did not concern him and Moore's opinions he ignored. He had not been listening closely, for his thoughts would, in spite of him, follow the ramshackle buggy down The Way.

"She had a right pleasant look and manner," he pondered. "I reckon she'll get some fun out of her job, no matter what that job is."

CHAPTER III

It was something of a jog to The Hollow people to find Miss Lowe actually settled at Trouble Neck. They had looked upon the possibility of her coming as an evil which threatened but might be averted. She had come, however; had actually bought the cabin from Smith Crothers, and fitted it up in a manner never known to cabin folks before.

Through all the pleasant summer days the broad door of the little house stood invitingly open and flowers had grown up as if by magic in the tiny front yard. A few choice hens and roosters strutted around the rear of the cabin quite at home, and a bright yellow cat purred and dozed on the tiny porch by day and slept in the lean-to bedroom by night.

"She takes a mighty heap of trouble to hide her tracks," Norman Teale confided to Tansey Moore; "but spy is writ large and plain all over her. I put it to you, Moore, would any one that didn't have to, come to Trouble Neck?"

Tansey thought not, decidedly.

"And did you ever hear on a woman doctor?"

Again Tansey shook his head.

"That woman's bent on mischief," Teale went on. "I got chivalry and I've got honour for womanhood in my nater when womanhood keeps to its place, but I tell you, Moore, right here and now, if that young person from Trouble Neck comes loitering 'round my business, I'm going to treat her like what I would a man. No better; no worse."

Moore considered this a very broad and charitable way of looking upon what was, at best, a doubtful business.

But Marcia Lowe did not seek Teale out, and if his affairs interested her, she hid her sentiments in a charming manner. Her aim, apparently, was to reach the women and children. To her door she won Sandy Morley with the lure of money for his wares. The second time Sandy called he told her of his ambitions and she fired him to greater effort by telling him of her home state, Massachusetts.

"Why, Sandy," she explained, "when you are ready, do go there. In exchange for certain work they will make it possible for you to get an education. I know plenty of boys who have worked their way

through college with less than you have to offer. Get a little more money and learning, and then go direct to Massachusetts!"

Sandy's breath came quick and fast. Work was part of his daily life, but that it and education could be combined he had not considered. From that time on his aim became localized and vital.

"Perhaps I can help you a bit?" Miss Lowe had suggested. She was often so lonely that the idea of having this bright, interesting boy with her at times was delightful.

"I'll—I'll bring all your vegetables to you if you will," Sandy panted. "I'll dig your garden and weed it. I'll——"

"Stop! stop! Sandy." Miss Lowe laughed, delighted. "If you offer so much in Massachusetts they will give you *two* educations. They're terribly honest folks and cannot abide being under obligations."

So Sandy came; did certain chores and was given glimpses of fields of learning that filled him at first with alternate despair and exultation. He confided his new opportunity to Cynthia Walden and to his amazement that young woman greeted his success with anything but joy.

"I thought you'd be right glad," said Sandy, somewhat dashed. "I thought you wanted me to learn and get on."

"So I do," Cynthia admitted, "but I wanted to do it all for you, until you went away."

"What's the difference?" argued poor Sandy.

It was middle August before Marcia Lowe took her courage in her hands and went to see Miss Ann Walden. With city ways still asserting themselves now and again in her thought, she had waited for Miss Walden to call, but, apparently, no such intention was in the mind of the mistress of Stoneledge.

"Perhaps after a bit she will write and invite me up there," Marcia Lowe then pondered. But no invitation came, and finally the little doctor's temper rose.

"Very well," she concluded, "I'll go to her and have it out. I'm not a bit afraid, and, besides, Uncle Theodore's business is too important to delay any longer. She doesn't know, but she *must* know."

So upon a fine afternoon Marcia Lowe set forth. Grim determination made her face stern, and she looked older than she really was. When she passed the Morleys' cabin she smiled up at Mary, who was standing near by, but the amiable mistress ran in and slammed the door upon the passerby. A little farther on she came to Andrew Townley's home and she paused there to speak to the old man sunning himself by the doorway.

"You certainly do favour your uncle, Miss Marching," Andrew mumbled; he had heard the stranger's claim of relationship and trustingly accepted it; but her name was too much for him.

"Since you come I git to thinking more and more of Parson Starr. He was the pleasantest thing that ever happened to us-all."

"Oh! thank you, Mr. Townley!"

So lonely and homesick was the little doctor that any word of friendliness and good-will drew the tears to her eyes. They talked a little more of Theodore Starr and then the walk to Stoneledge was continued.

Marcia Lowe had never seen any of the family except from a distance, and she dreaded, more than she cared to own, the meeting now. Still she had come to set right, as far as in her lay, a bitter wrong and injustice, and she was not one to spare herself.

Her advance had been watched ever since she left Andrew Townley's cabin, but in reply to her timid knock on the front door, Lily Ivy responded with such an air of polite surprise that no one could have suspected her of deceit.

"Certainly, ma'am, Miss Ann is to home. She am receiving in the libr'y. Rest your umbril' on the table, ma'am, and take a char. I'll go and 'nounce you to Miss Ann."

Left alone, Marcia did not know whether she wanted to laugh or cry. The brave attempt at grand manner in the half-ruined house was pitiful as well as amusing.

"This way, ma'am. My mistress done say she'll receive you in the libr'y."

And there, in solemn state, sat the mistress of the Great House. She, too, had had time to prepare for the meeting, and she was sitting gauntly by the west window awaiting her guest.

"It was right kind of you to overlook my neglect," Miss Walden began, pointing to a low chair near her own, "but I never leave home and I am an old woman."

The soft drawl did not utterly hide the tone of reflection on the caller's audacity in presuming to enter a home where she was not wanted.

The window was almost covered by a honeysuckle vine and a tall yellow rose bush; the afternoon breeze came into the room heavy with the rare, spicy fragrance, and after a moment's resentment at the measured welcome, Marcia said cheerfully:

"You see—I had to come, Miss Walden. I've only waited until I could become less a shock to you. You believe I *am* Theodore Starr's niece, do you not? I know there are all sorts of silly ideas floating around concerning me, but I need not prove my identity to you, need I?"

The winning charm of the plain little visitor only served to brace Miss Walden to greater sternness.

"I have no doubt about you. You are very like your uncle, Theodore Starr."

"Then let me tell you what I must, quickly. It is very hard for me to say; the hardest thing I ever had to do—but I must do it!"

Ann Walden sank back in her stiff armchair.

"Go on," she said, and her eyes fastened themselves on the visitor. She wanted to look away, but she could not. She was more alive and alert than she had been in many a year—but the reawakening was painful.

"I only knew—the truth after mother died. I found a letter among her things. Why she acted as she did I can never know, for she was a good woman, Miss Walden, and a just one in everything else. You may not understand; we New Englanders are said to love money, but we must have it clean. I am sure mother meant nothing dishonest—we had our own little income from my father and—the other was not used to any extent—I have made it all up."

"I—do not understand you!"

This was partly true, but the suffering woman knew enough to guide her and put her on the defence.

"There was a will made before my uncle came here—in that he left everything to mother and me in case of his death, but the letter changed all that—he wanted you to have the money!"

"Your mother was quite right!" the sternness was over-powering now; "the will was the only thing to carry out. I could not possibly accept any money from Theodore Starr nor his people."

For a moment Marcia Lowe felt the shrinking a less confident person feels in the presence of one in full command of the situation. She paused and trembled, but in a moment her sense of right and determination came to her aid. Her eyes flashed, and with some spirit she said:

"You are only speaking for yourself now."

"For whom else is there to speak?"

"The child!"

Had Marcia dealt Ann Walden a physical blow the result could not have been different. Horrified and appalled, the older woman gasped:

"What child?"

"My uncle's and your sister's! Miss Walden, you could not expect me to believe the story that the people tell around here. You perhaps think your sister was not married to my uncle—but I trust him. I think you and I, no matter what has passed, owe it to this little girl to do the best we can for her. I have left my home to help; I have no one besides her in the world—please consider this and be forgiving and generous. Oh! what is the matter?"

For Ann Walden had risen and stood facing Marcia with such trembling anger that the younger woman quailed.

"I wish you to leave my house!"—the words came through clenched teeth—"leave it and never return."

"If you resist me in this way," anger met anger now, "I will have to consult a lawyer. I mean to carry out my uncle's desires; I will not be party to any fraud where his child is concerned. I hoped that you and I might do this together for her—but if I have to do it alone I am prepared to do so. I have brought the letter I found among my mother's things—may I read it to you?"

"No!" Ann Walden stared blankly at the firm face almost on a level with her own, for Marcia Lowe had risen also.

"You—you cannot forgive us for the long silence? But at least do me this justice: I came when I could—as soon as possible. I was ill—oh! Miss Walden can you not understand how hard this is for me to do? Think how I must put my own mother at your mercy—my own, dear mother!"

Only one thought held Ann Walden—would her visitor never go? The few moments were like

agonized hours; the shock she had received had been so fearful that for a moment she was stunned, and before the true significance overwhelmed her she must be alone!

"I—have nothing to forgive. You and yours, Miss Lowe, have nothing to do with me and mine—you must indeed—go! I cannot talk of—the past to you. You—have made a great mistake—a fearful mistake. My sister has—has nothing——"

The stern young eyes compelled silence.

"I—I wish you would let me help you—for the love you once had for Uncle Theodore," said Marcia Lowe; "you must have forgiven your sister when she told you; can you not forgive him?"

"Stop! You do not know what you are talking about——" Vainly, almost roughly, the older woman strove to push the knife away that the ruthless, misunderstanding young hands were plunging deeper and deeper into the suddenly opened wound.

"Oh! yes, Miss Walden, I know—here's the letter!"

She held it out frankly as if it must, at least, be the tie to bind them.

"I spoke perhaps too quickly, too unexpectedly; but it is as hard for me as it is for you. I thought you would know that. I could not talk of little things when this big thing lay between us. It is our—duty."

Pleadingly, pitifully, the words were spoken, but they did not move the listener. Hurriedly, as if all but spent, Ann Walden panted:

"I reckon it is because you are young you cannot understand how impossible it is for you and me to—be friends. You must forgive me—and you must go!"

"But the money!"

"What money?" Something bitterer and crueller than the money had taken the memory of that away.

"Uncle Theodore's money. You see it is not mine—neither you nor I should keep it from Uncle Theodore's——"

"Oh! go, go; I cannot talk to you now. I will see you again—some other day—go!"

At last the look in Ann Walden's face attracted and held Marcia Lowe's mercy. She forgot her own trouble and mission; her impetuosity died before the dumb misery of the woman near her. Realizing that she could gain nothing more at present by staying, she placed the letter upon the table as she passed out of the room and the house.

For a few moments Ann Walden stood and looked at the vacant spot whence the blow had come. The restraint she had put upon herself in Marcia Lowe's presence faded gradually; but presently a sensation of faintness warned the awakening senses of self-preservation. Slowly she reached for the letter which lay near—no one must ever see that! She would not read it, but it must be destroyed. And even as she argued, Ann Walden's hot, keen eyes were scanning the pages that unconsciously she had taken from the envelope.

The date recalled to her the time and place—it had been written that summer when Theodore Starr had gone to the plague-stricken people back in the hills; after he had told her they, he and she, could never marry; that it had all been a mistake. How deadly kind he had been; how grieved and—honest! Yes, that was it; he had seemed so honest that the woman who listened and from whose life he was taking the only beautiful thing that had ever been purely her own, struggled to hide her suffering, and even in that humiliating hour had sought to help him. But—if what had been said were true, Theodore Starr had not been honest with her; even that comfort was to be dashed from her after all these years. She remembered that he had said that while he lived he would always honour her, but that love had overcome him and conquered him. Queenie had always seemed a child to him, he had told her, until the coming of Hertford, and the sudden unfolding of the child into the woman. He could no longer conceal the truth—in his concealment danger lay for them all, and his life's work as well. When he came back—they would all understand each other better! But he had not come back and then, when she had discovered poor Queenie's state, it was for Starr as well as herself that she sternly followed the course she had. She struck a blow for him who no longer could speak for himself—for he had died among his people.

"I loved him better than life," those were the words Ann Walden had spoken to her sister in that very room twelve years ago. The air seemed ringing with them still; "loved him as you never could have; but he loved you; he told me so, and because of my love for him—I hid what I felt. I could have died to make him happy, but you—why, you were another man's idle fancy while you lured Theodore Starr to his doom. The only thing you have left me for comfort and solace is this: I can now keep his dear, pure memory for my own, and love it to the day of my death."

Ann Walden looked quickly toward the chimney-place. There Queenie had stood shrinking before her like a little guilty ghost. She seemed to be standing there still listening to the truth, and avenging

herself at last.

"Hertford is the father of your unborn child. You——"

And then it was that Queenie had fallen! had hit her head against the andirons and was never again to suffer sanely. After that there were the dreary weeks when the changed girl had paced the upper balcony with her poor, vacant face set toward the hills. The pitiful story of her weak lungs was started, the journey to the far away sanatorium, which really ended in the cabin of a one-time slave of the family twenty miles away! The hideous secret; the journeys by night and that last terrible scene when the blank mind refused to interpret the agony of the riven body and the wild screams and moans rang through the cabin chamber. Alone, the old black woman and Ann Walden had witnessed the struggle of life and death, which ended in the birth of Cynthia and the release of Queenie Walden.

The four following years were nightmares of torture to Ann Walden. After bringing her sister's body home from the supposed sanatorium she lived a double life. As often as she dared she went to that cabin in the far woods. She carried clothes and food to her old servant and the little secreted child. She watched with fear-filled eyes the baby's development, and to her great relief she knew at last that no mark of mental evil had touched her! Then, when the old black woman died she brought the baby thing home; had explained it according to her knowledge of the people; they would believe what she told them—but this stranger who had left the letter—she had not been deceived for one moment!

The letter! While she had been reliving the past the words were entering her consciousness. What she knew she passed unheedingly; what she was yet to know rose as if to strike her by its force.

"I had believed that love," so Starr had written to his sister, "as men know it, was not for me; my work, my joy in the service had always seemed my recompense. I had asked Ann Walden to marry me because I felt sure of myself, and in this lonely place I needed the companionship, the wisdom and the social position her presence would give to this great work of lifting up those worthy of recognition. Then came the day when I saw the little sister—Ann Walden's and mine, for we had always called her that—a woman! She cast her childhood off like a disguise—I saw another man look at her and I saw her look at him! Something was born in me then after all the slow, sombre years—and I wanted—love! I think a madness overcame me, for, blinded and almost beside myself—I spoke to her—that child-woman, and told her how it was with me. She is the sort that wins your heart secrets by a glance of her tender eyes. And then——" Then came sharp words; disconnected and flashing like flame; but Ann Walden read on while her brain beat and ached.

"It was I she loved. I had aroused her—she saw only one man in the world—me!

"She lay in my arms—I kissed her.

"I took her with me on a long drive through the mountains—there was a dying woman and my dear love carried the poor soul unto the parting of the ways with such divine tenderness as I had never before beheld. She sang and almost played with her until the sad creature forgot her death pangs. It was the most beautiful thing I ever saw—that dying hour was perhaps the only joyous hour the woman ever had known—and my sun-touched darling gave it to her!

"We were married on our way home. I wanted to speak at once, but Queenie pleaded. She did not wish, just in her own first moment of joy, to hurt the sister who was mother to her as well as sister. I listened, but I realized that my child-wife was afraid! That was it. With all her brave, splendid characteristics, Ann Walden is one to call forth fear. I felt myself shrinking hourly from confession. She is all judge; she can be just, but she cannot, I think, be merciful. Hers it is to carry out the law, not sympathize with those who fall under the law. She makes cowards of us all! She is too detached to reach humanity, or for humanity, erring, sinning humanity, to reach her.

"The call came—I had to come to the sick and dying. I made half peace with myself by telling Ann Walden that I could not carry out our compact. I told her, what is the hardest thing for any man to tell a woman—that I did not love her. I could not love her! and that it was her sister I loved. I meant to explain everything later and confess—I expected to be back in a day or so—but I am here still and the chances are I must stay on for a long time, and I may lose my life; conditions are terrible, and only once a week a doctor comes!

"She, Ann Walden, is not the hard judge alone. I must not give you a wrong impression. When I told her, she shielded me against myself; would not let me suffer as I should—she excused me. She, to excuse me! But if anything happens to me—I want all my money to go to Ann Walden. By this act she will understand my trust in her and, accepting it, she will do for Queenie what otherwise she could not do—and do it more wisely than my darling could for herself. It must be the common tie, this little fortune.

"I am feeling very ill.

"I fear—my time—has come!

"I recall—there was no marriage certificate, but the service was performed by——"

Ann Walden dropped the blurred sheet and steadied herself against the window. Evidently Theodore Starr had forgotten the name, or perhaps the deadly dizziness of the disease had overcome him. It did not matter. Ann Walden, like Marcia Lowe, had no doubts—but his sister evidently had had,

and suddenly a bitter hatred filled Ann Walden's soul toward the dead woman she had never known.

"She who should have known him best," Ann Walden's thoughts ran burningly on—"she to doubt him and let all the years of injustice go on!"

And then the eyes of the tormented woman turned fearfully toward the far side of the room. The late afternoon was turning into twilight and the corner by the chimney was dim and full of shadow.

"And I—who should have trusted Queenie—I who knew her best of all—I let her suffer——"

The wraith by the hearth had her full revenge at that hour, for Ann Walden bowed beneath the memories that crowded upon her; the vivid, torturing memories. That last night—when the moans and calls of the dumb mind strove to express the agony of the poor body! The solemn hour when God entrusted a living soul to a mother incapable of realizing anything but the mortal pangs that were costing her her life!

The child dishonoured, shamed and hidden because of—misunderstanding. Humbly Ann Walden confessed that Theodore Starr's sister was no more to blame than she herself.

Outside a sudden shower had come over Lost Mountain; the room in which Ann Walden stood became dark and still, then a sharp crash shook the house—something white fell upon the hearth; ashes, long dead ashes were blown hither and yon by a rising wind. With a wild cry of—"My God!" Ann Walden sank in a chair. Wornout nerves could stand no more.

When she recovered consciousness she was lying upon the old horsehair sofa in the library. Ivy had gone on an errand, but Cynthia stood over her and the girl's face shocked the reviving woman into alertness. Familiarity had dulled her in the past, but now she saw the expression and outline of Theodore Starr's features bending near her.

"Oh!" she moaned shudderingly. "Oh! oh!"

"Aunt Ann, it is little Cyn! The tree by the smoke-house was struck, but we-all are safe."

"I must be alone!" Then gropingly and tremblingly Ann Walden got upon her feet.

"The letter," she panted, "the letter."

"Here it is—I found it on the floor where you fell."

At the time Cynthia was too distressed to attach any importance to the matter, but she recalled the incident later.

"Yes, yes!" Ann Walden gripped the closely written sheets; "and now I—I want to be alone!"

CHAPTER IV

Sandy Morley came out of his shed and turned his bruised and aching face to Lost Mountain. It was very early, and the first touch of a red morn was turning the mists on the highest peak to flaming films of feathery lightness.

There had been a desperate quarrel in the Morley cabin the night before, and Sandy, defending his father for the first time in his life against the assault of Mary, had reaped the results of the woman's outraged surprise and resentment.

"You!" she had shrieked, rushing at him; "you, taking on the man-trick, are you? Then——" and the heavy blow dealt him carried Sandy to the floor by its force. Later he crept to his shelter and suffered the growing pangs of maturity. The words of Mary had roused him more than the hurt she had inflicted. No longer could he submit—why? All the years he had borne the shame and degradation, but of a sudden something rose up within him that rebelled and defied. He no longer hated as he had in his first impotent childish heat; he seemed now to be a new and changed creature looking on with surprise and abhorrence at the suffering of some one over whom he had charge and for whom he was responsible. The some one was Sandy Morley, but who was this strange and suddenly evolved guardian who rose supreme over conditions and demanded justice for the hurt boy lying on the straw mattress in the wretched outhouse?

All night, sleeping only at intervals, Sandy Morley strove to understand. Morning found him still confused and tormented. He went outside and with aching eyes looked upon the cloud. Presently, as if ordered by a supreme artist, the rosy films parted majestically and Lost Mountain, stern and grim, stood clearly defined! Just then a bird-note broke the mystic stillness; it filled The Hollow with triumphant joy—it became part of the tumult of Sandy's soul compelling the discord to lose itself in harmony.

"I must go away!" Sandy murmured as if in prayer. "I must go away!" The new man into which he was merging felt its way cautiously through the brightening prospect. "I must go away, now."

That was it. The years of preparation were past. Little or much, he must take his savings and go forth! For a moment a soul loneliness possessed him.

"Where?" he faltered in that rosy quiet that was moved and stirred by the bird-song. "Where?" There was only one place on earth to him beyond his mountain home—he must go to that state which recognized so generously the yearning for knowledge he must go to Massachusetts! But now that the hour had arrived he found his day-dreamings of the past were as vague and unreliable as guides as his idea of heaven, that state of mind which Marcia Lowe always insisted was here and now, or nowhere at all!

Well, he would go to the Cup-of-Cold-Water Lady and get a more concise conception of heaven and Massachusetts, if possible.

Sandy turned his bruised face to earth as he reached this decision; like a condemned man on his last earthly day, he set about the doing of the unimportant but necessary duties that lay between the dawn and the night. With no joy did Sandy Morley anticipate his great change. He only realized the "call," and in a subtle, compelling way he felt himself driven by forces, quite beyond his control, to bear himself bravely.

He filled the rusty pail with water from the spring down by the Branch; he brought wood and lighted a fire on the ashy hearth before which, the night before, the quarrel had waged. Having finished the homely tasks he gathered some scraps of ash cakes and bacon together and made for himself a breakfast, which he washed down with some thin, sour buttermilk. After this he went to his shed and arrayed himself in a suit of clothes, old but decent, that some one at The Forge had charitably given him; then, packing a basket with some luscious late peas and berries that he had been fostering for weeks in a tiny garden patch back of the cabin, he started out on his last day's journey on the hills for many and many a year. He had thought it out clearly while he was performing his tasks. He would bargain and sell; he would draw Miss Lowe out as to particulars of direction, cost and details; he would bid her good-bye—she a stranger who had been so kind to him! He would miss her teaching and guidance; miss her strange inspiration of joyousness and courage. After leaving Trouble Neck he must see Cynthia Walden and tell her that the great hour had come! Then there was to be the final scene. He was going to ask his father to go away with him! The quarrel of the night before had decided him. Together he and his father might make a place for themselves beyond the touch of Mary and the sound of her terrible voice. Tenderly and with a beating heart Sandy recalled the old, old days—the days when Martin sang, and prayed his wonderful prayers to a little happy child. Yes, they would go away together and then nothing would be quite so hard or impossible.

Thus arranged, Sandy began his day. He sold his basketful at the first house—a place five miles away where some strange artist-folks were boarding. Sandy got a great deal of money there, for not only did the mistress of the house pay him well, but a man and woman gave him a dollar for posing for them while they sketched him. Reaching Trouble Neck, Sandy met his first setback. Miss Lowe was away; the little cabin was closed and on the door was pinned a scrap of paper which confided to any chance visitor that the owner would be gone for several days. Marcia Lowe had set out for that far place among the hills where her uncle's body had been laid years before. She had gone to make it beautiful, when she located it, and the task was to take longer than she knew.

Sandy sat down upon the doorstep dejected and disappointed. He had depended more than he knew upon what he felt sure the little doctor could give him, and yet, not for a moment, did he contemplate waiting for her return—his order had been given. As his great-grandfather had taken up arms unquestioningly long ago, so Sandy now responded to this later command. He must go that night!

After resting for a few moments and struggling against the dreariness that was spreading through his thought he roused and set forth for the Walden place. Having no legitimate business at the back door of Stoneledge, the boy had no intention of braving old Ivy's sombre stare or the chance meeting with the mistress of the Great House, but there were other ways of communicating with Cynthia besides the back door and the vicarious personalities of those who ruled over her. Youth has its own methods of telegraphy, and the hills people are master hands at secrecy. There was a certain bird-note for which Sandy was famous: a low but shrill pipe that had startled old Ivy more than once and was nearly always successful in causing Cynthia to materialize in due time. So Sandy, from the shelter of trees back of the Stoneledge smoke-house, gave his peculiar and penetrating call. A second time he gave it and then Ivy issued forth and, cocking her weird old head on one side, listened. A long silence followed. The hot afternoon palpitated and throbbed in The Hollow, but the hidden bird did not break it by another call. At last it became evident that Cynthia was beyond the reach of her slave's desires, and so poor Sandy gathered together his flagging strength and spirits and turned toward home with the forlorn hope that he might meet Cynthia on the way there. Now that the parting time had come he knew that the girl was his only real friend on earth in the sense that youth knows a friend. They were near each other, though so far apart. They spoke a common tongue and there were hours when the girl of the Great House and Sandy of the cabin reached across the gulf of tradition and class distinction and opened their souls to each other. During such moments Cynthia had awakened and called forth Sandy's dormant imagination. Through Cynthia he had been shown the beauty of the flowers; been taught the note of the birds and the thrill of life under winter's cold and hard wing. Poverty sharpened the senses of The Hollow people alike in hovel and great house; it drove Miss Ann and Cynthia into close quarters with Ivy and her weird superstitions; it drove Sandy and his kind into dangerous contact with each

other, for behind closed doors and in the semi-darkness of the one-windowed cabins evil traits grew apace and the cold and the poor food were fuel for passion and hate.

But no little enchantress met lonely Sandy on his homeward way.

"I reckon I must—go without!" he muttered with something much like a sob in his voice. Not even then did he dream of procrastinating. He was hungry and weary and when he reached the cabin he paused to eat again before going to the rock with his day's earnings. Mary, Molly, and Martin were absent, but that was no new thing. Sandy meant to hide his money, come back and speak to his father and then, by the dark of the moon, start out either with Martin or alone. Grimly the young, tired face set into stern lines; a paleness dimmed his freckles and a fever brightened his eyes, but the heat in his blood, now at the day's end, acted like a stimulant to his thoughts. No longer did he fear or doubt—he had passed that stage and, like a warrior reinforced and exhilarated, he began to whistle confidently and almost joyously. He meant to give Mary her share of his profits, but he would leave them in the box beside the stone that so long had hid his secret.

Over the Branch and up the hill to the woods went Sandy with an uplifted expression on his poor, bruised face and the dignity of his clothing adding a strange touch of age to him. Near the sacred spot he paused and the tune died on his lips. Some one or some thing was stirring just beyond, and, of a sudden, fear and past doubt drove the blood from his heart. His only thought was of Molly! All the years, perhaps, she had deceived and betrayed him. He had, like a coward, failed to count his money; to guard it as he should!

Creeping forward on hands and knees he made his way silently through the bushes. He knew the trick of the beasts; knew how to pad the underbrush beneath his hands before he trusted the weight of his body to it. When within a few feet of the spot whence the sound of moving came, Sandy started up and dashed with one bound into the open. His hands were spread wide with eagerness to grip that which had betrayed him, and so he came upon—Cynthia Walden! He fell back panting, when his brain, at last, interpreted for him what he saw. The girl sat with the tin box of money in her lap; the overturned stone beside her and the last rays of the hot sun filtering through the dogwood trees and pines upon her sweet, pale beauty. By a sharp trick of memory Sandy recalled how the dogwood blossoms one spring long past had looked like stars under the dark pines and now he thought that Cynthia's face was like the pale, starry blossoms. He was always to remember her so when, in the hard years on before, she was to come to him in fancy and longing. A pure girl-face, radiant with hope and bravery, touched, just then, with startled fear which faded into laughing triumph as she recognized Sandy.

"You thought it was—Molly?" she whispered, holding her hands clasped over the box in her lap. "So did I. Once I found her here—found her hunting under one rock after another. I gave her a lick on the back I reckon she has always remembered." The slow, sweet laugh rippled out—"Molly is mighty afraid of me."

Then Sandy managed to command his thought and motions. He stepped to Cynthia and knelt beside her.

"I am going away," he said softly.

"Yes, I know. When?"

"To-night."

"To-night?" Fourteen and twelve have no perspective—everything is final and vital to them. The past has been but a witchery of preparation in a fairy tale of wonder and delight; the actual experience of action found them both unfitted for the ordeal, but in each boy and girl is the potential man and woman, and Sandy and Cynthia met the present moment characteristically.

"I dreamed two dreams," said the girl with a shade of mysticism in her tones. "Once I saw you going down The Way, Sandy, with the look on your face that you now have. I stood by the big pine just where the trail ends in The Way, and watched you. Then I dreamed last night that I stood by the big pine again and you were coming up The Way a-waving to me like you knew I would be there. There was a look on your face—a new look—but I knew it, for I've seen it before in the Significant Room." Cynthia paused, for the question in Sandy's eyes held her.

"You know my story?" she said with her delicious laugh thrilling her listener; "the story part of my life?"

"Oh!" It came to Sandy then, in this strained, prosaic moment, the memory of Cynthia's fancy to set her little world in the frame of her "Pilgrim's Progress," the only book of fiction free to her. "Oh! yes, now I remember."

"Sandy, all these years I have tried and tried to make you fit in—but you wouldn't until—until last night. When it was right dark and still and everybody was sleeping, I went down into the old library—that's where Aunt Ann had the queer spell the day Miss Lowe came—the room is all dirty and full of ashes, for the chimney fell that afternoon; but right beside the fireplace there is an empty space on the wall that I've always saved for you!"

Cynthia had forgot the present in her fantastic play and she held Sandy as she always had before

by the trick of her fascination.

"Yes," he murmured; "there is your mother's picture and the old general's and the frame that holds your father's portrait—the father that no one knows about but you—and now—am I hanging in the Significant Room?"

Sandy was all boy now; the strange new dignity fell wearily from him—he was playing, after a hard lesson, with little Cyn.

"And what am I?" he asked, "what have you made me?"

"Oh! I did not make you, Sandy. You just were! The moonlight was streaming in through the window where the roses and honeysuckle are—it was a leafy moonlight and all ripply like dancing water. I was not afraid—I went right boldly up to—your picture, Sandy, and I knew you at once. You know in the Significant Room of my book it says there was a man in a cage; the man and his dream; and the man that cut his way through his enemies—the biggest of them all! But, oh! Sandy, mighty plain and fine I saw you like you were all three of the book folks. You were Sandy of the cage—and the cage was Lost Hollow! You were Sandy with your dream of helping us-all. Me, the po' lil' white trash in Crothers' factory—everybody! Then you were Sandy cutting your way through your enemies like the Hertfords are to your family; I heard Aunt Ann telling Ivy—and then right sudden I saw you hanging up in a gold frame with the ripply moonlight shining on you—— The Biggest of Them All!"

Sandy's eyes were brilliant and glittering; his breath came quick and hard, and to steady himself he whispered:

"I am going away—to-night!"

The vision vanished and Cynthia felt two large tears roll down her cheeks. They left no sorry stains upon the pale smoothness of the girl's skin; Cynthia's eyes could always hold a smile even when dimmed; her eyes were gray with blue tints and her straight, thick hair was the dull gold that caught and held light and shade. Some day she was going to be very handsome in an original and peculiar fashion, and Sandy unconsciously caught a glimpse of it now, and it disturbed him.

"I am going—to-night. I wonder if there is enough?"

He glanced at the box. "I have never counted it."

"Never counted it? I have counted it every week. That's because I am I, and you are you, Sandy. There's over thirty dollars."

At this Sandy gasped.

"I—reckon it will take me to Massachusetts," he said.

"I reckon it will take you to the world's end," Cynthia, the mystic exclaimed, "and back again!"

"Back again!" Sandy's imagination could not stretch past a certain limit.

"But you are coming back, Sandy?" A startled fear crept into the girl's eyes; "you promised!"

"I shall come back—yes!"

"Let us count the money together, Sandy."

Dishevelled dark head and smooth bright one bent close in the dimming light. There was a far-distant rumble of thunder, but neither heeded it; showers were almost daily occurrences, and excitement and concentration ran high. Suddenly Sandy started back and pointed to a small roll of bills—three one-dollar bills they were—but Sandy had never put a piece of paper money in the box!

"That!" he whispered hoarsely; "how did that get here?"

Too late Cynthia saw her mistake. All the small savings and sacrifices of her life she had exchanged that very day at the post-office for the three bills. Tod Greeley had picked out the cleanest and newest, and now they had betrayed her.

Sandy was on his feet at once, and a stern frown drew his brows together; the bruise on his cheek stung as the blood rushed to it, and then he waited.

Presently Cynthia rose to her feet and from her slim height faced Sandy on the level—eye to eye.

"I put it there!" defiance and pride touched the words, "it means as much to me as it does to you—the going away, I mean. I've thought it all out—you'll have to pay it back—pay it as I want it."

Sandy's mind worked more slowly; gropingly he strove to understand.

"How did you get it?" he asked relentlessly.

Cynthia laughed a little.

"Just scratches and pricks—it was great fun! I've been gathering the wool from the bushes under which the sheep go, for years and years; ever since you began to save, Sandy. Lily Ivy sold the wool to the darkies—and I got Mr. Greeley to change the pennies—for bills. It is all mine, every bit!"

A mist rose to Sandy's eyes—it almost hid that pure flower-like face shining under the dark trees.

"You mustn't be mean, Sandy; besides, you are to pay it all back."

"How?" That word was all Sandy could master for a sharp pain in his throat drove all else he meant to say back.

"Why, you are going to set me free—you must marry me!"

Like a child playing with fire Cynthia heedlessly spoke these words. They had no deeper significance to her than the lilt of a world-old song. Marriage was the end-all and consummation of her magic stories and, in this case, it had simply been a trifle more difficult to consider on account of the social difference between Sandy and her. However, that had been overcome by the wand of imagination. Sandy would evolve into something so peculiarly splendid that the chasm could be bridged!

The effect of Cynthia's words upon Sandy was tragic. He closed his eyes in order that he might shut out the hurting power of her face and commanding eyes—but between the lids and his vision the girl mocked him—he could not escape her!

The night before his manhood had been stung to life by Mary's cruelty; it was fanned into live flame now by the childish tenderness of this girl so near to womanhood that the coming charm and sweetness glorified her. Then she touched him and a wave of delicious pain coursed through his body.

"How did—this happen?" A finger lightly passed over the bruise on his cheek. He could not answer.

"I know! But they couldn't hurt the you of you, Sandy. I see the bigness shining through everything. Why do you keep your eyes shut?"

Sandy opened his eyes desperately and saw only the child until eye met eye again, and then the vision of what Cynthia foretold shook him once more.

"My head—spins," he said vaguely; "the day's heat made it ache."

"You will take my money, Sandy?"

"Yes."

"And you will come back and—marry me?"

"I'll come back and—and——"

"Will you marry me, Sandy, like they do in books?"

"If—if—that is the best way, yes."

"Oh! it always is! It's a mighty fine way, because then no one can—make you do things. I shall make you do whatever I choose, Sandy—will you mind?"

"No."

"You know in my book, Sandy, there is a Madam Bubble and I'm making myself like her. You can make yourself into anything, I reckon, Sandy, if you just *will*, and dream about it. Listen to me!" Cynthia had Sandy by the shoulders now in frank, playful mood. "I am tall and comely—I looked up the word, and it says it means to be agreeable and good-looking. Well, I'm good-looking—or I'm going to be. Then the book says Madam Bubble speaks smoothly and smiles at the end of a sentence. I've tried and tried and now I can smile that way. Look, Sandy!"

Again Sandy forced himself to fasten his eyes on the sweet, tender mouth.

"I love to smile, Sandy."

Suddenly the girl's gay tone changed; she came back to grim facts with a catch in her voice.

"How I shall miss you, Sandy. The woods will be right empty—till you come again! I shall make believe find you on the hills even when I know you are not here, but always I will be able to see you in the Significant Room! I'm going to study and make myself fit for you—I shall be right busy. I am going to ask Aunt Ann to let me learn of the little doctor. I shall study the books you have and—it won't seem long, Sandy!"

The brave attempt at cheer, the tender renunciation in the soft voice, wrung Sandy's heart.

"I'm sorry I hated the little doctor for teaching you, Sandy. She helped you—to—to come back quicker, only I did not know then. She'll help me now, I reckon, to be ready for you. Sandy, I just couldn't see you go down The Way! You stand here like you were going to stay on forever and I'll run

down the trail. I won't look back once, Sandy, but—kiss me good-bye."

It was the little Cyn of the past playful days who pleaded so pathetically—forgetting caste and dividing line. The little Cyn who had always clung to her comrade when danger or fear threatened; but behind the childish words rang the woman's alluring sweetness—the woman little Cyn was some time to be. By a mighty effort Sandy Morley bent and kissed the pretty upturned mouth. The rough, unlovely clothing could not disguise the dignity of the stiff, boyish form; the bluish bruise on his face grew darker as the hot blood surged through it, but the clear, boyish eyes were frank and simple at last as the:

"Good-bye, Cynthia!" rang sharply.

There was one look more, full of brave sorrow, then Cynthia turned abruptly and ran like a wild thing of the woods into the shadow of the pines.

Sandy stood and watched her, with his thin face twitching miserably, until the sound of her going died away; then he groaned and bent to pick up the box of money that had lain unheeded while bigger things had been conceived and born. Slowly, mechanically he counted the small fortune to the last piece, then he placed two half dollars in the box and left it where any one could easily find it. Poor Sandy was beyond suffering now, or indeed beyond any sensation except that of dull action. His head was aching excruciatingly; fever throbbed in his body and a heavy weariness overcame him. He would rest before he went to his father!

Sinking to the ground he leaned against the tree under which Cynthia had stood and, for a moment, lost consciousness.

CHAPTER V

"So you've come home to be fed, eh?"

Martin Morley slunk into a chair and eyed the woman by the cook-stove ingratiatingly.

"I sho' have," he replied; "it smells like ash cakes, and I've brought a bucket of buttermilk from ole Mis' Walden's place. She certainly is a techersome woman but a powerful good manager."

"Where's the buttermilk?"

"Outside the do'!"

"Run and fetch it, Molly."

The child, glaring at Martin, sprang to do her mother's bidding and as she passed Morley he seemed to note, for the first time in his life, her fantastic beauty. And then Morley stared after her—she looked like *his* mother! With the thought a blush of shame rose to his thin, sallow face.

His mother! Between his mother and him lay a black abyss. What right had anything, holding part in that shadow, to look like his mother? He arose and almost snatched from the child the pail she had brought in.

"Hyar!" he cried, "let me take that, you're slopping it over the floor. Whar's yo' brother?"

With this Mary Morley turned from her task with hot, blazing face? She had been handsome once—but the fleeting beauty was gone.

"Sho'! *whar's* that blessed son of yours?" Mary screamed. "You better go and find out. Do you know what the brat has been doing all these years? Years, I say! While we-all have been slaving and starving he's been saving up; cheating us-all out of his earnings. Eating us-all out of house and home while he—saved and glutted!"

Martin stared at the woman as if she were speaking a foreign language.

"Who—tole yo?" he asked vaguely, hoping by the question to clarify the moment's confusion.

"Molly, she don' keep her eye on him fo' years! It's under a stone beyond the Branch—dollars and dollars while we-all done without."

"Whar did he—get it?"

"He only gave us part of what he earned—he made us-all fools while he hid the rest."

This was too bewildering for Martin and he looked helplessly at the girl who had been informer. The bold little face of Molly confronted him with something like fear in it.

"He'll sho' kill me!" she whined, "him and that—that Cynthia Walden."

This latter betrayal was new to Mary Morley and she came forward angrily.

"None of your lying!" she commanded—"nobody's going to hurt you so long as you tell the truth. What has the Walden girl got to do with the stolen money?"

"She watched it! She licked me right smart once because I—tried to find out how much there was. She told me she'd kill me sho' if I let on and I ain't till to-day when ma said she'd send me down to Miss Lowe's to larn things if she only had money to buy me some shoes. Why should Sandy have that money and me no shoes?"

Why he yearned to lay the lash on the girl before him, Martin could not tell, but she filled him with savage anger. She looked so mean, so hard and—young! Then he tried to think it was Sandy with whom he was angered. He had left the boy to his own devices, to be sure, but—hidden money and the Walden girl aroused a sudden hot fear in him.

"You lie!" he cried in a tone that for many a day Mary, with her growing power over him, had not heard. "You-all lie; you're a lying lot. I'll find the boy——" Martin reached up and took down a lash whip which hung beneath an old rusted sword on the wall. "I'll find the boy and the truth, and by heaven! the sneak and liar, whoever he may be, will get a taste of this!" He snapped the lash sharply.

Molly shrank from his path and Mary gazed after him in sullen amazement. Led by some intuition, Martin strode down the path leading to the Branch and, just as he crossed the almost-dry stream bed, he saw, on the hill opposite, Sandy coming toward him. The boy stopped as he caught sight of his father and waited at the edge of the woods. His brief rest had refreshed him and the cool evening breeze, bearing a shower in its keeping, calmed his aching head and feverish body. Martin noticed how white and haggard the boy looked and some instinct warned him to hide the whip behind his back. When he reached Sandy the two stepped back to where a log lay across the path and upon that Martin dropped, while Sandy braced against a tree.

"Whar was yo' going?" asked Morley.

"Home, Dad. I wanted to see you—and then——"

"Well——"

"I'm going away!"

"Going away?"

"Come, too, Dad! Come and let us fight it out together. She——" The boy's eyes, haunted and fierce, turned toward the home place. "She don't belong to us or with us. I don't know how better to say it—but she don't. She won't mind; no one will mind after the first. I've got to go and—I want you! I've been saving and saving little by little for years—there's enough now and we can go to-night. Out beyond—somewhere—Dad, there's something better for us than—this. By and by we'll come back. We'll come and help——" and a sob choked the words; "we'll come and help all Lost Hollow. Somehow I feel—called!"

Martin Morley stared at the boy before him as though he saw a ghost. And indeed a ghost of the grim past did confront him. He saw himself as he once was ere his Inheritance was downed forever. He, too, had wanted to break away; get out to the free chance and the new hope.

"You can't do it!" he said in a faint voice to that ghost of himself standing opposite in the darkening shadows. "There's something as allus holds us-all from getting away. It began back there in grandfather's day—it's settled on us-all like a death grip."

Sandy listened as if already he was far and apart from all the sordid, little hampering things that made up the life of Lost Hollow.

"What did—grandfather do?" he asked, like one who had no special interest in the matter.

"It was my grandfather, he was the friend of Lansing Hertford. They said he betrayed his friend—but they-all lied. First it was a whisper, then in your grandfather's time they-all spoke louder. The lie took away the faith of men from us-all and—that ended it! The lie slinks low till some Morley raises his head and then it springs up and strikes him down."

"It will not strike me down!" Sandy, weak and forlorn, straightened against the tree with the darkness almost blotting him from the eyes fastened tenderly on his face, spoke firmly. "I'll kill the lie whatever it was! What did they say, Dad?"

Never before had Sandy cared. He knew there was something lurking in the past that caused his father to slink from the mountain people, caused the men and women to avoid and shun him, but it had always existed. It was part of Lost Hollow and the Morley fate.

Then, alone with the last of his race, Martin Morley told the old story that had sapped the vitality of his family. Such a small, mean thing it seemed to have downed the once good stock! But in a place where tradition thrives on starvation, lack of ambition and misunderstanding, it had done its work. As

Morley drawled the ancient wrong to light, as he eased his soul of the burden and so shared it with his boy, his eye brightened and he sat straighter upon the fallen log for—at its completion—Sandy laughed!

"It was this—er—way. In them days us-all and the Hertfords was equals. The plantation lying off to the east of the old Hertford home place belonged to us-all"—many and many were the quarts of berries and bushels of nuts Sandy had gathered from there!—"but it slipped away—it's all gone years past. My grandfather and Lansing Hertford was close friends—none closer. They fought and loved side by side till Hertford—he got some kind of government order to go to furrin' parts a mighty distance from Lost Hollow. Some time after he went my grandfather followed on a pleasure trip—a pleasure trip, Sandy, think of that! He went away for pleasure! His pockets full of money and him right well fixed! On his travels he stopped and called on Hertford in them furrin' parts and Hertford he gave to grandfather a mighty precious bottle of stuff to bring back home to a big merchant down Lynchburg way. What happened the Lord only knows, Sandy, but when the merchant opened the bottle there wasn't nothing but water in it! No one ever spoke out in grandfather's day—they dassent. He was a mighty proud and upperty man, but a whisper and a nudge can do the work, and little by little grandfather was pushed down and out. In my father's time they spoke louder—they don' said how grandfather had sold the precious stuff before he came back; Lord, Sandy, I leave it to you, son, would he have come if he had done that low-down, mean trick?"

"No!" Sandy breathed the word like a hiss, and in the darkness and his weakness he felt the poison of the lie stealing into his thought, but he flung his head up proudly. "No! No!" he repeated clearly and defiantly; "No!"

"But they-all never trusted none of us again."

Sandy recalled his first visit to the Walden back door and his courage rose—they had learned to trust him even in Lost Hollow!

"Grandfather tried to rise up and failed. Father had his hope, but it was killed; I strove, Sandy, I sho' did, God knows! but you see how it has been with me. There's no use, son, we-all is damned!"

"I am—going to succeed!"

Sandy's voice struck through the gloom and stillness like a tangible blow. Martin started and gave a nervous laugh.

"Come home!" he said; "come home and bring your money with you. It will buy peace and pardon—them's better than any fool idees. And just remember this, Sandy Morley, we-all may be dastards and hard drinkers and what not, but we sho' don't desert women and children. They, down there, belong to us, son, and I expect you and me belong to them!"

Martin rose hurriedly and dropped the whip in the underbrush.

"Come on home, son!"

But Sandy did not move.

"It's come with me or I go alone, Dad."

The child was master of the man!

"You mean it? You mean you dare to disobey—me?"

"I'm going to—take my chance, Dad, out among—folks!"

"You—will—obey—me!" But even as the words were spoken, Martin felt how impotent they were.

"It's good-bye, Dad?"

It was good-bye. Both man and boy realized it. The night closed them in and the protecting trees sheltered them for a moment more.

"You po' little lad! you mean it?"

"Yes, Dad. Will you come?"

Martin turned one glance to where the light from his cabin door shone; then he groaned and said:

"No! God knows they do belong to me and I'm too old, too broken. The curse will get the best of you, boy, and you'll come trailing home. I'll be here—then! But——" And now Martin came closer and held him by the thin, trembling shoulders.

"Grandfather never done it! It was one man's word agin another's and the Hertfords have the luck—they allus had. Onct one of them come back"—and here Morley came closer to Sandy—"it was back in ole Miss Ann Walden's early days—he came back and something happened!" The whisper made Sandy creep with chill.

"What?" he asked, hoarsely.

"He done a mighty wrong to—Miss Ann's little sister, her that was called Queenie and looked it! We-all knew, but we-all stood by Miss Ann, even such as me stood by her! it was the only thing we-all could do for her. He got away! Then that po' chile took to watching from the balcony for him who never come—and then she went away—and by and by—the baby come home!"

"The baby?"

Sandy trembled and grew faint. He had eaten little and the burden being laid upon him was more than his strength could bear.

"Cynthia—the lil' girl with the face of Queenie, her mother?"

"No! No!" What he feared and abhorred the boy could not tell, but every instinct in him rose to do battle for the child—friend of his starved and empty life.

"It's your part, son, to stand by and never let on! We-all have done it; we-all took what Miss Ann said for gospel truth—and so must you!"

Then it was that Sandy laughed! The sound startled and shocked Martin and he almost reeled from before it, but strangely enough it seemed to brighten the heavy darkness.

"I don't believe it!" said Sandy between his bursts of laughter. "It's a bad dream—we-all must wake up."

"We can't fight them, Sandy!"

The poor legacy of hatred, wrong, loyalty, and despair was all that Martin Morley had to offer his boy as a weapon in the coming fight. The uselessness and weakness of it struck Sandy even then as he stood on the threshold of the new life. What did it matter? But it was the small thing, the old past that made up the shabby present of The Hollow. He was going to leave everything—even the old grudge—already the wider thought called him and gave a touch of daring to his laugh.

"Good-bye, Dad!"

And then Morley staggered toward Sandy and stretched his arms out to him. There was one thing more he had to offer!

"I—I want to tell you 'bout—yo' mother, Sandy—and me! No one ain't all bad; she was all good and yo' must lay hold o' the good. It will help if yo' can cling fast enough."

Oddly enough Sandy found himself against his father's breast without a sense of strangeness. Long years ago he had so lain in the strong arms—the recollection brought others in its wake; memories of safe, happy days—before Mary had come into their lives.

"I was older then her!" Martin spoke as if confessing to one who demanded the best and the truth at last. It was as though he felt that with the neglect and injustice he had of late shown the boy, there had been the holding back of his just due. "Yo' mother came from The Forge, she left a good home for me because she believed in me—she was terrible young and trusting and she didn't live to—find out! I was old enough to be her father, and I tried. God help me! I tried, but it was the old curse and not even the love I had for her could keep me up. But while she lived—it was better. The cabin was clean and tidy and she always sang about her work. She only stopped singing toward the last—when she got thinking about you she got solemner and stiller and then—you came! She—died the day after, and the blackness of it has shut the sunlight out of my life ever since, Sandy. I ought to have took my pay and made no fuss, and for a time I did. You and me lived on in the cabin with a woman's hand to help at the pinch, and for years I kept my head and yours above water. But when yo' are a man, son, you'll think kinder o' me than what yo' do to-day; a man's a man, and a lonely man is the worst of all—and so"—Martin's grizzly head was pressed against Sandy's—"and so—Mary came! She didn't ask much; she only wanted to live along with us-all in the cabin, but——" The dreary years seemed to spread before both man and boy in the silence which followed.

