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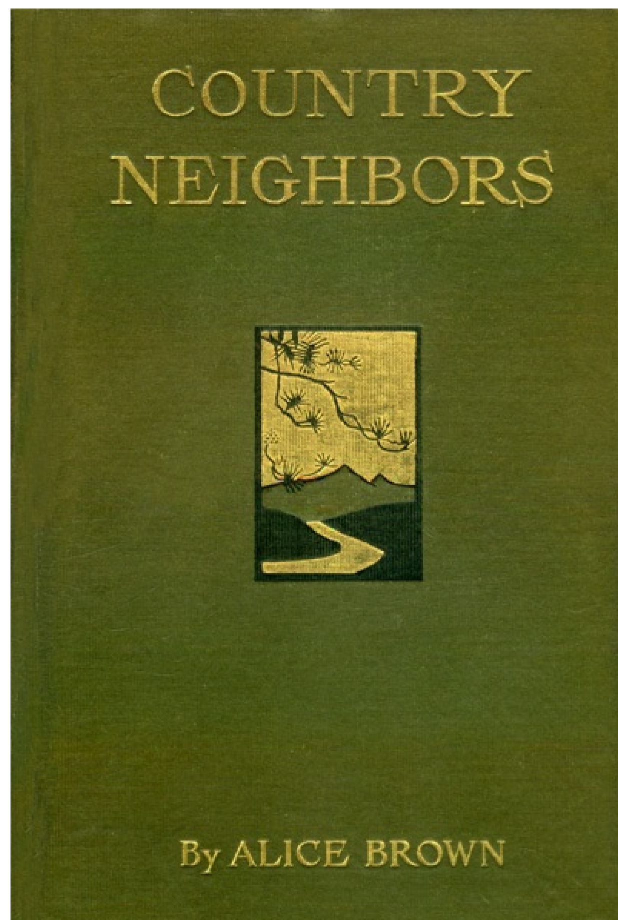

COUNTRY NEIGHBORS

BY
ALICE BROWN

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CONTENTS

The Play House 1
His First Wife 20
A Flower of April 42
The Auction 53
Saturday Night 76
A Grief Deferred 96
The Challenge 122
Partners 150
Flowers of Paradise 171
Gardener Jim 192
The Silver Tea-Set 215
The Other Mrs. Dill 237
The Advocate 265
The Masquerade 285
A Poetess in Spring 314
The Master Minds of History 341

THE PLAY HOUSE

[1]

Amelia Maxwell sat by the front-chamber window of the great house overlooking the road, and her own "story-an'-a-half" farther toward the west. Every day she was alone under her own roof, save at the times when old lady Knowles of the great house summoned her for work at fine sewing or braiding rags. All Amelia's kin were dead. Now she was used to their solemn absence, and sufficiently at one with her own humble way of life, letting her few acres at the halves, and earning a dollar here and there with her clever fingers. She was but little over forty, yet she was aware that her life, in its keener phases, was already done. She had had her romance and striven to forget it; but out of that time pathetic voices now and then called to her, and old longings awoke, to breathe for a moment and then sleep again.

Amelia seemed, even to old lady Knowles, who knew her best, a cheerful, humorous body; but only Amelia saw the road by which her serenity had come. Chiefly it was through an inexplicable devotion to the great house. [2] She could not remember a time when it was not wonderful to her. While she was a little girl, living alone with her mother, she used to sit on the doorstone with her bread and milk at bedtime, and think of the great house, how grand it was and large. There was a wonderful way the sun had of falling, at twilight, across the pillars of its porch where the elm drooped sweetly, and in the moonlight it was like a fairy city. But the morning was perhaps the best moment of all. The great house was painted a pale yellow, and when Amelia awoke with the sun in her little unshaded chamber, she thought how dark the blinds were there, with such a solemn richness in their green. The flower-beds in front were beautiful to her; but the back garden, lying alongside the orchard, and stretching through tangles of sweet-william and rose, was an enchanted spot to play in. The child that was, used to wander there and feel very rich. Now, a woman, she sat in the great house sewing, and felt rich again. As it happened, for one of the many times it came to her, she was thinking what the great house had done for her. Old lady Knowles had, in her stately way, been a kind of patron saint, and in that summer, years ago, when Amelia's romance died and she had drooped like a starving plant, Rufus, the old lady's son, had seemed to see her trouble and stood by her. He did not speak of it. He only took her for long drives, and made his cheerful presence evident in many ways, and when he died, with a tragic [3] suddenness, Amelia used selfishly to feel that he had lived at least long enough to keep her from failing of that inner blight.

On this day when old lady Knowles had gone with Ann, her faithful help, to see the cousin to whom she made pilgrimage once a year, Amelia resolved to enjoy herself to the full. She laid down her sewing, from time to time, to look about her at the poppy-strewn paper, the four-post bed and flowered tester, the great fireplace with its shining dogs, and the Venus and Cupid mirror. Over and over again she had played that the house was hers, and to-day, through some heralding excitement in the air, it seemed doubly so. She sat in a dream of housewifely possession, conning idly over the pleasant things she might do before the day was over. There was cold tongue for her dinner, Ann had told her, and a clear soup, if she liked to heat it. She might cook vegetables if she chose. And there was the best of tea to be made out of the china caddy, and rich cake in the parlor crock. After one such glad deliberation, she caught her sewing guiltily up from her lap and began to set compensating stitches. But even then her conscience slept unstirred. [4] Old lady Knowles was in no hurry for the work, she knew, and she would make up for her dreaming in the account of her day.

There was a sound without. The gate swung softly shut and a man came up the path. Amelia, at the glance, rose quickly, dropped her sewing, and hurried out and down the stairs. The front door was open, she knew, and though there was never anything to be afraid of, still the house was in her charge. At the door she met him, just lifting his hand to touch the knocker. He was a tall, weedy fellow of something more than her own age, with light hair and blue eyes and a strangely arrested look, as if he obstinately, and against his own advantage, continued to keep young.

Amelia knew him at once, as he did her, though it was twenty years since they had met.

"Why, Jared Beale!" she faltered.

He was much moved. The flush came quickly to his face in a way she had known, and his eyes softened.

"I should ha' recognized ye anywheres, Milly," he asserted.

She still stood looking at him, unable to ask him in or to make apology for the lack.

"I went straight to your house from the train," he said. "'Twas all shut up. Don't anybody live there now?"

[5] "Yes," answered Amelia, "somebody lives there." The red had come into her cheeks, and her eyes burned brightly. Then as he looked at her hesitatingly, in the way he used to look, she trembled a little.

"Come in, Jared," she said, retreating a hospitable space. "Come right in."

She stood aside, and then, when he stepped over the sill, led the way into the dining-room, where there was a cool green light from the darkened blinds, and the only window open to the sun disclosed a trembling grapevine and a vista down the garden path. Amelia drew forward a chair, with a decided motion.

"Sit down," she said, and busied herself with opening a blind.

When she took her own chair opposite him, she found that he had laid his hat beside him on the floor, and, with the tips of his fingers together, was bending forward in an attitude belonging to his youth. He was regarding her with the slightly blurred look of his near-sighted eyes, and she began hastily to speak.

"You stayin' round these parts?"

"No," said Jared, "no. I had to come east on business. There was some property to be settled up in Beulah, so I thought I'd jest step down here an' see how things were."

"Beulah!" she repeated. "Why, that's fifty miles from here!"

[6] "Yes," returned Jared. "It's a matter o' fifty mile. Fact is," he said uneasily, "I didn't know how you was fixed. It's kinder worried me."

A flush ran into her face, to the roots of her pretty hair; yet her frank eyes never left him. Then her evasive speech belied her look.

"I get along real well. I s'pose you knew mother wa'n't with me now?"

"I ain't heard a word from here for seventeen year," he said, half bitterly, as if the silence had been hard to bear. "There's no way for me to hear now. The last was from Tom Merrick. He said you'd begun to go with Rufus Knowles."

Amelia trembled over her whole body.

"That was a good while ago," she ventured.

"Yes, 'twas. A good many things have come an' gone. An' now Rufus is dead—I see his death in an old paper—an' here you be, his widder, livin' in the old house."

"Why!" breathed Amelia, "why!" She choked upon the word, but before she could deny it he had begun again, in gentle reminiscence.

"'Twon't harm nobody to talk over old times a mite, Amelia. Mebbe that's what I come on for, though I thought 'twas to see how you was fixed. I thought mebbe I should find you livin' kinder near the wind, an' mebbe you'd let me look out for you a mite."

[7] The tears came into Amelia's eyes. She looked about her as if she owned the room, the old china, and the house.

"That's real good of you, Jared," she said movingly. "I sha'n't ever forget it. But you see for yourself. I don't want for nothin'."

"I guess we should ha' thought 'twas queer, when you went trottin' by to school," he said irrelevantly, "if anybody'd told you you'd reign over the old Knowles house."

"Yes," said Amelia softly, again looking about her, this time with love and thankfulness, "I guess they would. You leave your wife well?" she asked suddenly, perhaps to suggest the reality of his own house of life.

Jared shook his head.

"She ain't stepped a step for seven year."

"Oh, my!" grieved Amelia. "Won't she ever be any better?"

"No. We've had all the doctors, eclectic an' herb besides, an' they don't give her no hope. She was a great driver. We laid up money steady them years before she was took down. She knew how to make an' she knew how to save."

His face settled into lines of brooding recollection. Immediately Amelia was aware that those years had been bitter to him, and that the fruit of them was stale and dry. She cut by instinct into a pleasant by-path.

[8] "You play your fiddle any now?"

He started out of his maze at life.

"No," he owned, "no!" as if he hardly remembered such a thing had been. "I dropped that more'n fifteen year ago."

"Seems if my feet never could keep still when you played 'Money Musk,'" avowed Amelia, her eyes shining. "'The Road to Boston,' too! My! wa'n't that grand!"

"'Twas mostly dance-music I knew," said Jared. "She never liked it," he added, in a burst of

weary confidence.

"Your wife?"

"She was a church member, old-fashioned kind. Didn't believe in dancin'. 'The devil's tunes,' she called 'em. Well, mebbe they were; but I kinder liked 'em myself."

"Well," said Amelia, in a safe commonplace, "I guess there's some harm in 'most everything. It's 'cordin' to the way you take it." Then one of her quick changes came upon her. The self that played at life when real life failed her, and so kept youth alive, awoke to shine in her eyes and flush her pretty cheek. She looked about the room, as if to seek concurrence from the hearthside gods. "Jared," she said, "you goin' to stay round here long?"

He made an involuntary motion toward his hat.

"No, oh, no," he answered. "I'm goin' 'cross lots to the Junction. I come round the road. I guess 'tain't more'n four mile along by the pine woods an' the b'ilin' spring," he added, smiling at her. "Leastways it didn't use to be. I thought if I could get the seven-o'clock, 'twould take me back to Boston so 's I could ketch my train to-night. She's kinder dull, out there alone," he ended, wearily. "'Twas some o' her property I come to settle up. She'll want to hear about it. I never was no kind of a letter-writer." [9]

Amelia rose.

"I'll tell you what, then," she said, with a sweet decision, "you stay right here an' have dinner. I'm all alone to-day."

"Ain't old lady Knowles—" He paused decorously, and Amelia laughed. It seemed to her as if old lady Knowles and the house would always be beneficently there because they always had been.

"Law, yes," she said. "She's alive. So's old Ann. They've gone to Wareham, to spend the day."

Jared threw back his head and laughed.

"If that don't make time stand still," he said, "nothin' ever did. Why, when we was in the Third Reader old lady Knowles an' Ann harnessed up one day in the year an' drove over to Wareham to spend the day."

"Yes," Amelia sparkled back at him, "'tis so. They look pretty much the same, both of 'em." [10]

"They must be well along in years?"

Amelia had begun putting up the leaves of the mahogany dining-table. She laughed, a pretty ripple.

"Well, anyway," she qualified, "old Pomp ain't gone with 'em. He's buried out under the August sweet. They've got an old white now. 'Twas the colt long after you left here." She had gone to the dresser and pulled open a drawer. Those were the every-day tablecloths, fine and good; but in the drawer above, she knew, was the best damask, snowdrops and other patterns more wonderful, with birds and butterflies. She debated but a moment, and then pulled out a lovely piece that shone with ironing. "I'll tell you what it is, Jared," she said, returning to spread it on the table with deft touches, "it's we that change, as well as other folks. Ever think o' that? Ever occur to you old lady Knowles wa'n't much over sixty them days when we used to call her old? 'Twas because we were so young ourselves. She don't seem much different to me now from what she did then."

"There's a good deal in that," said Jared, rising. "Want I should draw you up some water out o' the old well?"

"Yes. I shall want some in a minute. I'll make us a cup o' coffee. You like that." [11]

Jared drew the water, and after he had brought it to her he went out into the back garden; and, while she moved back and forth from pantry to table, she caught glimpses of him through the window as he went about from the bees to the flower-beds, in a reminiscent wandering. Once he halted under the sweet-bough and gave one branch a shake, and then, with an unerring remembrance, he crossed the sward to the "sopsy-vine" by the wall.

Amelia could not get over the wonder of having him there. Strangely, he had not changed. Even his speech had the old neighborly tang. Whether he had returned to it as to a never-forgotten tune, she could not know; but it was in her ears, awakening touches of old harmony. Yet these things she dared not dwell upon. She put them aside in haste to live with after he should be gone.

Her preparations were swiftly made, lest she should lose a moment of his stay, and presently she went to the door and summoned him.

"Dinner's ready, Jared!"

It sounded as if she had said it every day, and she knew why; the words and others like them, sweet and commonplace, were inwoven with the texture of her dreams.

Jared came in, an eager look upon his face, as if he also were in a maze, and they sat down at the table, where the viands were arranged in a beautiful order. Jared laid down his knife and fork. [12]

"Well," said he, "old Ann ain't lost her faculty. This tastes for all the world just as old lady Knowles's things used to when I come over here to weed the garden an' stayed to dinner."

Amelia lifted a thankful look.

"I'm proper glad you've come back, Jared," she said simply. "I never had any expectation of seein' you again, leastways not in this world."

Jared spoke irrelevantly:—

"There's a good many things I've wanted to talk over with you, 'Melia, from time to time. Now there's Arthur."

Amelia nodded.

"He ain't done very well, has he?" she inquired. "I never knew much about him after he moved away; but seems if I heard he'd took to drink."

"That's it. Arthur was as good a boy as ever stepped, but he got led away when he wa'n't old enough to know t'other from which. Well, I've always stood by him, 'Melia. Folks say he's only an adopted brother. 'What you want to hang on to him for, an' send good money after bad?' That's what they say. Well, what if he is an adopted brother? Father an' mother set by him, an' I set by him, too." [13]

He had a worried look, and his tone rang fretfully, as if it continued a line of dreary argument.

"Of course you set by him, Jared," said Amelia, almost indignantly. "I shouldn't feel the same towards you if you didn't."

Jared was deep in the relief of his pathetic confidences.

"Arthur married young, an' folks said he'd no business to, nothin' to live on, an' his habits bein' what they were. Well, I couldn't dispute that. But when he got that fall, so 't he laid there paralyzed, I wanted to take the cars an' go right on to York State an' see him. I didn't. I couldn't get away; but I sent him all I could afford to, an' I'm goin' to keep on sendin' jest as long as I'm above ground. An' I've made my will an' provided for him."

His voice had a fractious tone, as if he combated an unseen tyrant. Amelia dared not speak. At a word, she felt, he might say too much. Now Jared was looking at her in a bright appeal, as if, sure as he was of her sympathy, he besought the expression of it.

"There ain't a soul but you knows I've made my will, 'Melia," he said. "There's suthin' in it for you, too."

[14] Amelia shrank, and her eyes betrayed her terror; it was as if she could carry on their relation together quite happily, but as soon as the judgment of the world were challenged she must hide it away, like a treasure in a box.

"No, Jared!" she breathed. "No, oh, no! Don't you do such a thing as that."

Jared laughed a little, but half sadly.

"Seems kinder queer to me now," he owned, "now I see you settin' here, only to put out your hand an' take a thing if you want it. Did Rufus leave a will?"

Amelia shrank still smaller.

"No," she trembled; "no, he didn't leave a will."

"Well, I sha'n't change mine, 'Melia." He spoke with an ostentatious lightness, but Amelia was aware that his mind labored in heavy seas of old regret, buoyed by the futile hope of compensating her age for the joys her youth had lacked. "I guess I'll let it stand as 'tis, an', long as you don't need what I've left ye, why, you can put it into some kind o' folderol an' enjoy it. You was always one to enjoy things."

They sat a long time at the table, and Jared took, as he said, more coffee than was good for him, and praised the making of it. Then he followed her about as she cleared away, and helped her a little with an awkward hand. Amelia left the dishes in the sink.

"I won't clear up till night," she said. "We ain't talked out yet." [15]

She led the way into the garden, and under the grape-trellis, where the tall lilac-hedge shut them from the sight of passers-by, she gave him old lady Knowles's great armchair, and took the little one that was hers when she came over to sit a while with her old friend. The talk went wandering back as if it sought the very sources of youth and life; but somehow it touched commonplaces only. Yet Amelia had the sense, and she was sure he had, too, of wandering there hand in hand, of finding no surprises, but only the old things grown more dear, the old loyalties the more abiding.

Suddenly he spoke, haltingly, voicing her own conviction.

"Don't seem but a minute, 'Melia, sence we set talkin' things over, much as we do now. Seems if we hadn't been so fur separated all these years."

"No," said Amelia, with her beautiful sincerity, "I don't believe we have been, Jared. Maybe that's how it is when folks die. We can't see 'em nor speak to 'em, but maybe they go right along bein' what we like best. I know 'tis so with mother. Seems if, if she walked in here this minute, we shouldn't have so very many stitches to take up. Sometimes I've thought all I should say would be, 'Well, mother, you've got back, ain't you?' Kinder like that."

[16] The beautiful afternoon light lay on the grass and turned the grapevine to a tender green. Jared looked upon the land as if he were treasuring it in his heart for a day of loss. When the sun was low, and green and red were flaming in the west, he rose.

"Well, 'Melia," he said, "I've seen you. Now I'll go."

Amelia stirred, too, recalled to service.

"I want to make you a cup o' tea," she said. "You get me a pail o' fresh water, Jared. 'Twon't take but a minute."

He followed her about, this time, while she set the table; and again they broke bread together. When he rose from his chair now, it was for good.

"Well, 'Melia," he said; and she gave him her hand.

She went with him to the door, and stood there as he started down the path. Half-way he hesitated, and then came back to her. His eyes were soft and kindly.

"'Melia," he said, "I ain't told you the half, an' I dunno 's I can tell it now. I never knew how things were with you. I've laid awake nights, wonderin'. You never was very strong. 'Why,' says I to myself many a night when I'd hear the wind blowin' ag'inst the winder, 'mebbe she's had to go out to work. Mebbe she ain't got a place to lay her head.'"

[17] He was rushing on in a full tide of confidence, and she recalled him. She leaned forward to him, out of the doorway of her beautiful house, and spoke in an assuring tone.

"Don't you worry no more, Jared. I'm safe an' well content, an' you ain't got nothin' to regret. An' when we meet again,—I guess 'twon't be here, dear, it'll be t'other side,—why, we'll sit down an' have another dish o' talk."

Then they shook hands again, and Jared walked away. When he looked back from the top of Schoolma'am Hill, she was still in the doorway, and she waved her hand to him.

After that last glimpse of him, Amelia went soberly about the house, setting it in order. When her dishes were washed and she had fed old Trot, the cat, forgotten all day, she rolled up the fine tablecloth and left it behind the porch-door, where she could take it on her way home. Then she sat down on the front steps and waited for old lady Knowles. Amelia did not think very much about her day. It was still a possession to be laid aside and pondered over all the hours and days until she died. For there would be no other day like it.

The dusk fell and the sounds of night began to rise in their poignant summoning of memory and hope. [18] The past and the present seemed one to her in a beautiful dream; yet it was not so much a dream as life itself, a warm reality. Presently there came the slow thud of horse's feet, and the chaise turned in at the yard. Old lady Knowles was in it, sitting prettily erect, as she had driven away, and Ann was peering forward, as she always did, to see if the house had burned down in their absence. John Trueman, who lived "down the road," was lounging along behind. They had called him as they passed, and bade him come to "tend the horse." Amelia rose and shook herself free from the web of her dream. She hurried forward and at the horse-block offered old lady Knowles her hand.

"Anything happened?" asked old Ann, making her way past to the kitchen.

Amelia only smiled at her, but she followed old lady Knowles in at the porch-door.

"We've had a very enjoyable day, Amelia," said the old lady, untying her bonnet-strings. "Suppose you lay this on the table. Ann must brush it before it's put away. What is it? Child, child, what is it?"

Amelia had taken a fold of her old friend's skirt. It would have seemed to her a liberty to touch her hand.

"Mis' Knowles," she said, "I've had company. 'Twas somebody to see me, an' I got dinner here, [19] an' supper, too, an' I used your best tablecloth, an' I'm goin' to do it up so 't Ann won't know. An' I acted for all the world as if 'twas my own house."

Old lady Knowles laughed a little. She had never been a woman to whom small things seemed large, and now very few things were of any size at all.

"Who was it, Amelia?" she asked. "Who was your company?"

There was a moment's silence, and Amelia heard her own heart beat. But she answered quietly,—

"'Twas Jared Beale."

There was silence again while old lady Knowles thought back over the years. When she spoke,

her voice was very soft and kindly.

"You are a good girl, Amelia. You've always been a good girl. Run home, child, now, and come to-morrow. Good-night."

Amelia, out in the path a moment afterwards, the tablecloth under her arm, could hardly believe in what had surely happened to her. Old lady Knowles had bent forward to her; her soft lips had touched Amelia's cheek.

HIS FIRST WIFE

[20]

It seemed to Lydia Gale that from the moment she met Eben Jakes she understood what fun it was to laugh. She and her mother and three sisters lived together in a comfortable way, and Lydia, although she was the youngest, had come to feel that she was declining into those middle years when beauty wanes, and though the desire to charm may raise an eager hand, no one will stay to look. She was a delicate blonde, and when she began to recognize these bounds of life she faded a little into a still neutrality that might soon have made an old woman of her. The sisters were dark, wholesome wenches, known as trainers at the gatherings they were always summoned to enliven; but Lydia seldom found their mirth exhilarating. Only when Eben Jakes appeared at the door, that spring twilight, a droll look peering from his blue eyes, and a long forefinger smoothing out the smile from the two lines in his lean cheeks, and asked, as if there were some richness of humor in the supposition, "Anybody heard anything of anybody named Eunice Eliot round here?" she found her own face creasing responsively. Eunice Eliot had been her mother's maiden name, and it proved that she and Eben's mother had been schoolmates. [21] Eben's mother had died some years before; and now, taking a little trip with his own horse and buggy to peddle essences and see the country, he had included his mother's friend within the circle of his wandering.

Mrs. Gale had a welcome ready for him and for the treasured reminiscences of his mother's past, and the three older sisters trained with him to their limit. Lydia sat by and listened, smiling all the time. She thought Eben's long, lank, broad-shouldered figure very manly, and it shocked her beyond speech to hear one of the trainers avow that, for her part, she thought his thin, Yankee face, with its big features and keen eyes, as homely as a hedge-fence. Lydia said nothing, but she wondered what people could expect. She was a greedy novel-reader, and she had shy thoughts of her own. It seemed to her that Eben, who also had passed his first youth, must have been a great favorite in his day. Every commonplace betrayal in those intimate talks with her mother served to show her how good he had been, how simple and true. He had taken care of his mother through a long illness, and then, after her death, lived what must have been a dull life, but one still dutiful toward established bonds, with old Betty, the "help" of many years. Now [22] Betty had died, and before beginning another chapter with some domestic expedient, he had allowed himself this limited trip, to breathe another air and see the world. Lydia felt that he had deserved his vacation. All the weary steps to it, she knew, could scarcely have been climbed so robustly save by a hero.

Eben had stayed a week, and on the morning set for his leaving, Mrs. Gale and the three trainers harnessed in haste to drive over to Fairfax to see the circus come in. Lydia had refused to go, because, for some reason, she felt a little dull that morning, and Eben had soberly declared his peddling would take him another way. He meant to be off before the middle of the forenoon; and while he was in the barn, foddering his horse and greasing the wheels, Lydia bethought her how he had praised the doughnuts several nights before, and, with an aching impulse to do something for him before he should go, hastily made up a batch, judging that a dozen or so would please him upon the road. But she was left-handed that morning, and as she began to fry, the fat caught fire. Then Eben, seeing the blaze and smoke, dashed in, set the kettle safely in the sink, and took Lydia into his arms.

"Say," he whispered to her hidden face, "what if you an' me should get married an' go round some peddlin', an' make our way home towards fall?"

[23] Lydia felt that this was the most beautiful invitation that could possibly have been given her, and she answered accordingly:—

"I'd like it ever so much."

Within the next week they were married, and set out on their enchanted progress, stopping at doors when they liked, and offering bottles whereof the labels sounded delicious and sweet; or if a house looked poor or stingy, passing it by. Sometimes, when Lydia felt very daring, she went to the door herself to show her wares, and Eben stayed in the carriage and laughed. He said she offered a bottle of vanilla as if it were poison and she wanted to get rid of it, or as if it were water, and of no use to anybody. Once, when she had been denied by a sour-faced woman, he

stopped under the shade of a tree farther on, and left Lydia there while he went back and, by force of his smile and persuasive tongue, sold the same bottle to the same woman, and came back chuckling in a merry triumph.

This was the day that Lydia's summer happiness felt the touch of blight. She remembered always just the moment when the wind of trouble touched her. They were driving through a long stretch of maple woods with a ravine below, where ferns grew darkly and water hurried over rocks. Lydia was lying back in the carriage, swaying with its motion, and jubilant to her finger-tips. It was young summer now, and she answered back every pulse of the stirring earth with heart-beats of her own. Eben was laughing. [24]

"That's the way to do it," he was saying, in an exaggerated triumph. "Why, you've got to talk to 'em till they think that bottle o' vanilla's the water o' life, an' they'll have to knife ye if they can't git it no other way."

"You're a born peddler," smiled Lydia. Then she asked, "How'd you happen to start out?" She had heard the simple reason many times; but she loved his talk, and her idle mind preferred old tales to new.

Eben fell in with her mood, as one begins an accustomed story to a child.

"Well," he said, and he sobered a little, as memory recalled him, "you know, when mother died, old Betty stayed an' kep' house for me. An' when she died, this last spring, I kinder thought I'd git over it sooner if I traveled round a mite to see the sights. I didn't want to git too fur for fear I'd be sick on 't, like the feller that started off to go round the world, an' run home to spend the first night. You sleepy now?"

He had shrewdly learned that she liked long, dull stories to lull her into the swing of a nap.

"No," said Lydia drowsily. "You go on. Then what?" [25]

"Well, so I got Jim Ross to take over the stock an' run the farm to the halves. I took along a few essences to give me suthin' to think about, an' when I got tired o' rovin' I expected to turn back home an' begin bachin' on 't same's I'd got to end. An' then I stopped at your mother's to kinder talk over old times when my mother was little; an' you come to the door an' let me in."

"Eben," said Lydia, out of her dream and with all her story-book knowledge at hand, "don't you s'pose 'twas ordered?"

"What?"

"Don't you s'pose 'twas just put into your head to start out that way so 't you could come an' find—me?"

She spoke timidly, but Eben answered with the bluff certainty he had in readiness for such speculations:—

"Ain't a doubt of it. Sleepy now?"

He turned and looked at her as she lay back against the little pillow he had bought for her on the way. The sun and wind had overlaid the delicate bloom of her cheek with rose. The morning damp had curled her hair into rings. Something known as happiness, for want of a better word, hovered about the curves of her mouth and looked shyly out from under her lids. Eben felt his heart stir wonderfully. He bent toward her and spoke half breathlessly. [26]

"Say, Lyddy, I don't know 's I knew half how pretty you were." Then he laughed a little, as if he were ashamed. He was not a man of words, save only when he was joking. Thus far his fondness for her had found expression in an unfailing service and in mute caresses. He spoke bluntly now, chirruping to the horse: "I dunno 's ever I see any eyes quite so blue—unless 'twas my first wife's."

It was as if a sponge had passed over the quivering beauty of the earth and wiped it out. For the moment Lydia felt as if she were not his wife at all. At her silence, Eben turned and glanced at her; but her eyes were closed.

"Tired?" he asked fondly, and she faltered:—

"I guess so."

Then, according to a tender custom, he put his arm about her and drew her to him, and while he thought she slept, she lay there, her eyes closed against his breast, and the hard certainty upon her of something to think about. Blankness had seized upon her, not because he had married a woman before her, but because he had not told. Possibly he had told her mother in some of their desultory talks and had forgotten to say more. The chill wonder of it sprang from her learning it too late. She had to adapt herself to a new man. Until now she had believed that it was spring with them, and that he had waited for her with an involuntary fealty, as she had done for him. They had every guerdon of young love, except that there were not so many years before them. But even that paled beside the triumphant sense that no boy or girl could possibly be as happy as they, with their ripened patience and sense of fun. A phrase came into her mind as she lay there against his heart and knew he was driving slowly to let her rest: "the wife of his youth." It hurt her keenly, and she caught a breath so sharp and sudden that he drew her closer, as one stirs a child to let it fall into an easier pose. [27]

That day they stopped at an old-fashioned tavern in a drowsy town, and Lydia, after dinner, where she talked quite gayly about the house and the garden and the farther hills, said she thought she would go upstairs and lie down a spell. Eben looked at her with concern. She was always as ready as he for "poking about" new places.

"Ain't you feelin' well?" he asked her.

"Oh, yes," said Lydia, "I'm all right. Only I'm kinder sleepy. I guess this air makes me. It's higher up here than 'tis a few miles back."

[28] "Yes," said Eben, "we've been kinder climbin' up for some days. Well, you go an' sleep it off. Do you good. I'll have my pipe, an' then I'll mog round an' see 'f I can't work off a few bottles on the unsuspectin' populace."

When Eben came home from his successful sales, he found a changeling. His wife was not so different in looks or words as in a subtle something he could not define. She laughed at his jokes, and even, in a gentle way, ventured pleasantries of her own; but a strange languor hung about her. It might have been called patience, an acceptance of a situation rather than her eager cheer in it.

"You tired?" he asked her over and over again that day, and she always answered:—

"Mebbe I am, a mite."

So they settled down in the little tavern, and while Eben took excursions round about to place his "trade," she stayed behind, and either shut herself upstairs or sat meditatively in the garden. What moved her now was an overwhelming curiosity. She wondered what the first wife had been like, whether she could make doughnuts, and, above all, if she had been pretty. Sometimes she remembered, with a wild impulse to tell him because it seemed so desperately funny to her, the unhappy couple that had formed a part of her childhood's memories, who used to quarrel violently whenever the husband drank too much, and his wife, in his helplessness, used to go [29] through his pockets.

"Anybody can bear 'most anything," he used to declare, as he steadied himself by the gate, in drunken majesty, and addressed the school-children in a ring, "but goin' through anybody's pockets. That's more'n anybody ought to be called upon to bear."

Lydia smiled sorrowfully upon herself in the midst of her daze, at the wonder whether she also should be tempted to go through her husband's pockets, not thriftily, to save his purse, but to discover the portrait of his first wife. Yet she had resolved to ask him nothing; and then, in the way of womankind, she opened her lips one day and said the thing she would not.

They were sitting in the garden under the pear tree, with beautiful old borders, all a lovely neglect, on both sides. Lydia had been talking about flowers, and getting up now and then to pull a weed,—an ineffectual service where weeds were so plentiful,—and stopping to speak a word to a late sweet-william, as if it were a child. Eben was smoking his pipe contentedly and watching her.

"You like 'em, don't you?" he said fondly, as she came back and took her chair again.

"I guess I do," said Lydia. That day she felt particularly well and freed from the assaults of memory. The sun was on her face and she welcomed it, and a light breeze stirred her hair. [30] "Mother always said I was bewitched over gardens."

"You shall have all the land you can take care of," he avowed, "an' you shall have a hired man of your own. I can foretell his name. It's Eben Jakes."

Lydia laughed, and he went on: "We used to have a few beds, but when mother was taken away I kinder let it slip."

Suddenly Lydia felt her heart beating hard. Something choked her, and her voice stuck in her throat.

"Eben, how'd your mother look?"

"What say?" asked Eben. He was shaking the ashes from his pipe, and the tapping of the bowl against his chair had drowned her mild attempt.

"How did your mother look?"

He pursed his lips and gazed off into the distance of the orchard. Then he laughed a little at his own incompetence.

"I dunno 's I can tell. I ain't much of a hand at that. She was just kinder old an' pindlin' to other folks. But she looked pretty nice to me."

"Ain't you got a photograph of her here with you?"

He shook his head.

[31] "I thought mebbe you'd carry one round."

"Mother never had any real good picture," said Eben meditatively. "I dunno 's she ever set for a

photograph. She had an ambrotype taken when she was young, with kinder full sleeves an' her hair brought down over her ears. No, mother never had a picture that was any comfort to me."

Then Lydia dared her first approach.

"Ain't you got any photographs here with you, any of your other folks? I'd like to know how they look."

He shook his head.

"No. They're all to home. You'll find 'em in the album on the centre-table. Gee! I hope the house won't be all full o' dust. I never thought, when I set out, I should bring the quality back with me."

But she could not answer by a lifted eyelash the veiled fondness of his tone. All his emotion had this way of taking little by-paths, as if he skirted courtship without often finding the courage to enter boldly in. It was delightful to her, but at this moment she could not even listen. She was too busy with her own familiar quest. Now she spoke timidly, yet with a hidden purpose.

"I think pictures of folks are a good deal of a comfort, don't you—after death?"

Eben made no answer for a moment. He still gazed reflectively outward, but whether it was into the future or his hidden past she could not tell. [32]

"It's queer about dyin'," he said at last.

She answered him tumultuously:—

"What is?"

"Why—" then he paused, as if to set his thought in order. "I can't tell jest what I mean. Only folks can be here to-day an' there to-morrer. An' they can be all of a bloom of health, or handsome as a pictur'—an' lo ye! they're changed!"

A cold certainty settled upon her heart. The first wife had, then, been handsome. Lydia did not know whether acquired knowledge was a boon or not. Eben had risen, and was standing with his hands in his pockets, still looking into space. It seemed to her that he was miles away.

"An' I dunno which is the worst," he was saying, "to have 'em come down with a long sickness, or drop off sudden. I do, too. It's worse to see 'em suffer. But when they give right up afore your face an' eyes—"

He stopped, and Lydia thought he shuddered. Again she knew. The first wife had died suddenly, and the memory of the shock was too keen upon him to admit of speech. But he shook off reflection as if it had been the dust of the hour. Now he turned to her, and the sweet recognition of his glance was warming her anew. "Don't you go an' play me any such trick," he said, with the whimsical creases deepening in his cheeks. [33]

Yet she thought his eyes were wet.

"What?"

"Dyin'."

A new tenderness was born in her at the moment, seeing what he had endured.

"No," she wanted to say, "I hope you won't have to go through that twice." But she only shook her head brightly at him. "Come," said she, "it's time to harness up."

"I'll drive down through that cross-road," said Eben, "an' then I've finished up all them little byways. Byme-by, when we feel like settin' out for good, we can pike right along the old Boston road, an' that'll take us to aunt Phebe's, an' so on home. But we won't start out till we're good an' ready. I guess you got kinder tired afore."

"I'm ready now," said Lydia. The color was in her cheeks. She felt dauntless. At once, born somehow from this sober talk, she felt a melting championship of him, as if life had hurt him too keenly and she was there to make it up to him. Henceforth she meant to be first and second wife in one.

"Hooray!" called Eben. He tossed up his hat; and the tavern-keeper's wife, making pies by the kitchen window, smiled at him and shook her rolling-pin. "Then we'll start off to-morrer, bright an' early. I don't know how you feel, Mis' Jakes, but I'm possessed to git home." [34]

Lydia, for her part, was soberly glad, yet there was a part of her anticipation that was incredible to her. For even after her spiritual uplift of the moment before, the first thought that throbbed into her mind, like a temptation, was that of the album on the centre-table.

They drove off in the morning brightness, and Eben declared he had a good mind to give away his remaining essences and put for home as hard as he could pelt.

"We might cut right across country," he tempted himself. "No matter 'f we planned suthin' different. But then we couldn't see aunt Phebe."

"You're real fond of her, ain't you?" asked Lydia absently. She was wondering if aunt Phebe would speak of his first wife.

"She was mother's only sister," said Eben, in the deeper tone attendant on his mother's name. "She took care of mother in her last days. I guess we never had a mite o' family trouble but aunt Phebe was there about as soon as she could board the train."

[35] "Eben," said his wife, in her timid way of stealing on his confidence. It seemed now like a shy fashion of convincing him that she was worthy, if he would but let her, to know his heart.

"What is it?"

"Don't you think some things—some troubles—are too hard to be talked about?"

"I guess they be," assented Eben.

"We keep thinkin' an' thinkin' 'em over, but we can't speak. Mebbe 'twould be better for us if we could."

"Mebbe 'twould." Then he pulled out his pipe, as he did when the chariot of his affections neared an emotional pass. Eben was willing to graze a wheel by that abyss, but he skillfully avoided falling over.

They were climbing a long hill; and the horse, head down, sagged sleepily along, pulling faithfully. But at the top he halted, as if it seemed he knew what was below, and waited for their wonder. Lydia's eyes were closed, and Eben had drawn the first puff at his pipe.

"There," said he, "what think o' that?"

Lydia opened her eyes and gave a little cry. They seemed to be at the top of everything,—winding roads, like ribbons, patches of green that were ample woods, three dotted villages, and, full flare in their faces, the sunset sky. [36] The red and gold of it had spread and lavished until the eye, to rest itself, was almost forced, for a calming glimpse, back again to the cold blue east. Lydia looked and could not speak. Eben knew too much even to glance at her. He felt all the wonder of it, and the pride, for it seemed to him that it was, in a way, his sky, because it was so much nearer home. They stayed there in silence while the beauty changed but never faded, and the horse dropped his head, to rest.

"Well," said Eben at last, dryly, "I dunno 's ever I see such a sky as that, unless 'twas some I used to see with my first wife."

For the first time he seemed cruel. A bitter thought shot up in Lydia's heart that at every feast there was to be the unbidden guest. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, the sky had faded and the air was chill.

"I guess you're gittin' tired again," said Eben tenderly. "Well, we'll be to aunt Phebe's by eight, an' she'll put you straight to bed."

The tears had wet her cheeks. They were the first she had shown him, and he looked at them with dismay. "Hullo!" he cried, "hullo!" It was actual terror in his voice. "'Tain't so bad as that!"

Lydia straightened herself in the buggy and wiped away the tears with an impatient hand.

"I guess 'twas the sunset," she said tremulously. "I never see such a sky."

[37] "That all?" Eben was much relieved. Then he touched up the horse, and told him what a lot of oats were waiting in aunt Phebe's barn. "If that's all," he said, giving his mind to Lydia again, "you'll have to spend most o' your time in salt water. That's the kind o' sunsets we're goin' to have every night arter we get home. The doctor's ordered 'em."

Lydia made herself laugh, and they talked no more until they drove up to a prosperous white house on the outskirts of the first village, and aunt Phebe came to meet them. It was all a joyous tumult that night, and Lydia went to bed early, with a confused sense that aunt Phebe was very kind and that she had gold-bowed glasses and shook the floor when she walked, and that the supper was a product of expert cooking. Eben was uproariously gay, in the degree of approaching home, and took aunt Phebe about the waist to waltz with her, whereupon she cuffed him with a futile hand, remarking:—

"Eben Jakes, I'd be ashamed!"

Lydia had a sense of being in a homely paradise where everything was pleasantly at one, yet that she, companioned by the unclassified memory of a woman whose place she held, had no part in the general harmony. Next morning she overslept, and found herself alone. She heard Eben's whistle from the barn and the guffaw of the hired men, to whom he was telling pleasant tales, [38] and there were women's voices from the kitchen, and the fragrance of frying ham. She dressed in haste, and when she went down the breakfast-table was ready, in great abundance, and everybody waiting by their plates: Eben, aunt Phebe and her mild, soft-spoken husband, and Sarah, the spectacled spinster daughter, who looked benevolently dignified enough to be her mother's mother.

"Late? I guess not," said aunt Phebe, sinking into the chair behind the coffee-pot. "Folks get up here when they're a mind to, an' when it comes to Eben's wife—well, you can't say no more'n that in this house."

Lydia took her place rather shyly, but when Eben had found her hand under the tablecloth and

given it a welcoming squeeze, she felt more than half at home. Aunt Phebe passed coffee, and beamed, and forgot to serve herself in pressing food upon the others; but when the first pause came, she leaned back and smiled at her new niece. Lydia looked up. She met the smile and liked it. Aunt Phebe seemed a good deal more than a mother to the nice spinster daughter. She looked as if there were mother-stuff enough in her to pass around and nourish and bless the world. Aunt Phebe was speaking.

"Now," said she, "I didn't have more'n half a glimpse at you last night, Lyddy, such a surprise an' all, an' I had this mornin' to look for'ard to. An' now I'm goin' to take my time an' see for myself what kind of a wife Eben's be'n an' picked out." [39]

She was laughing richly all through the words, and Lydia, though she was blushing, liked the sound of it. She felt quite equal to the scrutiny. She knew the days of driving had given her a color, and she was not unconscious of her new blue waist. Then, too, Eben's hand was again on hers under the friendly cloth. Aunt Phebe looked, took off her glasses, pretended to wipe them, and looked again.

"Well, Eben," said she judicially, "I'll say this for ye, you've done well."

"Pretty good-lookin' old lady, I think myself," said Eben, with a proud carelessness. "Course she's nothin' to what my first wife was at her age; but then, nobody'd expect that kind o' luck twice. Aunt Phebe, here's my cup. You make it jest like the first, or you'll hear from me."

Lydia drooped over her plate. If Eben had sought her hand then, she would have snatched it away from him. All the delicate instincts within her felt suddenly outraged. At last she acknowledged to herself, in a flash, how coarse-minded he must be to mingle the present with his sacred past. But she started and involuntarily looked up. The spinster cousin was giggling like a girl. [40]

"Now you've got back," she was saying to Eben. "Now I know it's you, sure enough. He took that up when he wa'n't hardly out o' pinafores," she said to Lydia.

"What?" Lydia managed, through her anger at him.

"Comparin' everything with his first wife. Where'd he get it, mother?"

"Why," said aunt Phebe, "there was that old Simeon Spence that used to come round clock-mendin'. He was forever tellin' what his first wife used to do, an' Eben he ketched it up, an' then, when we laughed at him, he done it the more. Land o' love, Lyddy, you chokin'?"

Lydia was sobbing and laughing together, and Eben turned in a panic from his talk with uncle Sim, to pound her back.

"No, no," she kept saying. "I'm all right. No! no!"

"Suthin' went the wrong way," commiserated aunt Phebe, when they were all in their places again and Lydia had wiped her eyes.

"Yes," said Lydia joyously, as if choking were a very happy matter. "It went the wrong way. Eben, you pass aunt Phebe my cup."

And while the coffee was coming she sought out Eben's hand again and turned to gaze at him with such tell-tale eyes that the spinster cousin, blushing a little, looked at once away, and wondered how it would seem to be so foolish and so fond. [41]

A FLOWER OF APRIL [42]

Ellen Withington and her mother lived in a garden. There was a house behind it, with great white pillars like a temple, but it played a secondary part to that sweet inclosure—all bees and blossoms. Ellen and her mother duly slept in the house, and through the barren months it did very well for shelter while they talked of slips and bulbs and thirsted over the seed-catalogue come by mail. But from the true birth of the year to the next frost they were steadily out-of-doors, weeding, tending, transplanting, with an untiring passion. All the blossoms New England counts her dearest grew from that ancient mould, enriched with every spring. Ladies'-delights forgathered underneath the hedge, and lilies-of-the-valley were rank with chill sweetness in their time. The flowering currant breathed like fruitage from the East, and there were never such peonies, such poppies, and such dahlias in all the town.

Ellen herself had an apple-bloom face, and violet eyes down-dropped; some one said their lashes were long enough to braid. Fine gold hair flew about her temples, and her innocent chin sank chastely like a nun's. She and her mother never had a minute for thinking about clothes, and [43]

so they wore soft sad-colored stuffs rather like the earth; but these quite satisfied Ellen, because they were warm or cool to suit the weather, and beauty, she thought, grew only from the ground.

One spring twilight Mrs. Withington was putting out her geraniums, while Ellen leaned over the gate and talked with Susan Long. The frogs were peeping down by the mill, and a breath of dampness came from the upturned soil. Susan Long was the only one of the old schoolgirls with whom Ellen had kept any semblance of intimacy; the rest of them thought her oddly unsuited to their grown-up pastimes. She was like a bud, all close and green, while they flared their petals to the sun and begged for cherishing.

"Just think," said Ellen in her reedy voice, never loud enough to be heard at "teacher's desk" in school, "while we've been standing here three couples have gone by. I never saw so much pairing off."

Susan laughed exuberantly. She was a big girl, with a mariner's walk and hard red cheeks.

"Anybody but you'd seen 'em a good many times," she remarked. "If you ain't the queerest! Why, they're fellers and girls!"

"Yes, I know it," said Ellen innocently. "One was John Davis and Maria Orne, one was—" [44]

"Oh, I don't mean that! I mean they're goin' together. Ain't you heard what old uncle Zephaniah said down to the Ridge? He told father this year'd be known as the time o' the flood, all creation walkin' two and two. Why, everybody in Countisbury's gettin' married. Courtin' begun in the fall, with singin'-school, and this is the upshot. What do you s'pose I'm waitin' here for, 'sides talkin' with you? Just hold on a minute and you'll see Milt Richardson pokin' along this way. Then there'll be four couples instead o' three."

