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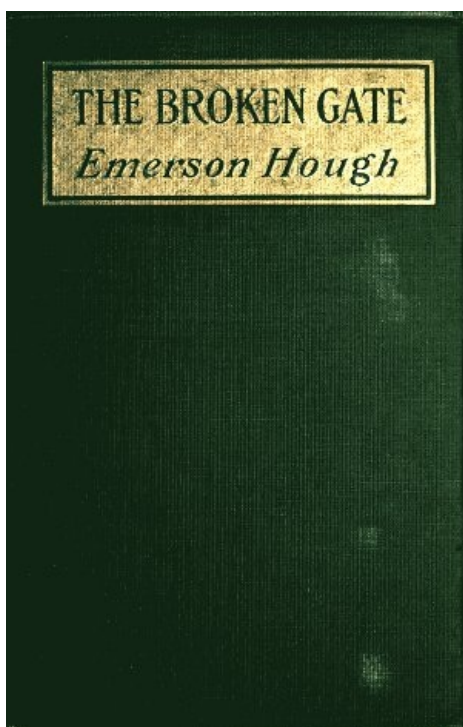
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BROKEN GATE: A NOVEL ***



The BROKEN GATE

A NOVEL

BY EMERSON HOUGH

**AUTHOR OF "THE MAN NEXT DOOR," "THE MAGNIFICENT
ADVENTURE," "54° 40' OR FIGHT," "THE MISSISSIPPI BUBBLE," ETC.**

**ILLUSTRATED BY
M. LEONE BRACKER**

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TO
ARTHUR T. VANCE
FAITHFUL AND KINDLY COUNSELOR



He felt her hands resting on his head as though in shelter.

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["Your Honor," said he, "I presume I am the defendant in this case."](#)

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The BROKEN GATE

CHAPTER I

THE HOMECOMING OF DIEUDONNÉ LANE

"Eejit! My son John! Whip ary man in Jackson County! Whoop! Come along! Who'll fight old Eph Adamson?"

The populace of Spring Valley, largely assembled in the shade of the awnings which served as shelter against an ardent June sun, remained cold to the foregoing challenge. It had been repeated more than once by a stout, middle-aged man in shirt sleeves and a bent straw hat, who still turned a truculent gaze this side and that, taking in the stragging buildings which lined the public square—a quadrangle which had for its center the brick courthouse, surrounded by a plat of scorched and faded greensward. At his side walked a taller though younger man, grinning amiably.

The audience remained indifferent, although the challenger now shifted his position to the next path leading out to a street entrance; and repeated this until he had quite traversed the square. Only, at the farther corner back of him, a woman paused as she entered the courthouse inclosure—paused and turned back as she caught sight of the challenger and heard his raucous summons, although evidently she had been hurrying upon some errand.

Ephraim Adamson walked hither and thither, his muscular arms now bared to the elbows; and at his side stalked his stalwart son, who now and then beat his fists together, and cracked his knuckles with a vehemence like that of pistol shots. But none paid great attention to either of the Adamsons. Indeed, the eyes of most now were following the comely figure of this woman, as usually was the case when she appeared.

"Take her now, right how she is," said one of the sidewalk philosophers, "and you got to admit yonder's the handsomest woman in this town, and has been for twenty years." He nodded to where she stood, hesitating.

That she was a tallish woman, of less than middle age and of good figure, was perceptible even at some distance as she finally advanced. She was well clad enough, and with a certain grace and trimness in her appointments—indeed seemed smart in a quiet and unobtrusive way—very neat as to hands and feet, and trim as to the small turban which served now as her only defense against the heat of the summer sun.

"Rory Lane," said one languid citizen to another, as they sat on comfortable boxes in front of the leading grocery store. "Wonder where *she's* goin', this time of day? Anyhow, she runs into Old Man Adamson on his regular weekly spree. He wants to fight, as usual, him and his half-wit boy. It's a shame."

"But they kin do it," responded the other ruminatingly. "It's got so lately, every Saturday afternoon regular, him and his half-wit yonder stands off the whole town. No man wants to fight a eejit—it ain't proper."

"Some has," remarked the first citizen thoughtfully.

"Well, anyways, old Joel Tarbush, the town marshal, had ought to look after such things. There he sets now, over yonder under the awnings in front of the Golden Eagle, and he sees them two plain enough."

His crony only chuckled. "Reckon Old Man Tarbush knows when he's well off," was his sententious reply.

The first speaker again pointed a thumb toward the courthouse grounds, where the woman now

was crossing toward the street. She was walking rapidly, apparently anxious to escape the notice of the two men in the yard, and intent on her purpose, as though she feared being late at some appointment. The younger and taller was hastening toward her, but shrinking from him she hurried on across through the turnstile, and out into the street. She advanced with a nod here and there to those whom she met along the street front, but she showed no effusiveness, and did not pause to talk with anyone, although all seemed to know her. Some women smiled at her faintly. Some men smiled at her also—after she had passed. All talked of her, sometimes nodding, head to head.

The woman so frankly discussed presently disappeared around the corner of the street which led down to the railway station, a half-mile distant. And now could be heard the rumble of the town "bus," bringing in its tribute from the train to the solitary hotel.

"Huh!" said one of these twain, "'Rory was too late, like enough, if she was plannin' to meet Number Four, fer any reason. Here comes the bus a'ready."

Aurora Lane had indeed been too late to meet the train, but not too late to attain the purpose of her hurried walk. A moment later the two watchers on the sidewalk, and all the other Saturday loafers, saw her emerge again from the street that led up from the railway station.

She was not alone now. A young man had spied her from his place in the hotel bus, and, whether in answer to a signal from her, or wholly of his own notion—regarding which there was later discussion by the two gossips above mentioned—had sprung out to join her on the street.

He walked by her side now, holding her by the arm, patting her shoulder, talking to her volubly, excitedly, all the time—a tall young man in modern garb; a young man with good shoulders and a strong and easy stride. His face seemed flushed with eagerness and happiness. His hat, pushed back on his brow, showed the short curling auburn hair, strong and dense above the brown cheeks. Those who were close might have seen the kindly, frank and direct gaze of his open blue eyes.

A certain aloof distinction seemed to cling about the young man also as he advanced now, laughing and bubbling over with very joy of life and eagerness at greeting this woman at his side—this woman whose face suddenly was glorified with a light none ever had seen it bear before. Why not? It was his mother—Aurora Lane, the best known woman of Spring Valley, and the woman with least reputation.

The two passed directly into the center of the town's affairs, and yet they seemed apart in some strange way. They met greetings, but the greetings were vague, curious. No one knew this young man.

"Huh!" exclaimed one of the two town critics once more. "There they go. Pretty sight, ain't it! Who's he?"

Old Silas Kneebone leaned to his friend, Aaron Craybill, on the adjacent store box. "Taller'n she is, and got red hair, too, like hers. I wonder—but law!—No, good law! No! It kain't be. She ain't nobody's wife, and never was."

"But there they go, walking through the streets in broad daylight, as bold as you please," commented his crony.

"I dunno as I'd call her bold, neither," rejoined Silas. "'Rory Lane, she's kept up her head all these years, and I must say she's minded her own business. Everybody knows, these twenty years, she had a baby, and that the baby died; but that's about all anybody ever did know. The baby's dad, if it had one, has hid damned well—the man nor the woman neither don't live in this town that can even guess who he was. But who's this young feller? Some relative o' hern from somewheres, like enough—reckon she must 'a' been goin' down to the train to meet him. Never told nobody, and just like her not to. She sure is close-mouthed. They're going on over towards her place, seems like," he continued. "Say, don't she look proud? Seems like she's glad over something. But why—that's what I want to know—why?"

The two persons thus in the public eye of Spring Valley by this time had come again to the corner of the courthouse inclosure, and apparently purposed to pass diagonally through the courthouse yard. Now and again the young man turned in friendly fashion to the onlookers, none of whom he knew, but whom he fancied to be acquaintances of his companion. He himself was altogether a stranger in the town. He felt a chill at the curious stares, the silent half smiles he encountered, but attributed that to bucolic reticence, so shrugged his shoulders and turned to Aurora Lane. Had any at that time heard his speech, they surely must have felt yet more surprise.

"Mom!" said he. "Mother! I've got a mother, after all—and such a splendid one! I can't believe it at all—it must all be a dream. To be an orphan all my life—and then to get word that I'm not—that I've a mother, after all—and you! Why, I'd have known you anyhow, I'm sure, if I'd never seen you, even from the picture I had. It was when you were a girl. But you've not changed—you couldn't. And it's you who've been my mother all the time. It's fine to be home with you at last. So this is the town where you have lived—that I've never seen. And here are all your friends?"

"Yes, Don," said she, "all I have, pretty much." Aurora Lane's speaking voice was of extraordinary sweetness.

"Well, you have lived here all your life."

"Yes," she smiled.

"And they all know you."

"Oh, yes," noncommittally. "It was too bad you had to be away from me, Don, boy. You seem like a stranger to me—I can't realize you are here, that you are my own boy, Dieudonné! I'm afraid of you—I don't know you—and I'm so proud and frightened, so surprised, so *glad*—why, I don't know what to do. But I'd have known you anywhere—I *did* know you. You're just as I've always dreamed of you—and I'm glad—I'm so very glad!"

"Mom! I loved your little picture, but I never knew how much I loved *you* till now—why—you're my *mother*! My mother! And I've never seen you—I've never known you—till right now. You're a ripper, that's what you are!

"And is that where you live, over yonder?" he added quickly, to conceal the catch in his throat, the quick moisture in his eyes. His mother! And never in all his life had he seen her face—this sweet, strange, wistful, wonderful face. His mother! He had not even known she was alive. And now, so overwhelmed was he, he did not as yet even think of unraveling the veil of ignorance or deceit—call it what one might—which had left him in orphanage all his life till now.

"Yes, over yonder," said Aurora, and pointed across the square. "That little house under the shade trees, just at the corner. That's home and workshop for me, Don."

She spoke softly, her eyes still fixed on him, the color of her cheeks deepening.

"Not so much of a house, is it?" laughed the boy, tears on his face, born of his new emotion, so sudden, so tremendous and so strange.

"Not so very much," she assented, laughing gayly also, and also in tears, which gave him sudden grief—"but it has served."

"Well, never mind. We're going to do better out West, Mom. We're going to have you with us right away, as soon as I can get started."

"What—what do you say—with *us*! With *us*?"

She spoke in swift dismay, halting in her walk. "What do you mean, Don—*us*?"

"I didn't tell you the news," said he, "for I've just got it myself."

"What a week! I heard of you—that you were alive, that you were living here—though why you never told me I can't dream—and now, today, Anne! Two such women—and for me. I can call God kind to me. As if I deserved it!"

He did not see her face as he went on rapidly:

"We didn't know it ourselves much more than an hour or so ago—Anne and I. She came out on the same train with me—we finished school together, don't you see! Anne lives in Columbus, fifty miles west. She's fine! I haven't had time to tell you."

He didn't have time now—did not have time to note even yet the sudden pallor which came upon his mother's face. "Anne?" she began.

"Huh!" said Silas Kneebone again from his place under the awning, "there she goes—'Rory Lane. Wonder who that kin be with her! And I wonder what old Eph Adamson's goin' to say to them! Watch at them now."

The young man and his mother by this time were within the courthouse fence and coming face to face with the two public challengers, who had so fervently notified all mankind of their wish to engage in personal combat.

Those beneath the awnings now saw the tall figure of the half-wit boy, Johnnie Adamson, advance toward Aurora Lane. They saw her and the tall young stranger halt suddenly—saw the young man gently push the woman back of him and stand full front, frowning, questioning, almost directly against the half-wit. He reached out a hand and thrust him back, sternly, fearlessly, half contemptuously.

"Wait, Don! Come back!" called out Aurora Lane. "Don't get into trouble here—come—come away!"

She plucked at the sleeve of his coat to draw him back. It was too late. The half-wit, cracking his knuckles now yet more loudly, and knocking his fists together, had wholly lost his amiable smile. Something primordial was going on, deep down in his rudimentary brain.

As for Eph Adamson, he also stood scowling and silent, a sudden wave of resentment filling his soul at seeing the happiness of these two.

"No, you don't—just you leave him be!" called out Eph Adamson, as the young man pushed the half-wit back from him, his own blue eyes now beginning to glint. "Leave him alone, unless you want to fight. He can lick you anyways, whoever you are. Do you want to fight?"

"No, why should I? I don't know you."

Don Lane turned toward the stranger, still frowning and somewhat wondering, but in no terror

whatever.

"I don't know you neither, nor what you're doin' here, but you've got to fight or 'pologize," said Eph Adamson, arriving at this conclusion through certain mental processes of his own not apparent. "You got to have our consent to cross this here courtyard. This is my son John, and you shan't insult him."

"Get on away—step back," said Don Lane. "I guess it's all right, but let my mother and myself alone—we're just going home."

A sudden wave of rage and wonder, mingled, filled the soul of drunken Eph Adamson as his venom rose to the boiling point.

"Mother!" he half screamed, "your *mother*? Who're you? You're a pretty pair, you two, ain't you? She said her baby died twenty years ago. Did she have some more? Who're you? *Mother*?—Say, after all, are *you* the town's boy—coming pushing past my son with her—your *mother*! What do you mean? If you're her son, you ain't *got* no mother, nor no father neither."

And now there came a pause, an icy pause—icy it was, out there in the glare of the hot summer sun. These four who stood in view of all the village might have been statues for the time, so motionless, so tense was each.

Not many actually heard the words of old Eph Adamson—words wrung out of the bitterness of his own soul perhaps, but words intolerable none the less. None had heard the words of Aurora Lane and the young man as they had spoken previous to this. None guessed who the stranger was or might be—none but drunken Eph Adamson. But all could see what now happened.

For one instant the young man stood almost like a statue. Then with one sudden thrust of his fist he smote the old man full in the mouth, so swift and hard a blow that Adamson dropped prostrate, and for the time motionless.

A sudden, instantaneous, electric buzz, a murmur, ran all around the square. A sound of shuffling feet and falling boxes might have been heard as men here and there rose eagerly, their necks craned out toward this swiftly made arena.

They saw the half-wit boy now advance upon Don Lane with a roar or bawl of rage, his arms swinging flail-like. All expected to see the newcomer turn and run. Not so. He simply stood for a half instant, sidestepped, and again swung in close upon his foe. Old Silas Kneebone described the affair many a time afterwards, at a time when Spring Valley knew more about Don Lane.

"You see, the eejit, he gets up again, hollering, and he goes in again at Dewdonny, bound for to knock his head off. But Dewdonny, he ducks down like a regular prize-fighter—I hear tell, at colleges, them athletes they have to learn all them sort of things—and he put up a fight like a regular old hand. But all the time he keeps hollering to the crowd, 'Take him away! Take him away! Keep him off, I say! I don't want to hit him!'

"Well, folks begun to laugh at Dewdonny then—before they knowed who he was—thinking he was afraid of that eejit; yet it didn't seem like he was, neither, for he didn't run away. At last he hits the eejit fair a second time, and he knocks him down flat. Folks then begun to allow he could hit him whenever he wanted to, and knock him down whenever he pleased.

"Now, the eejit, he gets up and begins to beller like a calf. He puts his hand on his face where Dewdonny Lane had done hit him the last time or two and he hollers out, 'Pa, he hit me!'

"But his pa could only set up on the grass and shake his head. I reckon old Eph was soberer then than he had been five minutes sooner. Say, that boy had a punch like the kick of a full growed mule!

"Of course, you all know what happened then. It was then that old Man Tarbush come in, seeing the boy had both of them two licked. He got up his own nerve after that. So now he goes over there to the courthouse ground, through the gate where they all was, and he lays his hand on Dewdonny Lane and then on the eejit.

"'I arrest you both for disturbing of the peace,' says he then. 'Come on now, in the name of the law.'

"'The law be damned!' says Dewdonny Lane then. 'Go take this man to jail. Are you crazy—what do you mean by arresting me when I'm just walking home with my mother? This wasn't my fault. I didn't want to hit him.'

"'Come on, Mom!' says he, and before Tarbush could help hisself he'd took 'Rory Lane by the arm again and off they went, and right soon they was in their house—them two, the milliner and her boy.

"And Joel Tarbush he heard him call her 'Mom' right there—that's how it all begun to git out.

"That's right—this was the town milliner and the boy she sent away, that never died none at all nohow.—'Rory Lane, and her boy we all thought was dead. And we'd never knowed it nor dreamed it till he spoke, right there in the public square! 'My mother!' says he. Can you beat that?

"Then 'Rory Lane turns around and fronts the whole lot of them. Says she: 'Yes, it's true! This is

my son, Dewdonny Lane,' says she. She said it cold.

"That was before we knowed all about how she had put him through college, and that this was his first visit home, and the first time he'd ever seen her—his own mother! I heard as how he'd thought all his life he was a orphan, and someone on the inside that very week—just when he'd finished in college—had wrote him that he wasn't no orphan, but had a mother living right here! So here he comes, hot foot—and didn't he spill the beans!

"She'd tried her durnedest to keep it all covered up—and you must say she'd made one big fight of it, fer it's hard fer a woman to keep her eyes and her hands off of her own flesh and blood, even if it ain't legal. But, somehow, it's hard to keep that sort of thing covered up, for a woman. It all comes out, time'n again—ain't it the truth? How she done it for twenty years is a miracle. But law! What's twenty years, come to forgettin' things like what she done?"

CHAPTER II

AURORA LANE

While the doughty town marshal, endowed now with a courage long foreign to his nature, was leading away his sobbing prisoner, followed by the prisoner's dazed yet angered parent, these other two, mother and son, continued rapidly on their way toward the home of Aurora Lane. The young man walked in silence, his enthusiasm stilled, although he held his mother's hand tight and close as it lay upon his arm. His face, frowning and stern, seemed suddenly grown strangely older.

They arrived at the corner of the tawny grassplot of the courthouse yard, crossed the street once more, and turned in at the long shady lane of maples which made off from that corner of the square. Here, just in the neutral strip between business and residence property, opposite a wagon-making and blacksmith shop, and adjoining the humble abode of a day-laborer, they came to a little gate which swung upon a decrepit hinge. It made in upon a strip of narrow brick walk, swept scrupulously clean, lined with well-kept tulips; a walk which in turn arrived at the foot of a short and narrow stair leading up to the porch of the green-shuttered house itself.

It was a small place of some half-dozen rooms, and it served now, as it had for these twenty years, as home and workshop alike for its tenant. Aurora Lane had lived here so long that most folk thought she owned the place. As a matter of fact, she owned only a vast sheaf of receipted bills for rent paid to Nels Jorgens, the wagon-maker across the street. In all these twenty years her rent had been paid promptly, as were all her other bills.

Aurora Lane was a milliner, who sometimes did dress-making as well—the only milliner in Spring Valley—and had held that honor for many years. A tiny sign above the door announced her calling. A certain hat, red of brim and pronounced of plume, which for unknown years had reposed in the front window of the place—the sort of hat which proved bread-winning among farmers' wives and in the families of villagers of moderate income—likewise announced that here one might find millinery.

When she first had moved into these quarters so many years ago, scarce more than a young girl, endeavoring to make a living in the world, the maples had not been quite so wide, the grass along the sidewalk not quite so dusty.

It was here that for twenty years Aurora Lane had made her fight against the world. It had been the dream, the fierce, flaming ambition of all her life, that her son, her son beloved, her son born out of holy wedlock, might after all have some chance in life.

It was for this that she aided in his disappearance in his infancy, studiously giving out to all—without doubt even to the unknown father of the boy—the word that the child had died, still in its infancy, in a distant state, among relatives of her own. She herself, caught in the shallows of poverty and unable to travel, had not seen him in all these years—had not dared to see him—had in all the dulled but not dead agony of a mother's yearning postponed her sweet dream of a mother's love, and with unmeasurable bravery held her secret all these awful years. Schooling here and there, at length the long term in college, had kept the boy altogether a stranger to his native town, a stranger even to his own mother. He did not know his own past, nor hers. He did not dream how life had been made smooth for him, nor at what fearful cost. Shielded about always by a mother's love, he had not known he had a mother.

This was as his mother had wished. As for him, in some way he received the requisite funds. He wondered only that he knew so little of his own people, half orphan though he was. He had been told that his father, long since dead, had left a certain sum for the purpose of his education, although further of his own history he knew nothing. That he was not of honorable birth he never once had dreamed. And now he had heard this charge for the first time—heard it made publicly, openly, before all the world, on this which was to have been the happiest day in all his life.

But if Don Lane knew little about himself, there lacked not knowledge of his story, actual or potential, here in Spring Valley, once his presence called up the past to Spring Valley's languid mind. There had not yet been excitement enough for one day. Everyone, male and female,

surging here and there in swift gossiping, now called up the bitter story so long hid in Aurora Lane's bosom.

As for Aurora, she had before this well won her fight of all these years. She was known as the town milliner, a woman honorable in her business transactions and prompt with all her bills. Socially she had no place. She was not invited to any home, any table. The best people of the town, the banker's wife, the families of the leading merchants, bought bonnets of her. Ministers—while yet new in their pulpits—had been known to call upon her sometimes—one had even offered to kneel and pray with her in her workroom, promising her salvation even yet, and telling her the story of the thief upon the cross. Once Aurora Lane went to church and sat far back, unseen, but she did so no longer now, had not for many years, feeling that she dared not appear in the church—the church which had not ratified her nuptial night!

She had her place, definite and yet indefinite, accepted and yet rejected, here in this village. But gradually, dumbly, doggedly she had fought on; and she had won. Long since, Spring Valley had ceased openly to call up her story. If once she had been wearer of the scarlet letter, the color thereof had faded these years back. She was the town milliner, a young woman under suspicion always, but no man could bring true word against her character. She had sinned—once—no more. If she had known opportunity for other sins than her first one, she held her peace. Human nature were here as it is elsewhere—women as keen; men as lewd. But the triumph of Aurora Lane might now have been called complete. She had "lived it down."

This long and terrible battle of one woman against so many strangely enough had not wholly embittered her life, so strong and sweet and true and normal had it originally been. She still could smile—smile in two fashions. One was a pleasant, sunny and open smile for those who came in the surface affairs of life. The other was deeper, a slow, wry smile, very wise, and yet perhaps charitable, after all. Aurora Lane knew!

But all these years she had worked on with but one purpose—to bring up her boy and to keep her boy in ignorance of his birth. He had never known—not in all these years! It had been her dream, her prayer, that he might never know.

And now he knew—he must know.

They stepped through the little picket gate, up the tiny brick walk and across the little narrow porch together, into the tiny apartments which had been the arena for Aurora Lane—in which she had fought for her own life, her own soul, and for the life of her son, her tribute to the scheme of life itself. Here lay the *penetralia* of this domicile, this weak fortification against the world.

In this room were odds and ends of furniture, a few pictures not ill-chosen—pictures not in crude colors, but good blacks and whites. Woman or girl, Aurora Lane had had her own longings for the great things, the beautiful things of life, for the wide world which she never was to see. Her taste for good things was instinctive, perhaps hereditary. Had she herself not been an orphan, perhaps she had not dared the attempt to orphan her own son. There were books and magazines upon the table, mixed in with odds and ends of scraps of work sometimes brought hither; the margin between her personal and her professional life being a very vague matter.

Back of this central room, through the open door, showed the small white bed in the tiny sleeping room. At the side of this was the yet more tiny kitchen where Aurora Lane all these years had cooked for herself and washed for herself and drawn wood and water for herself. She had no servant, or at least usually had not. Daily she wrought a woman's miracles in economy. Year by year she had, in some inscrutable fashion, been able to keep up appearances, and to pay her bills, and to send money to her son—her son whom she had not seen in twenty years—her son for whom her eyes and her heart ached every hour of every day. She sewed. She made hats. What wonder if the scarlet of the hat in the window had faded somewhat—and what wonder if the scarlet of the letter on her bosom had faded even more?... Because it had all been for him, her son, her first-born. And he must never, never know! He must have his chance in the world. Though the woman should fail, at least the man must not.

So it was thus that, heavy-hearted enough now, she brought him to see the place where his mother had lived these twenty years. And now he knew about it, must know. It took all her courage—the last drop of her splendid, unflinching woman-courage.

"Come in, Don," she said. "Welcome home!"

He looked about him, still frowning with what was on his mind.

"Home?" said he.

"Don!" she said softly.

"Tough work, wasn't it, waiting for me to get through, dear Mom? For I know you did wait. I know you meant that some day——"

He laid a hand on her head, his lips trembling. He knew he was postponing, evading. She shrank back in some conviction also of postponing, evading. All her soul was honest. She hated deceit—though all her life she had been engaged in this glorious deceit which now was about to end.

"Tough sometimes, yes," she said, smiling up at him. "But don't you like it?"

"If my dad had lived," said Don, "or if he had had very much to give either of us, you'd never have

lived this way at all. Too bad he died, wasn't it, Mom?"

He smiled also, or tried to smile, yet restraint was upon them both, neither dared ask why.

She caught up his hand suddenly, spying upon it a strand of blood.

"Don!" she exclaimed, wiping it with her kerchief, "you are hurt!"

He laughed at this. "Surely you don't know much of boxing or football," said he.

"You ought not to fight," she reproved him. "On your first day—and all the town saw it, Don! You and I—we ought not to fight. What—on the first day I've seen you in all these years—the first day you're out of college—the first day I could ever in all my life claim you for my very own? I believe I *would* have claimed you—yes, I do! But you came—when you knew you had a mother, why you came to her, didn't you, Don? Even me. But you mustn't fight."

"Why?" He turned upon her quickly, his voice suddenly harsh, his eyes narrowing under drawn brows. "Why shouldn't I fight?"

He seemed suddenly grown graver, more mature, strong, masterful, his eye threatening. She almost smiled as she looked at him, goodly as he was, her pride that she had borne him overpowering all, her exultation that she had brought a man into the world, a strong man, one fit to prevail, scornful of hurt—one who had fought for her! For the first time in her life a man had fought for her, and not against her.

But on the soul of Aurora Lane still sat the ancient dread. She saw the issue coming now.

"Mother——" said he, throwing his hat upon the table and walking toward her quickly.

"Yes, Don." (She had named her son Dieudonné—"God-given." Those who did not know what this might mean later called him "Dewdonny," and hence "Don.")

"I didn't thrash them half enough, those fellows, just now."

"Don't say that, Don. It was too bad—it was terrible that it had to be today, right when you were first coming here. I had been waiting for you so long, and I wanted——"

"Well, I tell you what I want—I want you just to come away with me. I want to get you away from this town, right away, at once, as quick as I can. I'm beginning to see some things and to wonder about others. I am ashamed I have cost you so much—in spite of what Dad left, you had to live close—I can see that now—although I never knew a thing about it until right now. I feel like a big loafer, spending all the money I have, while you have lived like this. Where did you get it, Mom?"

She swept a gesture about her with both hands. "I got it here," said she suddenly. "It *all* came from—here. You father sent you—nothing! I've not let you know all the truth—you've known almost nothing of the truth."

Then her native instinct forced her to amend. "At least half of it came from here. It was honest money, Don, you know it was that, don't you—you believe it was honest?"

"Money that would have burned my fingers if I had known how it came. But I didn't. What's up here? Have you fooled me, tricked me—made a loafer of me? I supposed my father set aside enough for my education—and enough for you, too. What's been wrong here? What's under all this? Tell me, now!"

His mother's eyes were turned away from him. "At least we have done it, Don," said she, with her shrewd, crooked smile. "We've not to do it over again. You can't forget what you have learned—you can't get away from your college education now, can you? You've got it—your diploma, your degree in engineering. You're a college man, Don, the only one in Spring Valley. And I'm so proud, and I'm so glad. Oh! Don—Don——"

She laid a hand on his breast shyly, almost afraid of him now—the first hand she had ever laid upon the heart of any man these twenty years. It was her son, a man finished, a gentleman, she hoped.... Could he not be a gentleman? So many things of that sort happened here in America. Poor boys had come up and come through—had they not? And even a poor boy might grow up to be a gentleman—was not that true—oh, might it not after all be true?

He laid his own hand over hers now, the hand on which the blood was not yet dried.

"Mom," said he, "I ought to go back and thrash the life out of that man yet. I ought to wring the neck of that doddering old fool marshal. I ought to whip every drunken loafer on those streets. Whose business was it? Couldn't we cross the square without all that?"

He stopped suddenly, the fatal thought ever recurring to his mind. But he lacked courage. Why should he not? Was this not far worse than facing death for both of them? Their eyes no longer sought one another.

"Mom——" said he, with effort now.

"Yes, my boy."

"*Where's my dad?*"

A long silence fell. Could she lie to him now?

"The truth now!" he said after a time.

"You have none, Don!" said she gaspingly at last. "He's gone. Isn't that enough? He's dead—yes—call him dead—for he's gone."

He pushed back roughly and looked at her straight.

"Did he really leave any money for my education?"

She looked at him, her throat fluttering. "I wish I could lie," said she. "I do wish I could lie to you. I have almost forgot how. I have been trying so long to live on the square—I don't believe, Don, I know how to do any different. I've been trying to live so that—so that—"

"So what, mother?"

"So I could be worthy of *you*, Don! That's been about all my life."

"*I have no father?*"

She could not reply.

"Then was what—what that man said—was *that the truth?*"

After what seemed to both of them an age of agony she looked up.

She nodded mutely.

Then her hand gripped fiercely at his coat lapel. A great dread filled her. Must she lose also her boy, for whom she had lived, for whom she had denied herself all these years—the boy who was more than life itself to her? Her face was white. She looked up into another face, a strange face, that of her son; and it was white as her own.

"I didn't know it," said he simply at length. "Of course, if I had known, I wouldn't have done what I did. I would have worked."

"No, no! Now you are just fitted to work. It's over—it's done—we have put you through."

"You told me my father was dead. Where is he—who is he?"

"I will never tell you, Don," said she steadily, "not so long as you live will I tell you. I have never told anyone on earth, and I never will."

"Then how do they know—then why should that man say what he did?"

"They know—about you—that—that you happened—that's all. They thought you died as a child, a baby—we sent you away. They don't know who it was—your father—I couldn't have lived here if anyone had known—that was my secret—my one secret—and I will keep it all my life. But here are you, my boy! I will not say I am sorry—I will never say that again! I am glad—I'm glad for anything that's given me *you*! And you fought for me—the first time anyone ever did, Don."

He was turning away from her now slowly, and she followed after him, agonized.

"It wasn't *your* fault, Don!" said she. "Try to remember that always. Haven't I taken it up with God—there on my knees?" She pointed to the little room where the corner of the white bed showed. "On my knees!"

She followed him as he still walked away. "Oh, Don," she cried, "what do you mean, and what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to try to forget everything of all my life. God! if I could undo it—if I could forget how I got my education," said he. "Tell me, didn't he help at all—did you, all alone, bring me up, far away, never seeing me, educating me, keeping me—taking care of me—didn't he, my father, do anything at all—for you?"

"No, I did it—or at least half of it."

"And who the other half?"

"Never mind, Don, never mind." She patted eagerly on the lapel of his coat, which once more she had caught and was fingering. "Oh, this was to have been my very happiest day—I have been living and working for this all these long, long years—for the day when I'd see you. Let me have a little of it, can't you, Don? If you should forsake me now, I will know that God has; and then I'll know I never had a chance."

Quickly he laid a hand upon her shoulder. "No, I'll wait."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "What is it that you will do?"

"Find out who he was," said he, his face haggard.

"You will never do that, Don."

"Oh, yes. And when I do—"

"What then?"

"I'll kill him, probably. At least I'll choke this lie or this truth, whichever it is, down the throats of this town. God! I'm *filius nullius*! I'm the son of no man! I'm worse. I'm a loafer. I've been supported by a woman—my own mother, who had so little, who was left alone—oh, God! God!"

"Don," she cried out now. "Don, I'd died if I could have kept it from you. Oh, my son—my son!"

CHAPTER III

TWO MOTHERS

The young man stood motionless, facing the white-faced woman who had pronounced his fate for him. Happily it chanced that there came interruption, for a moment relieving both of the necessity of speech.

The click of the little crippled gate as it swung to brought Aurora Lane to her senses now. She hastened to the door, toward the outer stair. She met someone at the door.

"Julia!" she exclaimed. "Come in. Oh, I'm so glad. Come! He's here—he's come—he's right here now!"

There entered now the figure of a youngish-looking woman, her hair just tinged with gray here and there upon the temples; a woman perhaps the junior of Aurora Lane by a year or so. Of middle stature, she was of dark hair, and of brown eyes singularly luminous and soft. Not uncomely, one would have called her at first sight. The second glance would have shown the limp with which Julia Delafield walked, the bent-top cane which was her constant companion. She was one of those handicapped in the race of life, a cripple from her childhood, but a cripple in body only. One might not look in her face without the feeling that here was a nature of much charm.

Miss Julia likewise was owner of two smiles. The one was sad, pathetic, the smile of the hopeless soul. The other, and that usually seen by those about her, was wide and winning beyond words—the smile which had given her her place in the hearts of all Spring Valley. These many years "Miss Julia," as she was known to all, had held her place as "city librarian," in which quasi-public capacity she was known of all, and loved of all as well.

She came in now smiling, and kissed Aurora Lane before she allowed herself to see, standing in the inner room, the tall young man, who seemed to fill up the little apartment. A swift color came into her face as, with a sort of summoning up of her courage, she went up to him, holding out her hands. Even she put up her cheek to be kissed by him. It was her peculiarity when feeling any emotion, any eagerness, to flush brightly. She did so now.

"Oh, Miss Julia!" exclaimed Don. "I'm glad to see you. Why, I know you too—I feel as though I've always known you just as you are! So—you're my fairy godmother, who's got a real mother for me! All these years—till I was a man grown—how could you?—but I'd know you anywhere, because you're just the image of the picture you sent me with that of her. I mean when you wrote me last week for the first time—that wonderful letter—and told me I had a mother, and she was here, but that I mustn't ever come to see her. Of course, I wired at once I *was* coming! See now —"

"You are tall, Don," said Miss Julia softly. "You are very tall. You are—you are fine! I'm so glad you grew up tall. All the heroes in my books are tall, you know." She laughed aloud now, a rippling, joyous little laugh, and hooking her cane across the chair arm, sank back into Aurora Lane's largest rocker, her tender, wistful face very much suffused.

Don fetched his mother also a chair, and seated himself, still regarding Miss Julia curiously. He saw the two women look at one another, and could not quite tell what lay in the look.

As for Miss Julia, she was still in ignorance of the late events in the public square, because she had come directly across to Aurora Lane's house after the closing of her own duties at the library this Saturday afternoon, when most of her own patrons were disposed for the open than for books.

"Yes, Don," said she again, "you are fine!" Her eyes were all alight with genuine pride in him. "I'm so glad after all you came to see us before you went on West—even when I told you you mustn't! Oh, believe me, your mother scolded me! But I presume you are in a hurry to get away? And you've grown up! After all, twenty years is only a little time. Must you be in a hurry to leave us?"

"I ought not to be," said he, smiling pleasantly after all. "Surely I ought to come and see you two good partners first—I could not go away without that. Oh, mother has told me about you—or at least I'm sure she was just going to when you came in. Strange—I've got to get acquainted with my mother—and you. But I know you—you're two good partners, that's what you are—two good scouts together—isn't it true?"

Miss Julia flushed brightly. His chance word had gone passing close to the truth, but he did not know the truth. Don Lane did not know that here sat almost the only woman friend Aurora Lane could claim in all Spring Valley. Miss Julia in fact was silent partner in this very millinery shop—and silent partner in yet other affairs of which Don Lane was yet to learn.

This was a great day for Miss Julia as well as for Don's mother. Time and again these two women had sat in this very room and planned for this homecoming of the boy—this boy—time and again planned, and then agreed he must not come—their son. For—yes—they *both* called him son! If Don Lane, Dieudonné Lane, was *filius nullius*, at least he might boast two mothers.

How came this to pass? One would need to go back into the story of Miss Julia's life as well as that of Aurora Lane. She had been lame from birth, hopelessly so, disfiguringly so. Yet callous nature had been kind to her, had been compassionate. It gave to her a face of wondrous sweetness, a heart of wondrous softness thereto. Hopeless and resigned, yet never pathetic and never seeking pity, no living soul had ever heard an unkind or impatient word from Julia Delafield's lips, not in all her life, even when she was a child. She had suffered, yes. The story of that was written on her face—she knew she might not hope—and yet she hoped.

She knew all the great romances of the world, and knew likewise more than the greatest romancer ever wrote of women. For her—even with her wistful smile, the sudden flashing of her wistful eyes—there could be no romance, and she knew that well. Not for her was to be ever the love of man. She was of those cruelly defective in body, who may not hope for any love worth having. Surrounded daily by her friends, her books, Miss Julia was an eager reader, and an eager lover. She knew more of life's philosophy perhaps than any soul in all her town, and yet she might enjoy less of life's rewards than any other. A woman to the heart, feminine in every item, flaming with generous instincts, and yet denied all hope of motherhood; a woman steeped in philosophy and yet trained in emotion—what must she do—what could she do—she, one of the denied?

What Miss Julia had done long years ago was to select as her best friend the girl who of all in that heartless little town most needed a friend—Aurora Lane. She knew Aurora's secret—in part. In full she never yet had asked to know, so large was she herself of heart. All Spring Valley had scorned Aurora Lane, for that she had no father for her child. And—with what logic or lack of logic, who shall say?—Julia Delafield had taken Aurora Lane close to her own heart—*because* she had the child!

It is not too much to say that these two hopeless women, the one outcast of society, the other outcast of God, had brought up that child between them. Those who say women have no secrets they can keep should have noted this strange partnership in business, in life, in maternity! This had gone on for twenty years, and not a soul in Spring Valley could have told the truth of it. Don Lane did not know of it even now.

"Why, Aurora," said Miss Julia more than once in those early years to her friend, "you must not grieve. See what God has given you—a son!—and such a son! How glad, how proud, how contented you ought to be. You have a son! Look at me!"

So Aurora Lane did look at Julia Delafield. They comforted one another. It was from Miss Julia that year by year, falteringly, she learned to hope, learned to hold up her head. Thus gradually, by the aid of the love of another woman—a rare and beautiful thing, a wondrous thing—a thing so very rare in that world of jealousy in which by fate women so largely live—she got back some hold on life—she, mother of the son of no man, at the urge of a woman who could never have a son!

"Oh, we will plan, Aurora!" said Miss Julia in those piteous earlier times. "We will plan—we will get on. We'll fight it out together." And so they had, shoulder to shoulder, unnoted, unpraised and unadvised, year by year; and because they knew she had at least one friend, those who sat in judgment on Aurora Lane came little by little to forgive or to forget her sin, as it once was called of all the pulpits there.

And now a drunken tongue had recalled sharply, unforgivably, unescapably, that past which had so long lain buried—a past to which neither of them ever referred.

In all these years time had been doing what it could to repair what had been. Time wreathes the broken tree with vines to bind up its wounds. It covers the scarred earth with grasses presently. In all these years some men had died, others had left the village. Certain old women, poisonous of heart, also had died, and so the better for all concerned. Other women mayhap had their sacrifices—and their secrets. But as for Aurora Lane, at least she had won and held one friend. And so they two had had between them a child, a son, a man. One had gathered of the philosophy of life, of the world's great minds. The other had brought into the partnership the great equipment with which Nature forever defies all law and all philosophy save her own.

Now, product of their twenty years of friendship, here he stood, tall and strong—Don Lane, their boy, blood on his hand because of that truth which he swiftly—too swiftly—had declared to be a lie; and which was no lie but the very truth.

But Don Lane still was ignorant of the closeness of truth of his last remark. He only put such face now on all this as he might.

"Miss Julia," said he lamely, and giving her instinctively the title which the town gave her, "I know you have been good to my mother."

"Why, no, I haven't, Don," said she, "not at all. I've been so busy I have hardly seen your mother for a month or so. But we have kept track of you—why, Don, I've got your class records, every one. You don't know how I got them? Isn't it true, Aurie?"

"I don't know what I would ever have done without her," said Aurora Lane slowly.

Don Lane laughed suddenly. "Why," said he, "it's almost as if I had *two* mothers, isn't it?"

Both women grew red now, and poor Don, knowing little as he did, grew red as well.

"But what's the matter with your hand, Don—you've cut yourself! I've told your mother she ought to fix that gate-latch."

Don looked once more at his wounded hand, and sought to cover the blood-stain with his kerchief. He saw that Miss Julia had heard nothing of the affair of a few moments earlier in the public square.

"Why, that's nothing," he mumbled.

This was too much for the straightforward nature of Aurora Lane, and rapidly as she might she gave some account to Miss Julia of these late events. She told all—except the basic and essential truth. A sad shame held her back from talking even before Miss Julia of the fact that her boy now knew he was the child of shame itself.

"That's too bad," said Julia Delafield slowly, gravely, as she heard the half news. "I'm awfully sorry—I'm awfully sorry for your mother, Don. You fought? My! I wish I had been there to see it."

Miss Julia's face flushed once more, indicative of the heroic soul which lay in her own misshapen body.

"I didn't want to hit that fellow," said Don. "Of course, they had no chance, either of them, with a man who could box a bit."

"And you learned that—in college, Don?"

He only grinned in reply, and thrust the wounded hand into his pocket, out of sight.

"I'll warrant you, Don," said Miss Julia, "that if it hadn't been for you old Tarbush, the town marshal, never would have taken Johnnie Adamson to jail. Those two were a public nuisance every Saturday afternoon. I'm glad you have ended it. But tell me, what made them pick on you?"

Don Lane struggled for a time, not daring to look at his mother, before he spoke. "The half-wit wouldn't let us pass, and then his father called me a name—if that man or any other ever calls me that again, I'm going to beat him up till his own people won't know him. I can't tell you," he went on, flushing.

He did not catch the sudden look which now passed between the two women. A sudden paleness replaced the flush on Miss Julia's cheek. A horror sat in her eye. "What does he know?" was the question she asked of Aurora Lane, eye only speaking the query.