"Good-bye, Sandy, good-bye!" Martin choked and held the boy off at arm's length. "Yo' great-grandfather's name was Sandford Morley. I gave you the name for good luck—maybe it—will help. Good-bye!"

"Good-bye—dear old Dad!"

The one-time trust and affection flooded the moment and place. Quite simply and naturally they kissed and fell apart.

"Yo' go first, lad—yo' ain't got nothing to take?" Sandy shook his head.

"No, Dad. Good-bye. The money will help me on. Some day I'm coming back, Dad, coming back to help! Wait for me, Dad, and hold tight for me—so I'll be glad. Dear, dear, old Dad!"

Then Sandy turned and set his face toward The Appointed Way. It had been hard to see Cynthia flee from him, leaving him lonely and forsaken; but it was harder now to leave the sad, broken father in the desolate blackness of night—and enter the new, hard life alone! But with never a backward look Sandford Morley went to meet his fate.

Martin stood and listened until the last sound dropped into silence. Then he went back. It was pitchy dark when he reached the cabin. There were mutterings of thunder in the distance again, and the odour of scorched meal in the air. Mary, with Molly hanging to her, stood by the rough table in the middle of the room.

"Did you find him?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And you——"

Martin turned and the look on his face silenced the woman.

"That boy," he said slowly, "belongs to me, do you understand? Keep your tongue off him—your hands will never touch him again. He's mine and God Almighty's from now on. You've starve him and beat him for the last time and now—never speak his name again. He's mine and God's—and his mother's!"

Martin was spent. He dropped into a chair and, folding his arms upon the back, bent his head upon them.

Then Mary's wrath broke.

"He's yours, is he?" she sneered, shaking her child off and striding toward the bowed figure—"he's yours and God's and his mother's! He belongs to a fine lot, doesn't he, the ungrateful little beast? And I'm to keep my tongue off him, eh? Ain't I good enough for him and you and the high company you belong to?"

Resentment old and rankling rose fiercely. What ever she had been and was, Mary clung to Morley faithfully according to her light and she writhed under the sting of the implied insult hurled at her now.

Morley did not move. A sense of desolation swept over him. He was following the trail of the lonely boy in the dark and the woman's infuriated words meant no more to him than the rumbling thunder.

"Who do I and mine belong to?" the tense voice went on; "to the devil I suppose! Well, then, Mart Morley, you listen to me now. This child"—she turned fiercely toward Molly—"is yours, mine and the devil's. You're a lazy lot that left us to starve or live as we could, but the devil has taken a hand in the game, do you hear? I reckon he'll see us through and no thanks to you! From now on you take what you can get and keep your mouth shut or—the devil and I will know why."

And then Morley lifted his head. The look of misery on his pinched face should have moved one to pity, but it did not move the heart of Mary Morley.

"What do you mean?" he asked wonderingly. "I—I—didn't follow all—you said."

"And there's to be no questioning," the voice had grown louder. "No questions—just take or leave what's offered; go or stay as you please, but if that brat of yours, God's and his mother's, ever shows his face near me or mine—I'll"—she laughed hoarsely—"I'll make him a discredit to you all! Come move up and eat the food I provided and drink the sour milk that was given you!"

Morley rose unsteadily. He tried to speak and command the situation that in some subtle way had escaped his control, but he felt bereft and desperate. Now that Sandy was quite beyond recall, to whom could he turn? His strength and spirit were crushed and degraded—he moved up and sullenly took the plate and cup that were pushed toward him! Once he glanced at Molly. She leered at him over the edge of her mug and her eyes were hard and cruel.

Martin Morley pushed the untouched food from him and strode to the door of the cabin. The storm was coming up fast now. The lightning flashed and the thunder shook the house. Morley's heart ached for the boy struggling alone and defenceless through the night, but he was glad he was gone! Whatever lay before of defeat or victory—he thanked God that the last of his race had had courage at least to make an attempt for freedom.

The house grew very quiet; Mary had taken Molly to the loft overhead, and presently Martin heard her deep breathing and the nestling of the little girl in the straw mattress. The storm passed at last and above Lost Mountain a bright and glowing star showed through the parting clouds.

Cautiously Martin whistled and then waited. Night after night this was his habit. When the others had departed he called Sandy's dog, fed it from the scraps he could gather, and comforted himself with the companionship of the faithful collie that was too wise to tempt Providence when Mary was around.

Martin whistled a second time and then called softly: "Bob! oh—Bob!"

There was no response. Again the man spoke drawlingly and fondly: "Bob! oh, Bob!" Then he went to the shed near the cabin and looked in. That had been Sandy's bed-chamber since the rule of Mary had begun—how terribly empty and lonely it looked now! How afraid the boy must have been when at first he was driven from the home place to the deserted outhouse! He had never whimpered nor complained. "Poor little lad!" breathed Martin, and leaned against the doorway of the wretched room. There was the ragged mattress and the little nest where the slight boyish body had so often rested after

the day's cheerless toil. On the wall were pinned two or three bright pictures that had drifted somehow to the barren place; there was a pitiful little frayed jacket hanging on a nail and a pair of sadly torn shoes in one corner.

The objects caused Martin to groan as he beheld them. He suffered as he had not suffered since Sandy's mother died in his arms! Like a drowning man he relived the years—the hard years when he cared for and loved the baby-child alone in the cabin. He recalled the boy's sunny ways and sweet confidence, until the Woman Mary entered their life. He had been miserable, his lower nature craved its own, and Mary came! He had accepted and he had lost his self-respect; everything! There was nothing left; there would be nothing more until—the end came, unless Sandy succeeded. Just then the moon came over a bank of black clouds and lit The Hollow. It shone full on Lost Mountain and into the deserted shed where but lately Sandy had suffered and slept.

Martin Morley dropped on his knees and turned his haggard, pain-racked face upward. He had once been a religious man; had once been a leader in the little church at The Forge before he gave up hope and ambition. His prayers had been the pride and boast of the mountainside, but that was long ago, and his lips with difficulty formed, now, the sacred words.

"God-a'mighty!" he breathed, "take care of that lil' boy out there alone on The Way. Don't fail him on the big road; keep him to the end! I ain't asking You to do anything more for me; I've give up; but he's just started forth! Watch him; keep him; don't let the sins of his fathers or his enemies tech him. Amen!"

There was a note of command in the prayer. A demand for justice and protection for one who could not defend himself. Having worded his appeal, Martin rose stiffly from his knees and closed the door of the shed after him.

He had done what he could; he must bear the agony and remorse silently from now on. The old laziness and indifference returned slowly as he retraced his steps, and when he entered the silent cabin again he went naturally to the crooked stairs leading up to the loft. The door was closed and locked! Mary had, in this final fashion, proclaimed her independence.

Martin made no effort to force his way or question the proceedings; with a weary sigh he looked about, then went quietly to an old settle by the hearth. Taking off his wet and ragged coat he rolled it up and placed it for a pillow. Finally he stretched his aching body upon the improvised bed and fell into a restless slumber.

VI

The hot, breathless morning followed the storm through which Sandy departed, and fell like a moist blanket over Lost Hollow. Even up at Stoneledge the vapour rose and settled depressingly. Every door and window in the livable part of the house was set wide to any chance stirring of the dead air. Ann Walden in the sitting-room, old Lily Ivy in the kitchen, and the child Cynthia in the dim, shadowy library, in the unlivable part of the house, were listless and indolent. Presently the black woman, having completed the preparations of vegetables for the simple mid-day meal, came to the sitting-room door and contemplated her mistress with respectful eyes. Ivy was fully seventy years old, but she was straight and strong as a woman of fifty and as keen and capable. She had been carefully reared as a house servant in the days of slavery, and she had followed the downward fortunes of the Waldens with dignity and courage worthy a more glorious cause. Her spotless but much patched gown was almost covered by a huge white apron. She wore a kerchief and a turban-like head covering.

"Miss Ann, honey, a leak done sprung in the roof over the west chamber las' night. The rain am permeated through the flo' and marked the ceiling in de libr'y."

Cynthia, lying on the horsehair sofa of the dim room across the hall, looked up and saw the new and ugly spot over her head.

"Well, Ivy, shut the west chamber off from the rest of the house. We have far too much space to care for as it is. When I reconstruct Stoneledge it will be time enough to reopen the disused rooms."

Ivy bowed her head complacently. It had always been the same since the war. One room after another had been shut off until the wide halls dividing the house, the living-room, dining-room, kitchen and three upper bedrooms were all that were left for family use.

"Yes, chile." Then after a pause: "I don' hear how dat wretch, Black Jim, was stricken, by God-a'mighty's justice, on The Way, las' night. He was found plumb dead under a tree whar de lightnin' felled him."

Miss Ann raised her spectacled eyes with something like interest.

"We-all will be safer," she said quietly. "A darky like Jim, who gets a twist in his head about

freedom and license, is a mighty dangerous creature."

"Yes, chile, dat's plain truth."

Cynthia held her breath. Sandy had been on The Way—what had God-a'mighty's justice done to him? Surely if any evil had befallen him Ivy would know. By some intangible current the gossip and news of the hills travelled rapidly and more or less accurately.

"Dat boy of Morley's has runned away from home!"

At this Ann Walden took off her spectacles and made no pretence of indifference.

"Run away?" she said. "I didn't know a Morley had spirit enough to do that even with conditions as they must be along of that woman of Martin's in the cabin. Where has he gone?"

"Nobody ain't knowing exactly—just gone! I expect he'll turn up again when his stomick done clutch him. Dat chile never done us-all no 'commodation job, but he was too good to live up to that cabin in de Holler. If I knowed whar he done hide himself, I clar I'd fotch him some victuals even if he *was* sharp as a sarpint's tooth in a bargain."

"If you hear of him, let me know," Ann Walden said quietly; "he's too good, as you say, to be left to that evil woman Martin lives with. I've had the boy on my mind for some time. He has the mark of cruelty and neglect; he' been mighty silent too, about it all—he resembles his grandfather."

And now Cynthia breathed again freely and happily. A breath of air stole through the window and across the room—the atmosphere was clearing.

"Whar's lil' Miss?"

"Lying down across in the library. Go close the door softly, Ivy, and come back. I have something to say to you about her."

The child upon the sofa wished to be alone with herself, so she shut her eyes and pretended sleep when the lean, black hand reached into the room and drew to the door. Cynthia wanted to think about Sandy; she wanted to follow him, in fancy, after her own fashion, and above all else she wanted to be with him in the Significant Room.

Once the door secured her from intrusion she arose from the sofa and locked it quietly; then she set the window wider to the summer day. The casement was choked with the yellow rosebush and heavy honeysuckle; the fragrance was almost stifling, but Cynthia heeded it not.

"Now," she whispered, with the slow smile coming to her lips, "now, Sandy Morley, I'm going to hang your picture in its place!"

The large gray eyes fastened upon the empty space near the chimney, the space where, when the afternoon was fair and clear, the western sun poured its light through the tangle of vines at the window and fell full upon it.

"The man who cut his way through his enemies." Cynthia knew her "Pilgrim's Progress" as many children know their nursery rhymes. It was her only guide to life, but she interpreted it for herself. "The Biggest of Them All." And then the girl laughed her rich, rippling laugh.

It was Madam Bubble now who stood before the fireplace, a gentle creature with little head bent forward in listening attitude and a waiting, pleading look in the fine eyes. A bit too tall and thin was she for grace, but Time would take care of that—and, fortunately, Cynthia was many-sided. The dull, monotonous life of Stoneledge had retarded development. Never having mingled with children, she was untested and untried along certain lines. Poor, shabby Sandy Morley had been and was her only interpretation of youth as it had touched her personally—he and her ungoverned imagination had supplied the motive power, so far, for the foundation of her emotions.

"I—helped you!" she said softly to "The Biggest of Them All"—"I. And wherever you are you will remember that."

There was an old, cracked, dimmed mirror between the chimney-place and the window, and tiptoeing to that, Cynthia viewed herself as if for the first time in her life. The image was strange to her; confusing and half fearsome. It was not the reflection of the awkward, thin Cynthia Walden that she saw; Cynthia of the long braids of hair and short patched gingham gown of irregular length—owing to many washings and shrinkings. It was the reflection of something Cynthia was to be some day who looked back at the questioning girl. Slowly the colour rose to the pale face and the big eyes flinched.

"Stand straighter!" commanded the inquisitor before the mirror. The shoulders braced, but too long had the slender neck bent forward to obey the sudden exertion now. Cynthia would always carry that waiting pose!

The ugly checked gown next caught the critical eyes and the impotent hands pulled it down at the waist, while a sense of its unloveliness brought a quiver to the sensitive mouth. "Hateful!" was the verdict.

Then with fumbling, unpractised hands Cynthia gathered her two long shining braids and bound them around her head—somewhere she had seen the fashion, and a feminine instinct appropriated it. Next she stepped quietly to the window and broke off a deep yellow rose and a delicate trailing bit of honeysuckle rich with bloom; these she wound with intuitive skill in her twisted braids, the rose nestled close to the left ear. Thus adorned she tested the mirror again. Gone now was the ugly gown; gone was the awkward pose—the face that smiled out at the young judge was a wonderful face with its secret promise of by and by.

"Oh! you pretty honey-girl!" There was absolute detachment and lack of vanity in the words. The woman-nature of Cynthia was simply giving homage to a young creature worthy its admiration. "Oh! I want to kiss you and love you! I want you to kiss and love me!" And then the denied craving for affection and fondling rose supreme. "I want to cuddle you, honey—you are mighty sweet!"

The slow smile touched the lips of the reflection—the dear, slow smile of Madam Bubble.

Cynthia pressed close to the old mirror and laid her lips to that alluring creature she was some time to be!

"Honey!" she whispered, "dear, pretty honey-girl!" The tears clouded the love-filled eyes; a sense of loneliness drove the rapture away, and the hands fell limply.

Going to the window, Cynthia knelt down and, resting her arms upon the sill, laid her pretty head upon them.

She was never to be wholly a child again. Never was she to let her hair fall in the little-girl fashion. Something had happened to her, and tracing the something back she realized that it had been done when Sandy kissed her good-bye!

Vivid was the red now in the girl's face. Her South had brought the bloom forth early, and she was unprepared and unlearned in its demands.

"I want—some one to love me!" No words formed the thought. "I want——" Then all the ties of her barren young life were reviewed and found inadequate. Presently the yearning eyes rested upon the old painting of Queenie Walden. It was a miserable piece of work; an indefinite likeness, but it held the gaze and the fancy of the girl upon the floor. "I want—my mother!" The hunger and longing brought fresh tears to the aching eyes. "Mother!" She had always known the relationship, and had always guarded it as a sacred secret. The flood of repression and denial came in full force now.

"I want to know all!" That was the demand, and straightway Cynthia sprang to her feet and ran from the room. She was still running when she came into Ann Walden's presence.

"What's the matter, Cynthia?"

"Aunt Ann, tell me about my father and mother!"

The sudden question, the sight of the flower-decked head, set Ann Walden into a trembling fit. Since the day of Marcia Lowe's call she had never been the same. She slept badly, ate poorly, and feared greatly. Day after day she had expected the late visitor to return or send a representative. When she heard that the stranger had gone away she breathed more freely for the respite, but dreaded the reason for the going. She had passed through such torture as she had never known or undergone before. Something, unsuspected, rose and reproved her; pride, self-esteem, and faith had perished when many readings of the letter had driven truth home. Finally nerves refused to suffer longer and a kind of revenge took its place.

"Very well!" she had concluded desperately; "Queenie and I will keep the child—at last! You and yours shall have no part in her or for her."

Thus she had decided regarding Cynthia. She meant to break forever with Theodore Starr and all who were connected with him. She would resent, not only for herself, but for the poor sister who had mistakenly, and for love of her, kept silence and left the memory of Starr unclouded as the only gift she could give the woman they both had wronged!

Yes, Ann Walden had thought it all out. When Marcia Lowe came again she would tell her that she believed there had been no marriage! That would end it. No proof could be found—did not Ann Walden know the shiftless mountain ways? Marcia Lowe would never press dishonour upon them all—and the money was no lure to the proud, poverty-stricken woman. She meant to revenge herself upon Theodore Starr by keeping Cynthia even at the price of proclaiming the girl's dishonour to Starr's niece.

From much thinking through wakeful nights and torturing days Ann Walden had evolved a very sincere hatred and bitter resentment. She almost believed that Starr had betrayed her sister, and poor Cynthia, who had always been a duty—not a joy—was to pay the penalty!

"Tell me about my father and mother!"

The strong young voice repeated the commanding words; the lovely flower-twined head bent forward.

There was no wise person to note and take warning of the strange light in Ann Walden's eyes as

she met the question put to her; it was, however, the look of insanity—the insanity which feeds upon hallucination; the kind that evolves from isolated repression and the abnormal introspection of the self-cultured.

"When you are older, Cynthia."

"No, now, Aunt Ann. I must know. My mother's picture hangs in the library, but my father's is not there and no one ever speaks of my father."

How could one fling into the simple innocence demanding knowledge, the bare, bold truth? But Ann Walden, driven at bay, worn, embittered and touched already by her doom, answered slowly:

"Your—father was—a bad man! that is why no one speaks of him; why his picture does not hang near your mother's."

"A bad man? What did he do, Aunt Ann?" A childish fear shook Cynthia's face. Bad, to her, was such a crude, primitive thing; "was he bad like—like the men here who drink and beat their women?"

"Worse than that!"

"Worse, Aunt Ann? Did he—beat my mother?'"

The horror, instead of calming Ann Walden, spurred her on.

"He—he killed her!"

"Killed her!" And with that Cynthia dropped beside her aunt and clung desperately to her hand, which lay idle in her lap. "Oh! is—is—he dead? Can he come to hurt us?"

Then Ann Walden laughed such a laugh as Cynthia had never heard before, but with which she was to become familiar.

"He's dead. He cannot hurt us any more. He did his worst—before you were born."

A sigh of relief escaped the girl as she listened and her tense face relaxed.

"But we would not touch his money, would we, Cynthia? nor have anything to do with any kin of his, would we?"

"No, no, Aunt Ann."

"Then——" and now Ann Walden bent close and whispered: "then have nothing to do with her—at Trouble Neck! She comes with money; with a hope of forgiveness—but we do not forgive such things, do we, Cynthia, and we Waldens cannot be bought?"

"No, no!"

"When you see her, tell her so! Tell her to keep away—we do not believe her; we do not want her!"

The flowers on the pretty girlish head were already wilted in the heat of the morning and something more vital and spiritual had faded and drooped in Cynthia Walden's soul. She looked old and haggard as she rose up and drew a long breath like one who had drunk a deep draught too hastily. Even the yearning for love had departed—unless God were good to her she would sink rapidly down, from now on, to the common level.

"I'll tell her, Aunt Ann," she said nonchalantly. "I'm right glad you let me know." Then she wandered aimlessly back to the library and over to the fireplace. Dejected and shrinking, she raised her eyes humbly to her "Biggest of Them All" and deep in her soul sank the truth that she, Cynthia Walden, once so gay and proud, was not the equal of Sandy Morley! If he were brave and fine enough he might help her from very pity—but if she were worthy, she must not permit him to do so.

Then it was that the first wave of actual soul-loneliness enveloped the girl, and when youth recognizes such desolation something overpowers it that no older person can ever understand.

And that very afternoon the great storm came that swept away so much and opened the way to more.

It was four o'clock on that same day that Liza Hope passed Stoneledge on the way down to the store. Liza was always just getting over having a baby or just about to have one and her condition was now of the latter character. Poor, misshapen, down-trodden creature! She accepted her fate indifferently, not because she was hard or bitter, but because she had never had a vision of anything else.

She paused near the chicken house where old Lily Ivy was hovering over a belated brood whose erratic mother had mistaken the season of the year.

"Howdy, Ivy! You-all has a right smart lot of fowls—but ain't it a mighty bad time to hatch?"

"Dis yere hen allus was a fool hen," Ivy vouchsafed, "givin' trouble an' agony to us-all."

"Does you-all like her the best?"

This question brought Ivy to her feet with a stare.

"The little doctor she done say as how we-all loves best the baby-things what be right techersome. She be right, too, I reckon. Them babies o' mine what died, and po' lil' Sammy what ain't clear in his mind, is mighty nigh to me. I ain't never thought 'bout sich till she cum. She steps up to my cabin now an' again an' her and me talks. The Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady I calls her, an' nights I lie an' think on her, an' she comes an' brings my daid babies to me in dreams-like, an' then I reach out for Sammy, an' I feel right comforted."

Ivy came close to her caller now and looked into the weary, sunken eyes compassionately. Her contempt of the po' white trash faded before the pathetic desolateness of Liza's glance.

"Liza Hope," she said, fixing the roving stare by her tone, "how be you going to face this winter? You be as fool-like as dis yere old hen-hussy. All your chillens was born during respectable times o' year. What you-all goin' to do wid no wood-pile, no nothin', an' a baby comin' long in the black time of winter?"

Liza faced her accuser blankly as if she had nothing whatever to do with the matter.

"I ain't no wise 'sponsible," she faltered; "de good Lord He knows I ain't hankerin' after no mo' calls and troubles. But the Cup-o'-Water Lady don' promise to come to me in my hour an' bide till I pass through my trial. Seems like I can bear it now when I think o' that. Some say they-all don't believe her is kin to Parson Starr as was, but I does. The Lord He don't make two sich-like less He uses the same mixin's. I knows, I do!"

Ivy started back. Oddly enough this was the first time she had heard the connection between Starr and the newcomer. She had taken for granted the rumour that had reached her concerning Marcia Lowe, and she had disapproved keenly of the call that young woman had made upon her mistress recently, but now, as Liza spoke, sudden recollection startled her. If the stranger were what Liza suggested, why then Ann Walden's condition might be accounted for! The surprise of this new thought turned Ivy giddy, but it also caused her to change the subject of conversation.

"When yo' come back from de sto'," she said with frigid dignity, "stop to de' rear do'. I has some corn bread an' bacon what you can carry 'long wid yo', an' an ole ironin' blanket fo' coverin'."

Liza muttered her thanks and shuffled on, her distorted figure casting a weird shadow as the blazing sun struck across her path as she entered The Way.

It was five o'clock when the reddish sunlight suddenly was blotted out by a huge black cloud. An ominous hush came with the shadows, and with instinctive fear and caution Ann Walden, in the living-room, closed the windows and doors. Cynthia, who was passing through the hall, ran upstairs to do the same, and then returned and stood listlessly by her aunt near the window looking out over the garden place, the little brook, which divided it from the pasture lot below, and the two cows huddling under a clump of trees beside the tiny bridge which spanned the stream.

"I—don't like the look of the sky," Ann Walden murmured; "I reckon it's going to be a mighty bad storm. Seems like the seasons get twisted these-er-days. Now if it was spring——" She did not finish her sentence, for a wave of wind brought the lagging storm on its breast; a blinding flash of lightning and a crash of thunder set it free and then the deluge descended. A wall, seemingly tangible, descended from the clouds to the earth—everything was blotted out.

"Good Lord-a'mighty!" Ivy dashed in from the kitchen, a grayness showing through the black of her skin; "I mus' save dem cows. I jes' mus'—God help me!" She ran through the room to the front hall, pulling her skirt over her head as she ran.

"Ivy, I forbid you leaving the house!"

The black woman paused, for even in that moment of excitement tradition held her—the servant was stopped by the mistress' voice, but too long had Ivy stood for higher things to renounce them now. She had stood between her loved ones and starvation; she had always kept the worst from them and she must continue to do so.

"Miss Ann, honey," she said in her soft, old drawl, "dem cattle down by de Branch is all that stan's 'twixt us-all and we-all becoming white trash! I jis' got-ter go, chile!"

Then before Ann Walden could speak again the woman was gone! They watched her beating her way through the wall of rain, without speaking; with every emotion gripped and silenced by fear and horror the two at the living-room window waited. They saw her reach the little foot-bridge; they saw her pause and hold to the railing as if for breath and then—there was nothing! The place where old Ivy had stood was empty. The cows, too, were going fast and helplessly away on a sea of troubled water.

Shock numbs the brain and stays suffering, but presently, like a frightened child rousing from sleep, Ann Walden turned to Cynthia.

"Ivy," she panted. "Ivy, where is she?"

Cynthia could not answer. She tried, but speech failed her. With large, fixed eyes she continued to stare at the blank space where once the little bridge had stood. What had happened was too awful for her comprehension. Then in the drear dimness of the room a hideous laugh rang out.

"Don't! don't, Aunt Ann!" Words came desperately now to the child; "oh! I'm so afraid!"

But again and again the laugh sounded.

"We-all are poor white trash! poor white trash! ha! ha! ha!"

Cynthia shrank from Ann Walden. What had happened she could not know, but of a sudden the old woman became a stranger, a stranger to be cared for and guarded—one to defend.

"Come," whispered Cynthia, "come away—dear—it's all right! Come, come!"

Alternately laughing and sobbing, Ann Walden followed the guiding of the hand upon her arm; she permitted herself to be placed on the ragged sofa on the opposite side of the room.

"Poor white trash!"

And there Tod Greeley and Liza Hope found them hours after. Cynthia, beside the prostrate woman, was crooning as to a baby, and over and over the desperate old voice wailed:

"We-all are poor white trash!"

CHAPTER VII

When Sandy had departed down The Way he felt weak and stricken. All the fervour and exhilaration were gone; there was no turning back, and he could not stand still. The walk to The Forge could easily be made before morning, with time to sleep on the way, so there was nothing to do but forget his misery and travel on. The storm, too, emphasized the necessity for this. On beyond there was a deserted cabin by the trail; he could sleep there in comparative comfort; under the falling roof there surely must be one dry spot large enough to shelter a thin, tired boy.

A crash of thunder caused Sandy to rush forward. He had the childish fear that many country children have of the extremes of Nature, and superstition swayed his every thought. Gathering his loose coat about him and clutching his money close, he made for The Way, and ran with all the strength remaining in him, for the deserted cabin.

Flash and splintering noise surrounded him. His eyes were blinded by the blue-red lightning; his ears were aching from the thunder's shock. Once he stood still, unable to suffer longer—for his nerves were paralyzed with fear, and at that pause a fork of vivid flame darted from the blackness and ran like the finger of a maniac down the side of a tall tree. The stroke was so near that the boy did not heed the crash that followed immediately; he saw the wood and earth fly and he shuddered as he looked. That was the bolt that ended the life of Jim the negro, but Sandy never knew.

In unconsciousness the boy waited for, he knew not what! He was dead, yet alive, unable to move or feel, yet standing and seeing. Then his blood began to flow once more, and sinking to his knees he wept as he had not since the night when Mary drove him from the cabin to the shed to sleep! Wet and trembling, he finally found strength and courage to go on, but a loneliness of soul and mind almost overcame him. He raised his aching eyes and saw the clouds parting; he heard the rising wind complaining in the tall trees and shaking the water down upon him. At that moment a star broke through the scudding masses of rolling blackness—one kindly eye of light, and at the same instant something touched his body with thrilling familiarity. He groped and felt in the lower darkness, then—because he had never been taught to pray—Sandy Morley bent his head over the wet and shaggy body of Bob, the collie, and laughed and sobbed from sheer gratitude and joy!

Stealthily the faithful creature had followed his friend. Life had taught him, even in his puppy days, to curb his inclinations. Where Sandy was, there was always happiness, but it was generally seasoned with danger, and Bob took no chances.

"Good dog! dear old fellow!"

Bob licked the caressing hands fondly. Never before had such appreciation been shown him even by the one who was lavishly bestowing it now; Bob did not seek to understand, he merely accepted and snuggled closer.

Sandy knew a later parting with the dog was inevitable, but human nature could not contemplate it then, so he bade Bob follow on and, with regained courage and determination, the two plodded down The Appointed Way with firmer tread. The shed was reached, and nestling close in a protected corner, they slept for several hours with no dream to disturb or frighten them. The storm passed; the stars

shone out, and a new moon crept up from the east. At four o'clock Sandy started up and began the readjustment of life. Bob was lying across his legs and breathing evenly. The warmth had been grateful even if the weight had been a burden, and a sense of joy flooded the boy as he patted the dear, faithful head.

A few minutes later the two were again on the road. Breakfast would have been acceptable, but both boy and dog had learned that food was not a vital necessity for the day's beginning. A cup of warming fluid would have set Sandy up wonderfully, for his throat was sore and his bones ached, but The Forge was not a great distance away and it was a new sensation to have a pocket full of money.

"Bob, when we get there you and I will fill up—I swear it, Bob!"

The collie resented the oath. He was willing to share and share alike, and between friends surely there was no need for such emphasis.

A soaked wood road on an early August morning is not a cheering place, and the travellers plodded on with weakening limbs and heavy hearts. Sandy comforted himself by the thought that food would set him up, but as he thought this his stomach rejected the idea with sickening insistence. The more he thought of food the more his head ached and his throat throbbed. Bob, unhampered by physical claims, jogged along cheerfully. He was used to hope deferred, and he was appreciative of the company he was in, and the absence of rough words and well-aimed kicks and blows.

The few miles of The Way seemed doubled on the moist August morning; the rising sun merely drew more dampness from the sodden earth; it did not dry it; but at last Sandy saw the opening ahead which marked the clearing around Smith Crothers' factory, he heard the buzzing and warning of machinery—at first he thought it was the strange sensation that was gaining force in his head, but presently he righted things and plucked up courage. Two miles beyond the factory: two miles of lighter woodland and then the sharp little hill at whose foot The Forge lay!

A busy day lay before Sandy. He must eat—the thought now was positive agony—buy some necessary clothing and get into touch with some inspired fellow creature who could give him information about Massachusetts. Over and over Sandy repeated the magic word. For nearly a year it had lain dormant in his consciousness. It was his earthly heaven; the paradise of his longings and desires, but now it had suddenly taken on earthly meaning and proportions. How was he to get there? Had he money enough to carry him to that wonderland where one could exchange work for an education?

So absorbed was the half-sick boy with the problem of his near future that he passed Crothers' factory unheedingly, and was well down the last sharp little hill before he realized it. A fever was gaining control over him and making him light-headed and care-free. Massachusetts lost its agonizing doubts—everything appeared to be coming to him; even the inevitable parting with Bob became vague and blurred. Why not take Bob along with him? Why not, indeed?

And so boy and dog, muddy and fagged, came to the end of the hill, to the edge of the town and the first house, known as Stagg's Place, where room and board could be obtained for a consideration!

Sandy, with that growing nausea, made his way toward it, and Bob, with his sixth sense serving him well, pricked up his ears, put on more style of carriage and estimated his chances at the back door. But at that critical moment an excited old gentleman dashed out of Stagg's Place and gripping a walking stick madly waved it on high. Spying Sandy he sensed probable help.

"Boy!" he shouted lustily, "stop that man! It's—it's life or death. Stop him! Send him back and I'll give you a dollar."

Sandy rallied his last remnants of strength and turned about. Off in the distance he saw the mounted postman jogging on his way toward the village and he dashed ahead! Bob, with his smouldering puppy nature coming unexpectedly to his help, scampered on, crazily barking and yelping as he had never permitted himself to do in the guarded past.

The postman, at last, heard the commotion and stopped short.

"You are to go back!" Sandy panted; "it's life or—death."

The horse was turned about and in the mud raised by the retreating hoofs the boy and dog followed wearily.

Whatever the matter was that had caused the confusion, it was adjusted by the time Sandy again reached the house. The old gentleman, muttering about a weak leg and a degenerate rascal, was sitting on the piazza fanning himself with a panama hat, while a thin, eager-eyed woman urged him to calm himself before worse harm was done.

"The Lord will provide, Levi," she was saying, as Sandy and his dog approached. "His ways are not our ways, but we might as well give credit where credit is due. His leadings are generally clearer sighted than ours be, having—as you might say—wider scope to scan." Then she glanced at the dirty, worn pair on the steps.

"Shoo!" she ejaculated, but neither dog nor boy stirred.

"What do you want?" she next asked.

"What—he said he would—give!" and then to complicate matters Sandy rolled over in a huddled heap and fainted dead away! Bob, bereft and frightened, hovered over him, emitting yelps and howls that shattered the summer calm.

The Markhams only took their meals at Stagg's Place; a small cottage near by was their lodging rooms, and to that Levi Markham ordered two coloured boys to carry the prostrate Sandy.

An hour later Matilda Markham sat beside the couch in the shaded living-room and looked thoughtfully upon the form stretched thereon. From outside the voice of her brother came appealing to all that was reasonable and sensible in Bob.

"Of course you can see your master, my good fellow. Just be patient, patient!"

Levi Markham liked all animals, and something about Bob's rugged ugliness and faithfulness called forth his admiration and sympathy.

"Come, come, old fellow, eat and drink. He's safe enough inside. You know well, you rascal, that he *is* inside!"

Bob blinked confidingly, but he would not touch the food which stood alluringly near at hand in a shining tin plate.

Sandy had recovered from his faint, but he was strangely weak and an inner stillness bound him speechless and immovable. He lay there—thinking, thinking! He knew a woman was beside him watching his every breath; he heard Bob outside and the sternly kind voice talking to him. But nothing mattered. Yes, one thing did matter. The money was in his pocket and Massachusetts was still in the near future!

Miss Matilda, by the process known only to her sex, had labelled and classified the boy on the sofa.

"He's what these shiftless negroes call quality," she pondered. "Filthy and worn to the bone as he is—he is quality or I miss my guess! Now what on earth has brought him to this pass?"

The lids were drawn close over Sandy's eyes; his thin face was pinched and wan, and the tan had faded mysteriously from the smooth skin. A dignity rested on brow and mouth, and the work-stained, folded hands were delicate and full of character. Sandford Morley had come to the parting of the ways and he had resigned himself to the inevitable. His helplessness put forth an appeal that reached through his sordid misery to the emotions of Matilda Markham. She adored boys—they were her one enthusiasm but, like her brother, the more she felt the less she permitted herself to show. "She knew her duty"—none better; "but she did not intend to have her feelings joggled in the broad light of day for curious folks to witness!"

So she watched Sandy now with her heart painfully in evidence.

"There's a bruise on his left cheek," mused Miss Matilda; "like as not he hit it against something." It was the effect of the last blow Mary Morley was ever to deal him, but of course the watcher in the orderly cottage could not imagine so outrageous a thing as that.

"He's got real nice hair if it wasn't so matted. I daresay it would curl if it had half a chance." Justice called for pity and protection, and while waiting to see what was best to do next, Matilda heeded inspiration.

"You awake?" she whispered. Sandy gave a weak nod. "Want something to eat? No? A drink of water, maybe? No? Very well, lie still and drop off to sleep again. You'll feel better presently, and can tell us about yourself, then brother will send you home."

The room was dim, but Matilda's eyes were keen, and she saw two large tears roll from under the closed lids and down upon the thin cheeks. Because of her understanding of boys, Matilda did not interfere with those mute tokens of weak surrender. Better the traces on the dirty skin than a later misunderstanding, but as the tears took their way a childless woman's pity and tenderness was following them mutely.

"You can't sleep? Well now, never mind. Just don't fuss." Then inspiration came again.

"Maybe you'd like to see your dog, he's just outside. He won't eat or drink and his nose is everlastingly pointed to the door."

At this Sandy's eyes opened so suddenly and so wide that Matilda Markham started. She had never seen such large eyes in any human boy's face and they were such strange, yearning eyes.

"You *do* want your dog?"

"Yes, ma'am! oh, yes!"

Without a word more, Matilda strode to the door.

"Brother," she said; "we want that dog here!"

Bob leaped up and followed his instincts. He made no noise or cry, he simply went to the low couch, and snuggled his rough head against the shoulder pressed on the pillow.

Matilda Markham could not bear the sight. It made her afraid of herself. Her brother, above all people, must not think her emotional. She knew what he thought of emotional women—he not only believed them incapable, but he mistrusted their moral natures. She walked out to the porch and sat grimly down in a rocker and swayed back and forth energetically.

"It's real hot," she vouchsafed presently. "This is a terrible shut-in place. I haven't any use for mountains unless you can get on the toppest peak."

"Has that boy explained himself?" asked Levi Markham, also swaying to and fro in his rocker. Matilda shook her head.

"What do you think we ought to do? I've been inquiring a bit and I find there is no police station nor hospital nearer than twenty-five miles. I asked the man at Stagg's what they did when men were injured in the factory, and he looked at me as if he thought I was a fool! 'They don't do anything to them,' he confided. It's an evil hole, Matilda. I never saw a place in my life that needed capital and human intelligence more. And what about this boy? He must belong somewhere, I suppose."

"I think he's pretty sick, brother; I guess we'll have to turn to and supply what the town lacks in ambulances and hospitals. He's burning up with fever, and he has a real wild light in his eyes."

"What do you mean, Matilda?"

"Well, brother, not to mince matters, I think if you undress him I'll turn to and clean him up some. After that we'll put him to bed in the little room off the dining-room and send for a doctor. I suppose they have a doctor somewhere around here, haven't they?"

Levi puckered up his lips and frowned.

"I've questioned about that, too," he admitted. "There is a doctor—goes horseback with saddle bags and medicine chest on a circuit covering acres and acres. Kind of a medical bully; brings people into the world and hustles them out. Doses and cuts them according to his lights. He's off on a stabbing case back among the hills—some still, they say, has let itself loose. He will be back when he patches up the worst and turns the rest over to the authorities. Matilda!"

Miss Markham started.

"Yes, brother."

"I don't want any one to see or know about that boy until after we've seen the doctor. He looks badly used and starved to me, and I never turn a dumb brute off when its luck is against it, until I know what I'm turning it to. You get a tub of hot water ready and I'll tackle the lad now."

It was seven that evening when the doctor returned from the hills and was told the "folks from the North" wanted to see him. He did not hurry himself. He rested, ate, and changed his clothes and then sauntered down the road to the cottage. Sandy, the worst of him, as Matilda explained, lay in a comatose state on the narrow, immaculate bed with Bob, now fed and comforted, on the floor beside him.

"That's Morley's boy from Lost Hollow," the doctor drawled, as he gazed upon the restless form. "At first I wasn't sure. I never saw him clean before. As I passed through The Hollow to-day Morley came out and told me the news. The boy's left home; he's going to get an education somehow—the father said he had saved money."

"There's nearly thirty-one dollars in his pants' pocket," Matilda broke in accurately.

"He comes of good stock back about the time of the Revolution. Running to seed since. It's mighty odd how blood bursts out now and again. This fellow's mother came from The Forge—a pretty creature—died when he was born. Took me thirty-six hours to bring him into life—but I couldn't save the mother. The father is a degenerate—the only sign of decency I ever noticed in him is his thought about this boy. Looks like a tussle for Sandy Morley now, I reckon. What you want to do about it? If he lives, which he likely enough won't, he's going to be a right smart bit of care."

Levi looked at Matilda and Matilda looked at Levi, and then they both looked at Sandy. "Massachusetts!" moaned the boy, tossing about restlessly—"I'm going to get there, I tell you! Mass—massa—chu——" The voice trailed off miserably and Bob was alert at once.

"I never cast a beast out——" began Levi.

"Not to mention a human boy," added Matilda.

"We're going to see him through or—out, doctor."

The impassive face of the doctor gave no intimation as to his emotions. He took out his medicine

bottles and forthwith began to complicate Sandy's chances in the hand-to-hand struggle.

An old black woman, famed for her charms and nursing, was secured by Matilda Markham to assist in the care of Sandy Morley.

"I shall keep an eye on the witch," Matilda warned her brother, "but she has a sense about nursing that can be relied upon."

And so the battle was on. Gossip about the boy was killed at the bedroom door. No one became interested or cared. The doctor, after a week or two, chancing upon Martin Morley on The Way, told him of Sandy's good fortune.

"Morley, if there's a bit of the man in you," he advised, "let go that boy and leave him to his opportunity. You've almost killed him, body and soul, among you, now; whether it be life or death, let him have a try for the clean thing. It's all you can do for him—forget him!"

And Martin, with bowed head, acquiesced.

"If he dies——" he faltered.

"I'll let you know," the doctor replied.

But Morley never heard of Sandy's death and the summer merged into autumn, and the cold and shadow settled upon The Hollow. When winter drove the mountain folks indoors to closer contact, bad air and poor food, it drove the devil in with them and hard times followed. But before the grip of winter clutched the hills, Sandy decided that in spite of the odds against him he would make another attempt to reach Massachusetts.

A mere shadow of a boy was he when, in late September, Matilda Markham got him out on the piazza one morning and, having tucked him up well in blankets, remarked enlighteningly, "There!"

All the fineness in Sandy had been emphasized during the weeks of sickness. As the bad food, the bruises and tan had disappeared—and what little flesh which his poor body possessed—the native delicacy and dignity grew and grew.

The people of The Forge, taking small interest in the Mountain Whites, for whom they had a contempt, merely relegated Sandy to "Luck with the Yankee who was dickering about a factory site."

As for Sandy himself he had wandered too near the perilous edge of things to be very keen as to his present and future. Often he lay with closed eyes and thought back to Lost Hollow. The actual distance between him and the only home he had ever known was short but, to a community that spoke of Sheridan's Ride as if it had occurred but the day before, and which slunk and shrank from moving out of its shadows, The Forge was a "right smart way off" and, besides, no one but Martin knew of the circumstances surrounding Sandy; and Martin, to the best of his ability, was doing the only thing he could do for his boy. Often on the long weary tramps in the woods he yearned to get a glimpse of things, but the rough doctor's warnings and suggestions held him back.

"Mart Morley, keep your clutches off that lad. You've nearly put an end to him. Give others a try now."

So with a courage and self-denial no one knew or suspected, Martin kept to the hills and made ready for winter as best he could. He and Molly, when the mood seized her, gathered wood and piled it carelessly by the cabin door. It seemed a goodly pile while the days were still warm and fine, but Martin, with a groan, realized how small the accumulation really was with the long, black months lying before.

CHAPTER VIII

The warm sun of September brought a faint tinge to Sandy's hollow cheeks. After Matilda's "There!" the boy had leaned his head back on the pillow of his couch and closed his eyes. Bob, sleek and well-conditioned, lay at his feet, starting now and then as he dreamed of other days rich in kicks and blows, and lean as to platters of nourishing food.

"Sleeping?" asked Levi, coming on the porch with the mail and whispering to his sister.

"I shouldn't wonder."

"He looks——" But Matilda shook her head at Levi and cut the words short. To express an opinion about Sandy's appearance at that moment would not do—it were best passed over lightly. Levi took a chair, drew it up close to his sister, and left Sandy and Bob free to compare, in dreams, the Then and Now of Life.

"It was no use," Markham whispered. "I might just as well have let the letter go that day he"—Levi nodded toward Sandy—"made his entrance on the scene. They won't accept my terms. I wish now I had let them know how I felt when my blood was up."

"Life's too short for that, brother. Up or down, blood hampers when it's hot. Common sense is always best. What does the letter say?"

"The Treadwell woman won't lose her hold on Lansing: not even for four years!"

Matilda's eyes dropped and she kept silent.

"She's about ruined him," Levi went on. "I put it to her plain and solemn, but she always slips through argument like a greased snake. Said I—let me have his next four years. I'll put him through college, give him work in the mills during the summer, and when he graduates I'll give him a choice of taking over the business or following a profession. The knowledge of business and some honest, hard work would bring the scamp's tone up. He's flabby now; flabby as his father before him."

"And she—says?"

Levi turned to the letter.

"She says she will not consider the plan for a moment, but she says she will not mention it to Lansing, and when I return he may choose for himself. I really thought the Treadwell woman would reckon with the money and not be so independent!"

"It's to her credit," Matilda murmured.

"Oh! doubtless she thinks when I have it out with the boy I'll change my mind. She'll find the contrary. It's come to the last ditch now. I'm not going to have any repetition of—the past with my money backing it!"

Again a long silence while Sandy apparently slept, and Bob twitched and grunted. Then:

"Matilda, we must return to Massachusetts. How soon can we go?"

Suddenly Sandy started up and leaned forward. His eyes were the one prominent feature in his face, and they were now hungry and anxious.

"Massachusetts?" he whispered in the weak, hoarse voice of the convalescent; "Massachusetts? That's where I'm going; there's money to pay my way, almost, I reckon. I'll work out the rest and make my schooling, too. I'll promise. Oh! take me with you!"

The agony of earnestness brought both man and woman to his side.

"Now, now!" commanded Matilda, pushing him back on the pillow; "nothing is ever gained by using yourself up in this shallow fashion."

"But I've got to go!" Sandy urged breathlessly; "I started out to go. I saved ever since I was seven years old to get away—and at last I fixed on—Massachusetts because they let you work for your learning there—and I've got to get it—get learning!"

"Come! come!" Levi asserted himself—"just you calm down. But if it will ease your mind any I'll tell you this much, lad. We've got it all fixed up amongst us—and if you want to go to Massachusetts and try your hand at your luck, you're going to be given an opportunity. Now, let go that grip on the arms of your chair! Matilda, get some broth; get——"

But he stopped short. The look in Sandy's eyes held him. Levi Markham often said afterward that the expression on the boy's face at that moment gave him a "turn." It was no boy-look; it was the command from all that had gone to the making of Sandy; command that the boy be dealt fairly with at last.

"I'm a hard man, Matilda," Markham said later, when Sandy had let go the grip of his chair, taken his broth and fallen exhaustedly to sleep; "I'm a hard man who has hewn his own way up, but I hope I'm a just man, and I declare before God I wouldn't dare play unfairly with the lad. He's not the first fellow I've put upon his feet; some have toppled over; some have gone ahead of me and given me the cold shoulder afterward—a few have stood by me in the mills—this youngster shall have a try to prove that look on his face."

So it was that ten days later the Markhams, with their "po' white trash," left The Forge—Bob rebelliously struggling in the baggage car. A certain piece of land high up among the hills had been purchased by Markham and the deed rested secure in his pocket. He knew what he was about, and if a certain fool of a boy thought well of a proposition to be made to him—there might be a future for himself and others later on.

"It's a great factory site," Markham had written home to his lawyer; "plenty of water and power. Land as rich as if it was just made, and labour aching to be utilized—not exploited."

The journey to Massachusetts was taken in slow stages—Sandy and Bob complicated matters.

"You—think, sir, my money will—hold out?" Sandy once asked wearily.

"I've been estimating," Levi thoughtfully returned; "barring accidents, taking to cheap hotels and allowing for a few weeks' rest after we reach home, the amount will about see you through."

"Thank you, sir."

They were talking in Sandy's bedroom in a very good hotel in New York at that moment.

"You look pretty spruce to-day, young man."

"I'm feeling right smart, sir. Could—could I, do you think, write—two notes?"

This was such an unusual request that Markham was curious.

"That's easy," he said; "there's writing things in yonder desk. I'll read the paper while you transact business."

Sandy was strangely sensitive to tones and expressions and now he turned to Markham.

"I want—my father to know I'm all right, sir," he said quietly. "If he knows that—he can wait till—I go back."

Suddenly the long stretches on beyond staggered Sandy and his thin face quivered.

"Then—there is——" Somehow an explanation seemed imperative to this man who was making life possible for him. There had never been any intimacy before, but something compelled it now; "a—a girl, sir. She helped me—earn money. She's—different from me—she's—quality, but she'd like to know, too."

Levi shifted his newspaper so that it walled Sandy's grim face from view.

"What's to hinder you making quality of yourself?" he asked. He was a man that liked his beneficiaries to succeed, and while Sandy interested him, in spite of himself, he disliked the boy's humility. There was something final and foreordained about it, and unless it were discouraged it might prevent what Markham was beginning to very much desire.

"Quality, sir, is not made. It—is!"

Levi grunted, and Bob, paying a visit to the room on sufferance, snarled resentfully.

"You cut that out, boy!" Markham snapped; "in Yankeeland it doesn't go. Massachusetts gives a good many things besides an education for good honest work: it gives opportunity for the man to grow in every human soul. We don't apologize for ourselves by digging up our ancestors—we only exhume them to back us up. By the time you go home you can stand up to the best of them in your hills—if it's in you to stand. It all lies with you. Now write your letters and leave all foolishness out. Afterward I have a plan to propose."

So Sandy painfully scratched his two notes off and sealed and addressed them. Then he waited for Markham's further notice.

The day was cool and fine, but the heated air of the room made an open window necessary. By that Sandy sat and looked out upon the big, seething city of which he was so horribly afraid. It smothered and crowded him; its noises and smells sickened him. The few excursions he had made with his projectors had left him pale and panting. He made no complaints—he realized that he was on the wheel, and must cling how and as he might, but he shrank mentally at every proposition that he should leave his room. The crowds of people appalled him and he yearned for the open and the sight of a hill. He dreamed vividly of Lost Mountain, and he always saw it now enveloped in mist—a mist that he felt confident would never again lift for him. It was homesickness in the wide, spiritual sense that overpowered Sandy Morley at that time.

"Sandford, are you strong enough to talk business?"

"Yes, sir, I reckon I am."

The quaint politeness of his protégé charmed Markham by its contrasts to the manner of other boys with whom he had come into contact.

"Sit down, and take it easy. Shut the window. You never seem to be able to hear when the sash is raised."

"Us-all's been used, sir, to still places."