"O Sue!" said Ellen, in a little bruised tone. She felt disturbed, as if the spring twilight had in some manner turned to a much-revealing day. Sue leaned over the gate and whispered rapidly:

"I'll tell you somethin' else, only don't you let it go no further. Mother says might as well not count your chickens till they're hatched, and aunt Templeton was left at the meetin'-house door. He asked me seven weeks ago come Wednesday, and I've got lots of my sewin' done. Some of my trimmin' 's real pretty. You come over'n' see it. Good-by. Don't you tell."

She walked carelessly away down the road, not casting a glance behind. But Milton was coming, a tall fellow, like his sweetheart heavy and honest of face. They might have been brother [45] and sister for the likeness between them.

Ellen withdrew from the gate and hurried back to her mother. "Come," she urged hastily, "let's go in."

Mrs. Withington was bent almost double, pressing the earth about the cramped geranium roots. She felt the delight of their freedom, with all the world to spread in.

"I ain't got quite through," she said, without looking up. "You cold? Run right along. I'll come."

But Ellen only flitted round the house into a deeper shade and waited. She hardly knew why, except that she was disinclined to see any more people walking two and two, with that significant and terrifying future before them.

The next morning, drawn by some subtle power, she went over to Susan's, and after sitting awhile on the doorstep, they slipped upstairs into the front chamber, and opened drawer after drawer of fine white clothing, wonderfully trimmed.

"Long-cloth!" said Susan, in a whisper. "Here's some unbleached. We had it on the grass last year; seemed as if it never'd whiten out. That's for every day."

Ellen looked, in the short-breathed wonder which sometimes beset her over a new blossom. [46] She touched the fabric delicately and lifted an edge of crocheted lace.

"Let's go over to Maria's," said Susan. "I'll make her show you hers."

They took the short round of the village homes where there were daughters young and still unwed. Everywhere white cloth, serpentine braid, and crocheted lace! Truly it was a marrying year. Ellen said very little, and the girls, talking among themselves, forgot to notice her any more than a flower in a vase.

But that late afternoon was very warm, and when she and her mother sat together on the steps considering rose-bugs, she suddenly broke off to say,—

"Mother, should you just as soon I'd have some new things, trimmed like the girls'?"

Mrs. Withington regarded her in wonder. Ellen did not lift her eyes, but a blush rose delicately in her cheeks.

"Well, I don't know but what 'twould be a good plan," said her mother, after a pause. "You ain't got an individual thing that's trimmed."

So next day they walked the two miles to town, and for weeks thereafter stayed indoors, setting stitches in snowy cloth, with piles of it drifted near. For a time that spring, the garden almost ran [47] to weeds. Then, because a long dormant consciousness stirred in Mrs. Withington, she went into

the attic and brought down woven treasures; and one Sunday, Ellen, her cheeks scarlet with the excitement of it, walked to church in a shot silk, all blue and pink, and a hat with a long white feather over her golden hair. There were pink roses under the brim, and they paled beside her face.

"God sakes!" whispered Milton Richardson, in the singing-seats, "Ellen Withington's a beauty!"

The girls rustled their starched petticoats and nudged one another.

"Ain't she come out!" said one; and another answered,—

"My stars! she's the cutest thing I ever see in all *my* life!"

Even the minister, who was then accounted an old man, being between forty-five and fifty, stopped on his way down the aisle where Ellen waited for her mother, busy in matronly conclave, and shook hands with her.

"I am very glad to see you out, my dear Ellen," said he. "You have been absent quite a while."

She looked up at him, her blue eyes full of wonder; everybody knew she had been regularly to church ever since she was a little girl. But the minister smiled warmly at her and went on.

[48] The next Sunday she came to church in a foam of white like a pear tree. That day Henry Fox, who lingered still unmated, strode up to her and remarked, while a cordial circle stood about to hear, "Pretty warm to-day." This was equivalent to "See you home?" at evening meeting.

"Yes," said she, desperately, "real warm." Then she caught her mother's hand and clung to it; and though Henry kept a dogged step beside them to their gate, it was only Mrs. Withington who spoke.

When the two women were inside the great cool sitting-room, Ellen was holding still by that hard, faithful hand. "Mother," she entreated breathlessly, "I needn't ever be with anybody but you, need I?"

Jealous arms were about her even before the words had time to come.

"No! no! you're mother's own girl."

The very next Wednesday Ellen went alone to match some trimming; her maiden outfit neared completion, and she was in haste to finish it. The garden needed her. When she had struck into the pine woods on her way home a wagon rattled up behind, and Milton Richardson called out, "Ride?"

[49] She was too timid to say, "No," and so she took his hand and climbed up to the seat beside him. The horse fell into a walk, and Ellen blushed more and more because she could not think of anything to say. Midway of the pines the horse stood still.

"Le's wait a minute in the shade," said Milton; and Ellen, glancing swiftly at him, wondered why he seemed so strange. He sought her eyes again, but she was gazing at the pines. Her cheek was rosy red.

"You been shoppin'?" he asked desperately.

"Yes," said Ellen, grateful to him for speech, wherein she was so poor. "I went to get some braid."

"You makin' up pretty things, same 's all the girls?"

"I've made some."

Milton caught his breath.

"O Ellen!" he burst forth, "I wish you'd let me kiss you!"

Suddenly she was gone out of the wagon, like a bird let loose from an imprisoning hand. He saw her running like a swift sweet sprite along the darkening road.

"Ellen, you hold on!" he cried, whipping up to follow. "I didn't mean nothin'! Oh, you let me jest speak one word."

But at the noise of his pursuit she fled over the low stone wall, and without a look behind, dipped into the hollow on her homeward way. [50] Milton swore miserably and drove on. He saw Mrs. Withington gathering cowslip greens in a marsh sufficiently removed from home, and that heartened him to draw rein before the still white house. Ellen would be alone. When he strode into the sitting-room she sprang up from the lounge where she had cast herself. The tears still hung in her long lashes, and her cheeks were white.

"My Lord! Ellen Withington!" he cried, in a shamed and rough remorse. "Couldn't you give me a chance to speak? I don't know what under the light o' the sun made me say that. Only you looked so terrible pretty. But you needn't ha' took it so."

She stood staring at him, fascinated, one brown hand trembling on her heart. Her eyes shot a glance at the door behind him, and he was enraged anew with pity of her.

"You don't know what it is to see a girl as pretty as you be," he went on, as if he scolded her,

"and all dressed up to the nines."

She was still looking at him dumbly. She saw beyond him the vista of Sue's broken life.

"Well, then, won't you be friends?" he urged. "Great king! you couldn't be any more offish if I'd done it. You needn't think anything's altered. You're the prettiest creatur' that ever stepped, but I wouldn't give up Sue for the Queen of England. Now will you say it's square?"

[51] So nothing was changed. She could not understand it, but she nodded at him and smiled a little. Her trembling did not cease until he was far upon the road.

When Mrs. Withington came home with her basket of greens, Ellen had supper all ready, and she ran forward and held a corner of her mother's apron while they walked together toward the house.

"You look kind o' peaked," said Mrs. Withington tenderly. "What you got on that old brown thing for?"

"I'm going to weed after supper," Ellen answered. "The garden looks real bad."

Mrs. Withington gazed at her keenly.

"Henry Fox asked if we were goin' to be home this evenin'," she said, with much indifference. "I told him I guessed so."

Ellen held the apron hard.

"O mother!" she whispered; "you see him. I haven't got to, have I?"

"Law! no, child," said the other woman. "I guess you ain't. You're mother's own girl."

So when the dusk came Mrs. Withington sat in the parlor and talked of crops with Henry, wan beside her, while Ellen, safe at the back of the house, weeded a bed of pansies purpling there. A soft after-glow lighted all the windows to flame, and fell full upon the face of one dark flower, [52] quite human in its sombre wistfulness. Ellen knelt and kissed it tremulously.

"You darling one!" she murmured under her breath; and somehow she knew that this was the only sort of kiss she should ever want to give.

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[53]

THE AUCTION

Miss Letitia Lamson sat by the open fire, at a point where she could easily reach the tongs for the adjusting of any vagabond stick, and Cap'n Oliver Drown, in the opposite angle, held dominion over the poker. No one else would Miss Letitia have admitted to partnership in the managing of her fire; but Cap'n Oliver wielded an undisputed privilege. The poker suited him because he had a way, in the heat of friendly dissension, of smashing a stick much before it was ready to drop apart of its own charring; and that Miss Letitia never resented. She herself was gentle and persuasive with a fire; but the cap'n's more impetuous method seemed to belong to him, and she understood, without much thinking about it, that when he blustered a little, even over a hard-working blaze, it was because he must. He was a tempestuously organized creature, of a martial front and a baby heart, most fortunate in his breadth of shoulder, his height, and the readiness of the choleric blood to come into his cheeks, the eagerness of his husky voice to bluster.

[54] These outward tokens of an untrammeled spirit helped him to hold his own among his kind, though his oldest friend, Miss Letty, prized him for different reasons. In her soul she had always regarded him as "real cunning," and had even, when she passed to bring up the dish of apples from the cellar, or a mug of cider, longed to touch the queer lock that would straggle down from his sparsely covered poll in absurd travesty of a baby's tended curl.

Probably no one, and certainly not the captain himself, knew exactly how Miss Letty regarded him. Miss Letty had been forty-seven years old the last November that ever was, as she had just told him, in talking over her forthcoming departure from the house where she had lived all the forty-seven years; and he knew, she added, just how she felt about the place and all that was in it. The cap'n nodded gravely, thinking, if it paid to say so, that he knew how the town looked upon her. She was good as gold, the neighbors said, and at that moment she especially looked it, in a still, serious way. She was a wholesome woman, with nothing showy to commend her and little to remark except the extreme earnestness of her upward glance. From her unconscious humility she seemed to be always gazing up at people, even when their eyes were on a level with hers. It might have indicated a habit of mind.

[55] It was only to-night that the rumor of her going had reached Cap'n Oliver, and he had come in to talk it over. Miss Letty's heart quieted as she saw him take her father's capacious armchair

and settle on the appliqué cushion, so sacred to him that whenever the cat stole a nap out of it, stray hairs had to be brushed scrupulously off, lest Cap'n Oliver should appear for an evening's gossip.

Miss Letty's house was at the end of a narrow way, bordered by cinnamon-roses and stragglers from old gardens; and some of the neighbors said it would make them as nervous as a witch to be so far from the road. But it did not make Miss Letty nervous. For some reason, perhaps because of long usage, it helped her feel secure.

"Well," she was saying mildly to Cap'n Oliver, "I'm gettin' along in years. What's the use of denyin' it? That's what Ellery said in his letter. 'You're 'most fifty, Aunt Letty,' says he. 'Time to quit livin' alone an' come out here an' let us take care o' you.'"

Cap'n Oliver scowled at the fire as if he found the freshly burning sticks too strong to be smashed, and resented it.

"Well," said he, "I'm fifty-four. Let 'em come to me."

"Now, be you really?" asked Miss Letty, in a pretty surprise, though she knew all the calendar of his life from the day she went to school for the first time and heard him, in the second reader, profusely interpreting a martial declaration to the Romans. "Well, who'd have thought it!" [56]

"I don't know," said Cap'n Oliver, staring into the fire, "as I'm any less of a man because I'm fifty-four years old. S'pose anybody should come to me an' say: 'Now you're fifty-four, cap'n. You better shut up shop an' go an' live in Washington Territory.'"

"It ain't Washington Territory," said Miss Letty, setting him right with a becoming air of humility. "It's Chicago they live to, Ellery an' Mary."

"Be that as it may," said the cap'n, "I've eat off my own plates an' drinked out o' my own cups a good many year, an' if anybody should try to give me a home, I'll bet ye, Letty, I'd be as mad as a hornet. I wisht you'd be mad, too. I'd think more of ye if ye was."

"You've been blest in a good housekeeper," said Miss Letty, in a gentle recall. "It ain't many men left alone as you be that's got anybody strong an' willin' like Sarah Ann Douglas to heft the burden an' lug it right along."

"It ain't Sarah Ann Douglas," said the cap'n. "Sarah Ann's a good girl, worth her weight in gold, an' growin' more valuable every day, but it ain't she that's kep' a roof over my head. I've kep' it myself because I would have it. So there ye be." [57]

"Well, I dunno how 'tis," said Miss Letty. She was staring placidly into the fire. "But I don't seem to have so much spirit as you have, Oliver. Seems to me, if Ellery an' Mary are goin' to feel worried havin' me livin' on here alone, mebbe I'd better sell off an' go back with 'em. That's the way I look at it."

"You never had any way of your own," said the cap'n.

Miss Letty put out a firm, plump hand and presented him with the poker.

"That stick's 'most fell apart," she said pacifically. "Mebbe you better give it a kind of a knock."

The cap'n did it absently and was soothed by the process. Then Miss Letty laid the shortened pieces together in a workmanlike way, and they blazed afresh.

"What you goin' to do with your things?" asked the cap'n, pointing a broad and expressive thumb about the place.

"Sell 'em off. That's what Ellery wrote. He says I could have an auction mebbe a week 'fore Thanksgivin',—that's about now,—an' then when he an' Mary come we could all go over to cousin Liza's to stay, an' start for Chicago from there. Seems if 'twas all complete."

The cap'n was staring at her. [58]

"You ain't goin' to sell off your things without ay or no?" he inquired. "Don't ye prize 'em—the table you've eat off of an' chairs you've set in sence you were little?"

Miss Letty winced, and then recovered herself.

"Yes," she said, "I do prize 'em. But it seems if they'd got to go."

"Why don't ye take 'em with ye?"

"I couldn't do that, Oliver. Ellery has got his home furnished all complete—oak chamber sets an' I dunno what all. There wouldn't be no room for my old sticks."

The cap'n meditated.

"Letty," said he at length, "if there was anybody you ever set by after your own father an' mother, 'twas my wife Mary."

"Yes," said Letty, with one of her warmly earnest looks. "Mary an' I was always a good deal to one another."

"Well, do you know what she said to me once? 'Twas in her last sickness. She was tracin' back

over old times, that year you an' I was together so much, goin' to singin'-school an' all. You had a good voice, Letty—voice like a bird. You recollect that year, don't ye?"

"Yes," said Letty. Her voice trembled a little. "I recollect."

[59] "That was the spring Mary kinder broke down an' went into a decline, an' you journeyed off to Dill River, an' made that long visit. An' when you come back, Mary an' I was engaged. Well, I'm gettin' ahead of my story. What Mary said was, 'Oliver,' says she, 'you don't know half how good Letty is. Nobody knows but me. It's her own fault,' says she. 'She gives up too much, an' it makes the rest of us selfish.'"

"Did she say that?" asked Letty. She was awakened to a vivid recognition of something beyond the outer significance of the words. Then she seemed to lay her momentary emotion aside, as if it were something she could cover out of sight. She laughed a little. "Well," she said, "I guess I don't give up much nowadays. I ain't got so very much to give."

Cap'n Oliver rose and carefully arranged the fire as if there would be no one to do it after he was gone. Miss Letty loved that little custom. It seemed a kind of special service, and often, after he had done it and taken his leave, she went to bed earlier than she had intended because, when his fire had burned out, she could not bear to rearrange it.

"Well," said he, "you bear it in mind, what Mary said. Sometimes you give up too much. You've gi'n up all your life, an' now you're goin' to give up to Ellery an' Mary. You think twice, Letty, that's all I say. Think twice."

[60] He shook hands with her gravely, according to their habit, and she heard his steps along the frozen lane. Then she opened the door softly a crack—this was old custom, too—that she might hear them farther. This time she was sure she actually knew when he turned into the road. She went back to the room and stood for a moment, her hand resting on the table, looking at the orderly fire and then at the chair which seemed to belong more to him than to her father. The cat got up from the lounge where, as she knew perfectly well, she had to content herself when Cap'n Oliver came, stretched, and walked over to the chair as if to assert her ownership. She was gathering her muscles for the easy leap when Miss Letty pounced upon her, gently yet with an involuntary decision.

"Don't you get up there, puss," she said jealously. "Do you think you've got to have a share in everything that's goin'?"

Then she laughed at herself in a gentle shame, lifted puss into the seat of desire, and stroked her ruffled dignity, and still laughing, in that indulgent way, sat down to see the fire out before she went to bed.

The next day Miss Letty set about cleaning her house, the actual first step toward leaving it; [61] and suddenly, as she worked, at a moment she could never identify, it came over her that things which had been hers by such long usage that they were as unconsidered as her hand that wrought upon them, were to be hers no more. Then, as she dusted and rubbed, she stopped from time to time, to regard the rooms and their furnishings musingly and wonder if she should remember every smallest touch of their homely charm. She hoped she should at least remember.

All the week she did not see Cap'n Oliver. He was over at the Pinelands, she understood, making his married sister a little visit, as he always did in the fall of the year. If she thought it a little hard that he should be away the last week her home was to wear its accustomed face, she did not say so, even to herself. It seemed to her a poor habit to wish for what was obviously not to be, and all by herself she set upon the day for the sale of her goods and sent for the auctioneer to come.

An auction was a great event throughout the countryside. It ordinarily happened in the spring, as if people had taken all winter to get used to parting with their possessions; and then wagons of every sort came from whatever region the county paper had reached, and families brought their lunches in butter-boxes and went about scrutinizing the household gear that was to come under the hammer, glad at last to know what the house walls had really held; [62] or they visited with their neighbors in little groups. But this was a day of fall sunshine and drifting leaves. Miss Letty, standing at an upper window looking out on her pear tree, the leaves leathery brown, felt a twitching of the lips. She gazed farther over her domain, and it seemed to her that it had never been so pleasant before, so mellowed and softened by the last light of the year. She knew there were neighbors in the yard below, and could not bring herself to glance at them. A line of horses stood there, and, she was sure, all the way up the lane, and she remembered that was the way they had stood when her mother was buried.

Then some one laughed out, in a way she knew, and she looked down and saw Cap'n Oliver. He was staring up at her window, as he answered a neighbor's greeting, and he gave a little oblique nod at her, and stumped along up the path. At once she recalled herself to the day, and went downstairs to meet him. It seemed very simple and plain now he had come.

The neighbors standing in the entry stood aside to let her pass, but she could scarcely notice them. It began to seem as if she must reach Cap'n Oliver, and then all would be well. The cap'n was in vigorous condition. His face looked ruddier, and he was shaking her hand and saying, as if she had endowed him with her state of mind:—

[63] "Soon be over, Letty, soon be over. Don't you give it a thought."

"No," said Miss Letty, choking, "I won't. I won't give it a thought."

But at that moment Hiram Jackson, who knew everything and was fervidly anxious to be the earliest herald, came stammering out his eagerness to tell.

"Say, Miss Letty. Say! you can't have no auction. You won't have no auctioneer. Old Blaisdell's wife's sister's dead, down to East Branch, an' he's gone."

Miss Letty, breathless, looked at the cap'n. "Well, there!" she said. It was in her mind that now she might not need to have the auction at all; and again she wondered, since she must have it, how she could ever make up her mind to it again.

"Oh, dear!" she breathed. "I'm sorry."

The cap'n was frowning at her, only because he was so deep in thought. He threw up his head a little, then, bluffly, as if he had reached a clearer decision he meant to follow out.

"Not a word, Letty," said he. "Now don't you speak a word. I'm goin' to auction 'em off myself."

She stared at him, her lips apart, in protest.

"Why, Oliver," she said, "you ain't an auctioneer."

"Well, I shall be after this bout. Now you come straight into the sittin'-room an' set down in the corner underneath the ostrich egg, where I can see you good an' plain. An' if I come to anything you want to bid in, you hold up your finger, an' I'll knock it down to you. You understand, don't ye, Letty?" [64]

It was hard to realize that she did, she looked so like a frightened little animal, turning her head this way and that, as if she longed for leaves to cover her.

"You understand, Letty, don't ye?" the cap'n was asking with great gentleness; and because she saw at last some sign of distress in his face also, she quieted, in a dutiful fashion, and nodded at him.

"Yes," she said, "I'll be where you can see me. But I sha'n't bid nothin' in. I don't prize 'em 'specially more'n I prize everything together. If I can give up an' go out West, I guess I can get along without my furniture. Shouldn't you think so?"

She went hurrying away across the hall and into the sitting-room, and Cap'n Oliver, his head bent a little, stroked his chin and watched her. Then he followed, making his way through the friendly crowd in hall and sitting-room, and mounted the dry-goods box prepared for the auctioneer. He looked about him and smiled a little, partly because people were gazing at him sympathetically, and partly over his own embarrassing plight. For he was a shy man. Nobody knew it but himself, and he was afraid that after to-day everybody would know. [65]

"Well, neighbors," said he, "I feel as if I was runnin' for President or hog-reeve or somethin', or goin' to speak in meetin'. But I ain't. I'm goin' to auction off Letty Lamson's things, an' I ain't been to an auction myself sence I was seventeen an' set on the fence an' chewed gum an' played 'twas tobacker while old Dan'el Cummings's farm was auctioned off down to the last stick o' timber. Well, I don't know 's I could say how 'twas done, nor how it's commonly done now, but I can take a try at it. Now, here's some books Miss Letty's brought down out o' the attic. I don't know what they be, but they look to me as if they might ha' come out of her gran'ther's lib'ry—old Parson Lamson, ye know."

"Yes," said Miss Letty, from the low rocking-chair a neighbor had insisted on giving up to her, "they did. Many's the time I've watched him porin' over 'em winter nights with two candles."

"There, you see! they're Parson Lamson's books. Many a good word he got out of 'em for his sermons, I'll bet ye a dollar. Why, ye recollect how much Parson Lamson done for this town, how he got up sewin'-circles in war-time an' set everybody to scrapin' lint, an' climbed out of his bed after he couldn't hardly stand with rheumatism to say good-by to the boys when they enlisted, an' how he wrote to 'em an' prayed for 'em—why, them books are wuth their weight in gold. How much am I offered for Parson Lamson's books? A dollar-seventy—Why, bless you, Tim Fry, there ain't a book there but's wuth a dollar-seventy taken by itself! Why, I'll start it myself at thirteen—" [66]

"Oh, don't you do it, Cap'n, don't you do it!" called Miss Letty piercingly. "I don't want 'em to bid on gran'ther's books. I want them books myself, if I have to work my fingers to the bone."

The cap'n took out his beautiful colored handkerchief with Joseph and his brethren on it, and wiped his face.

"Gone!" said he, "to Miss Letty Lamson. Now, ladies an' gentlemen, here's a little chair. I know that chair, an' so do you. It's the chair little Letty Lamson used to set in when she wa'n't more'n three year old, an' her mother used to keep her out under the sweet-bough tree in that little rocker whilst she was washin' or churnin'! What?"

He paused, for Miss Letty had waved a frantic hand. The tears were running down her cheeks. The others had before them the picture of little Letty Lamson swaying and singing to herself, but she saw the brown apple-stems over her head and smelled the bitter-sweetness of the blooms. She saw her mother's plump bare arms as they went up and down with the churn-dasher or in [67]

and out of the suds, and felt again the pang of love that used to tell her that mother was the most beautiful creature in the world.

"Why," said she, regardless of her listeners, "I wouldn't part with that chair for a hundred dollars. How ever come you to think I'd part with my little chair?"

The cap'n was looking at her in a frank perplexity.

"The chair," said he, "remains the property of our friend and neighbor, Miss Letty Lamson. Now, ladies an' gentlemen, here's a fire-set—tongs, shovel, an' andirons. That fire-set has been in this very settin'-room as long as I can remember. Summer-times the andirons have been trimmed up with sparrergrass an' the like o' that, an' winter-times they've been shined up complete an' the fire snappin' behind 'em. What am I offered—"

Miss Letty was standing.

"Oh," she cried, "I never meant to put that fire-set in. Why, don't you remember—"

[68] She was facing the cap'n, and the appeal of her voice and look ran straight to him over the heads of the others, like a message. It bade him recall how he and she had sat together and talked of sad things and happy ones, night after night, for many years. The talks had been mostly cheerful, for the cap'n would have it so, and whenever she felt poorly she had taken pains to put on a lively front, because she reasoned that menfolks hated squally weather. Now, with the passing of the andirons and all they stood for, it looked to her as if a door had shut on that pleasant seclusion where they two had communed together, and there would be no more laughter in the world. "Oliver!" she said, and stopped, because the coming words had choked her.

The cap'n was looking at her over his glasses with extreme benevolence.

"Letty," said he, "I guess you better go upstairs an' sort out some o' the bed-linen an' coverlets. I understood they wa'n't quite ready, an' we shall get to 'em before long. If I come to anything down here I think you set by particularly an' that you can pack up as well as not, I'll bid it in for ye."

The neighbors were nodding in a kindly confirmation, and Miss Letty also understood it to be for the best. She made her way through the friendly aisle cleared for her, and Cap'n Oliver waited until he heard her on the stairs above. He drew a heavy breath. [69]

"Now," said he, "I guess we can poke along. It ain't to be wondered at anybody should want to bid in their own things, but it's kind of distressin' to an auctioneer that wants to earn his money. Now here's this high-boy. I'll rattle it off before Miss Letty gets time to have a change of heart an' come down again. What am I offered for old Parson Lamson's high-boy, bonnet-top an' old brasses all complete?"

Timothy Fry, a bright-eyed youth in the background, started it at fifteen dollars. Timothy had hitherto, in his twenty years, shown no sign of enthusiasm more sophisticated than that of shooting birds in their season and roaming the woods in a happy vagabondage while the law was on. When he made his bid there was a great turning of heads. Some looked at him, but others fixed the cap'n with a challenging glance, because he and the cap'n were great cronies, and it had been jocosely said they were thick as thieves, and if one lied t'other would swear to it. But Timothy, in his Sunday suit, with a blue tie and an elaborate scarf-pin, looked the picture of innocence, and it was concluded that, although no one had suspected it, he was thinking of setting up housekeeping for himself. [70] The cap'n's face had an earnest absorption. He was evidently occupied only in being auctioneer.

"Pshaw!" he said, with a conversational ruthlessness. "Fifteen dollars! Why, I'd give that myself an' set it up out there at the cross-roads for autos to bid on while they run. Its wuth—well, I wouldn't say what 'twas wuth. Maybe you'd laugh, an' I ain't goin' to be laughed at, if I be an auctioneer."

"Twenty-five," piped up Deacon Eli King, won by the lure of city rivalry.

"Twenty-six," Timothy offered quietly.

"Twenty-eight," trembled Hannah Bond, who lived alone and braided mats for the city trade. She had always wanted a high-boy, but the sound of her own voice made it seem as if bidding might be almost too steep a price to pay for one.

"Twenty-nine," said Timothy.

After that there was very little competition. Nobody wanted a high-boy except for commercial possibilities, and about the time the bidding reached thirty-five dollars a foreshadowing timidity began to overspread the assembly. An autumn wind came up and set the bare woodbine sprays to beating on the window, to the tune of nearing snow. Summer buyers seemed far away. When one considered the drifted leaves and the cold sky, it looked as if full purses and credulous minds were a midsummer dream, never to come again. [71] So the high-boy, in this moment of commercial panic, was knocked down to Timothy Fry. Five or six chairs followed, and these also became his.

Then the crowd pressed into the west sitting-room, where there was richer treasure. Here, too, Timothy's unmoved voice beat steadily on, raising every bid, and here, too, he came out victor. In the next room also he swept the field, and now at last the crowd murmurously compared

certainties, one woman darkly prophesying he never'd pay for them, because he hadn't a cent—not a cent—laid up, and a man returning that nobody need worry. 'Twas only a joke of Tim's; but Miss Letty'd be the one to suffer. Timothy's eyes and ears were closed to comment. His commercial onslaught continued, and when, in the early dusk, horses were unhitched and there was time for comment at the gate, it was clearly understood that, save for what Miss Letty had bid in at the start, Timothy Fry was the possessor of every stick of furniture, every cup and bowl even, and all the ornaments and articles of common usage in the house. Timothy himself had gone. The men had looked about for him, to rally him on his approaching nuptials, the women for the ruthless cross-questioning his madness had invited; but he had slipped away softly, like the wood-creatures he hunted. Even Cap'n Oliver, who might be supposed to know his inner mind, [72] had betaken himself to the porch, and stood there, hat in hand, wiping his heated brow.

"Don't ask me," he returned to queries and conclusions in the mass. "I'm nothin' in the world but an auctioneer. Now I've learned the road, I dunno but I shall go right along auctionin' off everything I come acrost. You better be gettin' along home. Mebbe I'll sell your teams right off under your noses, if the fit comes over me."

"Timothy ain't goin' to be married, is he?" inquired aunt Belinda Soule, who sent items to the "County Star."

"S'pose so, sometime," concurred the cap'n jovially. "It's the end o' mortals here below. Dunno but I shall be married myself, if it comes to that."

"When's he goin' to take his furniture away?" continued aunt Belinda, with the persistence of her kind.

"Don't know. Mebbe he ain't goin' to take it. Mebbe he's goin' to marry Letty. 'Pears to me I heard a kind of a rumor she was goin' to marry 'fore long."

Aunt Belinda shook her head at him.

"Don't talk so about a nice respectable woman," said she. "An' she goin' to move away from us an' live nobody knows where. It's a shame."

[73] The cap'n burst into a laugh that aunt Belinda privately thought coarse, and turned back into the house, while she joined a group of matrons and went away home, discoursing volubly.

Cap'n Oliver stopped for a minute at the window in the empty parlor, watching their departing bulk, and then went into the hall, where the tread of many invading feet had left the moist autumn soil, with bits of grass and now and then a yellowed leaf.

"Letty!" he called roundly.

There was a light step above, and then Miss Letty's voice, a very little voice suited to the dusk and stillness, came down the stairs.

"Be they gone?" she faltered.

"Yes," said the cap'n, "they're gone, every confounded one of 'em."

"Did they take the things with 'em?" inquired Miss Letty. "I didn't dast to look. I knew I couldn't help feelin' it if I see 'em all loaded up with things I knew."

"You come down here, Letty," said the cap'n. "I want to say a word to you."

She did come, wondering, her face sodden with tears, and a miserable little ball of a wet handkerchief in her grasp. The cap'n met her at the foot of the stairs and, without warning, took her by the shoulders and shook her slightly, why, he did not know, except perhaps as a warning to put a prettier face on the matter. Then he drew her into his arms with a conclusiveness it [74] would have been difficult to resist, and kissed her soft wet cheeks. He kissed them a good many times, and ended by touching her trembling mouth.

"There," said the cap'n, "I don't know 's I ever kissed you before, Letty, but I expect to a good many times again, off 'n' on."

"Oh, yes, you did once," said Miss Letty, with unexpected frankness and simplicity. "'Twas the eighteenth of November, thirty years ago this very fall."

The cap'n looked at her and broke into a wondering laugh.

"Letty," said he, "you're the beateree, an' I'm a nat'ral-born fool. You're goin' to marry me right off as soon as I can get the license."

"An' live over to your house an' not go to Chicago?" inquired Miss Letty beatifically.

"Course you won't go to Chicago, unless we go together some spring or fall an' make 'em a visit an' show 'em we've got suthin' to live for as well as they have."

"Then I needn't have sold my furniture," said she, with a happy turn of logic.

"Sold your furniture? You ain't sold it. I had Tim Fry bid it all in for me, an' I was goin' to have it crated up an' tell Ellery, when he come, he'd got to let me pay it on to Chicago, whether or no. [75] An' then when I stood up there like a rooster on a fence, auctionin' of it off, it all come over me

'twa'n't the furniture an' the house I should miss. 'Twas you. I made up my mind then an' there I'd keep ye if I had to hopple ye by the ankle like Tolman's jumpin' steer."

Miss Letty withdrew from him and took a timid step to the west-room door, where, though the dusk was gathering, she could find the familiar shapes of her beloved possessions.

"I don't see how in the world I ever made up my mind I could," she said, a happy tremor in her voice.

It sounded to Cap'n Oliver strangely like a voice out of his past, unquelled by fears and abnegations. It was the voice that used to greet him when, in his splendid blue suit and shining satin tie, he had called for Letty Lamson, some thirty years ago, to take her in his sleigh to singing-school.

"Could what?" he inquired hilariously, out of his dream where the present made the fire on the hearth and the past lent him figures to sit by it.

"Why, get along without my old things."

"I s'pose you never so much as thought you couldn't get along without me," suggested the cap'n, in a kindly rallying.

"Yes," said Miss Letty soberly, "I did think that. I knew I couldn't."

SATURDAY NIGHT

Jerry Norton stopped for a moment swinging his axe and crashing it into the grain of the tree, and took off his cap to cool his wet forehead. He looked very strong, standing there, equipped with great shoulders, a back as straight as the tree its might was smashing, and the vigor bespoken by red-brown eyes, a sanguine skin, and thick bright hair. He seemed to be regarding the pine trunks against the snow of the hill beyond, and again the tiny tracks nearer by, where a winter animal had flurried; but really all the beauties of the woods were sealed to him.

He was going back five days to his quarrel with Stella Joyce, and scowling as he thought how hateful she had been in her injustice. It was all about the ten-foot strip of land the city man had claimed from Jerry's new building lot through a newly found flaw in the title. Jerry, Stella mourned, had relinquished the land without question.

"I'd have hung on to it and fought him through every court in the country," she had declared, in a passion of reproach. "You're so numb, Jerry! You just go pokin' along from day to day, lettin' folks walk over you—and never a word!"

Jerry had been unable, out of his numbness, to explain that he gave up the land because the other man's title to it, he had seen at once, was a valid one; nor could she, on her side, tell him how her wounded feeling was intensified because old aunt Bray, come from the West for a visit, had settled down upon him and his mother, in all likelihood to remain and go into the new house when it was built. But there was no time for either of them to reach pacific reasons when every swift word of hers begot a sullen look from him; and before they knew it they had parted.

Now, while he was retracing the path of their disagreement, lighted by the flaming lamps of her upbraiding, he heard a movement, light enough for a furry creature on its way to covert, and Stella stood before him. She did not look either obstinate or likely to continue any quarrel, however well begun. She was a round little person, complete in her miniature beauties, and now her blue eyes sought him with an extremity of emotion very honest and also timid. She had wrapped herself in a little red shawl, and her hands, holding it tight about her, gave a fantastic impression of being clasped in mute appeal. Jerry looked at her in wonder. For an instant they both stood as still as two wood-creatures surprisingly met and, so far, undetermined upon the degree of hostility it would be wise to show.

Stella broke the silence. She retreated a little, in doing it, as if words would bring her nearer and she repudiated that degree of intimacy.

"I just want a favor," she said humbly.

Jerry advanced a step as she withdrew, and the interval between them stayed unchanged. Now the trouble in her face had its effect on him, and he forgot for a moment how he hated her.

"Ain't anything the matter, is there?" he asked, in quick concern.

Stella shook her head, but her eyes brimmed over. That evidently annoyed her, and she released the little shawl to lift a hand and brush the tears away.

"Aunt Hill has come," she said.

He had an impulse to tell her, as a piece of news that would once have concerned them both, that his own aunt was making her plans to go West again, and that she had furnished the money for him to buy back the precious strip of land. The city man, seeing how much he prized it, had sold it to him. But while he reflected that now Stella cared nothing about his intimate concerns, she was rushing on.

"And mother's sick," she ended.

"Sho!" said Jerry, in a sympathizing blur. "Real sick?"

"No, nothin' but her rheumatism. But it's in her back this time. She can't move hand nor foot." [79]

"Why, yes," said Jerry, leaning his axe against the trunk of the wounded tree. "Course! you want I should go over 'n' help lift her."

Stella shook her head in definite finality.

"No, I don't either. Aunt Hill 'n' I can manage well enough. I guess mother'd be provoked 'most to death if I run round callin' the menfolks in."

"Well, what is it then?" asked Jerry, in palpable disappointment. "What is 't you want me to do?"

He thought he had never seen her cheeks so red. They made him think of the partridge-berries under the snow. She began her tale, looking indifferently at him as she proceeded, as if to convince them both that there was nothing peculiar in it all.

"Aunt Hill's an awful trial to mother."

Jerry took up his axe in one hand, and began absently chopping off a circle of bark about the tree. Stella was near saying, "Don't you cut your foot!" but she closed her lips upon the friendly caution and continued:—

"There's nothin' she don't get her nose into, and it just wears mother out."

"She's a great talker, seems if I remembered," said Jerry absently, wishing Stella would keep her hands under the shawl and not get them frozen to death. He was about to add that most women did talk too much, but somehow that seemed an unfortunate implication from one as unpopular as he, and he caught himself up in time. Stella was dashing on now, in the course of her obnoxious task. [80]

"If anything's queer, she just goes at mother hard as she can pelt and keeps at her till she finds it out. And mother hates it enough when she's well, but when she's sick it's just awful. And now she's flat on her back."

"Course," said Jerry, in a comprehending sympathy. "Want I should carry your aunt Hill off to the Junction?"

"Why, you can't! She wouldn't go. You couldn't pry her out with a crowbar. She's made up her mind to stay till a week from to-morrow, and till a week from to-morrow she'll stay."

Jerry looked gloomily into the distance. He was feeling his own limitations as a seer.

"Well," he said, venturing a remark likely to involve him in no way, "I s'pose she will."

"Now, see here," said Stella. She spoke with a defiant hardness, the measure of her hatred for what she had to do. "There's one way you could help us out. She asked about you right away, and of course she thought we were—goin' together, same 's we had been."

Here her voice failed her, and he knew the swift color on her cheek was the miserable sign of her shame in such remembrance. It became his task to hearten her. [81]

"Course," said he. "Anybody would."

"Well, I can't tell her. I ain't even told mother yet, and I don't want to till she's on her feet again. And if aunt Hill gets the leastest wind of it she'll hound mother every minute, and mother'll give up, and—well, I just can't do it, that's all."

Jerry was advancing eagerly now, his lips parted for speech; but her task once begun was easier, and she continued:—

"Now, don't you see? I should think you could."

"Yes," said Jerry, in great hopefulness. "Course I do."

"No, you don't either. It's only, she's goin' to be here not quite a week, and it's only one Saturday night."

"Yes," said Jerry, "that's to-morrer night."

"Well, don't you see? If you don't come over, she'll wonder why, and mother'll wonder why, and mother'll ask me, and, oh, dear! dear!"

Jerry thought she really was going to cry, this time, and it seemed to him that these domestic

whirlwinds furnished ample reason for it.

[82] "Course!" he said, in whole-hearted misery for her. "It's a bad place. A man wouldn't think anything of it, but womenfolks are different. They'd mind it terribly. Anybody could see they would."

Stella looked at him as if personal chastisement would be too light for him.

"Don't you see?" she insisted in a tone of enforced patience. "If you'd only dress up and come over."

Light broke in on him.

"Course I will, Stella," he called, so loudly that she looked over her shoulder to see if perhaps some neighbor, crossing the wood-lot, might have heard. "You just bet I will!"

Then, to his wonderment, she had vanished as softly as she came. Jerry was disappointed. He had thought they were going on talking about the domestic frenzies wrought by aunt Hill, but it seemed that further sociability was to be denied him until to-morrow night. He took up his axe, and went on paying into the heart of the tree. But he whistled now, and omitted to think how much he hated Stella. He was debating whether her scarlet shawl was redder than her cheeks. But Jerry never voiced such wonders. They seemed to him like a pain, or satisfaction over one's dinner, an ultimate part of individual experience.

[83] The next night, early after supper, he took his way "down along" to the Joyce homestead lying darkly under leafless elms. There was a light in the parlor, as there had been every night since he began to go with Stella, and his heart beat in recognition, knowing it was for him. He tried the front door to walk in, neighbor-fashion, but it resisted him, and then he let the knocker fall. Immediately a window opened above, and Stella's voice came down to him.

"O Jerry, mother's back is worse, and I feel as if I'd ought to be rubbin' her. You come over another time."

Jerry stood staring up at her, a choking in his throat, and something burning hotly into his eyes. But he found his voice just as the window was sliding down.

"Don't you want I should do somethin'? I should think she'd have to be lifted."

"No," said Stella, quite blithely, "I can do all there is to do. Good-night."

The window closed and he went away. Stella ran downstairs to the bedroom where aunt Hill sat beside her mother, fanning the invalid with a palm-leaf fan. Mrs. Joyce hated to be fanned in wintry weather, but aunt Hill acted upon the theory that sick folks needed air. Aunt Hill was very large, and she creaked as she breathed, because, when she was visiting, even in the country, she put on her black silk of an afternoon. She had thick black hair, smooth under a fictitious gloss, [84] and done in a way to be seen now only in daguerreotypes of long ago, and her dull black eyes were masterful. Mrs. Joyce, gazing miserably up at her daughter, was a shred of a thing in contrast, and Stella at once felt a passionate pity for her.

"There, aunt Hill," she said daringly, "I wouldn't fan mother any more if I's you. Let me see if I can get at you, mother. I'm goin' to rub your back."

Aunt Hill, with a quiver of professional pride wounded to the quick, did lay down the fan on a stand at her elbow. She was listening.

"Where's Jerry?" she demanded. "I don't hear nobody in the fore-room."

Stella was manipulating her mother with a brisk yet tender touch.

"Oh," she said, "I told him he'd have to poke along back to-night. I wanted to rub mother 'fore she got sleepy."

"Now you needn't ha' done that," said Mrs. Joyce from a deep seclusion, her face turned downward into the pillow. "He must be awful disappointed, dressin' himself up an' all, an' 'pearin' out for nothin'."

"Well," said Stella, "there's more Saturday nights comin'."

[85] "I wanted to see Jerry," complained aunt Hill. "I could ha' set with your mother. Well, I'll go in an' put out the fore-room lamp."

Stella was always being irritated by aunt Hill's officious services in the domestic field, but now she was glad to watch her portly back diminishing through the doorway.

"You needn't ha' done that," her mother was murmuring again. "I feel real tried over it."

"Jerry wanted to know how you were," said Stella speciously. "He's awful sorry you're laid up."

"Well, I knew he'd be," said Mrs. Joyce. "Jerry's a good boy."

The week went by and her back was better; but when Saturday night came, aunt Hill had not gone home. She had, instead, slipped on a round stick in the shed while she was picking up chips nobody wanted, and sprained her ankle slightly. And now she sat by the kitchen fire in a state of deepest gloom, the foot on a chair, and her active mind careering about the house, seeking out

conditions to be bettered. She wore her black silk no more, lest in her sedentary durance she should "set it out," and her delaine wrapper with palm-leaves seemed to Stella like the archipelagoes they used to define at school, and inspired her to nervous laughter. It was the early evening, and Mrs. Joyce, not entirely free from her muscular fetters, went back and forth from table to sink, doing the dishes, while Stella moulded bread. [86]

There was a step on the icy walk. Stella stopped an instant, her hands on the cushion of dough, the red creeping into her face. Then she dusted her palms together and went ever so softly but quickly to the front entry, closing the door behind her. Aunt Hill, pricking up her ears, heard the outer door open and the note of a man's voice.

"You see 'f you can tell who that is," she counseled Mrs. Joyce, who presently approached the door and laid a hand on the latch. But it stuck, she thought with wonder. Stella was holding it from the other side.

Jerry, in his Sunday clothes, stood out there on the step, and Stella was facing him. There was a note of concern in her voice when she spoke—of mirth, too, left there by aunt Hill's archipelagoes.

"O Jerry," she said, "I'm awful sorry. You needn't ha' come over to-night."

"She ain't gone, has she?" inquired Jerry, in a voice of perilous distinctness.

"Don't speak so loud. She's got ears like a fox. No, but I could ha' put her off somehow. I never thought of your comin' over to-night."

"Well, I thought of it," said Jerry. "I ain't seen your mother for quite a spell."

"Oh, she's all right now. There! I feel awfully not to ask you in, but aunt Hill's ankle an' all—good-night." [87]

He turned away after a look at the bright knocker that, jumping out at him from the dusk, almost made it seem as if the door had been shut in his face. But he went crunching down the path, and Stella returned, to wash her hands at the sink and resume her moulding.

"Law!" said aunt Hill, "your cheeks are 's red as fire. Who was it out there?"

"Jerry Norton." Stella's voice sank, in spite of her. That unswerving gaze on her cheeks made her feel out in the world, in a strong light, for curiosity to jeer at.

"Jerry Norton?" aunt Hill was repeating in a loud voice. "Well, I'll be whipped if it ain't Saturday night an' you've turned him away ag'in. What's got into you, Stella? I never thought you was one to blow hot an' blow cold when it come to a fellow like Jerry Norton. Good as gold, your mother says he is, good to his mother an' good to his sister, an' now he's took his aunt home to live with 'em."

"I can't 'tend to callers when there's sickness in the house," Stella plucked up spirit to say, and her mother returned wonderingly,—

"Why, it ain't sickness exactly, aunt Hill's ankle ain't. I wish I could ha' got out there. I'd have asked him in." [88]

Before the next Saturday aunt Hill's ankle had knit itself up and she was gone. When Stella and her mother sat down to supper in their wonted seclusion, Stella began her deferred task. She was inwardly excited over it, and even a little breathless. It seemed incredible to her, still, that Jerry and she had parted, and it would, she knew, seem so to her mother when she should be told. She sat eating cup-cake delicately, but with an ostentatious relish, to prove the robustness of her state.

"Mother," she began.

"Little more tea?" asked Mrs. Joyce, holding the teapot poised.

"No. I want to tell you somethin'."

"I guess I'll have me a drop more," said Mrs. Joyce. "Nobody need to tell me it keeps me awake. I lay awake anyway."

Stella took another cup-cake in bravado.

"Mother," she said, "Jerry 'n' I've concluded to give it up."

"Give what up?" asked Mrs. Joyce, finding she had the brew too sweet and pouring herself another drop.

"Oh, everything! We've changed our minds."

Mrs. Joyce set down her cup.

"You ain't broke off with Jerry Norton?"

"Yes. We broke it off together." [89]

"You needn't tell me 'twas Jerry Norton's fault." Mrs. Joyce pushed her cup from her and winked rapidly. "He's as good a boy as ever stepped, an' he sets by you as he does his life."

Stella was regarding her in wonder, a gentle little creature who omitted to say her soul was her own on ordinary days, yet rousing herself, with ruffled feathers, to defend, not her young, but the alien outside the nest.