"At least, Miss Julia," said poor Don, "you somehow certainly must know about me. I'll get all my debts squared around some time. As soon as I can get settled down in my new place West—I've got a fine engineering job out in Wyoming already—I'm going to have my mother come. And if ever I get on in the world, there are some other things I'm not going to forget. Any friend of hers ——" His big hand, waved toward his mother, told the rest of what he could not speak.

They sat on, uncomfortable, for a time, neither of the three knowing how much the others knew, nor how much each ought to know. Of the three, Aurora Lane was most prepared. For twenty years she had been learning to be prepared. For twenty years she had been praying that her boy never would know what now he did know.

Don Lane looked at his mother's face, but could not fathom it. Life to him thus far had been more or less made up of small things—sports, books, joys, small things, no great ponderings, no problems, no introspections, no self-communings—and until but very recently no love, no great emotion, no passion to unsettle him. This shadow which now fell over him—he could not have suspected that. But his mother all these years had known that perhaps at any unforeseen time this very hour might come—had prayed against it, but known always in her heart that it might come, nay, indeed one day must come.

"Damn the place, anyhow!" he broke out at length. "You've lived here long enough, both of you. It's nothing but a little gossiping hell, that's all. I'll take you away from here, both of you, that's what I'll do!" He stretched out a hand suddenly to his mother, who took it, stroking it softly.

"Don, boy," said she, "I didn't run away. Why should we run away now? If we did, we'd take ourselves with us wherever we went, wouldn't we? This is as good a place to live out life as any I could have found. You can't really evade things, you know."

"As though I asked to! I'd rather fight things than evade them."

"I think so," said his mother mournfully. "I suppose that's true."

"But you've got to be happy, mother," said he, again taking her hand in his. "I'll *make* you happy. I'm ready to work for you now—I'll pay you back."

"And Miss Julia?" smiled his mother. "It was she who told you the news, you know, and you didn't obey her—you came against orders."

"Why, yes, of course. She's been so awfully good to you. I know what she's been, be sure of that." (As though he did know!)

"Don't be too bitter, Don," said Miss Julia Delafield, slowly now, hoping only to salve a wound she felt he might have, yet not sure herself what the wound might be. "Don't be unrelenting. Why, it seems to me, as we grow older and begin to read and think, we find out the best of life is just being—well, being charitable—just forgetting. Nothing matters so very much, Don. That's doctrine, isn't it?"

Don Lane never finished what reply he might have made. There came yet another interruption, yet another footfall on the little walk without, following the clash of the crippled gate as it swung to. It was a man's footfall which they heard on the gallery. They all rose now as Aurora threw open the door.

It was the solemn visage of Joel Tarbush, the town marshal, which met Aurora Lane.

"How do you do, Mr. Tarbush?" asked she. "Won't you come in?"

The gentleman accosted gave a quick glance up the street and down.

"I'm a married man," said he, with something of a vile grin on his face as he looked at her.

She answered him only with the level gaze of her own eyes, and pushed open the door. He followed her in, hesitatingly, and then saw the others in the little room.

"Ma'am," said he, "I come to summons you to the justice court this afternoon."

"Yes," said Aurora Lane. "Why?"

"It's that Adamson case," said he—"he knows." He turned now to the tall figure of Dieudonné Lane, instinctively stepping back as he did so.

"In what way do you want us?" asked Don Lane now. "As witnesses? My mother—?"

"I want your—your *ma* as a witness, yes," said Tarbush, grinning, "since you've said it. For you, you'll have to come along on charge of resisting a officer; likewise for assault and battery, charge brought by Ephraim Adamson; likewise for disturbing the peace. Likewise we're going to test the case of *habeas chorus*. Old Man Adamson's got money. He's sober now, and he's got a lawyer—the best lawyer in town. They're going to get the eejit out of jail, and Old Man Adamson's going to make trouble for you."

How much longer Tarbush might have prattled on in his double capacity of officer and gossip remained uncertain. Miss Julia turned upon him, her large dark eyes flashing:

"Why do you bring her into it? She's just told me—they were only crossing the square—she was only trying to go home—she wasn't troubling anyone in all the world! Leave her out of it."

"I ain't got no choice in it," said Tarbush. "I'm serving the papers now. Miss Lane and the boy both comes. Not that I got any feeling in the matter."

"Why should you have?" asked Don Lane, with a cynical smile. "You've been letting that ruffian run this town every Saturday for years, they tell me, and you didn't dare call his bluff till you saw he was whipped. All right, we'll go. I'll see this thing through—but I want to tell you, you've started something that will be almighty hard to stop. You needn't think I'm going to let this thing drop here."

"Oh, now," began the man of authority, "I wish't you wouldn't feel thataway. I done my duty as I seen it. Didn't I take him to jail?"

"Yes, you did, after I had turned him over to you. But you took the wrong man at that."

"Who should I of took?"

"I don't know," laughed Don Lane bitterly. "All the town, I think. We'll see."

This was too cryptic for Joel Tarbush. Weakly he felt in his pocket for tobacco.

"Well," said he at length, "I done summonsed you."

"We have no choice," said Aurora Lane, after a time. "We'll get ready. Miss Julia, can't you go with me?"

"Of course," said Julia Delafield quietly.

CHAPTER IV

IN OPEN COURT

In his narrow little room upstairs in one of the two-story brick buildings which framed the public square of Spring Valley sat J. B. Blackman, Justice of the Peace, upholder of the majesty of the law. His throne was a knock-kneed, broken chair. In front of him stood a large scarred table, whereon rested the equipment of well-thumbed tomes which bolstered him in his administration of justice. In the room beyond stood a few scattered chairs, a long bench or two. On one wall, by

way of ornament, was a steel engraving of Daniel Webster. On the opposite wall hung certain lithographs of political candidates of like party persuasion with Blackman himself, for this was a presidential year, and certain crises of political sort existed, among others the choosing of a Senator of the United States. Among lesser likenesses on Blackman's grimy wall loomed large the portrait of his party's candidate, to wit: the Honorable William Henderson, late County Attorney, late District Judge, late member of the Legislature, late candidate for Governor, late Chairman of the State Republican Committee; and by virtue of the death of the late incumbent in the office of United States senator, himself now present candidate for that lofty honor. Otherwise than as to these purposeful decorations the room had small adornment and appeared judicially austere.

The hour was mid-afternoon, but so swiftly had the news of recent events spread abroad in the little village that already the room of Justice of Peace Blackman was packed. Aurora Lane's baby—why, she had fooled everybody—her boy never had died at all—here he was—he had been through college—he'd been somewhere all the time and now he had come to life all at once, and had fought Eph Adamson and the eejit, and had been arrested and was going to be tried. Naturally, the stair leading to the Justice's office was lined, and sundry citizens were grouped about the bottom or under the adjacent awnings.

Much speculation existed as to the exact issue of the legal proceedings which, it seemed, had been instituted by old Eph Adamson. When that worthy appeared, escorted by the clerk of Judge Henderson's law office, room respectfully was made for the two, it being taken for granted that Judge Henderson would appear for Adamson, as he always had in earlier embroglios. Much greater excitement prevailed when presently there came none less than Tarbush, city marshal, followed by Don Lane and the two women. Then indeed all Spring Valley well-nigh choked of its own unsated curiosity.

They walked steadily, these three, staring ahead, following close after the marshal, who now officiously ordered room for himself and his charges. When they entered Blackman's court that worthy looked up, coughed solemnly, and resumed his occupation of poring over the legal authorities spread before him on the table. Don Lane made room for his mother and Miss Julia, and took his own place at the side of the marshal. The latter laid his hand upon his arm, as if to show the assembled multitude that he had no fear of his prisoner. Don shook off the hand impatiently.

Outside, unable to restrain themselves sufficiently to be seated within the room, old Kneebone and his friend Craybill walked up and down in the narrow hall—lined with signs of attorneys, real estate men, and insurance agents—from which made off the door of Blackman's office.

"They'll bind him over," said old Silas to his friend. "They'll do that shore."

"Bind who over, Silas," said Craybill. "You mean Old Man Adamson and his eejit, don't you? The eejit's arrested, anyhow. But what's it all about? You don't believe it's true this here *is* 'Rory's son, now do you? How can that come?"

"Well, I ain't saying," replied old Silas cryptically, and nodding only in the general direction of the door, "but you'll see."

Old Aaron helped himself to a chew of tobacco thoughtfully. "They say Old Eph has got his dander up now, and's going to make plenty of trouble all along the line. Reckon he's ashamed of his son being licked thataway by just a kid like this. Come to think of it, it looks like Eph ain't got much glory out of it so far, has he?"

"No, and I'll bet he had to dig up some money—the Judge, he likely wouldn't think of it for less'n fifteen dollars anyways. That's the price of a good shoat these days. If the case was appealed, or if it got into a court of *nisy prisus*, or maybe got over into another county on a change of *venoo*, you can bet Judge Henderson wouldn't be doing none of them things for nothing, neither. The law's all right for them that has plenty of money. Sometimes I think there's other ways."

"Huh," said his companion, "old Adamson tried the other way, didn't he? Now look at him! If I was Old Man Adamson, or if I was his eejit son either, the best thing we could do, seems to me, would be to get out of town. This here boy's a fighter, if I'm any judge. Wonder if it is her boy! If it is, whoever was his father, huh? And how was he kep' hid for more'n twenty year?"

"He looks sort of changed since a couple of hours ago," said his friend judicially. "He's quieter now—why, when he come into town he was just laughing and talking like a kid. Of course, he must have knew—he knows who his father is all right. Now, come to think of it, if this here boy had any money he could sue them Adamsons for deefamation of character."

"How comes it he could? I hear say that all Old Man Adamson said was to call him nobody's son, and that's true enough, if he's her boy. If you call the truth to a man, that ain't no deefamation of character. As to 'Rory Lane, everybody knows the truth about her. You can't deefame a woman nohow, least of all her. We all know she had a baby when she was a girl, and it was sent away, and it died. Leastways, we *thought* we knew. I ain't right shore what we've knew. It looks like that woman had put up some sort of game on this town. What right had she to do that?"

"She was right white," said the other, somewhat irrelevantly. "Never seen no one no whiter than she was when she went in that door right now."

"I don't reckon we can get no seats any more—the room's plumb full."

They both were looking wistfully in at the packed assembly, when they had occasion to make room for the dignified figure of a man who now pushed his way through the throng.

"How do, Judge Henderson," said old Silas Kneebone, who knew everybody.

The newcomer nodded somewhat coldly. He nodded also, none too warmly, to another man who stood near the door—a tall man, of loose and bulky figure, with a fringe of red beard under his chin, a wide and smiling mouth, blue eyes, and a broad face which showed shrewdness and humor alike.

"How are you, Hod?" said Henderson carelessly; thus accosting the only man at the Spring Valley bar for whom really he had much respect or fear—Horace Brooks, popularly known in Spring Valley as "old Hod Brooks," perhaps the most carelessly dressed man physically and the most exactly appointed man mentally then practising before that bar. A little sign far down the narrow hall betokened that the office of Horace Brooks might thereabouts be found by any in search of counsel in the law.

"Oh, are you retained in this case, Hod?" Judge Henderson spoke over his shoulder.

"Not at all, Judge, not at all," said the other. None the less he himself followed on into the crowded little room.

As Judge Henderson entered all eyes were turned upon him. Conscious of the fact that he honored this assemblage, he comported himself with dignity proper for a candidate. He was a man well used to success in any undertaking, and he looked his part now. The full, florid face, the broad brow, sloping back to a ridge of iron-gray hair, the full blue eyes, the loose, easy lips, the curved chin, the large, white hands, the full chest, the soft body, the reddening skin of the face—all of these offered good index to the character of William Henderson. Lawyer, judge, politician and leading citizen—he was the type of these things, the village Cæsar, and knew well enough the tribute due to Cæsar.

A few eyes turned from the adequate figure of Judge Henderson to the loose and shambling form of the man who edged in to the front of the table. Rumor had it that in the early times, twenty years or more ago, Judge Henderson had come to that city with a single law book under his arm as his sole capital in his profession. Old Hod Brooks had made his own advent in precisely similar fashion, belated much in life by reason of his having to work his way through school. Since then his life had been one steady combat, mostly arrayed against Henderson himself. Perhaps it might have been said that they two from the first were rivals for the leading place at the local bar, little as Henderson himself now cared for that. He was well intrenched, and all opponents, such as this shambling giant with the red beard and nondescript carriage, must attack in the open.

Judge Blackman coughed ominously once more. "Order in the court!" he intoned, pounding on the table in front of him.

There was a general shuffling and scraping of chairs. Those standing seated themselves so far as was possible. Judge Henderson alone stood for a time in front of the table of Justice Blackman. The afternoon was very warm, but he represented the full traditions of his profession, for he appeared in long black coat, white waistcoat, and folded collar, tied with a narrow white tie. In some way he had the appearance of always being freshly laundered. His fresh pink cheeks were smooth and clean, his hands were immaculate as his linen. One might have said that at one time in his life he had been a handsome man, a fine young man in his earlier days, and that he still was "well preserved."

Not so much might have been said of old Hod Brooks, who had slumped into a seat close to Tarbush and his prisoner. That worthy wore an alpaca coat, a pair of trousers which shrieked of the Golden Eagle Clothing Store, no waistcoat at all, and it must be confessed, no collar at all, beyond a limp strip of wilted linen decorated by no cravat whatever.

As he sat now Brooks suddenly cast a keen, curious gaze upon the face of the young defendant who sat at the left of the city marshal—a gaze which, passing at length, rested steadily, intently, on the face of Aurora Lane, who sat, icy pale, staring straight in front of her. Her left hand lay in that of Miss Julia Delafield. The eyes of the latter—whose face was flushed, as was usual with her in any time of mental emotion—remained fixed upon the man who was to prosecute this boy, whose life was linked so closely with her own.

The great lawyer seemed not to see these women at all, and at first cast no glance whatever at the defendant. The whole thing was rather trivial for him; for although his fee really had been five hundred dollars—in form of a note from Ephraim Adamson secured by a certain mortgage on certain live stock—he knew well enough he honored Adamson and this court by appearing here in a mere Justice trial.

"Order in the court!" said Blackman once more. "The case coming on for trial is City of Spring Valley on the complaint of Ephraim Adamson against Dewdonny Lane." At this bold declaration of what had been a half credited secret to Spring Valley, all Spring Valley now straightened and sat up, expectant. A sort of sigh, half a murmur of intense curiosity went over the audience. It was indeed a great day for Spring Valley. "Lane—Dewdonny Lane." So he *was* the son of Aurora Lane—and had no family name for his own!

Justice Blackman paused and looked inquiringly at the battered visage of old Eph Adamson. He coughed hesitatingly. "I understand this case is one of assault and battery. I believe, Judge

Henderson, that you represent the plaintiff in this case?"

"Yes, your Honor," said Judge Henderson slowly, turning his full eye upon the court from its late resting place upon the campaign portrait of himself as it appeared on the wall. "I have consented to be of such service as I may in the case. Mr. Ephraim Adamson, our well-known friend here, is ready for the trial of the cause now, as I understand. I may say further, your Honor, that there will be a writ of *habeas corpus* sued out in due course demanding the body of the son of Ephraim Adamson, who is wrongfully restrained of his liberty at present in our city jail.

"As for this defendant——" Judge Henderson turned and cast an insolently inquiring eye upon the young man at the side of the town marshal.

"Who appears for the defendant?" demanded Judge Blackman austere, casting a glance upon the prisoner at the bar.

Don Lane arose, half hesitatingly. "Your Honor," said he, "I presume I am the defendant in this case, although I hardly know what it's all about. I haven't any lawyer—I don't know anybody here—I'm just in town. All this has come on me very suddenly, and I haven't had time to look around. I don't see how I am guilty of anything——"



"Your Honor," said he, "I presume I am the defendant in this case."

Just then arose the soft and kindly tones of a large voice which easily filled all the room. Old Hod Brooks half rose.

"Your Honor," said he, "it isn't customary for a member of the bar to offer his services unsolicited. I would say, however, that if the Court desires to appoint me as counsel for this young man I will do the best I can for him, since he seems a stranger here and unprepared for a defense at law. If there were any other younger lawyer here I would not suggest this course to your Honor—indeed, I have no right to do so now. I trust, however,"—and he smiled at Judge Henderson at the other end of the table—"that my learned brother will not accuse me of champerty, maintenance, or any other offense against my office as a servant of justice in this community. Of course, I may add, your Honor"—he turned to Justice Blackman again—"that in such circumstances my own services, such as they are, would be rendered entirely free of charge."

People wondered, turning curious looks on the big, gaunt speaker thus suddenly offering himself as champion in a rôle evidently unpopular.

Justice Blackman hesitated, and cast again a glance of query at Judge Henderson, on whom he much relied in all decisions. The latter waved a hand of impatient assent, and began to whisper with his clerk.

"The Court will allow this procedure," said Justice Blackman. "Does the defendant accept Mr. Brooks as counsel?"

Don Lane, embarrassed and somewhat red of face, half rose again, meeting full the fascinated, absorbed look on the face of Hod Brooks—a look which the keen eye of Henderson also saw. He puckered a lip and frowned estimatingly. Rumor said that Old Hod Brooks was going to come out as candidate for U. S. Senator on the opposing ticket. Henderson began now to speculate as to what he could do with Hod Brooks, if ever they should meet on the hustings. He studied him now as a boxer, none too certain of himself, studies his antagonist when he strips and goes to his corner opposite in the ring.

"Your Honor," said Don, "I don't know this gentleman, but what he says seems to me most kind. I surely shall be glad to have his assistance now." He did not look at his mother's face, did not see

the quick look with which Hod Brooks turned from him to her.

"Does my learned brother require time for preparation of his case?" inquired Judge Henderson sarcastically. "I will agree to a brief recess of the Court in such case."

"Oh, not at all, not at all," said Old Hod Brooks. "I know all about this case, better than my learned brother does. Not having any special interest in anything but this case—that is to say, not any alien interest, political or otherwise—I am ready to go to trial right now to defend this young man. If Judge Henderson will move his chair so he can get a better look at his own picture on the wall, I don't see but what we might as well begin the trial."

Certain smiles passed over the faces of a few in the audience as they saw the quick flush spring to the face of Judge Henderson. The chief delight in life of Old Hod Brooks was to bait his learned brother by some such jibes as this, whenever the fortunes of the law brought them together on opposing sides.

Judge Henderson coughed. "Your Honor," said he hastily, "I am glad that in the course of justice this young man has secured counsel—even counsel such as that of my learned brother—who also, I am informed, is not beyond aspirations of a political nature. I have no time for idle jests. If the defense is ready I may perhaps state briefly what we propose to prove."

"By criminy!" whispered Silas to Aaron at the hall door, peering in. "By criminy! I believe Old Hod's got him rattled right now!"

But Judge Henderson pulled himself together. He now assumed his regular oratorical position, an eye upon his audience.

"Your Honor," he said, "this case is very plain and simple. The quiet of our city has been violated by this young man, who has publicly assaulted one of our best-known citizens."

"Which one do you mean?" interrupted Hod Brooks, most unethically, and smiling behind his hand. "Which do you mean, the old drunkard or the young idiot?"

"Order in the court!" rapped Blackman, as still further smiles and shufflings became apparent at the rear of the room. Judge Henderson went on, flushing yet more.

"My client, your Honor," he said, "was standing peacefully in the public square, accompanied by his son. They were beaten up, both of them, by this young man who has been brought into this court by our properly constituted officer of the law. Without any provocation whatever, this defendant inflicted great personal injury upon my client."

"We will make Eph's face 'Exhibit A,' and let it go into evidence," smiled Hod Brooks amicably; and the audience smiled and shuffled yet more.

"As to the unlawful detention of the son of my client," resumed Judge Henderson, beet-red now, "we have chosen the remedy of *habeas corpus* rather than a simple discharge, because we wish to bring before our people the full enormity of the offense which has been committed here in the public view, actually upon the grounds of our temple of justice. We shall show——"

"Your Honor," interrupted old Hod Brooks at this point, half rising, "if this were a political gathering indeed, and not the trial of a cause in a justice court, I would rise to a point of order. As it is, I rise to a point of law."

"State your point," said Justice Blackman.

"We are trying, as I understand it, the case of this defendant, Dewdonny Lane, accused by this plaintiff, Ephraim Adamson, of assault and battery?"

Justice Blackman nodded gravely.

"Then why does my learned brother speak of *habeas corpus* in this case, and what is the case which he is trying, or thinks he is trying? What is his evidence going to be? And why does he not get on?"

"Your Honor," blazed Henderson, "I shall not endure this sort of thing."

"Oh, yes, you will, my learned brother," said Hod Brooks, still smiling gently. If Henderson had other resources, he needed them now, for keenly enough he sensed himself as slipping in this battle of wits before assembled electors; and it really was politics alone that had brought him here—he scented a crowd afar off. He now lost his temper utterly.

"If the Court will excuse us for a brief moment of recess," said he savagely, "I should like to ask the privilege of a brief personal consultation with the attorney for the defense. If he will retire with me for just a moment I'll make him eat his words! After that we can better shape these proceedings."

The blue eye that Hod Brooks turned upon his opponent was calmly inquiring, but wholly fearless. On the other hand, some sudden idea seemed to strike him now. He resolved to change his tactics. He was shrewd enough to know that, irritated beyond a certain point, Henderson would fight his case hard; and Hod Brooks did not want to lose this case.

Henderson, with a little wave of the hand, his face livid in anger, edged away from the table of the Justice of the Peace. Hod Brooks followed him out into the hall.

"Order in the court!" intoned the Justice yet again. There was a rush toward the door. "There now, go back, men," said Hod Brooks, raising a hand. "There's not going to be any fight. Let us two alone—we want to talk, that's all."

Don Lane looked steadily at the face of Justice Blackman. Aurora Lane stared ahead, still icy pale, her hand clasped in that of Miss Julia's. She felt, rather than saw, the gazes of all these others boring into her very soul. Here were her enemies—here in what had been her home. It seemed an hour to her before at length those standing about the door shuffled apart to allow the two forensic enemies to reënter, though really it had not been above ten minutes. Neither man bore any traces of personal combat. The face of Judge Henderson was a shade triumphant—strangely enough, since now he was to admit his own defeat.

"I tell you, I heard the whole business," said old Silas later on to his crony, who owned to a certain defect in one ear in hot weather such as this. "I heard the whole business. There wasn't no fight at all—not that neither of them seemed a bit a-scared. Hod, he raises a hand, and that made the Judge slow down.

"It's what you might expect, Judge," says Hod, for appearing in a measly little justice court case. He's got a mighty nasty way of smiling, Hod has. But scared? No. Not none.

"I'll fight this case as long as you like," says the Judge, "and I'll win it, too."

"Maybe, maybe, Judge," says Hod. "But they's more ways than one of skinning a cat. Suppose you do win it, what've you won? It's all plumb wrong anyhow, and it orto be stopped. These people all orto go on home."

"So you want to try the case here, huh?" says the Judge; and says Hod:

"That's just what I do. I mean I don't want to try it none at all. I've got various reasons, beside, why I don't want to try this case, or have it tried. Are you a good guesser?" I didn't know what he meant by that.

"What're you getting at?" says the Judge. "I know you've got something hid. There's a sleeper in here somewheres."

"Well, let it stay hid," says Hod. "But one thing is sure, you ain't hiding it none that you're out for Senator?"

"Why should I? I'll win it, too," says the Judge.

"Maybe, maybe," says Hod. "All I was going to say was, maybe you'd like to have me help you, say left-handed, thataway? Even left-handed help is some good."

"What do you mean, Hod?" says he. "They tell me you're mentioned strong for the other ticket and are out after the place your own self?" He takes a kind of look-over at Hod, no collar nor nothing, and that sleazy coat of his'n.

"That's so," says Hod. "I've got a chance anyhow. Even every bad-chance candidate out of your way is so much to the candy for you, Judge, ain't it so?" says he.

"Say now, you don't mean you'd talk of withdrawing?" Judge Henderson he was all lit up when he says this. "On what terms?" says he. "Of course, there's terms of some sort."

"Easiest terms in the world," says Hod—though I don't think it was easy for him to say it, for he's got as good a chance as the Judge, like enough. But he says, "Easiest sort of terms," and laughs.

"Talk fast," says the Judge.

"Dismiss this suit—withdraw from this case—and I'll withdraw from all candidacy on any ticket! That goes!" He said it savage.

"Do you mean it?" says the Judge, and Hod he says he does. "I've got reasons for not wanting this case to go on," says he. "It's politics brought you here, Judge, and I know that, but it's mighty good politics you'll be playing not never to try this case at all. Drop it, Judge. Politics against politics; you win. Lawyer against lawyer, I win. But I pay the biggest price, and you know it mighty well, even if you're a poor guesser why I'm doing this. Since you're getting all the best of the bargain, is it a bargain, then?"

"Henderson he thinks for a while, and says he at last, 'Anyhow, I never knew you to break your word,' says he.

"No," says Hod, simple, "I don't do that,"

"I'll go you!" says the Judge, sudden, and he sticks out his hand. "I shake politically, Judge," says Hod. "No more; but it's enough. We don't neither of us need explain no more," And *damn me!* If they didn't quit right there, where it seemed to me a whole lot of explaining what they meant 'd a-ben a right good thing for me anyways, for I couldn't gether what it was all about.

"But I heard the whole business—and there wasn't no fight, nor nothing, just only that talk like I said, and I don't know nothing of *why* they done it, I only know what they done. *That's* why there

wasn't no fight, no trial after all—and us setting there that long! I want to say, some things is beginning to look mighty mysterious to me. But I ain't saying what I think. You'll see."

Hod Brooks was first to address the court. He stood, a tall and hulking figure, one hand upon the shoulder of Dieudonné Lane—stood in such fashion as in part to shield Don's mother from the gaze alike of court and audience.

"Your Honor," said he, and his face now was very grave; "I assume the Court has been in recess. After conference with my learned brother I believe that he has some statement to make to the Court."

He turned now toward Henderson, who straightened up.

"May it please the Court," he began, "I find it incumbent upon me to withdraw as counsel in this case. My learned brother has lived up to the full traditions of courtesy in our profession, but I will only say that I have learned certain facts which render it impossible for me to represent this client properly in this cause. There would seem to have been certain justifying circumstances, not at first put before me, which leave me more reluctant to prosecute this defendant. I shall counsel my client to withdraw his suit."

Blackman in his surprise scarcely heard the deep voice of Don Lane's attorney as he spoke in turn.

"May it please the Court," said he gently, "it is the best function of an attorney to counsel restraint and moderation; it is most honorable of any great counsel to decline any case which does not enlist his full convictions. It is the duty of all of us to uphold the actual peace and actual dignity of this community. I have never entertained a fuller respect for my learned brother than I have at this moment. I withdraw what I said about his portrait yonder—and may say I do not blame any man for being well content even in the offer of an honor which I cannot and do not contemplate for myself—the great honor of the candidacy for the Senate of the United States. It is my own function, none the less, to state that there is no cause why my client should be longer detained. He and others, these witnesses, are virtually restrained of their liberty. I therefore move the dismissal of this case. I think these people all ought to go home. I further suggest that this court adjourn—if this latter suggestion be fully within my own province."

He turned an inquiring gaze upon Tarbush, city marshal, who by this time had fairly sunken down into the depths of his coat collar.

"How about the plaintiff?" said Blackman, turning a hesitating glance upon Judge Henderson, who seemed much relieved by what his opponent in fact and in *posse* had said.

"There is other counsel for him," said Judge Henderson, "but if he will take my own advice, he will drop the case now and at this point."

"What does the plaintiff say?" Blackman bent an inquiring gaze on the battered visage of Ephraim Adamson. The latter lifted up a swollen eyelid with thumb and finger, and turned a still confused gaze upon court and counsel. His reply, crestfallen though it was, brought a titter from the audience.

"I guess I'm satisfied," said he.

Blackman looked from one to the other, and then back to the faces of the disappointed audience of the citizens of Spring Valley.

"Order in the court!" exclaimed Blackman, J. P., fiercely. "This court is adjourned!" He spoke with a certain disgust, as of one aware of participation in a fiasco.

With a rush and a surge the room began to empty. Judge Henderson departed, well in advance, looking straight ahead, and acknowledging none of the greetings which met him. He evidently was above such work, even disgusted with the whole affair. Hod Brooks remained, his curious glance still riveted on Don Lane.

Don stood hesitating before the table of justice. He had not known before that his burly counsel had any acquaintance with his mother, but he saw plainly the glance of recognition which passed between them.

Aurora Lane and Miss Julia waited until the stair was clear, but as Don would have followed them, Hod Brooks beckoned to him, in his blue eyes a sort of puzzled wonderment, a surprise that seemed half conviction.

"I thank you, Mr. Brooks," said Don Lane, turning to his counsel. He wondered curiously why the big man should seem so red of face and so perturbed. "What can I do for you—I have not much ___"

The great face of Hod Brooks flushed yet more. "Don't talk to me about pay, my boy," said he—"don't talk to me about anything. Wait till things straighten out a little. The prosecution's dropped. That's all—or that's enough. Now, listen. I knew you when I saw you come in here! They told me you were dead, but I knew you when first my eyes fell on you. You're like your mother.

I've known your mother for years—I think a lot of her and her friend Miss Julia, don't you see? It's strange news to me you are alive, but you are, and that's enough. I must be going now. I'll see you and your mother both. But before I do, just come with me, for I've a little more counsel to give you—it won't cost you anything, and I think it will do some good."

He beckoned Don to join him once more in the hall, and what he said required but a moment. An instant later, and old Brooks had hurried down the stair. A part of his words to Don had been overheard by old Silas, but the latter could only wonder what it all might mean.

"Aaron," said he, "I ain't no detecative, and don't claim to be, but now, some day if anything should happen—well, I ain't sayin', but I know what I know, and some day, some day, Aaron, I may have to tell."

Brooks joined Aurora Lane and Miss Julia and walked with them along the shady street. They walked in silence, Aurora Lane still staring straight ahead, icy cold. It was not until they three halted at her little gate that she could find voice.

"How can we thank you?" said she. "How can we pay?"

The deep color came into the big man's moody face once more. He waved a hand. "You mustn't talk of that," said he. "I reckon I owe you that much and more—a lot more. I'm not done yet. I've done what I thought was right. But as for the case, I didn't fight it, and I didn't win it—the Judge and I, we just didn't make any fight at all, that's all. We settled it out of court, on terms that suited him, anyhow. I'm sorry for Blackman,—he was just honing to soak that boy the limit! *Your* boy, Aurora—that ought to have stayed dead, I'm afraid, but didn't.

"But peace and dignity," he added—"listen to me—we'll make a Sabbath school out of this town yet! I can't talk very much more now."

With a great uproarious laugh, somewhat nervous, very much perturbed, he raised his hat clumsily, turned upon his heel clumsily, and would have walked off clumsily. An exclamation from Miss Julia stopped him.

"Where's Don?" asked she. "And what's that over yonder—what does the crowd mean?" She pointed down to the corner of the courthouse square, where indeed a closely packed group was thrusting this way and that, apparently about some center of interest.

"Oh, that?" said Hod Brooks, carelessly, turning his gaze thither; "that's nothing. Pray don't be excited—it's only my—my client, carrying out the last of my legal instructions to him."

"But what does it mean?" demanded Aurora Lane in sudden terror—"what's going on there? Is there more trouble?"

Hod Brooks broke off a spear of grass from its place between the sidewalk and the fence, and meditatively began to chew it.

"Oh, no, I think not," said he gently. "I don't think the boy will have much trouble. He's doing what I counseled him to do."

"What have you told him—what is he doing—what does it all mean?" demanded Aurora Lane.

"Nothing," said the big man, still gazing ruminatingly at the scene beyond. "As a member of the bar I was bound to give him such counsel as should be of most practical benefit to him—I swore that in my oath of admission to the bar. So I told him that as soon as court was adjourned he ought to take old Eph Adamson and thrash him this time good and proper. I told him nothing would come of it if he did. I told him it was his plain duty to do it, and if he didn't do it I'd do it myself, because the dogs have got to be put to sleep again now in this town.... I must say," he added, "I am inclined to believe that my client is following his instructions to the letter!" After which Hod Brooks strolled on away.

The crowd at the farther corner of the square broke apart before long.

"By jinks! Silas," said old Aaron to his friend, "who'd a thought it? I've seen some fights, but that was the shortest I ever did see. And he made old Eph Adamson holler 'enough!' By criminy! he done that very thing. Looks to me, safest thing right is not to talk too much about 'Rory Lane!'"

Don Lane emerged from the thick of the crowd, his coat over his arm, his face pale in anger, his eye seeking any other champion who might oppose him.

"Listen to me now, you people!" he said. "If there's another one of you that ever does what that man there has done, or says what he said, he'll get the same he did, or worse. You hear me, now—I'll thrash the life out of any man that raises his voice against anyone of my family. You hear me, now?"

He cast a straight and steady gaze upon Old Man Tarbush, who stood irresolute.

"No, you'll not arrest me again," said he. "You know you won't. You'll leave me alone. If you don't, you'll be the next. I don't love you any too well the way it is.

"Get out now, all of you—you most of all," he added, and gave Marshal Tarbush a contemptuous shove as he elbowed his own way on out of the crowd.

Old Hod Brooks passed on down the street and took the opposite side of the public square,

paying no attention to all this. He ambled on until he found his own office at length. A half hour later he might have been seen in his customary attitude, slouched deep down into his chair, his head sunk between his shoulders, his feet propped up on the table, and his eyes bent on the pages of a volume of the law.

He had in his lap now no less an authority than "Chitty on Pleadings." He had sat there for some moments—and he had not seen a word on all the page.

CHAPTER V

CLOSED DOORS

By the time Don Lane had reached his mother's house he partially had pulled himself together, but his face was still pale and sullen, not yet recovered from the late encounter.

He cast himself down in a chair, his chin in his hand, looking everywhere but at his mother. His wounds, poor lad, were of the soul, slow to heal. The white-faced woman who sat looking at him had also her wounds, scarred though they were, these years. Her features seemed sharpened, her eyes larger for the dark shadows now about them. But she was first to speak.

"Wasn't it enough, Don," said she—"didn't I have enough without all this? And on the very day I have looked forward to so long—so long! You don't know how I have worked and waited for this very day. Why, it's the first time I've ever seen you, since you were a baby. You're a stranger to me—I don't know you yet. And then all this comes—now, on my one happy day."

"Well, how about it, then?" he demanded brusquely. "You know what they've been saying—I couldn't let it go. I *had* to fight!"

"Yes, yes, you have—and in a few hours you've undone twenty years of work for me. The sleeping dogs were lying. Why waken them this late?"

"*Who was my father?*" demanded the young man, now, sternly. "Come, it's time for me to know. I couldn't help loving you—no one could. But—him! Tell me—was it that man who defended me? Is my name Don Brooks?"

She made him no answer, though her throat throbbed and she half started as though at a blow.

"Oh, no, oh, no! What am I saying! Of course you understand, mother," he went on after a long, long silence, "I don't believe anything of this, not even what you have said to me about my being—well, *filius nullius*. There was a quick divorce—a hidden decree—you separated, you two—he was poor—that often happens. Women never like to talk about it. I can't blame you for calling me 'nobody's son,' for that sort of thing does happen—secret and suppressed divorces, you know. But as to that other—"

For a long time Aurora Lane sat facing a temptation to accept this loophole of escape which thus crudely her boy offered her—escape from the bitter truth. He would fight! He—and Hod Brooks—those two might defy all the town—might cow them all to silence even now. But—once more her inborn honesty and courage, her years-old resolution triumphed.

"I cannot tell you who your father was, Don," said she quietly, at length, ash pale, trembling.

"When were you married—when—where?"

"I was *never* married, Don! What I told you was true! Oh, you make me say a thing to you I ought never to have been asked to say, but it is the truth. You may believe it—you must believe it—it's—it's no good keeping on evading—for it's true, all of it." She was gasping, choking, now. "This is a ghastly thing to have to do," she cried at last. "Ah, it oughtn't ever to have been asked of me."

The boy's breath also came in a quick sob now.

"Mother, that's not true—it *can't* be! Why, where does that leave you—where does it leave *me*?"

Her voice rose as she looked at him, so young and strong, so fine, so manly.

"But I'm not sorry," she exclaimed, "I'm not—I'm *not*!"

"So what they told me—what I made them all take back—*it was true?*" He sank back in his chair.

"Yes, Don. We can't fight. We are ruined."

"Born out of wedlock!—But my father only ran away—you told me he was dead."

"Regard him so, Don."

"Where is he—who was he? Why did that man tell me to fight them all?"

"I will never tell you, Don, never."

Her dark eyes were turned upon him now, eyes unspeakably sad.

"But you must! You wouldn't deny me my own chance in the world?"

"You will have to make your own chance, Don, as I did. We all must. I have my secret. The door is closed. There is no power ever can open that door—not even my love for you, my boy. Besides, the knowledge could be of no use to you."

"Yes? Is that indeed so? You would debar me from the one great right of all my life? Tell me, is my guess right? I'll make that man marry you."

"Ah, you mean revenge?"

He nodded, savagely, his jaws shut tight. But his brow grew troubled. "But not if he came out and stood by me and you, even this late. I suppose——"

"There is no revenge for a woman, Don. They only dream there is—once I dreamed there might be for me. I don't want it now. I am content. There's more pity than revenge about me now. I only want to be fair now, if I can, and now I'm glad—this is my one glorious day. For you're mine. You are my boy—and I'll never say that I am sorry. Because I've got you. They can't help that, can they, Don?"

"He got us out of worse trouble, didn't he? Why did he do that, Mother? What made him look at us the way he did? And what made the other lawyer, Henderson, drop the case? How did they settle it out of court? Lucky for us—but *why*?" He spoke sharply, abruptly.

A trifle of color came to Aurora Lane's cheeks. "It was his way," she said. "He's a good lawyer—advancing right along, more and more every year, they say. He's always had a hard time getting a start. He's like me."

Don Lane sat silent for a time, but what he thought he held. He cast a discontented glance about him at the meager surroundings of his mother's home, with which he could claim no familiarity.

"How did you manage it, Mother?" he asked, at length. "How did you get me through—big, ignorant loafer that I've been all my life. You say he never helped any. Was he so poor as all that?"

"I couldn't have done it alone," said Aurora Lane, slowly. Mechanically she smoothed down the folds of her gown in her lap as she spoke.

"I have told you you had two mothers, if no father," said she at last, suddenly. "That's almost true. You don't know how much you owe to Miss Julia. She helped me put you through school! It was her little salary and my little earnings—well, they have proved enough."

"Go on!" said he, bitterly. "Tell me more! Humiliate me all you can! Tell me more of what I ought to know. Good God!" He squared his shoulders as if to throw off some weight which he felt upon them.

His mother looked at him in silence for some time. "Shall I tell you all about it, Don?" she said. "All that I may?"

He nodded, frowning. "Let's have it over and done with."

"When I came here I was young," said Aurora Lane, slowly, after a long time. "Julia was young, too, just a girl. We both had to make our way. Then—then—it happened."

"You didn't love me, Mother? You hated me?"

"Oh, yes, I loved you—you don't know what you say—you don't know how I loved you. But everything was very hard and cruel.... Well, one night I had made up my mind what I must do...."

"I washed you all clean that night. I dressed you the best I could—I didn't have much for you. But you were a sweet baby, and strong. I was kissing you and saying good-by to you then, when Miss Julia came in, right at the door."



"I was kissing you and saying good-bye ... when Miss Julia came in—"

"You were going to put me in a home—in some institution?"

"No!" She spoke now in short, quick, sobbing breaths.... "Don, do you know the little stream that runs through the edge of the town? Do you know the deep pool beneath the bridge where the water turns around? Well, I had washed you and dressed you.... I was going to put you *there*.... It was then that Julia came."

He turned upon her a face which it seemed to her never again could be happy and free from care.

"I didn't know all this, Mother," said he, quietly, whitely. "I ask your pardon. I ask you to forgive me."

"No, I have told you I wanted to spare you all this—I wanted that door to remain closed forever. But now it is open—you have opened it. I will have to tell you what there is behind."

It seemed many moments before she could summon self-control to go on.

"...So we two sat here in this little room, Julia and I. You were in my lap, holding up your hands and kicking up your feet, and we two wept over you—we prayed over you, too—she, that little crippled girl, hopeless, who could never have a boy of her own! I told her what I was going to do with you. She fought me and took you away from me.... And she saved you ... and she saved me.

"So now you have it." He heard her voice trailing on somewhere at a distance which seemed immeasurable. "You owe your life not to one woman, but to two, after all. Now you know why I called you Dieudonné. God sent you to me. As I have known how, I have resolved to pay my debt to God—for you. I want to pity, not hate. I want to be grateful. I want to be fair, if I can learn how."

Aurora spoke no more for some moments, nor did her son.

"We two talked it all over between us," said she after a time. "She asked me then, once, who was your father—Julia did. I said he was poor. I told her never to ask me again. She never has. Oh, a good woman, Julia Delafield—fine, fine as the Lord ever made!

"But she knew—we both knew—that I did not have the means of bringing you up. We put our hearts together—to own you. We put our little purses together—to bring you up. She took you away from me, pretty soon. She sent you to some of her people, very distant relatives. They were poor, too, but they took you in and they never knew—they died, both of them, who took you in.

"Then for a time we sent you to an institution for orphans. But we told everybody here that you had died. I told him so—your—your father—and I forbade him ever to speak to me again. I told you he was dead. I told him you were dead. He *is* dead. So are *you* dead. But all the dead have come to life. The lost is found. Oh, Don, Don, the lost is found! I've found so much today—so much, so much. You're my boy, my own boy. A man!"

He sat mute. At length she went on.

"We schemed and saved and contrived, all the little ways that we could to save our money—we have both done that all our lives for you. We wanted to educate you, your mothers did. And oh! above all things we wanted the secret kept. I did the best I knew. They all thought you died. I didn't want you to come here—it was Miss Julia. I didn't know you were coming till you wired. I was going to tell you not to come up—even from the depot. But you got in the bus. I was delayed there in the square by those men. And then all this happened. And after twenty years!"