"Now, then! In a day or two we will be home, Sandford. Home in Bretherton, Mass. We can't offer you mountains there, but it is a good rolling country and it's—quiet! I'm going to choose a school for you as soon as I can, a country school where you can catch up without having the life nagged out of you."

"And—and where am I to work and—live, sir?"

"You'll find work enough at the school for the regular terms—summers you are going to stop with Miss Markham and me and I'll set you to work in my mills. I always set every one I take an interest in, to work in my mills."

"Yes, sir." Sandy's eyes were growing "strange" again. Markham was learning to watch for that look.

"What's the matter?" he asked on the defensive; "what you thinking about?"

"Only Smith Crothers' factory, sir, and—and the children."

"See here, Sandford; don't you get me mixed with that——" he stopped short. At times his ability to converse with Sandy struck even him with wonder. It was when he forgot the poor figure before him, and was held by the expression in the thin face, that he let himself go.

"My mills," he continued more calmly, "are places of preparation; not—death traps."

"Yes, sir."

"It all depends on you, Sandford. I made my way up from as poor a chap as you are. I've given a lift to a good many other boys because of the boy I once was, but I never take any nonsense. I'm going to be fair with you and I expect you to be fair with me. Take things or leave them—only speak out what's in your mind and act clean. What I do for you isn't done for fun: I expect a return for everything I advance, and I take my own way to get it. While you are at school—it's school returns I want. When you go into the mills—I'll look for returns of a different kind. I'm going to give you an allowance, and it's got to do."

"Sir?"

"Oh!—I mean I'm going, after I get you on your feet, to put up a certain sum of money for you to live on; buy your clothes and get what amusement you can—along your own lines. I'm not going to pry or question you. You've got to feel your way along—it's always my method. They who stumble or run astray must learn their own lesson—not mine! I'll steady you at the start; after that you've got to learn to walk alone or go to——"

"Yes, sir!" The awful weight of responsibility was crushing Sandy as the city did—but he kept clear eyes on Markham.

"The only fun I have in life," Levi said, "is watching the outcome of my investments. You are an investment, Sandford, a flier—I call you! You're a risk and a pick-up, but some of my biggest hauls came from fishing where others scorned to take a chance.

"Yes, sir."

"You are willing to—agree?"

"Oh! yes, sir."

"Sounds like a big chance?"

"I reckon it does, sir, but it's what I saved money for ever since I was seven. The *chance*, I mean, sir."

"Sandford, when you feel that you can—not now, but some day—I want you to tell me all about yourself."

"Yes, sir." But the thin face twitched.

"And now come down to dinner."

For a few days more the crushing city did its worst for Sandy. The noise and confusion wore upon him cruelly. The memory of the faces of the crowds was to be a nightmare to him for years to come. To one who had dwelt where few crossed his path, the close proximity of hundreds and hundreds of eyes during the day left an impression never to be forgotten. The personal contact, too, drained the small, lately gained strength, but no complaint passed the boy's lips. Matilda pitied Sandy and in her quiet, slow thoughtfulness shielded him how and as she could. Markham had business in the city and was often absorbed, but at odd moments he relaxed and sought to entertain his sister and their charge by showing them the sights of the town. It would have been impossible for him to appreciate the suffering he often, unconsciously, caused Sandy, who, left to himself, would have crouched in some quiet corner and closed his eyes against every unfamiliar thing.

Quite weakened by the experiences of the stay in New York, the boy reached at last the lovely little New England village of Bretherton at the close of a radiant autumn day. He was too weary to feel even gratitude as the carriage that awaited the party bore him away from the noise and smell of the station by the railroad. His untried senses had been taxed to the uttermost since leaving The Forge. His eyes ached; his ears throbbed. Every new odour was an added torture, and his body quivered at every touch. Sleep came to him early, however, and the small, quiet room of the Markham house which had been allotted to him was like a sacred holy of holies to the overstrained nerves. Sandy slept like the dead all

that first night, but habit still swayed him, and at five o'clock he wakened suddenly and heard the stir of life out of doors. Some one was calling a dog—his dog! It was Miss Matilda, and Sandy smiled as he listened to her reasoning with Bob as was her custom. Slowly the rested nerves asserted dominion over the boy, but he did not move. He was back, in longing, among the old Lost Hollow scenes. He was too weak to adjust himself into a new environment; changes had worn out his ambition and hope. Miserably he turned upon his pillow and with a sinking of the soul yearned to take his faithful Bob with him and go back to that life which demanded no more of him than he was able to give.

But that very afternoon his future became so involved with that of another, whom he had never seen, that to turn back would have been an impossibility. He and Bob were walking over a stretch of soft, hilly land toward the autumn-tinted woods beyond, when young Lansing Hertford, the son of Levi Markham's dead sister, arrived for a consultation with his uncle. All his life Markham had hungered for something that had never been his—something peculiarly his own! His hard and struggling younger years had denied any personal luxury. He had worked his way up; supported his old father and mother and two sisters; had grimly set his face away from love and marriage, and then when wealth and opportunity came to him the desire was past. But with rigid determination he looked in other directions for compensation. At first it was his younger sister, Caroline. Like so many self-made men, the fine, dainty things of life attracted him. He had dreams of costly oil paintings and rare china, but in the meantime he devoted himself to his sisters. He and Matilda were of one mind: after their parents' death Caroline became their only care.

Exquisite, carefully educated and beautiful, they gloried in her. They endured the loneliness of the old Bretherton home while she visited with schoolmates, or travelled abroad with new and gayer friends. Caroline was the music of their dull lives; the art of their prosaic existences. Then the shock came when she announced her engagement to Lansing Hertford, an idle, useless son of a down-at-the-heel Southern family.

"He's no fit mate for you, Caroline," Markham said alarmedly.

"That may be, brother," the girl had replied, "but I must marry him. You have always said one must learn his own lesson, not another's. I am ready to take the consequences. I could never get away from the sound of Lansing Hertford's voice. I hear him at night. He tells me that when temptation or weakness overpowers him he breathes my name. So, you see, dear, I cannot escape."

"Don't be a fool, Caroline!"

Markham struggled against the sense of impotency surging around him.

"It's my lesson, dear. I'll never wince."

And she never had, even when Hertford's indifference changed to cruelty. After the birth of her child, Caroline Hertford failed rapidly and the end of her lesson came when her boy was two years old. Markham and Matilda had desired to take the baby then, but Mrs. Olive Treadwell, Hertford's married sister, put in a protest.

"It would blight the boy's future if any gossip touched the dead mother or bereaved father; besides he is too young to change nurses or environment."

When little Lansing was seven his father died abroad under conditions shrouded with secrecy, and then it was that Olive Treadwell sought Levi Markham and by methods unknown to the simple, direct man, contrived to interest him in her nephew and his.

"There'll be a mighty big fortune some day for some one to inherit—why not Lans?" she argued to herself and began her campaign. She had grown to love the boy in her vain, worldly way; she wanted him *and* the Markham money, and she cautiously felt her way through the years while the child was with her.

"I hear my nephew is called by your name," Levi remarked once during a call at the Boston home of the Treadwells.

"Just a childish happening. You know how simple little minds are; having no mother but me, he calls me mommy, and naturally people speak of him carelessly by my name."

"He should bear his own and seek to honour it," Markham returned with simplicity equalling a child's. Mrs. Treadwell winced. She dared not show how she resented any unkind reference to her brother, but she had always looked down upon his Yankee marriage, as she termed it, and never could understand why the plain Markhams failed to realize the honour her brother had paid them by taking Caroline for his wife.

"I must see that the misnomer is corrected," was all Mrs. Treadwell rejoined. So Lansing had passed through preparatory school and was ready for college before Markham could be brought to definite terms. The letter from The Forge was the first proposition, and now on that September day Lansing Hertford, prepared and coached by his aunt Treadwell, presented himself at Bretherton on the two-fifty train.

"He'll probably offer you a beastly little allowance," Olive Treadwell had warned; "but I'll add to that; so accept it like a lamb. Then he'll throw Cornell to you—he has right bad taste in universities—

but you must use your tact there, Lans. Tell him about your associates and how your future will be influenced by your college Frat and such things. Men like your uncle Markham are always snobs at heart."

Thus reinforced Lansing Hertford came up for judgment. He was a handsome, rollicking chap—a charming combination of his graceful father and his lovely mother—and he greeted his uncle and aunt with frank affection. Even in those days Lansing Hertford could will his emotions—or his emotions could will him—to sincerity for the time being. He had ideals and enthusiasms—he changed them often, and, as often, they changed him, but outwardly a frankness and openness were his chief attributes and had held his uncle, through the hope-deferred years, to expect big things of him.

CHAPTER IX

Lansing Treadwell, after an hour on the piazza with his aunt and uncle, followed the latter into the study and, taking the broad leather chair, faced Markham across the flat desk with candid, friendly eyes. Levi sat, as he always did when in that room, in his revolving chair; the leather one was reserved for visitors.

"Well, Lansing," he began, sternly endeavouring to obscure the hope, pride, and affection that were welling up in his heart as he looked at the boy; "you're through preparatory; have qualified for college and, after this year, are ready for your career!"

"I've done pretty well, Uncle Levi. I stand third in my class and I'm the youngest."

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen."

"You'll be eighteen when you enter college? That's too young."

"I'm older than my years," Lansing gave a boastful laugh, then did a bungling thing. "Won't you smoke, Uncle Levi?" and he passed a handsome silver case forward; "it's a great tie between—well, chums!"

"I've lived over sixty years without the need of that tie," Markham returned stiffly; "I do not think I'll take it up now. I'm not much of a preacher, but at your age, Lansing, I'd advise the collection of good tastes and habits; let the doubtful luxuries await the years of discretion."

Lansing pocketed his silver case and gave an embarrassed laugh. Levi went back to his former line of argument.

"It's Cornell and the beggarly allowance," thought Lansing, but it was no such thing.

"You are too young to go to college, Lans; too immature to really put yourself to any final test. Your assumption of dignity proves this more than anything else. Of course I do not know how much or how little you know of the past, but it is necessary, from now on, that you and I should understand each other perfectly. I was very"—Levi struggled for composure—"very fond of your mother."

"Yes, uncle."

"And I did not want her to marry your father. I feared he would not make her happy—he did not!"

The crisp facts came out with force but with no malignity, and Lansing Hertford dropped his eyes as he replied:

"Aunt Olive has told me they were very uncongenial." A flush rose to the young fellow's face. A pride, not altogether unworthy, rang in the words and for the first time Markham detected a resemblance to the father in the close-shut lips.

"I do not wish to say anything against your father that is avoidable, but for your own safety and my own protection I realize that you and I must be quite open with each other."

"Yes, uncle."

"Your mother died more of a broken heart than of anything else."

The boy set his jaw.

"I know father loved life and took it as it came," he said.

A brief silence rested between the two, then Markham went on:

"Naturally you inherit from both your parents. To a certain extent, certainly, a man, under God, is master of his life and I want to give you the best possible choice that lies in my power, not only for your own sake and mine, but for your mother's and—yes! your father's!"

"Thank you, Uncle Levi."

And now the boy's eyes were raised once more. They swept the room, Markham's face, and then travelled to the broad acres in rich cultivation as far as one could see.

"You have had too much pleasure and luxury, Lans; things have come too easily. You have never been brought face to face with a longing, and been made to understand that sacrifice, on your part, was necessary to obtain it. Unless you have felt so, you are in no position to find yourself, as you put it."

Again the vital silence.

"How do you know whether you want a college education or not? How do you know you are worthy of this great privilege? You may not even be fitted for it by nature."

Had Markham asked if his nephew knew whether he would ever want to eat a meal again, the boy could not have been more surprised. College, to him and his set, was as natural a sequence as dessert after the courses preceding it. For the life of him Lansing could not prevent a stare. His aunt had left him utterly unprepared for this.

"Now this is my proposition:" Markham had his elbows on his desk, his chin resting on the points of his clasped hands; "I will take you into the mills on exactly the same terms as I would any other young fellow—except that you will share my home—until you learn the rudiments of the business and discover whether you have any business sense or not. By the time you have mastered that and experienced some bodily labour, you will be in a position where you can choose, to some degree, your career. Should you, then, wish to enter college, I will permit you to select one, and I will see you through. It is my firm belief that between a preparatory school and college there should be a space of time, except in particular cases, for looking backward and forward—a breathing time; a time for relaxation and the acquiring of fixed aims. College should not be passed out to a boy as a plum or a luxury—it's too grave a matter for that. All my life I have deplored the lack of it—but I had to live and suffer before I realized its importance."

With all his honesty Lansing Hertford was trying at this critical time to get his uncle's point of view. Of one thing alone was he sure—he was, he believed, so far ahead of his uncle in his knowledge of life that the old gentleman seemed but a blurred speck on the social horizon. No longer could he be looked to as a safe adviser. Why, left to himself, the man might sacrifice the family name and prestige! He did not even understand the decent conventions due his own standing in the community! Suddenly Lansing Hertford felt old and anxious as though upon him, instead of Levi, rested the responsibility of the future. He tried to frame a reply that might enlighten and not insult, but it was difficult. At last he spoke.

"Uncle Levi, I cannot see what such effort and success as yours amount to if they do not place the next generation higher. What you say you have deplored in your own life should prove to you what I ought to have. Your experience counts for so much, you know. I expect to work, and work hard—I always have worked hard. I'm two years ahead of most fellows of my age. But I want to start from where you and my Aunt Olive leave off, I want to mingle with my kind—I am all but qualified to enter Yale—I could not go—back!"

"Your kind! Go back!" Levi's eyes flashed under his shaggy brows. "What is your kind? Have you ever mingled with those above or below you? And as to going back—is it degrading to place yourself in a position from which you can accept or decline a great opportunity intelligently? I was forced to learn my lesson in a hard school; you can still learn the lesson even with the limitations of luxury. Your 'kind' is good, bad, and indifferent, and there are other kinds. I see you before me, young and hopeful—but ignorant and blind. I want to open every avenue to you that leads to successful manhood. You are losing nothing by my plan; you are gaining much." Something very pleading rang in Markham's voice, but Lansing was deaf to it.

"Uncle Levi—I cannot! I'd be a disappointment to you if I tried. I've got to go on with the fellows. I'd lose more than you know if I broke away now and—and buried myself in the mill, and then tried later to pick up. You've never been through what I have—the break would be the end of me! You'd know it when it was too late. I mean to try to be the best of my kind, indeed I do—but the fellow I am is the result of my training and it means everything to me."

What Levi Markham saw before him now was the son of Lansing Hertford—all resemblance to the mother was gone. Baffled and defeated by a something invincible and beyond his understanding, the old man faced the calmness of the young fellow in the chair across the desk. When he spoke he addressed a Hertford only.

"You have heard my proposition, Lansing; I mean to stand by it; unless you can accept my terms I shall change my will."

Could Markham only have understood he would have known that it was the pride of his race, not the Hertfords', that spurred Lansing to retort angrily:

"I did not know I was being bought. I thought you were doing it for what you believed was my good!"

"And so I am!" The incongruity of thus arguing with a boy of seventeen did not strike Markham. It was man to man, with the influence of Olive Treadwell in the reckoning!

"Give me my college first, Uncle Levi, and consider the business afterward."

"I have worked this thing out, Lansing. I am not likely to change my mind."

And just then Sandy Morley passed by the window with his dog at his heels.

"Who is that?" asked Lans indifferently, and a blind impulse spoke through Markham.

"The boy who will accept the offer I make if you decline it!"

Lansing Hertford got upon his feet. All the forced affection and respect he had been trained to observe dropped from him. His uncle seemed a coarse, hard stranger, the surroundings distasteful. A certain mental homesickness for all the pleasant luxury and environment of his Aunt Olive's life overcame him. He spoke boyishly.

"I think I will return to Boston to-night, Uncle Levi. There's a train at seven. I couldn't eat dinner feeling as I do. Good-bye, I'm going to walk to the station. Will you be good enough to send my traps up to-morrow. Bid Aunt Tilda good-bye, please."

He put out his hand frankly and was gone before Markham realized the situation.

"It was not Lans you were fighting," Matilda sagely remarked later when her brother explained matters to her, "it was his dead father, and Olive Treadwell. You just better write to the boy, I guess, and get him to finish out his visit and reconsider. I tell you flat-footed, Levi, there ain't much give to you when you've worked yourself up, and I must say I like the lad all the better for the way he stood up for his kin. They are his kin, and good or bad, that Treadwell woman has won his affection when we couldn't. And to throw that—that strange boy at his head in that fashion! It wasn't worthy of you, Levi! It was downright shallow and you prating always of justice and sane reasoning!"

What might have happened when Markham had digested his sister's practical remarks was never to be known, for Olive Treadwell, in blind fury, and what she considered righteous indignation, prevented.

Weak and unbalanced, but with a deep-seated belief in her social superiority and worldly knowledge, she sent a letter, by special delivery, to Bretherton, that left Levi incapable of response:

I suppose you have taken this method of degrading my dead brother and me. That one of your humble origin can estimate the impression upon another of such an offer as you made to my nephew is quite beyond expectation. The Hertfords have always been gentlemen and ladies and *you* would send the last of the race, by the power of your vulgar money, to work among common labourers in order to break his spirit and pride! You are too blind, apparently, to appreciate the honour my brother paid your sister by marrying her. His personal shortcomings could not possibly outweigh the position that he gained for her when she took his name. Through all these years I have suppressed my feeling as to the matter because I have felt that you and I, working together, might place the son of your sister and my brother in a position that would reflect credit upon us both; but since you have failed to recognize your opportunity and, in sordid revenge, have sought to degrade him, I assume *all* responsibility in the future. I am, comparatively, a poor woman, but hereafter *Lansing Treadwell* and I will share and share alike. I shall endeavour, to the best that is in me, to prove to him that it is such men as you who hold the world back! Men who over-estimate money and undervalue blood and social position are not to be envied or trusted.

Having read this aloud to Matilda, Levi dropped the closely written sheet to the floor.

"She's got the courage of her convictions," Matilda snapped.

"And an old grudge," Markham returned.

"Well, I will say this for her," Matilda added; "she's upset her kettle of fish and Lans', too."

"So it seems! So it seems!"

Levi was looking at a flaming maple tree outside and thinking of his dead sister.

It was the evening of the day of the letter that Sandy Morley, sitting rigidly in the chair that Lansing Hertford had lounged in, listened to as much of an outline of his future as Levi Markham felt he could comprehend.

"And remember," Markham warned at the end, "I want you to learn how *little* a hundred dollars is as well as how big! One is as important as the other."

"Yes, sir," Sandy returned with a vague wonder, for he had yet to learn to think in dollars.

"Can you"—Markham considerately paused before putting the next question—"do you feel able to

tell me a little more about yourself than I already know? I should like to feel that you trust me."

Sandy was stronger and better for his days in Bretherton and, never having had any great consideration shown him, he looked upon Levi Markham as a veritable God especially upraised for his guidance and protection.

"I want to tell you!" he said in a low, tense voice. Leaning forward until his arms touched the opposite side of the desk, his thin, sensitive face was nearly on a level with Markham's.

"It's—this—er—way."

The shade at the broad window behind Sandy had not been lowered, and a very magnificent black night riddled with stars stood like a shield against which the boyish form and pale face rested. There was a crumbling fire on the hearth, and the lamp on the table was turned low. Markham, listening to the slow, earnest voice, became hypnotized by its quality and pure purpose. He felt the dreariness and hopelessness of the hard childhood, and the hate that Mary Morley had aroused seemed to the listener to be the first vivifying happening. He never took his eyes from Sandy's face from first to last. The years of labour, self-sacrifice and fixed purpose stirred him strangely, and the touch of spirit introduced into the boy's voice when he approached the end found an echo in Markham's heart.

"I'm going to learn and then go back and help them-all who can't help themselves," Sandy explained, "for *I* know, sir. No one what does not know, could ever do it! Us-all fears strangers. I'm going to get them-all safe some day, sir. I'm going to have a right, big place to gather them in and teach them. No Hertford curse is going to kill what has called me!"

So abstracted had Levi been, so distant in thought from the Bretherton study, and his own inward trouble, that this name, falling from Sandy's lips, shocked him beyond measure.

"What—did—you—say?" he gasped; "what name did you say?"

"Hertford, sir."

"What do you know of the Hertfords?" It was all Markham could do to hold his emotions in abeyance.

Sandy told his father's story, all but that which related to the Waldens, and the listener hung on every word.

"And so, sir, don't you see, I must be what they-all, my kith and kin, couldn't be? I've got to use my chance for them as well as for me."

"It's a big proposition, boy!" Levi relaxed.

"Yes, sir." The young face was tired and worn.

"Well, then, listen"—a strange light shone in Markham's eyes—"if you prove yourself able to tackle this job, by God, I'll back you! You and I will redeem that old Hollow of yours—you with my money! We'll get Smith Crothers by the throat and throttle him; we'll clean up the Speak Easies and cut more windows in the cabins. Where did you get the notion, son, that with more light and air there would be less damnation?"

"I've lived in the cabins, sir."

"Well, we'll cut all the windows you want and have the school and"—Markham was quivering —"we'll see if the Morleys can't rise up in the land of their fathers and stamp the Hertfords under foot!"

"Yes, sir!" And then Sandy gave one of his rare, rich laughs.

From that day the preparations began. A school in the mountains of New Hampshire was selected, and Sandy fitted out with everything necessary and proper.

Markham was noted for a sense of propriety. He kept his mills and lands in good condition because he was wise and sane; he housed his employees decently for the same reason, and he insisted upon their coöperation. He never let his taxes lapse, nor his money lie fallow. He had, hidden in a drawer of his desk, a valuable diamond ring that he took out in secret moments to enjoy. Occasionally the jewels were sent to Boston and put on the wheel because the artistic soul of Levi Markham demanded that through no carelessness of his should their lustre become dimmed. For much the same reasons Sandy Morley was entered upon his career in a manner befitting the hope that was in Markham for him.

The day Sandy was sent from Bretherton, Olive Treadwell and her adopted son, Lansing Treadwell, sailed for a year's stay in Europe, and Levi and Matilda Markham grimly agreed to leave things as they were.

"There's no use stirring up pudding past a certain point," Matilda said. "If you do it's apt to go heavy."

"And it's the part of wisdom to watch a rising batch of bread," Levi returned humorously. "When you can't get pudding—or when the pudding fails—look to bread and make the best of it!"

CHAPTER X

Cynthia Walden came slowly up the trail leading to the old gray house. Since the day of the flood which bore old Ivy forever from sight, she had confronted so many strange conditions that her eyes had the haunted, frightened expression common to the mountain people. The curse of the hills seemed to have settled upon her. She often said to herself, "poor whites," in order that the significance might be fully understood. Old Ivy had said that the cows were all that stood between them and the fate of others who had, through misfortune, accepted the title despised by the quality.

Well, she, Cynthia Walden, was no longer quality; of that there could be no doubt. Had Ivy and the cows been spared she might have hidden her disgrace of parentage, but now she must, in order to get food and wood, seek the help and charity of others, and she could no longer hold up her head!

At this thought the pretty, drooping head was lifted defiantly. No! she would not go down just yet, for one last motive remained. While she was at the store an hour before to buy a few necessary articles of food with the pitiful supply of money she had found in an old teapot on the kitchen shelf, a wonderful thing had occurred. Tod Greeley, weighing out some tea, remarked casually:

"I reckon, now I think o' it, Miss Cyn, there's a letter come for you. One for you and one for Mr. Morley."

"A letter!" Cynthia almost staggered. "A letter!"

Never in all her life had Cynthia received a letter, never had her imagination soared to such a height as to conceive of such a thing. Tod finished his careful weighing, then added a reckless handful and, having tied the tea up in a bulky package, wandered to the dirty row of letter boxes.

"Here it is!" he exclaimed after thumbing the morning mail over and remarking about each article.

"Yours and Mr. Morley's bear the same writing—Noo York! There ain't been a Noo York letter in this yere post-office since I came to The Hollow. It's a right smart compliment, Miss Cyn!"

Trembling and pale with excitement, Cynthia grasped the letter, tucked her little bundles under her arm and ran from the store.

The cold, crisp air of late autumn spurred her to action, and she kept on running, with the letter burning her hand like flame, so tightly did she grip it. Before she reached the broken and dilapidated fence separating the home place of Stoneledge from the trail, she paused beneath a tree to take breath and reconnoitre. She looked at the letter then for the first time, and she was sure it was from Sandy. Her heart beat painfully and her eyes widened. Looking about to make sure of privacy she tore open the envelope and lo! at the first words the gray autumn day glowed like gold, and the world was set to music. Poor Sandy, distracted by the noise and confusion of the big city, had permitted himself, when writing to Cynthia, the solace of imagination and memory.

"Dear Madam Bubble!" Why, Cynthia had almost forgotten her pretty, fascinating story-self! Her dear, slow smile had almost lost its cunning. However, it returned, now, and drew the corners of the stern young mouth up pathetically.

DEAR MADAM BUBBLE:

I am remembering everything and holding to it. I shut my eyes and I see you standing by The Way with your face like the dogwood flowers in the spring—shining and white and happy! That—er—way is how it is going always to look till I come back. No matter what happens to me; no matter how mighty hard things are, I am just going to stop short, when I feel I can't bear life, and shut my eyes and see you a-standing waiting like what you said. I've met much kindness and a great friend—it's the noise and strangeness and many folks what turn me crazy-like, but always when I shut my eyes—you come and it seems *home* again. If I don't write, please Madam Bubble, know it's because I'm fighting hard to get something fit to bring to you when I come back. And I reckon you better not write to me—I couldn't stand it. You know how I couldn't count the money till the time came! That is the sort I am and, besides, I've got to find out what this—er—life is going to make me into. If I shouldn't be worthy to come up The Way to you—you better not know. But I will be! I will be! Thank you for what you've done for me and most for letting me think you'll wait and be ready.

Cynthia dropped the letter in her lap—for she was crouching beneath the tree. It was a badly written and much-soiled letter but no missive straight from heaven could have performed a greater miracle upon her. A radiance flooded her face from brow to chin, and her eyes glistened with the happy tears that never overflowed the blue-gray wells that held them.

"Sandy!" The familiar name passed her lips like the word of a prayer; "Sandy—'The Biggest of Them All!' I'll be a-waiting by The Way like what I said!"

There were consecration and joy in the words, and the transformation in the girl was wonderful. Gone was the look of despair and surrender. Madam Bubble was herself again!

Springing up, the girl began to dance about among the sodden autumn leaves. She sang, too, as the wild things of the woods sing. There was no tune; no sustained sound, but mad little trills and unexpected breaks. She imitated the bird-note that was Sandy's signal; she meant to practise it every day and keep it for his return lest he lost it among the noises and crowds in which he must do battle. Then Cynthia spied a hole in the trunk of the tree and with sudden abandonment she pushed her letter into it.

"There!" she panted; "and I'll put my answers in it, too, and give them all to Sandy when he comes up The Way."

But hunger and recent trouble laid restraining hands upon the girl at that moment. She sank down and shivered nervously. Between this moment and the one of Sandy's return stretched a dreary space, and how was she to keep her heart light and meet the dreary problems that confronted her? Winter was at hand; the wood pile had been swept from the door, and there were only a few dollars in the cracked teapot. Old Ivy's body, rescued a week after the flood, was buried from sight in the Walden "plot," and Ann Walden was greatly changed. Cynthia did not understand, but she was terribly afraid. Ann Walden laughed a great deal, slyly and cunningly. She never mentioned Ivy except to question where she had gone. The mistress of the Great House, too, took to pacing the upper balcony and repeating over and over:

"The hills—whence cometh my strength!"

It was quite fearful, but Cynthia had already learned to keep away from her aunt at moments of excitement; her presence always made matters worse. And once, soon after her return, Marcia Lowe had ventured to call at Stoneledge, but the outcome of her visit had been so deplorable that the little doctor was driven to despair. She had knocked at the outer door, which stood ajar, and, receiving no reply, had walked into the hall and to the library. There sat Ann Walden just as Miss Lowe had left her on the fateful afternoon of the letter. When Miss Walden raised her eyes to her unannounced caller a madness, with strange flashes of lucidity, overcame her.

"Out!" she shouted—"it was all a lie—there never was a marriage! Never! Would you kill me and the child? Leave us alone. We will not take the money or the shame! Leave me! leave me!"

Then running to the far corner of the fireplace she sank upon the floor and with outstretched hands she moaned:

"He killed her! killed her! and I damned her; leave us alone!"

At that point Cynthia rushed into the room and caught the poor, old, shrinking form in her arms; then, with flashing eyes she turned upon Marcia Lowe.

"Go!" she commanded with sudden courage and desperation. "Go! Don't you hear Aunt Ann?"

"You promised, little Cyn!" whined Miss Walden, "you promised!"

"I know—all about it!" Cynthia murmured, still keeping her fear-filled eyes upon the caller—"I, too, want you—to go away!"

Her training had fitted Marcia Lowe to understand and take alarm at what she beheld, but it also demanded that she leave at once. Since then Cynthia had never seen the little doctor, and the change in Ann Walden did not include another furious outburst such as that.

The excitement of the letter faded when the magic sheet of paper was hidden from sight, and stern necessity brought the severe lines back to the thin, pale face. It was just at that moment that Smith Crothers came down the path, crunching under his heavy boots the damp leaves and branches. Seeing Cynthia beneath the tree he paused and took off his hat. Whatever the girl felt and believed of the man was gained though indirect information—he had meant nothing personal to her before, and it was something of a surprise for her to realize that he was a good looking man and could smile in kindly fashion.

"Little Miss Walden," he said courteously, "I've just been a-hearing how you-all suffered from the storm. Mr. Greeley done told me the old lady is all around cracked!"

"Cracked!" The mountain interpretation of this word flooded Cynthia's consciousness like a flame that made plain all the subtle fear of the past few weeks. That was it, of course! "All around cracked!"

"Oh!" came in a shuddering cry; "oh! oh! oh!"

"Now don't take on that-er-way," comforted Crothers, coming nearer. "Us-all mean to stand by you. I expect you-all ain't over-rich either, and we-all can help in a right practical way. What do you say, little Miss Cyn, to coming down to the factory and doing light work and getting mighty good pay?"

A new horror shook Cynthia's pallid face; but Crothers met it with a laugh.

"Don't take on without reason," he soothed. "Ain't I done something for the mountings?" he asked;

"I know what some folks think about me, little Miss Cyn, but you be a right peart miss, and I ask you straight and true—wouldn't things be worse, bad as they be, if I didn't take folks and pay 'em? Chillun is better 'long o' their mothers, when all's said and done, and they don't have to come if they don't want to, and when they do come the work don't hurt them. Just 'nough to keep 'em from mischief and me a-paying their parents for what is play to the young-uns."

Cynthia thought of Sandy's moan over the baby-things of the factory and her eyes filled. She did not know, perhaps Sandy did not understand, but once he had said to her during a flight of fancy:

"Some day I'm going to gather them-all away from old Smith Crothers and save them!"

"Come and see for yourself, little Miss Cyn."

The tone was friendly and kind, and the actual necessity of the future gripped Cynthia.

"Come and see. I know what is due to you and your folks, Miss Cynthia; I don't ask you to work 'long of the others. I have work for you right in my office where I can have an eye to your comfort and pleasure. Just copying letters and addressing envelopes and I will give you"—Crothers paused; his sudden desire was carrying him perilously near the danger point of being ridiculous—"I'll give you three dollars every week. Three whole dollars!"

With vivid memory Cynthia recalled the long years that it had taken to earn the three dollars for Sandy's venture and she gave a little gasp.

"Three whole dollars! And you can get down to the factory after you make the old lady comfortable, and I can let you have a little mule—all for yourself—to tote you to and fro."

"It's—it's very kind of you, Mr. Crothers," Cynthia panted; "I'll ask——" Then of a sudden she recollected that there was no one to ask. For the first time in her life she was confronted by an overpowering condition that she must meet alone! Just then a sharp touch of cold struck her as the changing wind found the thin place in her coarse gown.

"I'll—I'll come, and thank you, Mr. Crothers," she said in shaking voice. "I'll come, next week!"

"Good!" cried Crothers, "and I'll send up the mule—we'll put its feed in saddle bags—I'll throw that in and——" the smile on the man's face almost frightened Cynthia, though the words that followed seemed to give it the lie.

"I'm going to have one of the men stack wood for you, too, and lay in some winter vegetables. I don't want you to think badly of me, little Miss Cyn. I want to help you-all."

When he had gone Cynthia drew a long breath, and shivered as though some evil thing had threatened or touched her in passing, but an hour later she was thankful her sudden impulse had led her to accept Crothers' offer, for the wind changed and brought from its new quarter a biting warning of winter. Fires had to be kindled to warm the damp, dreary rooms, and Ann Walden, crouching by the blaze, looked gratefully up into Cynthia's face and laughed that vacant, childish laugh that aroused in the girl the fear that youth knows, and the pity that woman learns. And late that afternoon the little doctor, astride her rugged horse, rode up to the cabin of Sally Taber, and made a business proposition.

Sally was gathering wood behind her cabin with a fervour born of fear and knowledge. She knew what the change of wind meant and her wood pile was far from satisfactory. Long before Marcia Lowe came into sight the old woman stood up and listened with keen, flashing eyes alert.

"Horse!" she muttered, and then rapidly considered "whose horse?"

Not the old doctor's from The Forge, for he never used up horseflesh in that reckless fashion. His circuit was too far and wide for such foolish extravagance.

"It's coming this-er-way!" Sally concluded, and since there was no other human habitation on that particular route but her own she rightfully appropriated the approaching visitor. With a quickness of motion one would not have suspected in such an old body, the woman ran into her cabin and, as a society belle might have rushed for her toilet table, Sally made for a closet in the corner of her living room. From there she brought forth a can of vaseline and daubed some of the contents artistically around her lips; then she tied over her shabby gown a clean and well-preserved apron and smoothed her thin, white hair.

"Now," she muttered, composedly taking her knitting and sitting before her hastily replenished hearth-fire; "now, I reckon who-sumever it may be, will think I've had a po'ful feast o' po'k chops, judging from my mouf, an' no quality ain't mo' comfortable than I be?"

A smile of content spread over the old face as this vision of respectability enfolded the poor soul. At that moment Marcia Lowe jumped from her horse, tied it to a tree and came rapidly up to the open door. There was an anxious look in her eyes and the corners of her lips drooped a trifle more than they did when she first rode up The Way. The life of The Hollow was claiming her as it had her uncle before her. As she looked in the cabin and saw the composed figure of the mistress a gleam of humour lighted her face and she secretly rebelled at the sensation of lack of ease which often overcame her in the presence of these calm, self-possessed "poor whites."

"They are so inhumanly superior!" she thought, and then a kindlier feeling came.

"Good afternoon, Miss Taber."

Sally looked up with an assumed surprise worthy of her race and tradition.

"If it ain't Miss Lowe!" she exclaimed, coming forward cordially. "It sho' am, Miss Lowe! Come in, ma'am and rest yourself."

Sally's idioms savoured of darky dialect and her mountain quaintness:

"I'll brew a dish o' tea, ma'am."

Marcia Lowe refused this attention and stayed Sally by her first words.

"Miss Taber, I want you to help me out with a very difficult matter. No one can help me—but you!"

People might think what they cared to about this stranger from Trouble Neck—the men still distrusted her—but the women were rapidly being won to her.

"I 'low you can count on me, ma'am. I says to myself often, says I—Sally Taber, jes' so long as you can make a friend or do a 'commodation job, you is useful to de community—when yo' can't—why—den!" And with that Sally gave a "pouf!" as if blowing away a feather.

Marcia Lowe could not keep her eyes from the shining, greased lips; she was becoming acquainted with mountain peculiarities, but she was perplexed by the neat Sally's daubed face.

"It's about—Miss Walden," she said softly, moving her chair closer to Sally.

"What's happened 'long o' her?" An anxious look crept into Sally's eyes.

"I fear—she is not exactly right."

"It's in the family," Sally murmured; "when things go awry 'long o' them, they jes' naturally take to queerness. The ole general, Miss Ann's father, he done think he was God-a'mighty, long toward the last. I kin see him now a-coming up The Way blessing us-all. They ain't none o' them dangerous, jes' all around cracked, ma'am."

"But the little girl, Miss Taber, she ought not to be alone there with Miss Walden. You see I have studied medicine and I know—it is dangerous and—it mustn't be. See here! I cannot do anything without making more trouble. I'm not one of them, but you could go and—well, just take control! Say that you—need shelter and help—you know Miss Walden would do anything for her friends; put it that way and then"—here Marcia Lowe laid some money in the old shrivelled hands, "there will always be money for you to buy what is necessary for the comfort of you all."

The keen eyes glittered, and the quick mind was caught by the subtlety of the suggestion. Here was a chance to play great lady; to return favours that long had been conferred upon her, and at the same time retain her respectability and dignity. It was a master stroke and Marcia Lowe felt a glow of self-appreciation.

"You can care for her, Miss Taber; you can see that Cynthia is properly looked after, and you can give Miss Walden the joy of her life in thinking that she is able to help you. It is a pardonable bit of deceit, but will you assist me?"

After a decent show of hesitation, Sally decided that she would and, at the close of the afternoon, was seated behind the little doctor—with her pitiful store of clothing, jogging in a bundle at her back, on the way to Stoneledge. Miss Lowe set her down at the trail leading up to the old crumbling house, with these words:

"If ever my uncle did a kind deed, for you, Miss Taber, do this for him now."

Toting up the hill, Sally's thoughts wandered back to Theodore Starr and settled on a certain dark, cold night when he sat in her cabin piling the wood on her fire, while she lay shivering with chill upon her wretched bed. All the charms had failed, the rabbit foot, under the dripping of the north end of the roof had not eased a single pang, and hope was about gone when Starr chanced by. He had meant to ask for a bite and a night's shelter, for he was worn by travel and service, but instead he sat beside her the night through and fought death by the bravery of his spirit and the homely task of keeping warm the shivering body. He had put his coat over her and aroused her to interest and courage.

"The Lord does not let one of us off until our day's work is done," he had said even when he himself feared Sally's duties were over.

"Ah' mighty right He war'," Sally now muttered, panting up the last rise. "I reckon I got something yet to do."

Her advent at Stoneledge was nothing less than consummate acting. Knocking at the kitchen door she responded to the call from within and stood before Ann Walden crouching by the fire, and Cynthia awkwardly trying to evolve an evening meal from some materials on the table.

"Miss Ann, I've come to ax mercy o' you."

Miss Walden laughed foolishly.

"Everything is plumb gone an' I got to tell some one o' my misery. Nothing to eat; nothing to hold onto 'cept a trifle o' money what I'se afraid to let any one know I'se got. Miss Ann, chile, there ain't any one goin' to be s'prised at money coming from the Great House, so jes' let me bide long o' you an' lil' miss, for God's sake, ma'am."

The old tie between the family and its dependents held true now even through the growing mists of Ann Walden's brain.

"Cyn," she commanded, "get Ivy—where is Ivy? Tell her to make up a bed for Sally in the loft over the kitchen."

And then again she laughed that meaningless laugh.

CHAPTER XI

Life in the Morley cabin was tense and dangerously vital. The cold had settled down now with serious intent; the door was permanently closed except of entrances and exits and the two small sliding windows in the front and back of the living-room were never opened, and they were coated with grease and dirt until even the brightest day filtered through but dimly.

Martin was depressed and forlorn, he took what was offered him, asked no questions and seemed far and away from any hope of reasserting himself. He brought water and wood indoors; he made and kept the fire; he slept on the settle before the hearth and always he was dreaming or thinking of Sandy. The letter that had, after many weeks, drifted to him, had been read to him by The Forge doctor who happened to be riding by when Martin tremblingly pleaded with him for help.

"It's this-er-way," Morley had explained, striving to hide the depths of his illiteracy; "my eyes don' gone back on me. I reckon I better go down to The Forge and get specs, but jes' now I'd like to have light on this yere letter."

The doctor read poor Sandy's effusion with some emotion. With broader experience he saw the effort the boy had made to withhold his own lonely state from the father. There was an attempt at cheer in the words weighted, as the reader saw, with homesickness and longing.

"Now, Morley," he cautioned, when the letter was ended, "you keep your hands off that boy. If there is a spark of love for him in your heart, let him fight his battle off there alone. He's found a good friend and it's his one chance. If you want to do anything for him keep yourself above water; have the family respectable for him to come back to. I'm not much on prophesying, but remembering what you once were and what his mother was, I have hopes of Sandy."

No one knew or could have guessed that poor Martin was heeding the doctor's words, but he was. He had stopped drinking. Not a drop of liquor had passed his lips for weeks, and the craving was stronger at times than Martin could endure. At such moments he stole to the outshed and, gripping a certain little ragged jacket, which still hung there, to his twitching face, would moan: "Oh! God, help me for Sandy's sake." Not for his own—but for Sandy's sake always. And God heard and upheld the weak creature.

Then came the night when Mary and Molly aroused Martin from his sleep as they came in about midnight. Martin had supposed them upstairs long before. He had come in at nine o'clock from the shed where he had wrestled with his craving and, by the help of God, had come out victorious once again. He had fallen asleep soon after and a vivid and strange dream had held him captive by its power. Sandy had come to him clearly, and comfortingly; had sat close to him and laid his hand in his. They had talked familiarly, and then suddenly the boy had asked:

"Dad, how about Molly? She belongs to us-all, you said. I've been thinking about Molly; where is she?"

Just then the dream faded; the man on the hard settle pulled himself up, looked dazedly at the almost dead fire and—listened! Some one was fumbling at the door; some one was coming in! Martin's heart stood still for, with the dream fresh in his mind, he thought it was Sandy, and even through his sick longing for the boy a fear seized him. But Mary came into the dim room with Molly clinging to her. They tiptoed across the floor toward the stairway and had almost reached it when Martin flung a log of wood on the fire, and in the quick flash of light that followed stood up and asked in a clear, forceful voice:

"Whar you-all been?"

The strangeness and surprise took Mary off her guard, and she faltered:

"What's that to you, Mart Morley?"

Martin threw another log on the fire, as if by so doing he could illuminate more than the cold black room.

"What yo-all been doing? Molly, come here."

Frightened and trembling the girl came forward. She looked far older than her years. Her bold, coarse beauty had developed amazingly during the past few months, and the expression on her face now roused all the dormant manhood in Morley's nature. Ignoring the woman by the stairway, he gripped Molly by the shoulders, and holding her so that the lurid light of the flaming logs fell upon her, he drove his questions into the girl's consciousness and brought alarmed truth forth before a lie could master it.

"Whar yo' been, Molly?"

"Up to—to Teale's."

"What—doing?"

"Dancing for 'em."

Martin's eyes flashed. It was quite plain to him now—the hideous, drunken orgy, and this little girl fanning ugly passions into fire by her youth and beauty!

"You——" Morley rarely swore, but the eloquent pause was more thrilling than the word he might have spoken. While he clutched Molly, his infuriated eyes held Mary like something tangible, and drew her forth from her shadows.

"She's—mine!" the woman panted. For the first time in her life she was awed by Morley; "she's mine and—the devil's. That was the bargain and no questions asked. The devil pays good wages, Mart. We'll—we'll share with you!"

The woman was actually whining and seeking to propitiate the man.

"I've been true to you, Mart. Sure as God hears me, and 'taint cause I'm old and unsought either. I'll look after her, Mart—but—we-all have got to live!"

Morley tried to control himself before he spoke, and finally managed to say, not unkindly:

"Molly, you go upstairs. Shut—shut and lock the door!"

"Mart!" Genuine terror rang in Mary's tones. "Mart—she's mine and——"

"Go!" commanded Morley, and the child almost ran to do his bidding. Then alone the man and woman faced each other. Desperation gave courage to Mary. If all were lost but her physical strength and bravado, then she must use them.

"You did what you wanted to do with him as was yours," she panted; "you helped him away, and left us-all to starve. You leave—Molly to me and——"

"Stop!" cried Morley, unable to hear the brutal repetition. "You would sell the—the child to Teale and his kind?"

"It's the only way, Mart. I'll keep my hold on her—they——"

"You!" And then, driven by the outraged virtue of the suppressed and forgotten past, Morley gave expression to his emotions in the language of The Hollow. For the first time in his life he struck a woman!

Once the deed was done he reeled back, calmed at once into frozen horror. Mary staggered and fell. In falling she struck her head against the andirons on the hearth and lay quite, quite still while a stream of blood from a cut behind the left ear mingled with the ashes and turned them dark and moist. It seemed hours that Morley looked and looked before he could master himself and move toward the woman upon the floor. Finally he listened to her heart, but his own pulsing ears deceived him; he tried to raise her up, but his strength was gone, and he let the lifeless body drop again on the hearth. Then a craven desperation overcame him. Gone were his courage and power, like a maddened criminal he strode to the stairway and wrenched the locked door from its hinges and sprang up to where Molly, sobbing and moaning, crouched in the far corner.

"Come," he whispered; "come!"

"Where's—mother?"

"Her's gone—to—Teale!" The lie rang out fiercely, boldly. Then wrapping an old bedspread about Molly and keeping her close to him, he made his way down the stairs and out of the house. Molly did not turn to look into the lower room, she believed Martin, and she was numb with terror.

"Whar we-all going?" she panted, as Martin dragged her on. This question roused Morley. Up to that instant he had not considered where he was going; he only felt the necessity of flight.

"To—to Trouble Neck," he answered as if some one else were speaking through him.

"To her as—as they call the Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady."

Molly did not speak again, but the answer had stilled somewhat her fear and anguish. By the time she and Martin reached the Trouble Neck cabin her uncanny shrewdness and cunning were well to the fore.

The little clock on the mantelshelf had just struck two when Marcia Lowe raised her tired eyes from the book spread out on the table before her.

The one large room of the cabin was kitchen, dining-room, parlour, library; all that was not included in bed-chamber. The lean-to was Marcia Lowe's sleeping apartment and a tiny room above reached only by a ladder from outside, served as a trim, cleanly resting-place for a chance guest or a needy traveller.

The little doctor lifted her aching eyes and took in the rude comfort of her home-place with a deep sigh.

"Oh!" she whispered—for she had adopted the compromise of the lonely woman and talked aloud to herself—"oh! if they could forget my sex!"

She was thinking of a conversation she had had with The Forge doctor that very day.

"I—I wish you would work with me," she had pleaded; "they would accept you; obey what you say and—give me a chance."

The doctor had laughed good-naturedly. Miss Lowe amused him hugely. She seemed to him like a child playing with sugar and bread pills.

"My dear young lady," he had said; "they'd shoot me, and with good reason, if I let any petticoat Saw Bones tamper with them; no insult intended—only compliment, dear lady! Your books read like fairy stories; I'm too old a hand to be taken in. The revised Bible, ma'am, is dangerous for souls, and new ideas in physic are about the same for bodies. I read when I can—but I'm too human to experiment on my kind. A few old remedies and a good stiff bluff are all that are needed up-er-here. Now as to you, my dear young miss, I'd have to put you under lock and key or buy you a return ticket to that fly-in-the-face-of-Providence state of yours if you tampered with the bodies of these people. That uncle of yours juggled considerable in his day, but souls are one thing; bodies, another."

Marcia Lowe now clasped her hands behind her tired head and raised her eyes to the low ceiling.

"Just for one faithful soul!" she murmured; "no, one faithful body that would trust itself to me for—a month; a month! A few days of starvation; a magic little pill; a spell of patient waiting and then—a miracle."

But no response came from the stillness of the night and Miss Lowe was about to make preparations for bed when a sound outside stayed her. Then came a knock on the door! She went to the small window beside the door, drew aside the dainty white curtain, opened it halfway and asked:

"Is that you, Hope?" She had promised Liza to bide with her when her hour came, but it was not Hope who replied:

"This is Martin Morley, ma'am. Me and lil' Molly."

The door was opened at once and closed after the two.

"Now," said the little doctor, stirring the fire to greater effort and seeing that her callers had the easiest chairs in the room, "now, then, Mr. Morley."

Molly followed every motion of Marcia Lowe with unchildlike interest. Fear was gone from the girl's face, but an alert sharpness marked it.

"Can you give her," Martin nodded toward Molly, "a bed for—for to-night? I have something to tell you."

Marcia Lowe sensed that something serious lay behind the request, and rose at once and went to Molly.

"Come into my bedroom," she said; "I can make you very comfy, I'm sure. Will you sleep with me?"

Molly nodded and followed meekly. After a time Marcia Lowe came back and, standing in front of Morley, said quickly:

"What is it?"

The haggard, haunted face was raised to her.

"I've—I've done killed Mary!" he said simply.

The little doctor shuddered, but controlled her features; her eyes did not fall from the wretched man's face.

"Tell me!" was all she said. Then Martin slowly in a hushed voice, described all that had passed, even the vision of Sandy.

"The Lord-a'mighty, He knows I didn't mean to kill," Martin quivered; "but who-all will believe that? I meant to stay clean and fair for the boy's coming back, Miss Lowe, ma'am, deed I did, and now he'll come back to——" Martin could not frame the hideous truth in words; he gulped miserably and went on; "please, ma'am, keep—her, Molly, from Teale and them-all!"

"And you?" So simply did the question come that the man replied in kind.

"I—I can't let them-all cotch me, ma'am. Come morning, I'll be past hurting any one, more."

The childlike pathos in this criminal's voice and attitude confused the listener. For the life of her she could not deal with the situation in any ordinary fashion; it seemed like a dramatic incident bungled by amateurs. Presently she asked gently:

"Are you *sure* she is dead, Mr. Morley?"

The unreality held Martin, too.