"If he had give you the mitten, I shouldn't blame him a mite, turnin' him away from the door as you have two Saturday nights runnin'. But he ain't done it. I know Jerry too well for that. His word's as good 's his bond, an' you'll go through the woods an' get a crooked stick at last."

Then she looked across at Stella, as if in amazement over her own fury; but Stella, liking her for it and thrilled by its fervor, laughed out because that was the way emotion took her.

"You can laugh," said her mother, nodding her head, as she rose and began to set away the dishes. "But 'fore you git through with this you'll laugh out o' t'other side o' your mouth, an' so I tell ye."

Upon her words there was a step at the door, and Stella knew the step was Jerry's. Her mother, with the prescience born of ire, knew it too.

"There he is," she said. "Now you go to cuttin' up any didos, things gone as fur as they have, an' you'll repent this night's work the longest day you live. You be a good girl an' go 'n' let him in!" [90]

She had returned to her placidity, a quiet domestic fowl whose feathers were only to be ruffled when some terrifying shadow flitted overhead.

Stella flew to the door and opened it on her lover, standing still and calm, like a figure set there by destiny to conquer her.

"Jerry," she burst forth out of the nervous thrill her mother had awakened in her, "you're botherin' me 'most to death. It's awful not to ask you in when you come to the door, and you a neighbor so. But I can't. You know I can't. It ain't as if you'd come in the day-time. But Saturday night—it's just as if—why, you know what Saturday night is. It's just as if we were goin' together."

Jerry stood there immovable, looking at her. He had shaved and he wore the red tie she had given him. Perhaps it was not so much that she saw him clearly through the early dusk as that she knew from memory how kind his eyes were and what a healthy color flushed his face. It seemed to her at this moment as if Jerry was the nicest person in the world, if only he wouldn't plague her so. But he was speaking out of his persistent quiet.

"I might as well tell you, Stella, an' you might as well make up your mind to it. It ain't to-night only. I'm comin' here every Saturday night." [91]

She was near crying with the vexation of it.

"But you can't, Jerry," she said. "I don't want you to."

"You used to want me to," said he composedly.

"Well, that was when we were—"

"When we were goin' together." He nodded in acceptance of the quibble. "Well, if you wanted me once, a girl like you, you'll want me ag'in. An' anyways, I'm comin'."

Stella felt a curious thrill of pride in him.

"Why, Jerry," she faltered, "I didn't know you took things that way."

He was answering quite simply, as if he had hardly guessed it either.

"Well, I don't know myself how I'm goin' to take things till I've thought 'em out. That's the only way. Then, after ye've made up your mind, ye can stick to it."

Stella fancied there was a great deal in this to think over, but she creaked the door insinuatingly.

"Well," she said, "I'm awful sorry—"

"I won't keep you stan'in' here in the cold. I'll be over ag'in next Saturday night."

Stella went in and sat down by the hearth and crossed her feet on the head of one of the fire-dogs. She was frowning, and yet she was laughing too. Her mother, moving back and forth, cast inquiring looks at her. [92]

"Well," she ventured at last, "you made it up betwixt ye?"

Stella put down her feet and rose to help.

"Don't you ask me another question," she commanded, rather airily. "It's all over and done with, and I told you so before. Le's pop us some corn by 'n' by."

Before the next Saturday something had happened. Stella walked over to the Street to buy some thread, and Matt Pillsbury brought her home in his new sleigh with the glossy red back and the scrolls of gilt at the corners. Matt was a lithe, animated youth who could do many unexpected and serviceable things: a little singing, a little violin-playing, and tricks with cards. He was younger than Stella, but he reflected, as he drove with her over the smooth road, nobody would

ever know it because he was dark and she was fair, and he resolved to let his mustache grow a little longer and curl it more at the ends. Mrs. Joyce was away when this happened, quilting at Deacon White's; but all the next day, which was Saturday, she remained perfectly aware that Stella was making plans, and when at seven o'clock the girl came down in her green plaid with her gold beads on, Mrs. Joyce drew the breath of peace. [93]

"Well, there," she said, "if you behave as well as you look, you'll do well, an' if Jerry don't say so I'll miss my guess."

Stella was gazing at her, trembling a little, but defiant also.

"Mother," she said, "if Jerry comes, you go to the door and you tell him—oh, my soul! I believe there he is now."

But in the next instant it seemed to her just as well. She could tell him herself. She flew to the door in a whirl. But she got no further than his name. Jerry took her with a hand on either side of her waist and set her back into the entry. Then he shut the door behind him and laid his palms upon her shoulders. She could hear his breath, and it occurred to her to wonder if he had been running, the blood must be pumping so through his heart. He was speaking in a tone she had never heard from any man.

"What's this about your goin' to the sociable with Matt Pillsbury?"

She stiffened and flung back defiance.

"I'm goin', that's all. How'd you know it?"

"I was over to the store an' Lottie Pillsbury come in an' I heard her tell Jane Hunt: 'Brother Matt asked her, an' she says she's goin'.'"

"Well, it's true enough. I expect him along in three-quarters of an hour." [94]

"Well, he won't come." That strange savage thrill in his voice frightened her, and before she could remember they were not going together, she was clinging to his arm.

"O Jerry," she breathed, "you ain't done him any mischief?" But his arms were about her and she was locked to his heart.

"No," he said, "I ain't—yet." He laughed a little. "I stood out in the road till I heard him go into the barn to harness. Then he went back into the house to change his clo'es. An' I walked into the barn an' unblanketed the horse an' slung away the bells an' druv the horse down to the meetin'-house, an' left him there in the sheds."

Stella laughed with the delight of it. She felt wild and happy, and it came to her that a man who could behave like this when he had made up his mind, might be allowed a long time in coming to it. But she tried reproving him.

"O Jerry, the horse'll freeze to death!"

"No, he won't. He's all blanketed. Besides, little Jim Pillsbury's there tendin' the fire for the sociable, an' he'll find him. Now—" his voice took on an added depth of that strange new quality she shivered under—"Matt'll be over here in a minute to tell you he's lost his horse an' can't go. You want me to harness up an' take him an' you in the old pung, or you want to stay here with me?" [95]

Stella touched his cheek with her finger in a way she had, and he remembered and bent and kissed her.

"All right," he said. "That suits me. We'll stay here. Only, I don't want to put ye to no shame before Matt. That's why I played a trick on him instid o' breakin' his bones."

"O Jerry!" She had not meant to tell him, but it seemed she must. "I wasn't goin' with him alone. Lottie was goin', too. I told him I wouldn't any other way."

A GRIEF DEFERRED

[96]

When Clelia May set forth, as she did three and four times in the week, to hurry through the half-mile of pine woods between her house and Sabrina Thorne's, the family usually asked her, with the tolerant smile accorded to old jokes, whether she was going to see her intimate friend. Clelia always answered from a good-natured acceptance of the pleasantry, and went on, not in the least puzzled by the certainty that although she was but twenty-three and Sabrina was sixty, they were in all ways companionable. It had begun when Clelia, a child of ten, had had a temper-fit at home,

and started out to join the Shakers. She had met a turkey-gobbler at Sabrina's gate, and, ashamed to cry but too obstinate to run, had stood in blank horror until Sabrina came out and routed the foe. Then Sabrina had taken her in to eat honey and spend an enchanted afternoon. After that Sabrina's house was the delectable land, and Clelia fled to it when she was happy or when the world was against her.

To-day she walked swiftly through the warm incense of the pines. It was hot weather, and insects vexed the ear with an unwearied trill. But the heat of despair was greater in the girl than any such assault. Her cheeks had each a deep red spot. Her eyes were dark with feeling, and on the long black lashes hung fringing drops. She walked lightly, with springing strides. Beyond the pine woods, in the patch of sunny road bordered by dust-covered hardhack and elder, she paused for a moment, to dash the tears from her eyes. There in the open day she felt as if some prying glance might read her grief. The woods were kinder to it. [97]

Sabrina's house was at the first turning, a gray, weather-beaten dwelling of mellow tones, set within a generous sweep of green. It had a garden in front. Sabrina herself was in the garden now, weeding the balm-bed. Sometimes Clelia thought the garden was almost too sweet after Sabrina had been there stirring up the scents. At least a third of it was given to herbs, and even the touch of a skirt in passing would brush out fragrance from it. There were things there that strangely seemed to have no smell at all; but grown in such rank masses, they contributed mysteriously to the alembic of the year.

Sabrina, risen to her feet now, had a look of youth touched by something that was not so much age as difference. She was slender, and still with a girl's symmetry, the light-footed way of moving, the little sinuous graces of a body unspoiled and delighting in its own uses. Her face had a rounded plumpness, and her cheeks were pink. People said now, as they had in her youth, that Sabrina Thorne had the skin of a baby. One old woman, chiefly engaged in marking down human commodities, always added that it was because of that heart trouble Sabrina had; but nobody listened. Sabrina seemed to have made no concession to time, save that her waving hair was white. In its beauty and abundance, it was a marvel. It sprang thickly up on each side of her parting, and the soft mass of it was wound round and round on the top of her head. She was a beautiful being, neither old nor young. [98]

She stood there smiling at Clelia's approach.

"How do?" she said softly; but when the girl was near enough to betray the trouble of her face, she added, "Whatever is the matter?"

"Come into the house, Sabrina," said Clelia, in a muffled voice. "I can't tell it out here."

Sabrina dropped her trowel on a heap of weeds, and cast her gardening gloves on the top. She led the way to the house, and when they were in the coolness of the big sitting-room with its air of inherited repose, she turned about and spoke again in her round, low voice. "Well?" There was anxiety in the tone.

Clelia, facing her, began to speak with a hard composure. [99]

"Richmond—Richmond Blake—" and her voice broke. She threw herself forward upon Sabrina's shoulder and clasped her with shaking hands. "He has given me up, Sabrina," she moaned, between her sobs. "It is over. He has given me up."

Sabrina led her to the great chair by the window, and forced her into it. Then she knelt beside her and drew the girl's head again to her shoulder. She patted her cheek with little regular beats that had a rhythmic soothing.

"There, there, dear," she kept saying. "There, there!"

Presently Clelia choked down her sobs, and raised her face, tempestuous in its marks of grief.

"I'd just as soon tell you," she said, with a broken hardness, a composure struggled for and then lost. "I'd just as soon anybody would know it. I don't feel as if I'd any use for myself, now he don't prize me. Well, Sabrina, he don't want me any more."

"You sure, dear?" asked Sabrina. "You better be sure."

"We got talking about the land," said Clelia, in a high voice.

"The ten-acre lot?"

"Yes. I said to him: 'There's that man from New York. He's offered you two hundred dollars for it. Why don't you take it?'" [100]

"What's the man from New York want it for?" asked Sabrina, with what seemed a trifling irrelevance.

Clelia answered impatiently.

"I don't know. To build a summer cottage, I suppose. That's what Richmond asked me, and I said I didn't know. Then he said he wasn't going to sell till he knew what he was selling for."

"Well, I call that kinder long-headed, myself," said Sabrina.

"So you might; but the New York man went away that afternoon. 'Well,' says he, before he

went, 'that's my offer. Take it or leave it.'"

"But that's nothing to be mad about."

"We didn't stop there. I reminded Rich how far that money would go towards building, and his jaw got set, and he said he couldn't help it. Then I told him I'd be switched if ever I lived with his folks—"

"Oh, dear, dear!" lamented Sabrina. "You didn't say that, did you? Now you mustn't, dear. You mustn't say things folks can't forget."

A gush of tears flooded the girl's cheeks.

"Oh, I didn't mean to!" she cried, in the bitterness of remembering a battle lost. "He knew I didn't mean to. But I got sort of crazy, Sabrina. I did. And I told him at last—" Her eyelids dropped under their weight of tears. [101]

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him he could choose between his folks and me."

"What did he say?"

"He said, 'I'll choose now. It's over.' He got up and walked out of the room. He turned at the door. 'It's over, Clelia,' says he. 'Don't you ever call me back, for I sha'n't come.' And he won't. He ain't that kind."

"Oh, me! oh, me!" moaned Sabrina. She, too, knew he was not that kind.

They sat in silence for a moment, the girl looking straight before her in a dull acquiescence, and Sabrina's pink face settled into aging lines. Suddenly the girl spoke sharply.

"But I can't bear it, Sabrina, I can't bear it. It will kill me—if I don't kill myself."

Sabrina rose slowly, and took a chair at the other window.

"Yes," said she, "you can bear it. Other folks have gone through it before you, an' other folks will again. It's a kind of a sickness there's goin' to be as long as the earth turns round. You've got to bear it."

Her voice struck sharply, and Clelia, called momentarily out of herself, glanced at her with a sudden interest. For the first time since their intimacy, Sabrina looked her age. [102]

Little fine lines seemed to have started out upon her cheeks and forehead. Her eyes had the look of grief. But Clelia's thoughts went back at once to her own trouble. She spoke gravely now, like an older woman.

"It's not because we've quarreled, Sabrina. I'd say I was sorry this minute. But he wouldn't take me back. It shows he don't care. If he'd cared about me, he'd have thought 'twas a little thing; but he's chosen between us, and he won't go back."

"Well," said Sabrina conclusively, "however it turns out, it's here an' you've got to face it. Clelia, I've a good mind to tell you somethin' I ain't ever told anybody."

"Yes," said Clelia indifferently, her mind upon herself. "Yes, tell me."

Sabrina folded her hands upon her lap and set her gaze straight forward, and yet with a removed look, as if she had withdrawn into the past.

"I don't know as you ever knew, Clelia," she said, and Clelia at once thought that it was as if she were reading from a book, "but when I was about your age, I come near bein' married."

"Father said you were much sought after," said Clelia, with a prim shyness not like her own stormy confession. Sabrina, with her white hair and her young face seemed somehow set apart from love and the sweet uses of it. [103]

"I guess he never knew about that particular one. Nobody knew that. I had as good a time as you've had, Clelia. I liked him the same way. I've thought of it, day in, day out, when I've seen you with Richmond Blake. I've never been so near livin' since as I have when I've seen you an' Richmond together out in that gardin, laughin' an' jokin' in amongst the flowers. Well, he give me up, dear. He give me up."

Her hands took a firmer hold on each other. Her face convulsed into a deeper grief; and Clelia, who had never seen her moved with any emotion that concerned herself alone, gazed at her in awe, with her own passion quieting as she confronted that of one so old, yet living still.

"Did you—have words?" she ventured.

"No, dear, no. I guess we couldn't have had, I felt so humble towards him. I never forgot a minute how good it was to have him like me. No. There was somebody else. You see he was terrible smart. He put himself through college, an' then he met her, an' she was just as smart as he was. Lively, too, I guess. I never see her. But I hadn't anything but my good looks—I was real pretty then. I had that an' a kind of a way of keepin' house an' makin' folks comfortable. Well, I found out he didn't prize me; so I give him his freedom. An' he was glad, dear, he was glad." [104]

She rocked back and forth for a moment, in forgetfulness of any save the long-past moment when she was alive.

"O Sabrina!" breathed the girl.

It recalled her. She straightened, and resumed the habit of an ordered life.

"Now this is what I was comin' to," she said, "the way to bear it. It ain't a light thing. It's a heavy one. A lot o' folks go through with it, an' they take it different ways. Sometimes their minds give out. Folks say they're love-cracked. Sometimes they die. Yes, Clelia, often I've thought that would be the easiest. But there's other ways."

Clelia's tears were dried. She sat upright and looked at the woman opposite. It suddenly seemed to her that she had never known Sabrina. She had seen her nursing the sick or in the garden, smiling over her gentle tasks; but she had not known her. Sabrina spoke now with authority, as if she were passing along the laws of life into hands outstretched for them.

"When it happened to me, mother was sick. She had creepin' paralysis, an' I had to be with her 'most every minute. When I got my letter, I was in the gardin, right there by the spearmint bed. [105] You see I'd written him, dear, to offer him his freedom; but I found out afterwards I must have thought, in the bottom of my heart, he wouldn't take it. Well, I opened the letter. 'Twas a hot summer day like this. He took what I offered him, dear,—he never knew I cared,—an' he was pleased. The letter showed it. I spoke out loud. 'O God,' I says, 'I don't believe it!' Then I heard mother's voice callin' me. She wanted a drink o' water. I begun steppin' in kind o' blinded, to get it for her. Seemed as if 'twas miles across the balm-bed. 'I mustn't fall,' I says to myself. 'I mustn't die till mother does.' And then somethin' put it into my head I needn't believe it nor I needn't give up to it, not till mother died. Then 'twould be time enough to know I'd got a broken heart."

It almost seemed as if she had never faced her grief before. She abandoned herself to the savor of it, the girl forgotten.

"Well, mother died, an' that night after the funeral I set down by the window where I'm settin' now an' says, 'Now I can think it over.' But I knew as well as anything ever was that when I faced it 'twould take away my reason. So I says, 'Mother's things have got to be put away. I'll wait till then.' So I packed up her things, an' sent 'em to her sister out West. Some o' her common ones 't I'd seen her wear, I burnt up, so 't nobody shouldn't have 'em. I put her old bunnit into the [106] kitchen stove, an' I can see the cover goin' down on it now. 'Twas thirty-eight year ago this very summer. Then says I, 'I'll face it.' But old Abner Lake had a shock, an' there wa'n't nobody to take care of him less'n they sent him to the town farm, an' folks said he cried night an' day, knowin' what was before him. So I had him moved over here, an' I tended him till he died. An' so 'twas with one an' another. It begun to seem as if folks needed somebody that hadn't anything of her own to keep her; an' then, spells between their wantin' me, I'd say, 'I won't face it till I've cleaned the house,' or 'till I've got the gardin made.' An', Clelia, that was the grief that was goin' to conquer me, if I'd faced it; an' I ain't faced it yet! I ain't believed it!"

A sense of her own youth and her sharp sorrow came at once upon the girl, and she cried out:

"I've got to face it. It won't let me do anything else. It's here, Sabrina. I couldn't help feeling it, if I killed myself trying."

Sabrina's face softened exquisitely.

"I guess 'tis here," she said tenderly. "I guess you do feel it. But, dearie, there's lots of folks walkin' round doin' their work with their hearts droppin' blood all the time. Only you mustn't listen to it. You just say, 'I'll do the things I've got to do, an' I'll fix my mind on 'em. I won't cry till [107] to-morrow.' An' when to-morrow comes, you say the same."

Clelia set her mouth in a piteous conformity. But it quivered back.

"I guess you think I'm a coward, Sabrina," she said. "Well, I'll do the best I can. Maybe if 'twas fall I could get a school, and set my mind on that. I can help mother, but she'd rather manage things herself."

Sabrina bent forward, with an eager gesture.

"Dear, there's lots o' things," she said. "The earth's real pretty. You concern yourself with that. You say, 'I won't give up till I've seen the apple-blows once more. I won't give up till I've got the rose-bugs off'n the vines.' An' every night says you to yourself, 'I won't cry till to-morrow.'"

Clelia rose heavily.

"You're real good, Sabrina," she said. Then she added, in a shy whisper, "And I—I won't ever tell."

"You sit right down," returned Sabrina vigorously, rising as she said it. "I'll bring you the peas to shell. They're late ones, an' they're good. You stay, an' this afternoon we'll go out an' pick the elderberries down on the cross-road. I've got to have some wine."

[108] That week and the next Clelia made herself listlessly busy, and Sabrina was away, nursing a child who was sick of a fever. Clelia was pondering now on her own hurt, now on the story her friend had told her. It seemed like a soothing alternation of grief, sometimes in the pitiless sun-glare of her own loss, and again walking in a darkened yet fragrant valley where the other

woman had lived for many years. But on an evening of the third week, she had news that sent her speeding through the Half-Mile Road and in at the door where Sabrina sat resting after a hard day. Clelia was breathless.

"Sabrina," she cried, "Sabrina, Richmond's mother's sick and he's away. He's gone to New York, and she's left all alone with aunt Lucindy."

"What's the matter with her?" asked Sabrina, coming to her feet and beginning to smooth her hair.

"She's feverish, and aunt Lucindy says she's been shaking with the cold."

"You sent for the doctor?"

Sabrina was doing up a little bundle of her night-clothes that had lain on the chair beside her while she rested.

"No."

"Well, you do that, straight off. An' when he comes, he'll tell you what to do an' you do it."

"Can't you go, Sabrina? Can't you go? Aunt Lucindy wanted you." [109]

"No," said Sabrina, tying on her hat, and taking up her bundle. "I only come to pick me up a few things. That little creatur' may not live the night out. But I'll walk along with you, an' step in an' see how things seem."

Once only in the Half-Mile walk did they speak, and then Clelia broke forth throbbingly to the accompaniment of a sudden color in her cheeks.

"I don't know as I want to go into Richmond's house when he's away, now we're not the same."

"Don't make any difference whether it's Richmond's house or whether it ain't, if there's sickness," returned Sabrina briefly. But at the doorstone she paused a moment, to add with some recurrence of the intensity the girl had seen in her that other day: "Ain't you glad you got somethin' to do for him? Ain't you *glad*? You go ahead an' do what you can, an' call yourself lucky you've got it to do."

And Clelia very humbly did it. Then it was another week, and the two friends had not met; but again at twilight Clelia took her walk, and this time she found Sabrina stretched out on the lounge of the sitting-room. There was a change in her. Pallor had settled upon her face, and her dark eyebrows and lashes stood out startlingly upon the ashen mask. Clelia hurried up to her and knelt beside the couch. [110]

"What is it, Sabrina?" she whispered. "What is it?"

Sabrina opened her eyes. She smiled languidly, and the girl, noting the patience of her face, was thrilled with fear.

"How's Richmond's mother?" asked Sabrina.

"Better. She's sitting up. I sha'n't be there any more. He's coming home to-night."

"Richmond?"

"Yes. The doctor said there wasn't any need of sending for him, and I'm glad we didn't, now. Sabrina, what's the matter?"

"I had one of my heart-spells, that's all," said Sabrina gently. "There, don't you go to lookin' like that."

"What made you, Sabrina? What made you?"

Sabrina hesitated.

"Well," she said, at length, "I guess I got kinder startled. Deacon Tolman run in an' told what kind of doin's there was goin' to be to-morrow. He was full of it, an' he blurted it all out to once."

"About Senator Gilman coming?"

"Yes."

"And their trimming up the hall for him to speak in, and his writing on it was his boyhood's home and he shouldn't die happy unless he'd come back and seen it once more?" [111]

"Yes. That's about it."

"Well," said Clelia, in slow wonder, "I don't see what there was about that to give anybody a heart-spell."

Sabrina looked at her for a moment in sharp questioning, followed by relief.

"No," she said softly, "no. But I guess I got kinder startled."

"I'm going to stay with you," said Clelia tenderly. "I'll stay all night."

"There's a good girl. Now there's somebody round, I guess maybe I could drop off to sleep."

At first Clelia was not much alarmed; for though Sabrina was known to have heart-spells, she always came out of them and went on her way with the same gentle impregnability. But in the middle of the night, she suddenly woke Clelia sleeping on the lounge beside her, by saying in a clear tone:—

"Wouldn't it be strange, Clelia?"

"Wouldn't what be strange?" asked the girl, instantly alert.

"Wouldn't it be strange if anybody put off their sorrow all their lives long, an' then died before they got a chance to give way to it?"

"Sabrina, you thinking about those things?"

"Never mind," answered Sabrina soothingly. "I guess I waked up kinder quick." [112]

But again, after she had had a sinking spell, and Clelia had given her some warming drops, she said half-shyly, "Clelia, maybe you'll think I'm a terrible fool; but if I should pass away, there's somethin' I should like to have you do."

Clelia knelt beside her, and put her wet cheek down on the little roughened hand.

"There was that city boarder I took care of, the summer she gi'n out down here," went on Sabrina dreamily. "I liked her an' I liked her clo'es. They were real pretty. She see I liked 'em, an' what should she do when she went back home, but send me a blue silk wrapper all lace and ribbins, just like hers, only nicer. It's in that chist. I never've wore it. But if I should be taken away—I 'most think I'd like to have it put on me."

The cool summer dawn was flowing in at the window. The solemnity of the hour moved Clelia like the strangeness of the time. It hushed her to composure.

"I will," she promised. "If you should go before me, I'll do everything you want. Now you get some sleep."

But after Sabrina had shut her eyes and seemed to be drowsing off, she opened them to say, this time with an imperative strength:—

"But don't you let it spile their good time." [113]

"Whose, Sabrina?"

"The doin's they're goin' to have in the hall. If I should go in the midst of it, don't you tell no more'n you can help. But I guess I can live through one day anyways."

That forenoon she was a little brighter, as one may be with the mounting sun, and Clelia, disregarding all entreaties to see the "doings" at the hall, took faithful care of her. But in the late afternoon while she sat beside the bed and Sabrina drowsed, there was a clear whistle very near. It sounded like a quail outside the window. Clelia flushed red. The sick woman, opening her eyes, saw how she was shaking.

"What is it, dear?" she asked.

"It's Richmond," said Clelia, in a full, moved voice. "It's his whistle."

"You go out to him, dear," urged Sabrina, as if she could not say it fast enough. "You hurry."

And Clelia went, trembling.

When she came back, half an hour later, she walked like a goddess breathing happiness and pride.

"O Sabrina!" She sank down by the bedside and put her head beside Sabrina's cheek. "He was there in the garden. He kissed me right in sight of the road. If 't had been in the face and eyes of everybody, it couldn't have made any difference. 'You took care of mother,' he said. 'I like your mother,' I said. 'I'd like to live with her—and aunt Lucindy.' And he said then, Sabrina, he said then, 'We sha'n't have to.' And Sabrina, he's been on to New York to see if he could find out anything about the railroad that's going through to save stopping at the Junction; and he saw Senator Gilman, and that's how the senator came down here. He got talking with Richmond, old times and all, and he just wanted to come. And the railroad's going through the ten-acre pasture, and Richmond'll get a lot of money." [114]

Sabrina's hand rested on the girl's head.

"There, dear," she said movingly. "Didn't I tell you? Don't cry till to-morrow, an' maybe you won't have to then."

Clelia sat up, wiping her eyes and laughing.

"That isn't all," she said. "Senator Gilman wants to see you."

"Me!"

Sabrina rose and sat upright in bed. The color flooded her pale cheeks. Her eyes dilated.

"Yes. He told Richmond you used to go to school together, and he's coming down here on his way to the train. And sick or well, he said, you'd got to see him."

Sabrina had put one shaking hand to her hair. "It's turned white," she whispered.

But Clelia did not hear her. She had opened the chest at the foot of the bed, and taken out a soft package delicately wrapped. She pulled out a score of pins and shook the shimmering folds of the blue dress. Then she glanced at Sabrina still sitting there, the color flooding her cheeks again with their old pinkness. [115]

"Oh!" breathed Clelia, in rapture at the dress, and again at the sweet rose-bloom in Sabrina's face. Then she calmed herself, remembering this was a sick chamber, though every moment the airs of life seemed entering. She brought the dress to the bedside. "You put your arm in, Sabrina," she coaxed.

Sabrina did it. She moved in a daze, and presently she was lying in her bed clothed in blue and white, her soft hair piled above her head, and her eyes wide with some unconfessed emotion. But to Clelia, she was accustomed to look vivid; life was her portion always. The girl sped out of the room, and came back presently, her arms full of summer flowers, tiger-lilies, larkspur, monkshood, and herbs that, being bruised, gave out odors. Sabrina's eyes questioned her. Clelia tossed the flowers in a heap on the table.

"What you doin' that for?" asked Sabrina.

"I don't know," answered the girl, in a whisper. "There's no time to put 'em in water. I want to have things pretty, that's all. You take your drops, dear. They've come." [116]

But Sabrina lay there, an image of beauty in a sea of calm.

"I don't want any drops," she said. "I shouldn't think o' dyin' now."

Clelia went out, and presently Sabrina heard her young voice with its note of happiness.

"In this way, sir," she was saying. "Yes, Rich, you stay in the garden. I'll be there."

Senator Gilman, bowing his head under the low lintel, was coming in. He walked up to the bedside, and Sabrina's eyes appraised him. He was a remarkable-looking man, with the flowing profile of a selected type, and thick gray hair tossed back from his fine forehead. He sat down by her.

"Well, Bina," said he.

This was not the voice that had filled the hall that morning or jovially greeted townsmen all the afternoon. It was gently adapted to her state, and Sabrina quieted under its friendliness.

"Couldn't go away without seeing you," said Senator Gilman. "They told me you were sick. I said to myself, 'She'll see me. She'll know 'twould spoil my visit, if I had to go away without it.'"

Sabrina was looking him sweetly in the face, and smiling at him.

"How much time you got?" she asked, like a child. [117]

He took out his watch.

"My train is at five forty-five," he said.

"Then you talk fast."

"What you want to know?" asked her friend.

He had fallen into homely ways of speech, to fit the time.

"You've done real well, ain't you?" asked Sabrina eagerly.

The senator nodded.

"I have, Bina," said he. "I have. I've made money, and I own a grown-up son. He's got all the best of me and the best of all of us, as far back as I can remember—and none of the worst. I'll send him down here to see you."

"He must be smart," said Sabrina. "I've read his book."

"You have? Didn't know there was a copy in town. Nobody else here has heard of it."

"I see it noticed in the paper. I sent for it. I never spoke of it to anybody. I guess I was pretty mean. Folks borrow books, an' then they don't keep 'em nice."

"Bina, you're a dear. They've been telling me how you take care of the whole town. Richmond Blake—he's a likely fellow; he'll get on—he said you were the prettiest woman in the township. Said his father told him you were the prettiest girl." [118]

Sabrina's little capable right hand went out and drew the sheet over her blue draperies up to her chin.

"You're not cold?" asked the senator solicitously; but she shook her head and answered:—

"You've seen foreign countries, ain't you?"

"Yes. I've seen India and I've seen the Pyramids. I thought about you those times, Bina—how we recited together in geography; and I was the one that went and you were the one to stay at home. But near as I can make out, you've carried the world on your shoulders down here, while I've tried to do the same thing somewhere else—and not so well, Bina—not so well."

Her sweet face clouded. She was jealous of even a hint of failure for him.

"But you've come out pretty fair?" she hesitated anxiously.

"Pretty fair, Bina. It's been a good old world. I've enjoyed it, and I don't know as I shall want to leave it. But now I feel as if I were working for the next generation. The little I've done I can pass over to my son, and I hope he'll do more."

He laid his hand on the garnered sweets beside him. The herbs were uppermost. "Spearmint!" he said. Sabrina nodded, and he ate a leaf. Then one after another he took up the herbs, southernwood and all, and bruised them to get their separate fragrance. It was a keen pleasure to him, and Sabrina saw it and blessed Clelia in her heart. Presently he sat back in his chair and regarded her musingly. A softened look came into his eyes. A smile, all sweetness, overspread his face. It gave him his boyhood's mien. [119]

"I'll tell you what, Bina," he said, "in that first rough-and-tumble before I made my way, you did me a lot of good."

Sabrina lay and looked at him. Even her eyes had a still solemnity.

"You wrote me a little note."

More color surged into her face, but she did not stir.

"I was pretty ambitious then," he went on musingly. "My wife was ambitious, too. That was before we were engaged, you understand. We got kind of carried away by people and money and honors—that kind of thing, you know. Well, that little note, Bina. There wasn't anything particular in it, except at the end you said, 'I sha'n't ever forget to hope you will be good.' It was queer, but it made me feel kind of responsible to you. I thought of you down here in your garden, and—well, I don't know, Bina. I showed that note to my wife, and she said, 'Bina must be a dear.'" [120]

Sabrina's eyes questioned him.

"Yes," he said frankly. "She's a dear, too—only different. It's been all right, Bina."

"Ain't that good!" she whispered happily. "I'm glad."

He had pulled out his watch, and at that moment Richmond's voice sounded clearer, as the two out there in the garden came to summon him.

"By George!" said Greenleaf Gilman, "I've got to go."

He rose, and took her hand. He stood there for a moment, holding it, and they looked at each other in a faithful trust.

"You take some southernwood," counseled Sabrina, and he laid her hand gently down, to select his posy.

"I wish your wife could have some," Sabrina went on, in a wistful eagerness, "I don't seem to have a thing to send her."

"I'll tell her all about it," said her friend. "I'll tell her you're a dear still, only more so. She'll understand. Good-by, Bina."

When his carriage had left the gate, and Clelia came in with that last look of her lover still mirrored in her eyes, Sabrina lay there floating in her sea of happiness.

"Why, dear," said the girl, drawing the sheet down from the hidden finery. "You cold?" [121]

"I guess not," said Sabrina, smiling up at her.

"Did you keep that pretty lace all covered up? What made you, Sabrina?"

"I don't know 's I could tell exactly," said Sabrina, in her gentle voice. "Now, dear, I'm goin' to get this off an' have my clo'es. I'm better."

"You do feel better, don't you?" assented Clelia joyously, helping her.

That night they supped together at the table, and when the dusk had fallen and Sabrina sat by the window breathing in the evening cool, she said shyly, like a bride:—

"Don't you see, dear, sometimes we put off grief an' we don't need to have it after all."

"I see about me," said the girl tenderly, "but I don't see as anything pleasant has happened to you."

"Why," said Sabrina, in a voice so full and sweet that for the moment it seemed not to be her own hesitating note, "I've had more happiness than most folks have in their whole life. I've had all

there is."

THE CHALLENGE

[122]

Mariana Blake, on her way home from Jake Preble's in the autumn twilight, heard women's voices sounding clearly at a distance, increasing in volume as they neared. She knew the turn of the road would hide her from them for a minute or two to come, and depending on that security she stepped over the wall and crouched behind the undergrowth at the foot of a wild cherry. They were only her neighbors, Sophronia Jackson and Lizzie Ann West, with whom she was on the kindliest terms; but for some reason she felt sensitive to the social eye whenever she was carrying Jake a basket of her excellent cookery or returning with the empty dishes. Other neighbors, it was true, contributed delicacies to his rudimentary housekeeping, though chiefly at festal times like Thanksgiving and Christmas; but Mariana was conscious that she had kept an especial charge over him since his sister died and left him alone. Yet this she was never willing to confess, and though she treasured what she had elected as her responsibility, it was with an exceptional shyness.

[123] The voices came nearer at a steady pace, accompanied at length by the steady tread of Sophronia's low-heeled shoes and the pattering of Lizzie Ann on the harder side of the road. When they were nearly opposite the old cherry-tree, Sophronia spoke.

"Mercy! I stepped into a hole."

"Can't you remember that hole?" Lizzie Ann inquired, with her inconsequent titter. "I've had that in mind ever since I went to school. I always thought if I was one of the board o' selectmen, I guess I could manage to fill up that hole."

"I guess I shall have to set down here and shake the gravel out o' my shoe," said Sophronia. "You have this nice flat place, and I'll set where I can get my foot up easy."

There was the softest accompanying rustle, and they had both sat down. Mariana, over the wall, gripped her basket with a tenser hand, as if the dishes, of their own accord, might clink. She held her breath, too, smiling because she knew the need of caution would be brief. The instant they were settled, she told herself, they would talk down any such trifling sound as an unconsidered breath. She could foretell exactly what they would say, once they had exhausted the topic of gravel in the shoe. It would be either the new church cushions, or mock mince-pies for the sociable, or the minister's daughter's old canary that had ceased to sing or to echo the [124] chirping of others, and yet was regarded with a devotion the parishioners could not indorse. Mariana had seen both her friends that day, and each of them had been more keenly alive to these topics than any.

"I don't see what makes you so sure," said Sophronia, in a jerky fashion, accompanying the attempt to draw her foot into the position indicated for unlacing.

"Because I am," said Lizzie Ann. "So you are, too. Mariana Blake never'll marry in the world. She ain't that kind."

"I don't know why she ain't," said her friend, in an argumentative tone of the sort adopted to carry on brilliantly a conversation of which both participants know the familiar moves. "Mariana's a real pretty woman, prettier by far than she was when she's a girl. I know she's gettin' along. She was forty-three last April, but age ain't everything. Look at aunt Grinnell. She married when she's fifty-three, and she was homely 's a hedge fence and hadn't any faculty. Nor she didn't bring him a cent, either."

"Well, nobody'd say Mariana was homely. But she won't marry. Nor she wouldn't if she was eighteen. She ain't that kind."

"There, I've got it laced up," said Sophronia. She seemed to settle into an easier attitude, and [125] Mariana could hear the scratch of the heel as she thrust the rehabilitated foot afar from her on the lichened rock. "Well, I guess you're right, but I don't know why it's so, after all. If I was a man, seems if I should think Jake Preble, now, was a real likely fellow to marry."

"Jake Preble!" Such distaste animated the tone of that response that Mariana involuntarily raised herself from her listening posture, and the dishes clinked. "What's that? Didn't you hear suthin'? Why, Jake Preble's a kind of a hind wheel. He goes rollin' along after t'others, never askin' why nor wherefore, and he thinks it's his own free will. He never so much as dreams 'tis the horse that's haulin' him."

"Well, what is 't he thinks 'tis that's haulin' him?" asked Sophronia, who was not imaginative.

"Why, all I mean is, he don't take things for what they're wuth. He believes every goose's a

swan till it up and honks, and he's jest as likely to think a swan's a goose."

"You don't mean he ain't suited with Mariana?"

"No, no. I mean Mariana's cosseted him and swep' his path afore him, carryin' his victuals and cleanin' up the house when he's out hayin' or cuttin' wood, till he thinks it ain't so bad to bach it after all. If she'd just let him alone after Hattie died, and starved him out, he'd ha'nted her place oftener'n she's been over to his, and 'twouldn't ha' been long before he learnt the taste of her apple-pies and where they ought to be made. Now he knows they're to be picked mostly off'n his kitchen table when he comes in from work." [126]

"Mercy, you don't mean to say you think it's all victuals, do you?" inquired Sophronia, with her unctuous laugh. "You never had much opinion o' menfolks, anyways, Lizzie Ann."

"Well, they've got to eat, ain't they?" inquired Lizzie Ann. "That's all I say. Come, ain't you got your shoe on yet? Why, yes, you have. Come along. There's a kind of chill in the air, if 'tis September."

Mariana heard them rising, Sophronia contributing soft thuds of a good-sized middle-aged body and Lizzie with a light scramble suited to her weight.

"Mercy!" said Sophronia, "ain't you stiff?"

Then they went on together, and Mariana heard in the near distance the familiar patter dealing with Sophronia's proficiency in mock mince-pies. They were safely away, but she did not move. The cool September breeze rustled the blackberry-vines on her side of the wall, but it did not chill her. She was hot with some emotion she could not name,—anger, perhaps, though it hardly seemed like that, resentment that her friends could talk her over; and some hurt in the very centre of feeling because the shyness of her soul had been invaded. It seemed so simple to carry Jake Preble a pie of her own baking, as natural as for him to cut her wood and shovel paths for her in the worst winter weather. When it was a beautiful clearing-off day after a storm, she loved to sweep her paths herself, and Jake knew it; but he was always near to rescue her when the drifts piled too high. But then Cap'n Hanscom came, too, and he was a widower, and once Sophronia's own husband had taken a hand at the snowy citadel. Angry maidenhood in her kept hurling questions into the deepening dusk. Mariana was learning that in a world of giving in marriage, no woman and no man who have not accorded hostages to fortune can live unchallenged. [127]

When her ireful mood had worn itself away, she got up with the stiffness of the mind's depression intensifying the body's chill, and made her way swiftly toward home. She walked fast, because it seemed to her she could not possibly bear to meet a neighbor. Even through the dusk her tell-tale basket would be visible, the dishes in it clinking to the tune that Mariana was no sort of a woman to marry.

When she reached home, she fled up the path to the door, feeling at every step the friendliness of the way. The late fall flowers nodded kindly to her through the dark, and underfoot were the stones and hollows of the pathway familiar to her from a life's acquaintanceship. [128]

"My sakes," breathed Mariana.

A man was sitting on her steps, and because Jake was so vividly present to her mind, she almost spoke his name. But it was only Cap'n Hanscom, rising as she neared him, and opening the door gallantly.

"I says to myself, she'll be along in a minute or two," he told her.

The cap'n had a soft voice touched here and there with whimsical tones. When he was absent, Mariana often thought how much she liked his voice; but whenever she saw him she consumed her friendly interest in wishing he wouldn't wear a beard. She was a fastidious woman, and a beard seemed to her untidy.

"You stay here in the settin'-room," said she. "I'll get the lamp."

She slipped through the kitchen into the pantry and put her basket softly down, lest he should hear that shameful clink. Even Cap'n Hanscom could not be allowed, she thought, to know she had been carrying pies to a man who would not marry her because she was not the kind of woman to marry. When she came back, bearing the shining lamp, the cap'n looked at her in a frank approval. [129]

Mariana was a round, pleasant body with pink cheeks, kindly eyes, and, bearing witness to her character, a determined mouth; but now she seemed to be enveloped by some transforming aura. Her auburn hair, touched with gray, had blown about her head in an unusual abandon, her cheeks were flaming, and her eyes had pin-points of light. She set the lamp down on the table with a steady hand and drew the shades. Then she became aware that the cap'n was looking at her. He had a fatherly gaze for everybody, the index of his extreme kindliness, but it had apparently been startled into some keener interest.

"Well," said Mariana, and found that she was speaking irritably. "What's the matter? You look as if you never see anybody before."

She and the cap'n had been schoolfellows, though he was older, and often she treated him with

scanty ceremony; now, after she had tossed him that aged formula of banter, she laughed to soften it. But she was still unaccountably angry.

"Well," said the cap'n slowly, "I dunno 's I ever did see just such a kind of a body before."

[130] The words seemed to be echoing from the stolen conversation too warmly alive in her memory. He, too, she thought, was probably considering her a nice proper-looking woman, but one no man would think of marrying.

"Take a chair," she said, and the cap'n went over to the hearth where a careful fire was laid.

"Goin' to touch it off?" he inquired.

Mariana, with a jealous eye, noted that he was looking at the fire, not at her. She wondered if Lizzie Ann West would say a man had to be warmed as well as fed.

"Touch it off," she said, with a disproportioned recklessness. "There's the matches on the mantel-tree."

The cap'n did it, kneeling to adjust the sticks more nicely; and when one fell forward with the burning of the kindling, lifted it and laid it back solicitously. Then with a turkey-wing he swept up the hearth, its specklessness invaded by a rolling bit of coal, put the wing in place, and stood looking down at what seemed to be his own handiwork.

"There!" said he.

He took the big armchair by the hearth, and Mariana drew her little rocker to the other corner. She seated herself in it, her hands rather tensely folded, and the cap'n regarded her mildly.

"Ain't you goin' to sew?" he inquired.

[131] "Why, no," said Mariana, "I dunno 's I be. I dunno 's I feel like sewin' all the time."

"Well, I dunno 's there's any law to make a woman set an' sew," the cap'n ruminated. "Sewin' or knittin', either. Only, I've got so used to seein' you with a piece o' work in your hands, didn't look hardly nat'ral not to." He regarded her again with his kindly stare. "Mariana," said he, "you look like a different creatur'. What is 't's got hold of you?"

"Nothin', I guess," said Mariana. "Maybe I'm mad."

"Mad? What ye mad about?"

"Oh, I dunno. I guess I'm just mad in general. Nothin' particular, as I see."

"Well, if anybody's goin' to be mad it ought to be me," said the cap'n, lifting his brows with that droll look he wore when he intended to indicate that he was fooling. "I guess I've got to wash my own dishes an' bake my own johnny-cake for a spell. Mandy's goin' to leave."

"Mandy goin' to leave! Well, you will be put to 't. What's she leavin' for?"

"Goin' to be married."

"For mercy sakes! Who's Mandy Hill goin' to marry?"

"Goin' to marry the peddler."

"The one from the Pines?"

Cap'n Hanscom nodded.

[132] "He's been round consid'able this fall, but I never so much as thought he'd got anything but carpet-rags in his head. Well, seems he had. Now 't I know it, I realize Mandy's been stockin' up with tin for quite a spell. Seems to me I never see a woman that needed so much tinware, nor took so long to pick it out. I never got it through my noddle she an' the peddler was makin' on 't up between 'em."

"Well, suz," said Mariana. "I never so much as thought Mandy Hill'd ever marry."

"I never did, either," said the cap'n. "But come to that, it'd be queer 'f she didn't sooner or later. Mandy Hill's just the sort of a woman nine men out o' ten'd be possessed to marry. Wonder to me she ain't done it afore."

Mariana shot a glance at him. There was fire in it, kindled of what fuel she knew not; but the flame of it seemed to scorch her. The cap'n was staring at the andirons and did not see it.

"I'd give a good deal," he said musingly, "if I thought I could ever come acrost such a housekeeper as you be, Mariana. But there! that's snarin' a white blackbird."

"Cap'n," said Mariana.

Her tone seemed to leap at him, and he had to look at her.

"Why, Mariana!" he returned. Her face amazed him. It was full of light, but a light that glittered. [133] "By George," said he, "you looked that minute for all the world jest as your brother Elmer did when Si Thomson struck him in town meetin'. Si was drunk an' Elmer never laid up a thing after the blow was over an' done; but that first minute he looked as if he was goin' to jump.

What is it, Mariana?"

"Cap'n," said Mariana. She was used to calling him by his first name in their school-day fashion, but her new knowledge of life seemed for the moment to have made all the world alien to her. "Cap'n, if anybody said you couldn't do a thing, wouldn't you say to yourself you'd be—wouldn't you say you'd do it?"

"Why, I dunno," said the cap'n, wondering. "Mebbe I would if 'twas somethin' I thought best to do."

"No, no. If 'twas somethin'—well, s'pose somebody said you was a Chinyman, wouldn't you prove you wa'n't?"

"Why," said the cap'n mildly, "anybody'd see I wa'n't, minute they looked into my face. Nobody'd say anybody was a Chinyman if they wa'n't."

Mariana was able to laugh a little here, though a tear did run over her cheek in a hateful, betraying way. She wiped it off, but the cap'n saw it.

"See here, Mariana," said he stoutly, "who's been rilin' you up? Somebody has. You tell me, an' [134] I'll kick 'em from here to the state o' Maine."