She sat silent, using all her splendid command of her own soul to still the stubborn fluttering in her throat.

Dieudonné Lane looked everywhere but at her.

"Mother," said he at length, "did you—did you ever—love him?"

His own face flushed at the cruelty of this question, too late, after the words were gone. He saw her wince.

"I don't know, Don," said she, simply. "It happened. It couldn't again. You don't know about women. Seal your lips now, as mine are sealed. Never again a question such as that to me."

The sight of her suffering at his own words stirred the elemental rage in his heart.

"Tell me," he demanded again and again. "Who was he? Is that the man? I begin to see—I'd kill him if I knew for sure."

She only shook her head.

"But you must!" said he at last. "You are cruel. You don't know."

"What is that, Don? What do you mean? Oh, I see—*it is because of her*. It's Anne! There's someone else you love, more than you do me."

"Yes!" he confessed, "more than I do life. *That's* the reason I must know all about myself. Can't you see I've got to play fair? There's Anne!"

"Who is she, Don—you've never told me very much yet."

"Anne Oglesby—her family lived at Columbus before she was left alone. You know her—why, she's the ward of Judge Henderson, here in town. I believe she was left a considerable estate, and he handles it for her. She's been here. She's told me about this place—she's seen you, maybe—before I ever did. Yes—it's Anne! I've got to think of her. I don't dare drag her into trouble—my hands are tied."

He rose now, and in his excitement walked away from his mother, so that he did not note her face at the moment.

"You see, we met from time to time back East in our college town. I never told her much about myself, because I didn't know much about myself, really, when it comes to that. I said I was an orphan, and poor. But—I'd made all the teams—and I've studied, too. I was valedictorian, in spite of all, Mother. They don't amount to much, usually—valedictorians—but I was sure I would—when I knew that Anne—"

"I didn't know about our caring for one another until we found we had to part—just now, today, this morning on the train before I got off here. Then we couldn't part, you know. So just before we passed through this town, right on the train—today, in less than half an hour before I met you—this morning, this very day, I—we—well—"

"Yes, Don," she said, "I know!" Her eyes were very large, her face very pale.

He choked.

"But now we've got to part," said he. "If I am nobody, or worse, I've got to be fair with her."

A look of pride came into his mother's face at his words. "I'm glad, Don," said she. "You've got honor in you. But in no case could I see you marry that girl."

He turned upon her in sudden astonishment. "Isn't she as good as we are? Isn't her family—don't you know the Oglesbys of Columbus—who they are and what they stand for—where they came from? Can we say as much?"

"They are better than we can claim to be, Don, yes," said she, ignoring his brutal frankness. "I know her, yes. I knew her years ago—the ward of Judge Henderson. Sometimes she has been here and kept his household for him—some day she'll live with Judge Henderson even if she marries. He's very fond of her. But as to your marrying Anne Oglesby, you must not think of it."

"What on earth!" he began. "What have you against her?"

"It is enough that I feel as I do about any girl who has been here and who knows about—about the way—the way I've lived. Will she know who I am when she knows who *you* are—and what you are not? Has she identified us two—have you really been fair with her?" Now the color began to rise in her pale cheeks.

"I've not had time yet! I told you it all happened just a moment ago." Then, still brutally, he went on. "Why, what do you know of love? What do you know about the way I feel toward Anne?"

"Be as cruel as you like," said she, flushing now under such words. "I presume you feel as all men think they feel sometimes. They see that woman for that moment—they think that they believe what they say—they think they must do what they do. You are a man, yes, Don, or you could not have said to me what you have."

He flung out his arms, impatient. "I am having a fine start, am I not? I'm a beggar, a pauper, and worse than that. I've got to pay you and Miss Julia. I've got to go on through life, with that secret on my mind. I can't confront that man and tell him. You and I—just today meeting—why, we begin to argue. And now I've got to face Anne Oglesby with that secret. It can't be a secret from her. I'd never ask her to join her life to one like mine. And—God! a woman like her.... I can't tell you.... Death—why, I believe this is worse."

"Don't tell me, Don, don't try." She turned to him, her voice hoarse and low. "It's a wrong thing for you to talk to me about things of that sort. Birds out of the nest begin all over again—this must begin again, I suppose—but it's too awful—too terrible. I don't want to hear any more talk about love. But rather than see you live with her, rather than see you talk that way of her, it seems to me I'd rather die. Because, she knows all about *me*—or will. What made you come? Why didn't you stay away? Why couldn't you find some other girl to love, away from here?"

"Which shows how much you really care for my happiness! I suppose, like many women, you are stubborn. Is that it, mother?"

She winced under this, wringing her hands. "If I could only lie—if I only could!"

"And if I only could, also!" he repeated after her. "But she's coming tomorrow, Mother—I've made her promise she'd come to see you. She said she'd make some excuse to come down and see her guardian. I'm going to meet her tomorrow. And when I do, I've got to tell her what I've learned today—every word of it—all—all! And I'll be helpless. I'll not be able to fight. I'll have to take it."

"That's right, Don, that's right. Even if I loved her as you do, even if it were the best thing in the world for you if you could marry her, I'd say that you should not. Don, whatever you do, don't ever be crooked with a woman. She's a woman, too. No matter what it cost, I couldn't see her suffer by finding out anything after it was too late."

"It won't take long," said he, simply. "We'll part tomorrow. But oh! Why did you save me—why did Miss Julia come that night? My place was under the water—there! Then the door would have been closed indeed. But now all the doors are closed on ahead, and none behind. I'll never be happy again. And I'm making her unhappy, too, who's not to blame. It runs far, doesn't it?—far and long."

"As you grow older, Don," said she, "you will find it doesn't so much matter whether or not you are happy."

He shook his head. "I'm done. It's over. There's nothing ahead for me. I never had a chance. Mother, you and Miss Julia made a bad mistake."

It seemed that she scarcely heard him, or as though his words, brutal, cruel though they were, no longer impinged upon her consciousness. She spoke faintly, as though almost breathless, yet addressed herself to him.

"Why, Don, it was here in this very room ... and you lay in my arms and looked up at me and laughed. You were so sweet.... But what shall I do? I love you, and I want you to love me, and you can't. What have I done to you? Oh, wasn't the world cruel enough to me, Don? Oh, yes, yes, it runs far—far and long, a woman's sin! You are my sin. And oh! I love you, and I will not repent! God do so to me—I'll not repent!"

He looked at her, still frowning, but with tenderness under the pain of his own brow. At last he flung himself on his knees before her and dropped his head into her lap.

He felt her hands resting on his head as though in shelter—hands that lay side by side, hands long and shapely once, but bruised and worn now with labor could he but have seen them—Aurora's hands—he could not have helped but realize her long years of toil. He heard her faint, steady sobbing now.

After a time she bent lower above his head as he knelt there, silent and motionless. Slowly her hand began once more to stroke his hair.

CHAPTER VI

THE DIVIDING LINE

The commonplace sound of the telephone's ring broke the silence in the little room. Aurora Lane arose and passed into the adjoining room to answer it. Her son regarded her with lackluster eyes when she returned.

"It was Miss Julia," said she, "at the library. She wanted to know if you were here. She says we must be sure to come out tonight."

"Come out—to what?"

"It's her annual jubilee, when she reports progress to the town. She is very proud of her new books and rugs and pictures. Everybody will be there. You see, Don, we don't have much in a town like this to entertain us. Why, if I could see a real theater once—I don't know how happy I would be. We've had movies, and now and then a lecture—and Miss Julia."

"I don't want to go, mother."

"Neither do I, Don; so I'm going."

"Why should we go? It's nothing to us."

"It's everything to Miss Julia—and it's everything to us, Don. Stop to think and you will realize what I mean. We can't run away under fire."

"There's something in that," he rejoined after a time, slowly. "Besides, what Miss Julia wishes we both ought to do."

Hands in pockets, he began once more gloomily to pace up and down the narrow room. "I can't stand this much longer, mother," said he. "I've got to get out—I've got to get hold of some money somehow."

"Yes," said she. "As for me, I have collected the last money due me—it went for your graduation suit. I don't know how you saved your railway fare home. I didn't want you to know these things, of course, but as things have happened, you had to know. A great many things today—well, they've gotten away from me."

"It's I who have spoiled everything, too. But how could I help it—I just couldn't submit."

"It's hard to submit, Don," said she slowly. "Perhaps a man ought not to learn it. A woman has to learn it."

He turned to look at her wonderingly, and at length went over and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Dear Mom!" said he gently. "You're wonderful. You are fine—splendid! I'm just getting acquainted with you, am I not? You're a good woman, mother; I'm so glad."

She looked at him now with eyes suddenly wet, her face working strangely, and turned away.

"Come, Don," said she after a time. "We must get ready for our little supper. Spring Valley, you see," she added, gaily, "dines at six and goes to the movies at seven."

Presently she left him to his own devices for a time, before calling him out into the little kitchen which served her also as a dining-room.

"It's not much," said she, shrugging and spreading out her hands, "but it's all I'd have had—bread and milk and cereal. I don't use much sugar or butter." Then, hurriedly, seeing the pain she had caused him, she went on.

"You soon get used to such things. Why, I have only two gowns to my name, and I put on my best one to meet you, when you wired you were coming, and I saw I'd have to meet you. This hat has been fixed over I don't know how many times—once more, for you. You will see, I'll not be at much trouble to dress for the entertainment tonight."

She opened upon the table cover her little pocket book and showed its contents—one small, tightly-folded, much-creased bill, which still lay within its depths.

"My last!" said she, grimacing. "That's our capital in life, Don! And we have all the world against us now. We must fight, whether or not we want to fight."

"But now," she added, "I can't talk any more. Let us go. It may do us good. Miss Julia at least will be glad to see us, if no one else is."

Early as they were, they were not the first arrivals at the library room where Miss Julia Delafield had devised her entertainment. She had borrowed certain benches from the public school, certain chairs as well. Already a goodly portion of Spring Valley's best people filled these. The seats made back from the little raised platform which usually served as the librarian's desk place. This now was enlarged by the removal of all the desks.

Back of this narrow dais was draped a large flag of our Union, and in the center of its folds was the campaign portrait of Judge Henderson, chief speaker of the evening.

Aurora Lane and her son entered unnoticed for the time, and quietly took seats in the last row of benches at the rear, near to some awkward youths who had straggled in and seemed uncomfortable in their surroundings. Not even Miss Julia noted them, for presently it became her flushing duty to escort Judge Henderson, and several of her other speakers, to the edge of the little platform, where they took their places back of the conventional table and pitcher of water.

The leader in the town's affairs bent over affably to speak with his associates—three ministers of the gospel, Reverend Augustus Wilson, of the U. P. Church, Reverend Henry Fullerton, of the Congregationalist Church, and Reverend William B. Burnham, of the Methodists. There were many other ministers of the gospel in Spring Valley, which rejoiced exceedingly in the multiplicity of its churches; but to these, in the belief of Miss Julia, had more specially been given the gift of tongues.

There came presently and seated himself on the bench next to Aurora Lane yet another minister of the gospel, old Mr. Rawlins, of the Church of Christ, the least important denomination of the village, so few of numbers and so scant of means that its house of worship must needs be located just at the edge of town, where land was very cheap. A kindly man, Parson Rawlins, and of mysterious life, for none might say whence came his raven-brought revenue. Questioned, Brother Rawlins admitted that he was not in the least sure whether or not he had a definite creed. He held out his hand smilingly to Aurora Lane.... An old man he was, with white hair and a thin face, his chin shaven smooth and shining between his bushy white side whiskers. His eyes were very mild.

"How do you do, Aurora?" said he. "Now, don't say a word to me—I know this boy." And he shook hands with Don also. "I know him," said he, "and I know all he has done today—we all know all about it, Aurora, so don't talk to me. Tut, tut, my son! But had I been in your place very likely I should have done the same thing—I might have whipped old Eph Adamson. You know, sometimes even a minister asks, 'Lord, shall we smite with the sword?'"

The face of the old man grew grave as he looked from one to the other. Some presentiment told him that a change had come across Aurora Lane's manner of life. Could it be possible that she had grown defiant—was she restive under the weight of the years? Had this sudden and sensational resurrection of her past brought rebellion to her heart, all these years so patient, so gentle?

He waved a hand towards the backs of the assemblage. "I suppose you recognize some of your own handicraft, don't you, 'Rory?" said he, laughing.

Aurora laughed, also. "A good many," said she frankly. "But the mail order business in ready-

trimmed hats has cut into my trade a great deal of late. Then there are excursions into Columbus. Still, I see some of my bonnets here and there—even now and then a gown."

They both laughed yet again, cheerily, both knowing the philosophy of the poor. Further conversation at the time was cut off by the entrance of the musicians of the evening, an organization known as the Spring Valley Cornet Band. These young men, a dozen in number, made their way solemnly to a place adjacent to the platform, where presently they busied themselves with certain mild tapping of drums and soft moanings of alto horns and subdued tootlings of cornets.

The leader of the band was the chief clerk in the First National Bank, Mr. Jerome Westbrook by name, himself Spring Valley's glass of fashion and mold of form, and not unconscious of the public attention attracted to himself in his present capacity. Now and again he looked out over the audience to see if he could locate a certain young lady, none less than Sallie Lester, the daughter of the president of his bank, upon whom he had bestowed the honor of his affections. He was willing to add thereto eke the honor of his hand.

It was as Aurora Lane had said—this annual gathering of Miss Julia's was the social clearing house of the community. And this typical attendance, representative of the little city at its best, offered that strange contrast of the sexes so notable in any American assemblage. The men were ordinary of look and garb, astonishingly ordinary, if one might use the term; stalwart enough, but slouchy, shapeless, and ill-clad. Not so the women, who seemed as though of another and superior social world. If here and there the face of a man seemed stolid, cloddish, peasant-like, not so any of the half dozen faces of the women next adjoining him. Type, class—call what you like that which is owned by the average American woman, even of middle class—that distinction was as obvious as is usual in all such gatherings. Scattered here and there through this audience, as in any audience of even the humblest sort in America, were a half dozen faces of young women, any of whom must have been called very beautiful, strikingly beautiful—beautiful as Aurora Lane must once have been.

The apparel of the men was nondescript. That of the women, however or wherever secured, made them creatures apart. The men, too, sat uncommunicative, silent; whereas their daughters or spouses turned, chattering, laughing, waving a hand to this or that friend. In short, the women availed themselves fully, as women will, of this opportunity of social intercourse. And always, as head turned to head, there was a look, a whispered word, of woman to woman. Little by little, in the mysterious way of such assemblages, every woman in the house came to know that Aurora Lane and her boy—who had only been hid, and not dead, all these years—were seated on the back seat, next to Old Man Rawlins. Did anyone ever hear the like of *that*? In reality Spring Valley was out to hear the rest of the news about Aurora Lane and her unfathered boy as soon as possible. Gossip covers all the nuances, the shades, the inner and hidden things of information, especially when information may be classified as scandal. This is the real news. It never needs wings. It needed no wings now.

Naturally, it was incumbent upon Judge Henderson to introduce a minister of the gospel to open the meeting with prayer—we Americans apologize to Providence at all public occasions, even our political conventions. Naturally thereafter Judge Henderson rose once more, took a drink of water, and signaled to the leader of the Spring Valley Silver Cornet Band; whereupon Mr. Jerome Westbrook, wiping all previous trace of German silver from below his mustache, essayed once more the leadership in concord of sweet sounds. This brought Judge Henderson up to his introductory remarks, properly so-called.

He made no ill figure as he stood, immaculately clad as was his custom, his costume still being the long black coat, his white waistcoat, the white tie, which he had worn that afternoon in court. It was charged against him, by certain of his enemies, that Judge Henderson had been known to change his shirt twice in one day, but this was not commonly believed. That he changed it at least once every day had, however, come to be accepted in common credence, although this also was held as his sheer eccentricity.

His face was smooth-shaven, for really he was shaved daily, and not merely on Saturday nights. His wide, easy, good-humored mouth, his large features, his well-defined brows, his full eye, his commanding figure, gave him a presence good enough for almost any stage. He stood easily now, accepting as his right the applause which greeted him, and smiled as he placed on the table beside him the inevitable glass of water at which he had sipped. Some said that in his own office Judge Henderson did not confine himself to water—but any leading citizen must have his enemies.

The worthy Judge made precisely what manner of address must be made on precisely such occasions. To him his audience was made up of fellow citizens, ladies and gentlemen. He accosted them with the deference and yet the confidence of some statesman of old. Indeed, he might have been scarce less a figure than Senator Thomas Hart Benton himself, so profuse—and so inaccurate—were the classical quotations which he saw fit to employ. It had grown his custom to do this with care-free mind. Indeed, there was but one here in this audience tonight who perhaps might have chided him for his Greek—a young man who sat far back in the rear, in a place near the door—a young man who none the less, it must be confessed, paid small attention to the Hendersonian allusions which had to do with literature, with history, the gentle arts, the culture, the progress of our proud republic, and of this particular American community.

So now it came on to the time of Reverend Henry B. Fullerton, who likewise spoke of literature

and culture, patriotism and the glories of our republic. The other ministers also in due course, after certain uneasy consultation of the clock upon the opposite wall, spoke much in similar fashion.

After these formidable preliminaries, it was time for Judge Henderson to give the real address of the evening—this latter now delivered with frequent consultations of the large watch which he placed beside him on the table. So presently he came to such portion of his speech as requires the orator to say, "But, my friends, the hour grows late." Whereafter presently, figuratively, he dismissed the audience with his blessing, well satisfied from the applause that his campaign was doing well. He had but casually and incidentally allowed it to be known that his own annual check to the city library was for a thousand dollars—no more than would cover the librarian's salary.

By this time, it was a half-hour past midnight, and none present might say that he had not had full worth of all the moneys expended for this entertainment. It had been a great evening for the candidate. Moreover, most of the old ladies present had enjoyed themselves in social conversation regarding the absorbing news of the day. As for the half dozen young village beauties present, there was not one who did not know precisely where Don Lane sat—not even Sally Lester, who irritated Jerome Westbrook beyond measure when he saw her pretending to look at the clock at the back of the hall to see what time it was. Really, as Jerome Westbrook knew very well, she was only trying to see Don Lane, the newest young man in town—wholly impossible socially, but one who had made sudden history of interest in feminine eyes.

Moody and intent upon his own thoughts, Don Lane himself by no means realized the importance of the occasion so far as he himself and his mother were concerned. He did not know that he was on trial here, that they two were on inspection. His ears were deaf to the impassioned words of all and several of the orators of the evening. Before his eyes appeared only one face. It was that of a young girl with a face clean-cut and high-browed, with sweet and kindly eyes—the girl he was to meet tomorrow, to whom he was to say good-by—Anne Oglesby. "Anne! Anne!" his heart was exclaiming all the time. For now he knew that he in turn must bruise yet another human heart, because of what had been, and in his brain was room now for no other thought, no other scene, no other face. There swept down upon him, if he thought of it at all now and then, only a feeling of the insufficiency, the narrowness, the unworthiness, the tawdriness, of all this which lay about him. And yet it was this to which he must come back—this was his world—this at least was the world in which his mother had made her own battle—had won for a time, and now had lost.

After midnight, when the assembly was dismissed, Spring Valley felt it had done its duty—it had come out to see Miss Julia's library. Everyone who passed Miss Julia, as she stood near the door, flushed and pleased, congratulated her on the progress she had made, on the neatness of her desks and shelves. Some said a word about the great work she was doing. Others shook hands with the elevated elbow, smiled sweetly, and repeated, parrot-like, "So glad!" and "Thanks so much!" In any case, little by little the room was cleared. There remained only the unspeakable desolation of any room lately occupied by a crowd—the litter of paper and odds and ends, the dulled lights, the heavy and oppressive air.

In her place, back of the dividing line which fenced off the socially elect, stood Aurora Lane, pale, weary, and yet composed, her hands folded low before her. She looked straight ahead, nor asked any of these people passing out for that recognition which she knew they would not give her. Don himself, speaking now and then to the kindly old man who retained his place at their side, found himself now and again in spite of himself wondering that of all these who passed, and of these many who turned and gazed their way, none ventured a greeting. His own face grew hard. All life to him had been a sweet, happy, sunny thing till now. He never had known any contest but that of sport, and there, even in defeat, he had met sportsmanship. He had not learned that in human life as we live it, honor and fair play and generosity and justice are things not in any great demand, nor sportsmanship in any general practice.

"Come, we must go," said Aurora at length.

They were the last to leave the room, although they might have been the first. In a brief lesson Don Lane's mother had taught him much.

CHAPTER VII

AT MIDNIGHT

Miss Julia, late mistress of ceremonies, passed here and there, turning out the lights. The bonnets and blouses all had departed, the coughs and shufflings had subsided. She might give way now to the weariness, the reaction, attendant upon long hours of eager enterprise.

Strange, she did not look about to find her friend, Aurora Lane, did not even hasten to take the hand of Don Lane before he had left the room.

The little group at the door—Aurora, Don and the old minister, now was increased in the entry way by the addition of none less than the tall and awkward figure of Horace Brooks, who came forward, smiling uncertainly as the other three finally emerged from the door. Aurora, quickly

divining his purpose, made some hesitating excuse, and darted back into the hall, where now Miss Julia had well accomplished the purpose of extinguishing the lights. But what Aurora saw caused her to withdraw softly, and not to speak to Miss Julia at all that evening!

One by one the switches had cut off the side lights, the desk lights, those of the ceiling. Two lights remained burning at the back of the little platform where the speakers had sat, one electrolier on each side of the portrait over which still hung the draped flag of the Union—the portrait of the Honorable William Henderson, lawyer, judge, politician and leading citizen.

Before this portrait stood Julia Delafield, her smooth-topped stick resting on the little table against which she supported herself now. She stood, both her hands clasped at her bosom. She was looking up directly at the lighted features of this portrait, and on her face was so rapt a look, her gaze was so much that of one adoring a being of another world—so much ardor was in her face, pale as it was—that Aurora Lane, seeing and knowing much, all with a sudden wrench of her own heart, withdrew silently, thankful that Miss Julia had not known.

"Miss Julia's tired," said she to her companions, who still stood waiting at the entry way. "We'll not disturb her tonight, Don, after all. I know she wants to see you. You can imagine she has a thousand things to talk about—books, pictures, everything. But tonight we'll just go on home. We'll come again tomorrow."

The people of Spring Valley scattered this way and that from the classical front of the Carnegie Library. They passed away in long streams in each direction on the street, which, arched across in places by the wide branches of the soft maples, lay half lighted by the moon, and yet more by the flickering arc light sputtering at the top of its mast at the corner of the public square, which made the shadows sheer black. So close did the trees stand to the street that the summer wind could not get through them to lighten the pall of the night's sultriness.

In Spring Valley the climate in the summer time was at times so balefully hot that common folk were forced to take the mattress from the bed and spread it on the floor at the front door in order to get a partial breath of air. The atmosphere was close and heavy under the trees tonight, and some commented on the fact as they passed on toward the public square where yet further separations of the scattered groups must ensue.

They passed along a street lined by residence houses, some small, others large, all hedged about with shrubs or trees, all with little flower beds; a certain conformity to accepted canons in good taste being exacted of all who dwelt in the village. Each one of this dispersing assemblage knew his neighbor, and all the other neighbors of the town. This was general plebiscite. Moreover, it seemed to have a certain purpose—an ultimate purpose of justice.

This was the actual jury of peers—this long stream of halting, hesitating figures who at midnight strolled on across the patch-work shadows of the maples. And before it had come on for trial the case of Aurora Lane and her unfathered boy.

"Look at them go!" said Old Hod Brooks, chuckling bitterly to himself as he and his companions turned toward the public square, this same thought occurring to him. "For instance, there's an even dozen just ahead of us now, if we cared to poll them."

Had this jury been polled it might have been found in some part resembling the original concourse which filled Noah's ark, since for the most part they walked two and two. Ben McQuaid, traveling salesman—the deadly rival of Jerome Westbrook in matters of fashion—who traveled out of Chicago but had his home in Spring Valley, because it was cheaper living there—walked now arm in arm with Newman, the clothing merchant of the Golden Eagle. He inquired solicitously as to the condition of business. Newman said he "gouldn't gomplain, though gollections mide be better." But that was not in the least what both were thinking of at that time.

"Seems like there was a little rukus on the square today," said McQuaid casually. "I just heard of it—Number Four come in a little late today."

"Vell, yes," said Newman, looking around to see that he might not be heard. "I ain't saying a vord about it—but listen, that kid has the punch in either hand—the last time you should have seen it—you see, they got at it twice now already—"

They drew apart, because they now saw approaching them too closely at the rear two of the ministers of the gospel. These found themselves none too happily assorted.

"I enjoyed your remarks very much indeed, Brother Burnham," said Reverend Fullerton, with a mendacity for which no doubt the recording angel dropped a suitable tear. "I agree with you that the tendency towards looseness of living in modern life—"

Reverend Fullerton coughed ominously. Anyone very close to him might have heard half-whispered words of "brazen exhibition" and "necessity of public measures."

But these did not speak freely, because close behind them came yet two—Dr. Arthur Bowling, the homeopathic physician, who somewhat against his will had fallen into the company of Miss Elvira Sonstebey. Now, Miss Elvira Sonstebey was the town's professional invalid. She tried regularly all the doctors in turn as they arrived. It was well known of all that she had suffered all the diseases ever known to man, as well as many of which no man ever had known. Just now, with much eagerness, she was explaining to Dr. Bowling that she feared her neuritis had become complicated with valvular heart trouble, and that she suspected gall stones as well. As to her

rheumatism, of course she had long since given up all hope of that—but this trouble in her arm —; and much other conversation extremely painful to Dr. Bowling at that time, because he was much possessed of the inclination to step forward a few paces and walk with Sally Lester, the banker's daughter. But even they hit common ground of converse when Miss Sonstebly voiced her belief that it was an outrage for a public personage like a certain milliner she could name if she cared to say, to appear in public on an occasion such as this, when only the most refined personages of the town should have been invited.

"I am sure," said she in tense tones to the young doctor, "that although alone in the world myself—not so old as some would try to make me out, either—I would die rather than have anyone voice the slightest suspicion of blame against me—the slightest blemish on my name. Now, *that* woman...."

Back of these two came yet others. Old Mr. Rawlins had gently said his farewells to Aurora and her son when they emerged upon the open street, and as he advanced passed certain of these groups, until presently he fell in with none less than Miss Hattie Clarkson, soprano and elocutionist of Spring Valley, who had favored the assemblage that evening with two selections, but who, it seemed, was not wholly satisfied.

"It seemed to me, Mr. Rawlins," said she, throwing about her shoulders the light scarf of tulle which she always wore when entertaining professionally—"that the exercises rather dragged tonight. Of course, we know what to expect when Judge Henderson speaks—he's very entertaining, to be sure. But it seemed to me that had there been a selection or two more of elocutionary sort it might have lightened up the evening—Who is that coming just back of us?" she whispered, looking back over her shoulder.

"That's Aurora Lane, my dear," said Mr. Rawlins, quietly. "Her son is with her."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, indeed! There's one of the best women I ever knew, my dear."

Miss Clarkson drew herself up proudly, and bent upon him an icy glance. By now they had approached the corner of public square. "I think I must say good *night*, Mr. Rawlins!" said she, with icy emphasis.

"Good night, my dear," said the old minister, sighing.

Not far ahead of Ben McQuaid and merchant Newman walked two other citizens, J.B. Saunders, leading grocer and prominent Knight Templar, and Nels Jorgens, village blacksmith—the same whose shop was across the way from the home of Aurora Lane. It was said of Mr. Saunders that it would have been difficult to surprise him at any hour of the day or night when he was not in his uniform of a Knight Templar, or carrying his sword case and hat. For some reasons best known to himself, and anticipating all possible surprises, he had taken with him to the meeting this evening the two latter accessories of his wardrobe, which now he carried as he walked on in conversation.

His neighbor wore an alpaca coat and no necktie whatever—a reticent, gray-whiskered man, whose bank account had a goodliness perhaps not to be suspected from first look at its owner. The two talked of many things, but naturally came around to the only topic which was in the mind of all.

"What'll he do—old Eph Adamson," asked Saunders. "It looks like he couldn't stand for what's been handed to him. That young fellow has pounded him up a couple of times. If I was Adamson I certainly would have the law on him good and plenty."

"Well," said Old Man Jorgens, comfortably, "I don't know much about it anyway, but it looks to me Adamson has got pretty near enough already. He pays a lawyer to get him clear, and when he gets out of that court already he gets licked once more again. And he knows the boy can lick him."

"You think he'll like enough lick him again?"

"Yeh, that's like enough, yeh. I heard things have been said of his mother by Adamson. Oh, yes, the news is out now—she couldn't hide it no more now—there is the boy she said was dead. But, you know, after all, my friend, a mother is a mother, and men is men. When they say things of how we was born, you would fought, I hope? Me, I hope too. No man likes to hear his mother called of names. And she is his mother. Too bad it is—a bad business all around."

"But then—why, Nels, we know——"

"Yes, we all know," said Jorgens stolidly. "I know and you know, and we all know. And what I know is this:—For twenty years she lives across the street from me, as straight and as good a woman as anyone in this town—each first day of the month right in my hand here she pays the rent, not a month missed in twenty years. I rather rent a house to her as to any business man in this town, and I say she is straight as any woman in this town! No man goes there, not any more now in twenty years. The man who meets her on the public street he takes his hat off—now. Her boy—well, he looks citified to me, but at least he can fight. Yeh, I vote he was in the right. Tomorrow my wife shall take some more eggs to Aurora Lane in her house; yeh, and coffee."

There were two other members of the unpolled jury, and they paused now in the full light which came from the mast at the corner of the public square. Judge Henderson, wearied by the

exertions of the evening, was disposed to ascend the stair to his own office in search of a manner of refreshment which he well knew he would find there. Turning in this laudable enterprise he met face to face the city marshal, Old Man Tarbush, who halted him for a moment's speech, drawing him apart to the edge of the sidewalk.

"I just thought I'd ask you, Judge, since I see you," said Tarbush, "whether you think I done right or not."

"What do you mean, Mr. Marshal," inquired the judge, none too happy at being interrupted.

"You know how it was. He licked Old Man Adamson again right at the foot of the stair, before the record of his trial was hardly dry on the books. It was unlawful, of course. I didn't arrest him no more, because I seen what had happened in the other trial. You pulled out of that. I didn't want to make no needless expense for the county. But I been sort of uneasy in my mind about it, and I just thought I'd ask you."

"Exactly, exactly," rejoined Judge Henderson. "Well, now, Tarbush, come to think it over, that matter came up for trial, and we concluded the best thing to do was to sort of let things take their course—you see, the young man in all likelihood will leave town very soon. In the conduct of my own affairs I sometimes have seen that it is well enough not to stir things up. Leave them alone, and sometimes they will smooth themselves down."

"Then you wouldn't run him in if you was me?"

"No, I think not, I think not. Let it go for the time. Perhaps there may be further developments, but with such information as I have at hand now, I would be disposed to approve your conduct. There's nothing like letting bygones be bygones in this world—isn't that the truth?"

"But now, about the eejit, Johnnie," resumed the city marshal once more, reaching out his hand still to detain the other, "I don't know as I done right about him, neither."

"What have you done then, Tarbush?"

"Well, I let him go. You see, I don't know but maybe the *habeas chorus* proceedings would be squashed like the rest. Besides, the eejit boy has been raising all kinds of hell down at the jail, raving and shouting and threatening me. About a hour ago or less I concluded to let him loose, so as to get shut of him."

"You did let him go? And he was not discharged?"

"Well, now, what's the difference, Judge," said the old man. "We couldn't really get no sleep down there, he was making so much fuss, so I just let him out. He lit out upon the street right thataway, towards home—not so very long ago."

Judge Henderson gazed moodily in the direction to which Tarbush pointed.

"Well," said he, "maybe you did right, and in any case this isn't the time and place to discuss it. My professional hours"—and he turned away and walked slowly up the stairs to his own office, intent upon the purpose already prominent in his mind.

The arc light illumined fully the great town clock in the cupola of the courthouse. The hands pointed to a quarter of one, after midnight.

The deliberations of the jury of Spring Valley might have been said to have concluded at the time when Aurora Lane, her son Don, and old Hod Brooks—the last group of the slow procession—themselves turned the corner and emerged upon the public square. The matter of bringing in the verdict was another affair.

CHAPTER VIII

THE EXTRAORDINARY HORACE BROOKS

Something made Aurora Lane uneasy. She turned now and extended her hand to the tall man who walked at her side. "Good night, Mr. Brooks," said she.

But old Hod Brooks only put his hands deeper in his pockets and slouched on alongside. "I'll just go on along with you to the gate. It's hot tonight, isn't it? I don't know when we've had such a spell."

She could not well dismiss him now, so indeed the three walked yet a while together.

Don Lane still was silent, moody. There was little of the Jesuit in his own frank soul. He knew nothing of dissembling, and had no art of putting a good face upon a bad matter. All these complications which so swiftly had come into his life seemed to him only a terrible and overwhelming thing in the total. The morrow was coming for him—nay, it already was at hand, and he knew what that must bring of additional grief. Anne! Anne! He must tell her. He must leave her. Never in all his care-free life had he been so wretched, so miserable, as he was now. Moreover, for reasons he could not stifle he did not like the presence of Brooks here, even though

he and his mother must acknowledge the debt under which he had laid them that day.

"I'll tell you, Mother," said he after a time, when he had turned off the square into their own street. "Just excuse me for a few minutes, won't you? It's so hot and stuffy that I don't feel that I can sleep. I'll just take a little run down the street, if you don't mind."

"But why, Don?" she inquired.

"You see, I've always been used to keeping fit, and I don't like to break my training—we always had to exercise in college, on the teams. I don't feel good when I don't. I'm used to doing my half mile or so every night just before I go to sleep."

"Huh!" said Old Hod Brooks, looking at the young man appraisingly. "So that's how you keep in training, eh? Well, it seems to work all right!" His sudden gusty laughter sounded loud in the night, but it lacked the note of ease.

"Go on, go on," he added—"as you get older maybe you'll find it takes all your gimp to take care of your mind and your money, and you'll let your body just about take care of itself. But go ahead—I'll just walk on down with your mother."

"Don't be long, Don," said Aurora Lane; and she meant it, for she felt uneasy at thus being accompanied to her own gate, a thing unknown in her history. She was glad that old Nels Jorgens, on ahead, had just turned in at his own gate.

Don Lane trotted off slowly, with long elastic stride, up on his toes, with his elbows tucked in and his chin high, filling his lungs as best he might with the hot and lifeless air. The sound of his footfalls passed down the street, and was lost as he turned at the further corner of the square.

"Good night, now," said Aurora Lane once more, as she and her companion approached her little gate.

But Hod Brooks did not turn away, although he made no attempt to enter. Instead he reached out a large hand impulsively and arrested hers as it would have pulled together the little crippled gate behind her. Still she did close the gate—until the sudden impact of his own weight snapped off its last remaining hinge. He picked it up carelessly and set it within the fence, himself leaning against the post, filling the gap, his hands back in his pockets.

"Aurora," said he, with a strange softness in his voice, "this seems to me almost like Providence."

"What do you mean?" she said. "I must go——"

"Please, not yet," said he. "Just think—how else could it have been possible for me to talk with you?"

"Without compromising yourself?" She smiled slowly and bitterly, but did not see the hot blood rise to his face.

"That's not right!" said he. "Without compromising *you*—that's what I meant. I only meant that there is no place where we well could meet. And I wanted to say something to you, at last—what sometime has got to be said between us."

"We both know everything now, so why talk?" said she. "It was fine of you today in the trial. We owe so much—we'll pay when we can."

The dull red in his face deepened. "You may stop that, if you please," said he. "It's not right between us. The showdown has come. Why not settle up, at last?"

She turned, not knowing what to do, unwilling to leave him standing there.

"It's been years, Aurora. Now, listen—I'm going on up in the world myself, at last. I want to take you with me. I didn't want to say anything till the right time. It's been a long, hard pull for me, too, here in this town. It's hard for men like me to talk."

"You mustn't talk," said she. "You mustn't say a word—you mustn't be seen here even."

He looked at her slowly. "I'm here deliberately," said he. "Listen now—I must tell you some things, Aurora. I've loved you from the first day I saw you. Can't you credit me at least a little? You're splendid—you're beautiful—and you're good."

She choked a bit, raised a hand in swift protest.

"You're still young, Aurora," said he, not paying attention to what she said. "Of course I'm older, but there's a lot of time left yet for you and me—a lot of living. You've had mighty little out of life, here by yourself. Now I've stood it as long as I can. Since the whole truth about the boy has broken out today and can't ever be covered up again, it seemed to me I just had to tell you that you needed me to take care of you—someone more than just yourself. Things may go harder for you now. They've been hard enough already. You need help. Who more natural to help you than myself, feeling as I have, as I do?"

"Oh, you *mustn't* talk that way!" Her voice trembled. "You must go on away. I'm not—good——"

"You're good enough for me—good as I am, surely—and I want to get into this game with you now. You need me. That means we've got to be married. Oh, the boy's fine, yes, but he'll be going

away. You need a man—a husband—someone you can depend on, Aurora. Isn't there anything welcome in that thought for you? Aurora, I want to marry you—at once, right away. I say that right now and here."

Aurora Lane looked this way and that, every way. Her gaze happened to go down the long vista beneath the maples, to fall upon the face of the town clock on the courthouse. The hour hand with a short jerk moved forward and the deep note of the bell boomed out—it was one o'clock of the night; and all was not well.

She turned as she felt the tense grasp of his great knotted hands still upon her own.

"You say that—to me——" she managed to say at last. "Why, everybody knows—all the town knows——" Her voice shook. "I suppose I'll have to leave here now after what's happened. But *you'd* have to leave if you took up with such as me—even this late, it would ruin you. Don't you think of your own prospects? Why, I couldn't marry you, no matter how much I loved you."

"You don't love me at all?"

"How could I?"

"That's true," said he simply. "How could you?"

"I don't mean that," she corrected herself hastily.

"It's just what I said," he rejoined. "This seems providential to me. I can't allow these people to murder you a dozen times a week the way they will do now. You can't make this fight alone any more, Aurora—I can't any longer bear to see you try it. It's all out now. It's going to be harder for you after this."

She did not make any answer to him at all, but she heard his big voice murmuring on.

"I reckon it's love, after all, Aurora—I don't know. I don't know much about women. I just feel as though I had to take care of you—I feel as though you ought to depend on me. Can't you believe that?"

"I ought not to believe that of any man," she broke out.

"Like enough, like enough," he nodded, "but you've known only one man—that's your full horizon. Now, having had so hard a fight in business, I have put marrying to one side. Let's not say that we're both young—for we're not. But let's remember what I told you—there's a lot of life left for you and me yet if you'll only say the word. Don't you want to make anybody happy?"

"Oh, you mustn't say that to me!" said Aurora Lane. "But you would want me to be honest, wouldn't you? You wouldn't want me to lie? Somehow, I've never learned to lie very much."

"No," said he simply; "no, I reckon not. You never have."

"No matter what——"

"No matter what."

"Then tell me, how could I say I loved you now? For twenty years—all my life—I have put that thought away from me. I'm old and cold now. My heart's ashes, that part, can't you understand? And you're a man."

"Yes," he nodded, "I'm a man. That's so, Aurora. But now you're just troubled. You've not had time to think. I've held my secret, too. I've never spoken out to you before. I tell you, you're too good a woman to be lost—that isn't right."

"You pity me!"

"Maybe. But I want to marry you, Aurora."

"What could I do—what could be done—where would you have any pay in that?"

"Don't trouble about the pay. How much have the past twenty years paid you?"

"Little enough," said she bitterly, "little enough. About all they've given me—about all I've got left—is the boy. But I want to play fair."

"That's it," said he. "So do I. That's why I tell you you're too good for me, when it comes to that, after all."

"Why, it would all have to come out—one way or the other. It all *has* come out, as you say. We couldn't evade that now—it's too late. Here's the proof—Dieudonné—and I can't deny him."

He nodded gravely. She went on:

"Everyone knows about the boy now—everybody knows he's—got no father. *That's* my boy. Too late now to explain—he's ruined all that by coming here. And yet you ask me to marry you. If I did, one of two things surely would be said, and either of them would make you wretched all your life."

He turned to her and looked at her steadily.

"They might say I was the father?"

She nodded, flushing painfully. "They might guess. And a few might think that after all these years——"

"Maybe," said he slowly. "But you see, after all, it's only a theoretical hurt I'm taking if I stand between you and these damned harpies here. They're going to torture you, Aurora, going to flay and burn you alive. I'd like to do about anything I could for you, anything a man can in such a case as ours. As for sacrifice—why, whatever you think I think of you, I believe we can both call it sure that I want to stand between you and the world. I want to have the *right* to take care of you. It's what I want to do—must do. I've waited too long. But it's what I always have intended. You'd never let me. I never seemed to get around to it before. But now——"

"Impossible!" she whispered, white, her great eyes somber. "There is no way. Love of man has gone by for me. It knocked once. It has gone by."

"Wait now, let us go on with the argument just a little further, my dear!" said he gently.

"We have argued too long already," she said faintly. "You must go. Please go—please don't talk to me. You must not."

"I wish I could agree with you," said he, disturbed and frowning, "because I don't want to make you any more unhappy. But listen, it just seemed to me that this was providential—I had to come to you and tell you what I have told you tonight. Why, widows remarry—time and again widows marry."

"Yes, *widows!*" He could barely hear the sob which she stifled in her throat.

"Well, then," said he, "how about you and me? I don't think it's a fair argument, but I ought to point out to you that perhaps I've got a chance in the world. They wanted me, for instance, to make the run for the senatorship—against Judge Henderson. Today I agreed with him not to accept the candidacy. In return he agreed to drop that case against Don. Well, you've traded me out of the United States Senate, Aurora. But I made that trade—for you and the boy."