"I reckon she is," he faltered; "I—I couldn't hear her heart—and she laid right still. I expect she is dead."

The ludicrous overpowered even the turn of possibility, and the little doctor said:

"You just mustn't kill yourself or harm Sandy unless it is necessary, you know. If you will go out and harness my horse to the buggy, you and I will make sure."

By the time Morley had mechanically fulfilled these commands, Marcia Lowe had decided, from the sound of Molly's breathing, that she might safely be left alone, and, cloaked and hooded, joined Martin outside.

It was a dreary ride, and the two spoke seldom.

"You are to be no coward, Morley," Marcia Lowe had said; "you're to face your future like a man—like Sandy's father. He will well understand. I will stand by you and see fair play for you; I'll pay for a good lawyer, and you will take your medicine, whatever it is, and be clean and decent for your boy and girl. I'll take care of Molly."

After a time Martin agreed to this, but from the shivering of the form beside her, the little doctor realized the struggle.

And so they reached Morley's cabin and entered, like ghosts, into the fear-haunted place. Mary was gone. The fire was smouldering in the last flashes, the damp ashes were drying—but Mary had made a bodily escape.

"So!" whispered Marcia Lowe. "It was better to make sure. Go upstairs, see if she is there."

Mary was not there.

"Now come back."

Through the chill of the early morning the two drove silently back to Trouble Neck and with strange foreboding the little doctor made her way at once to the lean-to bed-chamber—Molly, too, was gone! She had made her way to Teale's, Miss Lowe felt sure.

The next morning the news spread fast, garbled by many tongues.

Teale's place had been raided! Teale had escaped and the Morleys had accompanied him.

"Well!" said Sally Taber to Cynthia; "I 'spect Mart Morley had to get his livin' somehow. The yaller streak's got the best of him."

Cynthia made no reply. Oddly enough in her fancy she was gazing upon the portrait of "The Biggest of Them All."

CHAPTER XII

Martin Morley slept, in the clean loft over Marcia Lowe's living-room. There was a good warm bed there, and before he had gone up the ladder to his much-needed rest, the little doctor had fed him and given him hot coffee to drink.

"You are safe," she had comforted him. "God has been good to you, Martin Morley. Molly is with her mother and, sad as it is, we can do nothing more for her. Forget it all, and to-morrow you and I will consider the future."

So Martin slept and slept, and the front door of the cabin was kept closed and locked.

Refreshed and humble, Martin, on the evening of the following day, cautiously crept down the ladder from his loft-chamber and tapped upon the outer door of the cabin.

It was a very smiling and trim little body that welcomed him and bade him sit down to a table laid for an evening meal.

"You see I've waited for you, Mr. Morley; we have a slice of ham, some hot biscuits, and baked potatoes. There's a loaf of cake, too, and coffee and a try at a pudding for which my mother used to be famous."

Every nerve of Martin's starved stomach thrilled, but his eyes did not meet Marcia Lowe's.

"You are feeling better, Martin Morley?"

"Yes, ma'am; thank you, ma'am."

"Well, then I want you to share my meal."

"I—I ain't worthy, ma'am. I can never pay you, ma'am, for what you've done and meant to me. I'm ready to go now, ma'am."

"Where, Martin Morley?" The little doctor was pouring the coffee, and the odour made Morley dizzy with longing.

"I ain't just settled in my mind as to that, ma'am. The world's big, beyond The Hollow."

"Too big for you, Mr. Morley, until you are yourself—your best self again. And you can pay me—I have my bill ready."

Martin eyed her furtively and tried to steady his hand as he reached out for the plate of savoury food she was passing to him. They ate silently for a while, then Marcia Lowe tried to cheer him by scraps of gossip that had drifted to her during the day.

"They think you have gone with Teale," she said with a little laugh; "the idea of your flying off in that company! Have another potato, Mr. Morley; the staying power of a baked potato is simply marvellous."

When the meal was finished and the dishes put away, Marcia Lowe faced her gloomy guest with deep, serious eyes.

"You feel you owe me something, Mr. Morley?" she asked. They were sitting opposite each other by the hearth; a pouring rain dashed against the window and a rising wind howled through the trees. A sleek yellow cat turned around two or three times and then settled comfortably at Marcia Lowe's feet and purred happily.

"I do that, mum."

"You are—willing to do something for me—for Sandy, but most of all for yourself?"

Morley was becoming accustomed to the little doctor's quaint way of putting questions, but her manner still puzzled him.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered confusedly.

"Then listen, Martin Morley. I want to save you, first of all for yourself—next for that boy of yours, who, I somehow feel confident, will come back to honour us all. I believe I can do what I have in mind—there is a little risk, very little, but will you run it for me?"

Morley's thin face twitched. Many emotions swayed him. Doubt, suspicion, superstition, the ingrained revolt of sex—the male resenting this power of the female—all, all held part in Morley's mind, weakened by trouble and malnutrition, but above all was the innate yearning to prove himself for Sandy. Martin had the supreme instinct of parenthood.

"You know you were willing to die for him, Mr. Morley. Are you not willing to run the chance of a better, cleaner life?"

Marcia Lowe was bending forward now, her face radiant and inspired—she looked young, lovely and compassionate.

"I—I—don't follow you, ma'am." Poor Martin was caught in the toils of the enthusiast.

"Then listen. I have studied and—conquered to a certain extent—a great and noble help for humanity—but I am hampered in my work because I am a woman. Oh! no one—no man can understand how terrible it is for us women to look beyond the man and woman part of life and see *human beings* needing us, crying out to us, and for us, to realize that often we might help, in our own way best of all—if only something, over which we have no control, did not bar us. You see, men have no right to deprive human beings of any assistance the world can give. If we women tell men of our hopes and our beliefs, they accept or decline as they think best—and so much is lost! Why, I have been pleading with The Forge doctor ever since I came, to work with me in doing what I long to do, and he will not—he laughs! I am not rich enough or important enough to bring a big doctor from my home to do this thing for you, all that I could do alone. So here I stand with, I solemnly believe, a precious gift and I—I—cannot give it to you because—you won't trust a woman!"

Marcia Lowe was talking far and beyond Morley; he stared bewildered at her, but something within himself was reaching out and touching, with soul-intensity, the tragic appeal from the little woman opposite.

"Uncle Theodore Starr came here because he loved his kind and felt that you all needed him most. Because you had no choice, he believed you would accept him. Can you remember how he worked among you? served you and died for you?"

"I—do, mum!" An old sense of gratitude gave force to the words.

"Well, I feel as he did, only I want to mend your poor, sick bodies; make you strong enough to want to help yourselves like men and women! I want you to know that you have *souls*."

But now Martin was lost again. The stare settled on his face and only the hypnotism of the woman across the hearth guided him. Marcia Lowe saw this, and grew desperate.

"Oh! dear, what shall I do?" she cried helplessly. "Can I say anything that will make you understand? The thing I have is safe and sure. It might go wrong with you—only *might*—but I want, I must have, your consent. Just suppose it did go wrong with you, but that you knew it would help hundreds of others—would you be willing to try?"

Morley did not attempt an answer.

"Let me put it another way!" and now the little doctor arose and stood in the full glow of the fire, while the roar of the wind and the flaring of the red light filled the room with sound and colour. The slim, pale woman looked very weak and small to be the leading actor in this tragic drama of the hills, and the big, stupidly staring man opposite seemed very insignificant as a great sacrifice.

"See, I will put it this way. They call me the Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady because—I give them all a little drink of water and it makes them better! I made the little Hope boy well; ask Liza, she knows. I gave your Sandy a cup of cold water and it helped his throat—I could have helped him more, poor boy, if he had not gone away. Martin Morley, I want to give *you* a cup of cold water—oh! please trust me! You must do what I ask you to do—just for one little week. It will be hard, but I will watch with you and share every suffering hour. I will nurse you and care for you as a daughter might, and then, at the end, I believe as truly as God hears me, that you win stand straight and take your place—*your* place—among men!"

"A charm?" Morley panted, for he was quite overcome by the power exerted over him.

Full of zeal and trust, seizing upon anything to gain her end, Marcia Lowe replied:

"Exactly—a charm! See!" and suddenly she turned to the closet beside the chimney-place; taking out a small bottle she held it up to the light with a glow of reverence upon her uplifted face. "Fifteen tiny grains of this!"

Morley was fascinated.

"Fifteen grains," he repeated, like a man talking in his sleep—"fifteen grains!"

"Yes, yes! and then you must have—faith! You know you always *must* have faith in charms."

Morley assented to this.

"Will—you—will you try?"

"I—reckon I will, mum!"

"Will you promise? Oh! If I have ever done anything to make you grateful, promise! promise!"

"I promise!"

From that night the cure began. Shut away against the mountain-world, favoured by one of the hill storms, prolonged and depressing, the little doctor tested her charm. She was nurse and companion as well as physician. Willing to do battle and take the consequences for the faith that was in her, she wrestled with her problem. Men had proven the thing elsewhere—why not she, here among her dead uncle's people?

"You cannot eat until I tell you to, Martin Morley," she said.

For the first day or so the weakened man, used to deprivation, made no demur; then his haggard face and imploring eyes pleaded for food, and on the third day he asked for it, cried for it like a starving child. This wrung Marcia Lowe's heart.

"Oh! we women," she whispered to herself scornfully; "I declare I must put a watch upon myself or I will find myself going to the cupboard and betraying the faith of Doctor Marcia Lowe!"

Then she resorted to subterfuge, and playfully bullied poor Morley.

"See! If I do not eat, can you not keep me company? What manners have you, Martin Morley, to eat while a lady starves?"

The wretched fellow tried to smile, but wept instead.

After that, Marcia Lowe rarely left the room; never unless Morley slept. She stole like a thief to her closet and ate her food when, and as she could.

"It's the nurse of Martin Morley who refreshes herself," she thought comfortingly.

It was on the fifth evening of the battle with the deadly foe of the mountain poor-whites, that Marcia Lowe heard a knock upon her cabin door. So alone and absorbed had she been for the past few days that a demand from the outer world startled and annoyed her. Martin was sleeping—he lay in the lean-to chamber—so on tiptoe the little doctor went to answer the summons.

The storm had passed unnoticed by Marcia Lowe, and a bright starry heaven lay behind the tall figure of Tod Greeley on the doorstep.

"Oh! Come in, come in!" whispered Marcia—and oddly enough she felt a glow of relief and welcome. Greeley came in and grimly took a chair by the cheerful fire on the ashless hearth.

"I've come on a mighty unpleasant errand, ma'am," he said; "and I ain't one as can pass around sweets before the bitters."

All the way to Trouble Neck Greeley had arranged this speech, and the medical flavour of it had given him courage.

"You're very kind to come yourself, Mr. Greeley," Marcia Lowe was smiling; "another might not have been so welcome. And now for the bitter! I'll gulp it bravely, for I like sweets better."

She sat down in her own rough little rocker, and swayed calmly to and fro.

"Well, mum, the County Club, in session down to the store, delegated me to call on you. Leastway, I done told them I reckoned no one else *but* me should come first!"

"Thank you again, Mr. Greeley."

"Since the raid on Teale's——" Tod drawled uncomfortably—"there's them as is scared. I ain't standing up or setting down for them Speak Easies back o' The Hollow, but business is business, and no man knows who's going to get struck so long as——" Greeley glanced cautiously about—"so long as—you're hiding what you *are* hiding!"

For a moment Marcia Lowe tried to readjust her thoughts and get them into some sort of connection; finally she laughed, laughed so long and so noiselessly that Greeley grew nervous.

"Lord, ma'am!" he faltered, "you can't afford to take it that-er-way lest you've got your place *full* of 'em!"

"Oh! Mr. Greeley. They think, the club thinks I have something to do with the raid? Why I did not know, until some one told me, that there had been one. Come, I want you to see what I am hiding!"

She motioned her guest to the doorway of the lean-to.

"Look!" she whispered.

For a moment Greeley did not recognize the wan, helpless creature huddled on the bed; so small, so pitiful was the unconscious man that he seemed a stranger. Then in amaze and half terror, Tod breathed:

"Mart Morley! What you—doing—to—him?"

Marcia Lowe's eyes were full of tears, and her trembling lips were hardly able to frame the words:

"I'm helping him to lead his people back to their heritage! Oh! you do not understand; but he and I —with God on our side, are fighting—just plain fighting a—a worm!"

At that moment Morley stirred and opened his hollow, starving eyes.

"Food," he gasped in a voice Greeley never forgot; "God-a'mighty—food!"

Then Greeley beheld a miracle. He saw Marcia Lowe run to the fire in the living-room and bring to the bedside of the sick man a tiny kettle of some smooth liquid; he saw her dip a spoon in and then hold it to the lips of Morley. She had forgotten Greeley; forgotten all but the man upon the bed.

"Slowly, slowly!" she whispered; "we've won! we've won! There! there! It's going to be all right from now on—the charm's worked!"

Awed and afraid, Greeley tiptoed from the house, and all the way back to the waiting County Club he muttered like a half-wit:

"Fighting a worm! Fighting a worm!"

CHAPTER XIII

The day that civilization and education took Sandy Morley into its keeping, saw Cynthia Walden astride Crothers' mule jogging down The Way to the factory. Sandy, arrayed in immaculate attire, was borne to his school among the New Hampshire hills by train and coach. He was desperately lonely; thoroughly frightened, but he was well in body; healthfully sustained by good food, and he had so much money in his pockets that he was in deadly fear of being waylaid and robbed. Cynthia, on the contrary, was dressed in a shabby gingham gown freshly laundried and stiffly starched, but much mended, and her pocket was guiltless of money. She had no fear of being attacked, so she sang sweetly and joyously as she bobbed about getting her blood circulating, for the old coat and hood she wore were pitifully inadequate for the crisp weather. Cynthia was young and hope led her on; besides, she had just deposited a most poetic letter to Sandy in the hole of the tree. Old Sally Taber had smoothed the problem of Stoneledge for the time being, and there was going to be plenty of money now that Crothers had opened the way for Cynthia to employ her talents!

Cynthia tried the bird-note Sandy had conquered so successfully.

"Why don't we-all have birds in winter 'stead of summer?" babbled Madam Bubble from her mule; "and moons on dark nights, and hot suns at Christmas?" Then she laughed, and the laugh left the dear, slow smile as a reminder after the joyous sound died away.

"The Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady is in the church," Cynthia exclaimed suddenly as she neared Theodore Starr's small edifice from whose chimney smoke was rising. Then she kicked the fat sides of her mule and turned her supercilious head aside in order to escape Marcia Lowe's eyes, were they scanning The Way.

"It's right noble of her to take care of Sandy's father," the just mind granted; "but Aunt Ann and I—must do without her!"

A touch of yearning lay in the words. Cynthia needed what Marcia Lowe might mean to her, and only loyalty to Ann Walden restrained her.

But Marcia Lowe did not see Cynthia pass. For months now, through the doors and unbarred windows, the light and air had come into the little church, and the spirit of Theodore Starr had, in some subtle manner, been permitted to live again. People dropped in occasionally and sat and thought of the dead parson. Sometimes Marcia Lowe welcomed them and coaxed them to tell her of her dear uncle. She always sat in what she called "the minister's pew," and there were times in her lonely detached life when she seemed to see the calm, fine face looking down at her from the poor pulpit. He never looked the weak man who was afraid of Ann Walden; to his loving niece he was ever the strong brother-of-men who had died while serving them not worthy of him! As Cynthia rode by, Marcia was building a fire in the drum stove, lately placed in the church, and singing, prayerfully, a favourite hymn.

"Alone with Thee, amid the mystic shadows,
The solemn hush of Nature newly born;
Alone with Thee in breathless adoration,
In the calm dew and freshness of the dawn.

"So shall it be at last, in that bright morning
When the soul waketh and life's shadows flee."

The fire responded and outside the shadows of the dark trees of The Way enshrouded Cynthia as

she hurried on.

That day in the factory was the hardest day of Cynthia's life. To a young girl born in freedom, be that freedom of the meanest, the confinement and authority were deadly. Then, too, to witness the utilization of the baby-things that were mere cogs in the machinery of Crothers' business, hurt the mother-heart of the girl cruelly. At the noon hour she tried to make the sad little creatures play—but they had forgotten how, if they ever knew; they, stared at her with wondering eyes; ate all of her lunch she offered, and shivered in their thin clothes by the wretched fire in a shed provided for their leisure time.

"Oh, Sandy, Sandy," murmured Cynthia as she looked about, "I'll help you get them away from here some day."

A new fear and hate of Crothers grew in her heart as she impotently suffered for the children, but Crothers was as gentle and kind to her as any wise and considerate father could have been. He was patient with her bungling and errors; he did not turn her off to his clerks for instruction, he spent his own time upon her. Every moment that he was near her Cynthia trembled, and when he accidentally touched her she recoiled sharply. Crothers noticed this, and at first it angered him; then caused him much amusement. Unconsciously the girl was fanning into sudden and violent flame that which might have slumbered on for months. Before the end of the first week Crothers had noticed how lovely Cynthia's shining braids were as they twined around her pretty, bent head. His eyes grew thoughtful as he noted the lines of the softly rounded shoulders and dainty girlish bosom. The little dent in the back of the slim neck was like a dimple and even the small roughened hands were shapely and beautiful.

"How old are you, little miss?" Crothers asked her the third day of her business life, and Cynthia fearing that her youth might prove an obstacle answered blindly:

"Going on—fourteen!" She looked more, for her South, in spite of all her meagre upbringing, had developed her rapidly. Crothers smiled indulgently.

When Saturday night came four dollars was handed to Cynthia by Crothers himself.

"It was to be three," she said, holding the money toward him. He took the fingers in his, closed them over the bills, and said:

"Just a little present for a nice little girl who has tried so hard to be good."

Cynthia drew back and her eyes flashed dangerously.

"I do not want it!" she said quickly, and flung a dollar on the desk. "I only want what is mine!" After she had gone Crothers swore a little; then laughed. The laugh was more evil than the oath, but no one was there to hear.

Cynthia had no one to speak to about her fear and loathing of Crothers. Besides, she had entered upon her career and dared not turn back. She did not understand herself, nor the man who was her employer; she did not understand conditions nor the yearnings that possessed her; she only knew that she must fight against becoming a poor white, and learn to overcome the limitations of her birth, and Crothers seemed her only chance. On the long rides to and from the factory she thought often of her poor mother and wondered about her bad father. She wished she had learned more about them while Ann Walden was capable of telling her. The time was past now when the mistress of Stoneledge could impart any reliable information to the girl. When the weather permitted the old woman paced the upper balcony crooning to the hills, and as cold and storm shut her inside she seemed only happy in the library. So Sally Taber, reinforced by the money which supposedly she so miraculously had saved, had the room made habitable. Mason Hope was coaxed into giving some of his valuable time to the repairing and by mid-winter the place was comfortable.

"Ole miss is jes' a plain moon-chile now," Sally confided to Marcia Lowe at one of their private conferences; "it's right silly to oppose her."

"Yes, give her everything you can, Sally, and oh! if she ever has flashes of reason get her to talk and—remember what she says!"

"Deed and deed I will," promised Sally. "And if she ever do get her wits back it will be in dat ole libr'y-room. She acts right human thar at times."

Marcia Lowe was sorely puzzled about Cynthia those days. If she were only sure that Ann Walden would never recover her reason she would take her chances with the girl and plead Theodore Starr's cause, but with no actual proof, and with Ann Walden's evident past instruction to Cynthia, she hesitated to make her own claims. Then, too, there were times when doubt rose in her mind, not as to her uncle, but Cynthia's parentage. There might never have been a child born to Queenie Walden. The Hollow story of adoption might be true after all. That would have accounted for old Miss Walden's bitter resentment. It was all very difficult and confusing, but in the meantime she could love the girl, and do, indirectly, for her what personally she could not.

Oftener and oftener the little doctor went to the church by The Way and "sat with Uncle Theodore," as she put it. It was less lonely there; the store was near by and the passers-by were becoming more friendly. Occasionally they dropped in. Tod Greeley and old Townley more than the others, and chatted

sociably. Marcia Lowe had much to be grateful for, and when, one morning two weeks after Morley had been pronounced cured by his faithful doctor-nurse, he came to her, as she sat in the church, and said quietly:

"Miss Lowe, I'm going up yon——" pointing to his own cabin, seen now between the bare trees, "to straighten it up a bit," she wept as if her heart would break. Martin did not witness the outbreak; he had set forth upon his task. Marcia Lowe was alone and upon her knees.

"Dear God!" she repeated over and over; "dear God! he is saved. He'll open the way to others."

Martin Morley went upon his new course unheeded for a time, for a tragic happening to Cynthia and a calamity to the community threw the little doctor and many others into chaos.

Cynthia had been a month in Crothers' factory, when one late afternoon he said to her:

"Little miss, could you bide at The Forge tonight?" Cynthia started back and looked at him.

"It's this-er-way; you've become mighty helpful to me and I've got a batch of letters to get off by the morning's mail. It looks like there is going to be snow, too, and I'd hate to keep you late and then send you toting home after dark. Now if you can stop over and work 'long o' me till—say ten o'clock, we can finish the work and I'll set you down safe and sound at my boarding-house for a good night's rest."

Cynthia gave her usual shudder and sought about for an excuse. She knew Crothers' boarding-house keeper; knew her to be a decent soul who had more than once, lately, brought a hot meal to her at midday when she brought Crothers'. There was snow in the air, too, and a late ride through the woods at night was almost more awful than to stay at the factory.

"They-all will worry," she faltered in her pretty, slow way.

"I sent word by Hope's boys," Crothers reassured her, "they've just gone. I knew I could depend upon you."

Cynthia struggled to control herself, and finally gave her smile and shrugged her shoulders.

The mistress of the boarding-house brought to the factory a piping hot supper for two at seven o'clock. She seemed to know all about Cynthia's proposed stay, and showed no sign of misunderstanding it.

"You better fotch the chile in 'bout nine," she suggested to Crothers as she went out; "she do look clean beat now. Quality don't last out at work like trash do; they certainly do tucker out sooner."

Crothers bade the garrulous woman a pleasant good night, and then set himself busily to the task of mastering a pile of correspondence on his desk. Cynthia went to the little table by the window that served as her writing-desk and asked quietly what she should do. Crothers handed her a list of names and a package of envelopes and told her to address them. The old clock on the wall ticked away comfortably; the warmth and the late hearty meal combined to drive away fear and apprehension of, she knew not what, and Cynthia was soon absorbed in the task set her.

Presently the kerosene lamp on her table flickered and went out; then glancing over at Crothers' back she asked timidly:

"Please, may I sit by your desk, sir? The light's failed."

Crothers turned about and smiled at the pale little creature in the shadows.

"Come right along, little miss! Here, let me fetch your chair. There, now!"

Seated at the end of the flat-topped desk, Cynthia tried to resume her work, but the unrest of the early afternoon possessed her and she felt a tear roll down her cheek—the cheek nearest the man at her left side.

What happened after that Cynthia never could tell clearly; she only knew that a large, hot hand wiped the tear away and a burning kiss fell upon her cheek!

Horrified, and shaking with fear, the girl sprang to her feet and reached the opposite side of the desk near the window looking out toward The Way. She had but one thought: she would break the window and make a dash for safety! But Crothers was upon his feet also. He did not offer to come nearer, but he leaned over the desk and said quietly:

"What you afraid of, lil' girl?"

"You!" The word was like a hiss.

"Of me? Can't you give me a kiss? I don't want to hurt you; I'm your best friend; why, see here, I'll give you a right smart new coat and hat and dress—for a kiss; just a little kiss."

Cynthia's eyes seemed fastened to the smiling, cruel face, but she did not tremble now. Calmly, clearly, she was thinking what she could take with which to defend herself.

"Just—one—more—kiss—lil' girl," and now Crothers was coming around the corner of the desk. It seemed like some fearful nightmare, but Cynthia was ready!

"Just one—more—kiss right on the pretty mouth!" The large, white hands were extended and the teeth showed through the red lips. At that instant Cynthia seized the lighted lamp which stood near, and with desperate strength flung it toward the reaching body! There was a crash, a curse, a fall, and then the room was blotted out by darkness.

For a moment there was a deathlike stillness and in it the girl crept toward the door, unfastened it and gained the open. There were feathery snowflakes in the air and they touched Cynthia's face like holy kisses, wiping away the evil one that had burned there but a moment before. Groping and running she reached The Way and, from behind a tree, paused to take breath. Never had she felt more self-possessed or secure; her mind was clear and sane. If Crothers came out, she could outstrip him in a race for the boarding-house, and she meant to go to the boarding-house that night! Something within her guided her now; something was protecting her and saving her—it was the Woman Cynthia was by and by to be!

As the girl by the tree panted and reasoned, she saw, from the factory window—the window of Crothers' office—a darting tongue of light; another followed and in a moment the glass was ruddy—and smoke was issuing from the door left open when she ran out.

"The place is on fire!" Then—"why does he not come out?"

For a moment only a madness seized Cynthia while hate and revenge had their way:

"Let him die!" she muttered, setting her teeth close and gripping her hands; "let him!"

But even as the words were spoken she was running back to the factory. She rushed into the smoke-filled hallway and, by the light of the fire, she saw Crothers lying full length where he had fallen. The flames were feasting on the rug by the desk and the unconscious man's head lay upon that rug!

Cynthia knelt beside Crothers and called his name, but the ugly smiling lips made no motion of reply. Then she seized him under the arms and frantically tugged and tugged at the heavy body. The flames were almost at her feet, the wool of the carpet had caught first and the licking tongues followed the burden she bore, greedily. At last she was at the door; outside, and the safe, black night surrounded them! She lay Crothers down and breathed fast and hard. The snowflakes were larger; thicker now, and there was a harshness in their touch.

Presently Cynthia began to call louder and louder, and the fire gaining power lighted the night and crackled merrily.

"Help! help! help!"

And help came. First on the scene were the boarding-house mistress and her sons; then followed others of The Forge, and soon a group had gathered and were aimlessly running about, giving orders and foolishly bemoaning the havoc that was spreading.

Quite calm and uncaring Cynthia answered the questions put to her. She defended herself without once realizing that she was doing so.

"Crothers got up suddenly—and fell!" she said to the mistress of the boarding-house who was working over the man on the ground, bathing his face with snow and slapping his hands with her own rough ones.

"Yes, the lamp overturned—and the fire was so quick!"

"Yes, I could not let Crothers die; I had to pull him out!"

Then a man near by said:

"Plucky little devil." The words rang in Cynthia's ears strangely. Why did they praise her? What had she done? She wanted Crothers to die. Now that he was out of the fire, she did not want to see his eyes open again, and yet she was straining her own to get the first sign in his. Of a sudden Crothers looked full at her wonderingly, dazedly, and at that sight Cynthia fled, and, in the confusion, no one missed her. She did not go to the shed for her mule, she made for The Way uncloaked and unhooded and ran for her life until, overcome by weariness, she paused to take breath. Looking back she saw only a dull glow where the factory had stood and black smoke was rolling thick up into the pure, falling snow.

It was fear of Man that haunted Cynthia as she toiled up the hillside; Man as he had loomed first on her horizon, cruel, seeking, and selfish. When the hard branches of the tree touched her she stifled a scream, for they felt like the demanding hands of Man; when a hungry animal darted across her path she recoiled, remembering another animal with face and form of Man.

It was three o'clock in the morning when Cynthia left The Forge—though how the hours had passed from nine till three she was never able to explain;—it was eight o'clock when she passed Andrew Townley's cabin and saw smoke curling from his chimney. Sensation was slowly returning to her; she felt cold, weak, and hungry, but with the senses aroused she realized that she could not go home! She could not face Ann Walden's vacant stare, or Sally Taber's coarse cheerfulness. In all her world she was

alone, alone! But even as she thought this her weary feet were bearing her to Theodore Starr's little church which was never locked by day or night. She reached the door at last, and with all her remaining strength pushed it open and staggered up to where the steps led to the small raised altar. Dropping down she bent her aching head upon her arm and sobbed:

"Father! Mother!" simply because in all God's world no other words came to her relief.

Theodore Starr's little daughter had come to him quite naturally in her first great sorrow!

CHAPTER XIV

And there Marcia Lowe found her. Fortunately the little doctor went early to the church, for she had conceived of a Christmas such as The Hollow had never known, and it seemed fitting that Theodore Starr should be the host!

Quite merrily she entered and went directly to the stove to start a fire. As she drew near, the outstretched form of Cynthia Walden caught her eyes and she cried aloud in astonishment and fright. At first she thought the girl was frozen to death, for she lay so still and her thin clothing was evidence of the danger run.

"Dear heart! dear heart!" whispered Miss Lowe, overcoming her desire to take the girl in her arms until she had made a fire. Once the genial heat began to spread Marcia Lowe set a kettle of water on the stove and then gave her maternal instincts full play. She gathered the slight form close and kissed again and again the thin oval cheek and close shut mouth.

"Poor little, little girl!"

The warmth and sound stole into Cynthia's far place and summoned her back. Her first look was full of terror; her second was one of unearthly joyousness, and then because the woman of Cynthia had no need to battle longer for her, the child made its claims and, clinging and sobbing to the little doctor she moaned again and again:

"I am so afraid; so afraid!"

It was long before Miss Lowe could quiet her. She wrapped her heavy coat about her and forced some drops of hot water between the stiff, chilled lips. Then she bathed the face and hands gently with water cooled with snow, murmuring tenderly meanwhile:

"Dear little girl; poor little Cynthia! It's all right now."

When the girl was soothed and comforted she went to the store to buy food—anything to be had, for she knew instinctively that whatever was the cause, Cynthia had tasted no food that day.

"Come back soon!" moaned the girl crouching by the stove, "I am so afraid."

After she had eaten some stale crackers, soaked in diluted condensed milk, Cynthia sat up, still and pale, and faced Marcia Lowe dumbly, imploringly.

"Can you tell me, little Cyn?"

"No!" The voice was distant and monotonous.

"But something has happened, dear. I want to help you."

"The factory—is burned down!" A shudder ran over the rigid young figure. Marcia Lowe saw that she might hope to win her way if she did not startle the benumbed mind.

"Were you hurt, dear? Was any one hurt? When did it happen? How did you hear?"

After each question Marcia waited, and then put another. Still that fixed, steady gaze.

"I—I was there. It was night. He—he kissed me—don't look like that! look away! your eyes hurt me!"

Marcia came closer and took the girl in her arms.

"Now, darling," she whispered, "close your eyes and I'll close mine—there are only you and I and—God here."

"He—he kissed me, Crothers did! Then he wanted me to do something—oh! I do not know what, but something he thought I could do—I felt it, and—and I threw the lamp at him. It was lighted and he went down in a heap and I—I ran right hard, but I went back and pulled him out when the fire started. I do

not know why—for I want him out of the world. I shall be afraid always while he is in the world!"

"It's all right now, little Cyn, all, all right."

This only could the horrified woman repeat over and over, as she swayed to and fro with closed eyes and Cynthia on her breast.

Vividly she seemed to see the late scene. The helpless girl; the brutish man; the lonely night shutting them in and only a miracle to save. Details did not matter, and the miracle had come, but the after effects were here and now.

It was near noon before Marcia Lowe dared take Cynthia away from the shelter of the church, and when she did so she chose an hour when all but Greeley were absent from the store, and he was in the rear, eating his dinner.

"You must come to Trouble Neck, little Cyn," she said firmly; "you'll be safe there, and we must think this out."

Cynthia made no demur, and wrapped in Marcia Lowe's coat—Marcia had a lighter one beside—she clung close to the little doctor and walked the three miles to Trouble Neck without a word of complaint.

"It's plain good luck," Marcia Lowe thought, "that Martin Morley is out of hospital." And then she smiled grimly up into the girl-face beside her, for Cynthia was fully as tall as she.

It was late afternoon when Tod Greeley strode over to Trouble Neck for no particular reason. Outside the door he stood and listened to low-spoken words and snatches of song.

"'Taint nowise normal, I reckon," mused he; "a woman's tongue and mind has got to have some one to hit up against, or the recoil is going to do some right smart damage to the woman herself." Then he knocked, and went in at the word of command to enter.

"Just conversationing with yourself?" he asked.

"Yes. Poor company's better than none. Sit down, Mr. Greeley; you're always welcome."

"I brought some news. Crothers' factory is plumb burnt to the ground."

"Land sakes!" ejaculated the little doctor in the idiom of her home town; "any damage besides the factory?"

"Crothers is right used up. They say he tipped over the lamp in his hurry to get up and—things happened."

"Dear suz!" Marcia Lowe was lapsing into old-fashioned speech.

"And Miss Lowe, little Miss Cynthia was thar after hours! They do say she acted like she was possessed. She pulled Crothers out of the flames and saved his life I reckon—that is, if it *is* saved! He ain't perked up much yet, 'cording to reports. But Miss Lowe—little Miss Cyn ain't come home! I'm tumble feared lest she went back again for something, and——"

Miss Lowe got up from her chair and cautiously motioned Tod to the doorway of the lean-to.

"Look!" she whispered. Greeley expected still to see Martin, but instead he saw the delicate, sleeping face of Cynthia Walden. He drew back with a stifled cry.

"That there room o' yours," he faintly said when he reached the fireside again, "is right nerve-racking. It's like one of them Jack-boxes at Christmas."

"She only stopped here because she was tired. When she awakens I will take her home," explained Miss Lowe.

Greeley was nonplussed, but when he was in doubt he turned the subject and talked more than usual.

The following day Cynthia was taken home. Providence and the strain and excitement saved her from serious harm, but when Marcia Lowe left her by the gate of Stoneledge there seemed to be something tragic in the fact that after such an experience, no explanations were necessary. Ann Walden was past any earthly worriment, and Sally Taber could not understand then, or ever, the soul-hurt little Cynthia had received.

"It's good friends now and always, little Cyn?"

"Yes, dear Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady!"

They stood by the dilapidated gate.

"And you will come often to Trouble Neck?"

"Right often."

"And you are not afraid? Remember I have a care over you."

"I am not afraid."

"Then kiss, little Cyn, and God bless you."

On her way home Marcia Lowe stopped at the church to rest and "talk it over with Uncle Theodore."

The golden winter sunset streamed through the window and lay bright and fair like a shining way up to the altar. Marcia walked the brilliant strip and sat down in the minister's pew. Wrapping her heavy coat about her she raised her eyes to the pulpit and a great comfort came. Then she closed her eyes and the pale, fine face of her uncle seemed to rise before her.

"If you could only tell me all about it, dear," she whispered. "I would help any little girl. God knows, but I could help yours so much easier! Isn't there some way, uncle, that you can make me understand? Is your place so far away?"

A step fell upon the floor; a shambling, tottering footstep. Miss Lowe turned and saw Andrew Townley.

"Sit here beside me," she said; "this is a good place to be."

"It's a right good place, ma'am. Seems like we-all can't kill Parson Starr. I seem to feel like it was only yesterday when he rode up The Way and sorter settled down like a blessing long o' us-all. Lately, as I pass by or turn in yere I get a call back to something what he spoke. To-day it came to me right sharp how he said 'greater love' and then went on to explanify. I'm right old in years, ma'am, and I'm doddering, I expect, but I reckon I knows as much as that po' moon chile o' Hope's. You know Crothers has got him, too, 'mong the wheels, and the po' lil' boy he comes home all wild and sicklike, and mornings Hope has to lick him down The Way—he hates that-er-much to go. Come to-morrow, I'm going down to Crothers' and I'm going to offer up myself 'stead o' that moon chile. When I go to join Parson Starr I'd like to have something to offer him by way o' excusing myself. 'Parson, I'll say to him, parson, this I done 'long o' "Greater Love."'"

Marcia Lowe's eyes filled with tears as she took the poor old fumbling hands in her own.

"Dear, dear friend," she faltered, "God will not need your service. He has chosen a burnt offering instead of a human sacrifice. The factory is in ashes now, and for a time, the children may rest."

"Sho'!" murmured Andrew. "Sho' to be sure." Then he wandered back to that past which held Starr.

"The last time I saw the parson was that-er-day when he went a riding off to the Gulch to help ole Miss Lanley out o' life. He had lil' Miss Queenie long o' him—she was the Walden girl as *was*."

Marcia Lowe sat up straighter and again gripped the wandering, wrinkled hands. Her uncle's letter came vividly to mind and she felt suddenly that she was being led by old Townley back to clear vision.

"Go on!" she whispered soothingly, seeking not to confuse the rambling wits. "Just where was old Miss Lanley's place?"

Andrew laughed foolishly.

"Lanley!" he pattered on. "Susie May Lanley! I reckon she was a right putty one in her day. I uster set and watch her and say this-er-way: 'plenty o' them! I'm going to get one!' meaning to make her jealous long o' gals, but she never took no heed—but Landy! she died forsaken and lone, and times is when I think she would have been a mighty sight better off if she had took me!"

Townley's long reminiscence had tired him woefully and he began to cry pitifully, swaying to and fro and repeating:

"She done died forsaken and lone!"

Then he fell asleep, his white head on Marcia Lowe's shoulder, the full radiance of the late sun flooding over them through the western window. For a half hour he slept and when he awakened he seemed hopelessly addled. Muttering and groping, hardly seeming to notice his companion, he made his way out of the church.

"Old Miss Susie May Lanley!" the little doctor repeated over and over. "I must hold to that until I get it on paper. I guess Uncle Theodore was married by some one living near old Miss Susie May Lanley's!"

Just as Marcia Lowe was leaving the church, Cynthia came running down the trail. She was smiling and calm.

"I came back," she said confidingly, "to tell you something. I've worked it out myself."

"Yes, dear;" the girl's face struck Marcia strangely. A new expression rested upon it.

"I'm—not—going—to suffer any more."

"Why, little Cyn?"

"No. No more! It hurts and hurts and then you get over it, and go on just the same. I'm not going to suffer!"

Miss Lowe went close and took the pretty face in her hands.

"See here, little girl, if suffering is a teacher it is not such a cruel thing; be a good learner."

"No. Last night in the blackness and fear something happened—here!" The girl put her hand over her heart. "But now with the sun shining over Lost Mountain, it's all so right safe and still and happy that I'm sorry for the hurt of last night. No, I am not going to suffer. I'm going to be just lil' Cyn again. I thought you would like to know."

"Oh, dear," and then Marcia laughed. "You-all make me want to cry so easily! I am glad, dear. Surely I do not *want* any one to suffer; but see here, will you come to me every day, Cynthia? I want to teach you some necessary things. Things like—well—book things! Things that Sandy just loved."

"I reckon I will, Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady!"

Then she was gone as she had come. Crothers' touch had only alarmed her; it had not soiled her.

"Thank God!" murmured the little doctor; "the woman in the child shielded her from all but physical shock! And what a quaint philosophy for a girl to evolve."

That evening as Marcia Lowe stood before her little mirror in the lean-to, braiding her long smooth hair, she talked a bit for comfort's sake.

"It's plain luxury to lie in my own bed again," she said, "the bench in the other room can never be made anything but a martyr's cot." Then she glanced up and faced her own smiling image with the braids twisted about the head.

"Oh!" she faltered, falling back, "oh! Uncle Theodore!" For there, smiling at her with the slow, lingering smile, the face of Cynthia seemed to shine out by the flickering candlelight, instead of her own!

The long dressing-gown gave a childish setting to the little doctor's form, the coronet braids; the happy, smiling face was young and wonderfully, strikingly like Cynthia's.

"They always said I was so like Uncle Theodore! I've got Cynthia to her father by way of—me!"

Then the Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady did a most unaccountable thing—she fairly pranced about the room.

"I've found it!" she sang; "without resurrecting old Miss Susie May Lanley! What's a stupid marriage certificate compared to God's plain handwriting? I can keep my secret now, Uncle Theodore, until the right time. It was so good of you, dear, to give me proof."

CHAPTER XV

Seven years passed, leaving their traces, and upon a certain afternoon in August Levi Markham and Matilda sat on the piazza of the Bretherton home and awaited the arrival of Mrs. Olive Treadwell.

Old Bob, Sandy's collie, lay at Levi's feet. Bob was fat and full of years; he wore a heavily studded collar with perfect dignity and had, apparently, quite forgotten lean days and promiscuous kicks. Levi could now shuffle his feet with impunity. Bob never suspected ulterior motives and the sight of a broom or club had lost all terrors for him.

Markham did not look any older than he looked seven years ago. Indeed, his interest in Sandy Morley, his pride in that young man's achievement, and Sandy's absolute love and loyalty to his benefactor, had done much to relieve Markham of years instead of adding them to him. Matilda had not fared so well. She looked like fragile ware, but she never complained and with quiet courage she went her westering way thankfully.

"Levi is wonderfully softened," she often thought; "it doesn't hurt him so much these days to praise instead of blame, and naturally folks respond. It's mostly on account of Sandy. Levi does so mortally hate to lose that when he wins out he thaws out!"

The broad acres of Bretherton were rich and full of harvest as the old brother and sister waited that afternoon. At last Levi snapped his watch cover and said sharply:

"That three-fifty train is always late! Do you suppose—she—Mrs. Treadwell, will expect to be put up for the night?"

"I hope not," Matilda replied, knitting away gently with closed eyes. "I'm not one who takes pleasure in folks' disappointments and I'm glad to say the village inn is comfortable and not over crowded. I *can*, if it is necessary, tell Mary Jane to put an extra plate on for the evening meal."

"Wait and see how things turn out," cautiously advised Levi.

"What time is it now, brother?"

"Two-forty-five! But I put no faith in that train."

"Was that a letter from Sandy you got in the noon mail?"

"It was, Matilda. I think it would be safe to have an extra plate put on for him."

Matilda opened her eyes.

"Levi," she said; "I'm not one to nose about much, but what is the meaning of all this?"

Levi set his lips grimly.

"I never knew that Treadwell woman to break in after a long silence but for two things," he replied; "either she wants something or she wants to get rid of something. Three years back she asked for help when she found that precious nephew of hers——"

"And ours, Levi," Matilda put in; "we can't disown him. Blood is blood even if it clots."

"Well, our nephew, then! When she found young Lansing Treadwell eating up her income, she begged for some scraps of what she pleased to term 'his mother's rights!'"

"And you gave them to her, Levi!"

"I couldn't let Caroline's boy die in a hole even if Hertford's son put him there!"

"You speak real comically sometimes, Levi. There are times when I could think Sandy was talking through your voice!"

"Well! well! every man has a streak of the dramatic in him!" Markham's lips relaxed, "and I must say that to see Sandy Morley and Lans Treadwell good friends without either sensing the true relations of birth and tradition, tickles me through and through. I guess that Treadwell woman would have done her prettiest if she had caught on. But she doesn't know where Sandy hailed from and she's covered the Hertford name out of sight for personal grudge, and those two youngsters sailed into each other as if they were steered by Fate and no one interfering. Lans Treadwell can't get anything but good out of Sandy, and there isn't a soul living—you and I included—who could draw Morley from his course, so I've looked on and chuckled considerably."

"Brother, I sometimes wonder how it is that you trust Sandy as you do—you never question."

"Not out loud, 'Tilda."

"But he does not always explain. Now his working this summer as he has! Every other summer it has been in the mills, but this summer he had to have more money than you gave him. What for, Levi? I ask you flat-footed and not casting any suspicion, but what did he want it for?"

"That's the reason I've asked him down to-night. I want to find out. I never have questioned him over much. When he said he wanted more money I took for granted that he did and so long as he didn't hint for me to give it, I sort of allowed it wasn't any of my business. He's mastered the rudiments at the mills; he's over twenty-one—just over—and I rather enjoyed seeing him take the bit in his teeth. But I sensed that Mrs. Treadwell was coming to get rid of something to-day and I thought it might be just as well for Sandy to be on hand later. Matilda, if they two lap over each other, you steer Sandy away till I march her off."

Matilda nodded and again shut her eyes while she knitted her soft wools into a "rainbow scarf." When she spoke, her thoughts had taken a sudden and new turn.

"I'll admit, Levi, that Sandy's clothes set on him as I never saw a man's clothes set. They are the making of him. He's terrible good looking—considering!"

"Considering—what?" Markham frowned at the placid face and close-shut eyes. "Considering! ugh! Why, 'Tilda, there is blood running in that boy's veins that we Americans ought to bow down before! There are times when he looks at me in his big, kind, loving fashion, that I feel as I did the first time the poor little dirty devil raised his eyes to me, only now all that went to the making of the lad seems to be saying, 'thank you, Markham, and God bless you!'"

"Levi, you're an awful good man, and time's mellowing you more than any one would have looked for."

"Thank you,'Tilda."

And then for a long time they sat in silence and thought their own thoughts. Bob grunted and turned around facing the brother and sister, blinked, grunted again, and probably thought of Sandy also.

The train that afternoon was on time, and the carriage Markham sent to the station presently appeared bearing Mrs. Treadwell.

Olive Treadwell was handsomer than ever, for her gray hair softened her features and the years had added just enough flesh to her bones to insure grace, not angularity.

"I am going back on the six-two train, Mr. Markham, if you will permit your coachman to take me to the station. Lans and I have a very important engagement this evening."

Levi gave the order and handed his visitor to a chair.

"Matilda has some iced tea for us," he said, "and then we will go inside."

Mrs. Treadwell greeted her hostess and sat languidly down, taking off, as she did so, her long dust coat and displaying an exquisite gown of pale violet.

There was a little desultory conversation, two cups of delicious tea and one of Matilda's choice sandwiches and then Markham led the way to the library.

Mrs. Treadwell took the deep leather chair, Levi lowered the awning over the west window, and courteously sat down opposite his visitor.

"It is years since we met, Mr. Markham," Olive Treadwell said; "but you have been very kind to me, meanwhile. I am not one to forget."

Markham nodded his head and lowered his eyes. After a decent pause Mrs. Treadwell continued, feeling her way through her remarks like a cautious person stepping gingerly over a mental ice pond. She always seemed to leave a subject open to more than one interpretation and by the lifting of Markham's eyebrows or the raising of his eyes she chose her footing. The raising of his keen eyes under the shaggy brows was very disconcerting and illuminating.

"I know, my dear Mr. Markham, that you are not as worldly as I am; I am confident that along certain lines of conventions we will differ now, as we have in the past, but, being worldly I cannot bear that an injustice should be done that would cause you to act in such a way as to defeat your own aims and ideals."

The eyebrows went up as if they were on springs, and Mrs. Treadwell leaped to a safer footing.

"Of course, when I refer to worldliness, I mean social worldliness. I have learned, I have been forced to learn, the justice of your once-proposed dealing with my Lans before he went to college. Your business sense cannot be questioned. Had the boy been placed in your hands then, I really believe his outlook on life would have been clearer and finer. He has associated with those who have coloured his views by—well, let us say, artificial lights. Still, the boy is the best of his kind—I will say that for him. I hope I can make you believe that I have come to you to-day entirely for your own best interests—not his!"

And now the steely eyes met the soft brown ones and demanded the nearest approach to truth that Olive Treadwell had to offer. She flushed and went back to her former place of safety and tried again.

"Let us resort to no subterfuge," she said with a charming smile.

"Thank you," Levi nodded and again lowered his lids.

"To be quite frank, then, what I mean is this: I recognize that you are one of the few men who regard your wealth as a trust; your capacity for acquiring wealth a talent for which you are responsible. As I said before, I feel that had I realized your true motives at the time Lans graduated from preparatory school, I would have been eager to place him in your charge to learn the great business of life and the use of wealth in your way. I made an error; I confess it willingly. Since then I have heard of your wise and private charities——"

"I never give charity, madam!"

"You are so modest! Well, your understanding helpfulness."

"Simply good business, madam."

"Very well—good business! and that brings me to my point. I have always said that if I must trust myself, my confidence, or my money to anyone, I would choose a person who, by training, instincts, and possibilities most nearly was akin to myself. I sincerely believe inheritance and blood do count. Now just suppose——" Mrs. Treadwell gingerly put her weight on the next footing; "suppose you were obliged to intrust your wealth and future interests to one of two men, would you not feel safer in the hands of the man who, for family reasons and by inherited tastes, could understand you and your

ideals?"

"Certainly, madam."

"You know when a test comes you have to take a good deal for granted in one who has no tie of blood to hold him to you?"

"May I request, madam, that you tell me exactly what you mean in as few words as possible? I see that you are embarrassed by what you have been kind enough to come to tell me—I believe it will help us both if you state your facts without further explanation or preparation."

The tide had carried Olive Treadwell out into midstream—it was sink or swim now!

"I will do so. I cannot bear to see you duped by your adopted—shall I say, son?"

"I have never held the position of father to young Morley. I've helped him to find himself as I have many another young man. He has no reason to dupe me. We understand each other fairly well; better, I think than most old men and young ones."

"Exactly! That is what you think."

"It is."

"Very well, then listen. Remember I would not have come to you if I had not had evidence. You take exception to Lans and his ways of life, I have been informed that you have even called him a—a—libertine!"

"With modifications—yes!"

"I do not ask, Mr. Markham, that you try to withhold your judgments until you know all the facts about my boy. You were never fair to him; you saw him—you see him now—through his father, my poor brother!"

"Madam, for his mother's sake I have always kept in touch with his career even when I knew he was beyond any caution or judgment of mine. I know that he has shamefully compromised a young woman and quite openly flaunts his relations with her by calling them some new-fangled name. Perhaps I am a narrow-gauge man, madam. All my life I have been obliged to travel from a certain point to a certain point—I'm made that way. I have endeavoured to look about to help my fellow-men, when I could in justice do so, but I have stuck to the tracks that seem to me to lead safely through the land of my journey. I am not interested in branch roads or sidings."