"Oh, it's nothin'," said Mariana. "Here, you lay on another stick. I was only thinkin' when you spoke of Mandy, what a fool she was to tie herself up to the best man in the world if she could get good wages, nice easy place same as yours is. Well, there, Eben! I do get kind o' blue when the winter comes on and I sit here by the fire watchin' my hair turn gray. If anybody was to offer me a job, I'd take it."

"You would?" said Cap'n Hanscom.

She saw a thought run into his eyes, and hated it. She liked Eben Hanscom, but all the decorous reserves were at once awake in her, bidding him remember that she was not going to scale the trim, tight fence of maidenly tradition. He began rather breathlessly, and she cut him short.

"I'd come and be your housekeeper," said Mariana, hurriedly in her turn, "for three dollars a week, same as you give Mandy, and be glad and thankful. Only I'd want somebody else in the family. I dunno why, but seems if folks would laugh if you and me settled down there together like two old folks—"

"I dunno why they'd laugh," said the cap'n stoutly. His eyes were glowing with the surprise of it and the happy anticipation of Mariana's tidy ways. "Nobody laughed at me an' Mandy; leastways [135] if they did, I never got hold on 't."

"Well, you see, Mandy's day begun pretty soon after your wife was taken, and folks were kinder softened down. Anyways, I couldn't do it. 'Tain't that I'm young and 'tain't that I'm a fool, but I'd just like to have one more in the family."

"Aunt Elkins might think she could make a home with us," said the cap'n, pondering. "No, she wouldn't, either, come to think. Her son's sent her her fare to go out to them this winter. Ain't you got some friend, Mariana?"

"No," said Mariana. She was watching him with a steady gaze, as if she had planted a magic seed and looked for its uprising. "If there was only somebody else that's left alone as you and I be," she offered speciously.

The cap'n felt a quick delight over his own cleverness.

"Why," said he, "there's Jake Preble."

"He never'd do it," said Mariana. She shook her head conclusively. "Never 'n the world."

"I bet ye forty dollars," said the cap'n. "He could go over 'n' take care of his stock an' do his choppin', an' come back to a warm house. I'm goin' to ask him. I'm goin' this minute. You set up, an' I'll be back an' tell ye."

"You take it from me," Mariana was calling after him. "He won't do it and it's noways right he [136] should. You tell him so from me."

"I bet ye forty dollars," cried the cap'n.

The door clanged behind him and he was gone. Mariana had never heard him in such demented haste since the days when one squad of the boys besieged another in the schoolhouse, and Eben Hanscom was deputed to run for reinforcements of those that went home at noon. But she settled down there by the fire and held herself quiet until he should come. She seemed to have shut a gate behind her; but whether she had opened another to lead into the unknown country where women are like their sisters, triumphant over things, she could not tell. At the moment she found herself in a little inclosure where everybody could see her and laugh at her, and she could not answer back.

Before the forestick had burned in two, she heard him coming, but he was not alone. She knew that other step, marking out a longer stride, and the steady inarticulate responses when the cap'n talked. The cap'n opened the door and they walked in. Jake Preble was ahead, a tall, powerful

creature in his working-clothes, his thin face with the bright brown eyes interrogating her, his mouth, in spite of him, moving nervously under the mustache.

[137] "What's all this?" said he roughly, approaching her as if, Mariana thought, he owned her.

That air of his had pleased her once: it gave her a curious little thrill of acquiescent loyalty; but now it simply hurt, and the instinct of resentment rose in her. What right had he to own her, she asked herself, when it only made other women scornful of her? She lifted her head and faced him. What he saw in her eyes he could not perhaps have told, but it suddenly quieted him to a surprised humility.

"You goin' over to keep house for him?" he asked, with a motion of his head toward the cap'n, who seemed to be petitioning the god of domesticity lest his new hopes be confounded.

"Yes," said Mariana, "but I ain't goin' unless he can get one or two more. I'm tired to death of settin' down to the table alone. One more wouldn't be no better. Three's the kind of a crowd I like. Two's no company. Don't you say so, cap'n?"

"I prefer to choose my company, that's all I say," the cap'n answered gallantly.

Jake looked from one to the other and then back again. What he saw scarcely pleased him, but it had to be accepted.

"All right," said he. "If you want a boarder, no reason why you shouldn't have one. I'll shut up my place to-morrer."

[138] The red surged up into Mariana's cheeks. She had not known it was easy to cause such gates to open.

"When's Mandy goin'?" she asked indifferently.

"Week from Wednesday," said the cap'n. He was suffused with joy, and Mariana, in one of those queer ways she had of thinking of inapposite things, remembered him as she saw him once when, at the age of fourteen, he sat before a plate of griddle-cakes and saw the syrup-pitcher coming.

"Thursday, then," she said. "I'll be along bright and early."

She rose and set her chair against the wall. That seemed as if they were to go.

"You'd better by half stay where you be in your own home," she called after Jake, shutting the door behind him. "You won't like settin' at other folks' tables. You've set too long at your own."

He came back, and left the cap'n waiting for him in the path. There he stood before her, the gaunt, big shape she had watched and brooded over so many years. Something seemed to be moving in his brain, and he gave it difficult expression.

"Depends on who else's settin' at the table," he remarked, and vanished into the night.

[139] Mariana, moved and wondering, wanted to call after him and ask him what he meant; but she reflected that the women who inspired such speeches probably refrained from insisting too crudely on their value. Then she flew to the bedroom and began to sort her things for packing.

In two weeks she was settled at the cap'n's, and Jake Preble had come to board, doggedly, even sulkily, at first, and then suddenly armed with that quiet acceptance he had ready for all the changes in his life. But Mariana smoothed his path to a pleasant familiarity with the big house and its ways, and he began to look about the room, from his place at the table with his book or paper, wonderingly and even pathetically, as she thought, recalling the time before his sister died when his own house had been full of the warm intimacies of an ordered life. The captain reveled in the comfort of his state. He brought in wood until Mariana had to bid him cease. He built fires and drew water, and his ruddy face shone with contentment. She made his favorite dishes and seemed not to notice when Jake, too, in his shy way, awoke to praise them. She even read aloud to the cap'n on a Sunday night from the life of women who, the title declared, debatably, had "Made India what It is." On such nights of intellectual stress Jake betook himself to the kitchen and ostentatiously pored over the "Scout in Early New England." The cap'n, who was hospitality [140] itself, trudged out there one night, in the midst of a panegyric on Mrs. Judson, and besought him to come in.

"If you don't like that kind o' readin', Jake, we'll try suthin' else," he conceded generously. "I jest as soon play fox an' geese Sunday nights if anybody wants to. I ain't one to tie up the cat's tail Sunday mornin' so 's she won't play."

"I'll be in byme-by," said Jake, frowningly intent upon his page. "You go on with your readin', cap'n. I'll be in."

But, instead, he walked out and down the road to his own lonely house, and Mariana, though her brain followed him every step of the way, went on reading in the clearest voice, minding her stops as she had been taught when she was accounted the best reader in the class. But in those days of reading-classes her heart had not ached. It ached all the time now. She had shut the gate behind her, and the one she opened led into an unfamiliar country. Mariana had been born to live ingenuously, simply, like the child she was. Woman's wiles were not for her, and the fruit they brought her had a bitter tang. But whether her campaign was a righteous one or not, it was brilliantly successful. She could hardly think that any women, looking on, were laughing at her, [141]

even in a kindly way. She had taken her own stand and the world had patently respected it. Immediately on her moving to the cap'n's she had gone out in her best cashmere and made a series of calls, and far and wide she had gayly announced herself as keeping house because she wanted the money; in the spring, she told the neighborhood, she meant to take what she had earned and make a journey to Canada to see cousin Liddy, who had married into a nice family there, and over and over again had written for her to come.

"I guess Eben Hanscom never'll let you step your foot out of his house now he's tolled you into it," Lizzie Ann West remarked incisively one afternoon, when Mariana, after a pleasant call on her, stood in the doorway, saying the last words the visit had not left room for. "He ain't goin' to bite into such pie-crust as yours, day in, day out, and go back to baker's trade."

"I don't make no better pie-crust'n you do," said Mariana innocently.

"Mebbe you don't, but you're on the spot, and there's where you've got the whip-hand. Eben Hanscom ain't goin' to let you go. He's no such fool."

"Well," flashed Mariana, "I'd like to see anybody keep me when I've got ready to go." She was on the doorstep now, and the spring wind was bringing her faint, elusive odors. She felt like putting her head up in the air like a lost four-footed creature and snuffing for her home. [142]

"Oh, I guess you'll be glad enough to stay," said Lizzie Ann, with a shrewdness Mariana hated. "The cap'n's takin' to clippin' his beard. He's a nice-lookin' man, younger by ten years than he was when she's alive, and neat 's a pin."

Mariana chose her way back along the muddy road, choking a temptation to turn the corner to her own little house, build a fire there, and let single men fight the domestic battle for themselves. But that night when the spring wind was still moving and she stood on Cap'n Hanscom's doorstone and looked at the dark lilac buds at her hand, the tears came, and the cap'n, bearing in his last armful of wood for the night, saw them and was undone. He went in speechlessly and piled the wood with absent care. He stood a moment in thought, and then he called her.

"Mariana, you come here."

She went obediently.

"You ain't homesick, be you?" the cap'n inquired.

She nodded, like a child.

"I guess so," she responded. "Leastways, if 'tain't that I don't know what 'tis."

The cap'n was looking at her pleadingly, all warm benevolence and anxious care. [143]

"I know how 'tis," he burst forth. "You've give up your home to come here, an' you feel as if you hadn't anything of your own left. Ain't that so, Mariana?"

"I guess so," Mariana returned at random. "Mebbe I'll go down and open my winders to-morrow. I want to look over some o' my things."

The cap'n seemed to be breathing with difficulty. Mariana had heard him speak in meeting, and thus stertorously was he accustomed to announce his faith.

"Mariana," said he, "it's all yours, everything I got. It's your home. You stay here an' enjoy it."

"Oh, no, it ain't," cried Mariana, in a fright. "I've got my own place same 's you have. I'm contented enough, Eben. I just got kinder thinkin'; I often do, come spring o' the year."

"Well, I ain't contented, if you be," said the cap'n valiantly. "I never shall be till you an' me are man an' wife."

"O my soul!" Mariana cried out. "O my soul!"

"What's the matter?" said Jake Preble. He had just come over from his own house with a spray of lilac that was really out, whereas the cap'n's had only budded. Jake had felt a strange thrill of triumph at the haste his bush had made. He thought Mariana ought to see it. [144]

"There's nothin' the matter," she told him in a high, excited voice, "except I've got to go home. I've told Cap'n Hanscom so, and I'll tell you. I ain't goin' to eat another meal in this house. There's plenty cooked," she continued, turning to the cap'n in a wistful haste, "and I'll stop on the way down the road and tell Lizzie Ann West you want she should come and see you through. Don't you stop me, either of you. I'm goin' home."

She ran up the stairs to her room, and tossed her belongings into her trunk. Over the first layer she cried, but then it suddenly came upon her that she was having her own way and that it led into her dear spring garden, and she laughed forthwith. Downstairs the cap'n stood pondering, his eyes on the floor, and Jake regarded him at first keenly and in anger, and then with a slow smile.

"Well," said Jake presently, "I guess I might 's well pack up, too."

"Don't ye do it, Jake," the cap'n besought him hoarsely. "I guess, think it over, she'll make up

her mind to stay."

"Guess not," said Jake. It was more cheerfully than he had spoken that winter, the cap'n wonderingly thought. "I'll heave my things together an' go back to the old place." [145]

In a day or two it was all different. They had moved the pieces as if it were some sober game, and now Mariana was in her own little house, warming it to take out the winter chill, and treating it with a tender haste, as if she had somehow done it wrong, and Lizzie Ann had gone to Cap'n Hanscom's. Mariana had hesitated on the doorstone, at her leaving, and there the cap'n bade her good-by, rather piteously and with finality, though they were to be neighbors still.

"Well, Eben," she hesitated. There was something she had meant to say. In spite of decency, in spite of feminine decorum, she had intended to give him a little shove into the path that should lead him, still innocently, to her own blazonment as a woman who could have her little triumphs like the rest. "If you should ever feel to tell Lizzie Ann I was a good housekeeper," she meant to say, "I should be obliged to you." He would do it, she knew, and from that prologue more would follow. The cap'n would go on to say he had besought her to marry him, never guessing, under Lizzie Ann's superior system of investigation, that he had disclosed himself at all. But as she mused absently on his face, another spirit took possession of her, the one that had presided over her humble hearth and welcomed the two men there in the neighborly visits that seemed so pleasant in remembrance. What did it avail that this or that woman should declare she was unsought? She was ashamed of waging that unworthy war. She found herself speaking without premeditation. [146]

"You know what Lizzie Ann West says about you?"

"She ain't said she won't come?" He was dismayed and frankly terrified.

"She says you're dreadful spruce-lookin' and you're younger'n ever you was."

The cap'n laughed.

"That all?" he inquired. "Well, she must be cross-eyed."

"No," said Mariana, "she ain't cross-eyed; only she thinks you're a terrible likely man."

Then she walked away, and the cap'n watched her, blinking a little with the sun in his eyes and the memory of her Indian pudding.

Mariana did not find her house just as she had left it. It seemed to her a warmer, lighter, cleaner place than she had ever thought it, and, in spite of the winter's closing, as sweet as spring. She went about opening cupboard doors and looking at her china as if each piece were friendly to her, from long association, and moving the mantel ornaments to occupy the old places more exactly. Certain eccentricities of the place had been faults; now they were beauties wherein she found no blemish. The worn hollows in the kitchen floor, so hard to wash on a Monday, seemed exactly to fit her feet. And while she stood with her elbows on the window-sash, looking out and planning her garden, Jake Preble came. Mariana was not conscious that she had expected him, but his coming seemed the one note needed to complete recaptured harmony. What she might have prepared to say to him if she had paused to remember Lizzie Ann's ideal of woman's behavior, she did not think. She turned to him, her face running over with pure delight, and put the comprehensive question:— [147]

"Ain't this elegant?"

"You bet it is," said Jake. He did not seem the same man, neither the sombre dullard of the winter, nor the Jake of former years who had fulfilled the routine of his life with no comment on its rigor or its ease. His face was warmly flushed and his eyes shone upon her. "I don't know 's I ever see a nicer place," said he, "except it's mine. Say, Mariana, what you goin' to do?"

"When?" Mariana inquired innocently.

"Now. Right off, to-morrer, next day."

She laughed.

"I'm goin' to start my garden and wash my dishes and hang out clo'es, and then I'm goin' to begin all over again and do the same things; but it'll be my garden and my dishes and my clo'es. And I'm goin' to be as happy as the day is long." [148]

"Say," said Jake, "you don't s'pose you could come over to my house an' do it?"

"Work out some more? Why, I ain't but just over one job. You expect me to take another?"

Mariana was not in the least embarrassed. Lizzie Ann was right, she thought. Men-folks studied their own comfort, and Jake, even, having had a cosy nest all winter, had learned the way of making one of his own. Suddenly she trembled. He was looking at her in a way she wondered at, not as if he were Jake at all, but another like him, from warm, beseeching eyes.

"You shouldn't do a hand's turn if you didn't want to," he was assuring her, with that entreating look. "We'd keep a girl, an' Mondays I'd stay home an' turn the wringer. Mariana, I know you set everything by your house, but you could fix mine over any way you liked. You could throw out a bay-winder if you wanted, or build a cupelow."

"Why," said Mariana, so softly that he bent to hear, "what's set you out to want a housekeeper?"

[149] "It ain't a housekeeper," said Jake. "I've had enough o' housekeepin' long as I live, seein' you fetch an' carry for Eb Hanscom. Why, Mariana, I just love you. I want a wife."

Mariana walked away from him to the window and stood looking out again, only that, instead of the wet garden with the clumps of larkspur feathering up, she seemed to see long beds of flowers in bloom. She even heard the bees humming over them and the tumult of nesting birds. And all the time Jake Preble waited, looking at her back and wondering if after all the losses of his life he was to forfeit Mariana, who, he knew, was life itself.

"Well," said he, in deep despondency, "I s'pose it's no use. I see how you feel about it. Any woman would feel the same."

Mariana turned suddenly, and, seeing she was smiling, he took a hurried step to meet her.

"I 'most forgot you," she said, with a whimsical lilt in her voice. "I was thinkin' how elegant it is when we get home at last."

"Yes," said Jake dejectedly. "I s'pose you're considerin' your own house an' your own gardin-spot's the best there is in the world."

"Why, no," said Mariana, with a little movement toward him. "I wa'n't thinkin' o' my house nor my gardin particular. I guess I was thinkin' o' yours. Leastways, I was thinkin' o' *you*."

PARTNERS

[150]

"I GUESS I shall fetch it," said Newell Bond.

He was sitting on the doorstep, in the summer dusk, with Dorcas Lee. She knew just how his gaunt, large-featured face looked, with its hawk-like glance, and the color, as he spoke, mounting to his forehead. There were two kinds of Bonds, the red and the black. The red Bonds had the name of carrying out their will in all undertakings, and Newell was one. Dorcas was on the step above him, her splendid shoulders disdaining the support of the casing, and her head, with its heavy braids, poised with an unconscious pride, no more spirited by daylight than here in the dark where no one saw. She answered in her full, rich voice:—

"Of course you will, if you want to bad enough."

"If I want to?" repeated Newell. "Ain't I acted as if 'twas the one thing I did want?"

Over and over they had dwelt upon the great purpose of his life, sometimes to touch it here and there with delicate implication, and often to sit down, by an unspoken consent, for long, serious talks. To-night Newell spoke from a reminiscent mood. There were times when, in an ingenuous egoism, he had to take down the book of his romance and read a page. But only to Dorcas. She was his one confidant; she understood. [151]

"I don't know 's Alida's to blame," he meditated. "She's made that way."

Immediately Dorcas, in her sympathetic mind, was regarding a picture of Alida Roe as she saw her without illusion of passion or prejudice—a delicate, pale girl with a sweet complexion, and slender hands that were ever trembling upon fine work for her own adornment. She had known Alida at school and at home, in dull times and bright, and she had a vision, when her name was mentioned, of something as frail as cobwebs, with all their beauty. Whenever Newell Bond had begun to sound the praises of his chosen maid, she had set her mind seriously to considering what he could see in Alida. But it was never of any use. Alida always remained to her impalpable and vain. Now she answered patiently, according to her wont:—

"Of course she's made that way."

It was like a touch to keep the machinery going, and he responded:—

"You see, I hadn't asked her to set the day. It was kind of understood between us. An' then Clayton Rand come along an' begun to shine up to her, spendin' money like water, an' her mother was bewitched by it. So she orders Alida to throw me over an' take up with t'other man. I don't know 's Alida's to blame." [152]

"Do you s'pose they're engaged?" asked Dorcas, for the hundredth time.

He was silent for a moment, brooding. Then he answered, as he always did:—

"That's more'n I can make out. But if they are, I'll break it. Give me time enough, an' I'll do it

when they're walkin' into the meetin'-house, if I don't afore."

Dorcas felt old and tired. All her buoyant life seemed to settle to a level where she must foster the youth of others and starve her own.

"Well," she said gently, "you've done pretty well this year, sellin' house-lots an' all."

"I've done well this year an' I'm goin' to keep on," said Newell, in that dogged way he had. Often it heartened her, but never when it touched upon his weary chase. Then it seemed to her like some rushing force that should be used to turn a mill, wandering away into poor meadows, to be dried and lost. But he was ending as he always did: "Clayton Rand won't marry so long 's his mother's alive, no matter how much money he's got. An' while Alida's waitin' for him, I'll lay up what I can, an' I bet you I get her yet."

"You goin' to pick peas in the mornin'?" asked Dorcas. [153]

She had heard the clock striking, and it counseled her to remember how early their days began.

Newell came out of his dream. "Yes," he said, "that patch down the river road. I guess we can get off ten bushels or more by the afternoon train."

"All right," said Dorcas. "I'll be there."

"You mustn't walk down. I'm goin' t'other way myself, but I'll hitch up Jim, an' you can leave him in the old barn till you come home."

"No," said Dorcas, rising. "I'll walk. I'd rather by half than have the care of him. Maybe I'll catch a ride, too."

They said good-night, and Newell was walking down the path where clove-pinks were at their sweetest, when he turned to speak again. Dorcas, forgetful of him, had stretched her arms upward in a yawn that seemed to envelop the whole of her. As she stood there in the moonlight, her tall figure loomed like that of a priestess offering worship. She might have been chanting an invocation to the night. The man, regarding her, was startled, he did not know why. In that instant she seemed to him something mysterious and grand, something belonging to the night itself, and he went away with his question unasked. Dorcas, her yawn finished, went in to think of [154] him, as she always did, in the few luxurious moments before she slept. But her nights were always dreamless. She had the laborer's tired muscles and acquiescent nerves.

It was two years now since she and Newell had become, in a sense, partners. An affliction had fallen upon each of them at about the same time, and, through what seemed chance, they had stretched out a hand each to steady the other, and gone on together. It was then that Dorcas's mother had had her first paralytic stroke, and Dorcas had given up the district school to be at home. But she was poor, and when it became apparent that her mother might live in helpless misery, it was also evident that Dorcas must have something to do. At that time Newell, under the first cloud of disappointed love, had launched into market-gardening, and he gave Dorcas little tasks, here and there, picking fruit and vegetables, even weeding and hoeing, because that would leave her within call of home, where a little girl sat daily on guard. Newell lived alone, with old Kate to do his work, and soon it became an established custom for Dorcas to cook savory dishes for him, on the days when Kate's aching joints kept her smoking and grumbling by the fire. In a thousand ways she unconsciously slipped into his life, with his accounts, his house purchases, and the work of his fields; and the small sums he paid her kept bread in her mother's [155] mouth.

And now her mother had died, but Dorcas still kept on. She had no school yet, she told herself excusingly; but a self she would not hear knew how intently she was fighting Newell's own particular battle with him, how she watched here and there lest a penny be spilled and his road be made the longer to the goal he fixed. She was quite willing to consider breaking up Alida's intimacy with the other man, because, to her dispassionate mind, Alida was of no account in the world of feeling. She might have her mild preferences, but if Newell could give her muslin dresses and plated pins, he would suit her excellently. And Newell wanted her. As for Clayton Rand, he would be none the poorer, lacking her. She had thought it all out, and she was sure she knew.

The next morning, dressed in brown, the color of the earth she worked in, Dorcas stepped out into the dewy world and closed her door behind her. It was a long walk to the field. For some unguessed reason she had been heavy-hearted at rising; but now the pure look of the early day refreshed her and she went on cheerfully. Since her mother's death life had seemed to her all a maze where she could find few certainties. She had no ties, no duties, save the general ones to [156] neighborhood and church, and her loneliness now and then rose before her like something inexorable and vast, and would be looked at. Perhaps that was why she had thrown herself whole-souled into Newell's willful quest, though at moments she longed to strangle it with passion fiercer than its own; and why she wondered just what she could do after the desire of his heart had flowered and Alida was his wife.

As she walked along, she held her head very high, and carried her hat in her hand, leaving the sun to strike upon her shining braids and light them to a gloss. For the moment she was unreasonably happy, forgetful of the past, and aware only of the sunlight on green fields. Then suddenly she found that a light wagon had drawn up and Clayton Rand was asking her to ride.

She looked at him one quick instant before she answered. She had known him when they were both children and he came to spend the summer a mile away, and sometimes, for fun, went to the district school. Since then they had kept up a recognized acquaintance, but this was the first time in years that they had spoken together. He was a heavy-faced young man, with rough-looking clothes of a correct cut, and a suggested taste in dogs and horses.

"Ride?" he asked again, and Dorcas smiled at him out of many thoughts. She could not have whispered them to herself perhaps; but they all concerned Newell and his daily lack. Clayton saw the pretty lifting of her red lip above her small white teeth, and, being a young man ready to leap at desired conclusions, instantly thought of kissing. [157]

"I can't be mistaken," he said elaborately. "This is Miss Dorcas Lee."

Dorcas put her foot on the step and seated herself beside him. Then, surprised at his success, because she had looked to him like a proud person, though in a working-gown, he began a wandering apology for having failed to help her in. Meantime he touched up the beautiful sorrel, and when they began to fly along the road, and the sorrel's golden mane was tossing, Dorcas had a brief smiling concurrence with Alida. To speed like that was perhaps worth the company of Clayton Rand. He was talking to her, and she answered him demurely, with a dignity not reassuring from one of her large type and regal air. But presently he began, by some inner cleverness (for he had a way with him), to tell her stories about horses, and Dorcas listened, wide-eyed with pleasure. The way to the knoll was very short, and there she had to stop in the midst of a racing story that had the movement of the race itself, and bid him leave her. This time he remembered his manners, and leaped out to help her gallantly. [158]

"Miss Dorcas," he called her back after her pretty thanks, "I suppose—I don't half dare to ask you—but you like horses. Just let me take you over to the Country Club to-morrow, and we can see the racing."

For the space of a second, Dorcas gazed at the toe of her patched working-boots. She was thinking, in a confused tangle, of Alida and Newell, and wondering if she had any clothes to wear. Then she lifted her head quickly in a resolution that looked like triumph.

"Thank you," she said, with a shyness very charming in one of her large type; "I should be happy to."

"Thank *you*," said Clayton, jumping into the wagon. "I'll be along about half-past one."

All that day Dorcas bent over the pea-vines and listened to her thoughts. There were other pickers, but she had no words for them, even when they sat down together for their luncheon, nor for Newell himself, coming at night to take her home.

"You're real tired, I guess," he said, as he left her at the gate.

Dorcas flashed a sudden smile at him. It was all mirth and mischief.

"No," she said soberly, "I don't believe I'm tired." [159]

"I'm goin' to Fairfax to see about sellin' the colt to-morrow," said Newell, from the wagon.

Dorcas nodded.

"Maybe I'll take a day off myself," she said. "I'll be on hand next-day mornin', if you want anything picked. Good-night."

That evening at ten Newell was driving home from the village, and he marked her light in the kitchen. He stopped, vaguely uneasy, and walked up the path to the side door, and as he came he saw the shades go down.

"Dorcas!" he called, at the door, "it's me, Newell."

Then he heard her hurrying steps. But instead of opening the door to him she pushed the bolt softly, and he heard her voice in an inexplicable mixture of laughter and confusion.

"I'm real sorry, Newell, but I can't let you in. I'm awful sorry."

"All right," he said bluffly, turning away, yet conscious of a tiny hurt of pained surprise. "Nothin' wrong, is there?"

"No," came the laughing voice again, "there's nothin' wrong."

"That's all I wanted to know," he explained, as he went down the path. "Seein' the light so late—"

And again the voice followed him. [160]

"Yes, Newell, I'm all right."

Dorcas, an hour after, at her table ironing the dotted muslin she had washed and dried before the fire, laughed out again. She had a new sense of triumph, like a bloom upon the purpose of her life. At last she saw before her a path quite distinct from the dull duties of every day.

When Clayton Rand drove up with his pair of sleek horses and the shining rig that was admired by all the town, she went out and down the path very shyly, and with a blushing sedateness

becoming to her. Clayton saw it, and his heart leaped with the vanity of knowing she was moved because of him. But the cause was otherwise. Dorcas knew her hair was beautiful, and that her skin, in spite of its tan, was sweetly pink; but she also knew that the fashion of her sleeves was two years old, and that no earthly power could bring the gloss of youth to her worn shoes again. So she blushed and shrank a little, like a bride, and Clayton, who saw only that her skirts fluttered airily and her hat was trimmed with something soft and white, straightway forgot all the girls he had ever seen, and wondered if his mother could fail to approve such worth as this. And then again he began to talk about horses, and Dorcas began, in her rapt way, to listen, and put in a keen word here and there. Alida, she knew, had one idea of horses: that they were four-legged [161] creatures likely to run away, or to bite your fingers if you gave them grass. It was easy to compete with her there, and also because Dorcas really did love animals and need not pretend.

It was a beautiful day at the races. There were all sorts of magnificent turnouts, and ladies dressed in raiment such as Dorcas had never even imagined. She innocently fancied Clayton must know any number of them, and grew very humbly grateful to him for troubling himself about her. When she suggested that he must have many friends among them, he laughed with an amused candor, and told her they were gentry, a cut above. Yet Dorcas continued to believe he might have consorted with them, if he chose, and her manner to him had a softer friendliness because he was so kind. And when she could forget her old-fashioned gown, she was quite childishly content. At the gate that night he thanked her profusely for the pleasure of her company, and added, boldly:—

"Won't you go to ride a little ways to-morrow night?"

A sudden shyness made her retreat a step, as if in definite withdrawal. It was like a flower's closing.

"Maybe not to-morrow," she hesitated. It seemed to her the events she had moved were [162] rushing, of themselves, too fast.

"Next day, then," he called. "I'll be along about seven. Good-night."

And Dorcas went in to think over her day and dream again, not so much of that as of the desire she was fulfilling for another man.

At that time Newell was very busy over questions of real estate. He had bought, two years before, the whole slope of Sunset Hill, overlooking three townships and the sea, and now city residents had found out the spot and were trying to secure it. That prospect of immediate riches drew his mind away from his gardening. He forgot the patient things that were growing silently to earn him his desire, and only gave orders in the morning to his two men before he drove away to talk about land. Even Dorcas he forgot, save as a man remembers his accustomed staff leaning against the wall till he shall need it. But he has no anxiety about it, for he knows it will be there.

Dorcas hardly missed him, for she, too, had new ways to walk. Clayton Rand came often now. He seemed to be fascinated, perhaps by her beauty and the simplicity of her mien, and perhaps by the dignity of her undefended state. She never asked him into her house, though she would drive and walk with him. Her strength, that summer, seemed to her boundless. She could work [163] all day and sit up half the night sewing old finery or washing and ironing it, and then she could sleep dreamlessly for two or three hours, and wake to work again and drive with Clayton Rand in the evening. It seemed to her at times as if that life would go on breathlessly forever, and then again she knew it would not go on; for she had planned the end toward which it was tending, and the end was almost there.

One afternoon, as she came home from her work flushed and covered with dust, yet looking like an earth-queen in her triumphant health, she had to pass Alida's house, and Alida's mother was waiting for her by the gate. As Dorcas came on swiftly, she had a thought that Alida was not very wise, or she would keep her lovers away from Mrs. Roe. The mother and daughter were too much alike. The older woman was a terrible prophecy. The fairness of youth had faded in her into a soft ivory, her hair was a yellow wisp tightly coiled, and her mouth drooped in a meagre discontent. She regarded Dorcas frowningly from sharp eyes, and Dorcas stepped more proudly. She had fancied this onslaught might await her.

"Dorcas Lee!" called the woman sharply. "Dorcas Lee!"

Then, as Dorcas stopped, in a calm inquiry, the woman went on rushingly, all the words she had [164] not meant to say tumbling forth as she had thought them.

"Dorcas Lee, what are you carryin' on for, the way you be, with Clayton Rand? There ain't a decent girl in town would step in an' ketch anybody up like that. You'll get yourself talked about, if you ain't now. I was a friend to your mother an' I'm a friend to you, an' now I've gone out o' my way to give you warnin'."

Dorcas looked past her up the garden walk and at the porch where Alida sat rocking back and forth, her hands busy as ever with her delicate work.

"Alida!" she called softly. "'Lida, you come here a minute. I want to speak to you."

Alida laid down her work with care and placed her thimble in the basket. Then she came along the garden path, swaying and floating as she always walked, her pretty head moving rhythmically.

"'Lida, you come a step or two with me," said Dorcas gently, when the girl was at the gate. "I want to speak to you."

Alida opened the gate and, without a glance at her mother, stepped out upon the dusty path. People said Mrs. Roe talked so much that everybody had long ago done listening to her, and perhaps she had done expecting it.

[165] "You'd ought to have suthin' over your head," she called to Alida. "You'll be 's black as an Injun."

Dorcas took a long stride into the roadside tangle and broke off a branch of thick-leaved elder. She gave it to Alida, and the girl gravely shaded herself with it from the defacing sun. They walked along together in silence for a moment, and Dorcas frankly studied Alida's face. There was no sign of grief upon it, of loneliness, of discontent. The skin was like a rose, a fainter, pinker rose than Dorcas had ever seen. The soft lips kept their lovely curve.

"'Lida," she breathed, "what you goin' to do to-night?"

"I don't know," said Alida, in her even voice. "Sometimes I sew, when it ain't too hot. I'm makin' me a dotted muslin."

Dorcas found her own heart beating fast. The excitement of it all, of life itself, the bliss, the pain and loss, came keenly on her. She thought of the days that had gone to buying this thing of prettiness, the strained muscles, the racing blood and thrilling brain, the sweat and toil of it, and something choked her to think that now the pretty thing was almost won. Newell would have it, his heart's desire, and in thirty years perhaps it would look like Alida's mother with that shallow mouth. Yet her simple faithfulness was a part of her own blood, and she could not deny him what was his. [166]

"Alida," she said, in an eloquent throb, "do you—do you like him?"

"Who?" asked Alida calmly, turning clear eyes upon her.

Dorcas laughed shamefacedly.

"I don't know hardly what I'm talkin' about," she said. "I've worked pretty hard to-day. 'Lida, if there was anybody you liked, anybody you want to talk things over with—well"—she paused to laugh a little—"well, if I were you, I should just put on my blue dress, the one with the pink rosebuds, an' walk along this road down to the pine grove an' back again."

"The idea!" said Alida, from an unbroken calm. "I should think you were crazy."

Dorcas stopped in the road, decisively, as if the moment had come for them to part.

"That's what I should do, 'Lida," she said, "to-night, every night along about eight, till it happens. An' I should wear my blue."

Alida turned away, as if she felt something unmaidenly in the suggestion and might well remove herself; yet Dorcas knew she would remember. They had separated, and when they were a dozen paces apart, Dorcas called again:—

"'Lida!"

[167] Alida turned. Again Dorcas spoke shyly, from the weight of her great task.

"'Lida, Newell Bond's sellin' off Sunset Hill. He's doin' well for himself."

"Is he?" returned Alida primly. "I hadn't heard of it." Then she turned and, keeping her feet carefully from the dust, went on again.

It seemed to Dorcas that night as if she could not wait to finish the bowl of bread and milk that made her supper, and to put on her white muslin and seat herself by the window. She felt as if the world were rushing fast, the flowers in the garden hurrying to open, the sun to get into the sky and make it redder than ever it had been before, and all happy people to be happier. Something seemed sweeping after her, and she dared not turn and look it in the face. But her heart told her it was the moment that would come after her work had been accomplished and Newell had found Alida. As if she had known it would be so, she saw him coming down the road and called to him. He was walking very fast, his head up, and his hands, she presently saw, clenched as they swung.

"Newell!" she cried, "come in."

He strode up the path and she rose to meet him. She remembered now that she had many things to tell him, and the knowledge of them choked her.

[168] "Newell," she began, "you mustn't go—I don't know where you're goin'—but down that way, you mustn't go till eight o'clock. An' then I guess you'll see her. It'll be better than the house, because her mother's there. Why," her voice faltered and she ended breathlessly, "what makes you look so?"

He looked like wrath. It was upon his knotted brow, the iron lips, and in the blazing of his eyes.

"What's this I've been told?" he said, in a voice she had never heard from him, "about Clayton

Rand?"

She laughed, relieved and pleased at her own cleverness.

"It's all right, Newell," she called gleefully. "He hasn't been there for two weeks. He's comin' to-night to take me to ride, an' I'll make him go the turnpike road, an' she'll be down by Pine Hollow, an' you can snap her up under her mother's nose—an' she's got on her blue."

Newell put out his hands and grasped her wrists. He held them tight and looked at her. She gazed back in wonder. In all the months of his repining she had not seen him so, full of warm passion, of a steady purpose.

"Dorcas," he said, "I won't have it!"

She answered in pure wonder and with great simplicity:—

"What, Newell? What won't you have?"

He spoke slowly, leaving intervals between the words. [169]

"I won't have you ridin' with him, nor walkin' with him, nor with any man. If I'd known it, I'd put a stop to it before. Why, Dorcas, don't you know whose girl you are? You're mine."

Floods of color went over her face, and she looked down. Then, as he was silent, she had to speak.

"Newell," she said, "I only meant—I thought maybe I might help you—" There she had to look at him, and found his eyes upon her in a grave sweetness she could hardly understand. No such flower had bloomed for her in her whole life.

"Why, Dorcas," he said, "think how we've worked together! What do you s'pose we worked so for?"

Alida's name rose to her lips, but her tongue refused to speak. At that moment it seemed too slight a word to say.

"'Twas so we could find out where we stood," the grave voice went on. "That was it."

She felt breathless, as if they had together been pursuing some slight thing, a butterfly, a bubble, and now, when it was under their hands, they saw that the thing itself was not what mattered. It was the race. They had kept step, and still together now, they had run into a safe and happy place. [170]

There was the beat of hoofs upon the road.

"Stay here," she breathed. "I can't go with him. I'll tell him so."

She ran out and down the path, a swift Atalanta, her white skirts floating. Clayton Rand was at the gate. Even in the instant of his smiling at her she realized that the smile was that of one who is expectant of a pleasure, but only of the pleasure itself, he does not care with whom. Her eyes glowed upon him, her brown cheeks were red with dancing blood.

"I can't go," she said, in a full, ecstatic voice. "Thank you ever so much. I can't ever go again. See!" she pointed down the road. "Don't she look pretty in among the trees? That's 'Lida. She's got on her blue."

She turned and hastened up the path again. At the door she paused to look once again at the spot of blue through the vista of summer green. It was moving. It was mounting into Clayton Rand's wagon. Then Dorcas went in where Newell was waiting to kiss her.

"He's drove along," she said, from her trance of happiness. "'Lida's gone to ride with him."

Already the name meant no more to them then the bubble they had chased.

"Come, Dorcas, come," said her lover, in that new voice. "Come here to me."

FLOWERS OF PARADISE

[171]

Hetty Niles, with a sudden distaste for her lonely kitchen, its bare cleanliness the more revealed by the February sun, caught her shawl from the nail and threw it over her head. She spoke aloud, in a way she had taken up within the last week, while her solitude was still vocal with notes out of the living past:—

"I'll go over an' see Still Lucy."

Her dry face, hardened to all weathers, wore a look of anguish, an emotion that smoldered in the hollows about the eyes, and was tensely drawn around the mouth. She was like one of the earth-forces, or an earth-servitor, scarred by work and trouble, and yet so unused to patience that when it was forced upon her she felt suffocated by it. She hurried out into the fitful weather, and closed her door behind her. With her shawl hugged closely, she took the path across the fields, a line of dampness in the spongy turf, and, head down, made her way steadily to the little white house where Still Lucy, paralyzed for over thirty years, lay on the sofa, knitting lace. Hetty walked into this kitchen with as little ceremony as she had used in leaving her own. She withdrew the shawl from her head, saying, in the act,— [172]

"How do, Lucy?"

The woman looked up from her work, and nodded brightly. To the casual eye she was not of a defined age. Her face was unwrinkled and its outline delicate, and her blue eyes were gay with even a childish pleasure. She looked invitingly at the world, as if it could give her nothing undesired. Yet the soft hair rising in a crown from her forehead was white as silver, and her little hands were old. She was covered to the waist with a cheerful quilt. Her fingers went in and out unceasingly upon her work, while her bright glance traveled about the room. The stove gave out the moist heat of a kitchen fire where the pot is boiling, and the cat cocked a sleepy eye in the sun. Hetty seated herself by the stove, and stretched her hand absently toward its warmth.

"Parson's be'n in," she said abruptly.

"Caroline said so," returned Lucy, in her sweet, husky old voice. "I thought likely."

"He says I must be resigned," continued Hetty, with the same brusque emphasis.

"Oh, yes!" said Lucy. She spoke as if it were a task to be accepted gratefully.

"To the will o' God. 'Parson,' says I, 'I don't believe in God.'"

Lucy's fingers caught out a tangle in her thread, while her delicate brow knotted itself briefly. [173]

"Ain't that hard!" she breathed.

Hetty was brooding over the fire.

"That's what I told him," she went on. "An' I don't. I don't know 's ever I did, to speak of. It never really come up till now. He repeated texts o' Scriptur'. 'Parson,' says I, 'you ain't a woman that had one son, as good a boy as ever stepped, an' then lost him. 'Tain't a week,' says I, 'sence he was carried out o' this house. Don't you talk to me about God.'"

Lucy was looking at her with eloquent responses in her face. Hetty glanced up, and partly understood them.

"Nor you neither, Lucy," she made haste to say. "You're terrible pious, an' you've had your troubles, an' they've be'n heavy; but you ain't had an' lost. If I could take it on me to-day to lay there as you be, knowin' I shouldn't get up no more, I'd jump at it if I could have Willard back, whistlin' round an' cuttin' up didos. Yes, I would."

"I guess you would," murmured Lucy to herself. "It's too bad—too bad."

There was a step on the doorstone, and Caroline came in. She was Lucy's sister, gaunt and dark-eyed, with high cheek-bones, and the red of health upon them. She regarded Hetty piercingly. [174]

"You got company over to your house?" she asked at once.

"No," Hetty answered. She added bitterly, "It's stiller'n the grave. I don't expect company no more."

"Well," commented Caroline.

She had laid aside her shawl, and began fruitful sallies about the kitchen, putting in a stick of wood, catching off the lid from the pot, to regard the dinner with a frowning brow, and then sitting down to extricate from her pocket a small something rolled in her handkerchief.

"I've be'n into Mis' Flood's," she said, "an' she gi'n me this." She walked over to her sister, bearing the treasure with a joyous pride. "It's as nice a slip o' rose geranium as ever I see."

Hetty's face contracted sharply.

"I've throwed away the flowers," she said.

Both sisters glanced at her in sympathetic knowledge. Caroline was busily setting out the slip in a side of the calla pot, and she got a tumbler to cover it.

"Them parson's wife sent over?" she asked.

Hetty nodded. "There was a dozen of 'em," she continued, with pride, "white carnation pinks."

"She sent way to Fairfax for 'em," said Caroline. "Her girl told me. Handsome, wa'n't they?" [175]

"They wa'n't no handsomer'n what come from round here," said Hetty jealously, "not a mite. There you sent over your calla, an' Mis' Flood cut off that long piece o' German ivy, an' the little

Ballard gal,—nothin' would do but she must pick all them gloxinias an' have 'em for Willard's funeral. I didn't hardly know there was so many flowers in the world, in winter time." She mused a moment, her face fallen into grief. Then she roused herself. "What'd you mean by askin' if I had company?" she interrogated Caroline.

"Nothin', on'y they say Susan's boy's round here."

"Susan's boy? From out West?"

Caroline nodded.

"He was into Mis' Flood's yesterday," she said, "inquirin' all about you. Said he hadn't seen you sence he was a little feller. Said he shouldn't hardly dast to call, now you an' his mother wa'n't on terms. Seems 's if he knew all about that trouble over the land."

Hetty's face lighted scornfully.

"Trouble over the land!" she echoed. "Who made the trouble? That's what I want to know—who made it? [176] Susan Hill May, that's who made it. You needn't look at me, Lucy. I ain't pious, as you be, an' I don't care if she is my step-sister. You know how 'twas, as well as I do. Mother left me the house because I was a widder an' poor as poverty, an' she left Susan the pastur'. 'Twas always understood I was to pastur' my cow in that pastur', Susan livin' out West an' all, an' I always had, sence Benjamin died; but the minute mother left me the house, Susan May set up her Ebenezer I shouldn't have the use o' that pastur'. She's way out West there, an' she don't want it; but she'd see it sunk ruther'n I should have the good on 't."

"Well," said Lucy soothingly, "you ain't pastur'd there sence she forbid it."

"No, I guess I ain't," returned Hetty, rising to go. "Nor I ain't set foot in it. What's Mis' Flood say about Susan's boy?" she asked abruptly, turning to Caroline.

"Well,"—Caroline hesitated,—"she said he was in liquor when he called, an' she heard he'd be'n carryin' on some over to the Street."

Hetty nodded grimly. She spoke with an exalted sadness.

"I ain't surprised. Susan drove her husband to drink, an' she'd drive a saint. Well, my Willard was as good a boy as ever stepped. That's all I got to say."

The sisters had exchanged according glances, and Caroline asked:—

[177] "Stay an' set down with us? It's b'iled dish. I guess you can smell it."

Hetty was drawing her shawl about her. She shook her head.

"No," said she. "'Bleeged to ye. I'll pick up suthin'."

But later, entering her own kitchen, she stopped and drew a sharp breath, like an outcry against the desolation there. The room was in its homely order, to be broken, she felt, no more. She was childless. All the zest of work had gone. She threw off her shawl then, with a savage impatience at her own grief, and began her tasks. In the midst of them she paused, laid down her cooking-spoon, and sank into a chair.

"O Lord!" she moaned. "My Lord!" This was the worst of all the days since he had died. She understood it now. The flowers were gone. They had formed a link between the present and that day when they made the sitting-room so sweet. Even the fragrance of that last sad hour had fled. Suddenly she laughed, a bitter note. She spoke aloud:—

"If the Lord'll send me some flowers afore to-morrer night, I'll believe in Him. If He'll send me one flower or a sprig o' green, I'll believe in Him, an' hold up my head rejoicin', like Still Lucy."

[178] She repeated the words, as if to One who heard. Thereafter a quickened energy possessed her. She got her dinner alertly, and with some vestige of the interest she had been used to feel when she cooked for two. All the afternoon it was the same. Her mind dwelt passionately upon the compact she had offered the Unseen. Over and over she repeated the terms of it, sometimes with eager commentary.

"It can't hurt nobody," she reasoned, in piteous argument. Her gnarled hands trembled as she worked, and now, with nobody to note her weakness, tears fell unregarded down her face. "There's things I wouldn't ask for, whether or no. Mebbe they'd have to be took away from somebody else; an' I never was one to plead up poverty. But there's plenty o' flowers in the world. 'Twouldn't upset nothin' for me to have jest one afore to-morrer night. If I can have one flower afore to-morrer night, I shall know there's a God in heaven."