She looked up at him in sudden astonishment. She could not evade the feeling of shelter in his great presence as he stood there, speaking calmly, absolutely in hand, a grotesque and yet a great soul—yes, a great soul as it seemed to her, so used to littler souls. After all, she never really had known this man. Sacrifice? Had he not given freely, as a sacrifice, the greatest gift a man has—his hope for power and preferment? And he spoke of it as though it were a little thing. Aurora Lane was large enough to know a large act, belittled though it were by the doer of the deed.

"You see," he began, "we're old enough perhaps to talk plainly, plainer than young folks can—mostly I presume they don't talk at all—but I may talk plainly?"

"Oh, yes," said she, sighing. "I suppose we've made that certain."

"Now, now, don't say that—nothing of the sort, my dear. Your past is out of this question altogether. You're a *widow*, that's all. Your unknown husband is dead—he is unknown, but he is dead. That's the record, and accepted here. And isn't that our solution—the only one in all the world possible for us?"

She did not answer at all.

"The boy and I—I reckon the two of us could keep most of the people in this town or in this world attending to their own business, and not bothering about ours. Don't you believe that, Aurora? We've made a start—a sort of preliminary demonstration already."

But still she did not answer, and, agonized now, he went on:

"I'm a plain man, Aurora, pretty ignorant, I expect. I didn't come from anywhere—there's no family much back of me—I have had really very little schooling, and I've had to fight my own way. I can't play bridge—I don't know one card from another. I don't dance—there's no human being could ever teach a dance step to me. I've never been in society, because I don't belong there. But, as I said, I've got some standards of a man and some feelings of a man. I love you a lot more than you can tell from what I've said, or what I've done. It'll be a great deal more to you than you can believe now. I'll do a great deal more for you than you can realize. I'll give you at last—later than I ought to have done it—something you've never had—your *life*—your *chance* in the world—your chance at real love and real affection and real loyalty. You've never had that, Aurora. I couldn't offer it, for I had my own secret to keep, and my own fight to make. But love and loyalty—they'd be sweet, wouldn't they?"

She bent her head down upon her hands, which lay folded at the top of the pickets of the little fence.

"Sweet—sweet—yes, yes!" he heard her murmur.

"Well, then, why not end the argument?" he said. "Why, I've seen you here, all these years. I know every hair of your head. I have come really to love you, all of you, as a man ought to love his wife. I can't resist it—it's an awful thing. I don't think I'll forget—it's too late in life for me to begin over again, it's you or nothing for me. There's never been any other woman for me—and that ought at least to speak for me. There's been no other man for you. So why not end it? The world's been cruel enough for you as it is. I'll not say it hasn't been cruel to me, too. I've sat tight

and eaten my heart. I've had to fight, too. But don't I understand you, your fight, what it means to buck a game where all the cards are stacked? Don't I know?"

"It has been cruel, yes," said she at length, finding herself able to speak, "but it seems it has not been quite so cruel as it could be until—until now."

"Why, what do you mean? Am I cruel? Why?"

"You said—you said something about my being a widow."

He nodded. "Yes. I pick you up now—it's as though I find you new—I know you now at a later stage altogether in your life. You've grown. I see you as new and fresh as though you were just risen from the sea.... And all the past is nothing to me."

"You must not talk," said she, "because it only is to make us both the more unhappy. You are quixotic enough, or great enough—I don't know which—I can't tell which it is—to say you'd take the shame on your own shoulders in order to take it off of mine! You can't mean that! No! no! One life ruined is enough—you've ruined yours enough now, today, by what you've done for Don and me."

He seemed not to hear her.

"I've watched you all these years, and you've lived like a recluse, like a widow. I can't reproach you. God! Which of us may first cast a stone?"

Aurora Lane turned to him now a brave face, the same brave face she had turned to the world all these years.

"Oh," said she, "if only I had learned to lie! Maybe some women could lie to you. And women get so tired—so awfully tired sometimes—I couldn't blame them. I might marry you, yes—I believe I could. But I would never lie to you—I won't lie to you now."

"What are you going to say to me, Aurie?"

"What I'm going to say to all the world! I've never been married to anyone and can't be now. It would be more horrible to me than—that other. It's too late. It—it means too much to me—marriage—marriage—marriage! Don't—don't—you mustn't say some things to a woman. Oh, if all this had happened twenty years ago, when I was young, I might have been weak enough to listen to what you say. I was weak and frightened then—I didn't know how I'd ever get on—all life was a terror to me. But that was twenty years ago. I've made my fight now, and I've learned that after a fashion at least I could get on—I did—I have. I can go on through alone the rest of the way, and it's right that I should. That's what I'm going to do!"

She saw the great hand clutch the more tightly on two picket tops. They broke under the closing grip of his great hand.

"That's right hard," said he simply. "We can't be married now? But—tell me, can't I help you?"

"Oh, no, no, don't—don't talk of that!" she said. She was weeping now. "Don't try to help me," she sobbed bitterly. "You can't help me—nobody can help me—there's no help in the world—not even God can help me! You've been cruel—all the world has been nothing but cruel to me all my life. I've nothing to hope—there's nothing that can help me, nothing. I'm one of the lost, that's all. Until today, I'd hoped. I never will hope again."

Now she felt the great hand closing once more on top of hers above the broken pickets.

"Listen, Aurora," said he, "if it doesn't seem that you and I can be married, there's nothing in the world which makes it wrong for me to help you all I can—you mustn't think I didn't love you. You don't think that, do you?"

"I don't know what I think!" said she, rubbing at the ceaseless tears, so new to her. "All these matters have been out of my life—forever, as I thought. But sometimes—I've been so lonesome, you know, and so helpless—I'm tempted. It's hard for a woman to live all alone—it's almost a thing impossible—she's so lonesome—sometimes I almost think I could depend on you, even now."

"That's fine!" said he, choking up; "that's fine. I expect that's about all I had coming to me after all. So I oughtn't to be sorry—I ought to be very happy. That's about the finest thing I ever heard in all my life."

"And about the sweetest words I ever heard in all my life were what you said just now—after knowing all you do about me."

"But you won't tell me that you'll marry me now?" He bent and picked up her hand in both his great ones. "I know you will not." He kissed her hand reverently.

"Good night," said he gently. And presently she was sensible that his shambling figure was passing away down the street under the checkered shadows of the maples.

Aurora Lane stood yet for just a moment, how long she did not know. There came to her ear the sound of running footsteps. Her boy came down the street, passing Horace Brooks with a wave of his hand. He reached her side now as she still stood at the gate. He was panting, perspiring a trifle.

"Fine!" said he. "Let's go in. Maybe I can sleep—I'd like to sleep."

"What kept you so late?" asked Aurora Lane. She hurried in ahead of him.

CHAPTER IX

THE OTHER WOMAN CONCERNED

The sultry night at last was broken by a breathless dawn, the sun rising a red ball over the farm lands beyond the massed maple trees of the town. Not much refreshed by the attempt at sleep in the stuffy little rooms, Don and his mother met once more in the little kitchen dining-room where she had prepared the simple breakfast.

He did not know, as he picked at the crisp bacon strips, that bacon, or even eggs, made an unusual breakfast in his mother's household. He trifled with his cereal and his coffee, happily too considerate to mention the lack of butter and cream, but grumblingly sensible all the time that the bread was no longer fresh. He was living in a new world, the world of the very poor. His time had not yet been sufficient therein to give him much understanding.

He looked about him at the scantily furnished rooms, and in spite of himself there rose before his mind pictures he had known these last few years—wide green parks, with oaks and elms, stately buildings draped with ivy, flowers about, and everywhere the air of quiet ease. He recalled the fellowship of fresh-cheeked roistering youths like himself, full of the zest of life, youth well-clad, with the stamp of having known the good things of life; young women well-clad, well-appointed, also. Books, art, the touch of the wide world of thought, the quiet, the comfort, the beauty, the physical well-being of everything about him—these had been a daily experience for him for years. He unthinkingly had supposed that all life, all the world, must continue much like this. He had supposed, had he given it any thought at all, that the last meager bill in his pockets when he started home would in some magic way always remain unneeded, always unspent. He had opportunity waiting for him in his profession, and he knew he would get on. Never before in all his life had he known the widow's cruse.

So this was life, then—this little room, this tawdry, sullen town, this hot and lifeless air, this hopelessly banal and uninteresting place that had been his mother's home all these years—this was his beginning of actual life! The first lesson he had had yesterday; the next, yet more bitter, he must have today. The uninviting little kitchen seemed to him the center of a drab and dismal world, in which could never be aught of happiness for him or his.

"It's not much, Don," said his mother, smiling bravely as her eyes noted his abstraction. "I live so simply—I'm afraid a big man like you won't get enough to eat with me."

She did not mention her special preparations for his arrival. He did not know that the half-dozen new serviettes had been bought for his coming. He did not know that a new chair also had been purchased, and that he himself was sitting in it at that very time. In short, he knew nothing of the many sacrifices needful even for these inexpensive things about him. He did not know that marvel of the widow's cruse, filled against dire need by the hand of merciful Providence.

"It's all right, Mother," said he, toying with his fork; "fine, fine."

"Coffee strong enough, Don?" She looked at him anxiously. Usually she made it weak for herself.

"Oh, they never let us have it at all when we're training, mother," said he, "and not strong at any time. I know the simple life." He smiled as best he might.

"I have lived it here, too, Don," said she slowly, "because I couldn't well help it. I don't suppose anybody likes it when it's too simple. I like things nice, so much. I've always longed to travel. You know, Don, I hear of people going over to Europe, and I'm guilty of the sin of envy. I live right here in this little place all the time—I've done so all my life. I've scarcely been out of this town in twenty years. If I could see pictures—if I could go to see the great actors—if I could see a real theater—just once, Don—you don't know how happy I'd be. And I'm sure there must be more beautiful countries than this. Still"—and here she sighed—"Miss Julia and I have lived quite a life together—in the books, the magazines—pictures too, sometimes."

He looked at her dumbly now, trying to understand the steady heroism of a life such as hers. The real character of his own mother never yet fully had impressed itself upon him. Don Lane was a college graduate, but now for the first time in his life he was beginning to think.

"One thing," she added, "I'd never do. I'd never pretend to be what I was not—I didn't ever pretend to have what I didn't have. You see me, Don, and my life, pretty much as we are."

"And all this has been for me?"

"Yes," simply. "But although we grew up apart, I don't think I could endure it if I thought we really were to part—if you would leave me now."

"I was half hoping," she went on musingly, "that you could find it in your heart to stay here in this town."

He shook his head. "Impossible! That's one thing you really mustn't ask of me."

"Yes, I feared you would think of it in that way! But, as for me, this is my place—I've made my bed here, and I must lie in it. I know the people of this town—I know what they'll all do to me now. You see, you don't know these things yet."

"No," said he, "but you and Miss Julia both will be paid back—the money part of it—some time. As for me, I'm not going to have any home."

She sat silent for quite a time, the meager breakfast now being ended for both.

"Oh, can't you forget her, Don? Can't you give her up?" she said finally.

"I can't forget her, Mother, but I'll have to give her up. It all happened there on the car—just at once—in public."

"I'm glad you never kissed her, Don," said she. "You're both so young."

She shook her head slowly as she went on. "Love has to be loved in any case. That means—I suppose it means—that for the very young, if it be not one, it may later be another."

He only smiled bitterly at this. "It all comes to the same thing in any case," said he. "I'll have to tell her what I know, and we'll have to part. It would be the same with any other woman, if there could be any other. There can't be."

"I've been frank with you, Don, and I don't know whether to be glad or sorry for that. I'd love nothing so much in the world as to see you happily married—but nothing in the world could so much hurt me as to see you marry Anne Oglesby."

"No fear of it!"

"You'll tell her?"

"Yes. Today."

CHAPTER X

THE MURDER

Once more the strident call of the telephone broke in, and Aurora Lane stepped aside.

"It's Miss Julia," said she excitedly, turning upon her son eyes suddenly grown large. "Why, it's something awful! Don—a terrible thing has happened—last night."

"What's wrong—what's happened?" he demanded.

"Mr. Tarbush—the city marshal—why, you know—he was killed—murdered—last night—found this morning! It was about one o'clock, as near as they can tell, Miss Julia says. It's all over town."

An exclamation left the young man's lips. "What's that? Murdered?"

"Yes, yes—wait——" She spoke on into the telephone. "Yes, Julia, Don and I were just at breakfast—no, we've not been on the street yet—one o'clock, you said? That was when we were just coming home from the library!"

"Mother," said Don, "that's right! It must have been just about one o'clock, wasn't it?"

She looked at him steadily for a time, as she dropped the receiver, her own face a trifle pale. "Yes—we hadn't gone to sleep at the time it happened. He was killed right in front of his own house, Miss Julia says."

"And where is that?—you see, I don't know much about the town."

"Beyond the square, about three blocks from the farther corner—the little house with the low fence in front, and the deep front yard."

"We didn't pass that when we came up from the station?"

"No, we came another street. But, Don——"

"Yes?"

"When you were running last night, you must have passed right close to there! You didn't see anything strange?"

"Of course not! I'd have looked into it. I don't recall that particular house."

"Well," he added, after a moment's silence, "in spite of all that happened yesterday between him and us, I'm not going to call him anything but a good man—now."

She looked at him strangely—studied his face steadily.

"I'll be going out now, I think—I'm going to run over to see Julia for a time. Please don't go out on the street, Don. Stay right here. We got into trouble enough yesterday."

"You needn't fear," said he. "There's nothing and nobody in this town I want to see. I'll be glad when I shake the dust of it off my feet—when I once get squared away in my own business you shall leave this place and live with me."

And then, as there came to him again and again the anticipated pain of parting with the one he himself loved, he came up to his mother and put his arms once more upon her shoulders. Again her hands found his hair. She cast a quick glance about her, as though in his defense.

"Don," said she, "I think I'll never get over thinking of you as just a boy, a little boy."

He tried to smile. "Pity you didn't drown me in the pool yonder," said he.

It was the most cruel thing he could have found to say, although he spoke only in his own bitterness, careless, as a man so often is, of a woman's hurts. But she left him without comment; and soon he had resumed his own restless walking up and down in the narrow quarters which seemed to him such a prison.

Meantime all Spring Valley was afoot and agog over this news. It was the most sensational thing that had happened, as Aaron Craybill said, since Ben Wilson's wife went crazy out on the farm, come four years ago, and killed her four babies, and hid in the haystack until they found her three days later, and sent her to the asylum. And so forth, and so forth.

All the good folk met in groups at home or in the streets, so that within an hour after breakfast there was not a soul in all Spring Valley did not know that the town marshal had just been killed by some unknown person for some unknown reason. The news seemed dulling, stupefying. The clerks who opened the drug stores around the public square, the only shops open of the Sunday, were slow in their sweeping out that morning. Pedestrians on the streets walked slowly. The entire life of the town seemed slow. The sluggish, arresting solemnity of death sat upon all the little community.

Spring Valley had no daily newspaper, and even the weekly *Clarion*, a production of some six pages, had its trials in making a living there, so close was the village to larger towns which reached out and covered most of its commercial needs in this time of telegraph and trolley. The editor of the *Clarion* was, naturally, the correspondent of the largest daily of the near-by metropolis. Twice in all his life he had had opportunity for a first page story in the great city daily. His first metropolitan opportunity was when the aforementioned farmer's wife had killed her children, some four years ago. And now here was something quite as big. Editor Anderson sat at his own breakfast table for more than half an hour pondering on the opening sentence which he was going to write in his dispatch to the morning daily.

By eleven-thirty he had written his story, and had taken it down to the station agent for transmission by wire; and that worthy told him that as soon as Number Five got by he would begin to send the message. "I can't stop for anything so long as that now," said he.

It was somewhat longer as written than as printed, but Mr. Anderson described the murder of the city marshal in the following terms:

The progressive little city of Spring Valley, Jackson County, this state, was electrified this morning by the startling news of the murder of the well-known city marshal, Mr. Joel Tarbush, a man of sterling qualities, who has held the office for many years, and who had endeared himself in the hearts of the community not only for his discharge of his official duties, but for his kindness of heart. The funeral will occur tomorrow afternoon at half-past three. Reverend William D. Rawlins will give the funeral address.

The city of Spring Valley is all excitement at this writing. No trace of the cowardly assassin has yet been found, and the entire affair remains shrouded in the deepest mystery, which not even the keenest intellects have been able to penetrate. There is no one who can ascribe a motive sufficient to inspire the murder of so respected and harmless a citizen.

Some have ascribed the fiendish act to some hobo or tramp who may have taken revenge on the marshal for some real or fancied injury in the past. But no one can recall any instance in which the deceased has ever incurred the enmity of any such characters, so that all remain at a loss how to account for this act. There seems to have been no eyewitness, and therefore all is but mere conjecture.

Your reporter was among the first at the premises early this morning, and thus gained all the information that can be secured at this writing. He has interviewed Miss Audrey Tarbush, daughter of the deceased, who had for many years kept house for him in their residence on Mulberry Street, about five blocks from the courthouse, where the deceased had a small garden and raised vegetables and flowers which he sold in the best families of our flourishing city.

Miss Audrey Tarbush, when interviewed by our reporter, said that she had last night, according to her usual custom, retired at the hour of half-past nine. She did not attend the exercises at the city library, where most of the elite of the town were present last night, because of a headache from which she suffered. She left the front door unlocked,

as was her custom, for the entry of her father when he had finished the duties of his day's work. Usually, Marshal Tarbush came home at about ten o'clock, and himself then retired. On this night, by reason of certain extraordinary occurrences during the preceding day, he thought it wise to remain out later than usual. This was in accordance with his well-known courage and his conscientious endeavor to protect the residents of the city against any possible danger.

It was about a quarter after one o'clock, as near as Miss Audrey Tarbush can recall, that she was awakened by the sound of footfalls on the front porch. She called out, "Who's there?" but got no answer. As she went to the door her father succeeded in opening it and staggered in. He sank down into a chair near the center table. She saw then that he was very pale, and had a wound upon his head from which blood was still flowing. Much alarmed, she inquired of him what had occurred. The deceased was unable to answer. He seemed to be approaching a sort of coma.

"Who was it? Who did it?" Miss Audrey Tarbush demanded of him. It was a dramatic situation.

The deceased was unable to make an intelligent reply. "Someone hit me," he muttered. That was all he could manage to say, and that was all she could catch of his last words. Before long his head sank forward and he breathed his last almost in her arms. Unassisted she was able to carry the body of her father to the near-by sofa.

At that late hour the telephone operator had gone home, so she was unable to call any of the neighbors by means of the telephone. She does not recall how long she was alone with the dead body of her esteemed parent, but after a time her cries from the front porch were heard. The neighbors came to her assistance, but nothing could be done.

Examination of the remains of the deceased revealed a long and ragged wound over the upper and left-hand part of the head, breaking the cuticle for a distance of some four or five inches. The marshal's hat had been on when he was struck. The skull was broken for a distance of more than two inches, according to the examination of Dr. Amos N. Beals, who examined the body, the left parietal bone being crushed in as by some heavy instrument.

Your reporter deduces the following theory of the crime. At a late hour, after City Marshal Tarbush had finished his duties in the public square, he went towards his home, the public meeting at the library having by this time been dismissed. At a distance of perhaps fifty feet west of the front gate of his own home the deceased was approached by some miscreant, who with some heavy blunt instrument struck him down from behind, and who then made his escape, leaving no sign behind him. No club or weapon of any kind was found.

After receiving his death blow this estimable citizen seems to have walked, steadying himself against the top rail of the fence, until he reached the gate. The bloody finger prints upon the top of the fence were no doubt made by his own fingers, which he must have raised up to his head. He was able to enter his own gate, come up his own walk, and ascend his own front steps. Up to that time no one can tell the story. What ensued after that has been told by your reporter in the interview with Miss Audrey Tarbush, his loving daughter.

So ended a long and honorable life. The pallbearers will be chosen from leading citizens of the town, but their names have not yet been determined. He will be buried by the Knights Templar, to which order he belonged, probably on Sunday afternoon, because, although such haste may appear unseemly, this early funeral will allow a representative attendance of all the members of the order, including practically all our leading citizens, with their full music, so that the concluding exercises may thus show a greater tribute of respect, the attendance at any later day being sure to be far less general.

Your reporter has interviewed prominent citizens as to the cause of this crime which has so shocked our community. When approached by your reporter, Judge William Henderson, well-known candidate for the United States senatorship, former member of the Republic State Central Committee and prominent citizen in this state, said, "I cannot hazard even a guess at the perpetrator of this ghastly crime which has so shocked our community."

The story written by Mr. Anderson ended at this point. As printed it ended considerably in advance of this point; but at least, as he later told his wife, he had done his best to give his paper a good story. By the time his message was waiting in the hands of the station agent, telephone wires were busy between Spring Valley and other larger towns. The early afternoon papers in Columbus were on the streets by eleven-thirty with big headlines, and a few lines of type about the murder of "County Sheriff Abel Tarbush of Spring Valley, Jackson County, for which murder four tramps had been suspected and placed in jail." The deceased was described as a prominent Mason. By that time the star reporters of the morning dailies were on the through train, Number Five, bound east from Columbus to Spring Valley, as many learned by telephone; so that the arrival of Number Five this day would be a matter of special importance.

Of exact details in all these matters, Don Lane knew but little. It was for reasons of his own,

easily obvious, that he went down to the little station to meet the through train from the West. Anne Oglesby was coming!

His mother did not accompany him, of course, and he therefore was quite alone. Of all those whom he encountered hurrying in the same direction, all those who packed the little platform and who stood here and there in groups speaking solemnly one with the other, he could count not a friend, not an acquaintance. Dully he felt that here and there an eye was turned upon him, that here and there a word was spoken about him. He dismissed it as part of the aftermath of his own troubles of the previous day. He walked nervously up and down, impatiently looking westward down the line of rails, his own contemptuous hatred for all these lost in the greater emotion that filled his heart. Anne was coming—she was almost here! And he must say good-by.

Meantime, in the courthouse, there was going forward due action on the part of the officers of the law intrusted with the solution of such mysteries as this murder. The sheriff, a large and solid man, Dan Cowles by name, was one of the first to inspect the premises where the crime had been committed. Shortly after that he went over to the office of Blackman, Justice of the Peace and coroner, who by ten o'clock that morning had summoned his jury of six men—Nels Jorgens, the blacksmith; Mr. Rawlins, the minister of the Church of Christ; Ben McQuaid, the traveling man; Newman, the clothing merchant; J. B. Saunders, the Knight Templar; Jerome Westbrook, clerk in the First National Bank.

It chanced that the county prosecutor, a young man by the name of Slattery, was out of town at this time, so that the executive side of the law for a moment hesitated. The sheriff therefore called up Judge Henderson and asked his presence at the courthouse for a consultation. The two were closeted for some time in the sheriff's office. At this time the deliberations of the coroner's jury would have been well advanced; therefore, Sheriff Cowles took up the telephone and called up Coroner Blackman at the Tarbush residence, just as the latter was upon the point of calling for a verdict of the jury in the accustomed words, "Murder at the hands of party or parties unknown."

"Wait, Mr. Coroner!" said Sheriff Cowles. "There's going to be some more witnesses. Keep your jury together."

A few moments later the long shrieking whistle of Number Five was heard as she came up out of the Paw Paw Creek bottoms, climbing the hill at the brick yards, and swung around the curve through South Spring Valley into the stretch of straight track leading down to the station. As the grinding brakes brought the heavy train finally to a standstill, three or four young men swung down from the day coaches—reporters from outside towns.

Don Lane elbowed his way to the edge of the platform. His eye was searching eagerly along the train exits for someone else—someone else whom he longed and yet dreaded to see.

CHAPTER XI

THE NAME OF THE LAW

Don's moody face suddenly lighted up. A young woman was stepping down from one of the cars at the farther end of the train, the porter assisting her to the footstool. Now she was coming steadily along the edge of the platform, carrying in one hand a trim little bag, in the other a trim little umbrella. Now she was looking about, expectant. It was she—Anne!

His heart leaped out to her, his love rose surgingly at sight of her, sweet and beautiful as she seemed, and all so fit for love of man.

A tall young girl she was, who walked with head well up and the suggestion of tennis about her—an indefinable something of chic also about her, as indicative of physical well-being as that suggested by some of the young faces on the magazine covers of the day; which would explain why in her college Anne Oglesby always was known as "the magazine girl." She had straightforward gray eyes, a fine mouth of much sweetness. Above her forehead rose a deep and narrow ruff of dense brown hair, golden brown. Trim, yet well-appointed, she was one of those types whom unhesitatingly we class as aristocrats. A young woman fit for any higher class, qualified for any rank, she seemed—and a creature utterly apart from the crowd that now jostled her on the narrow platform.

Her eyes, too, lighted up at sight of the young man who now hurried forward to meet her, but no unseemly agitation marked her own personal conduct in public. Demure, clean, cool and sweet, all in hand, she did not hasten nor hold back.

Dieudonné Lane had told his mother that never yet had he kissed Anne Oglesby. Now, at sight of her and at the thought that almost at once they must part forever, a great rebellion rose in his heart. He stepped forward swiftly, impulsively, irresistibly.

He caught her quickly in his arms before all the crowd and kissed her—once. It was his great salutation to love—a salutation of great longing—a salutation which meant farewell.

She gasped, flushed rosy red, but walked straight along with him as he caught the bag from her

hands. She looked up at him, astonished, yet not wholly resentful. It was no place for speech on the part of either. The dust of the street seemed naught to him or her, and as for this curious crowd, they did not chill nor offend—Anne Oglesby suddenly wished to take all the world into her arms and greet it. Anne Oglesby at that moment loved—the touch of this man's lips on hers had wrought the irrevocable, immortal, awful change.

They had not yet spoken a word, these two, at the time he left her to call some vehicle for her use. He turned and looked directly into the face of Dan Cowles, sheriff, a man whom he had never seen before, but who now reached out and laid a hand upon his shoulder. Cowles had that instant reached the station platform.

Don would have passed, but the sheriff spoke:

"I want you. Come with me."

The tempestuous blood of the young man flamed at this, but now, as he looked into the solemn face before him, he found something to give him pause.

"What's up?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

"I'm the sheriff of this county," said Cowles. "Come with me."

"What do you want?" again demanded Don. "I'm with this young lady."

"That's no difference," said Cowles.

"It must be about the Tarbush matter," said Dewdonny Lane. "I'll testify, but I know nothing of that. I'll come on over directly. This young lady is going to Judge Henderson's."

The sheriff looked at the young girl curiously. The crowd now had surged about them. Like so many cattle at the smell of blood, a strange low sound, animal-like, a sort of moan of curiosity, seemed to rise. Wide-eyed, the girl turned.

"What is it, Don?" she exclaimed. "What has happened? The Tarbush case—what do you mean?"

"I'm going to take him to the coroner's hearing, miss," said the sheriff in a low tone of voice.

"Why, you see, Anne," began Don, "the city marshal of this town was killed last night. I suppose the coroner is looking into it. It's a terrible thing—the town's all upset—haven't you heard anything of it?"

"Why, no. I left home before any of our papers came out. How did it happen?"

Don felt the sheriff again touch his arm. "Step into my car," said he, "both of you—you get on the front seat with me."

A moment later they were whirling off up the dusty street toward the central part of the town. The crowd, breaking into little groups, came hurrying on along the sidewalks, some even falling into a run in the middle of the street.

"Well, he got him!" said one citizen to another. "Quick work for the sher'ff, wasn't it? A little more and that fellow would 'a' got off on that train, like enough. That's what he was down here for. I seen him lookin' for the train."

"Yes, and that young fellow had a dangerous look on him, too," said another. "He's *bad*, that's what he is! Look how he showed it yesterday—right after court, too."

Each had this or that comment to make, but all followed on now toward the scenes where the further action in the drama of the day must now ensue.

Cowles pulled up on the side of the square on which Judge Henderson had his office. "You may get out here, Miss," said he. "I think you'll find the Judge in right now."

"But why—what's the reason——" she began, much perturbed, and looking at Don. "What's wrong, Don? Aren't you coming?"

"Yes, Mr. Sheriff," said Don, "let me go up with her. I'll be right on over."

The big man looked at the two, a sort of pity in his face. "I'm sorry," said he, "but you'll have to come with me right away. Tell me, are you Miss Oglesby, his kin from over Columbus way?"

"Yes, yes," said she. "I've been here before. But tell me, what does this mean—this murder? It's an awful thing, isn't it? It seems to me I remember the marshal's name—maybe I've seen him. Who did it—whom do they suspect?"

"That's what we don't know for sure," said the sheriff, "and it's what we've got to find out."

"Why, who would ever have thought it of this little town!"

"Things happen in this little town, I reckon, about the same as they do anywhere," said the sheriff.

"Don——" She turned to him once more as she stood on the pavement, he still remaining on the front seat of the car where the sheriff's hand restrained him. "Why, Don——"

But the sheriff's solemn face was turned towards her. He shook his head. An instant and the car had whirled away from the curb.

They had parted, almost before they had met!

To Dieudonné Lane, ignorant as he was of the cause of all this, it seemed that the final parting of all had come, and, bitterly he reflected, they had had no chance—no chance whatever—for what was due them from their love, their life itself.

Anne Oglesby, the kiss of her lover's lips still sweet and trembling upon her mouth, her own mind confused, her own heart disturbed, turned towards the dusty stair, all her senses in a whirl. And within five minutes Don Lane, very pale and much distressed, was in the front part of the little home of Joel Tarbush. The officer had brought him before Justice Blackman, the coroner, and the coroner's jury, six solemn-faced men who sat now in the front parlor which had no other occupants save the red-eyed daughter of the dead man, and save the long and shrouded figure which lay upon the couch near by.

Don Lane could not misread the hostility of the gaze turned upon him by most of these whom now he saw.

Something suddenly caught at his heart—his first feeling of fear, of uncertainty; but even this was mingled with a rage at fate, which could be so cruelly unjust to him. And always, in spite of himself, he felt his eyes turning to look, awed, terrified, upon the long thing which lay upon the couch. And always the eyes of these six men saw what he did, saw what he saw.

"This is Dewdonny Lane," said the Sheriff briefly, and himself sat down to await the progress of events.

The formalities were few. "You may be sworn," said the coroner to him—"it's just as well." Then the oath administered, Blackman began the regular questions, and Don answered steadily.

"My name is Dieudonné Lane. I am twenty-two years of age. I have no residence as yet. I am a graduate in engineering. I'm going to Wyoming some time this month to take up my work there."

There was a little silence in the room, and then the coroner began again:

"Where were you just now?" he asked. "We sent for you at your home."

"I was at the station—I went to meet a friend."

"What friend was it?"

Don Lane flushed red. "What difference is it? Oh, if I must answer, it was Miss Anne Oglesby, of Columbus. I went down to the train to meet her."

Sheriff Cowles nodded. "That's true," said he. "I took her up to Judge Henderson's office myself."

"What relations have you with this young lady?" asked Blackman.

"That's not the business of anyone," said Don Lane hotly.

"Do you want counsel to protect you now?"

"No, why should I? I am perfectly willing to tell all I know about the case, and that's all I can do. There's no lawyer I'd send for anyhow."

"Where were you last night at about midnight?"

"I was at the library meeting with my mother."

"When did you leave there?"

"It must have been midnight or later—oh, yes, I remember seeing the town clock as we passed through the square. That was just before one o'clock—perhaps ten or fifteen minutes. We were out late—every one was."

"Who was with you when you were going home?"

"My mother, and for a time Mr. Rawlins here—one of you gentlemen of the jury. He will know. Just as we left the library we were joined by Mr. Horace Brooks."

"Where did you go?"

"We three walked on together. It was at the second corner of the square, where Mulberry Street turns off, that Mr. Brooks left me."

Nels Jorgens, one of the jury, now spoke up. "That's true," said he. "I saw the three of them walking along the front of the square, and saw them turn in at Mulberry Street. Across from where I live I saw two people at the gate. It was a man—a tall man—and her—Aurora Lane."

"You yourself were not at the gate then?"

"No," said Don, "I had left just at the corner of the square."

"Why did you leave them?"

"Well, I wanted to have a little run before I went to bed. I'm used to taking exercise every night—I always did at college, to keep up my training."

"Where did you go when you were running?"

"I may be mistaken in the directions, but it was across the square, opposite from Mulberry Street. I turned to the right. I must have run perhaps four or five blocks, I don't know just how far it was. It was quite warm."

"Did you come into this street?"

"I don't really know."

"You didn't see anybody?"

"Not a soul. I didn't hear a sound."

"What time was that?"

"I heard the clock strike one before I turned back."

"Gentlemen of the jury," said the coroner, "it was just about that time that Joel Tarbush was killed, right here."

"That's true," said Don Lane. "It's terrible to think of—but why—"

"You heard Judge Henderson's testimony, gentlemen," went on the coroner. "He told of seeing these three people pass by on the square in front of his office stair. Just before that he had said good night to Tarbush himself. He saw Tarbush start right over this way for his home. Now, just in time to catch him before he got into his home—if a man was running fast—a man *did* run from the square over in this direction!"

The members of the jury remained silent. Their faces were extremely grave.

"And, gentlemen, you have heard the testimony of other witnesses here before now, stating that this witness was heard to make threats to Tarbush yesterday afternoon, right after he was dismissed from my own court upstairs. Mr. Jorgens, I believe you were there. What did this young man say after he had for the second time assaulted Ephraim Adamson—twice in one day, and entirely regardless of the rebuke of the law?"

"He said, Mr. Coroner," replied Nels Jorgens gravely, even with sadness in his face, "just when he came out of the crowd where he had left Adamson laying on the ground already—he said to Tarbush, 'You'll come next'—or I'll get you next'—something of that kind."

"Was he angry at that time?"

"Yes, Mr. Coroner, he was," said Nels Jorgens, against his will.

Ben McQuaid leaned over to whisper to Jerome Westbrook. "It seems like this young fellow comes in here with his college education and undertakes to run this whole town. Pretty coarse work, it looks like to me."

Jerome Westbrook nodded slowly. He recalled Sally Lester's look.

Of all the six faces turned toward him from the scattered little group of the coroner's jury, not more than two showed the least compassion or sympathy. Don Lane's hot temper smarted under the renewed sense of the injustice which had assailed him yet again.

"What's the game?" he demanded. "Why am I brought here? What's the matter with you people? Do you mean to charge me with killing this man? What have I done to any of you? Damn your town, anyhow—the rotten, lying, hypocritical lot of you all!"

"The less you say the better," said the coroner; and the sheriff's steady gaze cautioned Don Lane yet more.

"Now, gentlemen," went on Blackman, "we have heard a number of witnesses here, and we have not found any man here that could bring forward any sight or sound of any suspicious character in this town. There hasn't been a tramp or outsider seen here, unless we except this young man now testifying here. The man on whose body we now are a-setting hadn't an enemy in this town, so far as has been shown here—no, nor so far as anyone of us knows. There has been no motive proved up here which would lead us to suspect anyone else of this crime."

Ben McQuaid once more leaned over to whisper to his seat-mate: "It's a likely thing a man would be running for his health, a night like last night, when he didn't have to! Ain't that the truth?"

The coroner rapped with his pencil on the table top. He was well filled with the sense of his own importance. In his mind he was procureur-general for Spring Valley. And in his mind still rankled the thought of the fiasco in his courtroom but the day before, in which he had made so small a figure.

"I want to ask you, Mr. Cowles," he said, turning to the sheriff, "if you ever have seen this young man before."

"Only once," said the sheriff, standing up. "Last night or this morning, just after the clock had

struck one—say, two or three minutes or so after one o'clock—I was going out of my office and going over to the east side of the square. I met this young man then. As he says, he was running—that is, he was coming back from this direction, and running toward the southeast corner of the square, the direction of his own home."

"Was he in a hurry—did he seem excited?"

"He was panting a little bit. He was running. He didn't seem to see me."

"Oh, yes, I did," said Don. "I remember you perfectly—that is, I remember perfectly passing some man in the half darkness under the trees as I came along that side of the square. As I said, it was warm."

"Now, gentlemen, we have thought it over for a long time," said the coroner, after a solemn pause. "We must bring in our verdict before long. It must either be 'party or parties unknown,' or we must hold someone we do suspect."

"We have had no one here that we could suspect until now. Take this young man—he is practically a stranger. He proves himself to be of violent and ungovernable temper. Allowed to go once from the justice of the law, he forgets that and goes violent again. He assaults a second time one of our citizens, Mr. Adamson. He resists arrest once by an officer of the law, and in the same afternoon he threatens that officer. He says, 'I'll get you.'

"This young man is seen just before one o'clock running over in this direction. Just a little ahead of him the victim of this crime was seen walking. He was killed, as his daughter testifies, somewhere just about one o'clock—it was at that time that he staggered into the house here."

"Just after one o'clock this young man is seen running—one of the hottest nights we have had this summer—running away from the scene of the crime, and toward his own home."

"I don't want to lead your own convictions in any way. I am willing to say, however, that if we have not found a man to hold for this crime, then we ain't apt to find him!"

"But, gentlemen, you don't mean"—poor Don began, his face pale for the first time, a sudden terror in his soul—"you *can't* mean that *I* did this!"

But he gazed into the faces of six men, upon whom rested the duty of vengeance for the wrong done to the society which they represented. Of these six all but two were openly hostile to him, and those two were sad. Rawlins, minister of the Church of Christ; Nels Jorgens, the blacksmith—they two were sad. But they two also were citizens.

"This witness," went on Coroner Blackman, "has in a way both abused us and defied us. He said he was not on trial. That is true. We can't try him. All we can do is to hold any man on whom a reasonable suspicion of this crime may be fixed. We could hold several suspects here, if there was that many. All we do is to pass the whole question on to the grand jury when it meets here. That's tomorrow morning. Before the grand jury any man accused can have his own counsel and the case can be taken up more conclusive. So the question for us now is, Shall we call it 'party or parties unknown,' or shall we——"

Don Lane dropped into a seat, his face in his hands, in his heart the bitter cry that all the world and all the powers of justice governing the world had now utterly forsaken him. The sheriff rose, and taking him by the arm, led him into another room.

In ten minutes a half-dozen reporters, trooping up from the train and waiting impatiently at the outer door, knew the nature of the verdict: "We the jury sitting upon the body of Joel Tarbush, deceased by violence, find that deceased came to his death by a blow from a blunt instrument held in the hands of Dieudonné Lane."

CHAPTER XII

ANNE OGLESBY

Judge William Henderson was sitting alone in the front room of his cool and spacious office, before him his long table with its clean glass top, so different from the work-bench of the average country lawyer. Everything about him was modern and perfect in his office equipment, for the judge had reached the period in his development in which he brought in most of his own personal ideas from an outer and a wider world—that same world which now occupied him as a field proper for one of his ambitions.

As he sat he was a not unpleasing figure of middle-aged success. His gray hair was swept back smoothly from his temples; his red cheeks, fresh reaped, bore the tinge of health. The large white hand before him on the glass-topped table betokened prosperity and success in every faint and fat-hid line.

Judge Henderson now was absorbed in the contemplation of a bit of paper which lay in his hand. It was a message from the telephone company, and it came from Slattery, county prosecutor. Something in it was of disturbing nature. Judge Henderson's brow was furrowed, his face was

troubled. He seemed, thus alone and not stimulated by an audience, years older than he had been but now.

He had been looking at this bit of paper for some time so intently that now he did not hear his hall door open—did not see one who paused there and then came, lightfooted, swiftly, across the space, to catch him and blindfold him as he sat. He heard the rustle of her skirts, and knew at once the deep counterfeit of her voice.

"Who is it?" she demanded, her hand over his eyes.

"Anne!" he exclaimed, catching at her hand. "You are here—when did you come?"

She went round and kissed him. "Just now," said she, "on the train from the city. You were not expecting me?"

"No, not at all."

"Well, here I am, Nunkie,"—she sometimes called her guardian by this pet name, although really they were not akin—"I'm finished and turned out complete—I'm done my college work now and ready for what we graduates call the Battle of Life. Do you think I'll do?"

She drew back and made him a pretty curtsey, spreading out her skirts. Indeed, she was very fair to look upon and he smiled at her admiringly.

"You are beautiful, Anne," said he. "You are very beautiful—you are fine."

"Do I please you in every way?" said she.

"Perfectly, my dear. You cannot do otherwise."

She looked at him demurely. "I'm not so sure," said she. "Wait until you have heard all I have to tell you."

"What's wrong? Are you in debt?"

"Worse than that, Nunkie dear—I'm engaged!"

Now indeed he looked at her with sudden consternation in his face. "What's that? You haven't told me anything of the sort."

"I never knew it until just now—at the station." She came now and sat down upon the arm of his chair. "It just happened yesterday—and today."

She put up a finger to her lips and rubbed them, fearing that he might see there the flame of the kiss they but now had borne.

"Who is the young man—if you are really in earnest about all this? Where did you meet him? Whoever he is, you've hardly done your duty by me. I'm your guardian—I stand *in loco parentis* for you. When did all this happen?"

"Yesterday, on the train. I didn't expect it myself. But I promised. He's promised me. We were going to tell you about it at once."

She was the very picture of happy and contented young womanhood as she spoke. Not so happy was the man whom she addressed.

"I can't guess at all whom you mean," said he. "Is he anybody—is he a man of station—has he any business—has he any means? How old is he—who is he?"

"I can't answer so many questions all at once, Nunkie," said she. "But I'm going to be very happy, I know that. Perhaps you can answer some of the questions for yourself—perhaps you know him. Well, it's Dieudonné Lane!—he's in town right now—a schoolmate of mine for four years. Surely, I know all about him."

Judge Henderson swiftly turned and looked at her steadily, cold consternation on his face. "Anne!" he exclaimed. "That can't be! It's absurd."

"Oh, I expected that," said she easily. "That's because he hasn't any money. I knew that. As for his family—he told me long ago that he was an orphan, that his father died when he was very young, and left only enough for his education, and that he would have to make his own way. Very well, some men have had to do that—you have had to yourself, Nunkie, isn't it true? And Don was born here in this very town—"

He put out his hand over hers as it lay upon the table-top. "Anne!" said he. "My child! You're but a child—an impulsive, foolish child. What have you done? You have not pledged your word—to *him*?"