Mrs. Treadwell was a bit breathless and angry but she was too far from shore yet to indulge in relaxation.

"Lans is not an evil fellow; he is high-minded and will prove himself in due time. I really am only seeking to help you be patient until he has had his opportunity, and not, in the meantime, make a fatal mistake. A new era is about to dawn when men and women, for the good of the race, will attack social conditions from a different plane from what you and I have been taught to consider right. Lans is in the vanguard of this movement—but I only implore you to give him time and while we are waiting let me ask you this—would you be more lenient to—to this protégé of yours than you are to Lans, if I could prove to you that he has been hiding his private life from you entirely? Has, apparently, laid himself bare to your confidence and good-will while, in a secret and shameful manner, he has had very disreputable relations with a young woman in Boston?"

Levi Markham took this blow characteristically: he sighed, raised his eyes to the speaker's face, and said calmly:

"I thank you, madam, for your interest in my affairs. I can readily see that you would not dare come to me with this matter unless you had facts. I appreciate your good-will toward me and Lans, but I am just wondering if this—this relationship of Sandford Morley's with a—with the young woman, might not be viewed as leniently as Lansing's—if all were known? He might call it by a new-fangled name, you know."

"Why, Mr. Markham! His intrigue is a low, vulgar thing. That is exactly what I am trying to make you understand. The difference lies right there. Lans is open and above-board; he's a gentleman. This young Morley is——"

"Well, well, madam!" Levi held up his hand calmly silencing the indignant voice. "I know Lansing has taken every one into his confidence who chose to lend an ear; we have all shared his life whether we approved or not and I will say this: young Morley has never asked any one to play confessor for him, but I am going to give him an opportunity to speak for himself if he wants to."

"He will lie, sir."

"He's the worst liar you ever saw, Mrs. Treadwell."

Just how to take this Olive Treadwell did not know. She was distracted. She felt that Markham was playing with her! Perhaps he knew all about Morley's escapades and preferred them to Lans' newer

ideals.

"You will investigate for yourself?" she pleaded; "in justice to Lans?"

"In my own way, Madam."

"You mean——"

"That I will look to my own interests as I always have. When all is said and done, ma'am, there's no law in the State that confines me to leaving my savings to any particular young man. I have still, I hope, a few years to my credit. I promise you I will devote them to securing the best possible good for the *trust*, as you so well put it, in my keeping. You are quite right also in saying that I consider the power of money-making a talent. It is my only talent and I do not underestimate it."

"You are a—hard man, Markham. Time has not softened you."

"I will still endeavour to be just, madam. I will tell you this—if I discover that I have been duped, I'll give, outright, a good sum of money to you in trust for Lansing!"

"You think I—I have simply tried to blacken Morley's character for personal gain?"

"No, no, Mrs. Treadwell. I ascribed the best possible motives to you!"

"Levi Markham—I cannot understand you."

"Why should you try, madam?"

Olive Treadwell got up and paced the room.

"You humiliate me!" she said angrily. "Of course I desire my brother's son to inherit rightfully. He will have all that I die possessed of. I am seeking his interests but only justly and humanly. When he first came in contact with this—this investment of yours—as you call him, it was as *tutor* to this Morley. Consider! *tutor*, my brother's son, to your—your waif! And the dear, noble fellow—my Lans, fell in love with him. Has trusted and helped him socially. Why, he made his college life easy for him by his own popularity. Quite by accident I discovered the vulgar intrigue of this—this Morley. I saw him go into a house where a little seamstress of mine lives! I inquired; I found him out; and—and, not for any low gain, but gain in the larger, higher sense I pocketed my pride and came to you as helpless women do come to strong men and you make me feel like a—village scandal-monger!"

"I beg your pardon, madam. I am sorry that my manner suggests this to you. But can you not see that I must master this situation in my own way? I cannot sell out my interest in my investment without reason. Give me a—week—no forty-eight hours!"

"Thank heaven!" Olive Treadwell exclaimed, "there is the carriage. No matter what the outcome of this is, Levi Markham, I reckon you'll live to thank me for putting you on the right track."

"I'm still on my narrow gauge, madam." Markham smiled not unkindly and put out his hand.

"Please bid your sister farewell. I shall not return to Bretherton, I imagine. I will never willingly abase myself again, not even for Lans!"

When she had gone Markham sank into the big leather chair and looked blankly before him. His eyes were fixed across the desk where he himself generally sat, and a kind of pity moved him for the part of him that no one ever knew or suspected. In Sandy Morley, he had realized nearer his yearning and ambition than he ever had before. His paternal instincts had been, to a certain degree, gratified. The boy had seemed so entirely his; had responded so splendidly to his efforts for him. They had grown so close together during the past years in their silent, undemonstrative fashion. Could it be possible that he had been deceived?

And then Markham pulled himself together and went around the desk to his revolving chair. It was as if the stern man of affairs took control and demanded of the doubting creature opposite, common sense and plain justice. "Hold your horses, Levi," he cautioned; "bide your time. Don't get scared off. Do you remember that old mine that no one else took stock in? It bought and feathered your first nest! Just you hold to that and keep your mind easy until you get onto the job yourself!"

CHAPTER XVI

Sandy came down from Boston that evening, tired-eyed and dusty. He walked up from the station because he had taken an earlier train and he wanted the walk through the quiet, sweet woods and fields before he met the two friends from whom he always kept his worries and troubles. By the time he entered the house on the hill he would be himself again!

And what had the seven years done for and with Sandy Morley? Outwardly they had wrought wonders with him. He was over six feet tall, broad and good to look upon. His clean-cut dark face was rather stern and serious, but his eyes had caught and held the light and kindness the world had shown him since he left Lost Mountain. When Sandy smiled you forgot his sternness; he could look very joyous, but recent happenings had set a seal upon his brighter side. Well dressed and well cared for he strode ahead, taking a cut be knew well through the woods and pastures leading up to the farmhouse, and for the first time in years the homesickness for Lost Hollow surged over him. Always in his deeper, more thoughtful moods the old home-place had a part. For years he rarely ate a meal, when he was hungry, without a grip of memory taking a flavour from the food. His hours of ease and pleasure were haunted by grim recollections of toil and dreariness which he had once endured, and which others, like him, were still undergoing. He never forgot, never became callous; but as time went on and success became more certain, he learned to estimate the value of utilizing his chances and economizing his strength and powers. As in the old days of preparation among the hills, he put in safe keeping his earnings, never counting them; never trusting himself to the encouragement or depression of their amount for good or ill—he awaited his hour and call. And, too, as in the old days he mistrusted and feared Molly, so now there were moments when he, superstitiously, expected some one or some thing to defeat him in his aims and ideals. For never had his vision faltered. He was still preparing to help Lost Hollow and all them who dwelt therein.

There had been times in the past when, strange to say, with good food in plenty about him, he had yearned with hungry longing for the rough ash cakes and sour milk of his early home; and there would always be hours when he would raise his eyes in soul-sickness and pray for a glimpse of Lost Mountain —the one lofty thing in his one-time little world. And the first few springs after his leaving his home he was ill when he saw the dogwood blossoms—they called to the depths of his nature and the depths answered not! He had kept the vow made to himself—he would neither write nor seek word from the hills until he were ready to go back to his own.

The first days at school were tortured experiences, but he mastered them first by physical courage, then by sheer fineness of character. He made great strides after the second year, and when he graduated from the New Hampshire Preparatory he was ready, with some tutoring, to enter Harvard. Oddly enough Lansing Treadwell became his tutor, neither knowing more of the other than the circumstances demanded. Again Sandy's rare disposition won for him a place in Treadwell's good will and liking. The young tutor prided himself upon his own popularity and social position; he made a virtue of his necessity for earning money and, in good natured, lordly fashion, blazed a trail for his uncle's protégé with a laugh of indifference at his own defeat with his austere relative.

When in due time Morley graduated with honours from college none was more generous with praise and pride than Lansing Treadwell.

"By Jove! my friend," he said, "I'm nothing but a big, bungling giant without genius or talent. Let me set you on my shoulders and you'll conquer the world—our nice, little world of Boston!"

But Sandy had no social ambitions. When his summer work in the mills was over, he found his greatest pleasure at Bretherton with Markham and Matilda and old Bob. And then, when sudden necessity lashed him to unexpected endeavour, he went to young Treadwell and said simply:

"I am not going to work in the mills this vacation; Mr. Markham has offered me a trip somewhere, but I have need of money for personal uses and I must—earn some. Can you help me?"

And again Lansing Treadwell, with a grin of amused understanding, put Sandy in the way of tutoring a rich man's sons.

And now, Morley, tired, sad at heart, needing what he was too generous and unselfish to ask for, was responding to Markham's summons and was on his way to Bretherton.

Of course neither Markham nor his sister could understand his need of sympathy and tenderness. Proudly he had withheld his private cares and troubles. He accepted from others only what he might some day hope to return; he never drew a check on the bank of sympathy without taking account of his savings!

When Sandy came in sight of the beautiful old house on the hill, and when but a meadow lay between him and it, he gave a long, sweet bird-call and waited. A second time he called and then he saw Bob loping over the front lawn and, with upraised sniffing nose, caper about. A third trill settled the dog's doubts, and with an abandon that age could not overcome he ran and jumped to the unseen friend.

"Good old fellow!" cried Sandy when Bob drew near; "good old pal!" And then the dog was in the young fellow's arms. After a few moments they sedately went on their homeward way together—Sandy's hand resting upon the uplifted yellow head.

"Sandy, you look thin!" Matilda remarked at dinner as she eyed him over her spectacles. "You make me think of the lean days after your fever seven years ago."

"I reckon I am still growing, Miss Markham."

Levi scanned the young face.

"Mill work never used you up," he said slowly.

"It's not work, sir. It's been right hot in town, and you know the city a ways stifles me."

"Umph!" said Markham.

After Matilda had gone to bed that evening Levi sat on the broad piazza with Sandy, while a late yellow-red moon rode majestically in the sky and lighted the dew-touched meadow land.

"Looks hot," Levi murmured; "hot and dry."

"Yes," agreed Sandy. Then quite suddenly Markham asked:

"Sandford, I wish you to tell me exactly why you wanted extra money this summer. I say wish, because I know I have no right to demand your confidence, but I do think I have a right to protect you against—well, against yourself when it comes to personal injury. You trusted me seven years ago with your confidence; you've talked pretty openly to me during your school and college years. Reports speak louder than words—but we've kept in touch with each other. I make no claims, but I'd like to think you know I am your friend."

Just then the moonlight shifted to Sandy's face and lay across it in brilliant clearness.

"I can tell you better to-night, sir, than I could have a week ago, for the need is past now. I have only kept it to myself because it has never seemed right that I should ask more of you than you offered to give—and this was my affair—mine alone."

"I see!" muttered Markham, and his jaw set, not with doubt of Sandy, but with detestation of the woman who earlier in the day had driven him to attack this boy's sacred privilege of independence and privacy.

"It began, sir, when I was in the midst of class work in June. I was having a particularly good time, you may remember, when, one night, a messenger came to my rooms and said some one wanted to see me near the gate of the Square. It was a girl, sir, though she looked a woman; a poor, sad, sick creature from my home—my half sister, Molly! I did not know her at first. She was right little and pretty when I last saw her, but cruelty and want had turned her into——"

Levi's eyes were riveted on the still, white face of the speaker, and his heart hurt him for very pity. He could not let the boy say the word.

"And she—what did she want?" he asked so sternly that Sandy, even with his reverence for Markham, took up arms in his sister's defence.

"Don't judge her harshly, sir; you do not know our hills. Molly was a mighty weak little girl, and when temptation came to her, she hadn't strength to resist, and they who should have defended her—sold her! I was not there, so I cannot be hard upon her, though she thought I meant to be at first. You see I was so shocked and surprised, and amid all the happenings I had almost forgotten. She threatened me, sir. It was right pitiful. She said every one was dead—her mother; our father——" Sandy's voice faltered—"she was alone. She hadn't forgotten her old ways either. You remember that I told you how as a little girl she had threatened the—the treasure under the rock beyond the Branch?" Markham nodded.

"Well—she threatened the treasure of to-day. She was for finding you out and begging—so—well, I bought her off! for I would not have you haggled and be made to repent your helping of me. I have kept her, sir, in a little room in a corner of Boston all summer. It was a neat and comfortable place, with a tree at the window. After a time she trusted me! At first it was hard for her to keep—well!—I reckon when one let's go as poor Molly did—it is right difficult to hold on long to a new and safer course. But—she died four days ago! She was alone, sir, with her head on the window sill; her poor little face set toward the tree. I had had a doctor for her—she had been feeling ill—it was heart trouble—she went without pain. I saw her buried to-day—some time in the future I am going to take her body to Lost Mountain. She'll really rest there, I reckon."

The moonlight passed from the white, tired face and Levi's aching eyes closed, taking the vision of Sandy with them. He recalled the boy's manner through the closing scenes of his college life; the outward calmness and grateful appreciation while the hideous trouble was eating the joy from the hours of triumph he had so bravely won. He reflected upon the following weeks of toil and lonely labour with that poor, dying girl in the background taking his life blood as once she had taken his hard-earned money. Then when he could bear no more Levi Markham got up and walked over to Sandy. He laid a trembling hand on his shoulder and by stern effort controlled his voice.

"My boy!" he murmured; "my—boy! words come hard; I'm not an easy talker—but—you and I are both tuckered out. I have never had a vacation in my life—a real vacation. I've always packed business and worry in my satchel. Will you come across the water with me, lad? Let us try to see if there is any play in us. Let's have a look at some regular mountains and some second-rate cities—and when we get back I want you to travel up to that tumble down Hollow you hailed from, and take my money along; we'll begin repairs at once—you bossing, I paying the bills. We'll set it going some—you and I! As to this trip abroad we'll take 'Tilda along to keep us straight and—and make us comfortable, Sandy!"

But Sandy's head was bowed on his clasped hands and the first tears he had shed in years were trickling through his fingers.

"You'll come, Sandy Morley?"

"Yes, sir."

"And—I want to tell you, my boy—that I'm satisfied with my flyer of an investment. Come! Come! You've acted the part of a man before you've been a boy. You and I have earned—a vacation."

An hour later Markham tapped at Matilda's door and the prompt, "Come in, Levi," caused him a moment's uneasiness.

"Insomnia?" he asked, drawing a chair close to his sister's bed.

"Just a little wakefulness, brother. Now don't get fidgetty. I'm real satisfied to lie here and think of my blessedness and comfort. It's gratifying to recall all your possessions in the night. They say worries stand out clearest then, but with me it's the other way. My troubles just vanish and every living, breathing pleasantness comes to the fore. Now, you, for example, Levi. I was praising God about you as you knocked. You're a changed man, brother. You were always a good man, but to be flat-footed I must say that there was a time when conversation with you was like jogging along over a stony road. One got so many bumps that it didn't seem worth while. I used to get terrible lonely at times, for I wouldn't take pleasures and leave you out—it always has seemed to me that you never got the *right* change for what you spent, and I wanted to do my share in keeping you company if you ever felt the lack. And then that poor little fellow came tumbling into our lives same as if God had sent him rolling down the mountain to our door. If ever there was a blessing in disguise, it was Sandy! I tell you he's a pretty comforting creature to hold to when you lie awake nights. A minute ago I was saying over and over—"thank God for Sandy!" He gets closer to you than you think, Levi—it's his way and he's the strongest, gratefullest fellow. Every time I look at him lately I think of the saying—strength of the hills."

And now Levi sought and found the thin, blue-veined hands folded peacefully upon the white coverlid.

"Sandy found the starved mother and father in us, Matilda. His need met ours, and God blessed us all."

"That's a true word, brother. You and I were real pinched in our aims and longings in the offset. Do you remember how you always wanted learning and college, and how I actually was besotted about traipsing around the world? Such dreams as we managed to make up! I have the old geography now with pin points all up the side of the Alps where you and I counted the height and then said we didn't believe it! Well, you've found success without college, and I've found peace without travel."

Levi patted the cool, old hands tenderly. Sandy's story had somehow made Matilda very precious.

"But lands, Levi! We are all old children and go on with our foolish dreams till we're tucked in at last for good and all. Maybe I ought to be ashamed to own to this, but I lie here nights and actually make believe I'm Sandy's mother. Mother's an awful comforting word to women as well as children."

"Well, Matilda, I'll own up to the same side play." Levi laughed softly; "the night he graduated I closed my eyes and listened to him reading off that fine stuff and—for a spell I fathered him and got real thrilled. But what I came to say to you to-night, 'Tilda, is no dream unless you can class it as a dream come true. Beginning to-morrow morning, I want that you should go into town and shop."

"Shop, Levi?" Matilda leaned up on her thin elbow and scanned her brother's face in the white light of the moon. "Shop, Levi? Shop for what?"

"Why—things! Have all the help you can get and take a reasonable time, but I'd like to have you get real stylish fixings. I'd like real well for you to have a lavender frock, something like that Treadwell woman wears. You and Sandy and I are going vacationing!"

"Lands, Levi! Vacationing just as canning time is coming?"

"That's about the size of it. What's the fun in a vacation if you ain't running away from plain duty?"

"Why, Levi, I do declare! Where are we going?"

The dear old face was shining in the ghostly gleam.

"Oh! we're going to see mountains that will make Mt. Washington and Lost Mountain look foolish."

"Levi, don't trifle lightly with God's handiwork. I've always held that scenes of nature ought not be compared—it's real presumptious."

"Well, then, Matilda, we're going to do the grand tour!"

"Levi, you surely are romancing."

"I'm going to buy tickets to-morrow for about the middle of September!"

"You can't be serious, brother?"

"I am going to spend money—for *nothing* once in my life! I'm going to get what we want and not count the change!"

"It sounds scandalous, Levi!"

"It's going to be a—scandal."

"What a sight we three will be, Levi." The dear old soul chuckled. Like a child she had at last caught the contagion of Markham's humour. "I just know them foreigners will think we are a pair of fond parents with our one chick and child. Do you think we need tell right out that we ain't, Levi? When it isn't necessary, couldn't we keep ourselves to ourselves and—make believe, with the ocean between us and them that know, that Sandy is ours?"

"We can, Matilda. And I want that Sandy should get his fill of paintings. Did you ever know how he leans to art? Why, he's got about a square acre of sketches among his belongings—he's shown me some, and while I do not set myself up for a critic I do say that there is feeling in his stuff."

"I've seen that dogwood one he carries about with him," Matilda answered, leaning back on her pillow. "It gives me the creeps. Times are when I fancy there is a ghost of a girl face in the flowers. Sandy laughs at me—but I've caught the sight more than once in certain lights and its real upsetting."

"Well, I want that he should take all the art in that he's capable of digesting, and I want you to see mountains and what not that you've hungered after all your days and I want to see—Paris!"

"It's a real outlandish city for morals, Levi."

"Well, it will make me glad to get back to Boston, Matilda," Levi chuckled. "Now lie down and try to sleep."

"I feel real drowsy, Levi. My! how much I have got to be grateful for. You are a good man, brother. Time was when I feared success might harden you."

Levi did not rest well that night. Alone in his prim, old-fashioned chamber he lay and made plans for the future.

"And after we come back," he thought, "I'm going to send Sandy up to the hills with blank checks in his pocket. I'm going to see what he can do in the way of redeeming Lost Hollow. He'll never be happy away from that God-forsaken place—it's in his soul and system. There's that land, too, I bought seven years ago! That oughtn't to be lying fallow."

Then his roving thoughts settled on his sister. "Matilda must consent to more help here in the house—she looks peaked."

A sharp pang brought him to an upright position. He seemed to be beside lonely Sandy as he had stood that very day by an obscure grave—somewhere in a shabby little graveyard.

"Matilda has been one sister in ten thousand and she's asked precious little. Caroline got things quite naturally while she lived at home—'Tilda took the leavings always and patched, somehow, a thankful, beautiful life out of them. She's going to get whole pieces of cloth from now——" he muttered, "with Sandy thrown in."

CHAPTER XVII

Perhaps it was the spring air; perhaps it was the turn in the tide of Cynthia Walden's life, but whatever it was it roused her and gripped her from early morning. At six o'clock on that May day she awoke in her shabby room of Stoneledge and looked out of the vine-covered window, heard a bird sing a wild, delicious little song, and then sat up with the strange thrill of happiness flooding her heart and soul.

It was a warm morning, more like late June than late May, and both the bird and the girl felt the joy in the promise of summer.

At nineteen Cynthia, like the spring morn, bore the mark of her coming fulfillment of beauty. She was very lovely, tall, slim, slightly bending, like a reed that had bowed to the wind instead of resisting. The child look, full of question and waiting, was still in her clear blue-gray eyes; the well-formed mouth had not forgotten its pretty, slow smile, and the pale, exquisite whiteness of the smooth skin was touched with a delicate tan and colour that did credit totally Taber's care and culinary art.

"I feel," whispered the girl, tossing the braids of her smooth gold-brown hair back from her face; "I declare I feel as if something was going to happen long o' me!"

Not for a moment did Cynthia imagine anything ill. Out of a barren, isolated life she had evolved and held to the strict philosophy she had once confided to Marcia Lowe in the little church. If trouble overtook her, she shielded herself as well as possible, smiled pleadingly and stepped aside. At such courtesy Trouble had obligingly gone on leaving the girl of nineteen as trusting and hopeful as a child. The old house had crumbled and tottered. Ann Walden had sunk into positive imbecility—but Cynthia had kept her faith and love. Sally Taber still ruled the Great House under the disguise of grateful dependent. She slept in the loft over the kitchen, made life a possible thing for a helpless woman and a young girl, and asked nothing for herself in return.

"If that woman doesn't have a crown studded two deep with jewels some day," Marcia Lowe confided to Tod Greeley, "I'll miss my guess."

And Tod, for various reasons, did what he could to show his appreciation of the old woman's nobility.

"Yo' sho' do give proper weight to us-all." Sally often told him. "Things do las' mor'n one could expect, fo' de money."

"I ain't goin' to run the risk of any pesky government investigation," Greeley replied. "Better be on the safe side, I reckon."

And now Cynthia again remarked to the pretty May morning:

"I feel as if something was going to happen 'long o' me."

Then she got up and made her simple toilet. The shining braids were wound coronet-style about the shapely head, and some moments were devoted to the choice of a gown. There were three hanging on nails behind the door leading to the hall; a checked gingham, brown, ugly and serviceable; a faded pink chambray, and a new, dull blue linen. This last was a gift from Marcia Lowe. It was the longest, most modern garment Cynthia possessed, and the colour filled her awakening artistic sense with delight.

"This one!" she murmured, and smiled at her own senseless extravagance.

"I reckon it's right silly," she said; "but it's mighty good fun to wear your Sunday frock on a Thursday!"

Then arrayed and glowing with pride Cynthia contemplated herself in her tiny mirror.

"If something happens 'long o' me," she nodded in friendly fashion into the glass, "it will find me ready."

After breakfast she meant to go to Trouble Neck and help Marcia Lowe with her "school." The little doctor's school was the newest and most exciting innovation in The Hollow. The student list was elastic and all embracing. Every department of life was taught, as and how it were possible. The timid, blighted little folks were lured to the cabin by all means at Miss Lowe's command and fed such crumbs as their poor wits could comprehend.

"Let's flip out the grains, Cynthia, dear," the little doctor urged; "perhaps some chick can swallow them. We must make hay while the sun shines. Crothers' new factory is looming up and when that whistle blows, good-bye to the Trouble Neck Academy!"

It had taken nearly seven years for Smith Crothers to collect his insurance, recover his health, and begin his business career again. He had left The Forge for two years, and since his return had gone slowly about his work of rebuilding and entering the arena. Whatever he thought or remembered of the night when his factory was burned, no one, but himself, knew. From a grim shadow of his former self he regained his health and looks; he nodded to Cynthia when he met her on The Way and the girl tossed her head at him indifferently. Only Marcia Lowe was anxious.

"Cynthia," she said, "promise me that you will not wander in the woods alone!"

"Not without a pistol," the girl replied. "I'm a mighty good shot, dear Cup-of-Cold-Water Lady!"

But Marcia Lowe shook her head.

When Cynthia went downstairs that May morning, Sally Taber had the plain breakfast on the dining-room table, and her face looked drawn and worried.

"Miss Cyn," she said, when she had set the corn bread and milk before the girl, "las' night ole Miss war right troublesome."

"You have been up a good deal, Sally?"

"I sho' have. Ole Miss took to wandering and nothing would suit her but de libry. I done made a fire there and let her play. She done dig at the hearthstone an' laughed and babbled 'til long 'bout three o'clock, then I carried her upstairs and laid her in her bed same as if she was a lil' tired out babby."

"Dear Sally!" Cynthia's eyes shone. "I'll stay home to-day and let you sleep."

"I reckon you will do nothin' like that! Ole Miss will be good for mos' the mornin' an' I'se goin' to patch up the libry. If ole Miss takes a fancy to that-er-room, she goin' to have what she wants! If she wants to pick 'long o' the hearthstone, she is goin' to do that; I'll loosen it up."

"I will watch her to-night, then!" Cynthia said, "and I'll be back right early this evening, Sally."

Just as Cynthia reached The Way, she met Martin Morley.

"Good morning, lil' Miss Cyn," he greeted; "seems like you be part of this yere pretty day."

"Good morning, Mr. Morley. You look right smart and dandified."

Morley was neatly and decently attired and his calm, clear eyes were steady and full of purpose. The "charm" had held good with him, and ever since the well-fought battle in the little doctor's lean-to chamber, he had gradually worked his way back to self-respect and content. Mary and Molly had drifted from his life so effectually that he had accepted the inevitable and never mentioned their names.

"Where you going, Mr. Morley?"

"I am going down to The Forge," Martin answered. "They-all say the young manager for that company what's going to build a factory up higher has come, and I'm going to try and get a job."

"Do you believe there *is* going to be a factory, Mr. Morley? Do you believe Smith Crothers would let any one have a factory so near his?"

"They-all do say, Miss Cynthia, that that-er company what sends this young man, is powerful rich and upperty. They-all do say that-er company ain't so much as consulted with Smith Crothers."

"It must be a mighty brave company!" The slow smile touched the sweet lips.

"Mr. Morley, I wonder if you will ever hear from Sandy?"

"Sho'! Miss Cynthia, you-all make me right creepy. I woke up this-er morning from a dream 'bout Sandy. It was a right techersome dream, but dreams be techersome. I dreamed that Sandy was daid, and yet I woke up right cheerful. I've reasoned it out this-er-way. Sandy *is* daid to me, lil' Miss Cynthia, but alive out in a bigger, wider life and sho' a right minded father should be mighty glad of that. I'm willing to give Sandy to a better life."

The old face twitched. "It's 'bout all I can do for my son."

"Oh! Mr. Morley, you're right noble but I don't believe Sandy's like that. He's just waiting 'till he has a mighty fine something to bring back to us-all, and then we'll see him coming up The Way as brave and smiling as can be."

Martin shook his head slowly.

"I don' doubt it, lil' Miss Cynthia. It's seven long years now! I've taken a right smart heap of comfort mending up the cabin and painting it and planting vines and flowers about. It has been the happiness I've allowed myself—getting ready for Sandy that ain't never coming! Good morning, just wish me luck 'bout the job. The getting ready means something even if you don't ever get what you're making ready for."

And with this Martin Morley went down The Way toward The Forge to seek his luck with the stranger who had arrived a few days before to begin operations on a certain piece of land which had been bought by a man—no one could recall his name—seven years ago!

Cynthia stood under the trees by the road after Martin left and fell into a reverie. It was early. By walking a little faster she could reach Trouble Neck in time for the possible pupils, and the lure of the morning held her. Looking up to catch more distinctly the note of a bird, she noticed how white and splendid the dogwood flowers were on the tree under which she stood.

"They certainly do look like stars!" she whispered. The day seemed pulsing with thoughts of Sandy Morley! Not for years had he been so in her mind. To be sure the hole in the tree near Stoneledge was quite filled with letters written to an imaginary somebody called, for convenience, Sandy—the "Biggest of Them All." But Cynthia's ideal bore little likeness to the actual Sandy, and her letters had become but the outpourings of a heart that must create its own Paradise or perish. Sandy Morley had faded into an indistinct blur, but the romance he had awakened bore the girl far and away from the common life of The Hollow.

"I thought," the uplifted face glowed rosily; "I thought I heard—a new note! Some strange bird!" Then, with a toss of the head which threw the broad brimmed hat back on the shoulders, "I must be getting right daffy! That's the bird Sandy Morley used to copy mighty cleverly. I could do it myself once —I wonder!" The pretty lips curved deliciously, and an effort was made to reproduce the sound. Sweetly, faintly it trilled and ended in a light laugh.

From the underbrush lower down beside The Way, a young man looked at the upraised face under the dogwood tree; listened to the answer to his call and felt his heart throb with such force that his lips drew close with the pain of joy. For a few moments he gazed and struggled for self-control but great

waves of happiness and delight overpowered him. He dared not move, but he sent a swift prayer to heaven—a prayer for guidance in a new life amid the old home-scenes for which his faithful heart had yearned while he had wandered far.

Cynthia's quick ears caught the rustle of the bushes across The Way and instantly her face changed and her hand gripped something in a little bag at her side. The stranger thought it wisest to step out. This he did with a laugh of understanding.

"Oh!" exclaimed Cynthia Walden, "I certainly do beg your pardon. I—thought—I thought you were Smith Crothers."

The sudden fear wrung this candid confession from the girl. "I reckon you don't know Smith Crothers."

"I—I've heard of him recently."

"I expect," Cynthia was full of interest now. "I expect you are the man from the North."

"You are quite right."

"Now I'm right sorry you didn't get here fifteen minutes ago."

The stranger's face flushed under its tan and the broad felt hat, in the right hand, shook perceptibly.

"Mr. Martin Morley has gone down The Way to see you. He reckons you will give him a job."

At this the man leaned heavily against a pine tree and stared at the girl. Had he heard aright? For months he had believed Martin Morley was dead—long dead!

"Yes, Mr. Morley was just here talking about the new factory up in the mountain."

To hear Cynthia say mountain was to love the high places better all the days of your life. So lingeringly and tenderly did the soft voice deal with the vowels and consonants that they suggested all the beauty and strength of the hills. The man opposite closed his eyes from sheer delight while the word sank into his consciousness and filled the empty places of his heart.

"He'll miss you, I reckon, but could you save a job for him?"

"I can and—will." The man opened his eyes and courageously walked across The Way and stood still, hat in hand, before the girl. He was tall and broad and good to look upon and youth went out to youth cordially and frankly.

"I reckon"—the homely word took the place of the Yankee "guess" naturally, "I reckon you are—Miss Cynthia Walden?"

"Yes." Cynthia's eyes shone. "Who—told you?"

"I heard about you." This was very lame, but it answered.

"And you—sir?"

"Oh, I am—the man from the North."

"You sound like you had Southern blood."

"My father and mother were Southerners."

"From round this-er-way?"

Again the man closed his eyes; the sweet voice and dear familiar expressions were almost more than he could bear.

"Not very far away."

A very little seemed enough to pacify the girl's curiosity.

"I reckon the North's mighty big," she ventured presently.

"It's—it's—tremendous."

"Do you know anything about—Massachusetts?"

"I came from there."

"Oh! And is that—so mighty big?"

"Not so big as the whole North. Though some still think it is."

"Did you ever hear——" Cynthia paused and clasped her hands together; "of a—a boy named Sandy

Morley? He went from here to there—long ago?"

It was a wild question, but the day was so haunted by Sandy that the words came of their own volition.

"I've met him; yes, I know him slightly."

The colour rose and faded in Cynthia's face and her breath came quick and hard.

"Oh! tell me about him. He came from this—Hollow! He went away years and years ago. Tell me—what has he become?"

Yearning, curiosity and honest interest marked the words, but the face of the girl was a child's face, not a woman's. "He must be a right big boy now!"

The man standing in The Way could not repress a smile. He saw that Cynthia Walden had in fancy enshrined the boy Sandy, but would she welcome the man Sandy had become? Fearfully, dreading the test that must be made, he drew nearer, and with lowered eyes bowed, and said:

"I am Sandy Morley!"

Cynthia gave a frightened glance at the tall, dark stranger in the road. She noticed, as if for the first time, his high laced boots, his corduroy trousers fastened in them, his flannel shirt and felt hat. All was fine and different, oh! so different from the ragged ugliness of the hills. That a stranger should be so clad did not interest her, but that her childhood's friend and slave should wear this livery of position shattered the beautiful portrait of the "Biggest of Them All" by one cruel blow.

"No! You cannot be Sandy—not Sandy Morley." Cynthia stepped back with outstretched hands as if to ward off an attack. The light faded from Sandy Morley's face and his eyes grew dark and pleading.

"I've been right homesick all the years," he faltered. "I've tried to make myself worthy to come back. Always I have dreamed of you standing as you stand now under the dogwoods, to welcome me, but now that I have come up The Way I find myself a—stranger!"

Cynthia was clutching the bough of a tree for support; her eyes were strained and pathetic.

"I—I do not know what I have expected," she whispered, her eyes clinging to his; "but it is this-er-way. I have made a different Sandy, and I've kept him so long in my dreams and fancies, that to see him a *man*, hurts. Oh! it hurts here!"

The clasped hands touched the panting bosom. Then Sandy came close to her and laid his firm, thin hand upon hers. The touch, the contact, brought sharply to the girl the memory of their parting when, beside The Way, she had asked him to marry her some day and Sandy had kissed her!

"Little Cynthia, try to make a place in Lost Hollow for the man Sandy, who has come home a lonely stranger."

He seemed old and detached, but his nearness and the memory of their last interview composed Cynthia. She drew back and the withdrawal hurt Sandy more than she could know.

"I—I must go!" she panted and turned, as in the old parting, and ran without one backward look.

Sandy stood and gazed after her with yearning eyes. Outwardly she was all his faithful heart could have asked. Her face, as he had seen it a few moments ago under the dogwoods, seemed placed there by some kind and good Providence to welcome him to his own after all the waiting years; the child, Cynthia, he had lost while he tarried afar. Manlike he was ready to accept the woman. But Cynthia was not a woman, and her immature nature was shocked and betrayed by him who had come claiming what she had ready, only for the boy of her childish faith and love.

Sad at heart, Sandy, after a few moments of readjustment, went mournfully up the trail leading to the old home-cabin. One bright gleam, alone, cheered him. There had been some mistake. Martin Morley was evidently alive and to him Sandy must look for welcome and the renewing of old ties.

The change in the cabin was startling. Empty, but neat and pleasant, the living-room stood open to the fair spring day. Flowers were standing in the windows in dented tin cans; the hearth was swept free of ashes and there was a small garden in the rear of the house, nicely laid out and planted. It seemed so like his own old garden that Sandy gazed upon it with strange emotions. He relived sharply the starved years of preparation, the cruelty and neglect. He went inside finally and sat down upon the settle by the hearth and, with bowed head, gave himself up to memory.

An hour passed and then a step outside roused him, but he did not turn.

"Sir, I reckon you be the boss of the new factory. I was a-going down to The Forge to seek you out and ask for work, but Tansey Moore, down to the store, 'lowed that 'twas you who had passed up this-er-way. If you be the boss could you——"

But he got no further. Sandy could not run the risk of another clash of words.

"Father!" he said, standing up and stretching his arms out pitifully to Martin. "Father!"

Morley recoiled for an instant and his eyes, old and dim, struggled to see clearly the figure and face before him. But it was not the mortal eyes of the man that saw and knew. It was the *father* that reached out with unerring instinct to its own! Martin had never had his dreams of what his boy was to become; he was there to accept whatever God in His mercy sent to him.

"Sandy! lil' Sandy! My boy!"

And then the tottering old frame was gathered in the strong young arms.

"Dad, dear old Dad. I've got a right good job for you!"

That was all. For a few minutes the clock on the high shelf ticked so loudly that it seemed to fill the room with noise. Neither man spoke, but they clung desperately. Presently a shadow fell across the floor and Sandy turned his head. Old Bob had found his way up from The Forge and panting and wheezing began to sniff around the room. Almost blind, yet guided by that sense we cannot understand, he had sought his own and found them. With a soft cry he crouched close to the two standing by the hearth and whined piteously. Martin aroused and stood upright.

"It's—it's Bob!" he cried. "Oh, Bob! Oh, Bob!" Then falteringly: "It's all right, Bob, she won't trouble you now—she's gone for good and all!"

That was the only reference to Mary, and Sandy did not tell Martin of little Molly's fate for many a day.

CHAPTER XVIII

If one can forget the languor of the summer and the fear of the winter, a September day among the hills is an experience to set the heart singing. The fluttering birds in busy preparation for flight, the carpet of Persian colours and the subtle charm of the smell of wood smoke in the air, all combine to arouse tender thoughts and pensive desires.

On such a day Cynthia Walden ran down the trail from Stoneledge and kept to the side of The Way where the leaves were thickest and the damp sweetness the richest. She wore her blue linen—it had been laundried many times since that May morning when Sandy first saw her in it; but, as Sally Taber, working under strict instructions, dried it in a pillow case—the colour was still true blue and the shrinkage slight.

Many things had occurred during the past four months. Wonderful breath-taking things; things that aroused many emotions and many passions. For one thing, that brave company in the North, which Sandy represented, had actually had the audacity and daring to start operations on a splendid factory building! Smith Crothers was sullenly, silently watching operations and making, apparently, indifferent threats as to what might be expected to happen to any Hollowite—"man, woman or child"—who turned from him and his interests to the factory back of Lost Hollow.

"There ain't any known head to the concern," he said one night at the County Club, "lest you count that youngster of Morley's as a head. I leave it to you—can you-all trust a Morley?"

The solemn pause before Mason Hope ventured a "no" gave Crothers food for reflection. Sandy was making his way into the confidence and appreciation of his people. Slowly, to be sure, so slowly that often he sighed disheartedly, but the change in attitude was noticeable and Sandy knew it when the sun shone and Cynthia Walden deigned to speak a pleasant word to him.

Beside the factory and near to it ground had been broken and a foundation laid for a building about which people, especially mothers, spoke in hushed voices.

"It can't be true," Liza Hope had said to Mrs. Tansey Moore one day as they dropped in to Theodore Starr's church to take breath and a dip of snuff. "A Home-school! that's what the Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady said it was, and when I axed her to say it plainer and not so polite, she done 'splain as how the chillens, our chillens, war to be gathered in from everywhere—even factories,—and teached and—and mothered! That's her word—mothered!"

"Don't them-all think us-all is—mothers?" Mrs. Moore sniffed contemptuously. "Us as borned them reckons we-all is mothers."

"But it's this-er-way." Liza was Marcia Lowe's interpreter to the cabin-folk and was gradually drawing them to the point where more than one had gone voluntarily to Trouble Neck and, after a chat and a cup of tea, had uttered the mystic word "youcum," which meant, "you call on me." No higher honour could a mountain woman bestow than this!

But Mrs. Tansey Moore had never taken the little doctor up socially.

"It's this-er-way. We-all can't act out what's in us-all. You know, Rose-Lily"—Mrs. Moore had one of the funeral-design names which so often decorated the plainest of her sex among the hills—"we-all just get caught in the wheels and go round like what we-all have to. I reckon you wouldn't have let your Sammy-Jo into the factory if the heart of you could ha' spoke. Seems like yesterday when I saw them-all totin' Sammy-Jo up The Way to kiss you good-bye, an' him only ten years old an' dyin' o' the hurt o' the wheels."

Rose-Lily bowed her head on her work-roughened hands and sobbed miserably.

"An' I reckon I wouldn' ha' let my po' lil' half-wit chile go—if I could ha' helped it. When Mason licked him down The Way o' mornin' it made the soul o' me sick. When the factory burned I thanked A'mighty God for, starvin' or not starvin,' the po' lil' feller couldn't go! The night he died in Miss Lowe's cabin when she war tryin' her charm on him—I jes' war right glad, for the factory down to The Forge war jes' about done and I war thankful he couldn't get caught in the wheels agin! I tell yo', Rose-Lily, the mother in us-all don't get a chance in The Hollow, but the Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady don' say things is goin' to be different. She 'lows that the Home-school will jes' make up to us-all for what's been denied."

Mrs. Moore moaned softly and shook her head. "It don't sound—earthly!" she muttered.

But Cynthia, tripping light-heartedly over the gold and red leaves by The Way, sang her gayest songs and cared not a rap for the new factory or the unearthly Home-school; she was thinking of Martin Morley's cabin and the miracle that had been performed there. She was bound for the cabin. Martin would surely be away, for his "job" demanded that he should watch the men working in gangs on the new buildings. Sandy was up North. He had been summoned there by Levi Markham, who had wanted to come to The Hollow but had been held back by Sandy.

"They are taking me hard," Sandy had written; "let me have time to win them over before you come. Your money is a great drawback to me."

Then Markham wrote a characteristic command. The faithful old heart throbbed through every line and had caused poor Sandy to laugh until he cried:

Then come up North at once with reports and plans. I'm not going to let you make ducks and drakes of my hard earnings without knowing why. Matilda—isn't very strong. She's taken to counting her blessings nights instead of sleeping. By the way—have you heard anything of Treadwell? His new fangled moral van has gone smash, they say; not called by its old-fashioned name, and he's—skipped. If you hear anything of him, let me know.

Sandy had been away ten days and every day Cynthia had gone to the cabin, set it in order for Martin's comfort; revelled in the wonder of it all and feasted her soul on the books in Sandy's study.

Cynthia had slowly, reluctantly but finally given up her ideal Sandy of the past. She still kept his one letter to her and her hundred and one letters to him in an oil-cloth package in the old tree. Sometimes she stole away and read them and cried a little, softly, forlornly, as a little girl might do for a broken doll. "The Biggest of Them All" relegated to his fate, Cynthia had turned to this new son of the Hills with frank and open mind. She weighed him, considered him and found him interesting. She was sensitive to success, and this practical, good natured, kindly Sandy was decidedly successful. He was as modest and unassuming as one could desire, but he had only to wave his hand and say so-and-so and lo! the old cabin grew and became beautiful, a factory sprang up, then a dream of a school which included everyone and everything. It was like a modern fairy story—the most exciting and compelling thing one could imagine.

Slowly, cautiously, Cynthia with childish curiosity approached this new being who had arisen on her horizon. Sandy, wise in the lore of the hills, lured her as cautiously. He had subdued his own emotions. He was a man; his life had developed him; she was still a child with the radiant woman of her blindly, gropingly, looking forth from the dear, blue-gray eyes. He could wait. She would be his dream of the hills and some day she would come true and he would tell her how he had always loved her; how her pale, sweet face, under the dogwood flowers, had kept him strong and pure and unspoiled through all the yearning years. He could wait until Cynthia, the woman, awoke and—looked at him! In the meantime he worked and grew marvellously happy in his earnest, quiet way. He made a seat for her in his study window—though she never knew how carefully he had arranged it, or how desperately he had struggled to get the right colour for the cushions. "Red," Levi had suggested when approached as to window-seat coverings. "Green, a good dark tone, is a wearing shade," Matilda had informed him, but Sandy chose blue—"the shade that looks as if it sank deeper and deeper," he explained to an artistic designer, and the man had not laughed!

Sandy bought and scattered books about in his study where Cynthia might run across them at will, and sometimes during his rare moments of leisure and enjoyment she would nestle on *her* window seat in his study while he, his back to her, painted at his easel near the north window. At such times Cynthia liked the new Sandy almost as well as the old and was gloriously content and happy. Poetry entered her life then for the first time—poetry through books, through Sandy's modest attempts at art, and through Sandy himself.

"Let us go out windowing," he coaxed her one day when they had had a golden hour together.

"Windowing, Sandy? What is windowing?"

"Why, we'll go around to the cabins and coax or bully the people to let us make windows in their homes—big, fine windows with glass that slides easy, up and down or sideways as one may prefer. I want it done before winter sets in."

"They-all will think us all-around cracked!"

"Let's try! Windows for sale! we'll cry. It will be mighty jolly."

So they had set forth with the result that by August Tod Greeley remarked to Marcia Lowe that he was "dog-dickered if the cabins didn't look like showcases surrounded by clapboards!"

When Cynthia reached the Morley cabin that rare September day she paused to look upon the splendour, and was thrilled anew at the changes and improvements. To the southwest end of the cabin three new rooms had been added. Two bed-chambers and a cosy sitting-room.

"For that Company up North when it comes down!" Sandy explained.

"It must be a mighty upperty Company!" Cynthia replied, looking in awe at the furniture which had been sent from some magic workshop.

"It is!" Sandy assented—viewing solemnly the enamelled bedstead, the cheap chairs and plain bureau.

"And real carpets on the floors!"

"Yes. The Company has tender feet."

The old living-room of the cabin had been more leniently dealt with. Sandy's passion for windows had been indulged, but its furnishings were designed for comfort without shock to Martin's habits. The kitchen in the lean-to, also windowed to the limit of space, had been given over to the imagination—nothing else could possibly have accounted for it—of Marcia Lowe. Shining rows of things never dreamed of in The Hollow hung on the walls or graced the shelves. The future might prove them, but the present wreathed them in the charm of mystery. The women came and looked upon them in silent wonder and talked of them afterward in hushed voices. A good-sized range, also, stood where once the dirty hearth was the only shrine to which the family food was intrusted during preparation. Even Sandy approached this innovation with ingrained reluctance, but Marcia Lowe was overcoming his timidity and Cynthia had already conquered its mysteries and was instructing Martin.

The greatest change on the Morley place, however, was the one-time shed bedroom of Sandy. The first time Sandy entered the crumbling shanty such a wave of bitterness and depression engulfed him that he realized he must either reclaim it or it would triumph over him. To tear it down would not have solved the problem; its absence would have been a more final acknowledgment of his defeat. The years of fear, loneliness, and want were ever to be vital realities of his life; the shed was the setting of his childish agony and spiritual growth—oh, that was it! He must not stamp the poor shell from sight; he must redeem it as his patient suffering had redeemed him. He must make it a place to which those he loved, those who needed him, might come knowing that welcome and understanding awaited them.

It seemed a miracle to see the dusty, crumbling place evolve into that bright study with its big, open fireplace, outside chimney, and the sacred window-seat. Overhead were two small bedrooms, opening into each other—Martin's and Sandy's. Plain, severe rooms they were; rooms into which the morning sun shone and into which the setting sun glowed when nature smiled. On the shingle roof the rain pattered musically, and no winter cold could conquer the heat which a certain drum stove in Martin's room managed to create and diffuse. On Martin's stand beside his narrow bed a lamp stood and near it a Bible. Martin had learned again to pray and often Sandy read the sacred book to him respecting always the fiction as to poor eyes and ignoring the illiteracy which the old man bitterly and secretly deplored.

At last Cynthia entered the study after a minute inspection of the house. The breakfast dishes were washed and put away; Martin was neat and orderly. His bed had been made and Sandy's was untouched.

"Still away!" whispered the girl and sank upon the window-seat while a thrill of pleasure brought the slow smile to the sensitive lips.

"Oh, the pretty day!" Then a desire to set the place in perfect order for Sandy's possibly near-return caused her to spring up and dart quickly from place to place, straightening a picture here, flicking the dust off the shelves and chairs, and lastly attacking the cluttered desk which had not been touched since the master went away.

Sandy was not orderly by instinct. Dirt distressed him, but superficial chaos seemed never to disturb him. He could lay his hand on whatever he wanted amid the layers of papers, books, and writing material.

"It's right Sandyish," murmured Cynthia; "I wonder if he will—mind?" Never before had she

thought of arranging the desk. Carefully, almost breathlessly, she piled some magazines in one place; some papers in another. The pens and pencils were stuck together in the yawning mouth of a particularly fierce silver gargoyle who evidently had been created to devour such articles, and then—at the bottom of the mass Cynthia came upon a book which had been quite hidden from sight. It was an open book; a book marked at a certain place. There was a strange familiarity about the book which caused the girl to take it up with trembling surprise. The blue and gold cover recalled emotions long since forgotten. How could she know that Sandy had scoured many a Boston book store for just that edition, causing the proprietors much annoyance and trouble?

"Pilgrim's Progress!"

Then backing to the window-seat, Cynthia sat down and feasted her eyes first upon the cover, then upon the words marked by an illuminating pencil:

Without doubt her designs were bad. But stay, now you talk of her, methinks I either have seen her, or have read some story of her.... Doth she not speak very smoothly and give you a smile at the end of a sentence?

The book fell from Cynthia's hands and lay motionless on her lap. Her fair face raised itself rigidly and the clear eyes looked, not at the cheerful, home-room, but back through the years: the sombre, shabby years—until they caught and held a girl of twelve demanding something—something so tremendous!—from a poor, trembling boy but a little older than herself! Then the old, half-doubting promise sounded and—a kiss fell upon Madam Bubble's lifted mouth!

"Oh!" The word came on a shuddering sigh and the fixed eyes faltered in their rapt look. A flood of rosy colour spread from brow to chin, and shame—not joy—claimed Cynthia Walden. Understanding rushed upon her, a blind, hideous, wrong understanding, but none the less terrible. Cynthia had forgotten the shadow of her parentage—for many years it had sunk into insignificance. The years had ignored it, no call had come for its recognition, but now—she understood. She had always been more the daughter of her bad father than of her sad mother! That was why she, a little girl, had spoken so to Sandy and brought that strange look to his face! She had not comprehended it then, but she remembered it now! It confronted her like a tangible thing. Because she was her father's daughter Smith Crothers had—kissed her! Men wanted to kiss her! On that fearsome night of the fire Crothers had only shocked and wounded the outer fold of Cynthia's soul; the innermost shrine had been guarded by the woman Cynthia was by and by to become; but now Cynthia felt she *was* that woman and all subterfuge was denied.