The day began with a sense of newness and exaltation at which she wondered. Until this hour, death had briefly ruled the house and chilled the air in it. Her son's overthrow had struck at the heart of her vitality and presaged her own swift doom. All lesser interests had dwindled and grown poor; her life seemed flickering out like a taper in the breeze. [179] Now grief had something to leaven it. Something had set up a screen between her and the wind of unmerciful events. There was a possibility, not of reprieve, but of a message from the unseen good, and for a moment the candle of her life burned steadily. Since the dead could not return, stricken mortality had one shadowy hope: that it should go, in its course, to them, and find them living. Again she vowed her

belief to the God who would send one sign of his well-wishing toward her.

"I'll set till twelve o'clock this night," she said grimly, laying her morning fire. "That's eighteen hours. If He can't do suthin' in eighteen hours, He can't ever do it."

At ten o'clock her work was done, and she established herself by the sitting-room window, her knitting in hand, to watch for him who was to come. A warm excitement flooded through her veins.

"How my heart beats!" she said aloud. It had hurried through the peril of Willard's illness and the disaster of his death. It was hurrying now, as if it meant to gallop with her from the world.

At half-past ten there was the sound of wheels. She dropped her knitting and put her hand up to her throat. A carriage turned the bend in the road and passed the clump of willows. It was the minister's wife, driving at a good pace and leaning out to bow. Hetty rose, trembling, her hand on the window-sill. But the minister's wife gave another smiling nod and flicked the horse. She was not the messenger. [180]

Hetty sank back to her work, and knit with trembling fingers. The forenoon wore on. It was Candlemas, and cloudy, and she remembered that the badger would not go back into his hole. There would be an early spring. Then grief caught her again by the throat, at the thought that spring might come, and summer greaten, but she was a stricken woman whose joy would not return. She rose from her chair and called out passionately,—

"Only one flower, jest one sprig o' suthin', an' I'll be contented!"

That day she had no dinner. She made it ready, with a scrupulous exactitude, but she could not eat. She went back to her post at the window. Nobody went by. Of all the neighbors who might have driven to market, not one appeared. Life itself seemed to be stricken from her world. At four o'clock she caught her shawl from its nail, and ran across the field to Lucy. Both sisters were at home, in the still tranquillity of their pursuits, Lucy knitting and Caroline binding shoes. Hetty came in upon them as if a wind had blown her.

"Law me!" said Caroline, looking up. "Anything happened?" [181]

"No," said Hetty, "nothin' 's happened. I don't know as 't ever will."

She sat down and talked recklessly about nothing. A calla bud, yesterday a roll of white, had opened, and the sun lay in its heart. Hetty set her lips grimly, and refused to look at it. Yet, as her voice rang on, the feverish will within her kept telling her what she might say. She might ask for the well-being of the slip set out yesterday, or she might even venture, "I should think you'd move your calla out o' the sun. Won't it wilt the bloom?" Then Lucy might tell Caroline to snip off the bloom and give it to her. But no one spoke of plants. Her breath quickened chokingly, and her heart swelled and made her sick. Suddenly she rose and threw her shawl about her in wild haste.

"I must go," she trembled; but at the door Lucy stayed her.

"Hetty," she called. Her voice faltered, and her eyes looked soft under wistful brows. "Hetty!"

Hetty was waiting, in a tremor of suspense.

"Well," she answered, her voice beating upon the word. "What is it?"

Still Lucy spoke with diffidence, as she always did when she touched upon her faith.

"I was only thinkin'—I dunno 's I can tell you, Hetty—but what you said yesterday, you know, about not believin' there's any God—I was goin' to ask you who you think made the trees an' flowers." [182]

Hetty did not answer. She stood there, her hands trembling underneath her shawl. She gripped them, one upon the other, to keep from stretching them for alms.

"Well," she answered harshly. "Well!"

"Well," said Lucy gently, "that's all."

Hetty laughed out stridently.

"I'm goin' over to Mis' Flood's," said she, her hand upon the latch.

"They've driv' over to Fairfax to spend the day," volunteered Caroline. "Better by half set here."

"Then I'm goin' over to Ballard's." She fled down the road so fast that Caroline, watching her compassionately, remarked that she "looked, as if she's sent for," and Lucy said, like a charm, a phrase of the Lord's Prayer.

Hetty looked up at the Floods' and groaned, remembering there were plants within. She spoke aloud, satirically:—

"Mebbe I could be the instrument o' the Lord. Mebbe if I climbed into the winder, an' stole a bloom, I could say He give it to me."

But she went on, and hurried up the path to the little one-story house where the Ballards lived. Grandsir was by the fire, pounding walnuts in a little wooden mortar, to make a paste for his [183]

toothless jaws, and little 'Melia, a bowl of nuts before her, sat in a high chair at the table, lost in reckless greed. Her doll, forgotten, lay across a corner of the table, in limp abandon, the buttonholed eyes staring nowhere. Grandsir spoke wheezingly:—

"We're keepin' house, 'Melia an' me. We thought we'd crack us a few nuts. Help yourself, Hetty."

'Melia lifted her bowl with two fat hands, and held it out, tiltingly. Her round blue eyes shone in a painstaking hospitality. She was a good little 'Melia.

"No, dear, you set it down. I don't want none," said Hetty tenderly. She steadied the bowl on its way back, and 'Melia, relinquishing the claims of entertainment, picked into her small mouth with a swift avidity.

"Clever little creatur'!" Hetty continued, in a frank aside.

But Grandsir had not heard.

"How old was Willard?" he inquired, pausing to test the mass his mortar held.

The tears came into her eyes.

"Thirty-four," she answered.

"How old?"

After she had repeated it, 'Melia turned suddenly, and made a solemn statement. [184]

"I picked off my gloxinias and gave 'em all to Willard." She lisped on the name, and made it a funny flower.

Hetty was trembling.

"Yes, dear, yes," she responded prayerfully. "They were real handsome blooms. I was obleeged to ye." She wondered if the lisping mouth would say, "There's another one open," and the fat hand pluck it for her. She shut her lips and tried to seal her mind, lest the child should be prompted and the test should fail.

"I dunno 's I remember what year Willard's father died?" Grandsir was inquiring.

"O Lord!" breathed Hetty, "I can't bear no more."

She threw her shawl over her head, and hurried out.

"Come again," the childish voice called after her.

Grandsir had begun to eat his nuts. He scarcely knew she had been there.

Hetty went swiftly homeward through the dusk. The damp air was clogging to the breath, and for a moment her warm kitchen seemed a refuge to her. But only for a moment. It was very still.

"I'll give it up," she said. "There's flowers in the world, an' not one for me. I might 'a' had 'em if He'd took the trouble to send. That proves it. There ain't anybody to send,—nor care." [185]

She walked about in a grim scorn of everything: the world, the way it was made, and herself for trusting it. When she had made a cup of tea and broken bread, the warmth came back to her chilled heart, and suddenly her scorn turned against herself.

"I said I'd wait till twelve o'clock to-night," she owned. "I'm the one that's petered out. This is the last word I speak till arter twelve."

She fortified herself with stronger tea, and sat grimly down to knit. The minutes and the half-hours passed. She rose, from time to time, and fed the fire, and once, at eleven, when a cold rain began, she put her face to the pane.

"Dark as pitch!" she muttered. "If anybody's comin', they couldn't see their way."

Then she lighted another lamp and set it in the window. It was a quarter before twelve when her trembling hands failed her, and she laid down her knitting and walked to the front door. The northeast wind whipped her in the face, and she could hear the surf at Breakers' Edge. The pathway of light from the window lay upon a figure by the gate. A voice came out of the stillness. It was young and frank.

"I'm holdin' up your fence, to rest a spell. I've given my ankle a twist somehow." [186]

Hetty ran out into the storm, and the wind lashed strands of hair into her eyes. She stretched a hand over the fence, and laid it on the man's shoulder.

"Who be you?" she demanded.

He laughed.

"I'll tell you, if you won't bat me for it. I'm your own nephew, near as I can make out."

"Susan's son?"

"Yes. Much as my life's worth, ain't it? Never saw anything like you an' mother when you get fightin',—reg'lar old barnyard fowls."

She gripped his shoulder tightly. Her voice had a sob in it, and a prayer.

"You got anything for me?"

He answered wonderingly.

"Why, no, I don't know 's I have. My ankle's busted, that's all. I guess I can crawl along in a minute."

She remembered how fast the clock was getting on toward midnight, and spoke in dull civility.

"You come in. I'll bandage ye up. Mebbe 'twill save ye a sprain."

Later, when he was by the fire and she had done skillful work with water and cotton cloth, and the pain would let him, he looked at her again.

[187]

"You an' mother ain't no more alike than a black an' a maltee," he said. "Hullo! what you cryin' for?"

The tears were splashing her swift hands.

"I dunno," she answered shortly. "Yes, I do, too. You speak some like Willard."

The clock was striking two when she went to bed, and she slept at once. It was necessary, she told herself. There was a man in the west room, and his ankle was hurt, and she must get up early to call the doctor.

The next day and the next went like moments of a familiar dream. The doctor came, and the boy—he was twenty-six, but he seemed only a boy—joked while he winced, and owned he had nothing to do, and could easily lie still a spell, if aunt Het would keep him. She was sorry over the hurt, and, knowing no other compensation for a man's idleness, began to cook delicate things for his eating. He laughed at everything, even at her when she was too solicitous. But he was sorry for her, and when she spoke of Willard his face softened. She thought sometimes of what she had heard about him before he came; and one April day, when they were out in the yard together, he leaning on his cane and she sweeping the grass, she spoke involuntarily:—

"I can't hardly believe it."

"What?" he asked.

[188]

"Folks said"—she hesitated—"folks said you was a drinkin' man."

He laughed out.

"I did get overtaken," he owned. "I was awful discouraged, the night I struck here. I didn't care whether school kept or not. But 'twas Lew Parker's whiskey," he added, twinkling at her. "That whiskey'd poison a rat."

She paused, with a handful of chips gathered from the clean grass.

"What was you discouraged about?" she asked kindly.

"Well,"—he hesitated,—"I may as well tell you. I've invented somethin'. It goes onto a reaper. Mother never believed in it, an' she turned me down. So I came East. I couldn't get anybody to look at it, an' I was pretty blue. Then the same day I busted my ankle I heard from another man, an' he'll buy it an' take all the risk, an'—George! I guess mother'll sing small when Johnnie comes marchin' home!"

He looked so strong and full of hope that her own sorrow cried, and her face worked piteously.

"You goin' back?" she faltered.

"Sometime, aunt Het. 'Long towards fall, maybe, to get things into shape. Then I'm comin' back again, to put it through. Who's that?"

[189]

It was a neighbor, stopping his slumberous horse to leave a letter.

"That's Susan's hand," said Hetty, as she gave it to him.

He read it and laughed a little. His eyes were moist.

"See here, aunt Het," he said, "mother's had a change of heart because I busted my ankle an' you took care of me an' all,—an' look here! she says she wants you should use the long pastur'."

Hetty dropped her apron and the chips it held. She stood silent for a moment, looking out over the meadow and wishing Willard knew. Then she said practically,—

"Soon 's your ankle'll bear ye, we'll poke down there an' see how things seem."

In a week's time they went slowly down to look over the fences, preparatory to turning in the cow. Hetty glanced at the sky, with its fleece of flying cloud, and then at the grass, so bright that the eyes marveled at it. The old ache was keen within her. The earth bereft of her son would never be the same earth again, but some homely comforting had reached her with the springing

of the leaf. She looked at the boy by her side. He was a pretty boy, she thought, and she was glad Susan had him. And suddenly it came to her that he had been lent her for a little while, and she was glad of that, too. His hurt had kept her busy. His ways about the house, even the careless ones, had strengthened the grief in her, but in a human, poignant way that had no bitterness. [190]

They went about, testing the fence-lengths, and then, before they left the pasture, stood, by according impulse, and looked back into its trembling green. The boy had let down the bars, but he was loath to go.

"Stop a minute," he said, pointing to an upland bank where the sun lay warm. "I'm tired."

"Lazy, more like," said Hetty. But he knew she said it fondly.

He lay down at full length, and she sank stiffly on the bank and leaned her elbow there. She looked at the sky and then at the bank. It was blue with violets. There were so many of them that, as they traveled up the sod, they made a purple stain.

"Well, aunt Het," said he, "you've got the pastur'."

She nodded.

"Don't make much difference how long you wait," he continued, "if it comes at last." He was thinking of his patent, and Hetty knew it.

"Mebbe we can't have things when we expect to," she answered comprehendingly. "Still Lucy's great on that. 'Don't do no good to set up your Ebenezer,' says she. 'You got to wait for things to grow.' Lucy's dretful pious." She passed her brown hands over the violet heads, as gently as a breeze, caressing but not bending them. "I dunno 's ever I see so many vi'lets afore." [191]

"Like 'em, aunt Het?" he asked her kindly.

"I guess I do!" but as she spoke, her eyes widened in awe and wonder. "My Lord!" she breathed. "They're flowers."

The boy laughed.

"What'd you think they were?" he asked, with the same indulgent interest. "Herd's grass?"

He turned over and buried his sleepy visage in the new leaves. But Hetty was communing with herself. Her old face had a look of hushed solemnity. Her eyes were lighted from within.

"Sure enough," she murmured reverently. "They're flowers."

GARDENER JIM [192]

"Jim!" called Mrs. Marshall, as the old man, carrying a basket in one hand and a spade in the other, was trudging steadily by. His blue overalls and jumper were threadbare under the soft brown they had achieved through his strenuous kneeling and the general intimacy of weeds and sod. He had a curious neutrality of expression—perhaps an indifference to what his blue eyes fell upon, save when they looked out from under their rugged brows at the growing things he tended. Then the lines about them multiplied and deepened, and his face took on new life.

Mrs. Marshall, the large lady at the gate, splendidly starched in her afternoon calico, regarded him without personal interest. He was merely an old resident likely to clear up a matter that had been blurred during her years of absence in the West. Jim's eyes traveled past her to the garden in the rear of the house, where yellow flower-de-luce was beginning to blow.

"They'd ought to put some muck on them pinies last fall," said he, in a soft voice which his gnarled aspect had not foretold.

"Now you stop thinkin' gardins for a minute an' pay some heed to me," said Mrs. Marshall. [193] "How was I goin' to look out for the pinies, when I only come into the property this spring? Uncle'd ha' seen 'em mowed down for fodder before he'd ha' let you or anybody else poke round over anything 'twas his. But what I want to know is—what was 't the Miller twins had their quarrel about, all them years ago?"

Jim answered without hesitation or interest: "'Twas about a man. They both on 'em set by one man, an' he led 'em on. He made trouble betwixt 'em. 'Twas thirty year ago an' more."

"An' they ain't spoke sence! My! what fools anybody can make of themselves over a man! He's dead now, ain't he?"

"I dunno," said Jim. Abstraction had settled upon him. "Say, Mis' Marshall, what if I should drop

in an' 'tend to them pinies?"

"Fush on the pinies!" said Mrs. Marshall heartily. "You can, if 't'll be any comfort to ye. 'Twas they that made me think o' the Miller twins. Husband never got over talkin' about their pinies. I'd ruther have a good head o' lettuce than all the pinies that ever blowed."

Jim dropped his traps, opened the gate, walked past her without a word, and began a professional examination of the garden-beds. When he came to a neglected line of box, he made a sympathetic clucking of the tongue, and before a rosebush, coming out in meagre leafage, he stayed a long time. [194]

"Too bad!" he said, as if the bush appealed to him for comfort. "Too bad!"

Mrs. Marshall had gone contentedly back to her sewing by the window, and a cautious voice challenged her from the bedroom, where her daughter, Lily, was changing her dress.

"Well," said Lily, "I guess you've done it this time. Didn't you know 'twas Jim's wife the man run off with? Well, it was."

Mrs. Marshall paused in her work.

"Well," said she, "I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I believe husband did use to say so. I ain't thought of it for years. How'd you find out so much?"

"I guess I don't have to be in a place long without hearin' all there is to hear," said Lily, coming out in her crisp pink muslin. "Here, you hook me up. Why, mother, he's Wilfred's own uncle! Wilfred told me. He said his uncle never'd been the same man since his wife run away."

Jim was wandering back to the road, deflected now and then by some starveling plant.

"Anything you want to do," called Mrs. Marshall, with a compensatory impulse, "you're welcome to. I may put in a few seeds."

Jim stood there, shaking his head in great dissatisfaction. [195]

"It wouldn't ha' done a mite o' good for me to come here while he was alive," he said, as if he accounted to himself for that grievous lapse. "He'd ha' turned me out, neck an' crop, if I'd laid a finger on it."

"Well, you come when you can," said Mrs. Marshall. She was benevolently willing to fall in with Gardener Jim's peculiarities, because, being love-cracked, he had no particular occupation save this self-chosen one. "What you s'pose I said to the new minister about you, Jim?" she continued kindly.

"Dunno," returned Jim, in his soft voice. "Dunno."

"Well, he says to me, 'I never see such a lot o' nice gardins as there is round here.' 'Don't you know the reason?' says I. 'Why, Gardener Jim goes round an' takes care of 'em without money an' without price.' Wake up, Jim. That's what I said."

The look of response had vanished from his face. He had taken a knife from his pocket and was clipping a dead branch from the prairie queen at the window. When the deed had been done with great nicety, he closed the knife, returned it to his pocket, and took his way silently out of the yard. Mrs. Marshall, glancing up from her sewing, saw him again trudging toward his lonely home. [196]

When Jim went along like that, his head bent and his eyes fixed upon the ground, people often wondered whether he was thinking of anything at all, or whether such intentness did betoken a grave preoccupation. Sometimes they tested him. "What you thinkin' about, Jim?" one would ask him, when they met upon the road; but Jim never replied in any illuminating way. If he answered at all, it was only to query, "How's your gardin?" and then, as soon as the response was given, to nod and hurry on again. If the garden was reported as not doing very well, Jim was there next morning, like the family doctor.

To-day, when he reached the cross-road leading to his little black house, he paused a moment, as if he were working out something and must wait for the answer. Then he continued on the way he had been going, and a quarter of a mile farther on stopped before a great house of a dull and time-worn yellow, where, in the corresponding front window of the upper chambers, two women sat, each in her own solitary state, binding shoes. These were the Miller twins. Sophy saw him as he opened the side gate and went along her path to the back of the house. She rose, tossed her work on the table, and ran into an overlooking chamber to watch him. Sophy had been the pretty one of the family. Now her fair face had broadened, her blond hair showed a wide track at the parting, and her mouth dropped at the corners; but her faded blue eyes still looked wistfully through their glasses. They had a grave simplicity, like that of a child. [197]

As she watched Gardener Jim, a frown came upon her forehead. "What under heavens?" she muttered; and then she saw. Jim was examining her neglected garden, and the wonder was not in that. It was that after all these years, when he had worked for other people, suddenly he had come to her. A moment after, he looked up, to find her at his elbow.

"I should think anybody'd be ashamed," said he, "to let things go to wrack an' ruin this way." The paths were thick with weeds. Faithful sweet-william and phlox had evidently struggled for

years and barely held their own against misfortune, and bouncing-bet was thrifty. But others of the loved in old-time gardens had starved and died. "You used to have the handsomest canterbury-bells anywhere round," said Jim. He spoke seriously, as if it pained him to find things at such a pass. "Don't look as if you'd sowed a seed sence nobody knows when. Where's your pinies?"

[198] Sophy turned toward the high board-fence that ran from the exact middle of the house down through the garden.

"Over there," she said.

"Over where?"

"In her part."

"Her part o' the place? What you been an' cut it up this way for?"

If Gardener Jim had ever heard of the feud that separated the two sisters he had apparently forgotten it, and Sophy, knowing his reputed state, felt no surprise.

"She lives in t'other part o' the house," she vouchsafed cautiously.

"Well," he grumbled, "that's no reason, as I see, why you should ha' gone an' sliced up the gardin." He gave one more estimating look at the forlorn waste. "Well, I'll be over in the mornin'."

"You needn't," Sophy called after him. "I don't want any gardenin' done," she cried the louder; but Jim paid no attention.

He was at the other gate now, leading into Eliza's grounds, and there he found Eliza waiting for him. She looked older than her sister. She was thinner, her eyes were sharp, and her chin was square and firm.

"Well," said she, "what is it?"

Jim hardly seemed to see her.

[199] "Where's your pinies?" he asked.

Eliza resolutely refrained from looking at the grassy plot where they sat in their neglected state.

"I dunno 's they're comin' up this year," she returned speciously.

"Yes, they be, too," said Jim, with vigor. He had gone straight over to the spot where the juicy red-brown stalks were pushing up among the grass. "Well, if I don't git round this fall an' feed up them pinies I sha'n't have a wink o' sleep all winter."

Eliza had followed him, and now she stood regarding the peonies absently and with almost a wistful curiosity, as if they recalled something she had long forgotten to enjoy.

"I ain't done much in the gardin for a good many year," she said. "I got kinder stiff, an' then I give it up. It's too late to do anything to 'em now, I s'pose?"

"No, it ain't neither," said Jim. "I'll be round to-morrer an' git the grass out an' put suthin' on to make 'em grow. Trouble is, 'tain't so easy to do it in spring as 'tis in the fall, them stalks are so brittle. Don't you touch 'em, now. I'll see to 'em myself."

Eliza followed him to the gate. She was curious, and yet she hardly knew how to put her question with the indifference she sought. As he was taking up his spade, she found the words:— [200]

"What's started you up to come here arter so many years?"

His eyes dropped. The shaggy brows met over them in a defense.

"I kinder thought I would," said he. Then he went soberly back to his own house.

Jim had no garden. Years ago, when his wife had left him, to run away with another man, he had tried to wipe out every sign of his life with her. It was in the early spring of the year when it happened, and the first thing he did, after he came back from the field and found her letter, was to drive the oxen into the home-plot and plough up the garden she had loved. The next day he had harrowed it and sown it down to grass, and then had taken to his bed, where the neighbors found him, and, one and another, nursed him through his fever. When he got up again, he was not entirely the same, but he went about his work, making shoes in the winter and in summer going from house to house to tend the gardens. At first the neighbors had deprecated his spending so much unrewarded time, or even forcing them to resuscitate old gardens against their will; but they had been obliged to yield. He continued his task with a gentle persistency, and the little town became resplendent in gardens—great tangles of cherished growth, or little thrifty [201] squares like patchwork quilts. Jim was not particular as to color and effect. He was only determined that every plant should prosper. Only the Miller sisters he had neglected until to-day, and nobody knew whether he remembered that it was at their house the man had stayed, charming hearts, before he went away again upon his travels, taking the prettiest woman of all with him, or whether it was merely connected with a vague discomfort in his mind.

To-night Jim went into his kitchen and cooked his supper with all a woman's deftness. His

kitchen was always clean, though, to the end of keeping it so, he had discarded one thing or another, not imperatively needed. One day he had made a collection of articles only used in a less primitive housekeeping, from nutmeg-grater to fluting-iron, and tossed them out of the window into a corner of the yard. There they stayed, while he added to them a footstool, a crib, and a mixed list of superfluities; then some of the poorer inhabitants of the town, known as "Frenchies," discovered that such treasure was there, and grew into the habit of stealing into the yard twice a week or so and, unmolested, taking away the plunder.

[202] To-night Jim determined to go to bed early. He had more to do next day than could possibly be done. As he sat on the front steps, having his after-supper smoke, he heard the beat of hoofs, and looked up to see Wilfred whirling by. Lily Marshall sat beside him, all color and radiance, in her youthful bloom. As Wilfred looked over at him, with a nod, Jim threw out his arm in a wild beckoning.

"Here!" he called. "Here, you stop a minute!"

Wilfred drew up at the gate, and Jim hurried down to them.

"Which way you goin'?" he called, while Lily looked at him curiously and Wilfred reddened with shame. He was sorry that this new girl come into town must see for herself how queer his uncle was.

"Oh, 'most anywheres!" he answered bluffly. "We're just takin' a ride."

"Well, you go down over Alewife Bridge, then, an' cast a look into Annie Darling's gardin. She's gone away an' left it as neat as wax, an' that gate o' hern swings open sometimes an' them 'tarnal ducks'll git in. You wait a minute. I'll give ye a mite o' wire I kep' to twist round the gate." He sought absorbedly in his pocket and pulled out a little coil. "There!" said he, "that's the talk."

Wilfred accepted the wire in silence, and drove along.

[203] "Who's Annie Darling?" asked Lily with innocence.

She had not been long in the town without hearing that Wilfred had been "going" with Annie Darling before his sudden invitation to her, that night after prayer-meeting, "May I have the pleasure of seeing you home?" Wilfred himself could not have told why he asked that question when Annie, he knew, was only a pace behind. The one thing he could remember was that, when he saw Lily coming, he realized that he had never in his life known there were cheeks so red and eyes so dark.

"Who is she?" asked Lily, again, tightening her veil. It had been blowing against his cheek.

"Annie Darling?" said Wilfred, with difficulty. "Why, she's a girl lives round here. Her mother died last winter, and she's been tryin' to go out nursin'. That's where she's gone now, I guess."

Lily Marshall laughed.

"It's a funny name," she said. "I should think folks'd turn it round and make it 'Darling Annie.'"

Wilfred felt a hot wave sweeping over him, the tide of recollection.

"Well," said he, "I guess they have—some of 'em."

[204] Lily gave him a swift glance, and wondered how much she really liked him. He seemed "pretty country" sometimes beside the young hardware man who was writing her from the West. But she was one to "make things go," and she talked glibly on until they had crossed Alewife Bridge and Wilfred drew up before a gray house with a garden in front, marked out in little prim beds defined by pebbles, and all without a weed. The iris, purple and yellow, seemed to be holding banners, it was so gay, and the lilacs were in bloom. He left the reins in Lily's hands, and stood a moment at the gate, glancing at the beds. Then he went inside, tried the front door, and shut a blind that had failed to catch, and after a second frowning look at all the beds, came out and wired the gate.

"Well," said Lily, as they drove away, "ain't you good, takin' all that trouble!"

Wilfred frowned again.

"I don't like to see things go to wrack and ruin," he remarked.

"How's she look?"

"How's who look?"

"Annie Darling."

"I can't tell how folks look," said Wilfred. He spoke roughly, and she glanced at him in a calculated show of surprise. "Why, you've seen her. She was at the meetin' the night I walked home with you."

[205] "Was she?" said Lily. "Well, I never noticed the folks here very much till I begun to get acquainted."

But she had brought back to him a picture he had been forgetting: Annie, standing in her garden, sweet, serious, and so kind. He had hardly thought before of Annie's looks. People never

spoke of them when they were recalling her. She was simply a person they liked to live beside.

The next morning Jim was at Mrs. Marshall's before breakfast—almost before light, she thought, because through her last nap she had heard his hoe clicking, and when she went out, there was the track of his wheelbarrow through the dew, and the liberated peonies, free of grass, stood each in its rich dark circle of manure.

A little later the Miller twins saw him coming, and Sophy was at the door awaiting him.

"Don't you want a cup o' tea?" she asked.

Sophy looked quite eager. It seemed to her that, with the garden resurrected, something was going to happen. Jim shook his head.

"I'll dig round them rose-bushes," said he. "Then I'll go an' git some dressin'."

"I'll pay for it," said Sophy. "You sha'n't have that to do."

[206] "It's no consequence," returned Jim indifferently. "I can git all I want out o' Squire's old yard. I pay him for it in the fall, cobblin'. It's no great matter, anyways."

Sophy disappeared into the house, and came out again, hurriedly, with a trowel in her hand.

"I don't know but I'll work a mite myself," she said, "if you was to tell me where 'twas worth while to begin."

"Don't ye touch the spring things," said Jim briefly. He was loosening the ground about the roses, with delicacy and dispatch. "Let it be as it may with 'em this year. Come November, we'll overhaul 'em. You might see if you can git some o' the grass out o' that monkshood over there."

Sophy, in her sun-bonnet, bent over her task, and for an hour they worked absorbedly. Suddenly she looked up, to find herself alone. But there were voices in the other yard. He was working for Eliza. But Eliza was not helping him. She walked back and forth—Sophy could see her passing the cracks in the high board-fence—and once she called to Jim in a nervous voice, "I wisht you'd go away."

Jim apparently did not hear. He went on freeing the peonies.

"No wonder things git pindlin' under this old locust-tree," Sophy heard him grumble. "Throwin' down leaves an' branches every day in the year. Half on 't's rotten. It ought to come down."

[207] "Well," said Eliza, "if it ought to come down, let it come. You know where to find the axe."

Sophy, on the other side of the fence, could hardly bear the horror and surprise of it. She forgot she was "not speaking" to her sister.

"O 'Liza!" she cried piercingly. "That was mother's tree. She set it out with her own hands. I dunno what she'd say."

There was a moment's quiet, and then Eliza's voice came gruffly:—

"You let the tree alone."

But Jim had no thought of touching it. He was working silently at his task. Sophy went into the house, trembling. She had spoken first. But it was to save the tree.

The warm spring days went on, and Annie Darling had not come. Weeds began to devastate her garden, and Wilfred used to look over the fence and wish uncle Jim would do something. Once he spoke to uncle Jim about it, in the way everybody had of making him responsible for the floral well-being of the neighborhood; but Gardener Jim would hardly listen.

"You 'tend to it! you 'tend to it!" he cried testily. "I've got all I can do to git them Miller gals' pieces into shape so 't they can sow a few seeds."

[208] But one morning he sought out Wilfred, mending a gap in his own orchard wall by the road.

"Wilfred," said Gardener Jim, "have you 'tended to Annie's gardin?"

He had laid down his hoe and put up a foot on a stone in good position for talk.

Wilfred dropped his crowbar and came forward.

"Why, no," said he, irritated, he hardly knew why, as if by a call to a forgotten task. "Nobody's asked me to 'tend to it."

Jim stood for a moment looking through the tree-spaces, and then his gaze came back to his nephew, and Wilfred, with a start, realized that he had never before had the chance to look into uncle Jim's eyes. Now he found them direct and rather stern.

"Wilfred," said Gardener Jim, "don't you be a 'tarnal fool."

Wilfred said nothing, but immediately, he could not tell why, he seemed to be looking upon a picture of Annie standing among the flowers in her little plain dress. His heart was beating faster, and he said to himself that, after all, it would be sort of nice if Annie would come home. Gardener Jim was speaking laboriously, as if he dragged out conclusions he had perhaps reached

long ago and had not yet compared with any one.

[209] "There's a time for everything. There's a time to graft a tree an' a time to cut it down. Well, it's your time o' life to make a 'tarnal fool o' yourself. Don't ye do it. If you do, like 's not when you're my age you'll be all soul alone, like me, an' goin' round 'tendin' to other folks's gardins."

Wilfred stared at him in wonder.

"I don't know," he found himself saying. "I might fix it, but I guess 'twould be kind o' queer."

Gardener Jim screwed up his face until his eyes were quite eclipsed.

"Queer!" said he. "Nothin' 's queer if you go ahead an' do it an' say nothin' to nobody. What if they do call ye crazed? That's another way to make 'em stan' from under an' let ye go it. There! I've said my say. Ain't that your axe over there by the well? You take it an' come along o' me. I'd ha' brought mine, only I thought mebbe I shouldn't need it till to-morrer. But I guess I shall. I guess I shall."

Wilfred followed him along the road to the Miller house, and there they saw the twins. Sophy, obscured by a sun-bonnet, was on her knees, sowing seeds in a bed Jim had made for her the day before; but Eliza stood quite still among the peonies, looking off down the road.

[210] Gardener Jim took his way into Eliza's part of the yard. She turned and looked at him uneasily, as if she wondered what exactions he might make to-day. Wilfred thought her face had changed of late. There were marks of agitation upon it, as if she had been stirred by unaccustomed thoughts and then had tried to hide them. Her eyes were troubled.

Gardener Jim walked over to the tall fence.

"Here, Wilfred," said he, "you take your axe an' knock off them boards. The posts'll go too, give 'em a chance. They're pretty nigh rotted off."

Eliza came awake.

"Don't you touch my fence!" she called. "Don't you so much as lay a finger on it."

Wilfred gave her a compliant look.

"You can't do that, you know," he said, in an undertone, to Gardener Jim. "It's their fence. They don't want it down."

Gardener Jim made no answer. He took the axe from Wilfred's hand and dealt the fence a stroke, and then another, and at every one it seemed as if something fell. Eliza strode over to him, and, without reason, stood there. Sophy left her seed-sowing on the other side and came also, and she, too, watched the boards falling. The women were pale and their eyes showed terror, whether at the unchained power of the man or at the wonder of life, no one could have told.

[211] Wilfred sauntered away to the old apple-tree, and began picking off twigs here and there, to drop them on the grass.

Gardener Jim threw down the axe at last and wiped his forehead.

"Where you want them boards piled?" he asked Eliza briefly.

"Down there by the wood-shed." Her voice trembled. "They'll make good kindlin'."

Over the space where two or three sound posts were standing, she spoke to her sister. There was something strident in her voice, as if she pleaded for strength to break the web of years.

"You better have some o' them boards."

"Mebbe I had," said Sophy.

"Here, Wilfred," called Gardener Jim. "You pile them boards an' I'll see if I can't loosen up the dirt a mite round this old phlox. Anybody must be a 'tarnal fool to build up a high board-fence an' cut off the sun from things when they're tryin' to grow."

Sophy looked timidly at her sister.

"I s'pose 'tis foolish to try to have anything if you don't take care on 't," she said.

Eliza cleared her throat and answered with the same irrelevance:—

"He's fixed up the pinies real nice. See 'f you remember which the white one was."

[212] Sophy stepped over the dividing line, and the two sisters walked away to the peony settlement. Gardener Jim touched Wilfred on the arm.

"You go along," said he. "I'll finish here. You 'tend to Annie's gardin. I hove a trowel over the fence there this mornin'. You go an' git up some o' them weeds."

Wilfred nodded in unquestioning compliance. As he hesitated then for a moment, watching the sisters, and wondering what they were talking about, Eliza raised her hand and brushed a leaf from Sophy's shoulder. Then they went on talking, but apparently of the garden, for they pointed

here and there in a fervor of discovery. Wilfred turned with a rush and went off to Annie Darling's.

He found the trowel under the fence, as Gardener Jim had prophesied, and he worked all day, with a brief nooning at home. The garden was full of voices. Here was a plant he had driven ten miles to get for her; here were the mint and balm she loved. It seemed to him, as the hours went by, that he was talking with her and telling her many things—confessions, some of them, and pleas for her continued kindliness. When he had finished, all but carrying away his pile of weeds, he heard a voice at the gate. It was Lily, under a bright parasol, her face repeating its bloom.

"Well, I never!" she called. "You goin' to turn gardener, same as your uncle did?" [213]

Wilfred took off his hat, to feel the air, and went forward toward her. He was not embarrassed. She seemed to him quite a different person from what she had before.

"I've just got it done," said he, with a perfect simplicity. "Don't it look nice?"

Lily had flushed, and, he thought with surprise, she looked almost angry. But she laughed with the same gay note.

"Been doin' it for Annie Darling?" she asked. "For darling Annie?"

"Yes," said Wilfred, "I've been doin' it for Annie."

"Mercy! how hot it is!" said Lily, "Seems if there wasn't a breath of air anywhere. I must get home and see if I can find me a fan."

She was rustling away, but Wilfred did not look after her. He was too busy.

When the weeds had all been carried away, he stood looking at the orderly garden with something like love for it in his heart. And then the gate clicked and Annie came in and up the path. There was a strange, wistful radiance in her face, as if she had chanced upon an undreamed-of joy. It was like the home-coming of a bride. Wilfred strode over the beds and put his arms about her.

"O Annie!" he said. "I'm glad you've come!" [214]

At six o'clock they were still in the garden, talking, though she had opened the house, and the smoke was coming out of the chimney from the fire boiling the water for their tea. Gardener Jim, going home from his work, came up to the fence and leaned on it, eying the garden critically.

"Well, Wilfred," said he, "you've done a good day's work."

The youth and maid came forward. His arm was about her waist and her cheeks were pink.

"How'd you leave the twins?" asked Wilfred.

Gardener Jim looked off into the road vista, and shook all over, mirthlessly.

"I heerd 'em say they were goin' to have flapjacks for supper," said he gravely, "an' fry 'em in Sophy's part." His eyes came back to Annie and studied her for a moment. Then he spoke abruptly. "I'm goin' to give you suthin', Annie—that set o' flowered chiny. It's all there is left in the house that's wuth anything. 'Twas my mother's, an' her mother's afore her, an' there ain't a piece missin'. When you git ready for it, Wilfred here he'll come round an' pack it up."

THE SILVER TEA-SET [215]

Ann Barstow stood at the kitchen table, rubbing her silver tea-set. The house was poor and old, but very clean, and Ann—a thin little eager body—seemed to fit it perfectly. Her strong hands moved back and forth as if she were used to work and loved it for its own sake; but there were other things she loved, and the days that summer seemed to her fuller of life and motion than they had been since she was young. She had lived alone in this little clearing, backed by pine woods, for over thirty years, and every sound of sighing or falling branch was familiar to her, with every resinous tang. Ann thought there was no place on earth so fitted for a happy life as a curving cross-road where people seldom came; but her content increased this summer when young Jerry Hamlin began building a large house across the road, a few rods below her gate, to live there with his wife. When Ann heard the news, she was vaguely agitated by it. For a time it seemed as if something were about to invade her calm. But as the house went up, she began to find she liked the tapping of hammers and the sound of voices never addressed to her. When [216] Jerry and his wife came to look at things, as they did nearly every day, and threw her a hearty word or a smile, she liked them, too, and it came to her that her old age was to be the brighter for company.

To-day the house was still and empty; she missed the workmen, and polished the harder, to take off her mind. A heavy step was at the door. She knew at once who it was: Mrs. John C. Briggs, walking slowly because her "heft" was great, and blooming with good-will all over her large face, framed in its thin blond hair.

"Come in," called Ann. "Set right down. I won't leave off my work. I'm all over this 'ere polishin' stuff."

Mrs. John C. sank into a seat, and devoted the first few moments to breathing.

"Well," said she, "I heard the workmen was off to-day; so I thought I'd poke in an' see the new house."

"Yes," said Ann, "they had to wait for mortar. It's goin' to be a nice pretty place, ain't it?"

"Complete. Well, I should think you'd be rejoiced to have neighbors, all alone as you be."

Ann smiled.

"I never see a lonesome minute," she said. "There's everything goin' on round in these woods. The birds an' flyin' things are jest as busy as the hand o' man, if ye know how to ketch 'em at it. [217] Still, I guess I've got to the time o' life when I shall kinder enjoy neighbors."

"Ain't you never afraid?"

"I guess there's nothin' round here that's wuss'n myself," returned Ann, proffering the ancient witticism with a jocose certainty of its worth. "I ain't very darin', neither. Not much like father, I ain't, nor what brother Will used to be. Either o' them'd face Old Nick an' give him as good as he sent."

"Well, all I can say is, folks can't be too near for me. What would you do if you should be sick in the night?"

"I dunno," said Ann gayly. "Set down an' suck my claws, I guess, an' wait till daylight. I can't think o' nothin' else." She had finished her polishing and set back the silver, to eye it with a critical and delighted gaze. Then she washed her hands at the sink, and brought out a fine white napkin from the high-boy, and spread it on a little table between the windows. "I dunno but I'm dretful childish," she said, "but arter I've got it all rubbed up, I keep it here in sight, a day or two, it ketches the sun so. Then I set it away in the best-room cluzzet."

"It's real handsome," said Mrs. John C. "How many pieces be there? This is the whole on 't, as I remember it."

"Jest as you see it. Yes, 'tis handsome. Mother set the world by it." [218]

"I dunno but I'd ruther have the wuth on 't," said Mrs. John C., as she had said many times before.

"Well," agreed Ann, "I dunno but father would. He wa'n't doin' very well that year. I was a little mite of a thing then, an' I remember it all as if 'twa'n't but yesterday. Father come in, an' he says: 'Well, I guess I've saved the judge a pretty good smash-up. That span o' colts run away down the river road.' 'Who's in the carriage?' says mother. 'He drivin' himself?' 'No,' says father. 'He'd jest lifted Annie in, an' there was a paper blew along the road, an' they started.' 'Annie?' says mother, 'that little mite? He don't deserve to have a child. Why, father,' says she, lookin' up over her glasses,—mother had near-sighted eyes,—'your clo's are all tore off o' you, an' there's your hand all bleedin'.' Father begun to wash himself up at the sink, an' while he stood there, in walked the judge. He was white as a cloth. 'Barstow,' says he, 'you name anything you want that's in my power to git ye, an' you shall have it.' 'Twas a pretty hard year for father, as I told ye, but he never asked favors from nobody. I can see jest how he looked when he turned round an' answered. Father was a real handsome man. 'Much obleeged, judge,' says he. 'I don't want [219] nothin' I can't git for myself.' The judge looked kinder hurt, but he turned to mother. 'Mis' Barstow,' says he, 'can't you think o' some kind of a keepsake you'd like?' Mother spoke up as quick as a wink. 'I want a little mite of a silver pitcher for cream,' says she. 'I see one when I was a little girl.' 'You shall have it,' says the judge; an' 'twa'n't a week afore this set come, all marked complete. I never see anybody quite so tickled as mother was; an' father he kinder laughed. He couldn't help it, to think how she got ahead of him."

"Well," said the visitor again, "it's as handsome as ever I see." She got slowly on her feet. "There! I guess I must be movin' along. We're goin' up to the street right arter dinner, an' I must have it early. Don't you want to send?"

"I'd like some molasses."

"Well, we'll drive this way an' call an' git the jug. Come over an' see us, won't you?"

"Yes, I will. You come again."

When she was gone, Ann, under the suggestion of an early dinner, set about getting her own. She had some calf's head from the day before, and she warmed it up with herbs. The kitchen smelled delightfully, and as she set out the food on her bare table, always scoured white to save the use of a cloth, she felt the richness of her own comfortable life. She ate peacefully, sitting [220] there in the sun and watching her shining silver, and just as she was finishing there came a

knock at the door.

"Walk right in," called Ann; but as nobody responded, she got up and opened the door herself. A young man stood on the broad stone, shabby, dust-covered, and with a tired face. The face was sullen, too. He looked as if life had been uncivil to him and he hated it. Ann felt a little shock, like a quicker heart-beat. It was in some subtle way like the face of her brother Will, who had died in his reckless youth.

"Gi' me a bite o' suthin' to eat," he said, as if it were a formula he had often used. "I ain't had a meal for a week."

"Massy sakes! yes," said Ann. "Come right in. Here, you set there, an' I'll warm it up a mite. I didn't have no potaters to-day,—I was in a kind of a hurry,—but I guess you can make out with bread."

He took the chair and watched her while she set on the spider again and warmed her savory dish. Ann filled the kettle at the same time. She judged that he might like a cup of tea, and told herself she would sit down and take it with him. But when the food was before him, he addressed himself to it, tacitly rejecting all her attempts to whip up conversation.

"You travelin' far?" asked Ann, over her own cup of tea, when she had skimmed the top of the milk for him. [221]

"Not very."

He frowned a little, and bent to his occupation. His hunger bore out what he had said. He cleared the dishes and drained the teapot. Then he rose, took his hat, and, without a look at Ann, jerked out a "much obliged," and was gone.

"Well," said Ann, smiling to herself ruefully, thinking of to-morrow's dinner, "talk about folks that eat an' run!"

But, washing the dishes and trying meantime to plan her happy afternoon, she could not put away the memory of her brother's eyes and one tumbling lock of hair; whispers from the past were clamorous at her ear. Presently there was the sound of wheels, and Mrs. John C., perched beside her meagre husband, called from the door:—

"Here we be, Ann. Where's your jug? What if you should clap on your bunnit an' ride along to the street?"

She spoke cordially, judging that on such a spring day everybody was better out of the woods and upon the highway.

"No," said Ann. "I got too much to do. I'm goin' into the pines arter some goldthread an' sarsaparil'. 'Most time for spring bitters. But I'm obleeged to ye for takin' the jug."

Half an hour later Ann closed the door behind her and, with a little basket on her arm and a kitchen knife to dig with, wandered away to her dear retreat. There she worked less than she had expected, the sunshine was so beguiling. She found many spring treasures, the sort she came upon year after year, and always with the same delighted wonder. A new leaf or a budding plant was enough to send Ann off into vistas of quiet joy. Spring clouds were thick, when she walked home, in a tumultuous white flock, and she liked them as well as the blue they covered. The earth was very satisfying to Ann. The air had made her hungry, and with a smile at her own haste, she drew out her little table and began to set it. [222]

Suddenly she stopped, as if a hand had grasped her heart. The room was different. A spot of brightness had gone out of it. The silver tea-set was not there. She hurried into the sitting-room, wild with hope that she might have set it away; but the place was empty. Ann went back into the kitchen, and sank down because her knees refused to hold her. Not once did she think of the value of what she had lost, but only as it linked the past to her own solitary days. The tea-set had been a kind of household deity, the memorial of her father's courage and her mother's happiness, a brighter sun of life than any that could rise again. She sat there still; her heart beat heavily. [223]

"Ann!" It was Mrs. John C.'s voice from the wagon. "Come git your jug."

Ann rose and went weakly out.

"There 'tis in the back o' the wagon," said Mrs. John C. "John'd git out, but the colt's possessed to start, an' I don't like to be left with the reins. Mercy, Ann! what's the matter o' you? You feel sick?"

Ann had dragged out the heavy jug, but there was no strength in her lean arms, and she swayed almost to the ground.

"No," she said, in a dull quiet, "I ain't sick; my silver tea-set's gone."

"Gone! gone where?"

"I don't know," said Ann, in the same despairing way, "unless somebody's stole it."

"John, do you hear that?" cried Mrs. John C., in high excitement. "That silver tea-set's gone. It's the one Ann sets her life by, an' it's wuth I dunno what. Can't you do suthin'?"

John C. looked about him with a vague solemnity.

"Anybody could git into these woods," he said, "an' you'd have hard work to find out where."