"Oh, yes, I have. I'm promised—my promise is given. More—"

"It's folly and worse than folly. It can't be—I won't have it—you hear me?" He broke out savagely now.

"I heard you—yes, but I'll jolly well not pay too much attention to you, even when you roar at me that way. As I understand it, I'm of age. I've been studying for four years to get ready to be able to know my own mind—and I do! My own heart also. And I know what's due me."

Her voice was low and very sweet, but the man who heard her winced at its cutting calm.

"You would marry a man like that, of no family, of no place, of no name?"

"Yes, I've just said that. I know all about it. We'll have to start at the bottom; and I ask you, didn't you start that way?"

"That's an entirely different proposition, my dear girl," said her guardian. "Times were different then. You are an heiress—you are a woman of family and place—and you don't have to go back to the old days—you don't need to ruin your own life through such terrible beginnings.

"But now, do you know who this young man's people are?" He asked this last after a considerable pause, during which his ward sat silent, looking at him steadily.

"Oh, yes. He told me he is an orphan—his father's dead long ago. And his mother——"

"You know his mother?"

"Yes, a milliner—I believe. But a good woman."

"Ah!"

She still looked at him, smiling. "I am 'advanced,' you see, Nunkie! In college we studied things. I don't care for the social rank—I want to marry a *man*. I love Don. I love—well, that kind of man. I'm so happy!"

She squeezed him tight in a sudden warm embrace. "I love all the world, I believe, Nunkie—even you, and you are an old bear, as everybody knows! And I thank you for all those papers in the long envelopes—with the lines and the crosses on them, and the pencil mark 'Sign here'—powers of attorney and receipts, and bonds and shares and mortgages and certificates—all that sort of thing. Am I very rich, Nunkie?"

"Not very, as heiresses go these days," said he. "You're worth maybe four or five hundred thousand dollars, not very much. But that's not the question. That's not really everything there is at stake in this—although I'm well enough satisfied that's all this young man cares for."

"Thank you!" said she proudly. "I had not known that."

"A good many things you have not known, my dear. Now listen here. Do you know what this marriage would mean to me? I want to be United States Senator from this state—and everything bids fair to see my ambition gratified. But politics is a ticklish game."

"Well, what on earth has that to do with me and Don?"

"It has everything to do! I'm *not* 'advanced,' I'm old fashioned enough to know that social rank does count in my business at least. In politics every little thing counts; so I tell you, for every reason in the world you must dismiss this young man from your thoughts. You are quixotic, I know—you are stubborn, like your mother—a good woman, but stubborn."

He was arguing with her, but Anne could not read his face, although she sought to do so—there seemed some veil hiding his real thoughts. And his face was troubled. She thought he had aged very much.

"In one particular matter," said she slowly, at last. "It seems to me a woman should be stubborn. She should have her own say about the man she is to marry."

"How much time have you had to decide on this?"

"Plenty. Twenty-four hours, or a little less—no, I'll say twenty minutes. Plenty. Uncle—he kissed me—before the world. I can't take it back—we have given—I have promised. Uncle, I have promised—well, all through me."

"Stop where you are!" said he. "Have you disgraced us all so soon? Has it gone so far? However that is, you shall go no further."

He rose, his fingers on the table-top, rapping in emphasis.

"My dear," he said, "I am older than you, and I have seen the world more than you have. I recognize fully enough the dynamic quality of what you call love—what I call merely sex in younger human beings. It is a thing of extreme seriousness, that's true. But the surest thing about all that sort of thing is that it changes, it passes. You will forget all this."

"You do me much honor!" said Anne Oglesby, coloring. "You speak with much delicacy. But love me, love my lover."

The swift resistance of a strong nature seemed suddenly to flash out at Judge Henderson from her gray eyes. Suddenly he turned and took her arm. He escorted her to the inner room, which served as his own study and consultation chambers.

"Come here," said he. "We'll have to talk this thing over quietly. This is a terrible matter—you don't know how terrible. There's a lot under this that you don't know at all. Anne, my dear girl, what can I say to you to alter you in this foolish resolve?"

"Nothing! I'm going to see his mother this very afternoon. He told me to come, so I could meet

his mother——"

"You're going to do nothing of the kind!" said Judge Henderson in sudden anger. "You're going to stay here and listen to reason, that's what you're going to do! You undertake to go into a situation which reaches wider than this town, wider than this state, do you? It is your duty, then, to prevent me from *my* duty? Are you so selfish, so egotistic as all that?"

She smiled at him amusedly, cynically, a wide and frank smile, which irritated him unspeakably. He frowned.

"It is time now for you to reflect. First—as you say—this young man has no father. His mother ——"

He paused suddenly, his pallid face working strangely now. The shrill summons of the telephone close at his hand as he sat had caused him to start, but it was with relief. He took down the receiver and placed his hand for the moment over the mouthpiece.

"Aurora Lane—you don't know about her?" he began.

Then she saw a sudden change of expression which passed over his face. "Yes—yes," he said, into the telephone. "The jury has brought in its verdict? *What's that?*——"

The phone dropped clattering from his hand on the desk, so shaking and uncertain was his grasp. He turned to his ward slowly.

"You don't know!" said he. "You don't know what that was I have just heard this moment! Well, I'll tell you. Dieudonné Lane has been held to the grand jury—while we've been sitting here. They've charged him with the murder of Tarbush, the city marshal. My God! Anne——"

It seemed an hour to both before she spoke. Her face, first flushed, then pale, became set and cold as she looked toward the man who brought this news. Once she flinched; then pulled together. But yesterday a girl, this hour a young woman, now she was all at once mature, resolved.

"You heard me, did you not?" he went on, his voice rising. "Charged—with murder! No one in the world knew he was alive—no one but you, and you never told me of him—no one ever dreamed of him till the last twenty-four hours, when he came blundering in here—out of his grave, I say! And in twenty-four hours he has made his record here—and *this* is his record. Do you know what this means? He may not come through—I want to say the chances look bad for him, very bad indeed." Judge Henderson's smooth face showed more agitation than ever it had in all his life before.

"Uncle," she said, after a long time, reaching out a hand to him, "now is your opportunity!"

"What do you mean? *My* opportunity? It's—it's a terrible thing—you don't know."

"Yes, yes. But you say you have been in the place of a parent to me. That's true—I owe you much—you have been good—you have been kind. Be good, be kind now! Oh, don't you see what is your duty? Now you can use your learning, your wisdom, your oratory. You can save Don—for me. You're my parent—can't you be his, too? We're both orphans—can't you be a father for us both? Of *course* you will defend him. He hasn't much. He couldn't pay you now. But I have money—you've just told me that I have.

"Oh, no, I don't mean that, about the money—but listen," she went on, since he made no reply. "Do you think *I'd* desert him now that he's in trouble? Do you think any woman of my family would do that? We're not so low, I trust, either of us, either side. You are not so low as that, I trust, yourself. Why, you'd not desert anyone, surely not an orphan boy, just starting out—you'd never in the world do that, I know."

In answer he smoothed out before her on the desk top the crumpled paper he had held in his hand.

"This," said he, "was brought to me just before you came in yourself. Before you told me of this affair, I was retained by the state's attorney to assist in the prosecution of the perpetrator of this crime, *whoever he might be*. I must say it is one of the most terrible crimes ever known in this community. The man who did it must pass from among his fellow men forever. It is my duty to accept this retainer for the prosecution, as I have done——"

"What—as you *have* done?—You'd help prosecute him—you'd help send him to the gallows, if you could—as innocent as he is? You—you—and he has no one to counsel with—only a poor woman, a widow, who's never had a chance—he an orphan, without a friend! You'd do *that?*"

His large white hand was raised restrainingly. "We must both be calm," said he. "I've got to think."

"Why, where will Don go—where will they put him?"

"He will go to jail, and be there until the grand jury meets—longer than that, perhaps—and yet longer, if the trial judge and jury bring a verdict against him!"

"But that's taking him away from me—right now—that's not right!—Can't he get out?"

"He might perhaps be released on bail if the bail were large enough, but the crime is the maximum crime, and the suspicion is most severe. I don't know what means he can command,

but he needs counsel now.

"But one thing, Anne," he added, "I forbid you. You must have nothing to do with him. Keep away from him. Go home, and don't meddle in this case. It must take its course."

"I would follow him to the foot of the gallows, if need be, Judge Henderson!" broke out Anne Oglesby in a sudden flare of passionate anger. "Ah, fine!—to give your word, your promise—to give your love, and then within an hour forget it all—to leave the one you love when the trouble comes! Is that all one gains—is that all one may expect—is that all a woman ought to do for the man she loves? Is that all she ought to expect from a man? Suppose it were I in trouble—would *he* forget me? Would *he* forsake me? Then shall I? You don't know me if you think that of me!

"You don't know me at all," she blazed on at him, as he turned away. "I've tried to reason. Whatever my success at that, the answer's in my own heart now." (Her heart, now beating so fast under the heaving bosom on which both her hands were clasped.)

"And you forget me? I—I'm in trouble now—it's awful—it's a terrible trouble that I'm in now." Judge Henderson's voice was trembling, his face was pale.

"You—in what way am I bound to you? Trouble—what do you mean? Why, listen!—All your life you have lived with just one aim and purpose and ambition in your heart—and that was yourself! Your own ambition—your own pleasure, your own comfort—those were the things that have controlled you always—don't I know, haven't I heard? You've been a very leech in this town—you have taken *all* the success in it—*all* the success of everybody, from *all* its people—and used it for yourself! It has been so common to you—you are so used to it—that you can't think of anything else—you can't visualize anything else. You think of yourself as the source and center of all good—you can't help that—that's your nature. So I suppose you think you are altogether within your rights when you tell me that I must wreck and ruin my own life to save you and your ambition! Why, you are—you're a *sponge*—that's what you are—you are just soaking in *all* the happiness of others—*all* the success of others, I tell you—taking it *all* for yourself. 'Our most prominent citizen!' Great God! But what has it cost this community to produce you—what are you asking it to cost me and those I love? Drops in the same bucket? Food for you and your ambition? Do you think I am going to stand that, when it comes to me—me and him—the man I have promised—the man I love? You don't know me! You don't know him! We'll fight!"

He sat, so astounded at this sudden outburst—the first thing of the kind he had ever heard from any human being in all his life—that for the time he could make no reply at all. She went on bitterly now:

"Men like you, sponges like yourself, have made what they call success in all the ages of the world—yes, that's true. Great kings, great cardinals, great politicians, great business men, great thieves have made that kind of a success, that's true enough—I've read about them, yes. Men of that sort—Judge Henderson—sometimes they stop at nothing. They'd betray their very own. I'm not your blood, but if I were, I'd not trust you! Men like you are so absorbed with their own vanity, their own selfishness—they're so used to having everything given to them without exertion, without cost, they grow regardless of what that cost may be to the ones that do the giving. In time they begin to think themselves apart from the rest of the world—don't you think that about yourself now? Oh, are you better than the world? Or are you just a man, like the rest of them? Didn't you ever know—didn't you ever kiss a woman in all your life and know what that meant?"

He had sat, his shocked face turned toward her, too stunned for answer. But she saw him start as though under the blow of a dagger at her last words.

"Don't think this hasn't hurt," said she, more composedly now. "It's the truth as far as I know it. With your power, your influence, you could get him free—soon—very soon—perhaps. You could make us both happy. But, so you say, that would make *you* unhappy! I know you well enough to know what the decision will be in a case like that, Judge Henderson!

"As for me—" she was closer to him now, utterly fearless, as a woman is who loves and sees the object of her love threatened—"our paths part here, now! I'm of age and my own mistress. I know my own mind, as I've told you. I'm going to stay—I'm going to stick—do you hear? I'm going to love him long as he lives. I'm going to *marry* him, if it's in a jail!"

Judge Henderson only began to wag his head now from side to side. His face had gone ghastly.

"Why, Uncle dear"—she came over to him now—"forgive me if I've been too outspoken—it's only because I'm so strained."

"Myself also," he groaned. "Strain? Why, yes. You don't know—you don't know!"

Suddenly she changed once more, still the woman, still the young girl, as yet half ignorant of life, her hands still on her heaving bosom now, the faint flush back in her cheeks.

"He *kissed* me, Uncle!" said she. "I don't know much, but it seems to me if a man kisses a woman—in that way—it's *life* for her and him! They can't help it after that. After that, a woman's got to do just all she can in the game of life—and he's got to do the best he knows. They can't help it. He *kissed* me.... And I told you I'll not desert him. It wouldn't be right. And, right or wrong, I can't—I *can't*!"

Panting, the tears now almost ready to drop from her moist eyes, she stood, a beautiful picture of young womanhood, so soft, so fully fitted for love and love's caresses; and now so wronged out of her love by sudden fate. But in her there was no sign of weakness or of yielding. The man who faced her felt the truth of that. His own face now was far the more irresolute of the two—far the more agitated.

Suddenly, haggard, frowning, he rose, at a sound which he heard in the outer room. Someone had entered.

As he stepped to the door between the two rooms, Judge Henderson turned, his finger on his lips, and made signs that Anne should remain where she was, undiscovered. The door hung just a trifle, wedged open by the corner of a fallen rug. Judge Henderson had not time, or did not think, to close it wholly. He stood face to face with the newcomer.

It was Aurora Lane!

CHAPTER XIII

"AS YOU BELIEVE IN GOD!"

Aurora Lane and Judge Henderson both started back as they faced one another. For the moment neither spoke.

Aurora was pale, quite beyond her wont, haggard-looking about the eyes. She had come direct from her home, without alteration of her usual daily costume. In spite of all, she was very far from uncomely as she stood now, about her the old indefinable stamp of class which always had clung to her. Certainly she was quite the equal in appearance of this tall man, soft from easy living, who faced her now, a trifle pasty of skin, a trifle soft about the jaws, a trifle indefinite about the waist—a man with a face as pale and haggard as her own.

Tense as she was, her long schooling in repression stood her in such stead as to leave her in the better possession of self-control.

"My dear—my dear Madam——" began Judge Henderson.

The hearer in the room beyond must have caught the pause in his voice, its agitation—and must have heard the even tones of the woman as she spoke at last, after a long silence.

"I have come to your office, as you know, for the first time," said Aurora Lane. She gave him no title, no formal address. "It is the first time in twenty years."

"You have lived a somewhat secluded life, yes, my dear Madam." His voice, his manner, his attitude, all were labored. He at least knew or suspected that he was talking to two women, and not one; for there was no way for Anne to escape and no way in which he could be sure she did not hear.

"You know about him—about the boy? Of course, everyone in town does. He didn't die. He's been away—in college. I never wanted him to see this place. But now he's come back—you know all about it. He's in jail. We've been thinking perhaps you could do something—that you would help us."

Her high, clear, staccato voice, easily audible far, now showed her own keyed-up condition.

Judge Henderson raised a large white hand. "My dear Madam," said he, himself very far from calm, "let us be calm! Let us above all things be calm and practical."

Aurora Lane's face froze into a sudden icy mask of wonder, of astonishment. She gulped a little. "I'm trying to be calm. I'm desperate, or I'd never have come here. You know that."

He was mumbling and clucking in his throat, gesturing imploringly, trying to stop her swift speech, which might be overheard, but she went on, not understanding.

"Until just now I was so happy. He was done with his schooling—ready to go out at his work. The expenses were very heavy for us, but we've managed. Look!"

She drew from her worn pocketbook the single bill that she had left in all the world, a tight-creased, worn thing. "In some way I've managed to hold on to this," said she. "It's all I've got left in all the world. That's my twenty-odd years of savings—except what I've spent to bring up my boy. I've got no more."

"My dear Madam," said Judge Henderson again, sighing, "life certainly has its trials at times." A remark sufficiently banal to pass muster with both his hearers, Aurora Lane here and Anne Oglesby in the room beyond. But, still ignorant of any other auditor, Aurora went on as though she had not heard him:

"I thought I'd come and talk to you—at last. If only Don could get out, I'd be willing to leave with him. We'd never trouble anybody any more." Her face was turned to him beseechingly.

"I know, of course, that you could save him if you liked.... I've had a pretty hard time of it. Don't you want to do this for him—for us—how can you *help* wanting to? You, of all men! My God! Oh, my God!"

"Hush! Hush! Don't speak so loud! Pray compose yourself, my dear Madam," exclaimed Judge Henderson, himself so far from composed. His own face was ghastly in its open apprehension. "He's ruined himself, that's all, that boy," he concluded lamely.

She stood before him, stony cold, for a time, growing whiter and whiter.

"And what about my own ruin? What does it leave to me, if they take my boy—all I have in the world? I didn't think you could hesitate a moment—not even you!" Her voice, icy cold, was that of another woman.

He turned from her, flinging out his hands. "He has disgraced you——" he began, still weakly; for he at least knew he was doubly on the defensive now, before these two women, terrible in their love.

"No, he has not!" flared Aurora Lane at last. "If I've had disgrace it's not through any fault of his. If he raised a hand in my defense, it was the first man's hand that has been raised for me in all this town—in all my life!"

She held before him again the tight-folded little bill, seeking with trembling fingers to unfold it so that he might see its pitifully small denomination. She shook it in his face in sudden rage. "That's my life savings! If there was such a thing as justice in the world, would I be helpless as this—so helpless that I could find it possible to come here to talk to you? Justice? Justice! Ah, my God in heaven!"

Aurora Lane's voice was slightly rising. She was fronting him in the last courage of despair. "You'd see that boy perish—you'd let him die? If I thought that was true, I'd be willing to do everything I could to ruin this town. I'd pull the roof down on it if I were strong enough. I'd throw myself away, indeed. I'd curse God—I'd die. Above all, I'd curse you, with my last breath."

Anne, in the next room, rooted in the horror of her silence, could not have heard his reply, but almost she might have pictured him, standing white, ghastly, trembling, as he was when he heard these words.

"But you can't do it—you can't deny him—he's a human being like yourself—he's part of——Ah, you'll get him free, I know!" Aurora's voice was pleading now. Judge Henderson's own voice was hoarse, unnatural, when at last he got it.

"Look at this message," he croaked, in a half whisper; and showed her the crumpled bit of paper which he had held in his own hand. He beckoned to her—yet again—for silence, but she did not understand.

"What is it?" asked Aurora. "What do you mean?"

"From the state's attorney! I have accepted this retainer. I'm of the prosecution! You have come too late. What can I do?"

"Prosecution—what do you mean? Prosecute him—*Don*? Too late—my God! Am I always too late—is it always in all the world for me—too late! Prosecute *him*? What do you *mean*?"

The sudden, wailing cry broke from her. Then her voice trailed off into a whisper—a whisper which might have been heard very far—which was heard through the half-closed door which led to the inner room. "Too late!" And at length the long-tried soul of Aurora Lane broke out in a final and uncontrolled rebellion, all bounds down, all restraint forgotten, every instinct at last released of its long fettering:

"You disown him—you'd disown your own flesh and blood—you'd let him die! Why, you'd betray your own Master for the price of office and of honor! Oh, I know, I know! The limelight! Publicity! Oh, you Judas!—Ah, Judas! Judas! You, his father! *Your own son!*"

Then sobs, deep, convulsive.

Came sudden rustling of garments in the adjoining room. The intervening door was flung wide. Anne Oglesby, her face pale, tense, came out into the room where stood these two.

"What is this?" she demanded of Judge Henderson. "This is Mrs. Lane? *Don's your son?*"

She turned to Aurora inquiringly.

"I have heard—I could not help hearing. His father! Don told me his father was dead. What's all this? Tell me!"

For a moment they stood apart, three individuals only. Then, slowly, with subtle affiliation of sex, the women drew together, allied against the man.

It was Anne who again was first to speak. Her voice was high, clear, cold as ice, with a patrician note which came from somewhere out of the past.

"Let me have all this quite plain," said she. "Mrs. Lane said 'flesh and blood!' Mrs. Lane said '*your own son!*' I heard her. What does it mean?"

"This is what it means!" said Aurora Lane, suddenly drawing Anne to her closely, after her one swift glance. "My boy's in jail. This—this man—Judge Henderson—is his father. He says he's hired to murder him—and he's our child."

"I didn't know!" broke out Judge Henderson, now facing both his hearers. "I never knew! You said he was dead—you told me so. It's all half a lifetime ago. I've had nothing to do with you, nor you with me, since we broke off more than twenty years ago. That was as you wished. God! I was only a man. You *said* the child died."

"Yes," said Aurora Lane, turning to Anne; "that's true—I did. I told that one lie to protect the boy. I sent him away when he was a baby to protect him. I said he was dead—to protect him—to keep him from ever knowing. But you know—you saw him—you *felt* it—you must have known, yesterday." She confronted the trembling man once more.

"Yesterday?" said Anne Oglesby.

"Yes. There was another trial then—and Judge Henderson prosecuted then also!" She turned again to him for his answer.

"I dropped the case."

"You dropped it because you were paid to drop it! You traded another man out of his own life's ambition—a better man than you are—that's what you did when you dropped the case. There's nothing more to trade—we've nothing more to pay—but how can you prosecute him—now—when his very life's at stake—when he's charged with murder? The punishment's death! You'd send him to the gallows now—my boy—and yours? You didn't know him then! Is it likely? Don't lie about it—if you didn't know him, *why* didn't you? Were you so busy looking at your own picture on the wall—so wrapped up in your own ambitions, that you couldn't see anything else? Couldn't you see your own flesh and blood—and mine? What's twenty years? Haven't I lived them, and wouldn't I know him—didn't I—when I saw him? You Judas!"

Motionless, she stood looking at the speechless man before her, until she felt the closer drawing to her of the tall young beauty at her side.

"And you're Anne?" she said, turning to the girl, her own large dark eyes now soft. "I know. He loves you, Don. Has he said good-by to you? Has he said he wasn't worthy of you, because he had—no father? *This* is his father—Don's father—Judge William Henderson. He'll not deny it. I told Don he mustn't think of you—of all women in the world—just because you are so close to Judge Henderson—Don's father.

"Now you see why I told my boy that lie—I didn't want him ever to know his father—yes, I'd told him his father was dead. And I don't want to seem a worse liar to my own boy—I've been bad enough, the way it is."

She felt Anne Oglesby's arm draw her closer yet, felt the soft warm body of the girl against her own.

"I make only trouble," said Aurora, murmuring. "And you—you're so beautiful. I don't blame him."

"I love him, too!" said Anne Oglesby steadily. "I'm not going to give him up."

Aurora Lane's tears came then.

"You—you two women—" gasped Judge Henderson—"do you know what you're doing here? Do you think I don't suffer, too?" Then Anne saw that every accusation Aurora Lane had made was true and more than true.

"About that trial yesterday"—he turned to Aurora—"I *did* have some sort of superstitious feeling—I own that—I couldn't account for it—I couldn't explain it. But you had assured me that your—our—er—the child—had died in infancy. I thought—I hoped it was only my own guilty conscience making me see things. I—I *have* had a conscience. But I knew nothing—we'd not met for years."

"That's all true," said Aurora to Anne, nodding toward Judge Henderson. "I've scarce spoken more than twenty words to him in twenty years. I've kept the secret, and carried the blame. Until yesterday Don never knew about himself—about his having no father. He hasn't a guess even now who his father was—or is—at least he'll never make the right guess. No one has, no one ever will. They may wrong another man, but they'll not suspect the right one."

She felt the strong young arm of Anne still about her, and so went on, nodding again toward Judge Henderson—"I asked him to defend his own son—you heard me, then? And he's told me he's hired to hang his son! And I called him 'Judas.' And I pray God to sink him in hell if he does this work. After all, there must be a hell somewhere—I think there must be. This is not right—it's not right! I've stood it all till now, but I can't stand this."

"Wait!" exclaimed Judge Henderson. "Give me time to think, I tell you! My whole life's up on this, as well as yours. You've had twenty years to think about this, and I've not had that many minutes. You and I've not met, I say—our paths have lain totally apart. It was in the past—we'd lived it down."

"We had lived it down!" Aurora Lane's laugh was bitter enough, and she made no other comment.

Still she felt, closer and closer, the warm young body of the girl who stood by her as the two

women faced the man in the ancient and undying battle of sex.

"Well, I dropped that case," resumed Judge Henderson, "name or claim the reason as you like. But *this* case is different—"

"Why?" asked Anne Oglesby. "What's the difference between the two cases? You say you didn't know, then. Now you know."

"But I've my reputation to keep clean, Anne! The higher you climb, the riskier the ladder. I could drop that little case yesterday, but let me drop *this* case, with all the whole town back of it—and all my whole political party back of it, too—that's another matter!"

"Is it, indeed!"

"Yes!" he rasped. "I put Judge Reeves on the bench here. It's a big case. If I withdrew a second time—if things got stirred up and people began to talk—why, that would be enough to put Old Hod Brooks on the scent. He'd well enough take care of all the rest! It would be the end of my career—in twenty minutes. There'd be nothing left of my chances—there'd be nothing left of my reputation—the work of twenty years would be undone. I'd be ruined!"

"The work of twenty years!" whispered Aurora Lane to herself. "Twenty years! And—ruin!" Her voice rose again. "What about us others? You're talking about yourself, your reputation, your success—how about Don? His *life's* at stake. So is mine—I'd not survive it if they killed my boy."

"What's he to you, anyhow?" broke out Judge Henderson—"this man Brooks? Are you in any conspiracy of his? What's under this? What's he to you? Was he ever—has he ever—"

"Stop!" said Aurora Lane, her voice sharp, her face cameo-cold. "Not another word!" And even the sullen and distracted soul of the man before her acknowledged the imperative command. "You traded him out of his place. You're trying to trade now in your own son's life! Is that—can that really be true of any man?"

"Don't bait me too far!" he rejoined savagely. "Don't you go on now and drive me into fighting these charges."

"I don't think you would, Uncle," said the calm voice of Anne Oglesby. "I don't think you would."

"So this," she added softly, "is what my guardian was! *In loco parentis!*"

The man before her writhed in his own bitter suffering, flinging out his hands imploringly under the lash of her words.

"Anne! Anne!"—Aurora turned to the girl at her side—"I wish all this might have been spared you. You're so young! But it all had to come out some time, I suppose, and I'd rather have you learn it from me than from Don. You've not seen him—he has not told you?"

"No. We only had a moment—not alone—just a little while ago. They took him away—I didn't know why, till just now. We've just heard what the coroner's jury said. But I'll not leave him till he tells me, to, and only then if he says he doesn't love me."

"He could never say that!" said Aurora Lane. "But I told him he must leave you."

"Did he say he would?"

"Yes, yes, of course! But when I told him that, I didn't know you; and I did not think Don ever would know who his father was. He doesn't know even now."

Judge Henderson turned suddenly, catching at a thought which came to him from Aurora's words.

"Why should anyone *ever* know!" he began. "If this whole matter could be quieted down—if this case could be dismissed—"

"Would you promise me," he turned toward Aurora—"if I could manage in some way to get all this hushed down—if I could save the boy's life—would you promise me, both of you, never to tell a soul in the world—never to let anyone get a breath of this? You are the only two that really know it at all—you said, Aurora, that even the boy doesn't know it all. Why should he, ever? It's been hid this long, why not longer?"

"Anne and I, and yourself, are the only human beings in the world who know it all," said Aurora Lane.

"Can *you* keep such a secret?" Judge Henderson turned more doubtfully to Anne Oglesby, whose cold, quiet scorn had cut him even more deeply than the bitterer words of the older woman.

"I'd do anything for Don—anything I thought he'd be willing to have me do. But I don't see how such a thing as this could be kept down. How can the law be set aside?"

"Listen here," he said, facing her, a little color of hope at last in his face. "You don't in the least know what you've been starting here, and you don't know anything about the remedy for it. The law? It's close to politics, sometimes! If I fall—can't you see—I drag down plenty of others—I drag down my own town—I drag down my whole judiciary—I've been on the bench here myself. Oh, you two don't know all about how things are done in politics. I'd drag down all the machinery of

my own party in this state—the thing would go even wider than that—I'd be compromising the national administration itself. I tell you, it's ruin, ruin, if this thing gets out. This is the very crisis of all my life—my whole fate, my whole past and future, are in your hands now, and much more beside—in the hands of you two women.

"But I've got to fight the best I may," he added, walking excitedly apart, and smiting one hand into the other. "Look here, now," and he turned to them with a new look on his haggard face. "Your fate's *in my hands*, too! Go beyond reason with me—threaten and goad me too far—and I'll see what can be done to ruin you two, if you succeed in ruining me!"

"I've not asked that," said Aurora Lane. "I don't care about that. What's revenge to me? And what's ruin? I've asked nothing of you—nothing, but my boy's life, and never that till now. You gave it to me once, unasked. I'm asking it again, now—his life—my boy's. I bore him in grief and sorrow. It's your time of travail now. That's all."

Judge Henderson almost wept in his own self-pity.

"Think how horribly, how grotesquely unjust all this is," his voice trembled—"raking up all the deeds of a man's youth. The past ought to be *forgotten*. A man's past—"

"Or a woman's?" said Aurora.

"Well, yes, or a woman's. But it's men like me who have to build up things, do things, administer things, wisely and justly. I've been a judge on the bench here, before the world, I say. And here you two women—why, it's ghastly, it's terrible, it's *criminal*. Your dragging me down—it—it's a hellish thing to do."

"What? What's that?" The voice of Aurora Lane rose again. "If there's any hell, it's for a false judge. You once sat on the bench, yonder—yes. Oh, Judas—worse—you are ten times worse than Judas!—Drag you down—drag all the town, all the state, all the society down? Why, yes, I would if I could! I will, I will!"

But, sobbing as she was, and desperate, she felt the light hand of Anne Oglesby now swiftly patting her shoulder for silence. The girl faced her guardian with the same light smile on her lips, cool and contemptuous.

"Wait a minute, Uncle," she said. "A moment ago you spoke of our fate being in your hands, too—of one ruin offset against another. Come now, you're a trader—you have been all your life, Uncle—it seems you're always willing to trade in the practice of the law. That's how you've got up where you are."

Her smile, her words, cut him beyond measure, but he clung to his idea.

"Very well, then. Now, suppose we trade!" He spoke sneeringly, but inwardly he was trembling, for he knew not what moment Aurora Lane might publicly make good her threat.

"What can he mean?" Aurora turned to Anne. But Anne, shrewder at the time, broke in: "Leave him alone. Let him go on."

"Well, now," said Judge Henderson, and actually half began to clear his throat, so sweet did his new thought appear to him, "as I was saying—there's no actual indictment yet—there's been no trial—the coroner has only held him over. Say I'd take on this prosecution, ostensibly—ostensibly—conditionally—ostensibly—to keep down any suspicion; and then, later on, after several continuances and delays, you know, and the disappearance of all the witnesses for the state—hum!—yes, I'll say it might be done. I'm not sure it couldn't be done more or less easily, now I come to think of it—I know Reeves, and I know how much he'd like to be governor of this state—they have to come downstate every once in a while for available timber.

"So, my dear girl," he turned to Anne in virtuous triumph, "after all, since this would do two things—save the boy's life and save my reputation, it might not be discreditable to be what you call a 'trader!'" There really was exultation in his smile.

"What do you want for it?" asked Anne Oglesby coldly. "Where would it leave Don? In jail indefinitely?"

"I could not state it more precisely! *He looks like me!* Oh, I'll admit that—my feeling was right, my conscience was right! He *is* my son. But *because* he is and *because* he looks like me, he's got to stay in jail where he'll not be *seen*,—a year or two, perhaps. There can't be any bail."

The two white-faced women looked each into the other's face, sad-eyed. Anne's breath came tremblingly. "It's the best we can do!" said she at last; and Aurora, seeing how it was, nodded mutely.

"What do you want for it, Uncle?" demanded Anne contemptuously again.

"I want—silence!" said he harshly, at last beginning to assert himself. "Silence! And I've got to be sure about it."

Suddenly he pulled open a drawer in the table before him. The women started, fearing a weapon; but it was only a book he drew out—an old, dusty book, the edges of its leaves once gilded—a copy of the Holy Scriptures, very old and dusty.

Judge Henderson by accident now saw the fly leaf, for the first time in years. It was the little Bible his own father had given him, half a lifetime ago, when he was first starting out into the practice of the law. On the yellowed leaf in faded ink could still be seen the inscription his father had written there in Latin for his son:

"*Filio meo; Crede Deo.*—To my son; Believe in God!"

"Will you swear on the Bible?" demanded Judge Henderson, "both of you, that you'll never tell nor hint a word of this to any human being in the world—not even to him—the boy?"

The hand which held the dusty little volume was trembling, but Judge Henderson was not thinking of his own father, nor of the inscription in the little book.

"Yes!" said Aurora Lane at once. But Anne Oglesby raised a hand for pause.

"I'll not swear to keep back anything from him, my husband. I'm not sure I could."

"Your husband——"

"I'm going to marry him, unless he sends me away."

"It can't be soon—it may be very long—it will be years——" Judge Henderson was getting back a little color now, a little self-assertiveness, a little more readiness to argue.

"I can wait," said Anne. "But I can't buy him cheap—Don wouldn't let me. I know who his father is, and he ought to know it, too. That's his right."

"Anne," said Aurora Lane, "I denied him that right. You got my secret by accident. Can't you keep it, too? It's a heavy weight that Judge Henderson has laid on more than one woman—a load to be borne by three women, myself, Miss Julia, and you. But this is to save Don's life."

"You'll swear secrecy on the Book?" broke in Judge Henderson.

"Yes!" said Anne Oglesby at length. "If you'll swear to perjure yourself against your oath of office as judge and as attorney—as you've said you would—I'll swear. Is that the trade?"

"It's the only hope he has, the only hope that you have, and the only hope that I have. Absolute silence! Absolute secrecy! I'm going to save him—but I'm going to save my own self, too." A slight color was in Henderson's gray face.

"Oh, you trader!" said Anne Oglesby, all her scorn for him now patent, fully voiced. "You sepulcher of a man! You failure! Oh, yes, yes, I'll swear! And I'll keep my oaths and my promises all my life, so help me God! Lift up the Book! You, too, Aurora."

"I swore it twenty years ago," said Aurora Lane. "I will again. You Judas! You coward! Lift up the Book! Lift it up, so that I may see! Is that the book they call the Bible—that tells of love and mercy, and truth, and justice, and forgiveness of sins? Lift it up, so that I may see!"

They faced him, their right hands raised, and he held up the Book, his thumb under the cover, exposing the inscription which he had not seen for years and did not now see.

"As you believe in God!" began Judge William Henderson.

CHAPTER XIV

AURORA AND ANNE

When Judge Henderson passed down the office stair, and out across the street toward the narrow little brick walk of the courthouse—which even on that day of the week now held a certain crowd—so disturbed, so preoccupied, was he that he gave no greeting to one or two belated loiterers about the store fronts.

"I reckon that young feller'll get his dose now," said old Aaron Craybill, demi-chorus to this tragedy, following with his bleared eyes the tall and well-groomed figure, frock-coated, top-hatted, which now was passing toward the temple of justice. "I wouldn't like to have no man like the Jedge after me if I'd done what that boy done. He's a-going to get *hung*, that's what's going to happen to him. Everybody knows Slattery ain't big enough for this case. With a 'Nited States Senator a-prosecutin' it, though, and ten reporters from the cities—well, I guess Spring Valley'll be heard from some!"

"I wonder when the funer'l's goin' to be," said his neighbor, Silas Kneebone. "Of course Rawlins is goin' to preach the sermon. He's good on funer'ls. Seems like he's e'en—a'most as comfortin' at a funer'l as ary minister you could get in this town—and there's quite some ministers here, too."

They hurried on away now presently even as Judge Henderson disappeared in the courthouse door. A strain of music had come to their ears, the sound of reeds and brasses.

"Thar's the band now!" exclaimed Aaron Craybill. "Knight Templar, too! They're goin' over to the hall to practice for the funer'l. Come on ahead! Hurry, Silas!"

Down the street, audible also through the open windows of Judge Henderson's office, came the music. Jerome Westbrook had hastened from his duties on the coroner's jury only to assume his labors as leader of the Spring Valley Silver Cornet Band; and as it was the duty of that band to head the procession of the Knights Templar in the funeral march of Joel Tarbush, himself a brother of the order, it seemed that a certain rehearsal in the infrequent effort of playing under march was needful on this Sabbath day.

Slow-paced, with swords reversed and even step, with eyes looking neither to the right nor to the left, following the music of the wailing horns, the muffled tapping of the drums, it came now into the civic center of the town, this solemn procession. At its head walked Saunders, master in the order, his opportunity now at hand; and behind him, in full regalia, came many others, all the leading citizens of this community, the pillars of the church, the props of the business structure of this village, the leaders and formers of its customs and its social order; all these anxious that the appearance of the secret order in public should be in all ways above reproach, even at cost of this quasi-public rehearsal. Joel Tarbush dead was receiving more tribute than ever had Joel Tarbush living.

In accordance with ritual or custom, after the actual march to the tomb, the musicians must render that selection which has spoken for so many hearts bowed down in weight of woe; but Jerome Westbrook knew that his men needed practice on Pleyel's Hymn; so they gave it now tentatively, in advance, as they passed through the public square on the way to the hall. To the strained senses of Aurora Lane, still sitting with Anne in the office where they had lingered, the wailing of the music seemed a thing unbearable. She caught her hands to her ears.

"Oh, God!" she whispered. "Oh, God! If only they would not."

The white, sad-faced young woman at her side took her trembling hand in her own. "It will pass," said she. "Everything passes. You have been brave all these years. I ought to be brave too! even now—after what you've told me."

"And I never knew you," said Aurora Lane after a time. "Not many women have ever said much to me."

"Nor did I know you," rejoined Anne Oglesby. "You were a stranger to me when I saw you now, right here—Don's mother! We were so excited, Don and I, that I never identified you two, although—yes—I knew—something about—about—What shall I call you—you see, maybe I'll be your daughter yet."

"Some call me—Mrs. Lane. Some—Miss Lane. You can't call me 'mother.' For most part I am the village milliner, my dear—nothing more than that. I'm nobody. But generally, I'm 'Aurora Lane.' ... Now you know it all. I'm so sorry for you, my dear girl. You're fine—you're splendid. You're a good girl; and you're so very beautiful. If only you belonged with—with him—with me. It's too bad for you."

Anne Oglesby, the more composed of the two, impulsively stroked back the thick ruff of auburn hair from Aurora's face. "You mustn't bother about me," she said.

"But I must bother about you! You must give him up. My dear, my dear, it can't be! I'm just learning now how hard that would be for him because it's so hard for me."

"He kissed me," said Anne Oglesby simply. "After that it was too late."

"Why, what do you mean, my dear?"

"He didn't have to do anything more after that," said Anne Oglesby slowly. "He had not had time to say anything before that."

"He should not have kissed you," said Aurora Lane. "But that was his farewell to you."

"It was not farewell!" said Anne Oglesby. "It was our beginning! I will *not* give him up. If he had not kissed me—just when he did—just as he did—I would not have known! I'm glad!"

Aurora Lane looked at her searchingly, slowly.

"Poor girl!" said she. "Dear girl! He could not help loving you—I cannot help it myself. You are the only woman in the world, I think, for him."

"I am not good enough," said Anne Oglesby stoutly. But then suddenly she cast both her strong young arms about the neck of Aurora Lane and dropped her head upon Aurora's shoulder.

"Oh, yes I am!" she said; "oh, yes I *am*! I know I must have been meant for him, or else—else—"

But she did not as yet reveal the secret of the Sphinx. They both fell silent.

"Ah, sacrifice!" said Aurora, wearily, after a time. "Sacrifice always for the woman. We are all so bent on that."

"There's much more than that," said Anne Oglesby, sagely. "Besides, sacrifice itself is not an odious thing. You sacrificed much of your life, your happiness, your freedom. Are you sorry for that now, or proud?"

"Dear girl!" murmured Aurora Lane, patting her on the shoulder. "Ah, you sweet girl! If you could only just remain always this young and wise—and ignorant!"

But Anne Oglesby seemed not to hear her. She was looking out of the window musingly now, her yellow-gloved hands supported on her tight-rolled umbrella, her hat making a half-shadow for her dark hair and her clear, definite features.

Now the red sun ball, having well completed its circuit over the parched and breathless town, was sinking to yet another lurid sunset. There lay over all a blanket of that humid heat which so often arrests activity in communities such as this, situated in the interior, where few cooling breezes come. The dry, dust-covered leaves of the maples hung unmoved. Here and there, still hitched to the iron piping which served as a rail on all sides of the courthouse fence, stood the teams of farmers still tarrying, unwilling to face the hot ride home from town, even though the duty of church attendance was long since past. A murder and a funeral—a Knights Templar funeral—Spring Valley had never known the like! And there was going to be a trial—a murder trial. Court would sit tomorrow. What village could ask more than was the portion of Spring Valley in these few hurrying days? And it was her boy, 'Rory Lane's; and she'd fooled everybody—but now—! Spring Valley licked its chops as it said "But now—"

The two women in Judge Henderson's office sat still in the sultry heat, looking out of the window over the sultry, sordid, solemn little town; how long they did not know; until now there came again across the heat-hazy spaces of the maples, over the hot tops of the two-storied brick buildings, the sound of the wailing music—the same music which may come from the noblest organs of the world, the same music which may have pealed on fields of battle after heroes have fallen, speaking, as music may, of a soul passed, of a life ended, so soon to be forgot. For a time let the wailing of the horns, the tapping even of these unskilled drums, record the duty of this man's fellows to give him at least a moment's full remembrance.

In this hot lifeless air of the somber Sabbath afternoon the burden of sorrow, the weight of solemnity, seemed yet heavier and more oppressive. If a soldier dies the music plays some lilting air which speaks forgetfulness on the march home; but now, for the second time came this reiterated mournful wailing for a passing soul. The band had learned its lesson by now. The dirge for the dead arose in a volume well regulated and sustained as the men marched from the hall at last for the final trial on the street.