Sandy understood. He had not forgotten. Out in his big, free world he had learned what Madam Bubbles were and still he had come back and been kind to her! Sandy never forgot. Big, brave, and tender, he had set himself to the task of keeping his word and fulfilling his vision. He had shielded poor Molly—he had told her the pitiful story without its gruesome details! He had come back to Lost Mountain to help the men and women and save the baby-things! He had come home to—keep his word with her, with Madam Bubble! That was why he was so gentle, so thoughtful.

"Oh! oh!" The moan was almost a wail, but no tear dimmed the large eyes.

"The Biggest of Them All!" Then the strained face relaxed and a glory touched it.

"But I—I can be next biggest," she faltered. "You are right noble—but I can help you, Sandy!"

Then very reverently the book was replaced upon the desk and a pencil taken from the gargoyle's mouth. Clearly, distinctly, another passage was traced by a wavering mark:

The man in the cage, the man and his dream, the man that cut his way through his enemies—the biggest of them all!

Sandy was to read those words by and by with varied emotions!

Then, having marked and turned to the page originally left open, Cynthia drew herself up and looked about the dear room as if taking a last look before going on a long journey.

And so Sandy came upon her. He had arrived at The Forge earlier in the day and had walked up The Way because his heart was full of the joy of life and he wanted to be alone and think his thoughts. He had been so lonely without his father, Lost Mountain, his people and—Cynthia! Not even the love and gratitude he held for Levi Markham and Matilda could hold him long from his own, without regret. And they were coming to him soon—the Markhams—they were coming for the holidays and he must make ready!

Noiselessly he entered his study and stood for a moment revelling in the sight of the girl of his thoughts, materializing before his amazed eyes. He could hardly believe his senses; the day, the place, were bewitched, and he had been so hungry for—just this! Unconsciously he stretched out his arms and his strong, dark face was flushed; his serious eyes glad and kind.

"Little Cyn!"

She turned, and her colour faded. Pale, imploring, she almost ran to him.

"Sandy!"

Now that she had understood and triumphed she could afford to be kind, too, and strong and brave. Something in the frank, unflinching eyes warned Sandy to content himself with the outstretched hands, although the soul of him yearned to hold the girl to him.

"You are glad to see me back, lil' Cyn?"

The old intonation thrilled the listener, but her eyes held true.

"Oh! so glad. 'Tis a mighty empty room you leave, Sandy Morley, when you go away."

"Cynthia—I wonder if I dare tell you something?"

"Yes." It were better now and over with!

"Do you remember that once I made a promise to you, dear?"

This was unfortunate, but the girl took it without a quiver of the white lids.

"All my life, since manhood came to me, and it came early, little girl, I have lived and dreamed of the hour when—I might keep that promise. I have waited because you seem still a child to me, dear, but I—want you! I want the child of you—I will hold it sacred and win the woman of you by and by. Do you not remember how in those old, old days it was you who taught me, awoke my imagination and—helped me to my own? Dear lil' Cyn—help me now! Help me help these dear people, yours and mine! I need you so, sweetheart, and I will be good to you! Marry me, lil' Cyn, marry me right away and let us go on together! I can do so much for you and yours—sweet——"

But Sandy got no farther. The hands in his wrenched themselves free and sought his shoulders. The very frankness and simplicity of the gesture sent a chill to Sandy's heart.

"Big, good Sandy!" There was a subtle plea in glance and words. The girlish need was driving the desperate woman back and out of sight. Cynthia could not kill the truth that had been born within her, but she could blind it, stun it and still keep for her own what the childish craving demanded.

"Big, good Sandy! Please be my Sandy, like you were a brother. I would be so lonely without you; I would miss this—this dear place mighty bad—but if you say such words, if you forget I am still lil' Cyn, why don't you see—I cannot come up this-er-way any more?"

So perfect was the attempt that it took all the girl's pride and strength to hold it. It was a bit overdone and Sandy fell back a step with a memory that Cynthia would never have resurrected had she had her way.

"I—am not worthy of you, Cynthia. I had forgotten, dear. You see, for seven years I have lived where such things did not matter; I have learned that they do *not* matter when all is said and done. Can you not trust me and forget that a Walden and a Morley are different——"

"Oh! Sandy!" and now the white, white face turned scarlet—"you think that of me?"

"It's in the blood of us all, Cynthia, but you and I, by forgetting it—can do so much."

"It is not that, Sandy."

"I know, dear, that I am old beside you—I know that I dare much when I say I am willing to take you, child as you are, and run the risk of making you love me while the woman of you—grows! I will help it grow—God help me! How I will glory in the task and if I fail——"

Sandy had drawn her hands from his shoulders and now held them fast and close.

"I will make you free, set you as free as you are to-day, my white blossom girl! You cannot understand; but God hears me and I swear it!"

Cynthia did *not* understand, but his fine passion flooded her soul with white light.

"How wonderful you are," she whispered. "You stand out big and high like our mountain——"

At that word Sandy closed his eyes, for he dared not look upon the dear, slow-smiling lips.

"But, Sandy, you are covered with—with mist like Lost Mountain sometimes is. Let me find you, Sandy, not as you would help me find you, but in my own way. Will you do this for—lil' Cyn?"

Without opening his eyes Sandy drew the clinging hands to his lips and kissed them.

"When you find me, dear heart, dear heart, will you tell me or give me a sign?"

"Yes, Sandy."

"And now—where are you going, Cynthia?"

For the girl was turning from him.

"Just down The Way. I must watch with Aunt Ann. She is a mighty troublesome lil' child these days. Good-bye."

They looked tenderly, frankly, in each other's eyes and then the girl was gone.

And that night Cynthia sat beside Ann Walden and kept watch and guard while faithful Sally slept. The bedchamber was very quiet and only a tallow candle lighted the gloom. The figure stretched out upon the bed was deathlike in its rigid motionlessness, and Cynthia's hand lay over the thin, old wrinkled ones for fear in a drowsy moment the woman might elude her.

It was past midnight when Ann Walden stirred and opened her eyes. Cynthia was alert at once, but the light that shone on the old face revealed an expression which had not rested there for many a day.

"Queenie!"

A cold horror overcame Cynthia, but she held her position and whispered:

"Yes."

"Go to bed, honey. I'm—I'm sorry."

"Never mind, dear." Cynthia meant to play the old sad game that was the only one possible with the poor creature on the bed.

"I reckon it was—Thorndyke Bothwell over by Susie May Lanley's, wasn't it?"

"Yes, dear."

"Why didn't you tell me, Queenie? Why didn't you-all trust me. I—I didn't mean to—be hard."

"No, dear. Never mind. Go—to sleep now."

"Thorndyke Bothwell, he went away—but there must be—some one to remember. The—letter—take it—to——"

Then a spasm passed over the grim face upon the pillow. The fleeting sanity was vanishing—"The hearthstone—her—down at Trouble——"

The candle flickered up luridly. The weak voice of the old woman shook and the eyes lost the lustre.

"You must bide with her—at Trouble——"

Cynthia could not understand; she had never seen the light fade from the face of one she loved, so the fixed stare, the cessation of speech, did not alarm her.

"See, dear Aunt Ann, I will put my head down on your pillow, so! There now! Shut your eyes right close, and I'll sing you to sleep, honey."

The candle decided to splutter once more, and give up the struggle. The long wick curled over, the tiny beam faded, and was—gone.

> Through the long night watches,
> May Thine angels spread
> Their white wings above me,
> Watching round my bed.

Like a little mother crooning over her frightened child, Cynthia sang the words tenderly. Marcia Lowe had taught her the words and tune after her fright at the time of the fire. It had been Cynthia's first evening song; she had often quieted her sudden fears in the dark nights by repeating the tender words:

> Through the long night watches——

and sleeping, surely with white wings above them, Ann Walden and Cynthia lay side by side when old Sally came to rouse them.

Shocked and frightened, Sally got Cynthia from the room without the girl realizing the conditions. Pacifying her by a promise to "take her turn" at the bedside, she left the girl in her own chamber while she ran, panting, stumbling—often pausing to rest—to Trouble Neck.

"Ole Miss Ann don' gone out at the turning o' the tide," she sobbed to Marcia Lowe.

"And little Cyn?"

"Come, oh! come," pleaded Sally; "fo' she cotch on."

"And now," thought the doctor as she mounted her horse with Sally astride behind, "I'm going to bring your little girl home, Uncle Theodore, and take my chance and your chance with her!"

CHAPTER XIX

Old Sally Taber sat in the full glow and warmth of an early October afternoon and looked about Sandy Morley's kitchen. The glow came from the sun which streamed through the broad window; the warmth emanated from the stove which Marcia Lowe had trained Sally to understand and respect. The cooking utensils, too, had become tractable objects in Sally's determined hands, for with a perpetual land of promise and fulfillment in sight, the old woman had rallied her forces for the homestretch.

Since the day when Ann Walden was laid in the family plot and Cynthia had been taken to Trouble Neck, Sally had lived in Sandy Morley's cabin and gloried in the title of "housekeeper."

"Three weeks," muttered Sally, sitting with her skirts well drawn up; her feet, encased in "old woman's comforts," resting comfortably in the oven of the stove.

"Three whole weeks an' po'k chops every day when there ain't something better."

With that she got up, went to a corner cupboard and brought out her can of vaseline.

"Yo' lyin' ole chile," she muttered; "yo' can sho' res' from yo' labours. This am a lan' o' honey an' the honeycomb."

Then voluntarily Sally raised the lid of the stove and pushed the tin can in upon a blazing piece of wood. The flames caught the grease and licked it greedily from the outer side of the box:

"Massa Fire," laughed Sally; "yo' like dat po'k chop?"

Then the heat hungrily battled for more and "pop" flew the cork and back leaped Sally.

"Gawd!" she gasped. "I sho' didn't think yo' would take it that-er-way. I was only foolin'!"

Sally had made great strides. She could laugh and joke with assurance in her heart. Sandy Morley had promised that she might have a home to the end of her days in Martin's cabin—the glorified cabin—and Sally, like many another, was learning to trust Sandy as no one had ever been trusted in Lost Hollow before. Sally rarely gave expression to her sentiments; she did not mean to permit the child whom she had helped Martin bring through his "teething," and whom she had spanked many a time, to get the upper hand; but she prayed by her very comfortable bed in the loft over the living-room that she might cook to Sandy's liking and prove herself worthy the blessing God bestowed upon her in her old age.

Glaring at the stove and not daring to risk another outburst of indignation, Sally stood helpless when Sandy entered the sunny kitchen.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Dat stove done have a real human sense," Sally replied; "an open fire we-all can reckon with an' keep an eye on, but yo' shet fire up in a packin' box an' who knows what's goin' on in its min'?"

Sandy laughed, put the lid in its place and sat on the table, swinging one long leg comfortably. He gloried in the element of home that he had brought about him and to see Sally in the kitchen always gave him a distinct thrill.

"Make some gingerbread for supper," he pleaded, "and give me the lickings, Sally. Do you know I never had lickings until I went to Massachusetts."

"Lands! Sandy Morley, I don' gave you millions mysef! Yo' pa was allas fur lettin' yo' off, but I lathered yo' mo'n once, chile, an' so saved yo' fo' yo' luck."

"I mean 'leavings' in the bowl when the cake's ready for the oven. Come Sally, let me help you get things together. Molasses, spices, milk——"

"I'll get the res'. Now, son, do tackle this yere can o' risin' powder. Take this yere Handy Andy an' pry the kiver. Seems like these new-fangled cookin' yarbs is put up jes' ter try the patience ob de saints."

Sandy took the instrument, and utilizing one of its many powers, loosened the cover and handed

the baking powder to Sally.

"I wonder how you ever kept your hand in at cooking?" he said musingly as he reflected upon the past. But Sally was on guard.

"Lor, chile! an' why not? Ain't I allas had my own po'k and bacon? Ain't I lived up to the Great House fo' years an' years?"

"Of course. And Sally, that reminds me. I'm going to buy the Great House and—make it as it was before the war!"

"Gawd!" gasped Sally.

"I shall want you to tell me exactly how it looked—you can remember?"

"Why, yes, chile!" Sally's hand paused, spoon in air. "I can see it same as it was yesterday. That-er Yankee man they called Sheridan—he passed up by The Way an' he stopt right on the home-place o' Stoneledge, an' General Walden he was there, an' old Miss, an' lil' Miss Ann—she was right little an' young then but mighty peart. I was stayin' at the Great House then, fo' it was near the time when lil' Miss Queenie was goin' ter be born—her as died up Norf at a horse-pittal. Well, that-er-Yankee Sheridan he don' say to General Walden, 'We-all is near starvin'.' Jes' like a-that! An' General Walden he don' say, standin' upperty an' mighty, 'We-all will share with yo', general, bein' war is war.' Then what-er-yo' think? Lil' Miss Ann she pearked up an' says right to his face: 'Yo' can't have Anna Isabel!' She never batted an eye when she spoke up, an' I thought I'd bust. The Yankee he don' ax who Anna Isabel was, an' lil' Miss Ann said right stiff, 'She be my turkey—she be our Christmas dinner.' An' jes' then Anna Isabel stalked straight-er-way befo' dat man Sheridan an' lil' Miss Ann pointed an' says 'There's Anna Isabel!' Well, we-all laughed an' I will say this for that Yank, he was powerful 'spectful to us-all. 'I'm bleeged to come in an' res' an' have a meal,' he don' said, and then he went on with his pack totin' at his heels.

"Fo' de Lord, Sandy Morley, shet off that snortin', roarin' fire or I'll fetch yo' a real old-time lick!"

Sandy ran to regulate the dampers, his face radiant and boyish. He was enjoying, as he never had enjoyed anything in his life before, the dear home-atmosphere of his hills.

Sally Taber returned to her task with energy born of appreciation.

"We'll fix the old house of Stoneledge up in great shape," Sandy said, coming back to the table and leaning forward on his hands to follow Sally's energetic manipulation of the gingerbread; "that ought to be something for the rest of us to live up to. I'd like to see little Miss Cynthia installed there as mistress!"

"Her ain't of the Walden blood——" Sally remarked, breathlessly beating the golden brown batter. Sandy winced. "But her has caught the manners."

"And," Sandy steered away from the danger ground, "we'll have the Home-school. It must be a home first; a school afterward, Sally. I want the baby-things to have the 'lickings' of cakes and puddings in the kitchen—it is to be a great, big, sunny kitchen! And I want them to have bedtime stories and soft songs." Sandy's eyes, tender and luminous, looked beyond Sally and rested on the gentle slope of Lost Mountain. "I want them to have what every child has a right to and which our children have never had."

Sally was thoughtfully baling the light cake into the long, shallow tins:

"I clar' I don't know," she muttered, "how Smith Crothers is goin' to 'commodate hisself to yo'!" Then she shivered and stood upright, her nostrils sniffing and her eyes alert like a deer in the wilds. "I don' thought," she murmured, "dat I heard a step and saw a shadder fallin'! Seems like the wind is changin', fetchin' chill an' storm!"

Sandy, with the superstition of The Hollow responding in his blood, went to the window overlooking The Way. Just turning into the trail leading up to the cabin a tall, lithe form swung in sight. Well dressed, carrying a modern suitcase, and whistling, gayly came the stranger. At the moment of recognition Sandy felt a cold aloofness overpower him. He spoke, as if to convince a doubting listener: "I—I reckon that is Lans Treadwell! Treadwell, of all people!"

But Sandy pulled himself together and went to greet his visitor with characteristic warmth and cordiality. He believed it was only surprise that had swayed him earlier. Lans, somehow, could not easily be fixed into place in the rough hill life. Lans, always at his ease in Boston, seemed oddly out of tune in Lost Hollow. But try as he might, Sandy could not feel like himself, with Treadwell's cheerful laugh and big-hearted, patronizing jollity resounding through the cabin. He was too desperately and determinedly bent upon being "one of them" to be comfortable.

"By Jove! Morley," he exclaimed, when Sandy had drawn him into the living room; "this is a place. You've worked wonders here. I have always wanted to see you in your family—is that your—your mother?" For Sally Taber could be seen and heard through the half-open door leading to the kitchen.

"No. My mother has been long dead. My father will return by evening meal time. Come in here, Lans—you see I have unoccupied quarters——" He led him to Levi's apartments. "Make yourself

comfortable. I'll start a fire on the hearth in this bedroom and the adjoining sitting-room."

"Well, I'll be"—Treadwell glanced about at the plain luxury—"eternally flambusted! If you are not a ——" Then he laughed.

It was after the evening meal which Sally served in silent, morose dignity, that the three men went to Sandy's study. The shed-rooms were attached to the main cabin by a narrow hallway and this passage was dark and cold. Coming from it into the warmth and glow of the room filled with books and pictures, Treadwell paused to glance about and exclaim before he took the easiest chair by the hearth and accepted pipe and tobacco. Martin was ill at ease and looked helplessly now and again to his son for leadings with this stranger who laughed so constantly and regarded him as if he were a person of inferiority and lack of intelligence who must, nevertheless, be treated with kindness and tolerance.

"I suppose," Treadwell remarked when the three had finally settled into some kind of comfort, "I suppose, Sand, you wonder how I found you out?"

Sandy had wondered but had restrained his curiosity. He looked now at the big, handsome fellow and again was seized with the sense of chill that he had felt in the afternoon.

"It sounds like a fairy story—a best seller or what you will. By and by"—he glanced at Martin as though to suggest a time when he would be absent—"I've got a lot to tell you, but something turned turtle in my affairs and got on to my nerves. Aunt Olive made me consult Doctor Travers, he's my uncle's pet aversion, you know, because he wanted Aunt Matilda to go into his sanatorium and Uncle Levi considered it an insult. Well, I saw Travers and he advised a vacation. 'Get to the hills,' he suggested, 'and browse a bit. Why don't you go up to that place—a hole in the ground,' he called it, 'where your uncle has sent—Morley?' And then it all came out, and by Jove! I found out that you hailed from the place of my forefathers!"

At this Martin dropped his pipe on the hearth and fixed his dim eyes on the stranger's face. Back rolled the years that had been but stagnant pools in poor Martin Morley's life; into focus came the simple hates and injustices that had brought him where he was.

"Your—forefathers!" he gasped, while a weird familiarity and resemblance to—he knew not what—made Treadwell something tangible and actual at last.

"Yes. We still own a good bit of land over beyond the place called The Forge. I've been having a look at it. It's run wild and rank, but it might be reclaimed, I suppose. There is a depraved old squatter on the place; lives in an old smoke-house. He actually remembered my grandfather and what do you think, Morley"—Lans had turned his back upon Martin, whose fixed stare and rigid pose disturbed him—"the old codger actually told me half of a story the other half of which Aunt Olive and I have often laughed over. Oddly enough it is a new and another connecting link between you and me. We're throw-backs, old fellow! Throw-backs and neither of us realizing it, but just naturally coming together."

Sandy was looking at his father. Martin was pale and haggard and his bony hands clutched his thin knees until the knuckles were strained and white.

"Hertford!" whispered Martin; "Hertford!"

"Sure thing!" Lans gave a laugh. "See, I'm discovered even in this disguise." He nodded toward the old man as one might toward an imbecile who had shown a gleam of intelligence. "Lansing Hertford is my real name; named for a grandfather just as you are, Sandy Morley. You see I've patched the scraps together. It was your grandfather and mine who were good pals way back in the musty ages. Some one played a practical joke on them and the friendship went up in thin air. It's left for you and me to pick up the pieces and—cement them together. I wonder if you ever heard about the bottle of stuff my grandfather gave your grandfather to bring home from—from Turkey, I think it was. Our forebears were globe trotters in a day when to trot meant to make history."

"I—I've heard it," Sandy muttered, his eyes still fixed on his father's rigid face.

"Did you ever hear the—joke?"

"Joke? No! Was there a joke?"

"Yes. Your relative stopped in Paris—he was a jolly old buck according to reports—and he hugged that everlasting bottle so close to him that some fellows—sounds beastly frivolous to refer to those dignified shades as fellows—but, anyway, some chaps from round about here were doing gay Paree just then and they caught on to your grandsire's devotion to that phial; they called it his Passion, his mistress, and one night when he had left it hidden in his room they found it, emptied out the contents—some kind of cologne it was—and filled it with water! They never heard the outcome, but Aunt Olive and I have often wondered how—some mountain girl probably enjoyed her smelling salts, or perfume, or whatever it was!"

Sandy could not move. He was spellbound, but Martin struggled to his feet and stood towering over Lans Treadwell, shaking as with ague.

"I reckon I can tell you how it—turned out," he said, while his poor old chin quivered as if the effort was almost more than he could endure. "It war this-er-way. He came home to The Hollow, Sandy's

grandfather, an' he brought the bottle of—water! Oh! my God—and them as opened the bottle—found out and began—to whisper! They all whispered an' nudged ole Sandford Morley out of life an' inter his grave. They-all hinted that he war a thief, a betrayer of his friend, but he war that upright and clean that he war deaf to whispers an' he—he didn't know the language of dirty slurs and off looks from them as war once his friends! He went to his grave without knowing what had edged him outer the respect of his neighbours. Then the lie grew an' grew an' took the life an' souls outer us-all an' made us po' whites—us as war as good an' better than your kin!"

A terrible fury was rising in Martin, and Sandy, unable to clarify the situation, paused before entering the fray.

"Then Sandy here, he got his call an' rose up to save us-all. Out in the world he found—you. You've come here—for what? for what?"

"Father!" At last Sandy was beside the old man. "Father, remember he is our guest! He has come to clear—can you not see—he has cleared—our name!"

Exultation and joy flooded Sandy; and his touch on his father's arm, the thrill in his voice had power to calm the old man.

"Good God!" Treadwell exclaimed, rising and facing the two; "is it out of such stuff, such dreams, such grudges, such shabby jokes, the life of the hills is made?"

"Yes." Sandy whispered, "out of such stuff we come—or remain! You can never know what you have done for us, Lans. Father will realize it later—he's nearer the past than I am. For myself I—thank you! You have, well, you cannot understand, but it's like you had put a broad, wide window in our lives, letting in sunshine and sweet air where mould and rot had once been."

He stretched his hand out frankly and tried to push his father forward to do the same, but Martin turned away, the tears streaming from his eyes. Sandy was looking to the future; Martin to the past; and Lansing Treadwell stood between the two with a light laugh upon his lips and a vague, contemptuous wonder in his eyes.

CHAPTER XX

They had tramped the hills together, Sandy and Lans. They had gone carefully over the plans for the factory and Home-school, had seen the growing building of the former and revelled in the dreams of the latter.

"It proves my liking for you, old chap," Lans had said, "when I can look at all this and not envy you. You see, Uncle Levi wanted to train me in the way I should go, but I got a twist in the wrong direction and—well! I never squeal. That's about all the philosophy or religion I have—I never squeal! Live your life; take your chances and squeal not! Then you remember I used to tell you that I was a big bungling giant? You've got the vision and the leading. But to think of Uncle Levi putting the reins in your hands! I can imagine him letting any one he likes hold the *end* of the reins—but he's leaned back and is letting you drive."

"Yes—but only because his big, wise head and loving heart tell him this is a safe road to travel."

"Oh! I don't know. Who's going to be any the better for—all this? There's a lot of Tommyrot about charity. If I were going to splurge I'd do it in the middle of the stage and make an advertisement of it at the same time. It's cheaper and more sensible. Why, if Uncle Levi would spend in Boston what he's spending up here—he'd have the world talking about his mills."

Sandy turned away. He was thinking of what Levi had said to him a few weeks before as he was ending his visit in Bretherton.

"Son"—he was "son" to the old brother and sister after that trip abroad—"son, go back to your hills and see in every ragged boy—Sandy Morley! In every little lass—your sister Molly! Gather them in, son, gather them in, and let us help them as we helped you to—come out cleaner and better. Work up there, son, as if God Almighty's eye alone was upon you. Men have forgotten the hill people, but God called you to lead them out of bondage."

"It pays to advertise," Lans was remarking.

"Yes," Sandy returned; "and Mr. Markham advertises in a most original and picturesque way."

Through all the walks and drives round about The Hollow, Sandy inwardly prayed that Cynthia might not materialize. Why he so strongly desired this he could not tell. He liked Lans; enjoyed his visit and companionship, but he hoped he would leave before Cynthia appeared. He grew restless at times and found himself longing to tell Treadwell that the Markhams were coming to The Hollow for

Christmas, and the rooms occupied by Lans would be needed. But the days went by and Cynthia kept from sight. The truth was, Sally Taber had gone to Trouble Neck and spread the news and warning.

"You-all bes' stay away," she said; "dis yere Yank be right triflin' and polite. He makes us-all feel like we war dirt under his feet. I clar' I'd like to work an evil charm on him! Ole Mr. Morley he don' take naturally to the woods an' leaves them young gem'men to themselves. I keep the do' closed 'twixt them an' me—he makes me feel like there was traps set fo' my feet."

"You must be having a real gay time up there!" Marcia Lowe replied, laughing at poor old Sally's indignation.

"Well, I'se cookin' mo' an' mo' monstrous every day. If that Yank can stan' what I have in store fo' him from now on, I reckon he don' got a stummick like a beast o' burden."

"Ah! poor Sandy," Cynthia cried; "you'll kill him, too. I reckon I'll come up and bring him food at night and put it in his study."

"Not just yet, little Cyn," Marcia Lowe replied, putting a protecting arm about the girl. "Cynthia's a bit run down," she explained to Sally; "off her feed a little. We're going to have a holiday. What do you think?—Mr. Greeley is going to take us 'over the hills and far away'—about twenty-five miles away! He's going over to make a will for an old man who is dying and he's invited us to share his carriage. Take good care of the Morleys, Sally, and let's hope the stranger will leave before we return. I'm getting real Southern in my tastes and am positively suspicious of Northerners!"

And it was a few nights after the night that Tod Greeley, with Marcia Lowe and Cynthia tucked comfortably away in the back seat of his carry-all, started on their trip, that Lans Treadwell and Sandy Morley sat before the fire in the study and had their talk—the talk that illumined the path on ahead for Sandy.

"Old fellow!" exclaimed Lans, taking the cushions from the window-seat and tossing them back again from where he stood in the middle of the room; "never *place* sofa pillows—chuck 'em! Only by so doing can you give that free and easy grace that distinguishes a Frat cosy corner from a drawingroom torture chamber."

Every cushion that Treadwell tossed seemed to strike with a thud on Sandy's heart. It was as if Treadwell were hurting little Cyn as she sat in her window-seat with her dear face turned toward them.

"Come, sit down, Lans. You are as nervous as a ghost-candle."

"Thanks!" Treadwell took a chair across the hearth from his host. "There's a devil of a storm rising out of doors."

"They're right common this season of the year. About six or seven years ago there was one up here that came mighty near ending the existence of a good many—it did carry one poor old darky woman away."

"That's cheerful! Sand, forgive me if I seem brutal, but do you know I believe the cooking up here is giving me indigestion. I wouldn't mind this if I didn't have your anatomy in mind, too. Those—what do you call them?"

"Ash cakes?"

"Yes. They were, to put it mildly, damnable."

Sandy laughed.

"They were right ashy," he admitted. "Sally is old and careless."

"She'll murder you, if you don't look out."

Sandy kicked a log farther back on the hearth and the room was filled with rosy light and warmth.

"Your father doesn't seem particularly drawn to me, Sand. Does he always retire to his chamber as soon as he has finished his—his evening meal? Somehow it looks pointed!"

Lans was not his usual, sunny self. The rising storm, his own thoughts, and the evil ash cakes were having their way with him.

"I never question father, Lans. He is old. I want him to do exactly as he chooses. You must not take offence."

"Certainly not. Only I do not want to feel I drive him away or deprive you of his companionship. Ever since I told the joke about that bottle of perfumery he seems to avoid me."

"Father hasn't a sense of humour," Sandy ventured, striving to keep the bitterness of resentment from his voice.

"The devil!" ejaculated Lans. "That log spits like a hag. A spark fell straight on my ankle."

"Excuse it," Sandy murmured, smiling as Lans nursed his silk-enclosed ankle.

"Hang it all, Sand! I've got to get back to civilization!"

Sandy bent over the fire to conceal his feelings. "Not to-night, surely," he said.

"No, but in a day or so. Morley, I—I want to tell you something. Tell you why I cut and came up here right in the middle of things at home."

The storm outside pounded on the windows; the fire flared and chuckled crisply. Sandy thought about Cynthia, wondered where she was, and then he became conscious of something Treadwell was saying.

"There was a time, Sand, when I couldn't have come to you with this. I thought you were such an infernal puritan—but Aunt Olive has told me of that—that little affair of yours which ended so—well so happily tragical, and it has made you seem more human. Of course there could have been no better way out for you and—her, and Uncle Levi was a brick to overlook it. I've liked him better for it, but my affair is another matter."

Sandy gazed dumbly at Treadwell and could not frame words to call the other to a halt. Not comprehending what Lans knew or misunderstood, having no intention of explaining—he simply stared and then turned to mend the fire.

"My affair—is different. You know about it—partially?"

"I've heard something. It was none of my business." A sternness crept into Sandy's voice which Treadwell entirely misunderstood.

"Well, because it was possible for me to come to you; because of all my friends, you seemed in this hour of trouble, the only one I *could* come to, I want you to make it your business, Sand."

The low-pitched, pleading voice awoke sympathy. It was that tone and manner which had caused people to straighten out the snarls of Lans Treadwell's life from babyhood up. There was capitulation. It was as if he had said: "I deserve no pity, no comfort, but—give them to me!" It awoke all the spontaneous desire for his happiness in every tender-hearted person who knew and liked him.

"I'm not indifferent, Lans. I only meant that in your friendship and mine there have always been reservations. You took me up because of your generous friendliness; you helped me mightily. I never felt the slightest inclination to penetrate into your private life, and my own was of such a nature that I was obliged to live it alone. My years away from the mountains were years of preparation to come back. Every hand held out to me was but a power to help me on my course. I have never—except recently with the Markhams—ever taken anything personally. I have always recognized that I was called to serve my people; I have been grateful, but I have never appropriated."

Treadwell looked hard at the fine, dark face touched now to vivid beauty by the rich glow of the fire.

"And I know few fellows who have won out as you have," he said admiringly. "You have that in you, about you, that attracts and compels. People trust you, like you—need you when a pinch comes."

"Thank you, Lans."

"And God knows I want you, need you, now!"

Sandy put out his hand, Treadwell gripped it, then both leaned back in their chairs and the story came, set to the wild strains of the mountain storm.

"She was one of those little creatures born to be the plaything of Fate. When she was seventeen she married Jack Spaulding—he was part genius, but more fool. He was caught by the girl's spirituality and brightness and he couldn't any more comprehend her than a raw-boned Indian could understand a water sprite. To him she was a woman he wanted—nothing more. He got her and when he wasn't lost in the maze of invention he permitted her—Good God!—he permitted her to supply the needs and yearnings of the—the man in him. Poor, little entrapped soul! She struggled between duty and loathing until her Guardian Angel saved her. When Spaulding was going through his ups and downs of fortune she stood by him. His downs were oftener and longer than his ups and she was pure grit and a bully little sport. Then he got on his feet with a vengeance. He could give her anything and, like a big, blundering savage he began to load her down with *things* and make his demands for payment and she—up and left him!"

Sandy felt that the heat of the room was oppressive, but he held his position and flinched not.

"Poor, little white-souled girl! She left him and tackled life with her wits and her two pretty hands. I met her during my senior year. She was reporting for a Boston paper, getting starvation wages; living like a bird in two rooms of a high-pitched house off in a desolate corner of town and thanking God for her—escape and freedom. Well, I lost my heart to her and you know how I and my set feel about certain things. Laws are all right for the—herd; a present help for the helpless; protection for the happy, and all the rest, but they should be handled wisely and discriminately by the intelligent minority. She—Marian Spaulding held the same views!"

"Why—didn't she divorce him—her husband?" Somehow the question sounded crude and unnecessary on Sandy's lips.

"For form's sake, she tried. Spaulding would not let her. He was an ugly devil and he just couldn't understand any woman snapping her fingers at his big money. He meant to starve her out, but he—well, he got left!

"I took rooms out near Cambridge. At first we were—friends! I wanted her to have time and quiet to think it out her own way. Learn to trust me; come to me of her own accord and because she was large enough to choose the braver course."

The heat was stifling Sandy, but he gripped the arms of his chair and kept still.

"She—she came to me willingly—three months ago! I've known and she has known, Sand, such bliss as only free, untrammeled souls can know who have gone through hell fire and proven themselves!"

Sandy almost sprang up. "You won't mind," he said jerkily, "if I raise the window? The room is like a furnace."

When he came back to his place, Lans, head bent forward in clasped hands, was ready for him.

"Women are all alike in some ways. They never dare let go entirely and plunge! They hold on to something, get frightened, and scurry back to tradition. Three weeks ago Spaulding sent for her—for Marian. He'd lost everything; was ill and needed her. She went! I found a note—that's all."

"Well!" Then having said that one word, Sandy sought about in his confused mind for another. Again he said, "Well!" and waited.

"I—I cannot be happy without her. The longer I stay away the stronger her claim seems to me. I must go back and—try again."

"Try—what?"

Sandy felt the cool, wet outer air touch his face as he leaned forward, for at last Lans Treadwell had aroused him. He was not, however, thinking of Lans and his yearnings; he was thinking of a little, unknown woman who was following the gleam of her conscience, while love, selfish love, was ready to spring upon her with its demands, before she had wrestled with and solved her own problem.

"Try—what?"

"To get her away from Spaulding; get her back to me and—happiness. We were happy, God knows we were!"

"If you—if she were happy, then her going proved something stronger than happiness called her."

"Women are like that. They hold the world back by their conventions and conservations. They ask for freedom and—and equality, and then they cling to tradition in spite of all."

"I reckon," Sandy's eyes were troubled and tender, "I reckon we-all better keep our hands off for a while and watch out to see them, the women, solve what is their business. They-all may want freedom and the rest—but it must be—as they see freedom and equality, Lans. I'm mighty sure in every woman's heart there is the beginning of a path leading—out and up, that they can find better alone. Why don't you wait until—until this little"—Sandy dropped into the sweet "lil"—"this little woman comes to you."

"She'd never come!" Lans half groaned; "you do not know how tradition would hold her there. She'd starve rather than to call me now."

Sandy was thoughtful a moment. He saw that Treadwell probably was right there, but a strange sense of protection rose in his heart. He felt he must protect that distant, strange woman from Lans in his present mood.

"Then I reckon you better stand off and watch unseen, Lans." Sandy made a bold stroke: "Are you thinking of her only? I'm mighty sure, Treadwell, in a case like this you ought not, you—dare not think of any one but her!"

The bald, rigid reasoning struck Lans Treadwell like the cold draught from the open window.

"Good God! Sand," he ejaculated, "let me shut that sash down. The cold gets into your heart as if it were driven by some infernal machine."

Sandy got up and pulled the glass down sharply, but he could not, thereby, bring comfort to Lans' conscience.

"What do you mean by a case like this, Sand? No case between man and woman can be separated that way. Her need is my need; mine is hers!"

"Is it?"

"Thunder! Sand, of course it is."

"I—I do not know. Things come so slowly, but I'm trying to learn for the sake of my people. The women and children, Lans, have got a clutch on me; they must always come first. Even when we want women happy, we want to give them happiness; give them the liberty *we* think is good for them. Treadwell, I'm mighty sure there are times when we-all better get out and leave them alone! We only make matters worse. You do not know these hills as I do—I don't want to preach, heaven knows! As I talk I am only feeling my own way, not pointing yours; but I know my hill people, and the women and children tug right hard at my heart. When love—such love as our mountain men know—takes a woman into a cabin—it generally shuts God out! I know this, and the children that come into life by way of our cabins are—well! I was a cabin boy, Lans! Women need God oftener than we-all do. Love puts a claim on them that it never does on us-all. Love demands suffering of them; responsibility that man never knows. Treadwell, we men must never clog up the trail that leads woman to her God. I know I'm right there! But tell me, are women and men different, so different in the lowlands and highlands?"

Treadwell was bent over, his face hidden in his hands. He made no answer.

"That little woman—down there"—Sandy's eyes were far and away from the warm, rude comfort of the room which held him and that stricken figure by the hearth—"is battling for what she believes is right. Something in her was strong enough to take her from you, your love, and the safety you stand for in her life. She has gone back to—what has stood for hell in her past. Do you, can you, understand her, Treadwell?"

"No!"

"Then, keep away until God, as she knows God, has had His way with her. Stand off and watch. Be ready, but let her fight her fight and come to you, if that is the end—with clean soul!"

And now Lans Treadwell was weeping as only men and children can weep when they are defeated by a stronger will they cannot understand, and cannot resist.

The great logs crackled and the wind roared in the chimney. Above, the shambling steps of Martin Morley sounded as he made his preparations for bed. Suddenly Sandy started up and listened.

"There's a call of distress from The Way," he said, getting upon his feet. Then he stood waiting for the next sound. Treadwell pulled himself together and listened also.

No call came, but presently steps were heard outside—a tap on the door of the room which led directly to the open.

"Come!" said Sandy, and in walked Marcia Lowe and Cynthia Walden. They were rain-soaked and wind-blown. Their faces shone and their eyes danced.

"This is the end of our holiday," Marcia said with a laugh. Neither she nor Cynthia paid attention to the man in the chair; he was hardly visible behind the high back. "Tod Greeley's shaft broke just as we were coming into The Way from the cross cut. We called and called, but finally we decided to find where we were—it is as black as a pocket out of doors—we were all completely lost. Cynthia and I felt our way along, while Greeley stayed with the horse—the beast acted like a fiend—and then we saw a light: your light! No other man in The Hollow wastes oil like you—and here we are!"

At this Treadwell made himself evident. Turning sharply, he met the big, lovely eyes of the girl beside the talkative little woman. The fair, damp face was inframed by tendrils of light hair under a hood of dullish red; the long, coarse, brown coat clung to the slim figure, and the mouth of the girl was smiling. Treadwell had never seen a mouth smile so before.

Sandy introduced his friend and then said: "Lans, make the ladies comfortable; I'll lend Greeley a hand."

CHAPTER XXI

Lance Treadwell did not leave the mountains the next day. The storm poured, and Sandy's words sunk deep in his light mind.

"Yes," he thought to himself virtuously, "I'll let Marian have it out with her conscience or whatever it was that took her from me. I'll write and tell her I'm waiting up here!"

In the meanwhile Treadwell took a new interest in the mountains, especially in that part of them known as Trouble Neck. Marcia Lowe and her "charm" appealed to him hugely.

"Why, it's been introduced in many other places," he said to the little doctor; "why can't you get your representative at Washington to get an appropriation for you?"

Marcia Lowe laughed long and merrily at this. "I really do not know who represents us at Washington," she replied; "it is some distant man, like as not, with axes galore of his own to grind, with these mystic votes of the mountains to help along. Doubtless he has a soul above names, and if a petticoat doctor should go to him and plead her cause for these people he would probably have me shut up as a maniac. The Forge doctor is making himself very unpleasant. He told me the other day that if I persisted in working my charm on many more people he would have me—investigated! Just fancy! investigating me! He used to laugh at me; it's got past the laughing stage now. When professional people step on each other's toes the atmosphere is apt to be electric. The Forge doctor has at last concluded that I am not a joke. A woman, to that sort of man, is either a joke or a menace."

Treadwell laughed gayly. Marcia Lowe was a delight to him; besides, Cynthia Walden was always present when he visited Trouble Neck, and Cynthia was bewitching. Treadwell did not talk of the girl to Sandy. He had no special reason for not doing so, but, having posed as a tragic creature—a man confronting a great soul-problem—he did not like to come down from his pedestal and stand revealed as a human being interested in a mountain girl.

"Her smile," he said to Marcia Lowe one day when Cynthia had left the room for a moment—"how do you account for that?"

"I never account for Cynthia," the little doctor replied. "I just take her and thank God. She and I live our beautiful little life with mists all about us. It's very fascinating and inspiring. She is such a child, and until there is some call to do otherwise, I am going to play with her. We actually have dolls! Of course there are all sorts of bones in the cupboard to pass out to the darling, but I'm waiting until she is hungry."

And so Cynthia played her part and smiled and dreamed. Things just were! There was no perspective, no contrast—the sun was always flooding her hours with the one small, white cloud of Sandy's marked passage in the "Pilgrim's Progress," to sail across her sky now and then. Treadwell did not surprise or shock her. He seemed a big, splendid happening from the world beyond the mountains. He was strong and pleasant and made one laugh, but he would go presently and they would talk about him as they talked about Sheridan's raid and Smith Crothers' fire—he was not part of Lost Mountain!

Cynthia, nevertheless, walked with Lans Treadwell through the trails, and once they had followed the Branch and come upon the new factory near The Forge. The girl told Treadwell of the fire, but she eliminated herself utterly from the story. She understood better now than she once had—her part in that snowy night. Then they spoke of Sandy and his hopes.

It was a gray, still day when they so freely discussed Sandy, and they were strolling up from Trouble Neck to the Morley cabin; Miss Lowe and Sandy were to meet them there later, coming from an opposite direction.

"Yes, Sandy is right noble," Cynthia said softly; "he was born, I reckon, to do a mighty big thing. When he was little it seemed like God said, 'Sandy Morley, I choose you!' There never was any one like Sandy."

Treadwell scanned the face near him, but saw only admiration and pride, detached and pure.

"We-all just waited like we were holding our breaths till he came marching up The Way. I can laugh now, Mr. Lans, but the morning I saw him first I was standing right there"—she pointed to the tree by the road where she had listened to Sandy's bird call—"and he came along, and when I knew that that big man was—my Sandy that went all raggedy down The Way years before—I expect I hated him! It seemed like he had stolen the nice boy, eaten him up and swallowed him! But no one hates Sandy. We-all want to do something big and fine. Why, every time I look at him, Mr. Lans, I feel like I must show him how glad I am he—well, he didn't swallow the old Sandy whole!"

Treadwell laughed delightedly.

"He's mighty good to get near to when you feel—troubled," Cynthia added; "and, too, you feel like you wanted to keep him from hurting himself!"

"How well you put it!" Treadwell's face grew serious. He recalled his hour of confession in Sandy's study and felt an honest glow of appreciation.

"When I was a right little girl," Cynthia went on, "I lived up at Stoneledge with Aunt Ann; she was my real aunt. I had a mighty queer life for a little girl and I reckon I would have fared mighty bad if I hadn't had a secret life!"

"You bad child!" Treadwell cried, shaking his finger at her; "a double life, eh?"

"Yes." The sweet smile gave Lans a bad moment. "Yes. In that-er-life I had all the things I wanted; all the folks I liked, and it just kept me—going! Sometimes I wish, oh! how I wish, that Sandy had a nice little other life, free of work and worry and loneliness, where he could—let go! Sandy does hold on so!"

"I wish I could have been in your 'other life'," Lans whispered.

"Oh! real folks never got there!"

"Well, if it will comfort you any," Treadwell broke in with an uncomfortable sense of being an off-mountaineer, "Sandy has—another life."

"Really?" Cynthia flushed and curiosity swayed her. She had never had so good an opportunity to know the man Sandy; she might never have again. "Really? and folks, right magic folks to—to play with?"

Treadwell thought of the Markhams and grinned; then he thought of Sandy's secret relations with the girl his aunt had told him of and he grew imaginative. "Yes. Now there is a man in Sandy's other world, a grim, rather stern man, but he has a magic wand that he lets Sandy wave now and then—it's great fun!"

"Oh! you mean the Company?"

"Exactly. That's his pet name. And there is a nice old fairy godmother who brews wonderful mixtures for Sandy and darns his socks and makes believe, when no one is listening, that she is his mother."

"I should love her, the honey!"

Treadwell stopped and gave a big, hearty laugh. Matilda Markham as a "honey" was about the most comical thing he had ever dreamed of.

"And is there"—the drawling sweetness of Cynthia's voice was moving Treadwell dangerously—"is there something young and pretty and mighty bright, too?"

"Yes." Treadwell's laugh was gone.

"A—girl—I reckon?"

"Yes, a girl—just girl enough, you know, to keep him—like—well—like other fellows."

"Oh!" Cynthia smiled, but her eyes grew as gray as the day; the blue faded from them. "I hope she is a mighty nice, upperty girl."

"I'm only playing, you know," Lans broke in. "I am imagining a life for Sandy something like your old secret life. It's all fun."

"You mean—Sandy has an—an imagination?"

"Precisely."

But the "girl" part of the make-believe remained in Cynthia's memory. Sandy had had his pretty story down there, away from Lost Hollow! Now he had come back; had left it all behind him! She saw it quite clearly. Perhaps when he was on that recent visit he had looked upon all the dear playthings as she used to look at her "Pilgrim's Progress," the portraits on the walls of the Interpreter's House, and her letters to her soul. Perhaps Sandy had played with the wand of the grim old Company; had tasted the brews of the dear Fairy Godmother and he had—bidden good-bye to the pretty girl-thing! It was very plain now; Sandy had accepted his life of duty in the hills, he had shut the door between him and his playroom.

Just then Smith Crothers crossed The Way, lifting his hat as he did so, to Cynthia. So silently had he come, so suddenly had he materialized, that Cynthia was taken off her guard. Her hand went to her side—but the pistol was not there! In her safer, saner life she often forgot the dangerous thing. A shudder ran through her body and she drew nearer Treadwell. The soft, gray day grew dark, and Crothers, like something evil, seemed to pervade everything. Instinctively Lans put his hand out and laid it protectingly on the shoulder beside him. The touch shared the taint, too.

"Oh! do not do that," pleaded Cynthia recoiling. "I was only startled because—he—the man came so suddenly."

"But I—I only wanted you to know you have—nothing to fear with me here."

Cynthia made an effort to smile, but it was a sad, little shadowy wraith of a smile.

The touch, the resentment, began their work from that moment. As Cynthia's shudder at Crothers' touch in the past had fanned the evil passions of the man, so her recoil now drew Treadwell's attention to the fact that she was not a child—but a woman; a woman who recognized him as man! The thought thrilled and interested him. It made him forget to write that letter to Marian Spaulding; it made him conscious that he did not care to talk about his many visits to Trouble Neck with Sandy Morley.

And Sandy, during the days of the prolonged visit, was often absent from home. The factory and the Home-school claimed his care and presence. He feared, at first, that Treadwell would have a dreary time by himself, but there were books, and Lans repeatedly told him the rest and quiet were doing him a world of good. Then—and the desire confused Sandy—he wished Treadwell would cut his visit short. The confession in the study had not drawn Treadwell nearer; it had driven him farther away. It was as if, by keener insight, Sandy had been cruelly disillusioned; had discovered that he, not Lans, was bound to bear a new burden of responsibility. Having confided in his friend, Treadwell, apparently, was eased

and comforted; while Sandy was constantly thinking of a certain, vague, little suffering creature who, by a word of his, was left to a hard fight with no help at hand.

"Why in thunder!" Sandy thought as he and Martin worked with the men over at the factory; "why in thunder doesn't he go home and—stand by?"

But Lans did not go away, and more than Sandy grew restive. Martin had taken a deep dislike to the visitor and was only held in check by Sandy's reasoning and demands.

"Why, Dad, Lans had nothing to do with the old misunderstanding. He has really done us a good turn by throwing light on the past."

"He—he laughed!" muttered Martin. "They-all laugh that-er-way. Big things is little to them-all; and little things is—big! Them Hertfords be—no-count! They all sound upperty and look upperty, but they-all is—trash!"

"Come, come, Dad! Lans isn't trash. He's done me more than one good turn."

"I reckon he'll do you a right smart bad one some day, son."

"Dad!"

"Yes, son. Now, why didn't the old general come an' tell us-all 'bout the joke? Why didn't he give us-all a chance to jine in the laugh? Then this lad's father—why didn't he come back to Lost Hollow and find out 'bout—Queenie Walden, as was?"

Martin's voice sank into a whisper, but the words had a terrific effect upon Sandy. So naturally had he accepted the life of The Hollow again, so happily had he permitted his hills to draw close about him, shutting away the noises and interpretations of the big outer world, that the old doubt about Cynthia's poor mother, the loyal outward holding to the story Ann Walden had told of her birth, had escaped him. Now it came thundering through Martin's whisper like a heavy blow.

If that hushed belief were true, then—Sandy could not stand; he sat down upon a fallen tree and stared at his father.

"If that is true, then Cynthia and Treadwell are——" The thought burned itself into the mind and soul of Sandy Morley. No longer could he permit things to drift past him; here, among his hills, vital truths were vital truths and might make or mar the people he was bent upon helping.

"Cold cramp yo', son?" Martin gazed at his boy.

"For a minute—yes, Dad."

From that day Sandy knew that Treadwell must go away. Just how to bring it about he did not know, for his shadowy doubt could not be voiced; there was not the least reason why it should be—but Cynthia must be kept from the intangible something that could never touch her but to bring dishonour. And after Lans departed, Sandy thought, he would try to know more of the hideous uncertainty; seek to find out what ground there was for the doubt. In rebuilding Stoneledge, he must do more—he must try to take the blight from the old name. "But suppose"—and at that Sandy raised his head—"more glory in the end and more need to win Cynthia to him!"