"Hard work!" repeated Mrs. John C., in extreme scorn. "I guess 't'll be hard work, but so's a good many things. Don't set there talkin'. Don't you worry, Ann! We'll stir up the neighbors, an' 'f your tea-set's anywheres above ground, we'll have it back, or I'll miss my guess. Come, John, come. Le' 's git along." [224]

Power and vengeance breathed from all her portly frame, and so they drove away, she even, as Ann saw, in her dull bewilderment, putting out a hand to shake the whip in its socket, and John C. holding in the plunging colt.

Ann wearily tugged in the molasses-jug and put it in its place. Then she sat down by the window, trembling, not to think over what had happened, but to bear her loss as she might. From the first moment of discovering it, she had had no hope. Tragic things of this sort were strangers to her simple life, and now that one had come, she knew no depth of experience to draw from. Sickness she could bear, or death if it should come, because they were factors of the common lot; but it had never occurred to her that so resplendent a thing as a silver tea-set could belong to any one and then be reft away.

The dusk gathered and thickened. The frogs were peeping down by the old willows, and for the first time in her life the melancholy of early spring lay cold upon her heart. It was perhaps eight o'clock when she heard a hand at the door.

"Ann!" called Mrs. John C. "Ann, you there?"

Ann rose heavily. [225]

"Come in," she said. "I'll light up."

When she had set the lamp on the table and lighted it with a trembling hand, Mrs. John C., waiting to find a chair, gazed at her in wonder. Ann looked stricken. Her hair was disordered, her eyes were sunken, and suddenly she was old. Mrs. John C. spoke gently, moved out of her energetic sweep and swing.

"Law, Ann! don't you take it so terrible hard. 'Tain't wuth it, even a tea-set ain't. What should you say if I told you they'd got onto the track on 't?"

"No," said Ann, out of her dull endurance, "they won't ever do that. When a thing o' that kind's gone, it's gone. Don't do no good to make a towse about it. I sha'n't ever see it again."

"Well, I guess I'd make a towse," said Mrs. John C., robustly. "If you won't, I will for ye. Mebbe you're nearer gittin' it back than you think. I told John I wa'n't goin' to wait a minute. I run over to tell ye." Then Ann listened, though as one still without hope. "Sam Merrill'd been down the gully road, fencin'," continued Mrs. John C., now with an exuberant relish of her news, "an' when he was comin' home along by the old Pelton house he sees a kind of a tramp goin' in there. He was youngish, Sam said, an' he had on a light coat, an' the pockets on 't bulged. What do you think o' that? Minute he said it, I says to myself, 'That's Ann's tea-set.'" [226]

All at once there came a picture before Ann's eyes: not the tramp with the bulging pockets, as he sought the hospitality of the ruined house, but the same tramp as he stood on her doorstone and asked for food. The whole event was clear to her. She called herself a fool for not having known at once.

"Sam say anything more about him?" she asked eagerly. "What he had on?"

"No. Come to think of it, yes, he did, too. Said he had on an old straw hat with a red an' blue band round it. Sam said he noticed that because 'twas so early for a straw. Said it looked more like a child's hat. Guessed he'd picked it up some'r's."

"Yes," said Ann, out of her daze, "so 't did." Yet she was not thinking of the hat as it might identify a thief, but of the brows under it, with a look she used to know.

"Why, Ann Barstow!" Mrs. John C. was saying, "you don't mean to tell me you see him yourself?"

Suddenly it seemed to Ann as if it were not the young tramp they were recalling, but her brother himself.

"No," she said defiantly. "I jest put in a word, that's all." [227]

Mrs. John C. swept on in the strain of her hopeful heralding.

"So, soon as Sam told that—'twa'n't more 'n half an hour ago—I says to him, 'You go an' stir up some o' the boys, an' 'long towards ten o'clock you jest surround the old Pelton house an' git him, tea-set an' all. Stan's to reason,' says I, 'it's an old deserted house, an' he's goin' to git part of a night's rest there. 'Fore mornin' he'll be up an' put for some banjin'-place he's got, an' then that silver'll be melted up an' you never'll see hide nor hair on 't again.' One spell I thought mebbe he was goin' to build up a fire in the old fireplace an' melt it right then an' there; but John says 'tain't likely. Says you need more heat'n that to melt up silver." She paused for want of breath.

"Be they goin' to do it?" asked Ann faintly.

"Who?"

"Them young folks. Be they goin' to surround him an' take him up?"

"Well, I guess they be," said Mrs. John C., rising and drawing her shawl about her. "They will if they've got any seem to 'em. So I told 'em when they was talkin' on 't over."

Ann followed her to the door.

[228] "If they should come acrost the tea-set," she hesitated, "mebbe they'd git hold o' that an' let him go."

Mrs. John C. gave her a reassuring touch with her capable right hand.

"Don't you worry," she said, out of cheerful experience of her own enterprise. "I see to that. I says to John C., 'He ain't a-goin' to slip out an' git away. It's goin' to be done accordin' to law an' order,' I says. 'I sha'n't sleep a wink till that scoundrel's landed in jail.' So I says to John C., 'You harness up the colt an' ride over an' git the sheriff, an' when the boys pitch onto him, have him ready to clap the handcuffs on.' Don't you worry, Ann. You'll see your tea-set yit."

Ann stood at the door, hearing her walking heavily away, and a gentle rage possessed her when she noted how broad her back looked, how capable of carrying burdens to their goal. She was deeply attached to Mrs. John C., but she realized how impossible it was to block her purposes. Hitherto they had all seemed beneficent ones; but now Ann felt something of the indignant protest that always surged in her when she saw a sleek and prosperous cat baiting a mouse. She went in and sat down again, with a double anxiety upon her. It was not only her tea-set she [229] lamented, but the hardness of life wherein any creature should be worried down and caught. And she remembered, as she did not in loyalty allow herself to remember often, that her brother also had been wild.

Suddenly something roused her. It was not so much a thought as a touch upon her heart, and she sat up straight, as full of fire and purpose as Mrs. John C. herself, only it was purpose of another kind. Mrs. John C. had the force of weight, and in Ann there were tense fibres of youth, not yet done thrilling. She threw her little shawl over her head and hurried out of the house. For an instant she paused, with a new impulse of caution, to lock the door. Then with a scorn of her present possessions, her one treasure gone, she latched it only, and took the wood-path to the swamp. Ann walked with a trained delicacy and caution suited to the woods. The thrilling of the frogs grew louder, and shortly she was at the old lightning oak that served her for a landmark. Before her lay the boggy place where she came in all warm seasons of the year for one thing or another: the wild marsh-marigold,—good for greens,—thoroughwort, and the root of the sweet-flag. P'ison flag grew here, too, the sturdy, delicate iris that made the swamp so gay.

Ann stayed a moment for breath. Haste had driven the blood to her face, and the cool spring air [230] seemed to generate in her the heat of summer. Until now she had loved the sound of the frogs, piping in the spring, but in the irritation of her trouble she spoke aloud to them: "Can't anybody be allowed to hear themselves think?" The haste of her errand tapped her again upon the arm, and she picked up the board which was one of the tools of her trade, left always at the foot of the lightning oak, and with it skirted the swamp to the east where the tussocks were large. Then, throwing her board before her from one foothold to another, she crossed the swamp. Twice she had fallen, and her dress was wet. She was muddy to the knees, but she wrung out her heavy skirts and ran along the path she knew to the door of the deserted house.

Ann thought she had never seen a place so still. It had the desolation of a spot where life has been and where it is no more. She listened a moment, her eyes searching the dark bulk of the house, her hand upon her racing heart. She smelled smoke. Then she called:—

"You there? I know ye be. Open the door."

There was no sound. She tried the door, and, finding it bolted, shook the handle with all the force of her strong arms.

"You let me in," she called again. "I've got suthin' to say to ye. It's suthin' you'll be glad to hear."

[231] But after she had waited a moment in the taunting stillness, she withdrew a little, that her voice should reach him, wherever he might be.

"I know all about it. You've took my silver tea-set an' you've got it in there now. Other folks knows it, too, an' about moonrise they're comin' here an' surround the house an' make you give it up." She paused for an eager breath. The futility of the moment choked her. "You hear to me," she called again, in her strained, beseeching voice. "'Twon't do ye no good to hide, for they know you're there. An' 'twon't do ye no good to fight, for there's a whole b'ilin' of 'em, an' like 's not they've got guns. Now when I'm gone—I'm goin' right off home now—you slip out the back o' the house an' go as straight as you can cut, right acrost the pastur'. That'll bring ye to a lane. You turn to your right an' foller it, an' it'll take ye onto the high-road. Then you take that an' keep to your left. T'others'll come from the right. An' if you find a good hidin'-place, you better clap the tea-set into it, under some brush or suthin', an' come back arter it some other time. Ye see, they've started up the sheriff an' I dunno what all. Mis' John C.'s puttin' on 't through, an' mebbe they've telegraphed over the country by this time. 'Tain't any small matter, takin' a silver tea-set [232] so. I'm terrible worried about ye. There! Now I'm goin'. You wait a minute, if ye don't want me to

see ye. Then you can put."

But when she had taken a dozen steps on her homeward way, she returned as hastily. Her voice broke again upon the stillness, with a thrill in it of renewed beseeching. "Look here, you! One thing you do, fust thing arter you git away from here. You see 'f you can't find some work an' you do it." The present experience seemed to have fallen away from her. She might have been addressing the boy who also had been wild in those years so long ago. "You keep on this way an' you'll end in jail an' I dunno but suthin' that's wuss. Mebbe nobody won't ketch ye this time,—you better melt the tea-set up soon as ever you can,—but some time they will. Now you mind what I tell ye."

This time she did turn away, and with her light and knowing step plunged into the woods. Once there, as she remembered afterwards, her knees seemed to fail her, but she went weakly on, until, at a good distance from the house, she sat down on a bank under the sighing pines and leaned against a tree to let the cool air touch her face. "My suz!" she breathed. Her mind was all a mingling of past and present, but chiefly it seemed to be invaded by a young face, sullen sometimes like the tramp's, and then again gay with laughter.

[233] When she came to her every-day frame of mind, the woods were still, and to her vivid sensibilities more deserted. She made no doubt the thief was gone in the way she had marked out for him. Ann had a childlike sense that he would believe her, because she meant so well. She took her own path soberly home again, not across the marsh this time, but half the way by the high-road. At one point she caught the sound of voices, subdued to the mysterious note of the hour itself. She stepped over a stone wall and lay down in the damp bracken there, and in a moment, as she expected, the cautious steps went by her on their quest, a party of eight or ten, as she judged, raising her head cautiously from her retreat to look and listen. Then she lay down again, chuckling softly as she did when the mouse escaped, even though it was to gnaw her cheese. And presently she took the road, and so went home.

Ann could not go to bed that night. It was not that she expected news, but she had a feeling that powers were abroad to shape and guide things, and that, though humbly, she must be among them. Perhaps it was the excitement of the time and stirring memories, but, for whatever reason, it seemed to her that her "folks" were all about her, strengthening her to the kindnesses and the loyalties of life. [234] She was not in the habit of praying; but as she lay upon the lounge in the kitchen, between waking and sleep, she kept saying to some hidden power: "You look out for him. Young folks don't know half the time what's best for 'em." And toward morning, in her confused state between life and sleep, she hardly knew whether it was her brother she prayed for or the unknown man. Once she heard a quick, sharp noise as if a window opened. She started up. "Yes, yes!" she called, out of her dream. "You want me? I'm right here." But no one answered, and she settled again to sleep.

It was seven o'clock when she opened her eyes to find the kitchen flooded with light. It was a brilliant day, but she was stiff and cold. After she had started her fire, she went into the bedroom to comb her hair, and glanced into the little blurred mirror she sometimes found her only company. The window was wide, the fresh May air blowing in, and there under the window on the floor was her silver tea-set. Ann sat down before it and gathered it into her arms as if it were a child. The tears ran down her cheeks. "To think," she kept saying, "to think he fetched it back. Only to think on 't!" And while she sat there, very happy with the tea-set in her lap, she heard a step she knew. She came swiftly to her feet. Then she put the silver on her bureau in a shining row, and questioned her face in the glass. [235] The tears were on it still, but that hardly mattered on a face that smiled so hard. But she did wipe away the drops with her apron, and then hurried into the kitchen to meet her visitor. Mrs. John C. was bedraggled from loss of sleep, and defeat sat upon her shining brow.

"Well, Ann," she said gloomily, "I ain't got any news for ye. He wa'n't there, arter all, though there'd been a fire an' they found he cooked himself some eggs. But they're goin' to beat up the woods arter breakfast, an' if he's above ground he's goin' to be took."

Ann could scarcely sober her smiling mouth.

"You tell 'em it's all right," she announced jubilantly. "Where do you s'pose I found it? In my bedroom, arter all."

Mrs. John C. regarded her with blighting incredulity. Ann had been guiltily careless, and yet she expressed no grief over the trouble she had made. It was beyond belief.

"Ann Barstow," said she, "you don't mean to tell me you had this whole township up traipsin' the woods all night, an' me without a wink o' sleep, an' that tea-set in your bedroom, arter all?"

Ann did flush guiltily. Her eyes fell.

"You beseech 'em not to think hard of me," she urged. "I never do put it in my bedroom,—you know yourself them two places I keep it in,—but there 'twas." [236]

Mrs. John C. turned majestically to be gone. She spoke with an emphasis that seemed, even to her, inadequate.

"Well, Ann Barstow, I should think you was losin' your mind."

"Mebbe I be," said Ann, joyously, following her to the door. "Mebbe I be. But there's my tea-set.

I'm terrible pleased."

THE OTHER MRS. DILL

[237]

Mrs. Dill and her husband, Myron, grown middle-aged together, and yet, even through the attrition of the years, no more according in temperament than at the start, sat on opposite sides of the hearth and looked at each other, he with calmness, from his invincible authority, and she fluttering a little, yet making no question but of a dutiful concurrence. She had bright blue eyes behind gold-rimmed glasses, a thin face with a nose slightly aquiline, and reddish hair that was her cross, because it curled by nature and she constrained it. Sometimes, when it kinked unusually, either in moist weather or because she had forgotten to smooth it, and when the pupils of her eyes enlarged under cumulative excitement, she looked young and impetuously willful; but the times were rare, and perhaps her husband had never, since their courting days, noted any such exhilaration. He was a large, imperious-looking man, with a cascade of silvery beard which he affected to tolerate because the expenditure of time in shaving might be turned with profit into the channel of business or of worship; but his wife, noting how he stroked the beard at intervals of meditation, judged that he was moved by something like pride in its luxuriance. Then she chided herself for the thought. [238]

It was balmy spring weather, but they had taken their places at the hearthstone from old habit when a matter of importance had to be considered. Their two chairs were the seats of authority in the domestic realm.

Mrs. Dill stooped, took up the turkey-wing, and gave the clean hearth a perfunctory flick. Then she returned the wing to its place and leaned back in her chair, gazing absently at the shining andirons.

"Well," she said, "Henrietta Parkman was in this mornin', and she told me you'd bought the medder; but I didn't hardly believe it."

"Yes," said Myron. He spoke in rather a consequential voice, and cleared his throat frequently in the course of talking, as if to accord his organs a good working chance. "The deeds were passed last week, and it's bein' recorded."

"What you goin' to do with it?"

"I bought it because it lays next to the Turnbull place, and when that come into my hands last fall, I knew 'twas only a matter o' time till I got the medder, too."

"Well, what you goin' to do with it?"

A tinge of anxiety was apparent in her voice, a wistful suggestiveness, as if she could conceive of uses that would be almost too fortunate to be hoped for. Myron hesitated. It often looked as if he judged it unwise to answer in any haste questions concerning the domestic polity, and Mrs. Dill was used to these periods of incubation. She had even thought once, in a moment of illuminative comparison, that her husband seemed to submit a bill before one branch of his mental legislature before carrying it on to the next. [239]

"I'm goin' to pasture my cows in it," he responded. "I shall buy in some more stock this spring, and I expect to set up a milk-route."

"How under the sun you goin' to manage that?" She seldom questioned her lawful head, but the surprise of the moment spurred her into a query more expressive of her own mood than a probing of his. "You can't keep any more cows'n you've got now. The barn ain't big enough."

"The Turnbull barn is. I've seen the day when there was forty head o' cattle tied up there from fall to spring."

"The Turnbull barn's twenty minutes' walk from here. You can't go over there mornin' and evenin', milkin' and feedin' the critters. You'd be all the time on the road."

"Yes," said Myron, "'tis a good stretch. So I've made up my mind we'd move over there."

A significant note had come into his voice. It indicated a complexity of understanding: chiefly that she would by nature resist what he had to say, and then resume her customary acquiescence. But for a moment she forgot that he was Mr. Dill, and that she had promised to obey him. [240]

"Why, Myron," she said, with a mild passion, warmed by her incredulity, "we've lived on this place thirty year."

"Yes, yes," said her husband. "I know that. What's the use o' goin' back over the ground, and

tellin' me things I know as well as you do? What if 'tis thirty year? Time we got into better quarters."

"But they ain't better. Only it's more work."

Myron got up and moved back his chair.

"I don't think o' movin' till long about the middle o' May," he rejoined. "You can kinder keep your mind on it and, when you get round to your spring cleanin', pick up as you go. Some things you can fold right into chists, blankets and winter clo'es, and then you won't have to handle 'em over twice. If Herman comes back from gettin' the horse shod, you tell him to take an axe, and come down where I be in the long lot, fencin'. I want him."

He paused for a hearty draught from the dipper at the pump, pulled his hat on tightly, and went out through the shed to his forenoon's work. Mrs. Dill rose from her seat, and stepped quickly to the window to watch him away. She often did it when he had most puzzled her and roused in her a resistance which was inevitable, she knew by long experience, but also, as her dutiful nature agreed, the result in her of an unconquerable old Adam which had never yet felt the transforming touch of grace. When his tall, powerful figure had disappeared beyond the rise at the end of the lot, she gave a great willful sigh, as if she depended on it to ease her heart, put her apron to her eyes, and held it there, pressing back the tears. [241]

Herman drove into the yard, and she did not hear him. She went to the fireplace now, and leaned her head against the corner of the mantel, looking down, with a bitter stolidity, at the hearth. Herman unharnessed, and came in, a tall brown-haired fellow with dark eyes full of softness, and a deep simplicity of feeling. As his foot struck the sill, his mother roused herself, and became at once animated by a commonplace activity. She did not face him, for fear he should find the tear-marks on her cheeks; but when he had thrown his cap into a chair, and gone to the sink to plunge his face in cold water, and came out dripping, she did steal a look at him, and at once softened into a smiling pleasure. He was her handsome son always, but to-day he looked brilliantly excited; eager, also, as if he had something to share with her, and was timid about presenting it. [242]

"Mother!" said Herman. He was standing before her now, smiling invitingly, and she smiled back again and picked a bit of lint from his collar for the excuse of coming near him, and proving to herself her proud ownership. "I've had a letter."

"From Annie?"

He nodded.

"What's she say?" asked his mother. But before he could answer, she threw in a caressing invitation. "You want I should get you a piece o' gingerbread and a glass o' milk?"

"No, I ain't hungry. She says she's kep' school about long enough, and if I'm goin' to farm it, she'll farm it, too. I guess she'd be married the first o' the summer, if we could fetch it."

Mrs. Dill stepped over to the hearth and sank into her chair. It seemed as if there were to be another family council. Her silence stirred him.

"I asked her," he hastened to say. "I coaxed her, mother. She ain't as forward as I make it out, the way I've told it."

"No," said his mother absently. She was resting her elbows on the chair-arm, and, with hands lightly clasped, gazing thoughtfully into space. Fine lines had sprung into her forehead, and now she took off her glasses and wiped them carefully on her apron, as if that would help her to an inner vision. "No, I know that. Annie's a nice girl. There's nothin' forward about Annie. But I was only wonderin' where you could live. This house is terrible small." [243]

"You know what I thought," Herman reminded her. He spoke impetuously as if begging her to remember, and therefore throw the weight of her expectation in with his. "When father bought the Turnbull place I thought, as much as ever I did anything in my life, he meant to make it over to me."

His mother's eyes stayed persistently downcast. A little flush rose to her cheeks.

"Well," she temporized, "you ain't goin' to count your chickens before they're hatched. It's a poor way. It never leads to anything but disappointment in the end."

"Why, mother," said Herman warmly, "you thought so too. We talked it over only night before last, and you said you guessed father'd put me on to that farm."

"I said I didn't know what he'd bought it for, if 'twa'n't for that," she amended. "Don't you build on anything I said. Don't you do it, Hermie."

Her son stood there frowning in perplexity, his hands deep in his pockets, and his feet apart.

[244] "But you said so yourself, mother," he persisted. "I told you how I'd always helped father out, long past my majority, and never hinted for anything beyond my board and clothes. And when I got engaged to Annie, I went to him and said, 'Father, now's the time to give me a start, or let me cut loose from here.' And he never answered me a word; but a couple of weeks after that he bought the Turnbull place. And last week it was, he said to me, kind of quick, as if he'd made up

his mind to somethin', and wa'n't quite ready to talk it over, 'I've got a sort of a new scheme afoot.' And then 'twas I wrote to Annie and asked her how soon she could be ready to come, if I was ready to have her. You know all that, mother. What makes you act as if you didn't?"

The argument was too warm for Mrs. Dill. She rose from her chair and began putting up the table-leaf and setting out the necessary dishes for a batch of cake.

"Your father wanted you should take an axe and go down where he is in the long lot," she remarked. "And I wouldn't open your head to him about what we've been sayin', Hermie. You talk it over with mother. That's the best way."

"Why, course I sha'n't speak of it till I have to." He took up his cap, and then with an air of aggrieved dignity turned to the door. "But the time'll come when I've got to speak of it. Lot Collins was tellin' me only this mornin' over to the blacksmith's, how his father's took him into partnership, and Lot's only twenty-one this spring. His father ain't wasted a day." [245]

"Well, that's a real business, blacksmithin' is," his mother hastened to reply.

"So's farmin' a real business. And father's treated me from the word 'go' like a hired man and nothin' else. He's bought and sold without openin' his head to me. I wonder I've grown up at all. I wonder I ain't in tyers, makin' mud-pies. If 'twa'n't for you and Annie, I shouldn't think I was any kind of a man."

His angry passion was terribly appealing to her. It made her heart ache, and she had much ado to keep from taking him to her arms, big as he was, and comforting him, as she used to, years ago, when he came in with frostbitten fingers or the dire array of cuts and bruises. But she judged it best, in the interest of domestic government, to quell emotion that could have, she knew, no hopeful issue, and she began breaking eggs into her mixing bowl and then beating them with a brisk hand.

"Father never was one to talk over his business with anybody, even the nearest," she rejoined. "You know that, Hermie. We've got to take folks as we find 'em. Now you go ahead down to the long lot. He'll be wonderin' where you be." [246]

Herman strode away, after one incredulous look at her, a shaft she felt through her downcast lids. It demanded whether father and mother had equally forsaken him, and gave her a quick, sharp pang, and a blinding flash of tears. But she went on mixing cake, and battling arguments as she worked, and when her tin was in the oven, washed her baking dishes methodically and then sat down by the window to read the weekly paper. But as she read, she glanced up, now and then, at the familiar walls of her kitchen, and through the window at the trees just shimmering into green and the skyey intervals over them. This was the pictured landscape she had worked on, framed by these wide, low windows, for all the years she had lived here, doing her wifely duties soberly, and her motherly ones with a hidden and ecstatic buoyancy.

The house, the bit of the world it gave upon, seemed a part of her life, the containing husk of all the fruitage born to her. It was incredible that she was to give it up and undertake not only a heavier load of work but a new scene for it, at a time when she longed to fold her hands and sit musing while young things filled the picture with beautiful dancing motions, and the loves and fears she remembered as a part of the warm reality of it, but not now so intimately her own. It was as if the heaped-up basket of earthly fruits had passed her by, to be given into other hands; but she had eaten and was content, if only she might see the banquet lamps and hear the happy laughter. She began to feel light-headed from the pain of it all, the pleasures and sadnesses of memory, the fear of anticipation, and turned again to her paper with the intent of giving her mind to safe and homely things. But something caught her eyes and held them. A window seemed to be opened before her. She looked through it into her tumultuous past. Or was this a weapon put into her hand for the exacting future? [247]

That night Myron Dill came into the sitting-room after his chores were done, and lay down on the lounge between the two front windows. He composed himself on his back with his hands placidly folded, and there his wife found him when she came in after her own completed list of deeds. He did not look up at her, and she was glad. She did not know how her eyes gleamed behind the glittering plane of their glasses, nor how deep the red was in her cheeks; but she was conscious of an inward tumult which must, she knew, somehow betray itself. For an instant she stood and looked at her husband, in what might have been relenting or anticipation of the road she had to take. She knew so well what mantle of repose was over him: how he liked the peeping of the frogs through the open window, and what measure of satisfaction there was for him in the consciousness of full rest and the certainty that next day would usher in a crowding horde of duties he felt perfectly able to administer. Mrs. Dill was a feminine creature, charged to the full with the love of service and unerring intuition as to the manner of it, and she did love to "see menfolks comfortable." [248]

"Don't you want I should pull your boots off?"

This she said unwillingly, because she was about to break the current of his peace, and it seemed deceitful to offer him an alleviation that would do him no good after all.

"No," said Myron sleepily. "Let 'em be as they are."

Mrs. Dill drew up a chair and sat down in it at his side, as if she were the watcher by a sick-bed or the partner in a cosy conversation.

"Myron," said she. Her voice frightened her. It sounded hoarse and strange, and yet there was very little of it, deserted by her failing breath.

"What say?" he answered from his drowse.

"I found a real interestin' piece in the 'Monitor' this mornin'. It was how some folks ain't jest one person, as we think, but they're two and sometimes three. And mebbe one of 'em's good, and t'other two are bad, and when they're bad they can't help it. They can't help it, Myron, the bad ones can't, no matter how hard they try." [249]

"Yes, I believe I come acrost it," said Myron. "Terrible foolish it was. That's one o' the things doctors get up to feather their own nest."

"No, Myron, it ain't foolish," said his wife. She moved her chair nearer, and her glasses glittered at him. "It ain't foolish, for I'm one o' that same kind, and I know."

His eyes came open, and he turned his head to look at her.

"Ain't you feelin' well, Caddie?" he asked kindly.

"Oh, yes, I'm well as common," she answered. "But it ain't foolish, Myron, and you've got to hear me. 'Double Personality,' that's what they call it. Well, I've got it. I've got double personality."

Myron Dill put his feet to the floor, and sat upright. He was regarding his wife anxiously, but he took pains to speak with a commonplace assurance.

"We might as well be gettin' off to bed early, I guess. I'm tired, and so be you."

"I've felt it for quite a long spell," said his wife earnestly. "I don't know but I've always felt it—leastways, all through my married life. It's somethin' that makes me as mad as tophet when you start me out to do anything I don't feel it's no ways right to do, and it keeps whisperin' to me I'm a fool to do it. That's what it says, Myron. 'You're a fool to do it!'" [250]

Myron was touched at last, through his armor of esteem.

"I ain't asked you to do what ain't right, Caddie," he asseverated. "What makes you tell me I have?"

"That's what it says to me," she repeated fixedly. "'You're a fool to do it.' That's what it says. It's my double personality."

It seemed best to Myron to humor this inexplicable mood, until he could persuade her back into a normal one.

"That wa'n't the way I understood it," he told her, "when I read the piece. The folks that were afflicted seemed like different folks. Now, you ain't any different, rain or shine. You're as even as anybody I should wish to see. That's what I've liked about ye, Caddie."

The softness of the implication she swept aside, as if she hardly dared regard it lest it weaken her resolve.

"Oh, I ain't goin' to be the same, day in, day out," she declared eagerly. "I feel I ain't, Myron. It's gettin' the best of me, the other creatur' that wants to have its own way. It's been growin' and growin', same as a child grows up, and now it's goin' to take its course. Same 's Hermie's growed up, you know. He's old enough to have his way, and lead his life same's we've led ours, and we've got to stand one side and let him do it." [251]

Her husband gave her a sharp, sudden glance, and then fell again to the contemplation of his knotted brown hands that seemed, like all his equipment, informed with specialized power.

"Well," he said at length, "I guess you need a kind of a change. You'll feel better when you get over to t'other house. There's a different outlook over there, and you'll have more to take up your mind."

She answered instantly, in the haste that dares not wait upon reflection. Her eyes were brighter now, and her hands worked nervously.

"Oh, I ain't goin' to move, Myron. I might as well tell you that now. I'm goin' to stay right here where I be. I don't feel able to help it. That's my double personality. It won't let me."

Her husband was looking at her now in what seemed to her a very threatening way. His shaggy eyebrows were drawn together and his eyes had lightning in them. She continued staring at him, held by the fascination of her terror. In that instant she realized a great many things: chiefly that she had never seen her husband angry with her, because she had taken every path to avoid the possibility, and that it was even more sickening than she could have thought. But she knew also that the battle was on, and suddenly, for no reason she could formulate, she remembered one of her own fighting ancestors who was said to have died hard in the Revolution. [252]

"That was old Abner Kinsman," she broke out; and when her husband asked, out of his amaze at her irrelevance, "What's that you said?" she only answered confusedly, "Nothin', I guess."

At that the storm seemed to Myron to be over, and his forehead cleared of anger. He looked at

her in much concern.

"I guess you better lay late to-morrer mornin'," he said, rising to close the windows and wind the clock. "I'll ride over and get Sally Drew to come and stay a spell and help you."

Something tightened through her tense body, and she answered instantly in a clear, loud note,—

"I ain't goin' to have Sally Drew. Last time I had her she washed up the hearth with the dish-cloth. If I want me a girl, I'll get one; but mebbe I sha'n't want one till Hermie brings Annie into the neighborhood to live."

She stood still in her place for a moment, trembling all over, and wondering what would happen when Myron had wound the clock and closed the windows and turned the wooden button of the door. He did not look at her, nor did he speak again, and when she heard his deep, regular breathing from the bedroom she slipped in softly, made ready for bed, and lay down beside him.

She slept very little that night. He seemed to be a stranger, because there had been outward division between them; and yet, curiously, she felt nearer to him because she might have hurt him, and the jealous partisanship within her kept prompting her to a more tumultuous good-will, a warmer service.

Next morning, when Hermie had left them at the breakfast-table, and gone silently to his tasks, his mother leaned across the table as if, for some reason, she had to attract her husband's attention before speaking to him. He was just taking the last swallow of coffee, and now he set down his cup with decision, and moved away his plate. She knew what the next step would be. He would push back his chair, clear his throat, and then he would be gone.

"Myron!" she said. She spoke as something within Myron remembered the school-teacher speaking, when she called him to the board. The something within him responded to it, and without knowing why, he straightened and looked attentive. "You noticed Hermie, didn't you?" she adjured him. "You noticed he didn't have a word to say for himself, and he wouldn't look neither of us in the face?"

"What's he been up to?" Myron queried, with his ready frown. "He done somethin' out o' the way?"

"No, he ain't. I should think you'd be ashamed to hint such a thing, Myron Dill, your own boy, too! All he's done is to stay here, and work his fingers to the bone, and no thanks for it, and he's right down discouraged. I know how the boy feels. Myron, I want you should do somethin'. I want you should do it now."

Myron gave his chair the expected push, but he still sat there.

"Well," he said, "what is it? I've got to be off down to the medderlands."

"I want you should make over the Turnbull place to Hermie, and have him fetch Annie there as soon as ever she'll come, and let him farm it without if or but from you and me."

Myron was on his feet. He looked portentously large and masterful.

"You better not think o' packin' the chiny," he said, in his ordinary tone of generalship. "We can set it into baskets with a mite o' hay, and it'll get as fur as that without any breakages."

His wife slipped out of her chair, and went round the table to him. She laid a hand on his arm. Myron wanted, in the irritation of the moment, to shake it off, but he was a man of dignity, and forbore. His wife was speaking in a very gentle tone, but somehow different from the one he was used to noting.

"Myron, ain't you goin' to hear me?"

"I ain't goin' to listen to any tomfoolery, and I ain't goin' to have anybody dictatin' to me about my own business."

"It ain't your business, Myron, any more'n 'tis mine. Hermie's much my son as he is your'n, and what you bought that place with is as much mine as 'tis your'n. I helped you earn it. Myron, it's comin' up in me. I can feel it."

"What is?"

In spite of all his old dull certainties, he felt the shock of wonder. He looked at her, her scarlet cheeks and widening eyes. Even her pretty hair seemed to have acquired a nervous life, and stood out in a quivering aureole. Myron was much bound to his Caddie in his way of being attached to his own life and breath. A change in her was horrible to him, like the disturbance of illness in an ordered house.

"What is it?" he inquired again. "What is it you feel?"

"It's that," she said, with an added vehemence. "It's my double personality."

Myron Dill could have wept from the surprise of it all, the assault upon his wondering nerves.

"You spread up the bed in the bedroom, Caddie," he bade her, "and go lay down a spell."

"No," said his wife, "I sha'n't lay down, and I sha'n't give up to you. It's riz up in me, the one that's goin' to beat, no matter what comes of it, same as old Abner Kinsman stood up ag'inst the British. Mebbe it'll die fightin', same's he did, and I never'll hear no more from it,—and a good riddance. But Myron, it's goin' to beat."

Her husband was frowning, not harshly now, but from the extremity of his distress. He spoke in a tone of well-considered adjuration.

"Caddie, you know what you're doin' of? You're settin' up your will in place o' mine."

"Oh, no, I ain't, Myron," she responded eagerly, with an earnest motion toward him, as if she besought him to put faith in her. "It ain't me that's doin' it."

"It ain't you? Who is it, then?"

"Why, it's my double personality. Ain't I just told you so?"

Myron stood gazing at her in the futility of comprehension he had felt years ago, when Caddie, who had been "a great reader," as the neighbors said, before the avalanche of household cares had overwhelmed her, propounded to him, while he was drawing off his boots for an hour of twilight somnolence before going to bed, problems that, he knew, no man could answer. Neither were they to be illumined by Holy Writ, for he had offered that loophole of exit, and Caddie had shaken her head at him disconsolately, and implied that the prophets would not do. But when she had seemed to forget that interrogative attitude toward life, he had settled down to unquestioning content in knowing he had the best housekeeper in the neighborhood. Now here it was again, the spectre of her queerness rising to distress him. [257]

She looked at him with wide, affrighted eyes.

"You set here with me a spell," she adjured him. "I'll lay down on the sofy, and you take the big rocker. If you see it comin' up in me, you kinder say somethin', and mebbe it'll go away."

Myron, though in extreme unwillingness, did as he was bidden. He wanted to bundle the whole troop of her imaginings out of doors, and plod off, like a sane man, to his fencing; but somehow her earnestness itself forbade. When they were established, she on the sofa, with her bright eyes piercing him, and he seated at an angle where a nurse might easiest wait upon a patient's needs, the absurdity of it all swept over him. The clock was ticking irritatingly behind him. He looked at his watch, and took assurance from the vision of the flying day. [258]

"Now, Caddie," said he, in that specious soothing we accord to children, "you lay right still, and I'll go out a spell and do a few chores, and then mebbe I'll come in and see how you be."

Caddie put out a hand, and fastened it upon his in an inexorable clasp.

"No, Myron," said she, "you ain't goin'. If I should be left here to myself, and it come up in me, I dunno what I might do."

Myron felt himself yielding again, and clutched at confidence as the spent swimmer reaches for a plank.

"What do you think you'd do, Caddie?" he demanded. "That's what I want to know."

"I can't tell, Myron," she returned solemnly. "True as I'm a livin' woman, I can't tell you. Mebbe I'd go over to the Turnbull house and set it a-fire, so 't I shouldn't ever live in it. Mebbe I'd take my bank-book, and go up to the Street, and draw out that money aunt Susan left me, and give it to Hermie, so 's he could run away, and take Annie with him. If that other one come up in me, I dunno what I'd do." [259]

Myron gazed at her, aghast.

"Why, Caddie," said he, "you can't go round settin' houses a-fire. That's arson."

"Is it?" she inquired. "Well, I dunno what it's called, but if that other one gets the better o' me, mebbe that's what I shall do."

Myron held her hand now with an involuntary fervor of his own, not so much because she bade him, but with the purpose of restraining her. An hour passed, and her blue eyes were fixed upon him with the same imploring force. He fidgeted, and at last longed childishly to see them wink.

"Don't you want to see the doctor?" he ventured.

"No," said Caddie, in the same tone of wild asseveration. "Doctors won't do me a mite o' good. Besides, doctors know all about it, and they'd see what was to pay, and they'd send me off to some kind of a hospital, and there'd be a pretty bill o' costs."

"I don't believe a word of it," Myron ventured, with a grasp at mental liberty. He essayed, at the same time, to draw away his hand, but Caddie seemed to fix him with a sharper eye-gleam, and he forbore.

"There's Hermie," she said. "I hear him in the shed, rattlin' round amongst the tools. You call him in here, and when he's here, you tell him he's goin' to have the Turnbull place, and have it now. Myron, you tell him." [260]

Myron made a slight involuntary movement in his chair, as if he were about to rise and carry out her mandate; but he settled back again, and Herman, having selected the tool he wanted, went off through the shed and, as they both knew, down the garden-path.

The forenoon went on in a strange silence, save for the sound of the birds, and an occasional voice of neighbors calling to Herman as they passed. Myron had still that sickening sense of illness in the house. The breakfast dishes were, he knew, untouched upon the table. The cat came in, looked incidentally at the sofa as if she were accustomed to occupy it at that particular hour, and walked out again. Myron drew forth his watch, and looked at it with a stealthiness he could not explain.

"Why," said he, with a simulated wonder, "it's nigh half after eleven. Hadn't you better see about gettin' dinner?"

"I ain't a-goin' to get any dinner," his wife responded. "I don't know as I shall ever get dinners any more. Myron, it's comin' up in me. I feel it." She dropped his hand and rose to a sitting posture, and for a moment, yielding to the physical relief of the broken clasp, he leaned back in his chair and drew a hearty breath. [261]

"Myron," said his wife. There was something mandatory in her voice, and he came upright again. "Now I'm goin' to do it. I don't know what 'tis, but it's got the better o' me and I'm goin' to do what it says. But 'fore I give way to it, I'm goin' to tell you this. You've got as good a home and as good a son and as good a wife, if I do say it, as any man in the State o' New Hampshire. And you can keep 'em, Myron, jest as they be, jest as good as they always have been, if you'll only hear to reason and give other folks a chance. You've got to give me a chance, and you've got to give Herman a chance. I guess mebbe I'd sell all my chances for the sake of turnin' 'em in with Hermie's. But you've got to do it, and you've got to do it now. And if you don't, somethin' 's goin' to happen. I don't know what it is. I don't know no more'n the dead, for this is the first time I ever really knew I had that terrible creatur' inside of me that's goin' to beat. But I do know it, and you've got to stand from under."

She turned about and walked to the side window, looking on the garden. She was a slight woman, but Myron, watching her in the fascination of his dread, had momentary remembrance of her father, who had been a man of majestic presence and unflinching will. [262]

"Herman," his wife was calling from the window. "Herman, you come here."

That new mysterious note in her voice evidently affected the young man also. He came, hurrying, and when he had entered stayed upon the threshold, warm-hued with work and bringing with him the odor of the soil. His brown eyes went from one of them to the other, and questioned them.

"What is it?" he inquired. "What's happened?"

Myron got upon his feet. He had a dazed feeling that the two were against him, and he could face them better so. He hated the situation, the abasement that came from a secret self within him which was almost terribly moved by some of the things his wife had spoken out of her long silence. He was a proud man, and it seemed to him dreadful that he should in any way have won such harsh appeal.

"Herman," his wife was beginning, "your father's got somethin' to say to you."

Herman waited, but his father could not speak. Myron was really seeing, as in a homely vision, the peace of the garden where he might at this moment have been expecting the call to dinner if he had not been summoned to the bar of judgment. [263]

"I guess he's goin' to let me say it," his wife continued. "Father's goin' to give you a deed o' the Turnbull place. It's goin' to be yours, same as if you'd bought it, and you and Annie are goin' to live there all your days, same 's we're goin' to live here."

Herman turned impetuously upon his father. There was a great rush of life to his face, and his father saw it and understood, in the amazement of it, things he had never stopped to consider about the boy who had miraculously grown to be a man. But Herman was finding something in his father's jaded mien. It stopped him on the tide of happiness, and he spoke impetuously.

"She's dragged it out o' you! Mother's been tellin' you! I don't want it that way, father, not unless it's your own free will. I won't have it no other way."

It was a man's word to a man. Myron straightened himself to his former bearing. In a flash of memory he remembered the day when his father, an old-fashioned man, had given him his freedom suit and shaken hands with him and wished him well. Involuntarily he put out his hand.

"It's my own will, Hermie," he said, in a tone they had not heard from him since the day, eighteen years behind them, when the boy Hermie was rescued from the "old swimmin'-hole." "We'll have the deeds drawed up to-morrer." [264]

They stood an instant, hands gripped, regarding each other in the allegiance not of blood alone. The clasp broke, and they remembered the woman and turned to her. There she stood, trembling a little, but apparently removed from all affairs too large for her. She had taken a cover from the stove, and was obviously reflecting on the next step in her domestic progress.

"I guess you better bring me in a handful o' that fine kindlin', Hermie," she remarked, in her wonted tone of brisk suggestion, "so 's 't I can brash up the fire. I sha'n't have dinner on the stroke—not 'fore half-past one."

THE ADVOCATE

[265]

"You goin'?" called Isabel Wilde from the road, to Ardelia, sitting forlornly on the front steps.

It was seven o'clock of a wonderful August morning, with all the bloom of summer and the lull of fall. Isabel was a dark, strong young creature who walked with her head in the air, and Ardelia, pretty and frail and perfect in her own small way, looked like a child in comparison. Isabel had been down to carry a frosted cake to her little niece Ellen, for Ellen's share of the picnic at Poole's Woods. It was Fairfax day, when once a year all Fairfax went to the spot where the first settlers drank of the "b'ilin' spring" on their way to a clearing.

"You goin'?" she called again, imperiously, and Ardelia answered, as if from some unwillingness:—

"I guess so."

"Now what do you want to say that for?" rang her mother's voice from an upper window, where, trusting to her distance from the road, she thought she could speak her mind without Isabel's hearing. "You know you ain't. Oliver's gone off to work in the acre lot." [266]

Isabel had heard. She stood regarding Ardelia thoughtfully, her black brows drawn together and her teeth set upon one full lip.

"Ardelia," she called softly, after that moment of consideration.

"What is it?" came Ardelia's unwilling voice, the tone of one who has emotion to conceal.

"Come here a minute."

Ardelia rose slowly and came down the path. She was a wisp of a creature, perfectly fashioned and very appealing in her blond prettiness. Isabel eyed her sharply and judged from certain signs that she had at least meant to go. She had on her light-blue dimity with the Hamburg frills, and her sorrowful face indicated that she had donned it to no avail.

"What time you goin', 'Delia?" asked Isabel quietly, over the fence.

Ardelia could not look at her. She stood with bent head, busily arranging a spray of coreopsis that fell out over the path, and Isabel was sure her eyes were wet.

"I don't know," she said evasively; "maybe not very early."

Isabel was looking at her tenderly. It was not a personal tenderness so much as a softness born out of peculiar circumstance. She knew exactly why she was sorry for Ardelia in a way no one else could be. Yet there seemed to be no present means of helping her. [267]

"Well," she said, turning away, "maybe I'll see you there. Say, 'Delia!" A sudden thought was brightening her eyes to even a kinder glow. "If you haven't planned any other way, s'pose you go with us. Jim Bryant's goin' to take me, and he'd admire to have you, too. What say, 'Delia?"

Ardelia's delicate figure straightened, and now she looked at Isabel. There was something new in her gentle glance. It looked like dignity.

"I'm much obliged to you, Isabel," she returned stiffly. "If I go, I've arranged to go another way."

"All right," said Isabel. "Well, I guess I'll be gettin' along."

But before she was half-way to the turning of the road she heard Mrs. Drake's shrill voice from the upper window:—

"He's begun to dig, 'Delia. Oliver's begun to dig. He won't stop for no picnics, I can tell ye that."

It seemed to Isabel as if the world were very much out of tune for delicate girls like 'Delia who wanted pleasure and could not have it. She paused a moment at the crossing of the roads, the frown of consideration again upon her brow. "Makes me mad," she said to herself, but half absently, as if that were not the issue at all. Then she turned her back on her own home-road and the house where her starched dress was awaiting her, and where Jim Bryant would presently call to take her to Poole's Woods, and walked briskly down the other way. [268]

Isabel stopped at the acre field, but she had no idea of what she meant to say when she was

there. Oliver was digging potatoes, as she knew he would be, and she recognized the bend of the back, the steady stress of one who toiled too long and too unrestingly, so that his very pose spoke like a lifelong purpose. She stood still for a moment or two before he saw her, gazing at him. Old tenderness awoke in her, old angers also. She remembered how he had made her suffer in the obstinate course of his own will, and how free she had felt when at last she had broken their engagement and seen him drift under Ardelia's charm. But he would always mean something to her more than other men, in a fashion quite peculiar to himself. She had agonized too much over him. She had protected him too long against the faults of his own nature, and now she could not be content unless, for his sake, she protected Ardelia a little also. Suddenly he lifted himself to rest his back, and saw her. They stood confronting each other, each with a sense of familiarity and pain. Oliver was a handsome fellow, tall, splendidly made, with rich, warm coloring. He looked kindly, but stolidly set in his own way. [269]

"That you, Isabel?" he asked awkwardly.

They had met only for a passing word since the breaking of their troth.

"Yes," said Isabel briefly. "I've got to speak to you. Wait a minute. I'll come in by the bars, and you meet me under the old cherry. It'll be shady there."

She turned back to the bars, ducked deftly under, and, holding her skirts from the rough land, made her way to the cherry in the corner of the lot. Oliver wonderingly followed. She felt again that particular anger she reserved for him, when she saw him stalking along, hoe in hand. It was a settled tread, with little spring in it, and for the moment it seemed to her a prophecy of what it would be when he was an old man, with a staff instead of the hoe. She was waiting for him under the tree.