To the tapping rhythm of the anthem of the dead, sometimes such a community as this does take thought—these uniforms are justified, these white plumes, these reversed swords are justified; for an humble man who has passed is dignified before his fellow men; and he has had his tribute. Sometimes at least men thus stand shoulder to shoulder, heads bared, and forget envy, backbiting, little jealousies, forget cynicism and ridicule. The diapason of the drums surely had its hearing. It sank deep to the soul of Aurora Lane, striking some chord long left unresponsive.

"Anne!" said she, her hand lying in that of the wet-eyed girl at her side, "it's over—for him."

The girl nodded. But after all, Anne was young. She raised her head in the arrogance of youth, even as there passed more and more remotely the mournful cadence of the drums.

"But he was old!" she said, defensively. All of youth and hope was in her protest.

Aurora turned upon her her own large eyes, dark-ringed today. Her mouth, long drawn down in resolution, was wondrous sweet now as it trembled a little in its once ripe red fulness. It became the mouth of a young woman—not made for sorrow. "You still can hope, then?" she smiled. And Anne nodded, bravely. So, seeing replica of her own soul, Aurora Lane could do no more nor less than to fold her in her own arms, the two understanding perfectly a thousand unsaid things.

"But come!" said Anne Oglesby at last. "We must make plans. There's a lot to be done yet, and we must start."

"I have no money," said Aurora Lane. "I don't know what to do."

"Money isn't everything," said Anne Oglesby, with the assurance of those who have all the money that they need. "I suppose I have plenty of money if my guardian will let me have it."

"Even if your guardian allowed it," said Aurora Lane proudly, "Don would not. He would not let you help him, nor would I, though we are paupers—worse than that. Did you know that, Anne?"

"I am finding out these things one by one," was the girl's reply. "But they have come after my decision." She spoke with her own quaint primness and certainty of her mind.

"There's just one man could help us," said Aurora Lane, hesitating, and coloring a trifle. "I mean Mr. Brooks, Horace Brooks. He's a good lawyer. Some say he is the equal of Judge Henderson—I don't know. You heard what Judge Henderson said of him. It's fear of Horace Brooks, as much as his own conscience, that's influencing Judge Henderson."

"And why couldn't we go to Horace Brooks then?" demanded Anne Oglesby. "What is the objection—why can't you go to him?"

"I'd rather not tell you," said Aurora Lane, and in spite of herself felt the color rise yet more to her face.

Anne Oglesby sat looking at her for some time in silence. "There are complications sometimes, are there not?" said she. So silence fell between them.

The drums had passed by now. The sun had almost sunk to the edge of the last row of dust-

crowned maples. The farmers here and there below were unhitching the sunburned horses at the courthouse rail.

"I see," said Anne at length. "You love him—or did—Don's father. Or do you still pity him!"

"Who are you?" said Aurora Lane, looking at her steadfastly. "You, so young! You talk of pity. Where have you learned so much—so soon? When you grow older, perhaps you may find it hard *not* to forgive. Everything's so little after all, and it's all so soon over."

Unsmilingly Anne Oglesby held her peace. "Why don't you want to ask Mr. Brooks to act as our attorney?" she asked. "And who is he—I don't know him, you see."

Aurora did not answer the first part of her question. "I'll tell you where Mr. Brooks' office is," said she—"you see that little stair just across the courthouse yard? Sometimes he spends Sunday afternoon in his office. It's—well—it's hard for me to go over there and ask him."

"Has he—has he—ever been much to you?" asked Anne Oglesby, directly.

"In a way, yes," said Aurora Lane, quite truthfully, but flushing red. "Outside of my own son, he is the only man that's ever raised voice or hand in my defense here in this town. Beyond that—don't ask me."

Anne Oglesby did not ask her beyond that. But when she spoke, there was decision in her tones.

"It is no doubt your duty to go to Mr. Brooks at once. Will he too refuse us?"

Aurora Lane's face remained flushed in spite of herself.

"I don't think he will refuse," said she. "But only Don's danger would ever induce me to ask him for any help. I'll ask him—for Don and you."

Twilight fell, and they still sat silent. There came at last the footfalls on the office stairs, and the two arose in the dim light to face the door.

Judge Henderson entered slowly, hesitatingly. He half started as, looking within the unlightened room, he saw standing silhouetted against the window front the tall, trimly-clad figure of his ward, and at her side, equally tall, the dim, vague outline of Aurora, clad in black. The two stood hand in hand, and for the time made no speech.

"I must go," said Aurora Lane, at length.

Anne would have passed out with her, but her guardian raised a hand. "I must ask you where you are going?" said he.

"Not with me," said Aurora, quickly. "No, no, you must not." And so, quickly hurrying down the stair, she herself turned into the open street.

"Anne," said Judge Henderson, "I am deeply distressed. This all is terrible—it's an awful thing. Did you hear that funeral march? God! an awful thing, right when I am in this terrible dilemma. I've just been on the long distance 'phone trying to get Slattery—I can't find either him or Reeves; and I've got to act before court actually opens."

"What do you mean by a dilemma?" she asked coldly. "Does any dilemma last long with you, Uncle, when there is any question of your own self-interest?"

His face flushed under the cool insolence of her tone. "It's a fine courtesy you have learned in your schooling!"

"Have you heard all her history now?" he asked after an icy pause.

"Not all of it, no. Enough to admire her, yes. Enough to understand how this town feels toward her, yes. Why don't you all burn her as a witch in the public square?"

"You have a bitter tongue, Anne," said he. "You are not like your sainted mother."

"A while ago you said I was! But my sainted mother, whom I never knew, never found herself in a situation such as this," rejoined Anne Oglesby. "At least, while my father lived, she had a man to fend for her. I have none. We are women only in this case."

"So it was your plan to marry a nameless man? You've sworn he always shall be nameless." The man's face showed a curious mixture of eagerness and anxiety. He wished to argue, to expound, but dared not face this young girl with the icy smile.

"Yes, I've sworn silence. It is a great and grave responsibility," said she. "I'm sadder for that, that's true. But there are many things in the world besides just being happy, don't you think? You see, I've no dilemma at all!"

Judge Henderson passed a hand over his forehead. He had fought hard cases at the bar, but never had he fought a case like this.

"Anne," said he presently, "I'm very weary. I've had a hard day. I want you to go on up to the house now—the servants will make you comfortable until I come. Just now I was afraid you were going on over with Aurora Lane to her house."

"Not yet, Uncle," said she. "Perhaps at some later time, if you cast me out."

He only groaned at this thrust.

She passed, a cool picture of youth, self-possessed and calm. He heard her foot tapping fainter as it descended the stair, listened to hear if she might come back again. But Anne went on down the street steadily, looking straight ahead of her. Already, it seemed to her, she had grown old. To those who saw her she seemed a beautiful young woman.

"That's Don Lane's girl," said one ancient to another, back of his hand. "Lives over at Columbus. He kissed her right there on the depot platform, this very morning. Huh!"

"I don't blame him," rejoined the other, with a coarse laugh. "But he ain't apt to get many more chances now. I wonder how he fooled her about himself—and her the judge's ward, or something."

"Nerve?" said his friend. "He's got nerve enough to a-done anything. But I guess they got him dead to rights this time."

"Yeh. The *town's* got him dead to rights. No matter what the law——" he stopped, his head up, as though sniffing at something in the air. "Gawd!" said he. "Wasn't that music a awful thing! I can feel it in my bones right now. It makes me feel——"

"It makes a feller feel like doing something more'n being just sad! It makes a feller feel like—well——"

"Like *startin'* something!"

The other nodded, grimly, his mouth caved in at the corners, tight shut now.

CHAPTER XV

THE ANGELS AND MISS JULIA

Anne scarcely had left the office when Judge Henderson, stepping into the inner room, pulled open a certain door of a cabinet beneath the washhand-stand. He drew forth a half-filled bottle of whisky, shook it once meditatively, and poured himself an adequate drink, refreshing himself with water at the tap. He stood for a moment, the half-emptied glass in his hand, looking at his features in the little glass which hung above the cabinet.

Not an unpleasant face it seemed to him; for so slowly had the lines come in his features, so slowly the gray in his hair, that almost he was persuaded they were not there at all. Delayed by the mirror to the extent of having consumed but half of his refreshing draft, yet purposing further imbibition, Judge Henderson paused at the sound of some person ascending the outer stair.

It was a very halting and uncertain step that came this time, one which seemed to double on each lift of the stair, with an accentuating tap-tap, as of a stick used in aid. But after a time he sensed its pause at his door. There was a rap, a faint little rap, although the door itself was ajar. Judge Henderson discreetly returned to the cabinet his half-finished glass of whisky and water, and stepped into the other room.

It was Miss Julia Delafield whom he met.

She was standing, her hand on the knob of the door, as if seeking support, or rather as though ready for flight. Her eyes were especially large and luminous now, as always they were when any supreme emotion governed her. Her cheeks were flushed in that fashion which she never yet had learned to control. Her smooth brown hair was held tightly back under her cool summer hat, and the hands resting on her smooth-topped cane were well gloved. Not ill-looking she was as she stood, stooped a trifle, bent over a bit.

She was half a-tremble now with the excitement that she felt. To any chance observer, even at this hour of this Sabbath day, it must have seemed that here was only a client come with purpose of consultation with an attorney. To the angels above who looked down on such matters as this, it must have seemed a pathetic scene, this in which Miss Julia figured now. To any human being knowing all the facts it must have been apparent that this call upon Judge Henderson was Miss Julia Delafield's great adventure.

It *was* her great adventure—the greatest ever known in all her life; and she had dared it now only because of two of the strongest emotions known to a woman's soul. These are two. They both come under a common name. That name is love.

It was love had brought Miss Julia hither. Love in the first place for Dieudonné Lane—or was it, really, in the first place, love for him? For we, who know as much as Aurora Lane knew of Miss Julia's secret—who once saw her gazing adoringly at a certain framed portrait when she fancied herself alone—would have known that there was more than one mansion in the heart of the little lame librarian.

Helpless, resigned—but yet a woman—Miss Julia loved in the first place as every woman with any touch of normality does love in spite of all. She had known all these years that her love was

hopeless, that it was wrong, that it was a sin—she classed it as her sin. And her sin being her own, she hugged it to her bosom and wept over it these twenty years—became repentant over it—became defiant for it; prayed over it and clung to it—in short, comported herself as any woman would. And now Miss Julia, being what she was, stood flushed, her tiding pulses rising to her eyes, staining her fair skin deep to her very neck, as she faced her great adventure—as she stood looking into the face she had framed on her wall, framed on her desk, framed in her heart as well, in silver and gold and all the brilliants and the gems of a woman's soul.

But she was here by reason of a twofold love. Always in her heart, since she could remember, there had been the great secondary longing for something small to love, to hold in her arms—the desire for a child of her own—the one thing which, as Miss Julia knew, might never be for her.

Indeed, this great craving had always remained unformulated, unidentified, until that time, years and years ago, when she first saw the baby of Aurora Lane lifting up its hands to her. So she had become one-half a mother, at the least.

He was half her boy, at least, he who now lay in prison. A woman is a coward as to revealing her love for her chosen mate—she will conceal that, deny that, to the death. But for the child her love is different—then she becomes bold—she will defy all the world—will force herself even into situations otherwise unthinkable. Except for her love for Don Lane, the fatherless, Miss Julia would never have undertaken to find a father for him.

But that child had a father! Each must have. Ah! how must the angels have wept over that piteous spectacle of Miss Julia in her own room, looking smilingly at the face she saw pictured here in her own hand—the face of one whom she held to be a great man, a noble man, a man good, just, wise, one with love and kindness in his heart as well as brawn and brains in his physical self. Yes, there was a father.... And he was perfect, heroic, for her; her love being thus much blessed by that divine blindness love works within us all.

Now, the face which Miss Julia saw in her boudoir, the face which she saw framed upon the wall of her library room, was the same which she saw now close at hand! She started, flushed, trembled, finding difference between a picture and a man.

Judge Henderson was urbane, as always with a woman. He led her to a seat, taking pains to turn on another clip of the electric light, which Miss Julia suddenly wished he had not done, since now she was most sensible of her uncontrollable blushes.

Yes, it was a great adventure! She had never before been alone with him—not in all her life. She had never been this close to him before. It was somewhat cruel now; but the angels have their ways of being cruel with us at times.

"Miss Julia," he began with an extra unctuousness in his tones, "Miss Julia, my dear girl, I surely am delighted to see you here. You have never before been here, I am persuaded—this is the first time in all our long and pleasant acquaintance. If ever in the past I have been able to be of service to you—"

In any conversation Judge Henderson was sure to bring the talk around to himself, to his own deeds, his own ambitions. His was an egotism so extreme as to be almost beyond accountability—he was a moron not in mentality but in sense of proportion. He could not have put two square blocks together if one of these blocks had to do with the interest of another but himself. There are such men, and at times they go far.

Miss Julia flushed again prettily, but she was too much the lady to giggle or squirm or do any of those unlovable things by which the hopeless female makes herself more hopeless. She was used to hearing herself addressed as "Miss Julia" by all the world; but it seemed none the less especially sweet to hear the words in these rich, full, manly tones. (In her diary she wrote, "He addressed me in rich, full, manly tones.")

"Yes, I came as soon as my duties allowed me to get away today, Judge. It was a busy day for me, although it is the Sabbath. I was classifying some of the books. Thanks to your generosity, we have just received a good shipment.

"But you see, the town is all wrapped up in all these other things that have happened—that's why I came, Judge Henderson."

"I presume you have reference to that unfortunate young man who now lies in prison? In what capacity then can I serve you, Miss Julia?" His tone now was icy and reserved.

"I came to you, Judge Henderson, because I knew I would find in you a champion for justice. Why, all the town has come to depend on you for almost *everything!* I suppose that is why I came—it seemed the natural thing to do."

Judge Henderson, regretting his half-finished glass, now impossible, coughed behind his hand.

"I am afraid, Miss Julia," said he, "that you don't quite know who he is, that boy."

"Ah, do I not! Why, he is *my* boy, my *own* boy!"

"I beg pardon, but what do you mean, Miss Julia?"

"I say he's my boy! What I say about that is privileged—it's professional, Judge Henderson. No one else has heard me say what I am telling you now. But he *is* my boy—my love has gone into

him, the same as if I were his mother."

He only stared as she rushed on.

"I know his mother—we have been friends here since we were girls, real friends. I'm the only friend she's got in this town—and the only fair and kind thing this town has ever done has been to allow me to be the friend of Aurora Lane. I suppose that's because I am only the little lame librarian! I don't count. She doesn't count. But—well, between us two—we've had a boy!"

He stared, pale, as she went on:

"Between us two, we've brought him up. We've educated him. Between us two, we have saved our money—it wasn't much—and we've managed to give him something of an education, something of a life more than he could have gotten in this town. We have put him through college—we have given him a profession—we were going to give him a start.

"I say 'we,' and I mean that. But, it isn't the money of mine that went into him—it's my *love*—it's the *love* I felt for him! Why, Judge, I've seen him grow up. I've held him in my two hands, this way, when he was so little ... oh, very little.... So you see, he's my boy, too!"

"And so," she added inconsequently, as he made no answer, "I came to you." (What the angels understood in Miss Julia's unspoken words then they did not make plain to the ears of the man who heard them.)

Judge Henderson sat astounded, looking at her steadily, unable to grasp all the emotion which evidently she felt, unable wholly to understand an act of clean unselfishness on the part of any human being.

"You see," said Miss Julia tremblingly, after a time—"his father—I never knew his father. She'd never tell me—I never asked but once. But you see, I only *fancied* that he had a father. I fancied I was his mother. I fancied——" But now Miss Julia's voice failed her, and her blushes alone spoke.

"I see," said Judge Henderson, not unkindly, and breathing more freely, "you fancied that you held an undivided interest in this child, this young man." She did not see his face very plainly, did not catch his hesitation as he engaged on this touchy theme.

Miss Julia nodded rapidly, swallowing hard. Her face was very beautiful indeed now. (The angels must have smiled with tears in their eyes as they looked down upon her now and saw how pathetically beautiful she was!)

"And that interest is still undivided?"

"Yes, we've not seen each other very much, Aurora and I, today, because things have been traveling so fast, but we are—we are partners in this trouble, as in everything else. We've got to have a lawyer, of course. There's not much money left between us—even my next month's salary is pledged. It cost more than we thought to get him through the graduation. There were clothes, you know—many things." And now she flushed again vividly. She was thinking of Don's little clothes, which once long ago she had helped to sew; and the angels knew this, gravely.

"He's a *splendid* young man, our boy!" she broke out again at length. "Can't you see that? Good in his classes—and an athlete—a splendid one. He's such a gentleman in all his ways, Judge Henderson, a son worthy of a father, of some good father, if only he had one! His father died, you know, when Don was just a baby." She was not looking at him now, not daring, as she went on.

"But you see, we are in trouble about him. That may come to anyone. Why, even you yourself, Judge Henderson, successful as you are—some time even you may know such a thing as trouble. It is the common human lot. And I have been told enough——"

"If I were in trouble," said Judge Henderson gallantly, and with a push of a full ounce of Monongahela back of his words, "I would go to just some such woman as you for help. But women don't seem to see any of the intervening obstacles that exist, do they, Miss Julia?"

"If we did, the world would stop," said Miss Julia, simply. And spoke a great truth.

"None the less there are obstacles," said he, after a time. "I fear there are insuperable ones, my dear." ("He called me 'My dear!'" wrote Miss Julia in her diary.)

"Why, not at all! I can't believe that, Judge. We'll manage it all in some way, Aurora and I. And, naturally we come to you as our champion—who should help us if not you yourself? Do I say too much, Judge Henderson?" she inquired timidly.

"No, not too much," said he with much modesty, "not too much, I trust. I hope I have always had, at every stage of my own career, the confidence of all my friends in this community."

There was a little pause. "But also, Miss Julia," he continued, raising a hand, "wait a minute—wait a minute. In order to deserve the confidence of all my friends I have always been forced to adhere to that course which to me and my own conscience seemed just and right. I will not undertake to disguise the truth, Miss Julia, I am already retained for the prosecution of this case. I must not listen to you coming to ask me to act for the defense. That at least is the present status of affairs. I shall be guided all along by my sense of right and duty. At present I cannot take the case for the defense."

She was feeling at the head of her stick, stumblingly, half rising. Suddenly it seemed to her that the walls were closing in upon her, that she must get away, get out into the open.

"That's cruel!" she exclaimed.

"At times it is necessary for us to be cruel," said Judge Henderson, virtuously. "If I am cruel, I regret with all my heart that it must be cruelty to one whom so long I have held in such esteem as I do you. We have long known your life, how exquisitely ordered it has been. I have never known before, of course, how much it was wrapped up with this young man's life. I am astonished at what I have learned. It is only my own high standard of honor, my dear—that same standard to which I have unflinchingly adhered at whatever cost it might entail upon me—which enables me to refuse any request that you might make me. Now I am pained and grieved, I am indeed."

A tear stood in the corner of Judge Henderson's eyes. It was an argument which he always had at hand if need were—an argument which had won him perhaps more than one case before a jury. And now he felt himself, as always, the central figure, appealing to a jury, extenuating, explaining, expounding. Moreover, he felt himself misjudged, an injured man. He did not care at the time to divulge any of the plan he but now had confided to Aurora and Anne.

"I have hurt you!" said Miss Julia, impulsively. "Oh, I would never mean to do that." She held out a hand swiftly, in part forgetful of her errand.

He took her hand in both his own—small and white it was, and veined somewhat, ink-stained as to some of the fingers—a hand which rested trembling in his own. (Now, what the angels saw is not for mortals to inquire! "He took my hand in both his own!" wrote Miss Julia in her diary.)

Judge Henderson gallantly clasped the hand and drew it a trifle closer to his bosom. "You believe me, do you not, my dear?" said he. "It grieves me to give you any pain. As for me, it does not matter." He dashed the tear from his eye.

But now Miss Julia's courage failed her. Her double sacrifice for the child and the child's unknown and uncreated father had failed! She limped toward the door. Her great adventure was ended.

But, at least, she had been alone in the presence of the great man whom she had loved these many years. And she had found him in all ways worthy! He was still a hero in her eyes, a great man, a noble man—yes, she was sure of that.

How must the angels have sighed as Miss Julia stumbled down the stair with this thing in her heart! For, in all her heart, she knew that, had she been young as Aurora Lane once was young, and had such a man as this asked of her anything—anything—she would have given! She would have yielded gladly all she had to yield—she would have given her life into his keeping.... For of such is the kingdom of love, if not the kingdom of heaven. And as to that last let the angels say, who watched poor Miss Julia as she stumbled down the stair.

CHAPTER XVI

HORACE BROOKS, ATTORNEY AT LAW

As for Aurora Lane, at about the time Miss Julia was leaving Judge Henderson's office, she herself was in the office of another lawyer upon the opposite side of the square—the man Henderson hated and feared more than any other human being.

Horace Brooks, after his usual fashion, was spending his Sunday afternoon in his legal chambers. He lived as a bachelor, the sole boarder of a family far out toward the edge of town—a family that had no social standing, but that never became accustomed to the ways of Mr. Brooks, who came and went, ate, slept, and acted, as one largely in a trance, so occupied was he with thoughts of his business affairs. Never was a soul less concerned with conventions or formalities than he; nor one more absorbed, more concentrated of purpose in large things.

He was sitting now, as often he might have been seen to sit, tilted back in his chair, with his feet on his table, where rested in extreme disorder many volumes of the law, some opened, face-down, others piled in untidy masses here and there. Mr. Brooks had no clerk and no partner. When he cited an authority in his library he left the book where last it was used, and searched for it pellmell if later need arose. This same system applied to every other article of use in the entire office—it was all chance medley, and the pursuit of the desired article was short or long in accordance with the luck of the searcher.

Around him on the floor lay countless burned matches, a pipe or two which scattered tobacco. The floor itself was covered layers deep with the ruins of two Sunday papers—at which form of journalism Horace Brooks openly scoffed, but none the less ruthlessly devoured after his own fashion each Sabbath afternoon.

He sat with his bearded chin sunk in his shirt bosom, his mild blue eye seeing nothing at all, his hands idle in his lap. He was concluding his Sabbath as usually he did, in the midst of the scenes surrounding his daily toil throughout the week. He started at the sound of Aurora Lane's knock

on the door.

"Come in!" he called.

He supposed it was some young lawyer from one of the offices down the hall, where struggling students, or clerks from the abstract offices, sometimes brought knotty problems for him to solve. These folk still lived in the rear of their offices—as indeed Horace Brooks but recently had done himself. A disorderly couch still might have been found in the room beyond, fragments of soap, a soiled towel or so, a broken comb, a sidelong mirror—traces of his own humble and arduous beginnings in the law.

But he turned half about now, and dropped his feet to the floor as he heard the rustle of a gown. He sat half leaning forward as Aurora Lane entered. He had small training in the social usages—he did not always rise when a woman entered the room, unless some special reason for that act existed. So he sat for just a time, and looked at her, the fact of her presence seeming slowly to filter into his brain. Then quickly he stood and went forward to her, his rare smile illuminating his homely features.

"Come in," said he. "Will you be seated? Why have you come here?" He was simple and direct of habit.

Aurora Lane looked at him not only with the eyes of a client, but with the eyes of a woman. She saw plainly the quick look of eagerness, the swift hopefulness which came into his eyes.

But she must forestall all that. "Mr. Brooks," said she, "I've come to you for help—I need your professional services."

He sat looking at her gravely for some time, the light in his face slowly fading away. "Help?" said he. "As how?" He was of the plain people, and at times lapsed into the colloquial inelegancies of his early life. But he needed little divination now to know that Aurora Lane came to him for no personal reasons that offered him any hope.

"It's about my boy," said Aurora. "You know—Don."

He nodded slowly. "Yes, I know—the coroner's jury has held him over."

"But he's in jail."

"Yes, they had that right—to hold him for the investigation of the grand jury. And this is a grand jury matter, as you must know. Court opens tomorrow. The grand jury sits tomorrow morning. At least the preliminaries won't take long. But the outlook is bad, Aurora—they mean to get him if they can."

Aurora Lane for a third time that day produced from her shabby pocket book the little worn bill which represented her sole worldly fortune. A flush rose to her temples now as she held it hesitatingly between her fingers.

He saw it very plainly, and caught something of her meaning in the pause. A slow red came also into his own face.

"You'd better keep that for the present," said he slowly after a time. He pushed her fingers back with the bill. "I know this is professional, but I can't take money from you now—not that money—because I know very well you've got none you can afford to spend. Aurora, there's no use trying to have secrets from me—we know each other too well."

"But what right do you leave me then to come to you?"

"I don't know that you have any right to come to me at all," said he slowly. "I've my own right to decline to deal with you at all in business matters. And you come here on business."

Aurora sank back into her chair. "Then what could I do?" she said faintly.

"Have you tried Henderson?"

"Yes," she said, faintly, and with much reluctance, "I did."

"Why, if you wanted me?"

"I can't tell you that. But I did. He refused to have anything to do with the defense for my boy."

"Very naturally—very naturally. Didn't you know he would before you went to ask him? Couldn't you guess that?—couldn't you have figured out that much for your own self? Didn't you know that man? He's not with the under dog."

"It seems not," said Aurora Lane, wearily. "So I came to you."

"Even after last night?"

"Yes, after last night. At first it was hard to think of it."

"Aurora," said he, "I reckon I'm not a very practical sort of man. If I were—if I were a man like Judge Henderson, say, I'd clamp on the screws right now. I'd try to get you to alter what you said to me last night."

"It wouldn't be like you. You've never yet—in all our lives—done anything like that."

"No? I'm second choice—that's my fate, is it—that's as high as I get? Yes, I reckon that's about a fair estimate of me—I'm a typical second choice man. I suppose I'll have to accept that fact." And now he laughed uproariously, though none too happily.

"Well, Aurora," said he after a time, "you have broken in here, anyway—just as I broke down your gate last night in my own clumsiness. Suppose we call it quits. Let's not figure too close on the moving consideration. There's nothing you can give Horace Brooks, attorney at law, in the way of pay. And you need Horace Brooks—*only* as attorney at law. What can I do for you?"

"I don't know, but all that can be done now for him you can do. I've nowhere else to go. It wasn't easy for me to come here, but I'd make any sacrifice for my boy."

"Sacrifices are at a discount in a lawyer's office. I don't ask you to reconsider your decision, as to me—as to me as your husband. But speaking of sacrifices, I only point out to you that so far as I'm concerned as a lawyer in this town, I might as well be your husband or your lover as your lawyer of record in this case! Since the trial yesterday, and my walk home with you last night, there'll be plenty who'll think so anyway. I may be held as a man worse than I ever was—and neither of us gain by that."

"That may be so," said she, bending her face forward in her hands. "God! What a trial, what a risk, what a peril I am to myself and everyone I meet! I've brought loss, suspicion, wrong on you—you who're noble! And after twenty years——"

"Yes, Aurora. Twenty years outlaws a claim in the law—for men—but not for women. Now, I take on those twenty years of yours when I take on this case. I'm clear about that. I can see this thing straight enough. This town will go into two camps. Ours is the hopeless one, as things stand now. We are the under dog. If I took this case—maybe even if I won it—I'd be hated by the men and snubbed by the women of this town. Now, I see all that clearly. And speaking of pay——"

"Oh, if you would," she exclaimed, leaning toward him, her hands extended, "I'd do anything you asked me. Do you understand that—*anything!*"

She paused. In the silence the little clock on the mantel ticked so loud it seemed almost to burst the walls. He sat for a long time motionless, and she went on, leaning yet more toward him.

"I've thought it all over again," she said desperately. "I'd—I'd begin it again—I'd do anything—I'd do *anything* you asked me——Why, I've nothing—nothing—oh, so little to give! But—as to what you said last night—I've thought of that. I'm ready—what is it that you wish?"

He looked at her dumbly for a long time, and she thought it was in condemnation. For almost the first time she voiced in her life—continually on the defensive.

"I don't understand it all," said she. "I've tried very hard since then. I was so young. I didn't know much at first—I didn't feel that it was all so wrong—I didn't know much of anything at all, don't you see?"

Now he raised his great hand, his lips trembling. "Just wait a bit, my dear," said he. "We'll take what you've said as proof of your love for your own son. We'll let it stop right there, please. We'll forget what happened last night at your broken gate—we'll forget what's happened just now inside my broken gate. I told you if I ever married you I'd do it on such a basis that I could look you in the face, and you could me. That's the only way, Aurora. There's not any other way. I reckon I'll always love you—but only on the square."

"But what can we do—you refuse to help us—and the boy's innocent!"

"Wait, my dear," said he slowly. "I've not a woman's wit, so I can't leap on quite so fast as you do. A lawyer reads word by word. I'm still in the preliminaries, not even into the argument of this case yet."

"But you have refused—you have said it meant ruin to you—I know—I mean that to everyone."

"You've meant a great deal more than that to me, my dear," said Horace Brooks, "and no matter what you mean—no matter what my decision may do to my future—no matter what it may cost me in my larger ambitions, which I entertain, or once did, the same as any other man here in America—why, let it go."

"But what are you going to do? I'm costing you everything, everything—and I can give you nothing, nothing—and I'm asking still of you everything, everything."

"Tut, tut! Aurora," said Horace Brooks, "I'm going to take this case—for better or for worse! Didn't I tell you I wanted to stand between you and trouble—any trouble? A man likes to do things for a woman—for the woman he loves."

She sat for a long time, white, motionless, looking at him.

"The pay——" she began stumblingly.

"I'd rather not hear you say anything about that," he replied simply. "You did not say anything at all. This is the *office* of Horace Brooks, attorney at law. As I understand it, I'm duly retained for the defense in the case of the state against Dieudonné Lane, charged with murder."

The blood came pouring back into Aurora Lane's face as she straightened. "You are a good man,"

said she. "I always knew it. I——"

He raised a hand once more. "These are business hours," said he, "and believe me, no time is left for anyone to do anything but work on this case."

"He's innocent, of course. He couldn't have done this—who was it, do you think?"

"Oh, now, I don't *know* who it was. It may have been Don himself. All men are human. A lawyer has to look all the facts in any case square in the face."

"But, my God! You can't think—you don't believe——"

"Please let me act as attorney. Now, I'm to blame in a sort of way in this case. I started a good deal of this trouble. I gave your boy the advice which threw him in jail—when I told him to thrash any man who said a word against his mother—you. He's made a certain threat or two. He's been found in very compromising circumstances indeed. The case looks bad against him. Yes, he needs a lawyer—but he's got one! We'll fight it through. You see," and he smiled again his wide and winning smile, "all my life, I've had a sort of leaning for the under dog."

"Now," said he, abruptly rising, "I'm in this case, and I'm going to take my chances. I've lost my chances on the Senatorship of the United States. I've kept my promise to Henderson and I've sent word to our central committee. I'm the under dog. But before all this is over, the people of Spring Valley are going to know there are two sides to this fight—and all these fights!"

"Now, listen, Aurora," he went on in his careless paternal fashion, as he walked, his great head drooped, his hands thrust into his pockets. "Figure it over. Last night we three walked home together—before them all. Everybody saw us. Everybody saw Tarbush. It can be proved that Don left us and went over, following after Tarbush. It can be proved that he was seen running away from that place—at just the wrong time—in just the wrong way."

"But it was someone else who killed him—it wasn't my boy——"

"You can't convince a jury by assertions. If it was not this man, they will ask, Who was it? Who was the other man, and why do you think so? Now, who *was* that other man, Aurora?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I. But we've got to find him. There's no trace of him. But as for Don, the boy, it's a trail, a plain one, and it leads——" He threw out his hands widely, as though reluctant to name the truth.

"But," he went on, "if he isn't guilty someone else is guilty. Under this criminal act in all its phases there lies some cause, of course—there is some criminal, of course. There has been crime committed, a very beastly, brutal sort of crime, almost inhuman—and that was done by some man. If I could put my hand on that man, why then——"

"It would mean life and happiness to me. It would mean satisfaction to you?"

"More than that," he smiled. "It would mean the life of your boy—many years yet for you and him together—once I'd have said maybe it might mean six years in the United States Senate for me. I don't know—I can't tell. The chances now are rather that even if I clear the boy, it means I'll have to close up this office and go somewhere else to hunt a law practice. But we'll take our chances."

"You are a great man, Horace Brooks," said Aurora Lane; and there was a sort of reverence in her tone. "Even after what has been between us, I can say that. Oh, I so much like—I so much admire a man who is not afraid, and who doesn't parley and weigh and dicker with himself when it comes to any hard decision. I like a brave man, a good man. You'll understand."

He raised a hand, a large hand, nervous, full-veined, gnarled, awkward, a hand never in all his life to be freed from toil's indelible imprint.

"Please don't," said he.

"But how can I say what I want?" said she. "I've always wanted to pay all my debts—that's to make up for all my faults, don't you see? I must be scrupulous—because——"

"Yes," said he, "I see. I've seen that for more than twenty years, ever since I've known you. Because that's true of you, and is true of so few women, so very few, is why I wished last night—that you were a widow!"

"Now, that's about all. When you *wish* that you could pay this debt—which isn't any debt so far—you've paid it, so far as I'm concerned. It is the *wish* to pay your debts that amounts to moral principle—and to business success too—in this world."

"And so," he laughed again his great resounding laugh, and thrust out his hand toward her, "I reckon you can call yourself something of a business success tonight after all. Now go home, and see that you sleep."

CHAPTER XVII

AT CHURCH

That Sunday evening Aurora Lane sat alone in her dingy little home. The walls seemed to her close as those of any prison. She found about her nothing of comfort. For once the little white bedside, all her life her shrine, failed in its ministrations. There rose in her heart a great vague hunger for gregarious worship—the sort which all these others had freely offered every week of all their lives—that same wish for gregarious worship on which are based all the churches, all the creeds, of all the world. As never in her life before Aurora felt now that she could no longer fight alone, in solitude—she needed something—she needed the sight of other faces, the touch of other hearts; needed the assemblage, the crowd—needed, in short, the world *en masse*, as we all do. She had lived without association and without sympathy too long. Now her starved nature at last rebelled.

So, having prayed faithfully, Aurora Lane rose not wholly comforted; and therefore she resolved to break the habit of her life, as she had lived it more than twenty years in this little town. In all that time she had not been within the door of any church, but now she felt that she must go—must be at least in part like to all these others on this evening of the Sabbath day.

The main note of such a community as Spring Valley is that of a resigned acceptance of life. This means a drab middle course, of small heroics, which yet does not debar from a quiet sympathy and mutual understanding. This in turn essentially implies some manner of religious belief, for the most part of the passive, un-investigative sort. Without doubt the church of this or that denomination—and in any such community there will be many—is the club and the court alike to those who maintain its beliefs—aye, and it is their hope and stay as well.

Aurora chose the largest church, where there was most apt to be the largest congregation. Passing there, she had heard the organ roll in its moving appeal. It seemed to her that she must hear music or she must starve, must die. The drain on her nature now had been so great that, much as every impulse drew her to yonder other edifice, the one with iron bars where lay her own son, a prisoner, she could not go there, could not see him again, until she herself had had restoration of some of the forces of her own life. She wanted music—she wanted light—she wanted the presence, close, near to her, of other human beings. Surely they must know—surely they too must some time have suffered, have grieved, have yearned.

The slow life of the little town, which the excitement of this extraordinary Sabbath had so largely diverted from its usual channels, now began to reassemble and to trickle toward the conventional meeting grounds. Those who had been delinquent at the morning services were at least tonight devout.

There is a sort of life of affairs, a sort of business life, of any church in any community. Thus, there may be many meetings beside that of the Sabbath day, in each church in any community. There must fall the practice of the choir, weekly, usually of Wednesday, sometimes of Saturday evenings as well, if the anthem prove especially difficult of mastery.

As to the choir proper, there must of course be the soprano—not always elocutionist, as was the soprano in this church of Spring Valley—but always well-clad, most frequently with long and glossy curls of chestnut and the most modish hat of any in the church. Most tenors are bank clerks or cashiers. It is the function of the tenor in any such choir to escort the soprano to her home. The contralto is for the most part married, beginning to show *embonpoint*. She is brunette, with wide and pleasant mouth; is able to make excellent currant jelly, of which she gives her neighbors generously. Her attire is apt to be not quite so well-appointed as that of the soprano, which indeed should not be expected of the mother of three, the arrangement of those white starched collars in a part of each Sunday's task. The basso may sometimes be a school teacher, yet some of the best have been owners of livery barns, no more; modest folk withal, and covetous of the back seat in the choir.

To this essential personnel of the church choir there may be added others, supplements or understudies for this or that musical part, young men with large cameo pins in their cravats, young women with spectacles. All these who sing soprano or contralto, at least all who still are young, must be taken home after services—not only the regular services of the church, but those of the choir practice midway of the week or at the week's close. And thereto, one must count the weekly prayer meetings, mostly for the old, but for the young in part.

It is, therefore, easy to be seen that the vestibule of any Spring Valley church of a Wednesday evening, sometimes of a Thursday evening, quite often a Saturday evening, and always of a Sunday evening, must hold a certain lay representation of the community. It is, or once was, one of the proper functions of the village church to act as social meeting ground. Practically all of the respectable marriages in Spring Valley actually were contracted, at least as to the preliminary stages, under the eaves of this or that church.

The vestibule was crowded this Sunday evening, as was customary, when Aurora Lane, quite alone, turned in from the sidewalk and ascended the eight broad wooden steps up to the church door. Passing thence to the inner door, she felt the silence which came upon the boys and young men who loitered there, waiting for the entrance or the exit of those of the opposite sex. She felt the stares which fell upon her—felt, rather than saw, the icy disapproval which greeted her even here, even among these. But she passed by, entered the house of worship, and sank into a seat very far back in the long, bare, ghastly, rectangular room.

Before or after the entry of Aurora Lane, there failed not in coming those who sit in judgment upon the lives of their fellows—the baker, the butcher, the school teacher, the hanger of paper, the maker of candlesticks as well. All these were here, parts of the life of this community. Miss Julia was not there, as Aurora Lane discovered. She wondered dully if it had not been her duty to go around to the library and ask for Miss Julia; but the longing for personal solitude had been as strong in her heart as the longing for silent human companionship, so she had come alone. In truth Miss Julia was recreant tonight. She was alone in her own room—alone with her diary—that is to say, face to face with the picture of the same man whom Aurora Lane had met that afternoon.

In the slowly filling pews there reigned now silence, broken only by the shuffling footfalls of the arrivals, that uneasy, solemn silence which holds those seated and waiting for the services at church. A school teacher who was born in the East somewhere leaned her head forward on the back of the seat before her, and with a certain ostentation prayed, or seemed to pray. Others would have done this very fetching thing as well, but lacked the courage, so sat coldly, stiffly, unhappily, bolt upright, awaiting the arrival of the minister.

The tenor came after a time, soon following the soprano, models alike of social graces and correct attire. They passed modestly, seemingly unregarding of the glances bent upon them. The bass singer was more conscious of his ill-fitting clothes as he hurried up the aisle, his Adam's apple agitated, betokening his lack of ease. The soprano by this time was shaking out her curls, fussing among the music sheets at the top of the organ, pushing back the stool, twirling its top about—all the while still quite highly unmindful of the gazes of the audience. The contralto came last, her brow furrowed with the thought that perhaps she had not left the cold meat on the table where her husband, the doctor, would find it when he came back from the country.

Came also in due and proper time the minister of church, the pillar of it all, bearing in his hand, rolled in its leather case, the sermon which he had written last Thursday morning—and which perforce he had been obliged wholly to rewrite since Saturday at noon! For, be sure, this sermon must take up the issues of the day—must stand for the weekly platform of the town's morality. The eyes of all now were bent upon the little roll of leather in the preacher's hand. They knew what must be there. In a way they moistened their lips. This was why the attendance was so large and prompt tonight.

But Aurora Lane, unskilled in any of these things, the prey to so many conflicting emotions at this hour, a novice in the house of God, sat silent, her hands folded, well enough aware she was not welcomed by those who saw her there, yet craving of them, dumbly, anguished, all their tolerance in her time of need.

Now the organ rolled after its fashion. There were voices not too highly skilled, perhaps, yet after all productive of a certain melody. The music softened the ice of Aurora Lane's heart. She felt that after all she was a human being, as these others all about her. Was not this anthem universal in its wording? Did it not say "Come unto Me"? Did it not say something about "All ye"—something about "Whosoever"? And Aurora Lane, all her life debarred from this manner of human classification, felt her heart tremble within her bosom as she heard these universal, all-embracing words. Those about her, righteous, virtuous, heard them not at all, because they had been sung so oft before.

The text of the evening matters little. Everyone there, excepting Aurora Lane, knew that the real text was the red-handed young criminal lying in the prison.

The preacher invoked the wrath of God upon him who had raised his hand against the life of one of the town's beloved. He read large lessons as to right living, educed all proper morals from these events, so startling, which had come upon this peaceful town. In short, he preached what manner of sermon he must have preached in this manner of church and this manner of town. At times his voice was low and tense, at times his tones grew thunderous. And every word he said he felt was true, or thought was true, or hoped to be the truth; because he himself had written it; and this was the Lord's day; and these were the services wherein the Lord is worshiped regularly.

But the music of the anthem remained in Aurora Lane's soul, so that she was practically unconscious of all this. Her mind was vague, dazed. She did not know her son had been tried and found guilty. The words clung in her heart; "All ye"; "Whosoever." And presently they sang yet another hymn, and in it again were the words, "Come unto Me!" There was great emotional uplift in all Spring Valley this day. The minister felt the emotion, here upon the souls of his audience. He prayed for what he termed an awakening.

But Aurora was not awakened. On the contrary, for a time her strained senses seemed dull, relaxed. Only she heard the music, only the Divine words still lingered in her consciousness. It seemed but a moment to her before she saw all the others rising noisily, opening hymn books, for the final hymn. She herself therefore rose and stood silently, her hands folded before her, her eyes fixed forward. They sang a dismissal hymn. Perhaps there were some who really praised God, from Whom all blessings flow. The minister raised his hands in that benediction which sent them all away full of a sense of duty done, albeit a trifle guilty as to that moral awakening regarding which the minister righteously had upbraided them.