While Sandy was struggling to work his way out of the snare, struggling to discover some social plank down which Treadwell could be courteously slid from Lost Mountain to Boston without damage to his dignity or the Morley sense of hospitality, Smith Crothers got his inspiration.

Filled with hate and envy, appreciating the fact that Sandy's business enterprises were menaces to his future prosperity, the man silently and morosely plotted and planned some kind, any kind of revenge. Cynthia, he dared not approach personally; even his evil thoughts dared not rest upon her directly. He had nothing with which to lure her; not even a decent approach could be made. The girl was always on guard; he could make no apology; he could hope from no self-abasement to win her faith. To harm her brutishly would be to secure his own death, for well he knew that the subtle force that was coming into life in The Hollow was making the men remember they were men and the women to realize it also. Then, too, the factory back of The Hollow would be running in a year's time. It would put on the market a different line of merchandise than his, but it would draw its labour from the same sources from which he drew.

"That damned yellow cur," Crothers thought, "will put up prices; shut down on the brats, and backed by the money of a fool who thinks to get a big name this-er-way, will get me by the throat if I don't get him first."

Vaguely, stupidly, Crothers desired to get Sandy away from The Hollow. If only he could cause him to lose interest, give up the job and turn the Company up North sick of the venture, all might be well. Crothers had even fancied the good effect of a plague in The Hollow that would wipe out the labouring class; of course, that would cripple him, but he'd have the ground to himself and he could make up for that. However, at the plague suggestion Marcia Lowe rose grimly with warning gesture. The little doctor was undermining several things. She was teaching the women to live decently, cook decently, and take a human interest in their children. Her charm, too, was having effect; more than Martin

Morley had tested its potency and taken to holier ways. The Forge doctor often told Crothers that the She-Saw-Bones ought to be behind bars, but even in Lost Hollow you couldn't put a person behind bars for cleaning souls and homes.

And then, at that juncture, Crothers came upon Treadwell and Cynthia. He saw the girl's shudder and her look at her companion, and he understood the shudder but misunderstood the look! Lansing Treadwell had not cared to cover his true identity; rather boastfully he had proclaimed himself a Hertford and meant, some day, to reclaim his family lands and bring back the glory of the past. But Lost Hollow had its private opinion of the Hertfords, and when the County Club had been permitted to share the joke about that old story which had damned the Morleys, the club refused to laugh. Oddly enough they took sides with Martin Morley, and in their late understanding of facts made flattering overtures to Martin that embarrassed him deeply.

"Morley," Tod Greeley urged, "you-cum down to the club and set in Townley's armchair. Andrew Townley ain't ever going to sit anywhere again, I reckon; he's flat on his back for keeps now. His chair is mighty empty-looking and there ain't a man round the store but would welcome you to that seat of honour."

With no idea of resentment Martin replied: "You're mighty kind, Greeley, and time was when I'd like to have jined you-all, but now Sandy and me is right companionable and—him not being a smokin' man, I'd be mighty lonesome in the circle, and Sandy would miss me to home."

"And serves us-all right, too," Greeley said to the club. "Us-all pitting a Hertford agin a Morley!"

So the situation was ripe for Crothers to use Cynthia and the doubtful Hertford against Morley, and, incidentally, the Company against Morley.

"Sandy Morley would like to get the girl," Crothers reasoned primitively; "and if this-er-Treadwell or Hertford can smirch her—it will finish Sandy; take his appetite for The Hollow away and—clean up the whole business—getting me even for past hurts, too—damn her!"

Like many another blindly passionate man, Crothers hit out in the dark with what weapons he had and landed a blow where he least expected, the recoil of which stunned and downed him.

CHAPTER XXII

Crothers was a man who approached his ends by the use of his better qualities. The man whom the children of the factory shrank before in trembling fear, the man whom the men fawned before, and the women loathed and hated in dumb acquiescence, was not the man who years ago crept around the desk in his office to implore a kiss from "little Miss." Crothers could smile and speak courteously; his hard eyes could soften and attract, and there was no doubt as to his business capacity and positive genius in bargaining.

With a more or less clear idea as to the outcome of his desires, Crothers was perfectly explicit as to his desires. He wanted to get Sandy Morley away, permanently away, from Lost Hollow. Could he achieve this, his business might prosper as in old days, his command of the community gain power and his future be secure. If he could bring this desired consummation to pass, by harming Sandy and, incidentally, Cynthia Walden and Marcia Lowe, so much the better. They were disturbing elements in the place and nothing was secure, not even the suppression of the women and the degeneracy of the men.

"In the family and the town," Crothers had said once to Tod Greeley, "there must always be a head; a final voice, or there will be hell."

"Who do you want to boss your family and town?" Greeley had innocently asked. Crothers had not committed himself; he believed actions should speak louder than words!

Seeking about for a beginning of his campaign to turn Sandy Morley from his course, Crothers landed upon Lans Treadwell.

Treadwell could not always be at Trouble Neck while Sandy and Martin were at the factory-building back in the woods; reading palled upon Lans, too, and the bad cooking for his private meals began to attract his attention. That he did not resent anything in his friend's home and make his farewell bow was characteristic of Lansing Treadwell. He was thoroughly good-natured, inordinately selfish, and was consumed by deep-rooted conviction that Sandy Morley owed him a great deal and that he was conferring a mighty honour upon the young man by accepting his hospitality. No doubt arose as to his right in sharing Sandy's home, but as time went on he did, as all weak and vacillating natures do, resent young Morley's strength of character, simplicity and capacity for winning to himself that which Lans felt belonged to him by inherent justice. It had been one thing to know that his Uncle Levi Markham had taken another young man and set him on his feet, but quite another to realize that his uncle had adopted a poor white from the native hills of the Hertfords and was providing him with

wings. A new element had entered into Lans.

"It's like Uncle Levi," he bitterly thought, with his Aunt Olive's instructions well in mind, "to so degrade me, my father, and our family. If he could put every upstart on a throne who had hewed his way to the throne, he would be supremely happy."

In these frames of mind Crothers and Treadwell met and exchanged views. If Morley could put a factory up and hope for success, Lans wanted to see the workings of a similar business already on the ground. So, during listless hours, the young man frequented Crothers' neighbourhood, ate at Crothers' boarding-house, and drank with him at The Forge hotel. Not looking for any shortcomings, Lans did not observe them. He found Crothers an agreeable man with a desire to uplift The Hollow by practical, legitimate methods, not fool-flights of fancy. Then, too, Crothers had a fine sense of the fitness of things. He deplored the fact that a man of Sandy Morley's antecedents should, by the vulgar power of money, gain control over the people.

"I tell you, sir," Crothers exclaimed, "the South has got to be reclaimed through blood; not mongrel blood backed by dirty money!"

This sounded very fine to Lans Treadwell.

"Now, I was a thinking this-er-way lately: 'Spose young Hertford came and took command 'stead of young Morley? 'Spose the old place of the Hertfords was rebuilt and the family established here again—what would happen, sir? I put it to you right plain and friendly."

Lans was thrilled. He rose to any vision called up by another; as for himself he was no vision-builder. His face flushed and his eyes flashed.

"I have never thought of it that way," he said; "as you put it, it seems almost an imperative duty that the best Southern blood should return to the hills and reconstruct where and in the manner it alone understands."

"Exactly. Now I reckon you don't know, sir, but there are mighty big back taxes unpaid on the Walden place and—and your forefathers' land, sir. I'm thinking of buying both places in simply from a sense of public spirit. I ain't going to let those smiling acres go into alien hands if I know myself—not if I ruin myself in the deal."

"Few men would show such spirit as that, Mr. Crothers!"

Lans was deeply impressed.

"Well, sir, a man as has the right stuff in him gets sentimental about something. My weakness is my—South! I came from mighty good stock, sir. I was in the university when the war broke out; I left and did my share of fighting and then came back to—well!" Crothers' eyes grew misty. His feelings almost overcame him and Lans Treadwell was equally moved.

"Since then it has been an upward climb. I gave up love, home, and marriage. I've become a coarse man in the fight, but my heart is true to the ideals and principles of the South. I have dreams, too, of the day when the best blood—blood such as yours, sir, recognizes the need of the hills and comes back with its tradition and force to—to—reclaim us-all socially, religiously, and—and—morally. It will mean sacrifice, sir. The North, with its luxury and ease, will be hard to leave, but life is sacrifice to men, sir, and the day will dawn when the Hertfords will come to The Hollow with determination to control affairs. I'm going to hold their place ready, sir, for that day!" This sounded almost too fine to be true, and even Lans demanded details.

Then it was that Crothers laid his foundations. He would buy the Hertford plantation; the Walden, also, if he could. He suspected that back taxes could not be met by the legitimate owners—if they could be disentangled from the mists that surrounded their possessions—he meant to get them into his own power. Then it further appeared that should Lans Treadwell desire to return to the hills of his fathers, the way would be made easy, and with Crothers to back the efforts of the "blue blood" a very respectable opposition would evolve to check the growing strength of such men as Sandy Morley.

"Morley's all right as far as he goes," Crothers interjected; "I ain't got nothing to say against Morley as Morley, but what I do say is—does the South want to be led out of darkness by a poor white when its own blue blood only needs a chance to flow through?"

Lans looked serious. He felt disloyal to Sandy; old associations tugged at his heart; but all at once the story of Sandy's relations with a girl in Boston, the story coloured and underlined by Olive Treadwell, rose and confronted him. If Sandy could deceive and hoodwink Levi Markham, what could others expect? Personally, Lans had no desire to stone Sandy, but a fine glow was filling his heart. If the way could be opened for him to help his people, could he not achieve as much as Sandy: defeat his uncle's revenge—it seemed only that to Lans, then—and, perhaps, when Sandy had come to terms, work with him for the good of Lost Hollow?

It was splendid! Purpose and strength came to Treadwell. He was ready for sacrifice; ready to forego the ease and joy of his city life; ready to renounce his claims upon a certain little woman fighting her battle apart from him! He would show Morley that he *could* be pure and resourceful, he could put his longings aside for the greater good!

Lans must always have his mental, spiritual, and physical food served on dainty dishes! While he stood by Crothers he saw, in fancy, a noble home arise above the trees on the old Hertford place. He saw his Aunt Olive—no! it was not his Aunt Olive that he saw; it was—Treadwell's breath came fast—it was Cynthia Walden who stood at the door of the uprisen house of the Hertfords and smiled her radiant smile of welcome to him!

Lansing Treadwell was always a victim of suggestion and flashes of passion. The polished brutality of his father and the mystic gentleness of his mother had been blended in him by a droll Fate and, later, confused and corrupted by his Aunt Olive's ignorant training.

From that day Lansing Treadwell fell into the hands of Smith Crothers, and the plotting evolved so naturally, so apparently wisely, that no shock or sense of injustice aroused all that was good in the last of the Hertfords. Crothers gradually assumed the guise of public benefactor, a man who, resenting the obvious stupidity of men like Levi Markham, for no ulterior motive other than human rights, undertook the placing of Lansing Hertford upon the throne of his ancestors!

Secrecy was absolutely necessary. Conditions might arise to defeat Crothers' philanthropic schemes, but when all was concluded Morley must be taken into their confidence and made to understand that open and fair competition was both right and democratic.

And while all this was going on Sandy toiled at the buildings all day, reported progress to Levi every evening, tried to do his duty by Treadwell, while he sought for some reason to get him away before any harm was done.

It was difficult to account for what happened to Cynthia Walden at that critical time. It all happened so quickly, so breathlessly. The child in the girl was flattered, amused and uplifted by Lans Treadwell. He was so gay, so captivating. He taught her to play on Marcia Lowe's mandolin, and when he discovered how splendidly and sweetly she could sing the plaintive songs of her hills and the melodies of the old plantation days, he was enraptured and gave such praise as turned Cynthia's head and filled Marcia Lowe with delight.

"You little genius!" Lans exclaimed one day; "try to dance, too. You look like a spirit of the hills."

Then Cynthia danced and danced and forgot Sandy away among his buildings; forgot his grim determination and serious manner. It was song and dance for Cynthia, and the little doctor looking on, charmed by the turn their dull life had taken, saw no danger. To her Cynthia was a child still, and she was grateful that she should have this bit of brightness and joy in her narrow, drab-coloured life.

The arrested elements in Cynthia grew apace and with abnormal force. Through Lans Treadwell she realized all the froth and sunshine girlhood craves—she forgot Sandy because at that moment he held no part in the gay drama that was set to music and song. And then, quite naturally, too, the woman in the girl pleaded for recognition. Here was a man who appreciated her; would accept her as she was, although he asked no questions of her, regarding her poor little past. He talked splendidly of the big vital things of life which Cynthia thrilled at, but could not express in word or thought. Oh! it was most sure that Lans Treadwell would never care what had brought her into being—it was the woman! Sandy might do a big thing from duty; Lans would do big things because with him duty was but love of—humanity! Cynthia did not know much about humanity and Lans never said he loved her—but it came upon the girl all at once one day that she—she, little Cynthia Walden, was needed, desperately, sufferingly needed by a great-souled man to help in saving Lost Hollow! How magnificent! Sandy meant to save The Hollow alone and single-handed—Sandy was limited, that was Lans's modest interpretation—but Treadwell had his vision, too, and his vision included her! It was breath-taking and alluring.

Treadwell did not make any physical or emotional claims upon the girl—something led him dangerously, but wisely. He taught her to call him brother and he spoke to her as "little sister." This was particularly blinding to Marcia Lowe.

"Brother and sister in the broad human sense," pleaded Lans, and so the net drew close around little Cyn, and she did not struggle, because the mesh was so open and free that it did not chafe the delicate nature nor stunt the yet blind soul.

At the end of the third week Crothers, in fatherly manner, suggested to Lans that he was compromising Cynthia. So considerately and humanely did the man speak of this that Lans could take no offence, particularly as Crothers just then had brought their common interests to such a pass that to resent anything would have been fatal. A very beautiful and many-coloured bubble was well in sight!

"You see," Crothers explained, "them men up to Greeley's store are a right evil lot. Knowing that Cynthia Walden was a nameless waif when old Miss Ann adopted her, they cannot believe a right smart feller like you has honest motives and they are getting ugly."

Lans had heard the report of Cynthia's early childhood; the girl herself had sweetly and pathetically referred to it—and they thought he was that kind, eh? Well, he would show them! Having accepted the fate of the man on a desert island, Lans Treadwell meant to treat the natives he found there, fairly and nobly. In his mind he had cut himself adrift forever from the old life and its claims; Cynthia was the most attractive little savage on his isolated, safety isle—he would claim her virtuously and bravely; he would train her; educate her to be no unworthy mate for him in his god-like sacrifice for his family honour.

Never had Lans Treadwell been so dramatic nor such a fool, but he had caught little Cyn, and before she realized what had happened or why she had permitted it to happen, she drove away with Treadwell over the hills one day to see some land Crothers had urged him to look at and, a storm overtaking them, they were delayed in an old cabin where they sought shelter over night and then and there Lans brought her to see that for all their sakes they should be married before going home.

"Married?" gasped Cynthia, as if the word were foreign; "married! me, little Cyn? Why, only *women* marry!"

"And you are a woman, sweet!" Even then Lans did not touch her, though she looked more divine with her big eyes shining and the blessed smile parting her lips than he had ever seen her.

"I—a woman? Well, I reckon I am—but it seems mighty queer when you first think of it. And—the folks would say evil things of me because you took care of me and didn't risk my neck on the bad roads in the dark? What could they-all say?"

For the life of him Lans could not frame the words with that lovely face turned to his. "You must trust me, Cynthia. I will protect you and you must protect me."

"I—protect you? You are right funny. What could they-all do to you?"

"They could horsewhip me; tar and feather me——"

"Oh! no!" And now the light faded from the girl's face. Once at The Forge a man was treated so—yes! there was something about a woman, too!

The storm had raged all night. Lans made a fire and laughed and joked the dark lonely hours through. After midnight Cynthia fell asleep from sheer exhaustion and Lans placed his overcoat under her head while he smoked by the fire and grew—as imagination fed upon itself—into a being so immaculate and saint-like that the morning found him prepared for the final and dramatic climax. He awoke Cynthia, touched her as if she was a spirit, and took her to the little town known as Sudley's Gap and there—married her!

Cynthia was excited and worn from her night's experience, but the ceremony and Lans's manner made it all seem like a new play. They were always playing together, he and she. Big brother and little sister lived in the moment and had no care for the past or future. They had breakfast together, after the visit to the missionary, and it was afternoon before they started for home. At last Cynthia grew very quiet—the play had tired her; she was frightened and unhappy. How could what had happened secure Lans from the anger of The Hollow folks, if staying away were wrong? It was all very foolish. They could have gone to Sandy and explained. Already Sandy stood in the girl's life as safety and strength.

Just then Lans turned and looked at her. To him it was beyond comprehension that a girl of nineteen could be what Cynthia was. Ignorant she might be, surely was, but she was vital and human; she had witnessed life and its meaning in The Hollow—she was primitive and childish—but she understood!

Lans felt himself, by that time, to be about the highest-minded man any one could hope to find. He had practised great self-repression; he had accepted his future life suddenly, but with all its significant responsibilities. When he reached The Hollow there would be tumult, no doubt, but every man and woman there would count on the hot, impulsive Southern blood and, after the first shock, would glory in a Hertford who could carry things with such a high hand and, withal, a clean hand!

Laying the reins down over the dash-board, Lans turned to Cynthia, his passion gaining power over him as the sense of possession lashed it sharply. The pretty big-eyed girl was his! He had secured her by the sacredest ties, but for that very reason he need withhold himself no longer.

"Wife!" he whispered. "Wife, come; sweet, come!"

This was no play. The call awakened no response, but fear laid its guarding hand upon the girl as it had on that terrible night when Smith Crothers asked of her what Treadwell was now seeking in a different way, but in the same language.

"No!" Cynthia shuddered, shrinking from him. "No!"

The denial had awakened evil in Crothers; it aroused the best in Treadwell. For a moment he looked at the wild, fear-filled eyes and then a mighty pity surged over him.

"I—I would not hurt you for all the world, little Cyn," he said, taking up the reins. "I've done the best I could for you, dear; when you can you will come to me—won't you? In the meantime it's 'brother and little sister!'"

Come to him! Thus Sandy had spoken, too! The memory hurt.

The strain of the Markham blood rushed hotly, at the instant, in Lans's veins. It gave him courage and strength to forget—the Hertfords.

He took Cynthia to Trouble Neck and manfully told Marcia Lowe what had occurred. The little doctor, worn by anxiety, was almost prostrated.

"No one knows but what Cynthia was here all last night," she said. "I've lied to Tod Greeley. I told him you had not taken Cynthia; that she was ill with headache."

"Now!" Cynthia laughed lightly; "you see we need not have done that silly thing at Sudley's Gap."

Marcia Lowe began to cry softly.

"Oh! dear," she faltered, "but Smith Crothers knows and Sandy Morley, too. Oh! I have been so blind, so foolish, and you have been such mad children."

"I am going to Sandy at once," Lans explained. The plain common-sense atmosphere of the cabin and the little doctor's evident suffering were calming Treadwell's hot Southern blood and giving a touch of stern prosaic grimness to the business.

Cynthia, once she was safe with Marcia Lowe, was so unflatteringly happy that Lans Treadwell might well be pardoned for thinking her lacking in ordinary mentality, and this thought was like a dash of ice water on his growing chilliness. He became awkward and nervous. He felt like a man who had run headlong to a goal only to find that it was the wrong one, with no strength or power to retrace his steps he owed to defeat and failure, and in that mood he sought Sandy.

CHAPTER XXIII

Marcia Lowe was mistaken. Sandy did not know. He knew that Treadwell had not returned the evening before, but Tansey Moore, who was now manager of Crothers' new factory, had told him that Treadwell had gone to look up a piece of land back of Sudley's Gap, and the storm had naturally detained him.

The sudden growth of intimacy between Crothers and Lans surprised and amused Sandy. Full well he realized Crothers' motive, and he could afford to laugh at that, but he felt annoyed and hurt at Lans's weak falling into the trap. The disloyalty to himself did not affect Sandy, he was far too sensible and simple a man to care deeply for that, and it somehow made it easier for him to reconcile his conscience to the growing distrust and contempt he had for Treadwell, but he disliked the idea of Crothers using his friend to gain his mean ends.

"Lans is not one to tie up to," he said to himself, and then smiled at the quaint expression which he had learned from Levi. "And to-morrow I will tell him that I must make ready for the Markhams."

The day after Cynthia's marriage Sandy had gone early to the buildings. He and Martin had worked hard; settled a difficulty among the men, which they both felt confident Crothers had instigated, and, upon reaching home late in the afternoon Sandy was told that Old Andrew Townley was ill and wanted him. Liza Hope had sent word.

"I reckon you can wait to eat," Sally Taber had suggested; "ole Andy has been dyin' with consumption ever since dat time when he went to The Forge an' got baptized in his wife's night shift—him not being able to get a robe! Andy took a mighty stiff chill that-er-day an' it war like a finger pintin' the way to his grave. Andy war thirty when he waddled into de Branch in dem swaddling clothes, an' he's over ninety now. I expect he can hol' on till you've tended to yo' stummick."

But Sandy had not waited. He went to Andrew and found the old man wandering on to the end of his journey in a very happy frame of mind. He was, to himself, no longer the weak creature dying in his poor cabin. Lying on the comfortable cot Sandy had provided, smilingly gazing through the broad window Sandy's inspired saw and hammer had designed, he believed himself to be a young and strong man helping another up The Way with guiding hand and cheerful courage. Sitting by the bed, Sandy took the cold, shrivelled fingers in his warm young ones, and the comforting touch focussed the wavering mind.

"Eh, there, son, it's a right smart climb, but the end's just yonder! See that-er-light?"

"Yes, old friend, I see the light."

Sandy bent low and whispered gently.

"That-er-light, son, is in Parson Starr's window. Starr, Starr! He war a mighty clear star an' his light ain't going out, I reckon. Hold fast, son! A few more steps and the totin' will be over. It's been right heavy goin'—but——"

The poor old body struggled to rise and Sandy, putting an arm under the shoulders, lifted Andrew to a sitting position.

"Do you see the—light, old friend?"

"I—see—the star!"

"Yes. The star and the light, Andy?"

"Yes—that's—home!"

Facing the west with wide welcoming eyes, Andrew slipped from life so gently and quietly that for some minutes Sandy held him without knowing that the light had gone out and the weary soul had reached home by The Appointed Way. When the knowledge came to him, his eyes dimmed and reverently he lay the stiffening form back upon the pillow; crossed the thin, worn hands upon the peaceful breast, and turned to his next duty with a murmured farewell to ears that no longer could be comforted by his kind words.

Sandy went home and ate his evening meal with his father. He did not mention Andrew's death. Martin was so genuinely happy at having his son to himself and Lansing Treadwell out of the house, that Sandy disliked to shadow the joy.

"Suppose we read a bit," he suggested when the two were seated in the study. Martin accepted joyously. "What shall it be, Dad?"

"Well, son, it do seem triflin' to set your mind to anything but Holy Writ when you're idle, but to-day I found an ole paper up to the works with a mighty stirrin' picture on it; a real techersome picture of a man danglin' from a high cliff by his two hands, and nothin' 'twixt him an' certain death, I reckon, but the writingman's understandin' of the scene. Yo' know, Sandy, I ain't had my specs fitted yet an' so I couldn't fin' out about the picture an' it's been right upsettin' to me all day."

Sandy took the crumpled paper Martin produced from an inside pocket and began to read the hair-raising tale. Toward the end he discovered it was a serial which left the hero, at the most breathless point, still hanging. Thereupon Sandy evolved from his own imagination a fitting and lurid ending that appeased Martin's sense of crude justice and left nothing to his yearning soul unanswered.

"I call that-er-tale a mighty good one," Martin remarked when, hands upon knees, eyes staring, and chin hanging, he heard the grand finale. "Taint allas as the ungodly gets fetched up with so cutely. It's right comfortin' to think o' that low-down trash a-festerin' in the bottom o' the gulch."

Then Martin, the gentlest of creatures, went pattering up to bed in his stocking feet, muttering cheerfully to himself as he mounted the dark stairs, candle in outstretched hand:

"A festerin' eternally at the bottom!"

After his father departed Sandy sat by his fire alone and waited. So Lans found him, and gloomily took a chair across the hearth.

"Have you had supper, Lans?" Sandy asked after greeting him cordially.

"Yes. The storm kept me last night. I got back—not long ago. I had a bite while I waited for the horse to be seen to. The poor beast was pretty well worn out."

There did not seem to be anything more to say on that subject, so Sandy remarked:

"Smoke if you care to, Lans; don't mind me."

But Lans did not care to smoke and suddenly he jumped up, plunged his hands in his pockets and faced Sandy with crimson cheeks and wide eyes.

"Sand," he blurted out, "I'm in a devil of a hole; I've pulled about all Lost Hollow in with me. I'm a fool and worse, but you know how I am. Any big passion that seizes me—holds me! I'm not responsible while the clutch is on me. I ought to be taken out and shot. I——"

But Sandy's blank stare called a halt.

"I—I wouldn't take it that way, Treadwell," he said, thinking that some obvious villainy of Crothers' had opened Lans's eyes to facts; "I may be able to get you out of the hole."

Then, ludicrously, the story he had just read to his father came into his mind. Lans seemed to be the creature at the bottom of the gulch, and it was up to him, Sandy, to rescue the knave in spite of Martin's satisfaction in leaving him there to fester. Sandy smiled.

"Good God, Morley, what are you laughing at?" Lans cried; "this is no laughing matter."

"I beg your pardon, Lans. An idiotic thing occurred to me and you are such a tragic cuss that I never can think things are as bad with you as you imagine."

"Sand, this is a—hell of a thing! I don't know what you will say. Fellows like you with their hands always on their tillers, fellows with cool heads and calm passions never can understand us who fly off at every spark that's set to us. All I can promise you is this—help me now and, by God! I'll let your hand rest on my tiller till I get into smooth waters again and—I've learned my lesson! What I've got to tell you sounds like a yarn, Sand. All the time I was coming up The Way I kept repeating 'it's not true!' but good Lord—it is! Morley, I'm married. I was married early this morning!"

The little woman struggling with her problem up North came to Sandy's mind. She had not been able to keep up the fight; she had followed Lans and—but no! If there had been a wedding then the husband must have died! Sandy looked puzzled.

"If it was the best, the only way, old man," he said, "I don't see why you should take it this fashion. You—loved her; you cannot have changed in so short a time."

And now it was Lans's turn to stare blankly. With his temperament, time and place had no part. He was either travelling through space at a thundering speed or stagnating in a vacuum. He had almost forgotten Marian Spaulding and his present affair took on new and more potent meanings.

"I—I married Cynthia Walden!" he gasped. "I married her—this morning. We were out alone all last night. The—storm—you—know! She didn't understand—I tried to—to shield her—she doesn't understand—now. Good God! Morley, stop staring! Say something, for heaven's sake!"

But Sandy could not speak, and his brain whirled so dizzily that he dared not shut his eyes for fear of falling. Like a man facing death with only a moment in which to speak volumes, he groped among the staggering mass of facts that were hurtling around him, for one, one only, that would save the hour. He remembered vividly the old story of Cynthia's mother which Ann Walden had proclaimed, but he remembered, also, the hideous belief that lay low in Lost Hollow. Dead and buried was the doubt, but now it rose grim and commanding. Sandy tried to form the words: "She is your sister!" But the words would not come through the stiff, parted lips. Honesty held them in check; they must not become a living thought unless absolute proof were there to substantiate them.

The two men confronted each other helplessly, silently, and then Lans Treadwell, overcome by sudden remorse, and a kind of fear, strove to propitiate the sternness that found no expression in words.

"I've been devilishly wrong, Sand, and returned your hospitality and friendship with bad grace, old fellow, but I drifted into it and when it was too late—I did what seemed the only decent thing. I know I couldn't have explained, and she turned my senses by her sweetness. She's like a baby, Morley, and I mean to—to do the right by her, as God hears me!"

Treadwell used the name of God so frequently and ardently that it sickened Sandy.

"Yes," he groaned, "you will do right by her or——" the dark eyes flashed dangerously; "and you'll do right by her—in my way!"

This was unfortunate and Sandy saw his mistake. Lans Treadwell's shoulders straightened and his jaw set in ugly lines.

"If it's going to be man to man, Sand," he muttered, "I reckon I've got the whip hand. She's my wife, you know, and the laws of this nice little state are pretty explicit along certain lines. When all's said and done—what are you, as a man, mind you, going to do about it?"

Again the staggering doubt was like a weapon for Sandy's use, but he hesitated still.

"I—I wonder if you know what you have done?" he groaned again.

"When you talk like that, Sand," Lans whispered, his face softening, "I don't! And I implore you to help me."

"You don't know our South, our Hollow," Sandy went on, with a pitiful tone in his unsteady voice. "It takes us so long to—wake up! It's something in the air, the sun, the winters—the life. Cynthia has not roused—she is only dreaming in her sleep. She's a child, a little girl, and you have dragged her into ——"

"Hold on, Sand!" Lans warned once more.

"I have been waiting"—Sandy did not seem to heed the caution—"I've been waiting and watching for the hour when she would realize that she was a woman. I've loved her all my life, worshipped her, but I would not have startled her before her time to have saved my soul from death! Had she realized, Treadwell—had things been open and fair, I would have taken my chance—but—you!"

Again the blaze darted to Treadwell's eyes.

"And what do you insinuate?" he asked—but he got no farther. There was the sound of quick, approaching steps outside and a moment later a sharp knock on the door; Sandy strode forward and opened it, then closed it upon Marcia Lowe and Cynthia.

Quickened by spiritual insight Sandy saw that the girl was awake to the reality of things. Shock had shattered her childishness forever, but she was not afraid. Uncertainty and ignorance were there, but no sense of danger in the clear, wonderful eyes.

"Oh! Sandy," she panted, going close to him and holding her hands out, "Sandy, you know?"

"Yes."

"I wanted to be here with you-all after she"—the sweet eyes turned to Marcia Lowe—"told me. I—I thought maybe he"—she glanced toward Treadwell—"might not tell you, till morning. Poor dear!"

This last was to Sandy, for the look in his eyes wrung the tender heart with divine pity.

"Sit down," Sandy urged, placing chairs near the hearth and bending to lay on more wood, "there is much to say."

Then it was that the little doctor took command. She did not sit down as the others had; she stood by the table with some loose papers in her hand.

"I feel as if it were all my fault," she began. "Things lie so still here; we seem so shut in. Cynthia has been like a child to me—I haven't thought ahead and I just played with her and worked out—my puzzle piece by piece. It was only a week ago that I felt sure; I meant to tell Cynthia slowly and little by little—and then this happened!"

Marcia Lowe's face was fixed and white. No one spoke. Then she went on again.

"I have always believed Cynthia's father was—my uncle, Theodore Starr! I came to Lost Hollow because I believed that, but I had no absolute proof and Ann Walden denied me support. But look at her—look at Cynthia and me! Of course I am old, old, and she's a baby, but can't you read God's handwriting in our faces? See the colour, form—expression——"

Morley and Treadwell stared at the two faces and into their benumbed consciousness something vital struggled to life. It brought a gleam to Lans's eyes; a groan of surrender to Sandy's lips! The contrite voice was going on and on.

"There was no marriage certificate. There had been an unhappy engagement between my uncle and Ann Walden—he, poor, timid, gentle soul, dared not speak at the proper moment, he dreaded giving pain, and he married Cynthia's mother privately, and before things could be made plain—he died up in the hills, serving men! The man that married them went away—only a year ago he came back; recently Mr. Greeley drove over to Sudley's Gulch to make a will for this man; Cynthia and I went with him. The man died a few days ago. Among his papers was a notebook in which was recorded the marriage of Queenie Walden and Theodore Starr! The man was a—a magistrate, the thing was legal—Little Cyn is—my niece!"

An empty room never seems so still as one in which living, wordless men and women are held by breathless silence. Treadwell dared not speak. He seemed a stranger; one who had no right to be there. Cynthia's eyes were lifted to Sandy Morley's face and did not fall away. Having said what she had come to say, Marcia Lowe held out her written words of proof and waited. After a long pause Cynthia spoke and her voice was electrical in its effect.

"Sandy," she said, going close to him and holding him with her clear gaze and slow, brave smile, "you know I did not mean—to do wrong?"

"Yes, little Cyn."

"I'm right glad I'm—I'm my dear father's child. All my life he's been a happy name to me—and I'm mighty proud to be his, really. I'm going to be brave for him and my mother! Sandy—I am not afraid—I am not afraid!" The words came slowly, drawlingly but unbrokenly.

"My aunt," and for an instant the eyes rested on the bowed head of Marcia Lowe, "has told me many things—I understand right many things, now! I know you-all want to help me; want the best for me—but what's done, is done, Sandy Morley, and I can do my part. If—if—my husband wants me—I am ready—to go to him. Sandy, I am not afraid!"

Then they waited. Sandy stood with his back to the fire, motionless and white; Marcia Lowe had sunk into a chair and bending forward hid her face in her hands; Cynthia drew back from Sandy and stood alone in the middle of the room.

What emotions and thoughts swayed Lans Treadwell, who could know? But looking from one to the other of the little group the craven distrust died from his face and an uplifted expression took its place. He stood straight and tall and good to look upon as he realized that he was at last the final judge.

"Cynthia!" he said calmly, and his voice was low and firm; "I do—want you! you are my wife! You are not afraid?"

Slowly he stepped over to her; he forgot the others—he and she were all! He put out his hands and Cynthia laid hers in them.

"I am not afraid," she whispered. And before the light in her upraised eyes Lans Treadwell did not flinch.

"I, too, wish to help you—in my own way. Can you trust me?"

"Yes."

"Will you leave the hills with me—me alone?"

For an instant the sweet smile faded, but it was for the loss of her mountains; not her doubt of her husband which drove it away.

"Yes," she murmured.

Then Sandy found his way back from his place of torment and he strode to the two in the middle of the room. He laid his hand upon Treadwell's shoulder, and all the smouldering passion in his heart rang in his words.

"Lansing Treadwell, swear to me, that you will leave her soul to her own keeping until——"

Treadwell gave him a long, steady look.

"I swear!" he said.

"When—her hour comes to—understand and choose—let her be white and pure as she is now!"

"I swear it, Sandy Morley."

"Then," and now Sandy's eyes dimmed, "good-bye, little Cyn. You'll miss the mountains—but there are good, true hearts—down beyond The Way."

At this Marcia Lowe drew near:

"Little girl—come home! She is mine until you take her from Lost Hollow, Lansing Treadwell."

The hands that held Cynthia's let her free. A pause followed. Then:

"Good-night—good-night!" The pretty, pale face flushed tenderly. "Good-night. And now come, dear Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady!"

The sweet attempt at cheer all but crushed those who heard and understood.

CHAPTER XXIV

The Markhams came to Lost Mountain early in December. The weather was fair and mild and much of the time could be spent out of doors. Matilda, frail but with that gentle tenacity of life that marks many women for longevity, settled at once into the semi-rough life of the cabin with innate delicacy and aptness. The rooms Sandy had so lovingly planned and furnished became *hers* after the first day, and no truer compliment could have been paid her host than this homelike acceptance of his thoughtfulness. To see her soft, bright knitting in the sitting-room gave Sandy a positive thrill and when he came back, after a long day of tramping about with Levi, and found the dear, smiling woman awaiting him, he knew the first touch of the mother in his own home that had ever been his. And sorely the poor fellow needed it just then!

Levi, too, was a saving grace in those empty hours after Cynthia's going. Swelling with pride, he followed Sandy about from cabin to factory; from factory to Home-school. In vain he struggled to suppress any outward show of the pride and delight he took in everything he saw. He sought to keep things upon a dull, business level, but exultation at times overcame him when Sandy was well out of sight. To Martin or Matilda he permitted himself a bit of relaxation.

"Well," he had said to Martin after the first strangeness had worn off, "so you are the father of this boy, eh?"

"I am, sir!"

The pride that rang in Morley's voice was never veiled, and his native dignity was touching.

"I reckon any one might doubt it, sir, seeing him and me, but he's mine and I'm his."

"Well, well!" Markham put his hand out frankly. "I hope you're grateful."

"I am mighty grateful, sir. Mornin' an' night I kneel an' thank my God, an' day in an' out I live the poor best I can, sir, my thankfulness."

Markham gripped the thin, hard hand appreciatively. He knew more of Martin than Martin suspected, for Marcia Lowe had made it her first duty, after the Markhams' arrival, to get into touch with them. Not Sandy alone had been the theme of the little doctor's discourse; Martin's grim and self-sacrificing fight in her cabin was given in detail with other happenings in The Hollow.

"Oh! they are so big and silent and patient," Miss Lowe had explained, "they cannot for one moment comprehend their own importance in the scheme of things. I feel it a duty to shine up their

virtues."

Levi was deeply touched by all he heard, and when things puzzled him he gruffly insisted that he needed a walk to calm his nerves, and always it was the little doctor who straightened the tangle.

"Miss Interpreter," Markham dubbed her, and through her he became acquainted with Smith Crothers and Crothers' mark upon recent occurrences. Of course Levi knew of Lans Treadwell's visit to the hills. Markham was not a superstitious man, but he had remarked to Matilda before they came to Lost Hollow that it "looked like the hand of God." After a séance or so at Trouble Neck, Levi changed his mind.

"I tell you, Matilda," he confided by her fireside one night after a particularly satisfying day with Sandy, "we take for granted that God Almighty's hand is the only guiding in the final analysis, but the devil gets in a twist now and again, and I guess he had more to do with Lansing's heading up here than God did. Once old Nick got the boy here he did his best to use him, too, but from what I can learn Lans spunked up at the end and showed himself more of a man than we might have expected. He played a good deal of havoc in a few short weeks, though."

Marcia Lowe had eliminated Sandy from poor Cynthia's romance or tragedy. She had put a purely commercial valuation upon Crothers' interference, for the look on Sandy's face the night he bade Cynthia good-bye haunted the little doctor and would to the last day of her life. Before it her eyes had fallen, and whenever she recalled the scene a silence fell upon her. No thought or word could express what she, too late, surmised, and her lips guarded the sanctity of Sandy's secret.

When Levi confided Marcia Lowe's interpretations to his sister she was very unresponsive. She listened but made no comment other than:

"Sandy works too hard. He looks real peaked to me. It don't count to your credit, Levi, or his either, for that matter, if he feels he's got to pay you back in bone and muscle past a certain point."

"Now, 'Tilda," Levi put in, "what do you mean by that?"

"I mean——" Matilda condensed her impressions: "I think he looks real pinched and peaked."

This put Markham on a new track, and the next day he fell upon Sandy with the one weapon which, more than any other, caused Sandy to love and honour him.

"See here, son,"—it was oftener "son" than "boy" now—"don't get any fool idea in your head that you owe me more than an eight hour day's work."

They were going over the plans of the Home-school as Levi spoke, and Sandy laughed lightly. "You are my agent, my—my promoter, son, and, as such, you hold a responsible position at—at good pay!"

"Thank you, sir. I understand that and I am anxious to carry out your wishes. I am eager to get this thing running, not for you, sir, alone, but my people. Crothers seems hell-bound just now in frightening them into signing contracts for themselves and their children for years to come. Of course the contracts are not worth the paper they are written on, but a general belief is spreading that our works cannot be relied upon and, in order to benefit The Hollow, Crothers is offering to protect the people against us by securing positions for them if they will agree to stand by him. When I think of the baby-things, sir, and the long, deadly hours of toil that lead to no preparation for betterment, my soul sickens. Now this, sir"—Sandy pointed to a particularly high and open space on the blue print—"is the hospital room."

"The—the what?" Levi put on his glasses.

"The hospital room, sir, I'm going to put Miss Lowe in control; I'd like to have another physician too, sir, and a few nurses. Right up there"—Sandy's eyes gleamed as they followed his finger to the space on the blue print—"we want to tackle the real trouble of the South, sir. Why, do you know I only heard the other day that Tod Greeley went to our representative, a year ago, and begged him to get an appropriation from Congress to start the work against the hook worm in this district and the request was refused." Sandy gave a hard laugh. "Well, I reckon Greeley and I know why, sir. Lost Hollow is too ignorant. Our votes can be got without the appropriation. The big, human need does not matter! Where there is more intelligence the representatives have to understand conditions. But it will matter by and by, sir! I know what that little doctor did for my father. I know what she's done for one or two of Mason Hope's children and the girl of Tansey Moore's who was—who was like my sister Molly! I want Miss Lowe and her helpers to have that high and bright place, sir, for their workshop. It must have sun and air, sir, and books and toys and—and music, too, for the fight is a hard and bitter one and the days and nights, at best, are terrible."

Levi Markham leaned back, took off his glasses and fixed Sandy with his keen glance. For a few moments he could not speak; he had been carried far and beyond his normal depth. When he got command of himself, he said slowly:

"Son, it looks to me as if we would need all we can make up North to stamp out some of the evils of the South, but, God willing, we're going to make a stab at it! See here, who is the representative for this district?"

Sandy gave the name of a man many miles away.

"Well, I guess he can be brought to learn the language of Lost Hollow, son, if some one shows him his duty. Some good laws, too, that would put a quietus on this Smith Crothers' ambitions ought to be looked after. He shouldn't be the say-all up here. No man is good enough or safe enough to take the bit in his own teeth—not even you, Sandy Morley!"

"Law, well carried out, is the best way, sir."

"Exactly! And now for the rest of the building, boy. What are these little cubby holes?"

"Bedrooms, sir. This is only an idea of my own. It's rather extravagant and it's subject to your decision, of course. I'd like to have each child have his own room, sir. A boy or girl grows so in a special little corner that is quite his own. I have a design of a small chest of drawers that I'd like to show you later. It does not take up much space and it combines washstand, bureau, table and—a place for the boy or girl's things."

"Things?" Levi was again bending over the blue print.

"Yes, sir. Things dear to each child's heart. Stones, sticks, anything that cannot be—explained." Sandy gave a low laugh. He was harking back to the old shed beside his father's cabin and the gay prints tacked to the worm-eaten boards.

"The separate rooms can stand, son, and those little jimcracks of drawers are favourably passed on, too. And these?" Levi's thick forefinger stopped at the elevation of the first floor.

Sandy gave a rich, satisfied laugh of content.

"Well, sir, it is this-er-way"—The Hollow's soft running of the words together delighted Levi's ear —"when the poor little creatures have had their fight out on the upper floor and have got down to these small rooms and have realized that they are human beings, then we're going to fix them—fix them, sir, right here!" Sandy's eyes flashed and his jaw set in the stern, grim fashion that Levi had long since grown to watch for and admire.

"By the time they reach the ground floor, sir, I reckon we can tackle them and begin to make them pay for themselves. By that time they will have something to draw on and we'll exact payment. Right here and here"—Sandy's forefinger was going rapidly from point to point, and Levi's stubby digit was laboriously following—"are the workshops, the school rooms, the kitchens and conservatories. Why, sir, even the idiot children can be utilized. They love flowers and animals; we must find their one gleam and guide their poor feet on the way. Good food, honest hours of work, systematic exercise and proper amusement—why, sir, from this ground floor we are to send men and women out into the world who will reflect credit on Lost Hollow and redeem its name. And you, sir——"

The two men faced each other suddenly. Markham seemed to realize anew the delicacy and fineness of the thin, brown face—-Matilda's words rang in his ears, "he looks real pinched and peaked." The homely phrase carried more weight to Markham than any scientific terms of a specialist. A sharp pain shot through his heart; he had the quick impulse to shield and protect this young fellow who was being carried afield on the wings of his enthusiasm. Protect him from what?

"See here, son, we cannot afford to go too fast with this hobby of yours. Get the buildings up as soon as you can; carry out all the material plans just as you have designed, but we've got to get our feet on good firm ground before we tackle the human problems. You know I am against paternalism, first and last. I'm willing to give opportunity, but nothing else."

"That is all they need, sir. Some must be shown opportunity—others are strong enough to grip it, but it's mighty good common sense, sir, to open the eyes of the blind and strengthen the feet of the weak—it's what you-all did for me, sir."

"Umph!" Markham exclaimed and then got suddenly up. "I'm going to take a stroll down The Way," he said. "Fix things here in an hour or two and see if you can get some kind of a rig for a drive this afternoon. I want Matilda to get the lay of the land before the winter sets in."

And then, confused by mingled emotions, Markham bore down upon Smith Crothers in his factory, a mile or so down the mountain, and attacked that gentleman in such a blunt and utterly unlooked-for manner that Crothers was startled and helpless.

The directness of the blows left Smith Crothers without defence; he was obliged to use his own crude weapons with the ever-growing conviction that they were worse than useless. Markham availed himself of no propitiation—he rushed his opponent into the open at the first onslaught, and thereafter he attacked him fore and aft mercilessly.

"See here, Crothers," he began, when the head of the factory had invited him into his private office and, with smiles and bows, had seated his guest; "you and I had better understand each other right now. You know, and I know that you know, that I am The Company up North which you are maligning here in The Hollow. Now I'm willing to lay down my hand and show my cards. I'm going to back this boy of Morley's by millions, if necessary, and there are millions to count on—not millions to be made. *Why* I am doing this is my concern—all that matters is—I'm going to do it! Maybe it is a whim; maybe it is plain tomfoolery; every man has his weak side—I have mine. That factory up the hill is going to run as soon as it is finished; the Home-school is going to open its doors likewise; and both institutions are

going to pay and don't you forget it! You put one product on the market; I another. We won't clash there—the rock we may split on is the labour question."

Crothers gasped feebly.

"I reckon I understand conditions here, sir, better than"—he longed to say "any damned Yankee," but he controlled the impulse—"any stranger from the North."

"No you don't!" Markham flashed back. "Exploitation isn't any fairer here than where I come from. Because these people don't realize it is no excuse for men like you and me. I know all about what you set forth as explanation and excuse—it goes up North the same as it does here. Supply and demand; business is business and all the rest of it, but you and I know that it ought not go! We have no right to take it out of the people."

"You've managed to take out your pile"—Crothers' smile was vanishing,—"'cording to your own telling. Millions ain't got by magic, these times."

Markham fixed the ugly eyes with his calm gaze.

"You are free to come and see how I have made my money," he said. "I have a system that includes every employee in my money-getting. They, every mother's son of them, have a chance with me to better themselves. I have never worked a child in my mills nor a woman about to become a mother, or for months after. I don't talk about these things—I live them! Now I mean to make money up here—honest money; my just share, and I'm going to follow my past line of action. I find it pays. Young Morley knows conditions here, and I'm going to pay him a big salary as interpreter. He's a high class man. Why, good God! Crothers, I sometimes think he was called to lead his people out of bondage."

Having permitted himself this flight Markham struck another blow that completed Crothers' dismay.

"There have got to be laws protecting these mountain folks from themselves. I'm not casting reflections, but you have all been passed by in the general scuffle, down yonder, and some one has got to sit up and take notice. There should be child labour laws, educational laws and sanitary laws. There should be appropriations made for carrying on good work in the mountains!" The light of Sandy's torch was flaring well ahead of Markham and he was following eagerly.

"Such men as you ought to be up and doing. It's going to be an open fight, as far as I'm concerned, and I want to tell you now that so long as there is decent and clean methods used, all may be well, but I'm going to see fair play, and I thought it was only friendly to come to you and show my cards."

"Thank you!" Crothers moistened his lips and plunged his hands in his pockets. "Is this a threat, sir?"

"No; a warning."

"Well, sir, I mean to do business along my own lines."

"I mean to do the same, Crothers, and I'd like to add, that in any clash please remember you are up against me—not Sandford Morley."

"I'm not likely to forget that, sir."

There was a little more talk, pro and con, and then the two men parted as men can do, after a heated and vital discussion, apparently on the best of terms.

It was the night of that day when, before the fire in the little sitting-room devoted to the Markhams' use, Levi sought to ease his sister's mind concerning Sandy.

"The boy was up against it with Crothers," he explained, "and making no outcry. You know Sandy's way. He wouldn't confide in us about that poor little sister of his—he thought it wasn't in the bargain. He meant to fight this big bully in his own fashion without calling on me, but I've taken a hand in the game and put Crothers wise as to principles. I may have to get a few knocks before I am done, but Sandy won't be the buffer. I guess the boy will pick up from now on. He's nervy and stronger than he looks."

Matilda sat in her low, broad rocker. Her dressing gown of pale violet enshrouded her tiny figure like the soft petals of a flower; her faded eyes and gentle face were lowered, and her gaze fixed upon the burning logs.

"Brother," she said tenderly and wistfully; "the boy has had a mortal hurt. This evil man has not dealt it, and neither you nor I can cure it. It has not killed his mind and spirit, but it's killed the heart of the lad."

Levi Markham got up and stood with his back to the fire. He was going to be enlightened—he knew that—but in man fashion he pushed the inevitable from him.

"Whim-whams, 'Tilda! Now what do you mean in plain American? Who's given the boy a blow—a hurt, or whatever you fancy?"

"It's the—the little girl, brother, that Land has run away with."

"Good God, Matilda!"

"Levi, I do wish you would curb your language. You know how I dislike profanity."

"I beg your pardon, 'Tilda."

"While you have been sensing business conditions, brother, I've sensed something else. I've sort of gathered this Cynthia Walden up piece by piece. The old woman who works here gave me a bit; that dear little woman doctor—the aunt of the girl—has told me some of the story; from Martin Morley I've taken a mite. Little by little it has come to me, until I've patched the whole together and I can see real plain and clear, now, the spirit of Lost Hollow that led Sandy out and up and then—escaped to a place he cannot reach! Oh! brother, when one is lonely and old and not over strong, it is so easy to get at the heart of a thing for them one loves."