"Oliver," she began, speaking out of an impulse hardly yet approved by judgment, "you goin' to the picnic?"

Oliver looked at her in wonder.

"Why, no," said he slowly.

"Didn't you promise 'Delia you'd go?"

"No, I guess not. I said mebbe I'd be round if I had time, but I ain't found the time. These 'taters have got to be dug." [270]

The red had surged into Isabel's full cheeks. She looked an eloquent remonstrance.

"Oliver," she said impetuously, "'Delia's sittin' on the front steps, waitin' for you to come. She'll be terrible disappointed if you put her aside like this."

Oliver took off his hat and passed a hand over his forehead. She noticed, as she had a hundred times, how fine his hair was at the roots, and was angry again because he would not, with his exasperating ways, let any woman love him as she might. He seemed to have nothing to say, but she knew the picture of lone 'Delia sitting on the steps was far from moving him. It did cause him an honest trouble, for he was kind; but not for that would he postpone his work.

"Oliver," she continued, "did you ever know what 'twas that made me tell you we must break off bein'—engaged?"

He was looking at her earnestly. His own mind seemed returning to a past ache and loss.

"I understood," he said at length—"I understood 'twas because you kinder figured it out we shouldn't get along well."

She stood there, a frowning figure, her lips compressed, her eyes stormy. Then she turned to him, all frankness and candor. [271]

"Oliver," she said, "I never give you any reasons. What's the use? I was terrible fond of you. I was. I don't know 's any girl ought to say that when you're engaged to somebody else, and I'm engaged myself, and happy as the day is long. But what 'twas—what come between us—you never made me have a good time."

He stood leaning upon his hoe, very handsome, very stern in his attention to her, and, as she could see, entirely surprised. The child in her, that rare, ingenuous part she kept in hiding, came out and spoke:—

"Why, Oliver, we never had any fun! You were awful good to me. You'd worry yourself to pieces if I was sick; but we never had more'n one or two good times together, long 's it lasted, and them I planned. And I got terrible tired of it, and I says to myself, 'If it's so now, when we're only goin' together, it'll be a million times worse when we're married.' And then when you took a fancy to 'Delia, I was real pleased. I says to myself. 'Maybe she'll know how to manage him. Maybe 'twas somethin' in me,' I says, 'that made him not want to have a good time with me, and maybe now 'twon't be so.' And when I see you goin' on the same old way, workin' from mornin' till night, I says to myself, 'Something' 's got to be done. I ain't goin' to have 'Delia put upon like this.' 'Tain't because it's 'Delia. I ain't so terrible fond of 'Delia, only we went to school together. But don't you see, Oliver, I couldn't say it for myself? No girl could. But I can for 'Delia." [272]

"Well," said Oliver, "well." He was entirely amazed. Then as he looked at the field, a general

maxim occurred to him, and he remarked, "The farm's got to be carried on."

"No, it ain't, either," said Isabel, with a passionate earnestness, "not as you do it. Other folks don't work themselves to death the way you do, and you're forehanded too. It's because you like it. You like it better'n anything else. You were born so, and it's just as bad as bein' born with an appetite for drink or anything else."

"I never knew you felt so, Isabel," he said gravely. "I don't see why you didn't speak on 't before when—old times."

"I'd rather have died," she declared passionately. "Any girl would. 'Delia would. Maybe she'll cry all the afternoon if she finds she ain't goin'; but if you call over there Saturday night, butter won't melt in her mouth. She won't tell you how 'shamed she is before folks to think you didn't take the trouble to go with her. Anyways, she won't if she's any kind of a girl."

Oliver had plucked some wisps of grass from the edge of turf under the tree, and he was wiping his hoe thoughtfully. Isabel began to laugh. She was trembling all over from old angers and the excitement of her new daring, and she kept on laughing. [273]

"One thing," she said, as she brushed away the tears with an impatient hand, "'Delia's mother's got her spy-glass on us this very minute. What under the sun she thinks I'm here for I don't know and I don't much care. You can tell her anything you're a mind to. Only you come. Come now, Oliver, you come!"

Oliver quite meekly hung up his hoe in the branches and waited for her to lead the way.

"I've got to ketch the colt," he said. "Mother took Dolly to go after aunt Huldy. Mother's always made a good deal o' the picnic."

There was a beat of hoofs upon the road, and Isabel, her present mission stricken from her mind, turned to see. It was Jim Bryant, driving by to call for her.

"My soul!" she said, under her breath.

"What is it, Isabel?" Oliver was asking her, with concern.

She had caught herself up, and she laughed in a sorry mirth.

"Nothin'," she said. "You catch the colt."

They walked out of the field in silence. At the stone wall he paused.

"Isabel," he said solemnly,—and with that double sense she had had all through the interview, she thought this was the look she had seen on his grandfather's face when he led in prayer,—"Isabel, you'd ought to spoke to me before. Why, I've been tryin' to get ahead so 's to make her comfortable, when—we set up housekeepin'." [274]

Isabel was not sure whether he meant her or Ardelia. At any rate, it was the woman to whom he was determined to be loyally kind. She also paused and looked at him with earnest eyes. It was the last moment in all her life to convince and alter him.

"Don't you see, Oliver," she urged, "that's what folks are together for, chiefly, to have a good time. I don't mean they've got to be on the go from mornin' till night. They've got to work hard, too. Why, what's 'Delia marryin' you for, anyways. 'Tain't to stay at home and work, day in, day out. She can do that now, right where she is. 'Tain't so 's she can see you workin'. She can take her mother's spy-glass and have that, too, till she's sick to death of it. You go along, Oliver, and catch the colt."

He looked at her very kindly, gratefully, too, perhaps, and turned away toward the live-oak field. But Isabel, hurrying homeward, stopped and called him.

"Oliver, you say your mother's gone?" [275]

"Yes."

"She lay your things out?"

"No, I guess not. I told her I wa'n't goin'."

"Well, I'll see to it as I run along."

Laying out the things of the men folks of the family was rigidly observed in this household, where Oliver was regarded as the cherished head. He had been brought up to a helpless lack of acquaintance with his best clothes. He knew them only as lendings apt to constrict him a little when he got them on, and to rouse in his mother a tendency to make unwelcome remarks about his personal charms. Where they lived, between those times of warfare, he scarcely knew.

Isabel laughed a little to herself, in a rueful fashion, as she hurried along the road. Her own swain was waiting for her, but not for that would she abjure the quest. She ran up Oliver's driveway and, without pausing, opened the blind where the key, she knew, was hidden, and snatched it forth. She unlocked the door and crossed the kitchen, rigid in its order, with Oliver's cold luncheon set out on the table under wire covers. She made her way upstairs, and in his room, also in beautiful array, stood for a moment looking about her. Isabel gave a little laugh. "I

[276]

should think I was crazy," she said to herself; and then she opened bureau drawers until she found the careful display of bosomed shirts she knew were there. She laid one on the bed, his collar and necktie beside it, and took down his best suit from the closet. She gave the collar of the coat a little unnecessary brush with her hand. It seemed almost a wifely touch, and she was angry with herself. Yet it was only that this was mating-time, and the tender and the maternal strove blindly in her, and brought forth a largess great enough to touch other lots besides her own.

Then she sped downstairs and went away to her own home. Her mother—a little woman, all energy—met her at the gate. She had on her best bonnet and carried her Paisley shawl. She was shading her eyes with her hand and looking tense in a way Isabel declaimed against, for it made wrinkles in her mother's nice forehead.

"For mercy sake, where you been?" she called. "Ain't you seen Jim?"

"No," said Isabel lightly. "Where is he?"

"Well, I dunno where he is," said her mother reprovingly. "He come here after you, all dressed up, an' I told him you was gone down to Ellen's to carry the cake. So he said he'd go along down an' fetch you up, an' I told him he better stop to Ardelia's an' see if you wasn't there. An' then he come back, ridin' like the wind, an' he said I could tell you Mis' Drake said you's goin' to the [277] picnic with Oliver. She see you through the spy-glass, an' Oliver'd gone to ketch the colt."

"There's father," said Isabel steadily. "He's drivin' out the carriage-house now. You got the cake in the buggy?"

"You do worry me 'most to death," said Mrs. Wilde. Her face had tied itself into a snarl of knots, from which the kindly eyes looked angrily. "Who you goin' with, Isabel? You ain't been an' took up with Oliver again, after all's said an' done?"

Isabel laughed, but her voice shook a little, and not with mirth.

"I'm all right, mother. Don't you say anything to anybody. That's all. Here comes father. Take care your dress. You'll get wheel-grease on it."

Her strong hands were lifting the little creature, and Mrs. Wilde found herself driven away. She was turning a glance over her shoulder to the last, and calling, "Isabel, you tell me—" But father, who had Isabel's masterful purpose, whipped up, and they were gone.

Isabel, still smiling, as if the sun itself could judge her and it was desirable to keep up some appearance before it, went into the house and closed the door behind her. She took off her hat [278] and hung it on its nail in the front hall. Then her muscles seemed to weaken in a strange way, and she went into the darkened parlor where no neighbor would find her, and sat down by the centre-table. She bowed her head upon the great picture-Bible, and unmindful of the cross and anchor in perforated paper below and the green wool mat with its glass beads, began to cry. Isabel hated tears with a fiery scorn. She liked to stand on her two feet and face the world as her father did; yet here she was, sobbing over the centre-table and drawing quick breaths of misery. Even then, in the passion of her grief, it did occur to her that in all the anger she had felt toward Oliver in times past, she had never wanted to cry. Something now had hurt a deeper heart than she knew she had.

She had got over the first tempest of her grief, and sat drying her eyes with a wondering shame, and suddenly there was a sound of a horse driven rapidly. Hope flooded her face with color. She sprang up and slipped to the window and peered out at the side of the curtain. But it was not he. It was Oliver, erect and handsome in his best clothes, and Ardelia beside him. Oliver glanced up at the house as they went by; but he bent to Ardelia again in a way that looked fondness and protection at once. And Ardelia was openly in paradise. She was looking up to him [279] with no eyes for any face at the window, and as they whirled out of sight Isabel saw her lift a hand and with an intimate, pretty motion brush something from his coat. Then they were gone, and immediately the neighborhood seemed to settle into a quiet. All the town was at Poole's Woods, and Isabel was left behind.

For a long time, it seemed to her, she sat there, trying to still her breath and school herself into her old serenity. Then, with her handkerchief, a little wet ball, tight in one hand, she rose, went to the glass that even in the darkened light showed her a miserable look, made a little face at herself, and walked out into the kitchen. There she stood idly for a moment, debating what she should do. Jim Bryant had not lived long in the town, but she knew him well from these few weeks of intimacy. He was tempestuously devoted to her, in a way that stirred her blood. There was plenty of fire and passion in him; he had a temper, and he would not come back. Isabel set her lips. "I guess," she said to herself, "I'll have the burnfire." She thought of baking pound-cake, but all the day before they had made cake for the picnic. She might wash the blankets, or begin quilting, or clean the cistern. These dramas were hardly exciting enough. The bonfire was better. She tied on her father's hat and kilted her skirts. Then she brought out the iron rake from the [280] barn and settled the brush-heap anew. It was on the square of land where she had had her perennial bed for three years, and now she had decided to sow it down to grass. The litter of the garden was there, with splinters of shingle and dried weeds, and next week her father meant to burn it.

Isabel touched her match and stood by, watching, while the flames curled and crept. Then they

crackled among the brush, and she held them down and got excited over it, and for an instant forgot Poole's Woods. It was a good little fight out-of-doors in the hot sun, with a stream of fire when it caught something dry, and then a column of smoke that made a tang in the air and stirred her blood deliciously. Isabel was like a creature of the earth combating something for the earth's good, and getting hotter and more breathless every minute.

"What you doin' there?" called a voice from the gate.

She forgot the bonfire, remembering her father's hat and her kilted skirts. Jim Bryant threw the gate shut with a clang and came striding across the yard. He was tall and brown and sturdy. Isabel knew exactly how he looked with his brow set and his blue eyes blazing.

"I've got a burnfire," she said, and raked the harder. [281]

Jim came up and took the rake out of her hand. It seemed to be for no purpose save that he had to do something. Isabel put up her head and looked at him. There was hostility in her glance, but it was the challenge of sex that meets and measures.

"I see the smoke comin' up over this way, an' I thought there was the devil to pay," he said harshly. "What you carryin' on like this for?"

"I ain't carryin' on," said Isabel, from tense lips. "This is our land, and I guess I can have a burnfire if I want to."

"Why ain't you at Poole's Woods?" The fire was dying down a little, but one persistent flame moved like a snake in the dry stubble, and he savagely stamped it out. "Why ain't you? I come after you."

"You didn't wait, did you?"

"Old Mis' Drake said you were goin' with Briggs."

"Did I tell you so?"

He weakened a little.

"N-no! But she said you'd been down talkin' it over an' Oliver'd gone to ketch the colt. She offered me the spy-glass."

Isabel's lips had a little line of white about them. She looked full at him now.

"Did you take it, Jim?" [282]

"Take it? No!" he roared at her. "Do you think I'd do a thing like that?"

They stood looking at each other, glance holding glance, their eyes blazing. Suddenly he threw the rake as if he had been throwing down a shield and held out his arms to her. Isabel walked into them, and while they kissed, her father's straw hat slipped back over her shoulders, and she laughed and never missed the fluffy headgear lying in her room upstairs, waiting for Poole's Woods. Suddenly she remembered that they were out in the broad sunlight, in sight of the road, and then she bethought her that all the town had gone to Poole's Woods to leave them the world alone to kiss in. She remembered, too, that old Mrs. Drake's spy-glass might be trained on them at that moment.

"I don't care," she said, and laughed.

"Don't care for what?" asked her lover, his lips at her ear.

"For anything. There! let me go. Here's some more fire in the grass."

They stamped and raked quite soberly for a moment, and then Isabel began to laugh again. She looked wild and beautiful in her fight with the earth and her own heart. Jim laughed a little, too.

"What is it, Bell?" he asked. [283]

"I don't know," she said, in the ecstasy of happiness. "I guess I like a burnfire."

When it died still lower, they walked toward the house, hand in hand, and sat there on the steps watching it.

"Well," said Bryant, smiling at her, "you want to go to Poole's Woods?"

Isabel smiled back.

"I guess so," she said. "We can be there by luncheon-time."

"All right. I'll go home an' harness up." Half-way down the path he stopped and turned. "Say, Isabel!"

She answered from the porch on her way in to don the muslin dress.

"What is it?"

"You never told me what you were down there for."

"Where?"

"Down to Oliver's."

She shook her head and laughed.

"No, nor I sha'n't, either." His brows were coming together. "'Twas an errand," she called to him. "It wa'n't mine, either. You got to know?"

Again they stood looking at each other, this time with a steady challenge as if more things were decided than the moment's victory. Then suddenly, as if in the same breath, they smiled again, and Bryant gave her a little nod. [284]

"Get your things on," he called. "We're goin' to Poole's Woods. That's all I want to know."

THE MASQUERADE [285]

The summer boarders had gone, and Marshmead was settling down to a peace enhanced by affluence. Though the exodus had come earlier than usual this year, because the Hiltons were sailing for Germany and the Dennys due at the Catskills, not one among their country entertainers had complained. Marshmead approved, from a careless dignity, when people brought money into the town, but it always relapsed into its own customs with a contented sigh after the jolt of inexplicable requirements and imported ways. This year had been an especially fruitful one. The boarders had given a fancy dress party with amateur vaudeville combined, for the benefit of the old church, and Martha Waterman now, as she toiled up the hill to a meeting of the Circle, held the resultant check in one of her plump freckled hands. Martha was chief mover in all capable deeds, a warm, silent woman who called children "lamb," plied them with pears, and knew the inner secrets of rich cookery. She was portly, and her thin skin gave confirmation to her own frequent complaint of feeling the heat; but though the day had been more sultry than it was, she would not have foregone the pleasure of endowing the Circle with its new accession toward the meeting-house fund. [286]

The Circle had been founded in war time when women scraped lint and sewed with a passionate zeal. Martha was a little girl then, wondering what the excitement was really about, though, since it had lasted through her own brief period, she took it that war was a permanent condition, like bread or weather. Now she often mused over those old days and thought how marvelous it was that she could ever have been young enough to see no significance in that time of blood and pain. In these middle years of hers the Circle was a different affair, but it kept its loyal being. To-day it met in the basement of the church, and there, when Martha went plodding in, nearly all the other members were assembled. Sometimes they sewed for sufferers from varying disasters, but to-day their hands were idle, and a buzz of talk saluted her. They looked up as one woman when she entered.

"There she is," called two or three, and Lydia Vesey, the little dressmaker, as sharp and unexpected as the slash of her own too-impulsive scissors, came forward with a run.

"You got it?" she inquired.

Mrs. Waterman laughed richly, and set her umbrella in the corner. Then, still holding one hand closed upon the check, she untied her hat and fanned herself with it during the relief of sinking into a seat. [287]

"Do let me get my breath," she besought, yet as if she prolonged the moment for the sake of the dramatic weight the tale demanded. "Seems if I never experienced such a day as this. It's hotter'n any fall I ever see."

"You look very warm, Martha," said Ellen Bayliss, in her gentle way. She was sitting by the window, bending over an embroidered square, the sun on her soft curls and delicate cheek unveiling the look of middle life, yet doing something kindly, too; for though he showed the withered texture of her skin, he brought out the last fleck of gold in her hair, and balanced sadness with some bloom. Ellen had been accounted a beauty, and her niece Nellie was a beauty now, of a more radiant type. She was the rose of life, but aunt Ellen had the fragrance of roses in a jar.

"You sewin', Ellen?" Martha inquired, as if she were willing to shift the topic from what would exact continued speech from her, and at least defer her colleagues' satisfaction. "You're the only one that's brought their thimble, I'll be bound."

"It's only this same centrepiece," Ellen answered, holding it up. "Mrs. Hilton told me if I'd send it after her, she'd give me three dollars for it. I thought I could turn the money into the fund." [288]

"You got it?" Lydia Vesey cried again, as if she could not possibly crowd her interest under, and this time she had reënforcements from without. Mrs. Daniel Pray, who was almost a giantess and

bent laboriously over to accommodate her height to her husband's, took off her glasses and laid them on her declivitous lap, the better to fix Martha with her dull, small eyes.

"I'll be whipped if I believe you've got it, after all," she offered discontentedly. "Mebbe they're goin' to send by mail."

Martha looked at her a moment, apparently in polite consideration, but really wondering, as she often did, if anything would thicken the hair at Mrs. Pray's parting. She frequently, out of the strength of her address and capability, had these moments of musing over what could be done.

"Speak up, Marthy, can't ye?" ended Mrs. Pray irritably, now putting on her glasses again as if, having tried one way, she would essay another. "Didn't you see Mis' Hilton at the last, or didn't they give it to you?"

Martha unclosed her hand and extended it to them impartially, the check, face uppermost, held between thumb and finger. They bent forward to peer. Some rose and looked over the shoulders of the nearer ones, and glasses were sought and hastily mounted upon noses. [289]

"Well, there," said Mrs. Hanscom, the wife of the grain-dealer who always stipulated for cash payment before he would deliver a bag at the barn door, "it ain't bills, as I see."

"It's just as good." Ellen Bayliss looked up from her sewing to throw this in, with her air of deprecating courtesy. "A check's the same as money any day. I have two, twice a year, from my stock. All you have to do is to write your name on the back and turn 'em into the bank."

"Well, all I want to know is, what's it come to?" Lydia Vesey said. "Course it's just the same as money. I've had checks myself, days past. Once I done over Miss Tenny's black mohair an' sent it after her, an' she mailed me back a check,—same day, I guess it was. How much's it come to, Marthy?"

"See for yourself," said Martha. She laid it, still face upward, on the table. "It's as much yours as 'tis mine, I guess, if I be treasurer. Forty-three dollars an' twenty-seven cents."

There was a chorused sigh.

"Well, I call that a good haul," said Ann Bartlett, whose father had been sexton for thirty-eight years, and who, in consequence, looked upon herself as holding some subtly intimate relation with the church, so that when the old carpet was "auctioned off" she insisted on darning the breadths before they were put up for sale. "What money can do! Just one evenin', an' them few folks dressed up to kill an' payin' that in for their ice-cream an' tickets at the door." [290]

"We made the ice-cream," said Martha, as one stating a fact to be justly remembered.

"We paid ourselves in, too," said Lydia sharply. "I guess our money's good as anybody's, an' I guess it'll count up as quick an' go as fur."

"Course it will," said Martha, in a mollifying tone. "But 'tis an easy way of makin' a dollar, just as Ann says. There they got up a fancy-dress party an' enjoyed themselves, an' it's brought in all this. 'Twa'n't hard work for 'em. 'Twas a kind o' play."

"Well, I guess they did enjoy it," said Mrs. Pray gloomily. She had settled her glasses on her nose again, and now, with her finger, went following the bows round under her hair, to be sure they "canted right." "I guess they wouldn't ha' done it if they hadn't."

"There's one thing Mis' Hilton says to me when she passed me the check," Martha brought out, in sudden recollection. "'Now here's this money we made for you,' she says. 'Use it anyways you want, so 's you use it for the church. But,' she says, 'why don't you make up your minds now you'll give some kind of an entertainment after we're gone, a harvest festival,' she says, 'or the like o' that? Then you could do your paintin',' she says, 'an' get you a new melodeon for the Sunday School, or whatever 'tis you want. We've showed you the way,' she says. 'Now you go ahead an' see what you can do.'" [291]

Lydia Vesey looked as if she might, in another instant, cap the suggestion by a satirical climax, and Ellen Bayliss rested her sewing hand on her knee and glanced thoughtfully about as if to ask, in her still, earnest way, what her own part could be in such an enterprise. But a step came hurrying down the stairs, the step of a heavy body lightly carried, and Caddie Musgrave came in at a flying pace. It was Caddie who, with the help of her silent husband, kept the big boarding-house on the hill. No need to talk to her about summer boarders, she was wont to say. She knew 'em, egg an' bird. Take 'em as folks an' nobody was better, but 'twas boarders she meant. They might seem different, fust sight, but shake 'em up in a peck measure, an' you couldn't tell t'other from which.

"I guess you're tired," said Ellen Bayliss, in her gentle fashion, taking a stolen glance from the embroidery and returning again at once to her careful stitches. [292]

"Tired!" said Caddie. She dropped into a chair and leaned her head back with ostentatious weariness. "I guess I be. An' yet I told Charlie 'fore they went I never'd say I was tired again in all my born days, only let me get rid of 'em this time."

"How'd you manage with 'em this season?" asked Mrs. Pray, as if her question concerned the importation of some alien plant.

Caddie opened her eyes and came to a posture more adapted to sustaining her end of the conversational burden.

"Why, they're all right," she owned, "good as gold, take 'em on their own ground. I found out they were good as gold that winter I went up an' passed Sunday with Mis' Denny. But take 'em together, boardin', an' what one don't think of t'other will. This summer 'twas growin' fleshy, an' if they didn't harp on that one string—well, suz!"

Mrs. Pray nodded her head solemnly.

"I said that," she returned. "I said that to Jonathan when I come home from the Circle the day they was here talkin' over the fund an' settlin' what they'd do. I come home an' says to Jonathan [293] wipin' his hands on the roller-towel there by the back door, I says, 'What's everybody got ag'inst growin' old, an' growin' hefty, too, for that matter?' I says. 'Seems if folks don't talk about nothin' else.'"

Martha put in her assuaging word.

"Well, I guess human natur' ain't changed much. I guess nobody ever hankered after gettin' stiff j'ints an' losin' their eyesight an' so. 'Twould be a queer kind of a shay that was lookin' for'ard to goin' to pieces while 'twas travelin' along. Mis' Denny's niece that reads in public read me that piece once. I thought 'twas about the cutest that ever was."

Ellen Bayliss had laid her sewing on her knee, and now she looked up in an impulsive haste, the color in her cheeks and a quick moving note in her voice.

"It isn't growing old that's the trouble. It's talking about it. Why, the night after that meeting of the Circle—" She stopped here, and her eyes, widening and growing darker in a way they had, gave her face almost a look of terror.

"What is it, Ellen?" asked Martha Waterman kindly. "You tell it right out."

"Why," said Ellen, "this is all 'twas. That night at supper, my Nellie kept staring at me across the table. 'What is 't, Nellie?' I says, at last. Then she colored up and says, not as if she wanted to, [294] but as if she couldn't help it, 'I hope I shall look like you sometime, aunt Ellen.' You see how 'twas. She meant, when she was old. She never in her life had thought anything about me being old, and they'd put it into her head."

A pained look settled upon her face, and before she took up her sewing again she glanced from one to another as if to ask them if they really understood. There was a little warm murmur of assent. Ellen was beloved, and there was, besides, a concurrent strain of sympathy through the assembly who had known all her past. They remembered how Colonel Hadley had "gone with her" awhile when she was teaching school at District Number Four, and how Ellen had faded out, the summer he was married to Kate Leighton, of the Leightons on the hill. Now his nephew, Clyde, was going with Ellen's niece in a way that vividly mirrored the old time, and they had heard that the colonel, when he came for one of his brief visits in the summer, had somehow put a check to love's beginning. At least, Clyde had seen Nellie only once after his uncle went away, and had speedily closed the old house and followed him.

"There, Ellen," said Lydia Vesey, from a rare softness. "I guess nobody'd ever say 't you was growin' old. They'd only think you was sort o' palin' out, that's all, same 's a white dress is [295] different from a pink one."

"Well, now, I'll say my say, an' done with it," remarked Caddie Musgrave, with her accustomed violence. "I'm ready to grow old when my time comes, an' if I get there by the road some have took before me, I guess I sha'n't be put under the sod by any vote o' town-meetin'. As I look back, seems to me 'most all them that's gone before us has had their uses to the last. Think o' gramma Jakes! Why, she hadn't chick nor child of her own left to bless her, an' see how she was looked up to, an' how every little tot in town thought he's made if he could be sent to gramma Jakes's to do an arrant, an' she give him a pep'mint or a cooky. 'Twa'n't the pep'mint though. 'Twas because she was a real sweet nice old lady, that's what 'twas."

"Yes, I remember gramma Jakes," said Anna Dutton, from the corner. She was a round, pink, near-sighted little person, who had tried to cure herself of stammering by speaking very slowly, and now scarcely talked at all because she had found how unwilling her more robust and loquacious neighbors were to give her the right of way in her hindering course. "Seems if I could see her now standin' there on her front porch, her little handkercher round her neck—"

[296] Caddie broke in upon this reminiscence, according to a custom so established that Anna Dutton only kept her mouth open for an instant, as if the opportunity for speech might return to her, and then quite calmly settled back with an air of pleased attention.

"They're afraid o' gettin' old an' they're afraid o' gettin' fleshy," Caddie announced. "Well, there's no crime in gettin' old, now is there? An' if there is, you can't put a stop to 't in any court o' law. An' as for bein' fleshy, if you be you be, an' you might as well turn to an' have your clo'es made bigger an' say no more."

Mrs. Pray presented her mite with her accustomed severity of gloom, as if she had selected the words most carefully and wished to have it understood that they were the choicest she had to offer.

"I was fryin' doughnuts, a week ago Saturday, an' Mis' Denny come along with that lady friend o' hers that's down here over Sunday. I offered 'em each a warm doughnut, an' they was possessed to take it. They'd been walkin' quite a spell, an' they'd called for a drink o' water. They said 'twas the time in the forenoon when they drinked. But they looked at the doughnuts good an' hard, an' they says: 'No. It's fattenin',' says they. 'It's fattenin'.'"

[297] "Yes," said Caddie, with a scornful cadence, "I'll warrant they did. That's what they said about two things out o' three, soon 's the hands moved round to meal-time. 'It's fattenin'!' Oh, I'm sick an' tired to death of it! I ain't goin' to be dead till I be dead, thinkin' about it all the time, not if I can keep my thoughts inside o' me an' my tongue in my head. So there!"

"Well, now," said Martha Waterman, with the mildness calculated to smooth a troubled situation, "hadn't we better be gettin' round to thinkin' what we'll do to earn us a mite more money for the fund? Seems if, now they've done so well by us, we'd ought to up an' show what we can do—a harvest festival, mebbe, or a sociable for all, an' charge for tickets."

One woman had not spoken. She was a thin, dark-eyed creature, with a gypsy face and a quantity of gray hair wound about on the top of her head. This was Isabel Martin, who was allowed her erratic way because she took it, and because, it had always been said, "You never could tell what Isabel would do next, only she never meant the least o' harm." She had come softly in while the others were talking, and drawn Ellen's work out of her hand, with a swift, pretty smile at her. "Rest your eyes," she had whispered her, and sat by, taking quick, deft stitches, while Ellen, unconscious until then of being tired, had dropped her lids and leaned her [298] head against the casing, with a faint smile of pleasant restfulness. Now Isabel put the work back into Ellen's hand with an accurate haste, and looked up at the group about her.

"I'll tell you what to do," she said. Her voice thrilled with urging and suggestive mischief. It was a compelling voice, and they turned at once.

"If there ain't Isabel," said Martha Waterman. "I didn't see you come in."

"Le' 's give a fancy dress party of our own," said Isabel.

"Dress ourselves up to the nines, an' put on paint an' powder, an' send off to the stores to hire clo'es an' wigs?" inquired Caddie. "No, sir, none o' that for me. I've seen what it comes to, money an' labor, too. I've just been through it, lookin' on, an' I wouldn't do it not if the church never see a brush o' paint nor a shingle, an' we had to play on a jew's-harp 'stead of a melodeon. No!"

Ann Bartlett gave a little murmur here.

"I never heard of anybody's bringin' a jew's-harp into the meetin'-house," she said, as a kind of official protest. "I guess we could get us some kind of a melodeon, 'fore we done such a thing as that."

Isabel was going on in that persuasive voice; it seemed to call the town to her to do her bidding.

[299] "No, we ain't goin' to do it their way. We're goin' to do it our way. They've set out to see how young they can be. Le' 's see 'f we can't beat 'em seein' how old we can be. Le' 's dress up like the oldest that ever was, an' act as if we liked it."

The electrifying meaning ran over them like a wave. They caught the splendid significance of it. They were to offer, in the guise of jesting, their big protest against the folly of sickening over youth by showing how fearlessly they were dancing on toward age. It was more than bravado, more than repudiation of the cowards who hesitated at the onward step. It was loyal and passionate upholding of the state of those who were already old, and of those who had continued their beneficent lives into the time when there is no pleasure in the years, and yet had given honor and blessing through them all. They fell to laughing together, and two or three cried a little on the heels of merriment.

"I dunno what mother'd say," whispered Hannah Call, whose mother, old and yet regnant as the best housekeeper in town and a repository of all the most valuable recipes, had died that year. "I guess she'd say we was possessed."

[300] "We be," said Isabel recklessly. "That's the only fun there is, bein' possessed. If you ain't one way, you'd better be another. It's the way's the only thing to see to."

"I said I was sick o' paint an' powder," said Caddie. "Well, so I be, but I'll put flour in my hair so 't's as white as the drifted snow. I've got aunt Hope's gre't horn spe'tacles."

"I guess I could borrer one o' gramma Ellsworth's gounds," said Mrs. Pray. A light rarely seen there had come into her dull eyes. Isabel, with that prescience she had about the minds of people, knew what it meant. Mrs. Pray, though she was contemplating the garb of eld, was unconsciously going back to youth and the joy of playing. "She ain't quite my figger, but I guess 'twill do."

Lydia Vesey gave her a kindly look, yet scathing in its certainty of professional strictures.

"There ain't nobody that ever I see that's anywhere near your figger," she said, in the neighborly ruthlessness that was perfectly understood among them. "But you hand the gound over to me, an' I can fix it."

"Everybody flour their hair," cried Isabel, with the mien of inciting them deliriously.

"Everybody that's got plates, take 'em out," added Martha, the administrative, catching the infection and going a step beyond.

"Why, we can borrer every stitch we want," said Lydia Vesey. "Borrer of the dead an' borrer of the livin'. I know every rag o' clo'es that's been made in this town, last thirty years. There's enough laid away in camphire, of them that's gone, to fit out three-four old ladies' homes." [301]

"It'll be like the resurrection," said Ellen Bayliss, with that little breathless catch in her voice.

"What you mean by that, Ellen?" asked Martha gently.

"I know what she means," said Isabel, while Ellen, the blood running into her cheeks, looked helplessly as if she wished she had not spoken. "She means we're goin' to dress ourselves up in the things of them that's gone, a good many of 'em, an' we can't help takin' on the ways of folks that wore 'em. We can't anyways help glancin' back an' kinder formin' ourselves on old folks we've looked up to. Seems if the dead would walk."

Sometimes people shuddered at Isabel's queer sayings, but at this every one felt moved in a solemn way. It seemed beautiful to have the dead walk, so it was in the remembrance of the living.

"Shall we let the men in?" asked Caddie anxiously. "I dunno what they'll say 'f we don't." Her silent husband was the close partner of her life. To Marshmead it seemed as if he might as well have been born dumb, but Caddie never omitted tribute to his great qualities. [302]

"Mercy, yes," said Isabel, "if they'll dress up. Not else. They've got to be gran'ther Graybeards every one of 'em, or they don't come. You tell 'em so."

"You going home, aunt Ellen?" came a fresh voice from the doorway. "I've been staying after school, and I thought maybe you'd be tired and like me to call for you."

It was Nellie Lake, a vision of youth and sweet unconsciousness. She stood there in the doorway, hat and parasol in hand, crowned by her yellow hair, and in the prettiest pose of deprecating grace. Aunt Ellen smiled at her with loving pride, and yet wistfully, too. Nellie had called for her many times, just to walk home together, but never because aunt Ellen might be tired. The infection of age was in the air, and Nellie Lake had caught it.

"Come in, Nellie," she said. "No, I don't feel specially tired, but maybe I'll go along in a minute."

"Want to come to an old folks' party?" called Isabel, who was reading all these thoughts as swiftly as if they were signals to herself alone. "Want to dress up, an' flour your hair, an' put on spe'tacles, an' come an' play with us old folks?"

The girl's face creased up delightfully. [303]

"A fancy dress!" she said. "What can I be?"

"You'll be an old lady," said Isabel, "or you won't come."

"Is it for the fund?" asked Nellie.

"Well, yes, I suppose it's for the fund, some," Isabel conceded. "But take it by an' large, it's for fun."

The night of the masquerade was soft and still, lighted by the harvest moon. Everywhere the fragrance of grapes enriched the air, and the dusty bitterness of things ripening. The little town hall was gay with lights, a curious blending of the west and east; for the boarders had left Japanese lanterns behind them, and their grotesque prettiness contrasted strangely with bowery goldenrod and asters and the red of maple leaves. Colonel Hadley, standing a moment at the doorway in his evening walk, this first night of his stay, when he had come with his nephew to look out some precious old books in the attic, and perhaps the more actually to draw Clyde away again after the errand was done, thought he had never seen such abandonment to a wild pleasure, even in his early days at Marshmead. For it was pleasure, though it seemed to be the festival of the old. Men and women bent with years and yet straightening themselves when their muscles ached, were promenading the hall, not sedately, according to the wont of Marshmead social gatherings, to fulfill a terrifying rite, but gayly, as if only by premeditation did they withstand the beckoning of the dance. [304]

At the end of the hall, in a bower of light and greenery, sat a row of others who were apparently set apart for some honor or special service. From time to time the ranks broke, and one group after another stayed to talk with them, and always with the air of giving pleasure by their deference and heartening. Suddenly the colonel's eyes smarted with the sudden tears of a recognition which seemed to touch not only life as it innocently rioted here to-night, but all life, his own in the midst of it. At once he knew. These were the very old, and those who had lived through their fostering were paying them beautiful tribute.

At that moment his nephew, boyishly changed, but not disguised, in old Judge Hadley's coat

and knee-breeches, stepped out of the moving line, a lady with him, and came to him. Clyde, too, was flushed with the strangeness of it all, and the joyous certainty that now for an evening, if only that, Nellie Lake was with him. The colonel looked at her and looked again, and she dropped her eyes in a pretty, serious modesty. [305]

"Ellen!" he said involuntarily.

Then she laughed.

"That's my aunt," she told him. "I'm Elinor. I'm Nell. I tried to look like auntie. I guess I do."

"No," said the colonel sharply, "you don't look like Ellen Bayliss. You've made up too old."

Yet she had not, and he knew it. She had only put a little powder on her hair and drawn its curling richness into a seemly knot. She had whitened the bloom of her cheeks, and taken on that little pathetic droop of the shoulders he remembered in Ellen Bayliss the day he saw her in his last hurried trip to Marshmead. He had not spoken to her then. She had passed the station as he was driving away, and he had felt a pang he deadened with some anodyne of grim endurance, to see how youth could wilt into a dowerless middle age.

"I guess you haven't seen aunt Ellen," said Nellie innocently. "I'm just as she is every day, but she's made up to-night to be like grandma, or the picture of aunt Sue that died."

There she was. She had left the moving line for a moment, and the minister, in robe and bands of an ancient time, devised by Ann Bartlett and made by Lydia Vesey, had bowed and left her for some of his multifarious social claims. A chair was beside her, but she only rested one hand on the back of it and leaned her head against the wall. She was in a faded brocade unearthed from some dark corner Lydia Vesey knew the secret of, and she was age itself, beautiful, delicate, acquiescent age, all sadness and a wistful grace. The colonel looked at her, savagely almost, with the pain of it, and then back again at the girl who seemed to be picturing the first sad stage of undefended maidenhood. At that moment he knew he had put something wonderful away from him, those years ago, when he ceased to court the look in Ellen's eyes and turned to a robuster fortune. At the time, he had told himself, in his way of escaping the difficult issue, that the pang of leaving her was his alone. She, in her innocence of love, could hardly feel the death of what lived so briefly. Now, as it sometimes happened when his anodyne ceased to work, he knew he had snipped the blossom of her life and she had borne no fruit of ecstasy; and in the instant of sharp regret it came upon him that no other woman, through him, should tread the way of love denied. He stooped to Nellie, standing there before him, and kissed her on the cheek. Whether in this blended love and pain he was kissing Ellen or the girl, he did not know, but he saw how Clyde started and grew luminous, and what it meant to both of them. [306] [307]

"How did you know it?" Clyde was asking. "We are engaged. I wrote to her to-day. I was going to tell you, but I couldn't. You knew it, didn't you? You're a brick."

The girl flushed through her powder, and her eyes sent him a starry gratitude. But now the colonel hardly cared whether they had acted without his knowledge or whether they were grateful for his sanction. He and they and Ellen Bayliss seemed to be in a world alone, bound together by ties that might last—would last, he knew; but the mist cleared away from his eyes, and the vision of life to come faded, and he saw things as they were before, and chiefly Ellen standing there unconscious of him. He walked over to her.

"Ellen," he said bluffly, holding out his hand, "I've got only a minute, but I want to speak to you if I don't to anybody else."

She straightened and gazed at him, startled out of her part into a life half joy, half terror. He had taken her hand and held it warmly.

"Ellen," he said, "they're engaged, that boy and girl. Did you know it?"

"No," she answered faintly, but with candor. "No. I've discouraged it. I thought of you." She paused, too kind to him for more. [308]

"I didn't know," he said. "I hadn't seen her. How should I know she was like you? How should I know if he lost her he mightn't be making a mistake? Yes, they're engaged. I sha'n't be at the wedding. I'm going abroad, but I shall send my blessing. To you, too, Ellen. Good-by. God bless you."

Then he had walked out of the hall, as alien, with his middle-aged robustness, as the mortal in fairy revelry; and Ellen, knowing her towns-people were looking at her in kindly interest, stood with dignity and yet a curious new consciousness of treasured happiness, as if she had a secret to think over, and a solving of perplexities.

Isabel Martin dropped out of her place, where she had been talking with Andrew Hall, and, forgetting in her haste the consistency of her part, ran over to her. Isabel, out of her abiding mischief, had dressed herself for a dullard's part. She had thought at first of being an old witch-woman and telling fortunes, but instead she had put on pious black alpaca and a portentous cap, and dropped her darting glances. To Andrew Hall, who was a portly Quaker in the dress of uncle Ephraim long since dead, she seemed as sweet as girlhood and as restful as his own mother. Andrew had been her servitor for almost as many years as they had lived; but she had so flouted him, so called upon him for impossible chivalries, out of the wantonness of her fancy, that he had [309]

sometimes confided to himself, in the darkest of nights when he woke to think of her, that Isabel Martin was enough to make you hang yourself, and he wished he never had set eyes on her. Yet she was the major part of his life, and Andrew knew it. Now he followed her more slowly, and was by at the instant of her saying,—

"O Ellen, you couldn't go over across the orchard, could you, an' see if Maggie L.'s got the water boilin' for the coffee? I'm 'most afraid to go alone."

Ellen, waking from her dream, looked at her and smiled. She knew Isabel's tender purposes. This was meant to take her away from curious though tolerant eyes and give her a moment to wipe out the world of dreaming for the world of men.

"No," she said softly. "You don't need to."

"You let me go," said Andrew gallantly. "I can see if it's bilin' an' come back an' tell ye."

"You!" said Isabel, abjuring her disguise, to rally him. "You'd be afraid. Come, Ellen."

[310] She linked an arm in Ellen's, and falling at once into her part of sober age, paced with her from the hall. Andrew, constrained in a way he hardly understood himself, was following them, but in their woman's community of silent understanding they took no notice of him. Outside, the night was soft and welcoming, unreal after the light and color, an enchanted wilderness of moonlight splendor. They had crossed the road to the bench under the old poplar, and there Ellen sat down and drew a breath of excitement and gladness to be free to think. The moonlight seemed still brighter, sifting down the sky-spaces, and the two women together looked up at it through the poplar branches and were exalted by that inexplicable sense of the certainty that things come true. Dreams—that was what their minds were seeking passionately—and dreams come true.

"Ain't it wonderful?" Isabel asked softly.

"Yes," said Ellen, in the same hushed tone, "it's wonderful."

"I'll leave you here by yourself an' run acrost the orchard," said Isabel, in her other careless voice. "When I come back, I'll stop here an' we'll go in together. Why, Andrew, you here?"

"You said you was afraid," he answered. "I'll go acrost with you."

"All right," said Isabel, with her kindest laugh, not the teasing one that made him hate her while he thought how bright and dear she was. [311] "Come take gran'ma acrost the orchard. Don't let anything happen to her."

They stepped over the wall and made their way along the little path by the grape arbor. The fragrance of fruit was sweet, and the world seemed filled with it.

"It's a pretty time o' year," said Andrew tremblingly.

"Yes."

"A kind of a time same 's this is to-night makes it seem as if life was pretty short. Be past before you know it."

"Yes."

She, too, spoke tremulously, and his heart went out to her.

"O Isabel," he said, "when you're like this, same as you are to-night, there ain't a livin' creatur' that's as nice as you be."

Isabel laughed. It was an echo of her flouting laugh, yet there was a little catch in the middle of it.

"There!" he said, with discontentment. "Now you're just as you be half the time, an' I could shake you for it. Sometimes seems to me I could kill you."

"Why don't you?" Isabel asked him, softly yet teasingly too, in a way that suddenly made her dearer. "If you don't see no use o' my livin', why don't you kill me?"

[312] "What you cryin' for?" Andrew besought her, in an agony of trouble. "O Isabel, what you cryin' for?"

"I ain't cryin'," she said, "but if I am I guess it's for Ellen Bayliss, an' things—" She had never heard of "the tears of mortal things," and so she could not tell him.

"Ellen Bayliss? What's the matter of Ellen Bayliss?"

"Oh, she gets tired so quick, that's all."

"Don't you get tired," said Andrew. "Don't you let anything happen to you. O Isabel!"

The moonlight and the fragrance and old love constrained them, and they had kissed each other, and each knew they were to live together now, and sharpness would be put away perhaps; or, if it were not quite, Andrew would understand, knowing other things, too, and smile at it.

When they went back to the bench Ellen was gone, but in the hall they found her dancing with Clyde, and almost, it seemed, clad in the flying mantle of her youth.

"It's Virginny reel," cried Andrew, the infection of the night upon him. "There's another set here. Come."

"Wait a minute," said Isabel, her hand upon his arm. "Look at the platform. Where's the old folks gone?"

The platform was deserted. The old folks, too, were dancing. Martha Waterman caught the recognition of it in Isabel's eyes, pointed at the empty seats of eld, and nodded gayly. She sped out of her place and, losing no step, danced up to Isabel and Andrew. [313]

"I dunno which's the youngest, old or young," she cried, "nor they don't either. We're goin' to have some country dancin' an' then serve the coffee an' sing 'Auld Lang Syne,' an' it's my opinion we sha'n't be home 'fore two o'clock. Ain't it just grand!"

A POETESS IN SPRING

[314]

Jerry Freelands felt that the day was not suitably ended if, after tidying up the kitchen and practicing "The Harp That Once" and "Oft in the Stilly Night" on his fiddle, he did not go across the fields to Marietta Martin's and compare the moment's mood with her, either in the porch or at her fireside, according to the season. They lived, each alone, in a stretch of meadow land just off the main road, and nobody knew how many of their evenings they spent together, or, at this middle stage in their lives, would have drawn romantic conclusions if the tale of them had been told.

In his youth Jerry had been a solitary, given to wandering "by the river's brim," as he liked to say, thinking of poetry and his fiddle. Marietta, even at that time, had been learning tailoring to support her mother, and she looked upon Jerry with unstinted admiration as too distinctly set apart by high attainments ever to be considered a common earthly swain. But Jerry did all his duties as if he were not gifted. He carried on the small farm, and, after his sister married and went away, nursed his mother until her death—"as handy as a woman," so the neighbors said. Yet [315] he knew that all this tribute to the lower life was only something mysteriously decreed, perhaps to ballast the soul lest it soar too high. The real things were fiddle-playing and writing verse, sometimes inspired by nature and again by love or death, and publishing it in the county paper. Jerry had one consolation, one delight, besides and above Marietta. This was the poetess, Ruth Bellair, and it was of her he was thinking as he crossed the field, this darkening twilight, to Marietta's house. There was a warm spring wind, and frogs were peeping. Jerry knew, although it was too dark to see, that down by the brook the procession of willows walked in a mist of green. It was a broken sky, with here and there a star between soft wafts of cloud, and the newness and beauty of the time smote upon him as he hurried on, and made him young again. He walked faster than usual, a tall, lightly moving figure, his head under his soft felt hat thrown forward and his loose hair blown back by the swiftness of his going. Time seemed to have fallen away from him at the call of some new anticipation. He was not a man nearing fifty as the morning's sun had found him, but a youth with the mountain-top splendidly near and the rising sun to light his steps.