All this was but the usual and regular experience of the congregation. To this woman, this outcast, the unconscious object of the wrath so lately uttered from the pulpit, it had been a great and gracious experience. Yes, she said to herself, she had been one of these others! She was

within sight and touch of other women. There were boys and girls, young human beings, close to her, all about her. And nothing had happened to her after all!

Her precious words, assimilated rather from the hymns than from the sermon, were uppermost in her consciousness as, absorbed, almost unseeing, she stepped out once more into the vestibule. "All ye ... *All ye*...."

Many passed her; none addressed her; a few drew aside their gowns as she came near. All stared. A sort of commotion therefore existed in the back portion of the vestibule as she emerged. The eyes of many young men were upon her boldly, curiously, insultingly, perhaps—she did not know.

It is a part of the formula of village life in such a community as Spring Valley, for the young men thus lingering in the vestibule to accost the maidens of their choice as they emerge from the body proper of the church building. The youth steps forward—preceding any rival if he may—removes his hat, at least in part, and having gained the maiden's eye, speaks the unvarying phrase, "May I see you home tonight?" Whereupon the young lady, smiling if favorably disposed to him, is expected to take his arm in sight of all; and they thus, arm in arm, descend the eight wooden steps to the sidewalk, and so walk away undisturbed. Thus there gradually ensues a general pairing off of all. The swain or the maid left alone is not rated of the social elect. This is the selecting place of the sexes, far more than the sacred parlor with its horsehair chairs and its album midway on the table of the marble top.

But now, as the little assemblage in the vestibule dissipated, there came an added commotion, not at the rear, but at the front of the vestibule. Someone was pushing on inside of the door—someone who apparently did not belong there.

It was the half-witted son of Ephraim Adamson, John, commonly called Johnnie, the idiot! Why he had come hither, why he was allowed to come, none might say, nor why he came unattended by any of his kin as was the usual custom. But none molested him. A bold youth said "Hello, Johnnie," and Johnnie respectfully took off his hat to him with an amiable grin. They would have mocked him had they dared, but in truth none knew what to do with him.

When Aurora Lane had passed in part the gauntlet of the loitering youths, and was about to step down the stair into the street, she felt a heavy hand fall on her arm. Then a peal of laughter rose back of her—laughter on the threshold of the church itself. For what the half-wit did was what he had seen these others do. Sidling up to her, his hat off, he said, "May I see—may I see you home this—this evening?"

This was accounted the greatest jest, the most unfailingly mirthful thing in the recountal, ever known in the annals of Spring Valley.

Aurora Lane started back from him in sudden shocked loathing, swiftly resentful also of the mocking laughter that she heard from those who still stood within the sanctuary. Sanctuary? Was there such a place as sanctuary for her in all the world? Was there any place where she might be safe, where she might be unmolested?

"Go on away!" she said sharply, and would have hurried down the stair. She looked this way and that. There was not a man to whom she might appeal as her champion—not one! She must trust herself.

"Go along!" said she. But actually she saw tears in the eyes of the half-witted giant now. "No, Johnnie; but I'll walk with you with these others as far as the corner of the square."

"All right," said he. "I'll do—I'll do that." A wide gap opened in the ranks of the slow procession on the sidewalk now as these two joined in. Not too wide, however, for there were certain ones who must keep track of all details regarding this epochal event.

"Where is your father, Johnnie?" asked Aurora Lane, quietly and distinctly, so that all might hear.

"He—he—I don't—I don't know. I ain't—I ain't been home. I'm out!" said Johnnie.

"You've not been home? What do you mean?"

"Wasn't there—wasn't there a funer'l for somebody today?" he asked mysteriously. "I can whip any man in Jackson County. My pa said so. We've—we've done it—we'd done it then if he—if he hadn't pitched on to me. He done that."

A sudden terror caught Aurora Lane's soul as she realized that the addled mind of this half-wit was more than to a usual extent gone wrong. She feared him with every fiber in her body. She stepped aside quickly as he made a loutish thrust at her arm, as though to pinch her.

"I'll pinch you!" said he. "You know why?"

"No, don't! Go away!" she exclaimed, and pushed out her hand.

"'Cause—'cause I like you!" said the half-wit. "That's why!"

Then for a time those who crowded up at the rear heard little, until he resumed.

"Oh, I know a lot more I could tell you some time. I ain't—I ain't been home at all. I'm just looking round. Ain't no one can stop me. There was some sort of—of funer'l, wasn't there, in town today?"

Me and my father, we can lick ary two men in Jackson County."

He would have made some sort of rude approach once more. But now even the tardy chivalry of these men of Spring Valley came back to them. Two or three stepped in between him and Aurora Lane. "Here, you," said the voice of one, "that'll do! Quit it now."

Aurora Lane did not have time to thank her rescuers. The painful situation was relieved suddenly. Just as they were turning at the corner of the public square there hurried up a man, an oldish man, untidy even in his Sunday garb, half running toward the group which now he saw approaching.

"Hello, Pa," exclaimed the half-wit, and laughed long and loud. "I didn't come home," said he. "I'm—I'm out!"

The sad face of Ephraim Adamson was seen by all, as he pushed in among them and took his son by the arm. They walked away briskly now together, Johnnie looking back over his shoulder.

But now, to the surprise of all—to her own surprise as well, so sudden was her resolve—Aurora Lane hurried after these two.

"Mr. Adamson," said she, "wait, don't whip him—I'm not angry—I understand."

Adamson halted for just a moment. "He's been away all day," said he, his face showing no resentment of her presence. "I didn't know they let him out last night—he didn't come home. I began looking for him as soon as I knew he was out—I thought he might be hiding in the fields—he does sometimes. He always runs away whenever he gets a chance. I'm sorry if he's done wrong—has he been bad to you?"

"I understand everything," said Aurora Lane. Many heard her say that. "Don't mind. Tomorrow, will you both be in town?—I might talk to you."

"No, Ma'am," said Adamson briefly. "He can't come any more. I may be here. What do you want of me—after what I've said—after what I've done to you? And here you come and bring him back to me."

His own face showed whitish blue in the flicker of the great arc light.

"Ma'am," he went on again, "there's a lot about you—you're some woman after all. Where have you been—at church?"

"Yes," said Aurora Lane, "I was at church."

"I ain't been there in years," said Eph Adamson sadly.

"Neither have I," rejoined Aurora Lane, "twenty years, I think—perhaps more."

He gazed at her now out of his old, bleared, sad eyes. "I wouldn't of been here now but for what's happened," said he. "Already I was sad—and I was drunk before I was. And I was—well, I felt like I was a rebel, that was all, yesterday. That boy of yours looked so fine, I couldn't stand it. Look at mine! I done wrong, Ma'am. I said what I had no right to say. I'm sorry, clean through—with all my heart I'm sorry for what I done yesterday."

She made no answer to him, and he went on. "It seems like some folks was sort of born under a cloud, don't it? I'm one of them, I reckon. All this has been my fault. I'm sorry as I can be. Can't you forgive me, Miss Lane, can't you forgive me any?"

"You didn't hear the anthem," said Aurora Lane, "because you were not in church. It said 'Whosoever.' It said 'All ye.'"

"In some ways," said Eph Adamson slowly—they had been for some time quite apart from the others, walking on slowly—"it seems like you and me was living our lives pretty much alike, don't it, Miss Lane? It's funny, ain't it—we hadn't either of us been to church—not in twenty years!"

None the less, as of old, these others passed by upon the other side, and left unattended those whose wounds were grievous.

At the corner of her street Aurora Lane paused. "Good-by, Mr. Adamson," said she. "Good night. I don't want to be unjust to anyone. I'm going to try not to blame you—I'd like to forgive all the world if I could. I'm in great trouble now."

He broke out in a sullen rage. "Forgive? Do that if you can," said he. "I can't. Maybe a woman can—but forgiving ain't in my line. Well, I'd give anything I could in the world if I hadn't said what I did yesterday right there on the public square. All this has come out of that—this whole trouble. You're different from what I thought. You're a good woman. I take off my hat to you."

"I take off my hat to you," mowed the idiot also, imitating what he saw and heard.... "May I see you home—may I see you home tonight? I'm—I'm out—I was out all last night. They can't pitch on us. Whip any man in Jackson County. Good night—good night, Ma'am. I'm sorry—I'm sorry, too."

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE COUNTY JAIL

Neither Judge Henderson nor his ward attended church services this Sunday evening, the former because of a certain physical reaction which disposed him to slumber, the latter because she had other plans of her own. The great white house, with its wide flanking grounds, where Judge Henderson had so long lived in somewhat solitary state, was now lighted up from top to bottom; but presently a light in an upper window vanished.

Anne Oglesby tiptoed down the stair side by side with the housekeeper. She cast a glance of inquiry into the front parlor, where, prone upon a large couch, was Judge Henderson—rendering audible tribute to Morpheus.

"He's violating the town ordinance about the muffler cut-out," said Anne smilingly to the housekeeper. "Oh, don't wake him—I'll be back presently—tell him."

She hurried through the yard and down the street toward the central part of the town. The streets about the square now were well-nigh deserted, since most folk were in the churches. Her own destination was a square or two beyond the courthouse, where stood another brick building of public interest; in short, the county jail.

It was the duty of the sheriff to care for the tenants of his jail, and he made his own home in a part of the brick building which served in that capacity—a small building with iron grates on the lower windows, arranged at about the height of a man's eyes as he would stand within on the cement floor of a cell, so that he might look out just above the greensward, his face visible to any who passed by. Many a boy had thus gazed with horror on the unshaven face of some ruffian who begged him for tobacco, or some tramp who had trifled too long with the patience of the community, usually so generous with its alms. Many a school child could show you the very place where the woman who killed her children was confined before they took her away—could point out the very window where she stood looking and weeping and wringing her hands—"Just like this"—as any child would tell you.

And some day perhaps children would point out this very window where now stood looking out, motionless—"Not saying a word to nobody"—the "man who killed the city marshal." Don Lane was standing at his grated window and looking out when Anne Oglesby crossed the grass plot and came up the brick sidewalk, fenced in by chains supported on little iron posts, which led to the jail's iron-bound door.

His heart gave a great leap. He saw her. She was coming to him—the one faithful, his beloved! Not even Miss Julia—not even his mother—had come, but here was Anne!

But at the next instant he stepped back from the window, hoping that she would not gain admission. Shame, deep and unspeakable, additional shame, twofold shame, compassed him as soon as he reflected. The bitterest of all was the fact that he must yield her up forever. He must tell her why. And now she had come—to see him in a cell! It was here that he must break his heart, and hers.

Sheriff Cowles opened the door when Anne Oglesby rang the bell. He stood for a moment looking out into the twilight.

"Who is it?" he asked. Then he recognized the girl whom he had brought down town from the railway station in his car that morning. Anne Oglesby was not a person easily to be forgotten.

"You know who I am, Mr. Cowles," said she—"I am Miss Oglesby, Judge Henderson's ward. I'm—I am respectable."

"Yes," said Cowles, "I know that, but why are you here?"

"Because I'd not be respectable if I were not here," she said quietly. "You probably know."

"Does the Judge know you have come?"

"No, he wouldn't have let me come if he had known. I want to see him—that young man, you know." Her own color was high by this time.

The sheriff hesitated. "Well," said he, "I don't want to do anything that isn't right, anything that isn't fair. I reckon I know how you feel."

"We're engaged to be married," said Anne Oglesby simply, and looked him directly in the face. "That gives me some rights, doesn't it?"

"In one way, maybe, but no legal rights," replied the sheriff, who was much perplexed, but who could not escape the compelling fact of Anne Oglesby's presence, the compelling charm of Anne Oglesby herself. "He's not really committed as yet, of course, only bound over by the coroner's jury; but the grand jury meets tomorrow, and they'll indict him sure. You know that. I can't take any chances of his getting away. I have to be sure."

"Your wife may come with me," said Anne Oglesby. "It's my right to talk to him a little while, don't you think? I'm not going to try to get him out. He hasn't had anyone to help him—he hasn't had any legal counsel."

"Who'd he send for, anyway?" asked the sheriff. "He's a sort of a waif, isn't he—her boy? I

suppose you've heard about him fighting here around town yesterday?"

"I don't know why he fought, but I know that if he did he had cause. I hope he fought well."

"They said it was about his mother," began Sheriff Cowles. "Some word about her was passed ___"

"You needn't say any more," said Anne Oglesby.

"He hasn't told me to send for any lawyer for him," said Cowles. "It don't seem like he's thought of it. He's just sort of quiet—mighty still all the time. Ha-hum!—I don't know what to say about your seeing him. Why didn't you ask your uncle, Judge Henderson?"

"Don't call him my uncle," said Anne Oglesby. "He's only my guardian in law. I've just told you he wouldn't let me come. That's why I've got to hurry."

"Well," hesitated the sheriff, "I'll have to warn you not to talk about this case where I can hear it. I'll have to hear all you say."

"Would you like to do that?"

The sheriff flushed. "No," said he, "not special; but you see my own duty is right clear. I can't play any favorites. If you was his lawyer, now, it might be different."

"I am his lawyer, the only one he's got so far as I know."

"Yes, I reckon the judge wouldn't care to take his case." The sheriff wagged his head. "He's no ways rich—not beyond four dollars and seventy-five cents and a pocket knife and some keys on a ring. He's broke, all right."

"He's never been anything else," said Anne Oglesby, hotly. "He's never had a chance. Do you want to keep a man from his chance all his life—do you want to help railroad him to the gallows? That's for the courts, not for you. Do you want to hang a man—are you anxious to begin that?"

Cowles' face grew pale. "God knows I don't! I never done that in my life, and I don't want to have to, neither. Don't talk about that to me, Miss."

"Then don't talk to me any more about those other things. I give you my word I'll not try to get him out, but I want to see him—I must see him—he'll want to see me. Don't you know—we've—we've just begun to be engaged."

"Some things I can't understand no ways," pondered Sheriff Cowles. "He's nobody, so far as I can learn. You're the Judge's ward—why, you're rich, they say."

"I'd give every cent I have to see him walk out right now. I suppose you were young once yourself. Were you ever in love, Mr. Cowles?"

"Yes," said the sheriff, slowly. "I was—I am yet, some. I can remember back. I don't believe I ought to let you in. But I'm afraid I'll have to, because you are young—like we all was once—and because you're in love. Did anyone see you coming over here?"

"I don't know; but all the town knows about him and me. Well, let them."

"You must promise not to help him in any way to get out—not to do anything you hadn't ought to do, nor against the law."

"I give you my promise," said Anne Oglesby.

Without more speech the sheriff turned and led the way down the stone-paved hall to the short cement stairs which made down upon the half-floor below, at the level of the cells. He turned the switch of an electric light, so that they might see the better in the hall.

There was but one tenant, and from beyond his door there came no sound, not even when Cowles unlocked the iron-shod door and stood, his revolver easy at his belt.

As Anne entered she saw Don Lane sitting on the edge of the narrow pallet, looking at the door. He had not risen. He had been sitting with his head in his hands.

He groaned now. "My God!" said he. "Anne! What made you come?"



"Anne! What made you come?"

The sheriff stepped within the door at the side of Anne Oglesby. "I'd stay about ten minutes or so if I was you," said he, and tried to look unconscious and impersonal.

Don Lane rose now, but stood still apart.

"Why do you say that, Don?" asked Anne, stepping closer to him. "Didn't you know I'd come?"

She reached out her hands to him, and he caught both of them in his.

"I ought to have known you would," said he, "and I know you oughtn't to. It makes it very hard. I said good-by to you—this morning—today."

"Won't you kiss me—again, Don?" asked Anne Oglesby.

He kissed her again, his face white.

"It's hard to know you for so little a while," said he, his young face drawn, his voice trembling—"awfully hard. What time there's left to me—I'll have it all to remember you. But we must never meet after this. It's over."

"Don, if I thought it was all over, do you suppose I'd let you kiss me now?"

"It's like heaven," said he. "It's all I'll have to remember."

"A long time, Don—a very long time!"

"I can't tell. They are not apt to lose much time with my case. The only crime of my life was in ever lifting my eyes to you, Anne. Oh, you know I'd never have done that if I had known—what I found out yesterday. But then I've said good-by to you."

"I didn't say good-by, Don!"

He half raised a hand, shaking his head sadly. "You must forget me, no matter what happens—no matter whether I am cleared or not. I'll never be the coward to ask you to remember me—that wouldn't be right. I'm beyond all hope, whichever way it goes."

"I've come tonight, Don," said she, quietly, "to see about your lawyer."

He half laughed. "There'll be small need for one, and if there were I've got no funds. It will take a lot of money."

"Well, what of that? I've got a lot of money. My guardian told me so today. I'm worth somewhere between a quarter and a half million dollars anyway—I'm not rich—but that would help us."

He laughed at this harshly. "I didn't know you had any money at all. And you think I'd be coward enough to take your money to get out of here—after what I have learned about myself since yesterday? Do you suppose I'd take my life from you—such a life as it's got to be now?"

"What do you mean, Don?—you won't let me go, will you? You don't mean——" She stepped toward him, in sudden terror of his resolution. "Why, *Don!*"

"Yes, yes. I spent all the afternoon here alone trying to think. Well, I won't compromise. I never meant to pull you into this—I'll not let you be dragged into it by your own great-heartedness. But, Anne, Anne, dearest, dearest, surely you know that when I spoke to you yesterday I didn't know what I know today! I thought I had a father. You *know* I'd not deceive you—you *do* know that?"

There was a shuffle on the stone floor of the cell. Sheriff Cowles, coughing loudly, was turning away from them. A moment later the door closed behind him. "Ha-hum!" said he to himself outside the door. "Oh, hell! I wish't I wasn't sher'ff."

They were alone. With the door closed the cell was dark, save for the twilight filtering through the barred windows high up along the wall.

Anne came closer to him and put her hands upon his shoulders. "Oh, Don," said she, "it's hard,

awfully hard, isn't it, to start with such a handicap? But when did all the men in the world start even? And is it always the one who starts first that finishes best? Don, you played the game in college—so did I—we've both got to play the game now! We'll have to take our handicap. But you mustn't talk about sending me away. I can't stand everything. Oh, don't! I can't stand that!" Her voice was choking now. She was sobbing, striving not to do so.

He caught her wrists in his hands, as her hands still lay upon his shoulders; but he did not draw her to him.

"Anne," said he, "the time comes in every man's life for him to die. I heard once about a man who could not swim and who saw his wife drown in the stream by him, almost at his side. He ran along and shouted, and said he could not swim. Well, he lived. The woman died. Suppose that had been our case. If we both went down together, it wouldn't be so bad, perhaps. But I'll not have my life as that sort of a gift."

"You won't let me help you, Don?"

"No! I won't let you have anything to do with me! I'll never allow your name to come on my lips, and you must never think of mentioning mine! Only—Anne, Anne—surely you don't think I had any idea before yesterday—about my father? I wouldn't buy my own happiness at that price. I'm no one's son. I'm dead, and doubly dead. But I never knew."

"No," said she, "I know you did not—I know you would not."

They both were so young, as they talked on now, wisely, soberly.

"So you are free," he said, casting away her hands from him, and standing back. "You never were anything but free."

"I'll never be free again, Don," said she, shaking her head. "You kissed me! I'm not a girl any more—I'm a woman now. I can't go back. And now you tell me to go away! Don't you love me, Don? Why, I love you—so much!"

"My God, don't!" he groaned. "Don't! I can't stand everything. But I can't take anything but the best and truest sort of love."

"Isn't mine?"

"No. It's pity, maybe—I can't tell. This is no place for us to talk of that now. You must go away. I hope you will forget you ever saw me. I don't even know my father's name—I don't know whether he is living—I don't know anything! I have been walled in all my life—I'm walled in now. I never ought to have touched even the hem of your garment, for I wasn't fit. But I couldn't help it."

"That's the trouble," said Anne. "I can't help it, either."

"Ah!" he half groaned, "you ought to be kept from yourself."

"Kept from myself, Don? If that were true of all the women in the world, how much world would there be left? That's why I'm here—why, Don, I had to come!"

"Anne! It can't be. It's only cruel for you to tear me up by coming here—by staying here—by standing here. I love you! Anne! Anne! I don't see how it could be hard as this for any man to part from any woman." He was trembling through all his strong frame now.

"But we promised!"

"The law says that a promise is such only when two minds meet. Our minds never met—I didn't know the facts—you didn't know about me—we have just found out about it now."

"Our minds didn't meet?" said Anne Oglesby. "Our *minds*? Did not our *hearts* meet—don't they meet now—and isn't *that* what it all means between a man and a woman?"

He stood, trembling, apart from her in the twilight.

"Don't!" he whispered. "I love you! I will love you all my life! You must go away. Oh, go now, go quickly!"

A merciful footfall sounded on the stone floor of the outer hall. The door opened, letting in a shaft of light with it. Cowles stood hesitating, looking at the two young people, still separated, standing wretchedly.

"I hate to say anything," said the sheriff, "but I reckon——"

"She must go," said Don Lane. "Take her away. Good-by—Anne! Anne! Oh, good-by!"

"Won't you kiss me, Don?" said Anne Oglesby—"when I love you so much?"

There were four tears, two great, sudden drops from each eye, that sprang now on Dan Cowles' wrinkled, sunburned cheeks.

But Don Lane had cast himself down once more on the pallet and was trying with all his power to be silent until after she had gone.

"In some ways," said Dan Cowles to his wife later that night, "he's got me guessing, that young fellow. He don't act like no murderer to me. But since she left, and since all this here happened,

CHAPTER XIX

THE MOB

Anne Oglesby left the jail shortly after the time when church services were ending. As she hurried by Aurora Lane's house in Mulberry Street she saw a light shining from the windows, but she did not enter—she could not have spoken to anyone now.

She evaded any meeting with her guardian after she had made her way back home. Judge Henderson had not known of her absence and was not aware of her return. Anne thus by a certain period of time missed seeing what Dan Cowles presently saw.

It was noticeable that Sabbath day that more than the usual number of farmers' wagons remained in town, quite past the time when the country church members usually started back for their homes. The farmers seemed to be in no hurry, even although they had seen a double church service. There was something restless, something vague, disturbing, over the town. A number of townsmen also seemed impelled to walk back toward the public square. Some strange indefinite summons drew them thither. Little knots of men stood here and there. Groups of women gathered at this or that gallery front.

No one knows the point where in vague public thought a general resolution actually begins. The ripple in the pool spreads widely when a stone is cast. What chance word, or what deliberate resolve, may have started the slowly growing resolution of Spring Valley may not be known; but now a sort of stealthy silence fell over the village as groups gathered here and there, speaking cautiously, in low tones.

A knot of men stood near the corner of the square looking down the street to the light which shone red from the shaded window of Aurora Lane.

"I know what was done right in this here town thirty year ago," said one high pitched voice. "It was old Eph Adamson's father that led them, too. Them was days when——"

"Why ain't Eph in town today?" asked another voice. "I seen considerable of his neighbors around in town today."

"He was, a while back," said someone.

"That must have been about a hour ago," said some other, looking about furtively at the faces of his neighbors.

"Let's take a stroll over towards the open lots near the jail," suggested someone else.

So, following the first to start with definite purpose, little straggling groups passed on beyond the corner of the square, beyond the jail itself, to a sort of open space not yet encroached upon by public or private buildings.

There was no shouting, no loud talking. The light was dim. The crowd itself moved vaguely, milling about, like cattle restive and ready to stampede, but not yet determined on their course.

"God! Did you hear that music this afternoon—they're done a-buryn' poor old Joel Tarbush by now, but I can hear it yet, seems to me! Now, what had poor old Joel ever done—all his life—to deserve bein' murdered like a dog? It makes my blood sort of rise up to think of that. Now, them that done that—them that was back of that——"

His friend, accosted, nodded grimly, his mouth was shut tight and turned down deep at the corners.

There did not lack one or two willing at least to talk further. One was a young man, rather well dressed, apparently fresh from church. He spoke to any who would listen.

"What I mean to say, men, is this," said he, "we've got to do something to clean up this town. It's the *people* that's behind the law anyhow. Am I right?"

"He talks like a lawyer—what he says is pretty true," said one farmer to another.

"That was a strong sermon our minister preached tonight," said yet another. "He said we'd have to stamp out crime and make a warnin'. The preacher e'en—a'most pointed out what we ought to do."

"... We'd ought to make a clean sweep of this whole family," said the same young man, more boldly now. "They're a bad lot—both her son and her."

"... We could break into the jail easy," said someone, after a time. "Cowles couldn't keep us from it. Maybe he wouldn't want to."

"... The trouble is," resumed the voice of the young man who had earlier spoken, "it's hard to make a law case stick. We've seen how that worked out in the trial yesterday—he came clear—"

they dropped the case, and nothing was done. Old Eph Adamson had to take all the medicine. But we ought to take our place as a law-abiding community—I've always said that."

"And God-fearin'," said a devout voice.

"Yes, a God-fearing community! It's been twenty years now that that woman has flaunted her vice in the face of this community."

"Ain't a man in this town that don't know about her—it's just sort o' quieted down, that's all," said a gray-bearded, peak-chinned man grimly; which was more or less true, as more than one man present knew, himself not guiltless enough of heart at least to cast the first stone at Aurora Lane.

"In the old times," grinned one stoutish man, chewing tobacco and speaking to a neighbor who held a hand cupped at his ear, "the folks wouldn't of stood it. They'd just 'a' had a little feather party. They rid such people out of town on a rail them days—that's what they done. And they didn't never come back after that—never in the world. As for a murderer—they made a eend of him!"

"And so could we make a eend of it all right now, this very night, if we had a little sand," said another voice.

For a time all these speakers fell silent, seeking resolve, waiting for an order, a command. But as they became silent they grew more uneasy. They broke ground, shifted, milled about, still like cattle. Then head was laid to head, beard wagged to beard again.

And then, all at once, it broke!

"*Come on, boys!*" cried a loud voice at last—not that of the young man who first had spoken—not that of any of these others speakers who had hesitated, lacking courage of definite sort. "*Come on! Who's with me?*"

The town of Spring Valley never mentioned the name of this speaker. The report got out in a general way that he was a farmer who lived a few miles out in the country. Indeed, sympathy for Ephraim Adamson's bad fortune in this case was no doubt largely at the bottom of this affair tonight—along with these other things; sympathy for Tarbush; the sermons of the preachers; the emotional spell of the dirge music, still lingering on these crude souls. No mob reasons. It was plain that most of the men, though not all, were farmers. But now they all fell in behind the leader as he started, a motley procession. Some folded handkerchiefs and tied them about their faces. Yet others reversed their coats, wearing them with the linings outside. Others pulled their hats down over their eyes.

Their feet, although not keeping time, none the less caught a ragged unison, in a sound which could have been heard at a considerable distance. Dan Cowles heard it now, and came to the door of the county jail. As he saw the crowd, he drew a long breath.

"They're coming here!" said he to himself at length. "I reckon they'll try to get him. I'll hold him anyways, and they know that." Quickly he darted back into the jail.

The procession debouched at the edge of the jail yard square, halted for a moment, then came on steadily, because someone at their head walked steadily. Perhaps there were seventy-five or a hundred of them in all. Most of them were neighbors, nearly every man knew who was his neighbor here, even in the darkness. Not one of these could precisely have told why he was here. By some process of self-persuasion, some working of hysteria, some general acceptance of the auto-suggestion of the mob, most had persuaded themselves that they were there to "do their duty." It sounded well. If, indeed, they had been brought hither merely by the excitement of it, merely under the hypnosis of it, they forgot that, or tried to forget it, and said they were there to do their duty—their duty to their God-fearing town.... But in the mind of each was a picture out of the past of which we may not inquire. That night far worse than murder might have been done.

"We want him, Dan. Bring him out!" The voice of the leader sounded dry and hoarse, but he did not waver, for he saw the sheriff make no move of resistance.

"You can't get him," said Dan Cowles. "You couldn't even if he was here. But he ain't here."

"What do you mean, he ain't here? We know he is!"

"Come in and see," said Cowles, stepping back. "I just been to his cell and he ain't there. Come in and search the whole jail."

They did come in and search the jail, piling into the corridors, opening every door, looking into every room even of the sheriff's living quarters, but the jail was empty! There was no prisoner there at all.

"We want Don Lane, that killed the city marshal," repeated the husky voice of the leader once more. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," said Sheriff Cowles. "If I did, I wouldn't tell you." And indeed he spoke only truth in both these statements.

"I know!" screamed a high voice in the middle of the man pack. "He's maybe up at her house—'Rory Lane's. Let's go search the place—we'll get him yet!"

It was enough. The mob, thus resisted, disappointed, began to mutter, to talk now, in a low, hoarse half roar of united voices. They turned away on a new trail. Some broke into shouts as they began to hurry down the brick walk of the jail yard. They jostled and crowded in the street, as they came into the corner of the public square. A general outcry arose as they caught sight of the light in the window of Aurora Lane's little home, a half block down the street, beyond the corner of the square.

Aurora heard the sound of their feet coming down the sidewalk. She heard the noise at her gate—heard the crash as the gate was kicked off its new-mended hinges—heard the men crowd up her little walk, heard their feet clumping on the little gallery floor. Her heart stopped. She stood white-faced, her hands clasped. What was it? What did they mean? Were they going to kill her boy? Had they killed him? Were they going to tell her that? Were they going to kill her, too?

"Come on out!" she heard someone calling to her. It seemed to her that she must go. In some strange hypnosis, her feet began to move, unsanctioned by her volition.... She stood at the door facing them all, her eyes large, her face showing her distress, her query, her new terror. On her face indeed was written now the whole story of her despair, her failure, her terrible unhappiness. She had aged by years, these last twenty-four hours. Now sheer terror was written there also. The mob! The lynchers! The avengers! What had they not and more than once done in this little savage town?... A picture rose before her mind ... a horrible picture out of the past. Wide-eyed, she caught at the throat of her gown, caught at the covering of her bosom—and then went at bay, as does any despairing creature that has been pressed too hard.

She looked down at them. Those nearest to her were masked. Back of them rose groups of shoulders, rough clad, hats pulled down.... No, she did not know one of them; she did not recognize even a face—or was not sure she had done so. They jostled and shifted and pushed forward.

"No! No! Go back! Go on away!" she cried, pale, her eyes starting. And again she called aloud, piteously, on that God who seemed to have forsaken her.

"Come on out!" cried a voice, thick and husky. "Come on out, and hurry up about it. Bring him out—we know he's here. We want Don Lane, and we're going to git him—or we'll git you. Damn you, look out, or we'll git you both! Where's that boy, that killed the marshal?"

"He's not here," answered Aurora, in a voice she would not have known to be her own. "I don't know where he is. Believe me, if he's not there in the jail, I don't know where he is. What do you want of him? He's not here—I give you my word he's not."

She still stood, near the door, her hands clutching at her clothing, a mortal terror in her soul, her frail woman's body the only fence now for her home, no longer sanctuary.

"You lie! We know he is here—he ain't in the jail. If the sher'f let him out, he'd come here. You've got him hid. Bring him out—it's no use trying to get him away from us. We want him, and we've come to git him."

The words of the leader got their support in the rumble of fourscore throats.

"I'm telling you the truth," quavered poor Aurora Lane. "Men, can't you believe me? Have I ever lied to you?"

A roar of brutish laughter greeted this. "Listen at her talk!" cried one tall young man. "Fine, ain't it! She's been just a angel here! Oh, no, she wouldn't lie to us about that boy—oh! no, she never has! Why, you ain't never done nothing *but* lie, all your life!"

They laughed again at this, and became impatient.

"This is her little old place," began the same voice. "I've never been in it before. I bet they's been goings-on, right here, more'n once."

"That's so!" said a man whose mouth corners were drawn down hard. "And in this here God-fearin' town o' ours, that's always wanted to be respectable."

"Sure we did, all of us!" encored the cracking treble of the same tall, well-dressed young man. "Whose fault if we ain't? She's his mother. This whole business come of her bein' what she is—looser'n hell, that's all. We stood it all for years—but this is too much—killin' the city marshal—"

"I didn't!" cried Aurora Lane, ghastly pale. "He never did. I've tried to live here clean for twenty years. Not one of you can raise a voice against me—you cowards, you liars! My boy—if he were here, not any ten of you'd dare say that! You'd not dare to touch him. Oh, you brutes—you low-down cowards!"

"We'll show you if we don't dare!" rejoined the steady voice of the leader. "Fetch him out now and we'll show you about that. We're goin' to git him, first 'r last, and it's no use trying to stop it. We'll reg'late this town now, in our own way. If that boy's out of jail, he's either skipped or else he's here. Either way, the safest thing to do is to come on through with him. If you don't, we'll see about *you*—and we'll do it mighty soon. Bring him out."

"Oh, hell!" shrilled a falsetto voice, "you're wastin' time with her. Go on in after him—she's got him hid—she's kep' him hid for twenty years and she's keepin' him hid now—and you can gamble on it! Go on in and git him!"

There came a shuffling of feet on the walk, on the gallery floor. Aurora was conscious that the blur of faces was closer to her.... She saw masks, hats, kerchiefs, stubbled chins crowding in, close up to her. A reek of the man pack came to her, close, stifling, mingled of tobacco, alcohol, and the worse effluvia of many men excited.... The terror, the horror, the disgust, the repugnance of it all fell on her like a blanket, stifling, suffocating, terrifying. She no longer reasoned—it was only desperation, terror, which made her spread out her arms from lintel to lintel of her little deserted door, where the last sacred shred of her personal privacy now was periled. The last instinctive, virginal—yes, virginal—terror at the intrusion of man, of men, of many men, was hers now. Home—sanctuary—refuge—all, all was gone. She stood, disheveled, her gown now half loosed at the neck as she spread her weak arms open across her door. Her eyes were large, round, open, staring, her face a tragic mask as she stood trying—a woman, weak and quite alone—to beat back the passion of these who now had come to rob her of the last—the very last—of the things dear to her; the last of the things sacred to her, the things any woman ought to claim inviolate and under sanctuary, no matter who or what she is or ever may have been.

But the fever, the hysteria of these no longer left either reason or decency to them, neither any manner of respect for the sacredness of womanhood; a thing for the most part inherent even under the severest strains ever brought to bear on man to make him lower than the brute—the brute which at its basest never lacks acknowledgment of the claims of sex.

These men had reverted, dropped, declined as only man himself, noblest and lowest of all animals, may do. There was no mercy in them, indeed no comprehension, else the appeal of the outraged horror on the face of Aurora Lane must have driven them back, or have struck them down where they stood.

"You git on out of the way now!" she heard the coarse voice of someone say in her face....

She held her arms out across her door only for an instant longer—she never knew by whom it was, or when, that they were swept down, and she herself swept aside, crumpled in a corner of her room.

The mob was in her home; she had no sanctuary! She caught glimpses of dark shoulders, compacted by the narrowness of the little rooms, surging on in and over everything, into every room, testing every crack and crevice. She heard laughs, oaths, obscenity such as she had never dreamed men used—for she knew little of the man animal—heard the rising unison of voices recording a renewed disappointment and chagrin.

"Damn her! She's got away with him!" called out someone.

"Sure she has—we might of expected it," rejoined another. "She always gets by with it somehow—she's pulled the wool over our eyes all her life. She's fooled us now once more."

"What'll we do, boys?" cried out the falsetto of the tall young man, whose face was not set strong with a man's beard-roots. "Are we going to let her get away with it like this?"

He made some sort of answer for himself, for there came the crash of broken glass as he flung some object across the room.

It was enough—it was the cue. "Smash her up, boys!" cried out another voice. "Put her out of business now! She's fooled us for the last time."

They did not find Don Lane, not though they searched this house as they had the jail. So now their anger caught them, resentful, unreasoning, unfeeling, brutal anger....

So they wrecked the little house of Aurora Lane. They tore down the pictures from the walls, the curtains from the windows, broke in the windows themselves. They smashed one piece of furniture against another. They even tore up the little white bed—at which for twenty years nightly Aurora Lane had kneeled to pray. Someone caught up one of the pillows, laughing loudly. "Here you are, here's plenty, I reckon! Damn you! You're lucky we don't give you a ride. Tar'n feathers, 'n a ride on a rail—that's the medicine for such as you."

The thought of escape, of rescue, of resistance now had passed from the mind of Aurora Lane. Frozen, speechless, motionless, she waited, helpless before this blind fury. They had been after Don, and they had not found him. Where was Don? And what would they now do to her? What was that last coarse, terrible threat that they had meant?

She caught her torn frock again to her throat as she saw, not a definite movement toward her, but a cessation of movement, a pause, a silence, which seemed more terrible and more ominous than anything yet in all this hour of torment and terror. What would they do now?

They had halted, paused, they stood irresolute, still a pack, a mass, a mob, not yet resolved into units of thinking, reasoning, human beings; when without warning suddenly, there came something to give them cause for thought.

There was still a rather dense crowd around the gate, on the walk, where some score or more lingered, who either had not entered the house or who had emerged from it. It was against the edge of this mass that a heavily built man, heavy of face, heavy of hand, cast himself as he now came running up.

It was the sheriff, Dan Cowles. He thrust a revolver barrel into the face of the nearest man, caught another by the shoulder. A halt, a pause, whether of irresolution or of doubt, of indecision

or of shame, came like a falling and restraining hand upon all this lately demoniacal assemblage. They did not move. It was as though a net had been sprung above them all.

"Halt!" called out the voice of the sheriff, high and clear. "What are you doing here?"

"It's the sher'f!" croaked one gray beard farther back. "God! what'll he do to us now?"

The feeling of apprehension gave courage to some of the bolder. Two or three sprang upon Cowles from behind and broke him down. He fell, his revolver pulled from his hand. He looked up into faces that he knew.

"Make a move and you'll get it," said a hoarse, croaking voice above him. "Shut up now and keep quiet, and keep to yourself what you seen. We're just having a little surprise party, that's all. We're only cleaning up this town."

But now another figure came running—more than one. Judge Henderson himself had heard the tumult on the streets. It was he who first hurried up to the edge of the crowd.

"Men!" he cried, holding up his hand. "What are you doing? Disperse, in the name of the law! I command it!"

They had long been used to obeying the voice of Judge Henderson. He was their guide, their counselor, their leader. Some hesitated now.

And then Judge Henderson pushed into the little group, looked over their heads, their shoulders—and saw what ruin had been wrought in Aurora Lane's little home. He saw Aurora standing there, outraged in every fiber, desecrated in her very soul, the ruins of her lost sanctuary lying all about her and on her face the last, last anguish of a woman who has said farewell to all, everything—life, happiness, peace, hope, and trust in God.

Henderson cast his own hands to his face as he pushed back from that sight. He stood trembling and silent, unstrung by one swift, remorseless blow from his own soul, his own long sleeping conscience.

Afar off, in the village, someone rang a bell—that at the engine house. Its summons of alarm called out every townsman not already in the streets.

But before this time reaction had begun in the mob. Something about Judge Henderson—the sudden change in his attitude—the blanched terror, the awful horror which showed now in his face—seemed to bring reason to their own inflamed and muddled minds. And now, as they hesitated, they felt the impact of two other strong men who flung themselves against them, shouldered their way through, up to the side of the struggling sheriff. Those in the way looked into the barrels of two revolvers, one held in each hand of a tall man, a giant in his rugged strength, as those knew whom he jostled aside in his savage on-coming.

"Hold on, men!" cried out the great voice of Horace Brooks. "I'll kill the first man that makes a move. Law or no law, I'll kill you if you move. What are you doing here?"

At his side there was another, a young man—white-faced—a tall young man whom not all of them had seen before, whom not many recognized now in the sudden confusion as they swayed back, jostling one and another in the attempt to get away—the young man, the prisoner they had wanted and not found. The young man swung at one arm of Hod Brooks, tried to wrest from him one of the revolvers—sought to gain some weapon with which he might kill. But Hod Brooks kept him away.

"Get back," he said, "leave it to us. God! Don't look at that! They've smashed her place all to hell!"

Still another man came, running, shouting—calling out—calling some of those present by their own names. It was old Eph Adamson, and tears were streaming down his face.

"You men!" he called out, and he named them one after another. "You're my neighbors, you're my friends. What are you doing here—oh, my God!—my God! What have you done? She's a good woman—I tell you she's a good woman."

The three of these newcomers broke their way in to the side of the sheriff, who by this time was up to his knees. They caught his gun away from the man who had taken it.

"Give it to me!" said the low, cold voice of the young man who was fighting—and before his straight thudding blows a man dropped every now and then as he came on, struggling desperately to get the weapon. "Give it to me!"

He reached out his hand for the sheriff's gun; but still they put him away, gasping, his eyes with murder in them.

"Get back," cried Horace Brooks. "Leave it alone. Get back. Look out, men—he'll shoot!"

There were five of them now who made a little group. Two others came running to join them—Nels Jorgens, the wagon-maker and blacksmith—at his side the spare figure of the gray-bearded minister, Rawlins, of the Church of Christ.

"Get into them now, Dan!" cried the great voice of Horace Brooks. "Break through."

So they broke through. Men fell and stumbled, whether from blows or in the confusion of their own efforts to escape. At the edges of the crowd men turned and ran—ran as fast as they could. After a time they of the smaller party were almost alone.

The sheriff turned away, picking up a coat which he found lying on the ground. The tall young man who had fought at his side stood now leaning against the fence, his face dropped into his hands, shaking his head from side to side, unable to weep. Cowles stepped up to him.

"I'm glad you come, boy," said he, "but it's no place for you here. I must have left the door open when I went away—I plumb forgot it. Where've you been, anyhow?"

"You forgot—you left the door unlocked after she went away—Anne. But I wasn't trying to escape—I wasn't going out of town."

"Where was you, then?"

"I was down at the bridge—I was thinking what to do. Once my mother was going to take me there.... But I thought of her—Anne, you know, and my mother, too. I hardly knew what was right.... I heard the noise...."