Matilda was crying gently into her dainty little handkerchief, and Markham stared at her, speechless and helpless.

"There! there! 'Tilda," was all he could think to say, but his tone was loving beyond description.

"She's the girl whose face haunted that picture of the dogwood flowers, brother. She's the girl he wrote to just once, you remember, that time when we stopped in New York on our way from here to Bretherton. I guess she's called and called to him from these hills ever since he left, and now——"

"Well, 'Tilda?"

"She's gone away and the call is—stilled."

Markham sat down again before the fire and buried his head in his hands. Quietly the old brother and sister sat for a full half hour, then Levi got up.

"Good-night, sister," he said.

"Good-night, brother."

That was all. They knew that they were unable to reach the hurt that Sandy had received.

CHAPTER XXV

But Matilda Markham could not sit down under her weight of conviction in protracted silence. The winter at last gripped The Hollow, and doors and windows were closed against the cold and storm. Markham, Martin, and Sandy were always away together much of the day, but Matilda sat by her fire, chatted a little with Sally, revelled in Marcia Lowe's frequent calls, and managed to weave a tender story from all she heard. She knitted her endless rainbow scarfs and gave them to the mountain women who received them in stolid amazement and doted upon them in secret. Once Matilda did a very daring and tremendous thing. She wrote to Olive Treadwell and asked some pointed and vital questions about Lansing's wife!

Having sent the letter away impulsively, the poor little lady had a week of real torture. Daily she walked to the post-office, when no one was watching, and caused Tod Greeley much amusement by her nervous anxiety.

"Meaning no offence," he confided to Marcia Lowe, "and respecting her age and gray hairs, I reckon the old miss is in love. It comes late to some folks," he sighed pathetically, "and it comes right hard when it strikes past the time limit, but nothing but love takes it out of folks like what this old miss is suffering."

At last the answer came and Matilda read it with the door of her bedroom bolted and the washstand barricading it as well.

Olive Treadwell wrote:

I'm mighty glad to say something about this affair to some one who can understand me. Imagine my feelings when, out of the blue, as one might say, Lans brought this girl home and said, "I'm going to leave her with you, Aunt Olive, until I can see my way clear. I am brother to her and she is sister to me until—the way's made plain." That was all and then Lans betook himself to his old quarters and began to work. He's taken a position on the *Boston Beacon* and calls, actually *calls*, on his wife evenings or takes her and me out to theatres and dinners. I'm supposed to be training this young woman, for what, heaven only knows! but I have my hands full. Lans was always erratic and poetic, but this is beyond my comprehension, He has had affairs of the heart, of course, but this is different. The girl is the strangest creature I ever saw; she is uncanny. After I got her into proper clothing I saw she had beauty and charm of a certain kind. She takes to ways and expressions mighty quick, and she is the sweet

appealing kind that attracts even while one disapproves. I confess I am utterly dumb-founded and if you can throw any light on this matter, pray do so. The girl seems to me to be half here and half somewhere else; she isn't unhappy, and she seems to adore Lans in a detached and pretty childish way, but why did he marry her and why should he, having married her, regard her in this platonic fashion?

Of course Matilda could not answer these questions but she cried over the letter a great deal and brooded over Sandy with all the motherhood that nature had not legitimately utilized. And then, one night, Sandy came to her quite simply and directly and claimed, in his great suffering need, what she alone had to give.

It was the week before Christmas. The cabin was gay and festive, for Marcia Lowe, in a lavishness of good cheer, had decorated everything she could command beginning with the little chapel and ending with the post-office. The County Club sat now 'neath an arbour of greens, and the lowliest cabin had its spray of pine or holly.

Martin and Levi were bent over a backgammon board in Sandy's study. Markham had undertaken to correct Morley's neglected education as to games; and Martin had, after the first week, so outstripped his instructor that Levi was put upon his mettle and every victory he wrenched now from Martin gave him a glow of pride he was not slow to exhibit. Seeing the two men engrossed, Sandy stole to Matilda Markham's little sitting-room and there found the dear lady asleep before the fire, her thin white hands sunk in a mass of beautiful wools. He stood and looked at the quiet, peaceful old face; he recalled, one by one, her kindnesses to him, her growing pride and love for him, and presently his eyes grew misty. The frail creature before him became touched by the magic of his gratitude and need, the most vital and mighty factor in his life. She, in this hour of his hidden craving, was the only one to whom he could turn, and right well he knew that she would stand by him.

Suddenly Matilda Markham opened her eyes and looked directly into Sandy's. It may have been that some dream had prepared her, God may have spoken to her in vision; however that may be she said gently:

"Son, you need me? Come, tell me all about it."

Quite naturally Sandy sat down at her feet and looked frankly into the dear, old face.

"I am going to ask you to do a great thing for me," he said; "I must ask you to do it without my explaining things to you to any extent—I want you to do it as a mother might for her son—trusting me if you can."

"Dear boy, I think I can promise to do what you ask."

Then the thin hands found their way to the bent head, and as they touched the thick, dark hair a thrill shot to the woman's very heart.

"Mother!" Sandy seemed inspired to meet her soul's longing. "Mother!"

"Son, go on. I am waiting."

"It—it is about the girl—Lansing Treadwell married."

"Yes."

"I must know how things are with her. Our mountain people can be so lonely and homesick away from the hills. At times nothing, nothing can take the place of the yearning. I—I can forget everything that has even been, if I know she is right happy and content—but I must know!"

A fierceness struck through the low-spoken words. "The doubt is—is killing me."

"Shall I go now, son, or wait until after the holidays?"

"Could you go now—and alone?"

"I can manage Levi, son. Travelling is real easy these days. It will take management, but I can get what I want."

"You would understand if you saw her."

Sandy's voice trailed off forgetful of the woman at whose knees he knelt.

"She can smile and make right merry, but you would know and understand. She is such a pretty, sweet thing, but she has the iron of the hills in her. She must"—again Sandy's voice shook with passion, —"she must have happiness! If—if the noise and confusion of the city have distracted her she must come back to the mountains. Lans will agree to this—I do not doubt him! She must not—kill herself—you will know when you see her. You must come back and tell me—you will?"

"I will, son."

Matilda yearned to show him Olive Treadwell's letter, but something kept her from doing it. She

wanted to do what she could for Sandy in her own way, and suddenly she felt herself a giant of strength and purpose.

"Travel alone!" she said to Levi later when she had cowed the poor man by her determination and exactions, "of course I can travel alone. Am I an idiot, Levi, or a fool? Haven't I a good American tongue to ask questions with? I remember our mother once told us she would spank us well if we ever got lost in a place where folks talked the same language we did. You put me on the train at The Forge with a through seat in a Pullman, telegraph to Mary Jane to meet me in New York, and I guess I can manage."

"But, 'Tilda, what on earth has seized you to act so uncertain in the middle of this visit? What will they think of you and me?"

Then Matilda made her master stroke and, by virtue of her sex-privilege, completed her triumph over her brother.

"Levi," she said—she was standing before him, her thin hands on his shoulders—"I ain't ever had what you might call a real fling where my emotions and sentiments were concerned. Let go of me, just this once, and trust me! I've always been sort of held back. First it was father and mother; then Caroline, and lastly you! I ain't never done exactly what I wanted to do without explaining, and now I want to be left free even if I die for it!"

"Well, well!" blurted Levi, but he caught the idea. "I guess women do have a sense of the tight rein now and then; it may lie loose mostly, but it never is quite laid off. 'Tilda, you may cut and run now, for all of me. I'll see to what, you may say, are your animal comforts—parlour car seats, tickets, and some one waiting for you in town, but you kick the heels of your inclinations good and high for once and I bet you and me will run the rest of the race together better, forever after. Whoop it up, 'Tilda, and remember money needn't be a hold back. You've got a big, fat slice coming to you, old girl."

Now that Levi had dropped the reins, the spirit of adventure possessed him. He and Sandy saw Matilda off on her journey three days later, in high spirits.

"I tell you, boy," he confided on the way back to the cabin, "it's a mighty good sign when a woman wants to jump the traces, and a good man isn't going to lick her into submission for doing it. The chances are a woman wouldn't take to kicking if the traces didn't chafe. I've meant to be kind to Matilda, but kindness can be chafing at times. A woman like Matilda, a little, self-sacrificing woman, is real enlightening if you pay attention."

Matilda seemed to develop and expand during that trip North. She ordered her meals with an abandon that electrified the waiters on the train, and then her sense of economy demanded that she should eat what she had ordered. Her tips were dazzling and erratic, but they, and her quaint personality, won for her great comfort and care. She was in better condition, physically, than she had been for many a day when, one golden winter afternoon, she stood in Olive Treadwell's drawing-room in Boston and waited for Cynthia. Mrs. Treadwell was out, but the "young lady," the maid said, was in.

"How very fortunate," thought Matilda and then took her rigid stand across the room. Unconsciously she was waiting to see what Lansing Treadwell had done to this girl of the hills whom he had so ruthlessly and breath-takingly borne away. Lans was, unknowingly, before the most awful bar of judgment he had ever stood—the bar of pure womanhood!

There was a step upon the stairs; a quick, yet faltering step, and then Cynthia entered the room and came toward Matilda Markham with deep, questioning eyes and slow smile. The impression the girl made was to last the rest of Matilda's life. Once, years before, Matilda had seen a rare and lovely butterfly caught in the meshes of a net, and, oddly enough, the memory came to her now as she looked at the sweet, starry-eyed creature advancing. She was as surely caught in an invisible net of some kind as the long-ago butterfly had been. Matilda Markham noted the conventional gown of dull blue with silver trimming; the little slippers to match, and the silken stockings; her eyes rested upon the string of small silver beads wound around the slim throat; all, all were but part of the mesh that caught and held the spirit that had ceased to struggle.

How lovely she was, this Cynthia of Lost Hollow, in spite of the crude conventions! The frank, waiting eyes were as gray-blue as her mountain skies; the lips, half-parted, had not forgotten to smile above the hurt and pain of her tiring days and homesick nights; the smooth braids of shining hair bound the lifted head just as dear Madam Bubble had designed them on the morning when the portrait of "The Biggest of Them All" was hung in the Significant Room.

"You—wanted to see—me?"

The drawl had become sacred to Matilda's ears.

"Yes, my child. I have come from your old home just to see—you."

A faint colour stole into the whiteness of the fair face.

"From Lost Mountain?" Oh! if Sandy could have heard her say that word how it would have rested his soul! "From Lost Mountain?"

"Yes, my dear. Come and sit here beside me."

Matilda could not stand longer. Her knees shook beneath her for, like a blinding light, the knowledge came to her that poor Lans, with all his faults, was exonerated from any wrong to this young girl! The innocent old eyes and the radiant young ones had no veil between them. Sitting side by side they smiled bravely at each other and then Cynthia reached out her hands.

"You are"—she whispered—"you are Sandy Morley's fairy godmother! Oh! I know all about you. Lans has told me. I am right glad—oh! mighty glad to see you!"

The voice shook with emotion and Matilda Markham could not answer for a moment. Never in her life had she been so moved. She longed to take this girl to her heart and hold her there, but instead she found herself, presently, telling the homely news of the hills to the hungry soul whose yearning eyes never fell from her face.

"And the little doctor is my own aunt, you know?"

"Yes, child. They told me all about it."

"It's right good to have one's own—at last;" this was plaintively whispered; "and my dear, dear father. You know his story, too?"

"Yes. It lives in the hills and speaks for him even to-day."

"They-all say I'm like my father."

"I am sure you must be. You are like Miss Lowe, and I guess one can always tell which parent a boy or girl is like. I guess Sandy, now, is like his mother. He doesn't favour his father."

"Yes. I reckon Sandy must be like his mother. I had never thought of that before."

Cynthia's eyes were fixed and dreamy.

"And you, child, are you happy and content?"—the words of Sandy were the only ones possible—"I must tell them all about you when I go back."

"You are—going back?" the yearning was unmistakable—"I thought, maybe, you were going to stay here—I'd be mighty glad to have you near."

"I'm coming home, to my own home a little later. I'll see you often then."

Slowly they were advancing and retreating, this woman and girl, but each venture brought them a little nearer. Like the incoming waters of a rising tide a slight gain was made, moment by moment. Then suddenly and unexpectedly a rushing current bore them to the high mark.

"You poor, homesick child! Come cry it out and have done with it!"

It was not like Matilda Markham to so assert herself; it was not like the dear, brave Madam Bubble to succumb as she now did; but, in another instant she was kneeling where Sandy had knelt a few nights before, and clinging to the dear hands which had, then, rested upon his bowed head.

The wall of suppression that Cynthia had raised, during the past weeks, between her mountain life and this artificial one of the city, crumbled at the message from the hills. Her part in the strange drama sank to insignificance, and in her weakness she was able to view it clearly and dispassionately with this plain little woman who had come to serve her.

"I did not understand," she sobbed; "I was tired—there had been the night in the storm, you know. I did not want to make trouble and—oh! how can I tell you, but it was only when the little doctor—my aunt—explained everything that I saw myself standing alone in the confusion with something I must say and do! I couldn't let them do my work for me, dear lady,"—the quaint expression caused Matilda Markham to draw in her breath sharply—"I was no longer a child and I had to bear my part. When we-all stood in Sandy's cabin and the truth came to us-all, at once, I reckon for the first time in my life, I realized I was a woman. I couldn't take my chance and leave Lans out. They-all wanted to save me from myself, but they forgot him and then when he said"—the girl gasped—"that he wanted me—I had to go! I did not go because any one compelled me—I just had to go! I was led like when I married Lans. More and more I see it now; I feel it in the night. It did not *happen*, dear lady; it all leads up to something God wants me to do; something no one can do as well as I. Sandy had his call—you know how he responded? Well, I have my leading. We-all, of the hills, get near God, dear lady. We are lonelier; we need Him more and He speaks more plainly to us, I reckon."

The superstition and mysticism of Lost Hollow held every thought and fancy of this girl, but Matilda Markham realized that they gave her strength and purpose as they had poor Sandy before her.

"Oh! my dear, my dear!" was all she could say, but she freed one of her cool hands from Cynthia's hot one, and laid it like a benediction on the girlish head.

"I am waiting, dear lady, for the thing I am to do, and Lans is mighty kind. He is my big brother and I am his little sister—until I can read my way plain. You did not know he was so good?"

"I thank God that he is!" breathed Matilda Markham devoutly.

"I wish I could make—Mrs. Treadwell understand. She—laughs!"

Matilda felt her ire rise. The laugh of Olive Treadwell could be brutal and cruel in its sweetest ripple!

"It seems right long and wearying waiting, waiting for the meaning."

Cynthia's slow words flowed on. She had ceased crying and was looking up now with brave, clear eyes, "and part of me is there—in Lost Hollow. That part of me comes to comfort *this* part of me—can you understand, dear lady?"

Matilda nodded. She did, indeed, understand.

"And that part of me makes this part of me—stay here! After that mighty hurry and trouble when Lans and I came away alone I was right frightened. There was just once—while we stayed a few hours in New York that I—that something happened. I was in a room, Lans had gone out to order luncheon and I felt I had to run away! I stood with my back against the wall when he came in and I reckon I was wild, for he came close and took my hands this-er-way——" Cynthia was acting the vivid scene standing now before Matilda Markham and holding her hands—"and he said slow and firm, 'lil' girl, I'm not going to hurt you. You and Sandy Morley are not going to see me fail!' And then that part of me that lives always in Lost Hollow went back mighty safe and strong. I haven't been afraid, dear lady, since."

Then it was that Miss Markham arose and realized her strength to its full extent.

"Child," she said, "I've changed my mind about going back to Lost Hollow to-morrow. I'm going to Bretherton and that is only a half hour by rail from here. I want you to come to me, there. I must see you again. I'll explain to Mrs. Treadwell and Lans. I declare I haven't felt so like my old self for years and years."

"Oh! dear lady!" Cynthia's shining eyes were large and happy; "dear lady! you mean you will let me see you in your own home?"

"I mean—just that."

"Oh! Oh! why sometimes I think that soon God will say, 'lil' girl, your task is done. Run back home now! Run back to your hills.' Maybe I can go back with you!"

A gayety rang in the sweet voice that almost reduced Matilda to tears. The abandon and inconsequence were so oddly mingled with the strange determined strength that the elderly woman was confused and irrational.

The wayward, wild creature of the hills, ensnared in the net woven by Lans's blind passion and irresponsibility, seemed so incapable of fulfilling any role that demanded the recognition of her as a wife in this superficial environment that Matilda felt immoral and sacrilegious. She wanted to say, instead of leaving it to a higher power, "Your task is done, lil' girl! Run back to your hills!" but instead she said brokenly:

"You will come to Bretherton?"

"Indeed, yes; dear lady!"

"Perhaps you will go out with me to-morrow if I stay over night in town?"

"If—oh! if they will let me. But you see, there are a mighty lot of things to do—I'm learning!"

"Good-bye then, dear child."

And that night, on the paper of a quiet little hotel, Matilda wrote a brief note to Lost Hollow. She addressed it to Levi.

I'm going to stay on a spell. I never felt better in my life. It was the thinking that life didn't need me any more, that was running me down. It's awful foolish for old folks to let go of things. By the way, I called at Olive Treadwell's to-day and saw Lans's wife. She's real fascinating and real good looking. Brother, I want you to reconsider about leaving Lans out of your will. He's coming out real strong and blood is blood! Tell Sandy this girl, Cynthia, sends kind regards and is enjoying her stay in Boston better than she expected.

This letter had a marvellous effect upon Levi and Sandy.

"What do you think of that?" Levi exclaimed shaking with laughter. "If that ain't spunk and real grit."

Sandy was looking out of the study window and did not reply.

"That's the old New England spirit. Never say die and all the rest!" Levi chuckled.

"Thank God for it!" was all Sandy said in return.

CHAPTER XXVI

The work God had sent Cynthia to do came to hand very shortly after Miss Markham's return to Bretherton. Cynthia had spent one blessed day at the quiet old farm, then Mrs. Treadwell and she went down together and stayed over one night, and once Lans ran down and had an hour's talk with his Aunt 'Tilda before she slipped back to Lost Hollow and Cynthia's task came for her doing.

Lans's visit had sent Matilda to her knees beside the four-post bedstead in the room that had once been Caroline Markham's.

"Caroline," the trembling old lips had breathed, "it was *your* boy who came home to-day. *Your* boy!"

For Lans quite frankly and naturally had told his story. The hot blood of the South was well in command and the light of reason was in the sorry eyes.

"Aunt 'Tilda, all my life I've been excused and forgiven for my faults—bat I'm going to work my way out now, God helping me! I'm going to take whatever punishment and joy comes. Up there in the hills I was like a devil caged. I had passed through a trouble and been worsted; I saw Morley standing where I should have stood, had I been less a fool years ago. I couldn't seem to see, up there, how he deserved all that was his. I was just maddened. I wanted to get on top and—I let go myself! Cynthia seemed a child at first but all of a sudden she flashed upon all that was evil in me—and I went blindly ahead until I stood among them all in Morley's cabin. They all seemed so big and fine and true and I saw—myself! All at once I found myself wanting more than I had ever wanted anything in my life—to make good! I took my own way. Some day you will all understand. That little girl is going to have her choice by and by—I only wanted my fair chance to win out. When she makes her choice her soul will be hers—I promised Sandy Morley that!"

It was this that had sent Matilda to her knees beside the bed of Lans's mother.

And one evening—it was two days before Christmas, Lans took Cynthia and his Aunt Olive Treadwell to a theatre in Boston. The play was a popular one and, being late, Lans was obliged to take a box in order to get seats. Cynthia felt and looked like a child. The excitement and brilliancy brought colour to her cheeks and made her eyes dance. She hardly spoke and only now and then heard what her companions said.

"Lans," Olive Treadwell said during the first act, "there is Marian Spaulding in the tenth row!"

This did not interest Cynthia but Lans's sharp start did. She turned and looked at him and then followed his eyes. A pale, slim woman in black was looking at them from the orchestra seats. The expression on the thin face remained in Cynthia's memory even when the scenes of the enthralling play drove it, for the time being, into shadow.

"Blue is Cynthia's colour," Mrs. Treadwell next remarked apropos of nothing. "She's right handsome, Lans. You ought to be less a fool and behave normally. She'd make a mighty sensation if ——" But this did not interest the absorbed third party in the box at all.

When the play was over and the audience was crowding into the lobby, Cynthia noticed the girl of the tenth row near them. She was not looking at them, but she gave the impression of listening to what they said. Again the face claimed Cynthia's attention.

"Brother," she said softly to Lans, "is that a friend of yours? She looks mighty sad."

Lans gave another sharp start and rather abruptly replied:

"I knew her once. Come, little sister, that is our number being called. We must not hold up the line of taxis. Aunt Olive is out of sight."

Strangely enough Cynthia did not dream of the play that night; nor did the sad, fair face of Lans's one-time friend hold part in her visions, but she did dream of Lost Mountain as she had not dreamed of it in many a night. She was back among the dear, plain home scenes. She was planning with Sandy the Home-school; she was in the cabin at Trouble Neck with the little doctor. The sun was shining in the broad, opened door and she and Marcia Lowe were sitting where the warm brightness flooded them. And at that juncture of the dream something very vivid occurred. Quite distinctly she heard the little doctor say:

"In all the world there is nothing so important as this, Cyn. Remember it as long as you live."

Upon awakening, Cynthia, in her still, dark room, found herself haunted by the dream and the little doctor's words. They were startling, yet strangely familiar. When, before, had Marcia Lowe spoken

them; what had she meant? Then suddenly it came back to Cynthia. It was about little children!

"Our loves and our poor selves!" Marcia Lowe had often said, and especially when she and Cynthia were working over the little ones of the hill cabins, "what do they matter compared to the sacred lives of these helpless creatures?"

She had been quite fierce about it once when she had told Liza Hope that God would hold her responsible if she brought any more blighted souls into existence through Mason's passion and her own weak yielding.

Lying awake and trembling in the small room off of Olive Treadwell's, Marcia Lowe's words returned with sharp insistence and kept Cynthia wakeful for many an hour.

The next morning she was alone when the maid came to her and said a lady wanted to see her on very important business and had asked that they might be undisturbed for a half hour. Cynthia, puzzled and half afraid, bade the girl bring the caller to the sitting-room in which she then was.

What followed was so vital and impressive that all her life Cynthia was to recall the setting of the scene. The whiteness of the sunlight streaming into the east windows, the deep red of the wall paper, the tick of the marble clock on the shelf, and the crackle of the cannel coal fire on the hearth. While she waited for the visitor she was unconsciously preparing for the part and the lines of what was to follow. By the time the slow, light steps were at the room door, Cynthia seemed to know who the stranger was. The maid closed the door after the guest and then Cynthia said quietly to the tall, black-robed girl:

"You—are—Marian Spaulding!"

"He—he has told you?"

"No. Mrs. Treadwell—told me! Please sit down."

They faced each other with only a few feet between them. Cynthia was obsessed with but one conscious thought—she must go on as she was led; say what she would be told to say. She could not think for herself. But the stranger—distracted and ill at ease, leaped at conclusions; hurried to her goal and took no heed of the obstacles in her path.

"I did not know until last night that he—that Lans had a sister," she said. "Our own affairs were so engrossing and—and exclusive—at that time!"

Marian Spaulding had an odd habit of spacing her words as if the sharp breaths in between were dashes to emphasize her thought. "I knew Mrs. Treadwell was aware of—of our arrangement—I knew, from Lans, that she was broad minded and generous but when I saw you two together last night—I—I wanted to come to you instead of to her!"

An overpowering excitement in the speaker began to affect Cynthia. She drew her chair closer and whispered:

"Please tell me—all about it!"

The significant words rushed Marian Spaulding breathlessly onward.

"I—I could not go to him—to Lans—until I made sure—as sure as possible—that I would not be injuring him by—by my demands. I wanted to tell some one who loved him and would think of him, first. He was always so heavenly good to me—I would not harm him even—now!"

"No!" Cynthia's deep eyes were fastened on the white, strained face. "I reckon no one would want to hurt Lans."

"I was so unhappy when—when he saved me from my life of shame and misery. There was no other way—and—and we had to choose! He was so noble—it was I who—who—gave myself to him; he never exacted—anything. I—loved him as only God and I can know! Poor Lans never comprehended why I left—but he—my husband was ill; dying and I could not help it. Something made me go back. It was the good in me that Lans had created that most of all compelled me to go. If Lans could believe that! oh! if he only could! A woman could, but could a man?"

Poor Cynthia was struggling to understand a strange language.

"I'm right sure," she faltered, "that Lans could understand."

"Do you think so? Oh! I have been so tortured. He told me to come to him if I needed him and God knows I need him now—but I wanted most of all—not to hurt him—or exact too much from his goodness. You see——" a palpitating pause followed. Then: "I did not *know* of my condition when I went away; I only heard and saw the wretched man who was once, who was still—my husband. I stayed and nursed him; he died—a month ago—and now—I must think of—of—the child!"

"The child?" Faintly Cynthia repeated the words and her bewildered mind struggled with them and fitted them, somehow, into the Hopes' cabin, and that scene where Marcia Lowe arraigned Liza.

The door of the sitting-room opened and Lans entered noiselessly. Marian Spaulding's back was

toward it and in her slow, vague way Cynthia was wondering why he should be there just then. The last shielding crust of childhood was breaking away from Cynthia—her womanhood, full and glowing, was being fanned to flame by the appeal this strange woman was making upon it. Cynthia, the girl who had been caught in the net, had no longer any part in this tragedy—she was free!

"The child?" she again repeated, "what child?"

"Why, Lans's and mine!"

Then Cynthia stood up quite firm and straight. She looked full and commandingly at Lans who was leaning, deadly white, against the door he had closed behind him.

"Here is Lans, now," she said, more to the haggard man than to the pale woman.

It was as if, in those four simple words, she appealed to the best and finest of him to deal with this fearful responsibility which was his, not hers. In that instant she relinquished all the forced ties that held him and her—she cast him off superbly at this critical time of his life; not bitterly or unkindly—but faithfully.

Marian Spaulding turned and rose unsteadily to her feet, then with outstretched arms, she staggered toward Lans. Over her pitiful, wan face a flood of passion and love surged—her lonely, desperate soul claimed its own at last!

"Lans! Lans!" she cried, falling into his arms; "you will understand! you must understand—and there is—our child!"

Lansing Treadwell held the little form close, but his wide, haunted eyes sought Cynthia's over the head pressed against his breast. Cynthia smiled at him; smiled from a far, far place, helpfully, bravely. She demanded his best of him with confidence, and the unreality of it all held no part in the thought of either.

"I must take her—away!" Lans found words at last to say.

"Yes," Cynthia nodded, still smiling her wonderful smile at him.

"I will return—soon. Come—Marian!"

Cynthia saw them depart, heard the lower door close upon them and then she awoke from her spell. Sitting down in a deep chair before the fire she took the incidents of the past few moments, one by one, and set them in order. Like an ignorant child selecting block after block and asking some wiser one what they meant, she demanded of her new self the answer to all she had witnessed.

The travail was long and desperate—and when Lans Treadwell found her, an hour later, he was shocked at the sight of her face.

"My God!" was all he could say.

"We must—talk it over," Cynthia said gravely. "I can understand now. You see, dear, I couldn't have her hurt—her and—and the child."

Lans dropped in the chair Marian Spaulding had sat in and bowed his head in his hands.

"Was there ever such a cruel situation?" he groaned. Cynthia came to him and knelt beside the arm of his chair. She had never come to him so before and the touch of her body thrilled the man.

"You did not tell her—about me, big brother? did you? You let her believe I am your sister."

"Good God! how could I tell the truth? I was afraid of killing her."

"And—the child. Of course you must not tell—now."

"Cynthia, in heaven's name, don't be too hard upon me—you are my wife!"

Fiercely Lans proclaimed this as if, by so doing, he could find refuge for her as well as himself. But Cynthia shook her head and drove him back upon his better self again.

"Those little words spoken by that man in the hills," she whispered, "couldn't count, I reckon, against—all the rest."

"They can! They shall, Cynthia. I can make the past clear to you, little girl——" Then he stopped still before the look in Cynthia's eyes.

"I am a—woman, Lans!" it seemed to say.

Presently he heard her speak.

"You told Sandy, dear, that night in the cabin, that you would leave my soul to me—until—well! You have left it to me, and the time has come! I have much to learn; but I understand a mighty lot now. It came to me while I waited, for you to come back from her! My soul would never be clean again, Lans, if

—I forgot—the little child—hers and yours! God will be very kind to us-all, dear, if we do right. It's mighty puzzling—but it will come straight. You once loved her?"

"Yes, Cynthia—yes!"

"And you never loved me in *that* way, dear?"

"You are my wife!" Again the fierceness, "you must and shall come first."

"No, Lans; I am not your wife!"

And with this Cynthia stood up and clasped her hands close.

"Every law in the land says you are!" Treadwell flung his head back and faced her; "this is a hideous tangle, but above all—through all—you are my wife!"

"I do not know, I cannot make you feel how I see it—but I am not your wife! I—I do not want to be! Why, when I saw the light in—in Marian Spaulding's eyes a little time ago as she ran to you—I seemed to know all at once—that it was not to you, Lans dear, that I wanted to run in my trouble, but to——"

"Whom?"

"To Sandy, dear. Sandy, up there in Lost Hollow."

"Cynthia!"

Was she shamming? Was she striving, ignorantly, to make escape easy for them all? Was she utterly devoid of moral sense? "Moral sense!" At that Lans Treadwell paused. The glory shining from Cynthia's eyes as she stood before him, made him shrink and drop his own. The strength and purity of the high places was upon her. She was lovely and tender, but primitively firm. The law of the cities she did not know; but the law of the secret places of the hills was hers. The law of love and Love's God.

"You must take her away, Lans, dear, and be right good to her as you have been to me, big brother," the sweet voice, the unutterable tenderness and firmness more and more carried everything before them; "and let the little child have its chance—poor lil' child! And by and by—oh! a long time perhaps—when you are all mighty happy and safe, you must tell her all about it, Lans, and make her love me—a little! Tell her—it was all I could do. She will understand and be right glad."

"And you—little Cyn?" The words came in a groan.

"I? oh! I reckon this is what God meant me to do, Lans. For this he brought me down The Way, and now he will let me go home!"

Mrs. Treadwell's step outside the door brought them both back to the poor artificial environment that bound them.

"I—I cannot see her now!"

Cynthia crouched before the stern, conventional tread of the approaching woman as if she were in a place she had no right to be and Lans quickly opened a door leading from the sitting-room to a bedroom through which she might escape. And as the slight figure ran from his sight he had a sickening feeling as if, wakening from a dream of mystery and enchantment, he found himself in the midst of sordid reality. The sweet purity of the hills passed with Cynthia and the actualities of his future entered with Olive Treadwell.

"Lans," she asked sharply, looking about the room, "who was the woman who called here this morning? The woman Cynthia saw?"

"It was—Marian Spaulding."

"Good heavens! Did she talk to Cynthia?"

"She—tried to—Cynthia—could not understand."

"She will some day, though, Lans! Can you buy Marian off? I wouldn't have believed she was so vicious. Did she—lie?"

"I rather imagine she spoke only—truth."

"Well! I reckon this is about the worst confusion that was ever brought about. Without being positively bad, Lans, you've managed to create a mighty lot of trouble for a good many innocent people."

"Yes, Aunt Olive."

Lans was standing by the window looking down into the empty street.

"What are you—going to do about it?"

Then Lans turned.

"Aunt Olive, I'm going to untangle the snarl—somehow! And I'm going to stand by—Marian!"

"Marian? You talk like a madman, Lans, or a fool—and a depraved one at that. You owe everything to Cynthia—you'll be held to it, too, by law!"

"Aunt Olive," and then Lans laughed a mirthless, cold laugh, "I wonder if either you or I ever really seriously thought we could—hold Cynthia? There is no law that could keep her here. She is of the hills. She came into our lives just long enough to purify our air and—clear my vision. She'll go back now. We—cannot keep her!"

"Go back—to whom?"

This practical question took the smile from Lans's lips.

"To Sandy Morley, I reckon," he said grimly; "most of every noble thing I might have had—gets to him—sooner or later. He always loved her; she has just confessed to me that she loves him."

CHAPTER XXVII

There was a crust of glistening snow upon The Way; every branch of the tall, bare trees was outlined with a feathery whiteness which shone, as one looked deep into the woods, like the tracery of some fantastic spirit going where it listeth without design or purpose. From Lost Mountain the shadows had long since fled, and the gaunt peak rose clear and protectingly over The Hollow, which, somehow, had undergone a mysterious change in a few short months—or, was the change due to the magic touch of love that dwelt in the eyes of a young girl who had left the early train at The Forge and, on foot and alone, was wandering up The Way with a song of joy trembling upon her lips? So quietly and quickly had she run from the station, that Smith Crothers, standing by the door of the saloon opposite, had been the only one to notice the passenger in the long coat, rich furs, and quaint little velvet hat.

"Who's that?" he asked of the bartender inside. The man, on his knees, scrubbing the floor, rose stiffly and came to Crothers.

"Ole miss from The Holler?" he ventured vaguely.

"Ole miss—be damned!" Crothers was in an ill humour.

"Company, maybe, for the Morley cabin. It's mighty 'mazing how many folks, first and last, do tote up The Way these days. But I don't see—nobody!"

Neither did Crothers, now, for the stranger was hidden from sight. Then he began to wonder if there really had been any one. The night's revel had been rather wilder than usual, and Crothers was not as young as he once was.

The bell of his factory was ringing, however, and he unsteadily made his way thither.

It was Cynthia who was treading lightly up The Way, but not the Cynthia who a few months before had gone so blindly to do the bidding of that inner voice of conscience.

"It was here," murmured she, standing behind a tall tree by the road, "that you fled from Crothers the night of the fire. Poor little Cyn!"

That was it! The child, Cynthia, walked beside the woman, Cynthia, now, and the woman with clear, awakened eyes—understood at last!

"Poor little Cyn! How frightened you were and how bravely you fought for—me! Or was it I who fought for you? Never mind! we have come home. Come home together, dear, you and I! How heavenly good it is for us to come—together!"

At every step the weariness and sense of peril, engendered by her experience, dropped from Cynthia. She was a woman, but Lans had left her soul to her, and she could clasp hands with the past quite confidently and joyously.

"Home! home!" The word thrilled and thrilled through her being, and on every hand she noted the touch of Sandy Morley with tender appreciation. She laughed, too, this thin, pale girl, and could Sandy have seen her then he would have thought her shining white face, set in the dark furs, more like, than ever, the dogwood bloom under the pines!

"And here I met him on The Way!" Cynthia paused at the spot where she had stood that spring morning, and saw, with a shock of disappointment, the man who had usurped her childish ideal of Sandy Morley.

"How lonely he must have been—when I did not know him! Oh! Sandy—to think I did not know you. You, with your brave, kind eyes and your tender heart!"

A tear rolled down the uplifted face. It was a tear of joy, for Cynthia was going to Sandy. From the unrest and unreality she had fled to him feeling confident that he would gather up the tangled and dropped threads of her life, and weave them, somehow, into a new and perfect pattern. She had so much to tell him! And he was there, close to her! Waiting, waiting for her to come to him and she could afford to dally by the wayside; gather up the precious memories—so like toys of the child she once had been and, by and by, she would go to him like a little girl tired of her day's wandering, and he would comfort her!

By the time Cynthia reached Theodore Starr's church all the heaviness of recent happenings was forgotten; it had no part in her thought. The church was gay in Christmas green and red holly berries. The morning sun, quite high by now, shone in the windows.

"Father!" whispered the girl as if in prayer, and then she knelt, where once her childish feet had borne her in terror, and buried her face in her hands. How well she now understood her dear, dead father! Strong in human love and sympathy, incapable of inflicting pain—even when pain would have been better and kinder than the lack of it—how like him she, the daughter, was! How she had slipped aside from the right path because weak desire to escape, or inflict pain, had been her portion. Well, she had suffered; had endured her exile; been mercifully spared from worse things, and now God had led her—home!

The unseen presence seemed to bend pityingly from the rude desk-pulpit and comfort the gentle heart of the returned wanderer.

Presently, choosing a time when the store near by was deserted, Cynthia ran from the church, across The Way, and escaped, unseen, to the trail leading up to Stoneledge. Her gay spirits returned and she sang snatches of song as she once used to sing. There was no sequence, no meaning of words, but the short sharp turns and trills were as wild and sweet as the bird notes. She tried Sandy's call—but her memory failed her there!

"Oh! the old tree," Cynthia ran to it. For months and months she had forgotten it, and the secret it held in its dead heart. Yes, the box was there! The box in which lay the outbursts of a girl's fancy and imaginings. With a mischievous laugh Cynthia removed the old letters and put them in the bag that hung from a girdle at her waist. Then she walked on to the old Walden Place. There a shock awaited her. What had happened? The crumbling walls had fallen in many places; but there were props and scaffoldings, too! Sandy had begun his work of redemption on the Great House. It was to be the home of the Markhams, but the surprised onlooker could not know that the property, taken by the county for unpaid taxes, had been bought in by Levi Markham in Sandy's name.

"Dear old Stoneledge!" And then Cynthia sat down upon a fallen log and knew the heavy heartedness of one who arrives too late to receive the welcome that was hushed forever. But suddenly her face brightened. In the general demoralization a portion of the house still stood—it was the wing, the library!

The roof had caved in, but the Significant Room stood open and stark to the glittering winter sunlight! Reverent hands had removed the furniture, books, and pictures; the stark and staring walls, with their stained and torn paper, were bared to the gaze of every chance passerby. Suddenly, to the yearning heart of the onlooker, a miracle appeared. The scene of devastation disappeared; there was a fragrance of honeysuckle and yellow roses in the sharp air and, in a dim, sweet, old, sheltered room stood a little girl with patched gingham gown and long smooth-hanging braids of hair, gazing up at a portrait that no eyes but hers had ever seen. It was little Madam Bubble and she was lovingly, proudly, exultingly, looking at "The Biggest of Them All!"

Unheeded, the tears rained down the cheeks of the woman standing by the ruins of her old home; she stretched her arms out tremblingly as if to hold the vision to the exclusion of all the rest of life.

"Oh! my Sandy, you have indeed cut your way through your enemies. Oh! my love; my dear, dear love."

How long she stood rapt in her vision Cynthia never knew. Her day of wonders enchanted and held her oblivious of weariness, hunger, or physical pain, but she must get to Trouble Neck; she must throw herself into the safe arms of the little doctor and—find peace and guidance. Later they—the Cup-o'-Cold-Water Lady and she—would go to Sandy's cabin as they had that night when Lans had claimed her and then—well, beyond that Cynthia could not see!

At Trouble Neck another disappointment met her. The trim cabin was empty! The unlocked door gave way to the eager pressure; the sunny room was full of generous welcome, and a gleam of fire on the hearth showed that the little mistress had not been gone long.

Some people leave a room more vacant than others. Like the breath of perfume, after the flower has been removed, their personality and dearness linger, making one miss them more, and long for them more keenly. As a child might suffer at not finding its mother awaiting it at the close of day Cynthia suffered then. She wandered to the table on which lay the little doctor's work—a child's dress! Beside it was a medical book opened at a chapter on the diseases of—children. And on the widespread book lay an unsealed note addressed to—Tod Greeley!

A smile, a wan, understanding smile touched Cynthia's lips, but presently it softened into the dear, old, slow smile, and the girl bent and kissed the penciled name of the postmaster, for the dear, absent hand had rested there last!

There were bread and milk and bacon in the pantry, and with happy familiarity Cynthia made a meal for herself, and ate heartily. After this she went into the lean-to chamber and taking off her hat and wraps, lay down upon the couch, for she began to realize how weary she was. She slept several hours and was awakened by a step in the outer room. Thinking it was Marcia Lowe she raised herself and looked through the half-opened door. It was Tod Greeley! He had lighted the oil lamp and stood by the table with Marcia's note in his hand. Over and again he read it, then folded it slowly and put it in his breast pocket.

A change had been wrought upon Greeley. He stood straight and firm; he was shaven and shorn and neatly dressed; his face was happier, too, than Cynthia had ever seen it. The lazy good humour was merged into purpose and dignity.

"To-morrow, then!" Cynthia heard him murmur; "to-morrow then!"

He extinguished the light and passed from the house, leaving Cynthia more lonely than she had been since she left the train that morning.

For an hour or two Cynthia struggled with herself. Abstractedly she knew that she ought not to go to Sandy Morley alone. Something that some one—she could not remember who or where—taught her, warned her that it was not right for her to leave Trouble Neck that evening.

"But why?" asked the great longing, "why?"

"You are Lans Treadwell's wife; his wife!"

At this Cynthia laughed outright. That part of her life had touched her only as her awful experience with Crothers had done; except that Lans had gained her confidence in Man while Crothers had imperilled it. The real self of Cynthia was pure and untouched; ready to offer now, to offer itself, upon the true altar of love and consecration. Nothing could change that; nothing could blind her to it; but over and through the knowledge ran the discord of suggestion left by the contact with convention, down, and far, from Lost Mountain.

It was eight o'clock when Cynthia gained her triumph over the claim upon her, and cloaked and hooded, started out.

She wore her own, old cloak and the red hood that Marcia Lowe's loving fingers had knitted for her. Sandy must not be disappointed in her; it must be little Cyn, not the Cynthia Lans Treadwell had claimed, who was to put forth her appeal for help.

The crisp, starry night was still and fine; the walk from Trouble Neck to Sandy's cabin brought the blood to the pale cheeks, light to the large eyes. How quiet the cabin was—and dark! Only one light shone forth and that was from the study. Cautiously Cynthia stepped close and looked in; the curtains were parted where a hasty hand had left them. Sandy, seated near the glowing fire, was painting at his easel. After a long day's work in the open air he was indulging his fancy, forgetting the trials and disappointments of his life in the poor talent that was his. The canvas was so placed that the watcher from outside could see it plainly over the back bent toward it. A face gleamed from a crown of dogwood blossoms—pink and white blossoms! It was the face of—Madam Bubble! The girl-face with the slow, alluring smile and the waiting eyes!

The woman outside bent her head upon her cold clasped hands while the waves of love and surrender engulfed her. All her life she had been coming to—Sandy! He had cut down every barrier but one! He must crush that! How strong he looked, how fine!

A tap as gentle as the touch of a bird's wing fell upon the frosty glass and Sandy turned sharply. He waited a moment, then came to the window. Cynthia, frightened at her daring, shrank into the shadow and breathed hard. Sandy waited a moment longer and then drew the heavy curtains together close, leaving the outer world in darkness.

A moment later Cynthia, regaining courage, crept close to the glass and tapped again. This time Sandy strode to the door, flung it wide and, standing in the panel of warmth and light with uplifted head, said sternly:

"Who is there? What is wanted?"

Who he expected he hardly knew himself, but the answer he received caused him to reel backward.

"It's—it's lil' Cyn, Sandy, and she wants—you!"

Then he drew her in, closed the door upon the world and, holding her before him by the shoulders, looked deep and searchingly into her eyes which met his unflinchingly and trustfully.

"Thank God!" was all he said, but in that moment poor Lans Treadwell passed unscathed before his last judge.

"How thin you are, little Cyn!"

Sandy had drawn the big leather chair to the hearth and seated her in it. He took off the cloak and hood and then stood back.

"I reckon the longing for home did it, Sandy."

"You have—been homesick?"

"Oh! mighty homesick. I have wanted the mountain until my soul hurt."

"Poor lil' Cyn."

"Say it again, Sandy, say it again!" The dimmed eyes implored him.

"Poor lil' Cyn."

No suggestion of impropriety had entered with Cynthia. Sandy was too fine and self-forgetful to be touched by worldliness. Cynthia had come to him; he and she were safe!

"And Lans, Cynthia?"

"Come close, Sandy. There, sit so, on the stool. I want to touch you, I want to see you near while I go back—go away from our mountain for a time. Come with me, Sandy, down to Lans!"

Then she told him. The red firelight played on her pale, sweet face; her hand sometimes reached out and lay upon the shoulder by the arm of her chair; once the fingers touched his cheek—but Sandy did not move and his eyes never looked up from the heart of the glowing log.

"It was a long journey to the day when I understood, Sandy. It was a hard path for ignorant feet and blind eyes—but God was very good to me. The South is slow with us-all, dear, but up there in the North—I awakened! I think it came—the truth, dear, when she—the girl, ran to Lans. In the mighty times of a woman's life she can only run that way—to one man! And like the mists, clearing from Lost Mountain, the shadows left me and I knew right well that come what might, Sandy dear, in all the time on ahead, in joy or sorrow, pain or—death it would be to you I would want to run."

The log fell apart in rich glory and then Sandy looked up into the drooping, flower-like face.

"Don't, lil' Cyn," he whispered, "you do not understand, but—you must not speak so to me."

Then she laughed.

"Oh! I reckon I know what you mean, Sandy. I've been through it all and—run away from it! Sandy, tell me true; before the good and great God, doesn't that poor girl belong to Lans more than I do?"

"Yes!"

"Isn't his duty to her?"

"Yes, yes, lil' Cyn."

"Then what is left? Just—you and me, I reckon, Sandy."

Sandy gripped his clasped hands close as if by so doing he could better control the rising passion of his love for the girl beside him. Her ignoring of stern fact turned his reason. She was right—but she was wrong! He must protect her and never fail her; he must not be less than Lans.

Then her words came to him in the chaos of his emotions; a new thought had claimed her. She had finished, at last, with the story of her exile; she was back among her hills.

"And the factory, Sandy, it is coming on right fast, I reckon?"

"It is nearly done."

"And—the Home-school?"

"That, too, is nearly ready."

"You haven't forgotten the lil' room, off in the corner, have you, Sandy? The lil' room where the baby-things are to come to me to be—cuddled?"

Sandy shivered.

"You—haven't left *that* out, have you, Sandy?"

"I had, lil' Cyn, but I am going to put it aback—to-morrow."

"I'm right glad, Sandy, for I've learned some mighty sweet lil' tunes, and I've bought some pictures and books with stories that will make them-all laugh when we've taught them how. My trunk is full of

things for the babies."

Sandy permitted himself one look at the dear face so close to his own. It wore the white rapt look he remembered so well; the wonderful, brooding tenderness as fancy held it. It was so she had looked upon him when, as a ragged boy, he sat beside her. She had awakened imagination within his starved soul and given his ambition wings with which to soar.

He and she were now bent forward toward the smouldering fire; he on the stool, she in the deep chair.

"Do you remember, Sandy, lil' Madam Bubble?"

"I reckon I remember nothing else so—clearly."

He looked away, he could trust himself no farther.

"And the 'Biggest of Them All'—you remember him?"

"I—I have forgotten him, Cynthia."

"No—you have not forgotten him, Sandy!"

"He—he does not seem to have any place, lil' Cyn."

"Oh! yes and yes he does! I reckon he is bigger than even you or I—know!"

Did she suspect the terrible weakness of desire that was overpowering him? At this thought Sandy gripped his hands closer; he felt her deep, true eyes upon him and a rush of blood dyed his dark face to crimson. Cynthia saw this and laid her cool hand upon his shoulder while she asked bravely, daringly:

"Do you love me—Sandy?"

What other woman on earth could have put that question at such a time? He and she were alone in the empty woods and the night held them. Sandy turned to her.

"As God hears me—yes, lil' Cyn, with all my heart and soul. I have loved you all my life."

"In this bag," Cynthia touched the bag at her waist, "are the letters I wrote to you, Sandy, while you were away. I hid them in an old tree by Stoneledge. The tree kept them safe for—me. There are a right many—all answers to the one you sent me. Do you want them, Sandy?"

"Yes."

"Here—Sandy!"

The letters, more precious than any other gift, lay in his keeping at last.

"God bless you, lil' Cyn."

She smiled divinely.

"I wandered far down in the valley, Sandy, and I had a hard lesson to learn; a hard thing to do, and I've come home to find you waiting for me. Oh! tell me, dear, isn't there one law, just one in our land to set a lil' girl free who has made a mistake?"

Behind the two by the fire a door opened and, on the threshold stood Levi Markham perplexed and awed. Slowly the meaning of the scene came to him; Matilda had somewhat prepared him; the question of the girl by Sandy's side shed a blinding light upon the confusion of his thoughts. Standing there, rugged and strong, he seemed the personification of power and solution. But he was waiting; he must know what Sandy felt! He drew back into the cold, dark passage and played the eavesdropper for the first and last time in his life.

"Mine! mine!" Never had Sandy's voice known that tone before. Levi bowed his head.

"You are mine! Yes, lil' Cyn, there is a law, there must be a law that can give us to each other; I have been waiting for you by The Way all my life, and you have come to me, lil' girl, at last—my lil' Cyn."

Then Levi Markham stole away. He felt along the passage with outstretched hands for his eyes were blinded. He must waken Matilda; he must—but there he paused. The door, at which he had just stood, was opening! He had time, only, to crouch in the shadow of a turn of the hallway before Sandy and Cynthia came out. Sandy had his right arm protectingly around the girl; her bright head rested on his shoulder; in his left hand Sandy held high a lighted candle.

"We must tell them, dear heart," he was whispering; "they two before any one else."

And then Levi, seeing flight possible, ran to his sister's room in order that he might share the confidence that he already possessed.

THE END

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A SON OF THE HILLS ***

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