Marietta lived in a little, low-browed, gambrel-roofed house, with a vegetable garden in the back, a flower garden in front, and an orchard at the west side. She had sold the adjoining meadows and also the woodland, because she said it was better to lessen care as you grew older, and she was a poor hand to keep up a farm. Marietta was of those who are perhaps not calm by inheritance, but who have attained serenity because life proves it to be desirable. To-night she saw Jerry coming and met him at the door, a plump, fresh-colored woman with sweet brows, thick white hair, and blue eyes full of a wistful sympathy. She was younger than he, yet her acquired calmness had given her a matronly air and made her the one to assume protection and a gentle way of giving. As she stood there in the doorway, lamp in hand, she looked like a benignant mother waiting to greet a returning child. [316]

"Well, Marietta," said Jerry.

He stopped a moment before her on the doorstone and drew the quick breath of the haste of his coming. Then he took off his hat, stayed for one look at the night behind him, and followed her in. Marietta put the lamp on the high mantel, and moved his chair slightly nearer the hearth. There was no fire, but the act seemed to make him more intimately welcome. Then she seated herself on the sofa between the two side windows and folded her hands for an evening's intercourse. Jerry took out his pipe, held it absently for a moment, and laid it down on the table. Marietta hardly liked that. He must be moved indeed, she knew, if he meant to forego his evening smoke. Jerry sat forward a little in his chair and let his long hands, loosely clasped, hang between his knees. He gazed straight out through the dark window as if he could see the lovely night pulsating there, and his bright gray eyes seemed to hold gleams of an extreme anticipation. Then he remembered the world where he found himself, this clean exquisite room with its homely [317]

furnishings, where he had become as familiar as if it were a secondary shell that fitted him so completely he hardly noticed it, and turned to her with an effect of winking his eyes open after a dream.

"Marietta," said he, "who do you suppose has come?"

She shook her head in an attentive interest.

He kept his gaze on her as if it were all incredible.

"Ruth Bellair," he said solemnly.

Now she did start, and her lips parted in the surprise of it.

"Not here?" she insisted. "You don't mean she's come here?"

He shook his head. [318]

"No. She's at Poplar Bridge. The paper said so to-night."

"What's she there for?"

"She's come to board. The paper said so. 'The well-known poetess, Ruth Bellair, has arrived to spend the summer at the commodious boarding establishment of L. H. Moody.'"

He looked at her in a pale triumph, and she stared back at him with all the emotion he could have wished.

"I can't hardly believe it," she said faintly.

"That's it," he nodded at her. "Nobody could believe it. Why, Marietta, do you suppose there's been a night I've sat here that I haven't either read some of her pieces to you, or told you something I'd seen about her in the papers?"

"No," said Marietta, rather wearily, yet with a careful interest, "you haven't talked about anything else scarcely."

He was looking at her out of the same solemn assurance that it had been commendable in him to preserve that romantic loyalty.

"She begun to write about the time I did," he said, tasting the flavor of reminiscence. "I used to see her name in the papers when I never so much as thought I should write a line myself. She's been a great influence in my life, Marietta."

"Yes, course she has," Marietta responded, rising to the height of his emotion. "I guess she's influenced a good many folks." [319]

"Well, I've got my chance. She's here within ten miles of us, and come what may, I'm bound to see her."

Marietta started.

"See her?" she repeated. "How under the sun you going to do that? You don't know her, nor any of her folks. Seems if she'd think 'twas terrible queer."

"She's used to it," said Jerry raptly. "She must be. People with gifts like that—why, of course folks go to see 'em."

He was removed and silent after this, and had scarcely a word for Marietta's late-blooming calla that had held her in suspense through the winter when she had wanted it, to unroll its austere deliciousness now in the spring. She brought him the heavy pot almost timidly, and Jerry put out his hand and touched the snowy texture of the bloom. But he did it absently, and she understood that his mind was not with her, and that there was little likelihood of his inditing a set of verses to the lily, as she had hoped. He got up and carried it to the stand for her, and there he paused for a moment beside it, coming awake, she thought. But after that period of musing he took up his hat from the little table between the windows and stood there holding it. [320]

"Marietta," said he, with a simple and moved directness, "what if I should carry her one of these?"

"One of my lilies?"

"Yes."

She brushed a bit of dust from a smooth green leaf, and the color rose to her face. She seemed to conquer something.

"When you going?" she asked, in a subdued tone.

"I thought I'd go to-morrow."

"Well, you can have the lily, all three of 'em if you want—have 'em and welcome."

He was at the door now, his hand on the latch. Marietta, watching him still with that flush on her cheeks and a suffused look of the calm blue eyes, noted how he stood gazing down, as if already he were planning his trip, and as if the anticipation were affecting to him.

He straightened suddenly and met her glance.

"You're real good, Marietta," he said warmly. "I'll call in the morning and get 'em."

"What time you going?"

"'Long about ten, I guess. Good-night."

[321] When she heard the clang of the gate behind him she went slowly in and stood by her lily for a moment, looking down at it, and not so much thinking in any definite channel as feeling the queerness of things. Marietta often had longings which she did not classify, for what seemed such foolish matters that, unless she kept them under cover, folks might laugh. The lily was not only a lily to her: it suggested a train of bright imaginings. It was like snow, she thought, like a pale lovely princess, like the sweet-smelling field flower that twisted round a stalk in a beautiful swirl. It seemed quite appropriate to her that Jerry should cut the flowers and carry them to Ruth Bellair. He would know, and the poetess also, what wonderful thing to say about anything so lovely, all in measured lines rhyming to perfection. She sighed once or twice when her head was on the pillow. It seemed amazing to her to be gifted as Jerry and his poetess were, and very stupid to be as dull as she.

Jerry, that night, hardly slept at all. He sat by his hearth, fiddle in hand, sometimes caressingly under his chin, sometimes lying across his knees; but he was not playing. He had opened both windows, so that, although the spring air was cool, he could get the feeling of the night and hurry the beating of his excited heart. Jerry was in no habit of remembering how old he was, and to-night [322] age seemed infinitely removed. He was thinking of poetry and of Ruth Bellair. She had always been what he called his guiding star. Once he wrote a set of verses by that title, and put under it, with a hand trembling at its own audacity, "To R. B." That had never been published, but he had read it to Marietta, and she had said it was beautiful. Ruth Bellair had always seemed very far above him, for although he wrote poetry the county paper accepted in prodigious quantities, she did verse of a sort that appeared in loftier journals. She had written "The Hole in the Baby's Shoe," which mothers had cut out and pinned on the window curtain, and children had spoken on Last Day, to the accompaniment of tears from assembled parents. Then there was her sonnet, "Shall I Meet Thee There?" which Jerry had always supposed to have been inspired by a departed lover, and many, many others that touched the heart and were easy to remember, they ran so steadily, with such a constant beat. Jerry knew exactly how she would look. She would have golden hair and blue eyes, and what she had called in one of her poems the "tender gift of tears." He had always, in fancy, seen her dressed in blue, because that was his favorite color, though he reflected that he might as easily find her clad in white.

[323] It was only toward morning that he slept, his fiddle on the table now, but very near, as if they had shared a solemn vigil and it still knew how he might feel in dreams.

It was about ten o'clock when he stopped at Marietta's gate with the light wagon and sober white horse he had borrowed from Lote Purington, "down the road." Marietta was ready at the door, a long white box in her hand.

"I been watching for you," she said. "I went up attic, where I could see you turn the corner. Then I snipped 'em off, and here they are."

Jerry took the box with a grave decorum, as if it represented something precious to him, and disposed it in the back of the wagon under the light robe.

"I'm obliged to you, Marietta," he said. "This'll mean a good deal to me." He stepped into the wagon again and took up the reins. Then the calm and beneficence of the spring day struck him as it had not before, in his hurried preparations, and he looked down at Marietta. They had always had a good deal to say to each other about the weather, and he knew she would understand. "It's spring, Marietta," he said, with a simplicity he had never thought it desirable to put into his verse.

"Yes," she answered, as quietly, yet with a thrill in her voice. "I don't hardly think I ever saw a prettier day."

[324] There was such a mist of green that the earth seemed to be breathing it out in swirls and billows. It was impossible to say whether there were more riot and surge in the budding ground, or in the heavens, where clouds flew swiftly. The birds were singing, all kinds together, in a tumultuous harmony. Jerry felt light-headed with the wonder of it; but Marietta had an ache at her heart, she did not know why, though she was used to that kind of thing when the outside world struck her as being full of tremulous appeals without any answers.

Though Jerry had the reins in his hands, he did not go. Instead, he continued looking at her standing there in her freshness of good health and the candor of her gaze that seemed to him, next to his mother's face, the kindest thing he had ever known. The blue of her eyes and the blue of her dress matched each other in a lovely way. He felt that he had something to say to her, but he could not remember what it was. Suddenly a robin on the fence burst into adjurations of a robust sort, and Marietta, without meaning to, spoke. She had always said since her childhood that a robin bewitched her—he was so happy and so pert.

"Jerry," said she, "what if I should get my hat and ride with you as far as Ferny Woods?"

"So do," said Jerry, with a perfect cordiality. "So do."

[325]

"It's a pretty day," Marietta asserted again; but he cut her short, advising her to get ready, and she ran in, a flush on her cheeks and lightness in her step. When she came out she had made no conventional preparations for a drive. She had only pinned on her broad black hat and taken off her apron. She carried a little oblong basket with a cover, and this she set carefully in the back of the wagon, with the lilies. Jerry alighted gallantly to help her in, and when he had started up the horse it was Marietta who began speaking. Usually she was rather silent, following Jerry's lead, but to-day the warmth and beauty and song had liberated something in her spirit, and she had to talk back to the talking earth.

"You know Ferny Woods are much as a mile this side of the Moodys'," she was saying. "You can just leave me there, and then you can go along and make your call."

"It seems pretty mean not to take you with me," Jerry offered haltingly. Yet he knew, as she did, that he had no desire to take her. This was his own sacred pilgrimage.

"Oh, I wouldn't go for anything," she answered eagerly. "You've looked forward to it so long—well, not exactly that, for you didn't know she was coming. But it means a good deal to you. And I don't care a mite. I truly don't, not a mite."

[326]

Jerry flicked at the horse's ears and spoke out of his maze of dreamy anticipation.

"Seems if I should know her the minute I put eyes on her."

"Well, I guess you will," she encouraged him. "Maybe she's the only boarder they've got, so far."

"No, no, I don't mean that. Seems if I knew exactly how she ought to look."

"How d' you think, Jerry?" she inquired confidentially, as if his fancies were valuable and delightful to her. That was the tone she always had for him. Jerry would have said, if he had needed to think anything about it, that Marietta was the easiest person to talk to in the whole world. But he never did think about it. She was a part of his interchange with life, as real and as inevitable as his own hungers and satisfactions.

"Well," he said, while the horse slackened into a walk, with the grade of Blossom Hill, "I guess she's light-complexioned. Don't you?"

"Maybe," nodded Marietta kindly. "You can't tell."

"I guess she don't weigh very heavy," said Jerry, in a shamefaced bluntness, as if he wronged the absent goddess through such crudities. "You can't seem to see anybody that's had the thoughts she has and the way she's got of putting 'em—you can't see 'em very big-framed or heavy, can you? I can't, anyways." [327]

"No," said Marietta, looking down at her own plump hands folded on her knee—"no, I don't know 's you can. Only see, Jerry! I always thought this little rise was about the prettiest view there is betwixt us and the Rocky Mountains."

They were on the top of Blossom Hill again, and Jerry drew the horse to a halt before winding down. All the kingdoms of the earth seemed, in Marietta's eyes, to be spread out before them. There was the rolling land of farms and villages, and beyond it the line of haze that meant, they knew, the sea. Tears filled her eyes. Then her gaze came home to an apple-tree by the side of the road.

"You see that tree, Jerry?" she asked. "Well, I've always called that Mother's Tree. Once, the last o' May, we borrowed Lote's team and climbed up here, and here was that tree in full bloom. Mother had a kind of a pretty way of putting things, and she said 'twas like a bride. 'Some trees are all over pink,' she says, 'but this is white as the drifted snow.' And the winter mother died, I rode up over this hill again, to get her some things to be buried in, and I stopped and looked at that tree. It snowed the night before, and 'twas all over white, and sparkling in the sun. I spoke right out loud. 'Mother's Tree,' I says." [328]

"Sho!" said Jerry. "You never mentioned that before. Anybody could almost write something out o' that."

"Could you?" asked Marietta, brightening. "I wish you would. I should admire to have you."

Jerry's excitement of the night before had waned a little. Suddenly he felt tired and chill, and, although the purpose of his journey had not been accomplished, as if the zest of things had gone.

"Marietta," said he, starting on the horse, "do you think much about growing old?"

"I guess I don't," said Marietta brightly, and at once. "That's a terrible foolish thing to do. Least, so it seems to me."

"But you don't feel as you did fifteen years ago, do you, Marietta?" He asked it wistfully.

She was ready with her prompt assurance.

"I don't know 's I do. Don't seem as if 'twould be natural if I did. Take a tree, take that apple-tree back there—I don't know 's you could say it had the same feelings it did when it sprouted up out o' the seeds. We're in a kind of a procession, seems if, marching along towards—well, I don't know what all. But wherever we're going, it's all right, I say. It's all right." [329]

They were silent then for a time, each scanning the roadsides and the vista before them framed in drooping branches and enriched by springing sward.

"You seem to have a good deal of faith, Marietta," said he suddenly. "But you ain't much of a hand to talk about it."

"Course I got faith," she answered. "It ain't any use for anybody to tell me there ain't a good time coming. I don't have to conjure up some kind of a hope. I know."

"How do you know?" asked Jerry.

She gave a sudden irrepressible laugh.

"I guess it's because the sky is so pretty," she said. "Maybe the robins have got something to do with it. Days like this I feel as if I was right inside the pearly gates. I truly do."

They were entering the shade of evergreens that bordered the ravine road, where there were striated cliffs, and little runnels came trickling down to join the stream below.

"I guess there ain't a spot round here that means more to folks in our neighborhood than this," said Marietta. "Remember the time somebody wanted to name it 'Picnic Road'? There were seventeen picnics that summer, if I recollect, all in our set."

"Yes," said Jerry. He remembered his poem about the "awesome amphitheatre nature wrought," and wondered if Marietta also recalled it and would quote some of it. But she only said:— [330]

"That kind of a round where we used to eat our suppers is about the prettiest spot I ever see. That's where I'm going to set up my tent whilst you're making your call. When you come back you can poke right on in there and 'coot,' and I'll answer."

Jerry's mercurial spirits were mounting now. The past few minutes had given him two beautiful subjects for poetry. He could make some four-lined verses, he thought, about the tree that was a bride in spring and the next winter robed for burial. He could hear the cadence of them now, beating through his head in premonitory measures. Then there was the other fancy that life was a procession to an unknown goal. Jerry had read very little, except in the works of Ruth Bellair and her compeers, and the imaginings he wrought in had a way of seeming new and strange. The talk went on, drifting back irresistibly by the familiar way they were taking to the spring of their own lives, not, it seemed, in search of a lost youth, but as if they had it with them, an invisible third, in all their memories.

"Here we are," said Jerry. He drew up at the bars that led into old Blaisdell's sugar-camp, and Marietta, not waiting for him, sprang out over the wheel. "You're as light as a feather," said he admiringly, but with no sense of wonder. They were still in that childhood land where everybody is agile for one long, bright day. [331]

"Light as a bun," returned Marietta flippantly. "Here, you wait a minute till I get me out my basket. When you come back you be sure to coot."

Jerry drove on a step or two, and then drew in the horse. Just as she had set her basket over the bars and was prepared to follow, he called to her:—

"Marietta, I believe I'll leave the team."

Marietta understood. She came back readily.

"Well," she said, "I think 'twould look better, myself."

"I can hitch to the bars, same as we used to," Jerry continued. "Remember how Underhill's old Buckskin used to crib the fence? Here's the very piece of zinc Blaisdell nailed on that summer we were here so much."

He had turned and driven back, and while he tied the horse, Marietta took out the box of lilies.

"I guess you better hold these loose in your hand," she said tentatively. "Seems to me 'twould look more appropriate." [332]

Jerry nodded. They both had a vision of the poet going on foot to the lady of his dreams, his lilies in his hand. Marietta lifted the cover of the box and unrolled them deftly. She looked about her for an instant, and then, finding feasible standing-ground, went to one of the runnels dripping down the cliff and paused there, holding the lily stems in the cool laving of the fall. Jerry, the horse tied, stood watching her and waiting. The bright blue of her dress shone softly against the wet brown and black of the cliff wall, and the pink of her cheeks glowed above it like a rosy light. Marietta had thought her dress far too gay when she bought it, but the dusk of the ravine road had toned it down to a tint the picture needed for full harmony. Jerry, though the familiar spot and her presence in it soothed and pleased him, was running ahead with his eager mind to the farm where Ruth Bellair stood waiting at the gate. Of course she was not really waiting for him, because she did not know he was coming, nor even that he lived at all. When he had mailed her the package of autumn leaves Marietta had pressed, he had not sent his name with them. Yet it seemed to him appropriate that she should be standing, a girlish figure, by the Moodys' gate, to let him in. After that they would walk up the path together, she carrying the lilies; and perhaps in the orchard, where the trees were in bloom, they would pace back and forth together and talk and talk. Jerry knew it was too early for apple-trees to be blossoming, even in this weather, but [333]

the orchard where Ruth Bellair walked would be white and pink. So he took his lilies in his hand and strode away, and Marietta watched him. At the turn of the road he stopped and waved his hand to her.

"Good-by!" called Marietta. "Good luck! Good-by!" Then a little sob choked her, and she stamped her foot. "What a fool!" said Marietta, addressing herself, and she walked to the bars with great determination, let down one, "scooched" to go through, and, picking up her basket, went on to the amphitheatre. Jerry need not have wondered whether she remembered his ornate poem. She did, every word of it, and as she walked she said it to herself in a murmuring tone. When she was within the beloved inclosure she paused a moment before setting down her basket, and looked about her. The place was not so grand as her childish eyes had found it, only a great semicircle of ground brown with pine needles and surrounded by ancient trees; but it was beautiful enough. Strangely, she had not visited it for years. Her own mates no longer came, [334] because they were doing quiet things at home, farming and household tasks, and Marietta would have had no mind, if she had been invited, to make one of a serious middle-aged rout taking its annual pleasure with a difference.

"I'd rather by half be alone," she said aloud, as she looked about her, "or maybe with one other that feels as I do."

Then she put down her basket and went, by a path she knew, to the spring cleaned of fallen leaves by the first picnickers of every season. There it was, the little kind pool with its bottom of sand and its fringing grasses, the cress she had planted once with her own hands and now beginning to show brightly green. Marietta knelt and drank from her hollowed palm. The cup was in the basket. When Jerry came back he should have it to slake his thirst; and presently she returned to the amphitheatre and lay down on the pine-needles, to look up through the boughs at glints of sky, and think and think. Perhaps it was not thought, after all. It followed no road, but stayed an instant on a pine bough, as a bird alights and then flies out through the upper branches to the sky itself.

Marietta could not help feeling happy, in a still, unreasoning way. She had not had an easy youth. It had been full of poverty and fears, and her later life had been lived on one monotonous [335] level of satisfying her own bare wants and finding nothing left for luxury. But something, some singing inner voice, was always, in these later days, bidding her take hope. She was not expectant of definite delights; she only cherished an irresponsible certainty. When the door opened to let in spring, it seemed to show her heaven also, and she gave herself up to the gladness of it. If Marietta had been able to scrutinize her inner being, she would probably have owned that she found Jerry Freelands' influence upon her a great and guiding one. It was, she knew, a precious privilege to know a poet, and to see the natural and spiritual worlds through his discerning eyes. It would have seemed to her wonderful to be a poet herself. Ruth Bellair, waiting in unconscious sovereignty for Jerry to seek her out and lay lilies at her feet, was, she knew, the happiest woman in the spring world. Yet the soft air moved the pines to wavelike murmurings, and Marietta too was happy.

It was nearly three o'clock when Jerry came back, and before that Marietta had roused herself to open her basket and spread a napkin on the big flat stone that made the picnic-table. She had laid a pile of fine white bread and butter on the cloth, a paper twist of pickles, because picnickers, according to tradition, are the better for consuming pickles, and some of her own [336] superior sugar gingerbread. The cup was there waiting for Jerry to take it to the spring. Then she listened for him. He did not give the expected coot, but came through the forest glade silently and with a halting step. When Marietta saw him her heart ran forward, before her feet. Jerry looked an older man; his years were so apparent to her that it seemed for a foolish instant as if his father were advancing toward her out of the past where she and Jerry had been young together. She hurried forward.

"What is it?" she besought. "What's happened?"

His dull eyes turned upon her absently. He took off his hat and dropped it at his feet.

"Why," said he, "nothing's happened that I know of."

The part of prudence was to halt, but anxiety hurried her on as if it might have been to the rescue of a child in pain.

"Didn't you see her?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes, I saw her."

He passed a hand over his forehead and smoothed his hair in a way he had, ending the gesture at the back of his neck.

"How'd she look, Jerry? What was she doing?"

"Why," said Jerry, narrowing his eyes, as if he recalled a picture he had found incredible, "she [337] was playing croquet out in the front yard."

"But how'd she look?"

"Why, she's a kind of a dark-complexioned woman. She wears spe'tacles. She's"—he paused there an instant and caught his breath—"she's pretty fleshy."

"Was she nice to you?"

"Yes, she was nice. She meant to be real nice and kind. She made me"—a spasm twitched his face, and he concluded—"she made me play croquet."

They stood there in the wood loneliness, dapples of sunlight flickering on them through the leaves. Marietta felt a strange wave of something rushing over her. It might have been mirth, or indignation that somebody had destroyed her old friend's paradise; but it threatened to sweep her from her basis of control.

"You sit down, Jerry," she said soberly. "I'm going to the spring to get you a cup of water, and then we'll have our luncheon."

When she returned, bearing the full cup delicately, he lay like a disconsolate boy, face down upon the ground; so she touched him on the shoulder and said, in a tone of the brisk housewife:—

"Luncheon's ready." [338]

Then Jerry sat up, and ate when she put food into his hand and drank from the cup she gave him. Marietta ate only a crumb here and there from her one bit of bread, for, seeing how hungry he was, she suspected that, in his poet's rapture, he had had no breakfast. She tried to rouse him to the things he loved.

"Only look through there," she said, pointing to a vista where a group of birches were shimmering in green. "I don't know 's I ever see a fountain such as they tell about, but this time in the year, before the leaves have fairly come, seems if the green was like a fountain springing up and never falling back. Maybe, though, it's the word I like, the sound of it. I don't know."

Jerry turned his eyes on her in a quick, keen glance.

"Marietta," he said, "you have real pretty thoughts."

"Do I?" asked Marietta, laughing, without consciousness. She was only glad to have beguiled him from the trouble of his mind. "Well, if I do, I guess you put 'em into my head in the first place." The feast was over, and she folded the napkin and swept away the crumbs. "Want some more water?" she asked, pausing as she repacked the basket.

Jerry shook his head.

"Marietta," said he, "seems if it wa'n't a day since you and I used to be here picnicking." [339]

She laughed again whimsically.

"Well," she said, "when I travel back over the seams I've sewed, looks like a good long day. I guess there's miles enough of 'em to stretch from here to State o' Maine."

Jerry seemed to be speaking from a dream.

"And the others have married and got children growing up," he mused. "Seems if we'd missed the best of it."

They had risen and stood facing each other, Marietta with the basket in her hand. Jerry took it gently from her and set it on the ground.

"Marietta," he said, "I guess I'm kind of waked up."

Her face quivered. He thought he had never seen her look exactly that way before.

"I'd work terrible hard," said he. "I guess I could make you have an easier time."

Then his appealing eyes met hers, and Marietta, because she had no wish to deny him anything, gave him her hands, and they kissed soberly.

When they walked back to the road, Jerry drew her aside to the birches on the sunny knoll.

"You mustn't lay it up against me," he said brokenly.

"Lay what up?" [340]

Her lips were full and lovely, and her eyes shone with the one look of happiness.

"It's spring with these." He pointed to the birches. "It ain't with us."

"I don't know." Marietta laughed willfully. "Ain't you ever seen an apple-tree blooming in the fall? or a late rose? Well, I have. So, there!"

To Jerry, looking at her, she seemed like a beautiful stranger, met in the way, and he kissed her again.

When they were driving home in their sober intimacy that had yet an undercurrent of that rushing river of life, Marietta turned suddenly to him.

"Jerry," she said, "when you played croquet, who beat?"

His eyes, meeting hers, took the merry challenge of them and answered it. They both began to laugh, ecstatically, like children.

"She did," said he.

THE MASTER MINDS OF HISTORY

[341]

"What's that dry-goods case in the front entry?" asked Elihu Meade.

He had sunk into his particular chair by the kitchen stove, and was drawing off his boots with the luxurious slowness of one whose day's work is done and who may sit by expectant while fragrant warm delights are simmering for supper. His wife, Amarita by name, stood at the stove, piloting apple turnovers in a pool of fat. At a first glance she and her husband seemed an ill-matched pair, he with a thin face and precise patch of whisker at the ear, a noticeable and general meagreness of build, and she dark and small, with a face flashing vivid intelligence. Elihu's mother—a large, loosely made, blond old lady—sat by the window, out of range of the lamplight even, knitting by feeling, and doubling her pleasures through keeping her glance out of the window, where a new moon hung.

While she felt the warmth of indoor comfort wafting about her, Amarita cast up a hesitating yet altogether happy look at her husband. She knew from old habit that she must choose her time of approach, but the warmth and the plenitude of supper and her own inner enchantment with what she had to tell convinced her against reason that the time was now. [342]

"Why," she began, "you see 'twas this way."

Mrs. Meade the elder, known as "old Mis' Meade," gave a majestic clearing of her throat. She brought her gaze indoors and bent a frowning glance on the two at the stove. A shade of vexation passed over her face, grotesquely elongating the downward-dropping lines.

"Rita," she called, in what seemed warning, "you come here a minute. Ain't I dropped a stitch?"

Rita responded at once, bending over the stocking ostentatiously displayed.

"You let me take it to the light," she began; but old Mis' Meade laid thumb and finger on her apron, and having caught her daughter-in-law's eye, made mysterious grimaces at her. Amarita, the knitting in her hand, stared frankly back, and the old lady, forced to be explicit, bade her in a mumbling tone:—

"Wait till he's through his supper. It's no time now. There!" she continued, with a calculated clearness, "you give it back. I guess I didn't drop it, after all. Your fat's burnin'. Ketch it off, Elihu, won't ye?"

[343] The imperiled fat made a diversion, and then supper was on the table, and old Mis' Meade moved away from the window and brought her great bulk over to partake of turnovers. There was a long silence while tea was passed and the turnovers were pronounced upon by the acquisition that is more eloquent than words. But after Elihu had finished his fifth and last, he pushed his cup away with solemn satisfaction and asked his wife across the table:—

"What's that packin'-case out in the front entry?"

Old Mis' Meade gave a smothered ejaculation of discouragement, but Amarita looked up with the brightest eyes.

She was having a moment of perfect domestic peace, when all she did seemed to bear fruitage in the satisfaction of hunger and kindred needs, and it innocently seemed to her as if her compensating pleasure was about to come. She gazed straight at her husband, her eyes darkening with the pleasure in them.

"Why," said she, "that's the 'Master Minds of History.'"

Elihu bent a frowning brow upon her.

"The 'Master Minds of History,'" she repeated. "The agent was here this afternoon—"

"You don't think the mice'll git at them pies up in the blue chist, do ye?" inquired old Mis' Meade, fatuous in a desperate seeking to direct the talk. [344]

Amarita gave her a passing glance of wonder.

"Why, no," she said. "They couldn't get in to save their little souls. You see"—she turned again to Elihu—"the agent was here this afternoon—"

Old Mis' Meade almost groaned, and went away to her bedroom, as if she could not endure the hearing of the coming contest or to see the slain.

"What agent?" asked Elihu.

He had gone back to his seat by the fire, and Amarita, answering, stood with her hand upon the devastated table.

"Why, the book agent. He come in a buggy, and he had this set with him."

"Set o' what?"

"Why, set o' books. He's takin' orders for 'em, and this was a set he brought along under the seat, thinkin' somebody, the minister or somebody that knew what's what, would buy it right out. There's twelve volumes, and they're a dollar and eighty-seven a volume, and there's illustrations, and it's all printed in the clearest type."

She paused, flushed and expectant, and Elihu stared at her.

"A dollar and eighty-seven cents!" he repeated. "You ain't gone and put your name down for twelve books, a dollar and eighty-seven cents apiece?" [345]

"Why, no," said Amarita. "Course I ain't. I didn't have the money, and so I told him. I would, in a minute, if I'd had it."

"Well, what's the packin'-case here for?" inquired Elihu slowly, while his mind labored.

"Why, he was possessed to leave it. 'You look over the volumes,' he says, 'and read 'em all you want to, and if you don't feel to subscribe then, it sha'n't cost you a cent.' And he's comin' along here pretty soon, and he's goin' to call, and if we don't conclude to keep 'em, he'll take 'em right back."

"My king!" said Elihu. He looked at her in complete discouragement, and Amarita returned his gaze with one bespeaking a conviction of her own innocence. "Don't ye know no better'n that? Take 'em away! All the takin' away he'll do'll be in a hog's eye. He'll say you bought 'em, and ain't paid for 'em, and 'long about the first o' the month he'll send in a bill for twelve books at a dollar and eighty-seven cents apiece."

Amarita made a picture of childlike misery. Her eyes had the piteous look of coming tears, and she swallowed once or twice before speech was possible.

"O Elihu," she breathed, "you don't really s'pose that, do you?" [346]

"Course he will," said Elihu. "That's the way they do—come drivin' along a time o' day when there's no menfolks to home, and take in the womenfolks. They know women ain't got no business trainin'. How do they know it? Because they've tried it over 'n' over, and every time they've come out ahead."

The tears were dropping now, and Amarita walked hastily away to conceal them, and got down her dish-pan, although the table was not yet cleared. By the time she had turned from the sink again, a shadow of her hopefulness came wanly back.

"I don't believe he's that kind of a fellow," she faltered. "He talked real fair. I thought I should admire to look 'em over. I thought maybe we could read some out loud in the evenin', while your mother knit."

"'Talk fair!' Course he talked fair," said Elihu. "That's a part on 't. I'll bet a dollar if you's in a court o' law you couldn't remember what he said."

"I could the sense of it."

"That's it! Why, don't ye know, when anything's business, it's got to be jest so and no other way? 'Tain't surprisin' you shouldn't. Womenfolks ain't called on to do brain work, any to speak of—well, keep school they may, and a matter o' that—but when it comes to business—d'ye have any witnesses?" [347]

"No," said Amarita, in a small voice.

"Well, you've done about as bad for yourself as ye could, fur 's I can see. Now, you hearken to me. You leave that packin'-case where he set it, and don't you move it so much as a hair to the right or the left, and don't you lift the cover. And if that feller ever darkens these doors, you come and call me."

Then Elihu rose and took a candle and went off to his desk in the sitting-room, and Amarita cleared the table with swift, sweeping motions, as if she longed to hurl the dishes from her. Old Mis' Meade came heavily back from her bedroom.

"Well," said she, in the scorn sprung from experience, "I never seen sich actions. Terrible time, an' nobody to it! What made ye tell him?"

Amarita returned no answer. She was washing dishes now, with no noise, setting down each article softly, yet with the same air of longing to destroy.

"Witnesses!" old Mis' Meade grumbled, settling to her work by the window. "If Elihu's the size he used to be, I'd show him how much womenfolks knew about business. If you want one o' them books to read to-night, you step into the front entry an' pick ye out one. I'll stand by ye." [348]

Still Amarita made no answer. She was not thinking of the books. Swift as wood-creatures coursing on the track of prey, her mind was racing over the field of her life with Elihu and pinning down the mistakes he had made. She had never seemed to see them, but not one of them had escaped her. There was the day when a traveling salesman had sold him the onion seed that never came up, and the other one when he had bought Old White of the peddler, and seen him go lame after a two-mile drive, and when he dated a note on Sunday and the school-teacher had laughed. At first Amarita had not merely ignored his errors. She had, indeed, shut her eyes upon them and turned quickly away; but as it became apparent that Elihu was keeping a record of her impulsive, random deeds and drawing data from them, so she began to see the list of his, and turned to it now and then, when he found her foolish, to read it over in a passionate self-comparison.

When the dishes were done she sat down to her sewing, outwardly calm, but conscious of that hot flush in her cheeks and of her quickly beating heart. Old Mis' Meade muttered a little as she knit, and cast her son a hostile glance from time to time. But Elihu was happily impervious to [349] criticism. He spread a sheet of paper on the table, and sat down to it with the air of a schoolboy who is about to square his elbows and perhaps put out a rhythmic tongue.

"Where's my two-foot rule?" he inquired of Amarita.

"In your t'other trousers," she answered, sewing swiftly, without looking up.

Elihu glanced at her in a mild surprise, and his mother chuckled. She was devoted to her son, and more or less overshadowed by his prerogative as "menfolks" born to absorb the cream of things; but the elderly good sense in her was alive to the certainty that if Amarita had not been so yielding, Elihu would never have been so bumptious.

After he had risen and gone off rather helplessly to seek his t'other trousers, Amarita did glance after him with a tentative movement from her chair. It almost seemed as if she repented and meant to go on the quest herself. Old Mis' Meade, translating this, held her breath and waited; but Amarita only sighed and took a needleful of thread. Then Elihu returned with the rule and a stubby pencil, and all the evening long he drew lines and held the paper at arm's length and frowned at what he saw. Old Mis' Meade was in the habit of going to bed before the others, [350] and to-night she paused, candle in hand, to interrogate him.

"Elihu!"

"What say?" her son returned. He was again regarding the rectangular patterns on his page, in some dissatisfaction and yet with pleasure, too. It was the look of one who makes.

"What under the sun you doin' of?" asked the old lady. "What you rulin' off? Makes me as nervous as a witch."

Elihu laid down his paper from that removed survey and leaned back in his chair. It seemed to add some richness to his task to have it noticed.

"Well," said he, "there's goin' to be a town meetin' next Wednesday, to take a vote on that money Judge Green left for the Old Folks' Home."

"Yes, yes," said his mother. "I know that. Come, hurry up. This candle's in a draught."

"Well," said Elihu, "we've talked it over, more or less, most on us, and we've come to the conclusion it's only a bill o' cost to go hirin' city architects to plan out the job. All we want's a good square house, and I thought I'd draw out a plan o' one and submit it to the meetin'."

"O Elihu!" said Amarita, in a tone of generous awe. "You think you could?"

"Think?" said Elihu. "No, I don't think. I know it. Mebbe I couldn't draw out a house with [351] cubelows and piazzas and jogs and the like o' that, but that ain't what we've got in mind. It's a good old-fashioned house, and I s'pose any man of us could do it, only nobody's got the nerve to try. So I took it into my head to be the one."

"Well," said his mother skeptically, "mebbe you can an' mebbe you can't. Good-night, all."

But Amarita leaned forward across the table, her eager eyes upon the paper. She had forgotten her resentment. It was happiness to her to see Elihu doing what he liked and succeeding in it.

"O Elihu," said she, "show it to me, won't you? Tell me what the rooms are."

But he was rolling up his work.

"No," he said; "wait till I get a little further along. Then I will. I'm going to the street and buy me a sheet or two o' cardboard to-morrer."

But they talked cozily about it for a half-hour, and when Elihu rose to wind the clock they were both convinced that he was a great man indeed.

All that week Elihu worked over his plan, and when he had at last set it accurately down on the cover of a bandbox, as a preliminary to drafting it out fair and large, he showed it to his wife. They had put their heads together over it at the table, when Elihu caught sight of Simeon [352] Eldridge bringing him a cord of pine limbs.

"You wait a minute," he adjured Amarita. "I got to help him unload. I'll show it to you when I

come in."

But Amarita pored over it by herself, and old Mis' Meade, at the window, knit and watched for the passing. It was a bright day, and it seemed reasonable that at least two wagons might go by.

"Don't you want I should bring it over there," said Amarita, at length, "and let you look at it?"

"Law, no!" old Mis' Meade responded, with the ruthlessness of one whose mind is not on futures. "I guess I can wait till they've begun to hew out their underpinnin'."

"Ain't it remarkable he can do a thing like that?"

"He ain't done it yet," said the old lady sagely. "I'll b'lieve it when I'm called to the raisin'."

Amarita flushed.

"I don't see what does make you cry him down so," she declared, with a rare resentment. "Seems if you didn't want to allow he can do the least thing out o' the common."

"Well," said the old lady, "I dunno 's he can. There, Amarita!" She threw caution from her as far as it would fly. "I guess I set by Elihu enough, an' more too, but it does go ag'inst the grain to see you makin' out he's the greatest man that ever stepped. 'Twon't be long before ye can't live with him. Can't either of us!" [353]

Amarita was silent, staring straight at the old lady, who glanced up presently and blinked at her.

"You goin' to let them books set there in the front entry?" she inquired, as if her point of attack had shifted.

"Why, yes, I s'pose so," faltered Amarita.

"Don't ye want to peek into 'em an' see what they be?"

"Why, yes; but I don't want to do anything to get Elihu into trouble about 'em. I s'pose I was kinder foolish to believe what the man said."

"Foolish!" retorted the old lady, with vigor. "Course you was foolish. Everybody's foolish one time out o' three. That's about the only thing there's no patent on."

"Well, I s'pose folks do get into trouble doin' things wrong-end-to," said Amarita.

She felt as if she were defending Elihu in his censorship.

"Why, yes! Nobody says they don't. Let 'em git in an' let 'em git out ag'in. It ain't doin' foolish things or not doin' 'em I complain of. It's Elihu's settin' himself up to be the only human creatur' that never stepped inside of a glass house. Law! if he did but know it, he's got a ninety-nine-year lease o' one, an' if he could git it into his head how plain I can glimpse him through the walls, a surpriseder man you never'd see. Elihu's as good a boy as ever stepped; but if he could be took down a peg—an' I shouldn't care if 'twas before the whole township, too—he'd be worth more by half than he is to-day. Law! you'd ought to seen him a hundred years ago or more, arter I gi'n him a good spankin'. Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth." [354]

"Oh, don't! He's comin'," Amarita begged her.

But he was not coming, and for an hour Amarita dwelt upon the plans. Her eyes grew bright and her cheeks flushed. Once she pushed her pretty hair back from her forehead and looked up at the old lady, as if she had impulsive things to say. But she did not speak, and turning back to the plans, she went absorbedly over them again. Old Mis' Meade watched her scornfully, and yet tenderly, too. If ever a woman was a fool over a man, she reasoned, Amarita was that fool; but in her heart she would not have had it otherwise.

Now that the plans were virtually finished, Elihu sat over them at an hour's stretch, testing and measuring in an extreme of accuracy. Amarita watched him, with that bright anticipation in her face; and old Mis' Meade, her eyes intermittently upon them, thought the long thoughts of age, half scornful, half sympathizing, and wondered again how any woman could be so lost in admiration over a man. [355]

At last it was the day appointed for town meeting, and Elihu was at his task for the last time, making a fair copy for his townsmen's eyes. It was about four in the afternoon, and the smell of hot apple-sauce was in the air. Amarita meant to have supper early, so that she could give her mind untrammeled to getting her husband into his bosomed shirt and starting him on his quest. But as she moved back and forth at her tasks she watched him, and her eyes glittered. Old Mis' Meade noted the excitement of her air and the double tinge of color in her cheeks.

"What's the matter, Rita?" she asked kindly, when Amarita stood for a moment by the table between the front windows, frowning with the care she was giving to sewing a button on a wristband. "Ain't you kinder feverish?"

Amarita started—almost, it might have been, with some inner consciousness not to be given away.

"Oh no," said she. "I ain't feverish, mother Meade. Maybe I'm kinder flurried, Elihu's goin' out [356]

and all."

"Goin' to take the womenfolks along with ye, Elihu?" called the old lady, a satirical note beating into her voice.

Elihu looked up absently from his paper.

"Why," said he, with a leniency slightly tinctured by the impatience responsive to a foolish question, "it's jest a town meetin', same as any other. We're goin' to take action on the Old Folks' Home."

"Take action?" repeated old Mis' Meade. "Oh, that's it, is it? Well, Rita 'n' I'll stay to home an' take action on the 'Master Minds o' History.' This is as good a night as any. Mebbe there's a few womenfolks in there—enough for pepper 'n' salt—if they ain't bound for town meetin'."

Elihu drew the long breath which is the due of happily completed toil. He began to roll up his plans. Amarita ran to him and looked over his shoulder.

"You got 'em done?" she asked.

The red in her cheeks had heightened. Her voice came huskily. Old Mis' Meade glanced at her, a sharp and quick survey. Elihu indulgently unrolled his paper and spread it on the desk.

"Yes," said he, "I got 'em done."

"O Elihu!" breathed his wife. She bent above the page, and in the fever of her interest seemed to pounce on it and scurry over it. "You goin' to show it to the town meetin'?" [357]

"Course I be," said Elihu, with a modest pride. "That's what I made it for."

Amarita straightened.

"Well," said she. Her voice was hard through what might have been an accepted purpose. "You may as well shave you. We'll have supper early."

Supper was a silent meal that night. Elihu was pondering on his triumph as a valuable citizen, and what Amarita thought no one could at that moment have foretold. She did not eat, but she drank her tea in hasty swallows, and burned her mouth with it. That, the old lady guessed, was why the tears came once or twice into her eyes. Amarita, her mother-in-law judged, had been staying indoors too much through the snowy weather, while Elihu worked on his plans. There had been no sleigh-rides, only the necessary driving to the street.

Old Mis' Meade had a little scheme in view, and now she brought it forth; it was a species of compensation for stay-at-homes during the absence of their lawful head for his two or three hours of civic duty.

"What if you should bring in a good big knot 'fore you go," she adjured him, "an' Rita 'n' I'll have us a fire in the fireplace. I dunno why, but seems if I didn't want to set in the kitchen to-night. Then by the time you come home there'll be a good bed o' coals, an' you can toast your feet 'fore you go to bed." [358]

There was a whirling half-hour of preparation, while old Mis' Meade washed the supper dishes and Amarita flew light-footedly about from kitchen to bedroom to get her lord into his public clothes. Elihu forgot the knot, and brought it in after he had assumed the garb of ceremony; and then he had to be fussily brushed from possible sawdust, while Amarita, an anxious frown on her brow, wondered why mother Meade always would distract him at the most important points. The fire was laid, but Elihu was one of those who believe in their own personal magic over a blaze, and he had to adjust the knot and touch off the kindling and watch the result a minute, to be sure the chimney had not caught. By the time he had harnessed and had appeared again to wash his hands and don his greatcoat, two other sleighs had gone by, bearing town fathers to the trysting-place. Amarita was nervous. She knew Elihu liked to be beforehand with his duties. But at last, his roll of plans in hand, he was proceeding down the path, slipping a little, for the thaw had made it treacherous, to the gate where the horse was hitched, and Amarita, at the sitting-room window, watched him. Old Mis' Meade came up behind her, and she too watched. [359]

Elihu was uncovering the horse. Amarita turned from her mother-in-law with a noiseless rush and flew out of the front door and down the slippery path.

"Elihu!" she called, with all the voice excitement left her. "Elihu, you come here. I've got to speak to you."

Elihu left the horse and came with long strides up the path, taking, as he hurried, glances at the roof.

"Roarin', is it?" he asked. "You think the chimbley's ketched?"

The roll of plans stuck out from his coat pocket. That was all Amarita could see. She laid hands upon him and drew him into the entry. There she shut the door and then stood with her grasp upon the other door, leading into the sitting-room, and held it tight. She was afraid mother Meade might come out to see what was the matter. Amarita leaned against the casing. In spite of the brightness of her eyes, she looked faint and sick. It seemed to be her grasp upon the latch that kept her now from falling.

"O Elihu!" she said. He was questioning her with puzzled eyes. "O Elihu! I've been awful mean to you." Her hold on the latch relaxed, and she sat down on the packing-case between them. "When I told you about the box the man left, and you seemed to think I didn't know enough to come in when it rained, I said next time you made any kind of a mistake I'd let it go, no matter who's goin' to laugh at you. And when it come to your plans"—she stopped here, and Elihu absently put his hand to the roll in his pocket—"when it come to them, I said you might show 'em to the minister and the doctor and everybody else. But, Elihu, there ain't—O Elihu, you ain't put a single closet in that house!"

Elihu stood there in silence, and Amarita sat on the packing-case, feeling her heart beat. It seemed a long time before she heard his voice.

"There! there!" he was saying. "You open that door and I'll look in an' see if the chimbley's ketched."

In a moment Amarita followed him. She heard mother Meade moving about the kitchen, and Elihu was just dropping his roll of paper on the fire. She gave a little cry, but he only said, in what seemed to her a very kind voice, almost the voice of courting days,—

"You run out and fetch me in the hammer and screw-driver, whilst I listen to this chimbley."

When she came droopingly back with the tools, Elihu was explicitly cheerful.

"There!" he said. "That's safe enough. We'll burn it out, come wet weather." Then he strode into the hall, and she heard two or three blows and the splintering of soft wood. "Here's your books," Elihu was calling to her. "You two take 'em out, and if 'tain't too late after I come home, I'll read a page. I guess we can foot the bill when it comes in."

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