Dan Cowles looked at him soberly. "Run on down to the jail now, son, and tell my wife to lock you in. Tell her I'll be on down, soon's I can."

Judge Henderson, white-faced, trembling, looked in the starlight into the face of the one man whom he classed as his rival, his enemy in this town—it was a wide, white face with narrow and burning eyes, a Berserker face framed with its fringe of red. Horace Brooks himself was still almost sobbing with sheer fighting rage. There was that in his eye terrible to look upon.

"Oh, my God!" said Judge Henderson again and again. "Oh, my God!—my God!—!" He supported himself against the broken posts of what had been the little gate of Aurora Lane.

CHAPTER XX

THE IDIOT

At seven o'clock of Monday morning, Johnnie Adamson stood at the roadside at the front of his father's farmhouse. He held in his hands a wagon stake which he had found somewhere and with it smote aimlessly at anything which came in his way. His usual amiable smile was gone. A low scowl, like that of some angered anthropoid, had replaced it. His mother, seeing that some unusual turn had taken place in his affliction, stood at the window of the farmhouse looking out at him and wringing her hands. She long ago had ceased to weep—the fountain of tears had dried within her soul. There came to her now and then the sound of his hoarse defiance, hurled at all who passed by on the road.

"Son John!—Eejit!—Whip any man in Jackson County!"

Ephraim Adamson was at the time in the field at work. His wife at length crept out to the back porch and pulled the cord of the dinner bell. Its sound rang out across the fields. Her husband came running, more than half suspicious of the cause of the alarm. Long had their lives been lived in vague dread of this very thing—a violent turn in the son's affliction. The father's anxious face spoke the question.

"Yes, he's bad," said the wife to him. "I'm afraid of him—he's getting worse."

The father walked out into the front yard. The youth came toward him, grinning pleasantly. He fell into the position of a batsman, swinging his club back and forth as he must some time have seen ball players do.

"Now you—now you throw it at me—and I'll hit it," said the half-wit. "You—you throw it at me—and I'll hit—I'll hit it."

To humor him, his father pitched at him a broken apple that lay on the ground near by. Johnny struck at it and by chance caught it fair, crushing it to fragments. At this he laughed in glee.

"Now—now—another one," said he. "I'll hit—I'll hit them all."

His father walked up to him and reached out a hand, but for the first time the boy resented his control. He broke away, swinging his club menacingly, striking at everything in his way. Ephraim Adamson followed him; but still evading, the half-wit passed out through the gate which led into the garden patch at the rear of the house. With his club he cut at the tops of everything green that he passed. Especially, with many yells of glee, he fell upon the rows of cabbages, then beginning to head out. With heavy blows of his club he cut down one after another. The game seemed to excite him more and more. At last it seemed to enrage him more and more. He struck with greater viciousness.

"Eejit!" said he. "I'm out—they can't pick on me! I can hit them! I will, too, hit them! I'll hit him!"

His father, following him, saw the face of the club all stained now—stained dark—black or red—

stained green. He caught at the stick, but for once found his own strength insufficient to cope with that of his son. The latter wrestled with him. In a direct grip, one against the other, in which both struggled for the club, the father was unable to wrest it from him; and continually he saw a new and savage light come into the eyes of his son. The boy threatened him, menaced him with the club. His father drew back, for the first time afraid. He went back into the house, to his wife, on whom he turned a gray, sad face.

"I'm afraid," said he slowly, "I'm afraid we'll have to send him away. He's awfully bad—he might do anything. I'd rather see him dead."

The nod of the sad-faced woman was full assent. She gazed out of the window blankly, barrenly. Ephraim Adamson went out again into the yard. He passed the boy, unseen, went out into the stable yard, and caught up his team, which soon he had harnessed to his light wagon. By this time Johnnie had gone to the woodpile and taken up the ax. He was endeavoring to split some cordwood, but he rarely could hit twice in the same place, all his correlations being bad. His father now threw open the gate and drove into the yard.

"Want a ride, Johnnie?" he asked; and the boy docilely came and climbed into the front seat beside him. Not even looking at his wife, Adamson started out at good speed for the eight-mile drive into Spring Valley. For the most part the boy was quiet now, but once in a while the return of a paroxysm would lead him to shout and fling up his hands, to grin or make faces at any who passed.

In town, at the corner of the public square, Johnnie became unruly. Some vague memory was in his mind. He pointed down the head of Mulberry Street.

"I want to go—I want to go there!" said he.

Before his father could stop him he had sprung out of the wagon and run on ahead. Adamson as quickly as possible hitched his team at the nearest rack and followed at full speed, sudden terror now renewed in his own soul. The boy had turned in at the gate of the little house of Aurora Lane—that little house now scarce longer to be called a home!

Aurora Lane was alive, within. She moved about dully, slowly, her mind numb at the horror of all she had gone through. The feeling possessed her that she was without help or hope in all the world, that her God himself had forsaken her. She heard the sound of running footsteps, and, gazing through the window, saw the idiot son of Ephraim Adamson standing just inside the gate. She heard him come up the steps, heard him begin to pound on the door.

"Quick! Miss Lane," called Adamson as he came following up on the run—he hoped that Aurora would hear him. "Don't let him in. Telephone—get the sher'f as soon as you can."

He walked up the steps now and took the boy by the arm as he hammered at the door with the head of the club.

"Come on, Johnnie," said he. "We'll go see the pictures. Come along."

It was not better than an animal, the creature who now turned facing him, growling. "Get out!" said Johnnie to him. "No one—no one can pick on me! I'll hit—I'll hit you. Whip any man in Jackson County. I'm out—I'll hit anybody touches me. I guess I know!"

His sweeping blows about him with the club forced his father back, and showed that any attempt to close with him would be dangerous. Adamson retired to the gate. Johnnie went on smashing everything about him, flower beds, chairs, a little table which stood on the front gallery—anything left undestroyed by the more intelligent but not less malignant visitors of the night before, who thus had set a pattern for him.

"I want in," he said pleasantly after a time, seating himself on the front steps. "Eejit—best man in Jackson County. She was good to me. She spoke to me kind. I won't hurt her."

Aurora Lane could see him as she gazed out from behind the window curtain. Her call on the telephone to the officer of the law had been loud, insistent, the appeal of a woman in terror. But now, as she looked out at Johnnie Adamson, something other than terror was in her wan face;—something like surprise—something like conviction! The thought brought with it no additional terror—rather it carried a swift ray of hope!

It was toward eight o'clock in the morning now. Few were abroad on the streets of Spring Valley, but now and then a passer-by turned to gaze at a man who was hurrying across from the court and turning into Mulberry Street. It was Dan Cowles, the sheriff, and they wondered where he was going now.

Ephraim Adamson heard the hurrying approach as Dan Cowles came down the street. The boy still was sitting on the steps. Suddenly he turned—and caught sight of the face of Aurora Lane at the window. He rose, removed his hat, and smirked.

"May I see you home?" said he. "Eejit—the best man in Jackson County. I can hit anybody! I'll show you."

He was mowing, smirking, talking to her through the glass of the window pane, jerking and twitching about, but he turned now when he heard the steps of his father and the sheriff on the brick walk back of him.

"He's gone bad, Dan," said Adamson in a low tone to the sheriff. "We'll have to lock him up. He'll have to go to the asylum. He's dangerous. Look out!"

Suddenly the half-wit turned upon them. His eyes seemed fixed on the star shining on the coat of Dan Cowles—identically the same star that City Marshal Tarbush had worn, Cowles having for the time taken on the deceased man's duties also. The sight enraged him. He brandished his club.

"There he is!" he cried. "I hit him once—I killed him—I'm going to kill him again! You can't pick on me. I'm out. I'll kill you again!"

"My God! *what's he saying, Dan?*" quavered the voice of the unhappy man, the father of this wild creature. "What's he *saying?*"

"Johnnie!" he himself called out aloud. "Johnnie, tell me—tell me who it was, and I'll take you to see the pictures right away."

"Him!" shrieked Johnnie. "Him—there's that shiny thing."

"When was it, Johnnie—what do you mean about this man?" The sheriff now spoke to him.

"I hit you—that night—I'll hit you again now! Nobody going to pick on Johnnie. Best man in Jackson County—eejit!"

"You're going to take me away to jail again," said he cunningly. "But you can't. I was just going to talk to her before, and you come and took me away. But I hit him. Now I'll kill you so you'll stay dead."

Slowly, cautiously creeping down the steps, club in hand, he followed the two men, who backed away from him—backed out through the gate on to the sidewalk, into the street.

From across the street Nels Jorgens in his wagon shop saw what was going on, and came running, a stout wagon spoke caught up in his own hand. He passed this to Ephraim Adamson.

"Look out, Sheriff!" he called out. "He's wild. He'll kill somebody yet."

Nels Jorgens and one or two others saw what then happened. The madman, now murderously excited, stopped in his deliberate advance. His eyes flamed green with hatred at all this before him. The lust of blood showed on his features, usually so mild. He saw his father standing now, this weapon in his hand; and forgetting every tie in the world, if ever he had felt one, sprang at him with a scream of rage. Ephraim Adamson stepped back, tripped, fell. He saw above him the face of his son, with murder in his eyes. He closed his own eyes.

And then Nels Jorgens and one or two others who came hurrying up saw a puff of smoke, heard the roar of a shot Dan Cowles had fired just in time....

There was no need to send poor Johnnie Adamson to the asylum. He had gone now to a farther country. He sank, a vast bulk, at his full length along the narrow strip of dusty grass between the curb and the walk. His shoulders heaved once or twice, his arms fell lax.

Dan Cowles, solemn-faced, his weapon still in his hand, turned to gaze at the haggard man who rose slowly, turning away from that which he now saw.

"It was the act of committing a felony," said Dan Cowles slowly. "It was to save human life. He resisted arrest, and he was armed. It was a felony."

But when old Ephraim Adamson turned his gray face to that of the officer of the law, in his sad eyes there was no resentment. He held out his hand.

"Dan," said he, "thank God you done it! Thank God it's over!"

CHAPTER XXI

A TRUE BILL

Now it was nine o'clock of the Monday morning. The grand jury was in session thus early, and it had thus early brought in a true bill against one Dieudonné Lane for murder in the first degree. The session of the jury had just begun. None of the jury knew of these late events at the house of Aurora Lane.

In his office Judge Henderson was pacing up and down all that morning. He had failed in every attempt to stop the progress of the law. He could not on Sunday afternoon reach by telephone or otherwise the men he wished to see; on Sunday night had seen this horror; and now, early on Monday, there was no way by which even he could arrest the procedure of the grand jury, made up of men who lived here, and who before this had made up their minds on the bill which Slattery, state's attorney, zealous as they, had rushed through at a late session with his own clerks on Sunday night after he had ended his Sabbath motor ride to an adjoining town.

Fate conspired against Judge Henderson and his shrewd plan for delay which was to have left him secure in his ambition and saved in his own conceit. These things now seemed shrunk, faded,

unimportant.

He had not slept at all that night. Before him now swept such a panorama as it seemed to him would never let him sleep again. He was indeed facing now the crisis of his life—a crisis not in his material affairs alone, but a crisis of his moral nature. He had learned in one swift lesson what others sometimes learn more deliberately—that the world is not for the use of any one man alone, but for the use of all men who dwell in it. It is the world of human beings who are partners in its use. They stand alike on its soil, they fight there for the same end. They are brothers, even though savage brothers, after all.

And among these are fathers, too. It was his own son who lay in yonder jail. Now at last some thought, a new, stirring and compelling emotion came into his soul. It was not her boy, but his—it was his son! And now he knew he had been indeed a Judas and a coward.

Judge Henderson's dulled senses heard a sound, a distinct and unusual sound. He stepped out into the hall and spoke to a neighbor who also was looking out of his office door.

"What was that shot?" he asked.

"I don't know," said the other. "Where was it at—around that corner? Oh, I reckon it was probably a tire blew out at Nels Jorgen's wagon shop—he has automobiles there sometimes."

Henderson turned back to his own office, his nerves twitching. He was obliged to face the duties of this day.

What was to happen now to William Henderson, the leading citizen of Spring Valley? Actually, he now did not so much care. It was his son—his own son—in yonder jail! The heart of a father began to be born in him, thus late, thus very, very late.... He had seen her face, last night.

He walked slowly down his stair and across the street to the courthouse. His course was such that he could not see into Mulberry Street. Some persons were hurrying in that direction, but he did not join them. He was too preoccupied to pay much attention to the sounds which came to his ears. As for himself, he could have gone anywhere rather than near to the house of Aurora Lane that morning. A great terror filled his soul, a terror largely of these people among whom he had lived thus long. They had wrecked her home. They might have done worse in their savagery. But it was he himself who was the real cause of that. Would she still keep her oath now, after this? Could she be silent now?

He walked on now into the courthouse and down the long hall. He was about to step into the county clerk's office, when he came face to face with a tall man just stepping out. It was Horace Brooks.

"Well, Judge," said the latter, "how is it with you today?"

He spoke not unkindly, although his own face was haggard and gray. Neither had he slept that night.

"It goes badly enough," said Henderson. "Nothing could be much worse. Well?"

"You want to know if the grand jury has voted that bill? They have—I have just heard. Of course you know I am counsel of record for the defense."

"I didn't know it."

"Yes, Judge, there's going to be a fight on this case," said Hod Brooks grimly. "That is, if you really want to fight. I've got nothing left to trade—but, Judge, do you think you and I really ought to fight—over this particular case?"

"I can't forswear my own professional duties," began Judge Henderson, his mouth dry in his dull dread, his heart wrenched. He wondered what Hod Brooks knew, what he was going to do. He knew what must come, but he was not ready for the hour.

"Come into this room," said Horace Brooks suddenly. "I won't go to your office, and I won't ask you to come to mine. But come in here, and let's have a little talk."

They stepped over to the door of the county treasurer's office, across the hall. It was a room of the sort usual in a country courthouse, with its high stools and desks, its map-hung walls, its scattered chairs, its great red record books lying here and there upon the desk top.

A young woman sat making some entry in a book. "Miss Carrie," said Horace Brooks to her, "Judge Henderson and I want to talk a little together privately. Please keep us from being disturbed. You run away—we won't steal the county funds."

Smilingly the clerk obeyed. Brooks turned to Judge Henderson abruptly.

"Look here, Judge," said he.

He pointed to a large framed lithograph which hung on the wall—the same which had hung on the wall in the library at the exercises of Saturday night. It was a portrait of the candidate for the United States Senate—Judge Henderson himself. The latter looked at it for a moment without comment, and turned back with an inquiring eye.

Brooks was fumbling in the side pocket of his alpaca coat, and now he drew out from it a good-

sized photograph, which he placed face upward on the desk beside them. It was done in half-profile, as was the portrait upon the wall.

"Look at this picture too, Judge, if you please," said he, "and then look back again at the lithograph. That was taken some years ago, when you were young, wasn't it?"

Judge Henderson flushed lividly. "I leave all those things to the committee," croaked he.

"—But this one here," said Horace Brooks slowly, "was taken when you were still younger, *say, when you were twenty-two*, wasn't it?" He moved back so that Judge Henderson might look at the photograph. He saw the face of the great man grow yellow pale.

"Where did you get this?" he whispered. "How?"

"I got it of Miss Julia Delafield, at the library, early this morning," said Horace Brooks. "I told Miss Julia, whatever she did, to stay in the library and not to go over to Aurora Lane's house. I—I didn't want her to see what had happened there. She was busy, but she found this picture for me. And we both know that really it is a photograph of the young man against whom the grand jury have just brought a true bill—within the last ten minutes."

There was silence in the dusty little room. The large white hand on the desk top was visibly trembling. Hod Brooks' voice was low as he went on:

"Now, as to trying this case, Judge, I brought you in here to ask you what you really want to do? I don't my own self very often try cases out of court—although I have sometimes—sometimes. Yes, sometimes that's the way to serve the ends of substantial justice."

Henderson made no reply—he scarcely could have spoken. He could feel the net tightening; he knew what he was to expect now.

"Now, here are these two pictures," resumed Brooks. "Suppose I *were* trying this case *in* court. I'm not sure, but I think I could get them both introduced in evidence, these two pictures. I think they are both germane to this case—don't you? You've been on the bench—we've both read law. Do you think as a judge you could keep a good lawyer from getting these two pictures introduced in evidence in that case?"

"I don't see how you could," said the hoarse voice of Judge Henderson. "It would be altogether immaterial and incompetent."

"Perhaps, perhaps," said Hod Brooks. "That's another good reason why I'd rather try the case here, if it suits you! But just suppose I enlarged this photograph to the exact size of the lithograph on the wall, and suppose I did get them both into evidence, and suppose I unveiled the two at just the psychological moment—I presume you would trust me to do that?"

"Now if I hadn't seen you last night just where you were, if I hadn't hoped, from what I saw of you, that you were part man at least—*that's how I would try this case!* What do you think about it?"

"I think you are practising politics again, and not law," sneered Henderson. But his face was white.

"Yes? Well, I'll tell you, I don't want to see you go to the United States Senate. In the first place, though I agreed not to run at all, I never agreed to help you run. In the second place, I never did think you were a good enough man to go there, and now I think it less than ever. And since you ask me a direct question of political bearing, I'll say that, if the public records—that is to say, the court records and all the newspapers—showed the similarity of these two pictures side by side, the effect on your political future might be very considerable! What do you think?"

"Now, if you take you and that boy side by side today," he went on, having had no reply, "the resemblance between you two might not be noticed. But get the *ages* together—get the view of the face the same in each case—take him at his age and you at something near the same age—and don't you think there is much truth in what I said? The boy has red hair, like me! But in black and white he looks like you!"

Judge Henderson, unable to make reply, had turned away. He was staring out from the window over the courthouse yard.

"Some excitement over there," he said. Hod Brooks did not hear him.

"That face on the wall there, Judge Henderson," said he, "is the face of a murderer! The face of this boy is not that of a murderer. But *you* murdered a woman twenty years ago—not a man, but a woman—and damn you, you know it, absolutely well! I saw last night that at last you realized your own crime, that crime—you had *guilt* on your face. I am going to charge you—just as you maybe were planning to charge that boy—with murder, worse than murder in the first degree, if that be possible—worse even than prosecuting your own son for murder when you know he's innocent!

"*You* murdered that woman whom we two saw last night! *You* made that beastly mob a possible thing—not now, but years ago. Do you think the people of this community will want to send you to the United States Senate if they ever get a look at that act? Do you think they would relish the thought that *you're* the special prosecutor where *your son* is on trial for his life? I say it—*your son!* You know it, and I know it. You'd jeopardize the life that you yourself gave to him and were

too cowardly to acknowledge! Do you think you'd have a chance on earth here if those things were known—if they knew you'd refused to defend him—that you'd denied your own son? And do you think for a moment these things will *not* be known if I take this case?"

"This is blackmail!" exclaimed Judge Henderson, swinging around. "I'll not stand for this."

"Of course, it's blackmail, Judge. I know that. But it's justice. And you will stand for it! I didn't take this boy's case to get him hanged, but to get him clear. I don't care a damn how I do it, but I'm going to do it. I'd fight a man like you with anything I could get my hands on. This is blackmail, yes; and it's politics—but it's justice."

"I didn't think this was possible," began Henderson, his voice shaking. "I didn't think this of you."

"There's a lot of things people never thought of me," smiled Hod Brooks. "I'm something of a trader my own self. Here's where we trade again."

"Listen. I didn't have the start that you had. I started far back beyond the flag, and I have had to run hard to get into any place. Maybe I'll lose all my place through this, I don't know. But I never got anywhere in my life by shirking or sidestepping."

"You have some hidden interest in this."

"Yes! Now you have come to it! I'm not so much thinking of myself, not so much thinking of you. I'm thinking of that woman."

He could not find Henderson's eyes now, for Henderson's face was buried in his hands.

"I was thinking of something of the sort," Brooks went on slowly, "in that other case, in Blackman's court last Saturday. Why didn't you try that case, Judge? Didn't you know then he was your boy?"

The suddenly aged man before him did not make any reply. His full eyes seemed to protrude yet more. "I felt something—I wasn't sure. She'd told me years ago the boy was dead. How could I believe I was his father? Don't ask me."

"I wish to God *I* could have been the father of that boy!" said Hod Brooks deliberately.

"We seem to be talking freely enough!" said Henderson. The perspiration was breaking out on his forehead. But Horace Brooks took no shame to himself for what he had said.

"The mother of that boy," he went on, "is the one woman I ever cared for, Judge. I'll admit that to you. If there were any way in the world so that I could take that woman's troubles on my own shoulders, I'd do it.... So, you see, this wasn't blackmail after all, Judge. It wasn't really politics after all. I was doing this for *her*."

"For her?"

"Yes. Now listen. You met her as a girl, when she didn't know much. I never met her really to know much about her until she was a grown woman, with a character—a splendid character whose like you'll not find anywhere in this town, nor in many another town. You never had the courage to come out and say that she was your wife—you never had the courage to make her your wife. You thought you could last her out in this town, because she was a person of no consequence—because she was a woman. And all the time she was the grandest woman in this town. But she didn't have any friends. Now, it seemed to me, she ought to have a friend."

"Do you call it blackmail now, Judge?" he asked presently. "Is this politics?"

But he ceased in his assault as he saw the pallor of the face of his antagonist.

"You've got me, Hod!" said Judge William Henderson, gasping. "I confess! It's over. You've got me!"

"Yes, I've got you, but I don't want you," said Hod Brooks. "I'm not after you socially, legally, politically, or any other way. I tell you, I'm thinking of those two women who put your son through college—who had all they could do to keep their souls in their bodies, while you lived the way you have lived here. They paid your debts for you—they advanced cash and character *both* for you—just two poor women. The question now is, How are you going to pay any of your debts? There'll be considerable accrued interest."

"I didn't know it all, I tell you," broke out Judge Henderson. "She hasn't spoken to me for years, you might say—we never met. I didn't know the boy was alive—she told me twenty years ago that he'd died, a baby. This has all come up in a day—I've not had time to learn, to think, to plan, to adjust—God! don't you think it's terrible enough, with him there in jail?"

"She never asked you for help?"

"No, not till yesterday."

"She was game. I was sure. That was one reason why I went to that woman night before last and asked her if she'd marry me."

"What—you did that?"

"I did that! I told her *I* would take the boy and give him a father. I said I'd even call him my own—

I'd come that close to losing my own self-respect in just this one case in the world. But, I told her, of course I couldn't do that unless she was a widow. And, Judge, I learned—from her—that she wasn't a widow. Oh, no, she didn't tell me about you—and I never figured it out all clean till just now—that the late District Judge of this county, and the Senatorial candidate for this State—was the father of the boy, Don Lane. Huh? Oh, stand up to it—you've got to take it.

"Now, this boy of yours had no father and two mothers—it's an odd case. But how did I learn who was the father of that boy? Not from Aurora Lane. No, I learned that from the other mother—this morning—Miss Julia. And as soon as I did—as soon as I was convinced I had proofs—I started over to find you."

"My God! man, what could you have meant?—You told her you would marry her?" Judge Henderson's sheer astonishment overcame all other emotions.

"I meant every word I said. If it could have been humanly possible for me to marry her, I'd have done that. Yes—I wanted to give her her chance. I couldn't give her her chance. It looks as though she didn't have one, never has had, never can have.

"Now, if I hadn't seen you last night right where I did—if I didn't believe that somewhere inside of you there was just a trace of manhood—it's not very much—it's damned little—I wouldn't have asked you to come in here to talk. I'd have waited until I got you in the courtroom. I'd have waited until I got you on the platform, and then I'd have taken your heart out in public. I'd have broken you before the people of this town. I'd have flayed you alive and prayed your hide to grow so I could take it off again, and I'd have hung it on the public fence. But, you see—last night—My God!

"I wouldn't trade places with you now, Judge Henderson," said Hod Brooks, after a time. "If I knew I had been responsible for what we saw last night, as you were responsible—I'd never raise my head again.

"As for the United States Senate, Judge, do you think you're fit to go there? Do you think this is blackmail now? Do you think you want to try this murder case? Do you think you want to try this case against this boy—your son—her son? There may be men worse than you in the United States Senate, but I will say it might be full of better. You're never going there, Judge. And you're never going to try this case."

"You've got me, Hod," croaked the ashy-faced man.

"Yeh, Judge, I have! But that's not the question."

"What do you mean?"

"You swore the oath of justice and support of the law when you were admitted to this bar. You've broken your oath—all your oaths. Are you going to throw yourself on the court now and ask for forgiveness?"

Henderson stood weakly, half supporting himself against the desk edge. He seemed shrunken all at once, his clothing fitted him less snugly. A roughened place showed on the side of his shining top hat—the only top hat in Spring Valley.

"I've tried this case," said Hod Brooks sharply. "I've tried it before your own conscience. It took twenty years for a woman to square herself. I'm going to ask the court to send you up for twenty years. You murdered a good woman. That's a light sentence."

A large fly was buzzing on the window-pane in the sunlight, and the sound was distinctly audible in the silence that now fell in the little room. It might indeed have been twenty years that had passed here in as many minutes, so swift a revolution had taken place. The making over of a soul; the cleansing of a life; the changing of an entire creed of conduct; the surrender of a dominating inborn trait; the tearing down and building over a vain and wholly selfish man.

"I think she's a good woman," said Hod Brooks simply, after a time.

"So do I!" broke out Judge Henderson at length, with a sudden gasp. "So do I! She's a good woman. I knew it last night. I've known it all along, in a way. It all came over me last night—I saw it all plain for the first time in all these years. Hod! You're right. I don't deserve mercy. I don't ask it—I'd be ashamed to."

"Religion," said Hod Brooks, quite irrelevantly, "is not altogether confined to churches, you know. A man's conviction may hit him anywhere—even in the office of the county treasurer of Jackson County. But if I was a preacher, Judge Henderson, I'd be mighty glad to hear you say what you have said."

In his face there showed some sort of strange emotion of his own, a sort of yearning for the understanding of his own nature by this other man; and some sort of rude man's sympathy for the broken man who stood before him.

"You both were young," said he softly and irrelevantly. "I'm not your judge."

"Hod," said Judge Henderson—"I'm done! I wouldn't go to the Senate tomorrow if they'd let me. For twenty years she's taken her fate. She's never told my name. She's never blamed me. She's paid all her debts. In the next twenty years—can I live as well as that?"

"Yes, she's paid her debts. We've all got to do that some time—there doesn't seem to be any good way of getting clear of an honest debt, does there? It costs considerable, sometimes." Hod Brooks' voice held no wavering, but it was not unkind.

"But now, Judge," he resumed, "we get around to my profession, which is that of the practice of the law. There's a true bill against the boy. State's Attorney Slattery don't amount to much—I know about a lot of things. You're the real intended prosecutor here. Now, I don't want any passing over of this case to another term of court—I'm not going to let that boy lie in jail."

"That was what I meant to do—I wasn't going to try for a conviction—I was going to try for delay."

"Come into court with me and openly ask the quashing of this indictment," said Hod Brooks. "And we can beat that delay game a thousand ways of the deck! But now, now—you *did* have the heart of a father, then? So, so—well, well! Say, Judge, we're not opponents—we're partners in this case."

"Hod——" began the other; but Hod Brooks was the master mind. "I believe we can show, some time, somehow," said he, "that the boy didn't do it. I know the boy's *mother*. Of course, his father wasn't so much!" He broke out into his great laugh, but in the corners of his eyes there was visible a dampness.

Judge Henderson hesitated for just a moment. "Believe at least this much, Hod," said he. "I didn't know as much at first as I do now. She—she told me all—I saw it all—last night. I want to tell the truth—near as I know. When I saw the boy in Blackman's court—it didn't seem possible, and yet it did. But who gave you the notion? What made *you* suspect it? You didn't suspect it then, in the justice court, did you?"

"Only vaguely," said Hod Brooks; "not so very much. I'll tell you who did—a woman."

"Aurora?"

"No—Miss Julia. Miss Julia sat there looking from the face of Don Lane to your own face. There was something in her face—I can't tell what. Why, hell! I don't suppose a man ever does know what's going on in a woman's heart, least of all a crude man like me, that never had any fine feelings in all his life. But there was something there in Miss Julia's face—I can't tell what. In some way, in her mind, she was connecting those two faces that she saw before her. If I hadn't seen her face, I wouldn't ever have suspected you of being the father of that boy!

"But something stuck in my mind. Now, this morning, getting ready to prepare my case, defending this boy, I went over to Miss Julia's library. I still remembered what I had seen. I found this picture there—she had that other picture there, hanging on her wall, too. She had them both! One was on the wall and the other on her desk. Now, she had certainly established some connection in her own mind between those two pictures, or else she wouldn't have had them there both right before her."

"Then you, too, know," interrupted Henderson, "the story of those two women—how they brought him up from babyhood—and kept the secret? Why did Miss Julia do that?"

"Because she was a woman."

"But why didn't she tell?"

"Because she was a woman."

"But why—what makes you suppose she ever would care in the first place for this boy when he was a baby?"

"Again, because she was a woman, Judge!"

"She came and told me all about her friendship for Aurora. But she admitted she didn't know who the father of the boy was. Then why should she connect me with this?"

"The same reason, Judge—because she was a woman!"

"And when you come to that," he added as he turned toward the door, "that covers our whole talk today. That's why I got you to come here. That's why I'm interested in this case. That's why I've made you try this case yourself, here, now, Judge, before the court of your own conscience. A crime worse than murder has been done here in this town to Aurora Lane—because she was a woman! She's borne the brunt of it—paid all her debts—carried all her awful, unspeakable, unbelievable load—because she was a woman!"

"And," he concluded, "if you ask me why I was specially interested in the boy's case and yours and hers—I'll tell you. I gave up—to you—all my hope of success and honor and preferment just so as to help her all I could; to stand between her and the world all I could; to help her and her boy all I could. It was because she was a woman—the very best I ever knew."

CHAPTER XXII

MISS JULIA

It was now ten o'clock of this eventful morning in quiet old Spring Valley. A hush seemed to have fallen on all the town. The streets were well-nigh deserted so far as one might see from the public square. Only one figure seemed animated by a definite purpose.

Miss Julia Delafield came rapidly as she might across the street from the foot of the stair that led up to Judge Henderson's office. She had hobbled up the stair and hobbled down again, and now was crossing the street that led to the courthouse. She came through the little turnstile and tapped her way up the wide brick walk. Her face, turned up eagerly, was flushed, full of great emotions.

Miss Julia was clad in her best finery. She had on a bright new hat—which she had had over from Aurora's shop but recently. She had worn it at the great event of Don Lane's homecoming—worn it to make tribute to her "son." She wore it now in search of that son's father—and she had not the slightest idea in the world who that father in fact might be. Miss Julia's divination was only such stuff as dreams are made on. The father of Don, the unborn father of her unborn beloved—was not yet caught out of chaos, not yet resolved out of time—he was but a creature of her dreams.

So Miss Julia walked haltingly through star dust. It whirled all about her as she crossed the dirty street. Around her spun all the nebulæ of life yet to be. Somewhere on beyond and back of this was a soft, gray, vague light, the light of creation itself, of the dawn, of the birth of time. Perhaps some would have said it was the light shining down through the courthouse hall from the farther open door. Who would deny poor little Miss Julia her splendid dreams?

For Miss Julia was very, very happy. She had found how the world was made and why it was made. And mighty few wise men ever have learned so much as that.

She searched for the father of her first-born—a man tall and splendid and beautiful—a man strong and just and noble. Such only might be the father of her boy.... And she met him at the door of the county treasurer's office, his silk hat slightly rumbled on one side.

"Oh!" she cried, and started back.

She had only been thinking. But here he was. This was proof to Miss Julia's mind that God actually does engage in our daily lives. For here he was!

Now she could bring father and son together; and that would correlate this world of question and doubt with that world of the star dust and the whirling nebulæ.

"Miss Julia!" The judge stopped, suddenly embarrassed. He flushed, which was all the better, for he had been ashen pale.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" she exclaimed. "I was looking for you, all over. I was at your office, but did not find you. Of course you have heard?"

"Heard? No, what was it?"

"Why, the death of Johnnie Adamson—it was the sheriff, just now—Dan Cowles shot him, right in front of Aurora Lane's house. He must have been trying to break in or something. His father was there."

"Why, great heavens!—what are you telling me? The sheriff shot him? Where is Cowles? I must see him."

"He's here in the courthouse now, they say. But it's all over now. Where have you been? I was going over to Aurora's house early this morning, but Mr. Brooks came in. I must go over at once ___"

"Come this way, Miss Julia," he interrupted.

He led her into the room he had just left. Racked as he was himself, he knew it would be too cruel an unkindness to tell Miss Julia now of what had befallen Aurora Lane the night before.

"The reason I came to you first," said Miss Julia—"before I went to Aurora—was about the boy—about Don. You see, he confessed—the half-wit did—before he was killed. The sheriff and others and his own father heard him say that he had killed Tarbush, don't you see? He'd gone wild, don't you see—he was a maniac. It was a madman killed Tarbush. Why, Don didn't do it—I *told* you he couldn't have done it! Didn't I?"

"So now it's all cleared—and I'm so glad!" she concluded, breathless.

"What's all this you are telling me, Miss Julia? Why, this is basic evidence—it does end the case! But you say there were witnesses to this confession?" A vast relief came into Judge Henderson's ashen face.

"Yes, yes, the sheriff and Eph Adamson and Nels Jorgens—they all heard him. And the poor boy—his body's in the justice's office now. They've sent a messenger after his mother—poor thing—oh, poor woman that she is!"

"Where is Adamson now—where's the sheriff?"

"As I said, the sheriff is here in the building somewhere. Old Eph Adamson won't speak to anyone. He seems half out of his own mind now. But he doesn't blame the sheriff. They say he's sorry for Aurora. Why?"

"So you see," said Miss Julia, leaping over a vast sea of intervening facts, "everything's all right now." And she sighed a great soft sigh of complete content. "Of course Don didn't do it. I knew that all along."

"Where's Anne—my ward?" asked Judge Henderson suddenly. "I want to speak to her a moment."

"I don't know," said Miss Julia. But she smiled, and all her choicest dimples came out in fine array. "I shouldn't wonder if she was in jail! Now I've got to go over to Aurora's. All this news, you know—"

But Miss Julia did not hasten away. To the contrary, she seemed not unwilling to linger yet a time—unconsciously. The truth was that all her heart was happy, with the one supreme happiness possible for her in all her life. For a second time she was here, standing face to face with her hero. So she sighed and smiled and dimpled and talked over this thing and that—until at length she turned and caught sight of the two pictures, the one on the wall, the other on the desk—which both men had left there, forgotten.

"Why, what's this?" said she. "I gave Mr. Brooks this one this morning," she said. "He might at least have returned it to me. He said he wanted to borrow it for a little while. Was he here?"

"He just went away," said Judge Henderson uneasily. "He was here just now."

Miss Julia was taking up the little photograph and looking from it to the lithograph with soft eyes.

"Isn't it fine?" said she. "Fine!" But she did not say which one of the two faces she saw before her was most in her mind.... And then in the little room with its dusty windows and its tumbled books and map-hung walls, Miss Julia leaped to the great fundamental conclusion of her own life.

She saw out far into the time of star dust and the soft vague light and the whirling nebulae. She saw all the great truths—saw the one great truth for any woman—saw her hero standing here—the dream father of her own dream child.... But Miss Julia never grasped the real, the inferior, the human truth at all. On the contrary, she made a vast and very beautiful mistake. She had assigned a dream father to her dream son, but no more. That Judge William Henderson was the father indeed of Dieudonné Lane she no more suspected than she suspected herself to be his actual mother. So, therefore, it had been only a path of dreams that Horace Brooks had followed when he saw her look from the boy's to the father's face. It was only a path of dreams now that again her eyes followed, as she looked from the portrait of the youth to the man who stood before her. Ah! Miss Julia. Poor, little, happy Miss Julia!

"So now, Judge," said she at last, "you can clear him, after all. It will be so fine for you to do that—so dramatic—so fitting, won't it?"

If Judge Henderson could have spoken, perhaps he would have done so; but she misunderstood his choking silence. She was miles away from the actual truth; and never was to know it in all her life.

"Don hadn't any father," said she. "His father's dead long ago, or Aurora would have told me. He's in his grave—and she'll not open it even for me, who have loved her so much. But if he had had a father..." Her voice ceased wistfully.

Judge Henderson coughed, his hands at his throat. She did not see his face.

"... If only he could have had a father like—this!"

Her own little hand fell gently—ever so gently—on the lithographed face of the great man, her hero, her champion—who always was to be such for her. It was the boldest act of all her quiet life. Her hand was very gentle, but as it fell, perhaps it dealt the heaviest blow to the vanity, the egotism, the innate selfishness of the man ever he had known, even in this swift series of blows he was now receiving. For once remorse, regret, understanding smote him sore. He saw how little he had earned what life had given him. He saw—himself!

"But then," she added hastily, and flushed to the roots of her hair—"I beg your pardon. That could not have been, of course. Don's father—the way he was born—why, *Don's* father couldn't have been a man like *you*! We all know that."

Miss Julia hobbled on away now to find her friend, Aurora Lane. She did not know the story of the night before. Miss Julia was very, very happy. She had her boy and his father after all—and both were above reproach! And she never told, not in all her life—and she never knew, not in all her life. And as she hobbled now up the walk beyond the little gate—somewhat repentant that her own eagerness had kept her away thus long from Aurora, she felt no remorse in her heart that she had not told Aurora Lane the real secret of her own life. "Because," remarked Miss Julia, to herself, like any woman, "there is one secret she has never told me—she has never told me who was Don's father!"

Poor little Miss Julia! Ah, very happy, very happy, little Miss Julia! Because she was a woman.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE STATE VS. DIEUDONNÉ LANE

Judge Henderson, haggard, shaken, turned and walked down one of the halls which traversed the courthouse building. In the central space, where the two halls crossed at right angles, was a curving stair leading up to the courtrooms and the offices of the immediate servants of justice. As he stood here he saw again the tall figure of Horace Brooks approaching. He walked even more stooped forward than was usually his case, shambling, his feet turned out at wide angles. His great face in its fringe of red beard hung forward—but it bore now nothing but smiles. It showed nothing of triumph over the man he saw standing here waiting, humble and broken. He himself had said that he lacked birth and breeding. If so, whence got he this strange gentleness which marked his face now, as he stepped up to Judge Henderson—the man who but now had stood between him and success—who must always, so long as he lived, stand between him and happiness—the man whom he had beaten?

"Judge," said Horace Brooks, "I reckon about the best thing we can do is to go right on up to the court and get this thing cleaned up. You've heard the news by now?"

Henderson nodded. "Yes, just now."

"Well, that softens up a lot of things, doesn't it? It will make things easier for everyone concerned—a whole lot easier for you and me, Judge. Now we can ask for the quashing of this indictment and the court can't help granting it. Cowles is there. He's just gone up. Adamson is with him."

So they went up before the court, and the judge listened to the story of the sad-faced officer and the sad-faced old man with him. And presently the clerk at his side inscribed in the records: "The State vs. Dieudonné Lane, murder in the first degree. Indictment quashed on motion of Assistant State's Attorney."

"You will discharge the prisoner from custody, Mr. Sheriff," said the judge.

"I'd like to say, if it please the Court," said Cowles, drawing a large and adequate handkerchief from his pocket and blowing a large and adequate nose, "that last night, at the time of the—the disturbance which these gentlemen here helped me to quell—this same young man that's just been discharged—why, he helped me as much as anybody."

"What do you mean?" demanded the judge severely. "You let him out of your custody when he was under commitment?"

"Yes, your Honor. I may have been short in some of my duties, your Honor. I let a woman—a young woman—go in there last night to see him for a few minutes. When she went out I must have forgot to lock the door. What they said, now, it must have stirred me up some way. When the mob formed and came to the jail the prisoner had walked out. But right at the worst of it, there he was. And after it he went on back to jail alone. When I got back he was in his cell. The door wasn't locked even then. My wife wasn't there.

"I reckon, your Honor, we've all of us sort of made a general mistake," concluded Dan Cowles deprecatingly. "I allowed I'd tell this Court about it."

So, amid the frowning silence of the court, and the silence as well of all who heard this, the two attorneys, the sheriff and Ephraim Adamson walked on down the winding stairs.

Adamson saw coming across the courthouse yard the figure of an angular woman, dressed in calico, a sun-bonnet on her head, a sodden handkerchief in her hand. He walked on hurriedly to meet her. At the very spot where so lately he and his son had stood to challenge the world to combat, he took this gaunt old woman in his arms, in the sunlight before all the world. "Mother!" said he.

And at about this same time—since after all the world and life and swift keen joy of living must go on just the same—two young persons stood not far distant from that scene; stood not in the full light of the sun, stood not in the wisdom and sadness of middle age, but in youth—in youth and the glory and splendor of the vast, ineffable, indispensable illusion. The dim twilight which lighted them might have been the soft, vague light of the world's own dawning—the same which poor Miss Julia had seen that very day.

Cowles hastened away from the door after he had thrown back the bolts—the bolts and bars which had been laughed at by love all this time. The young man came out into the stone-floored hall where Anne Oglesby stood waiting for him—all beautiful and fresh and clean and sweet—fragrant as a very flower in her worthiness for love.

"Don!" she said, and held out her arms, running toward him.

"Oh, Anne! Anne!"

His arms went about her. And this time there was no one there to see.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE SACKCLOTH OF SPRING VALLEY

Number five roared eastward through the town that day on time. No one stepped down from the train, and no one took passage on it. Spring Valley had dropped back into its customary uneventfulness so far as the outer world might tell. It was but a little hamlet on the long line of fields and trees that lies along the way of Number Five.

Hurrying on toward the vast confusion of the metropolis, Number Five gave up its tenants to be lost in the cosmic focus of the great city, where all about were the lights and the anxious faces. The city, with its tall, dentated outline against the sky—wonderful, beautiful, alluring; the city with its unceasing strife, its vast and brooding peace, where walk side by side the ablest men, the most beautiful women of all the world, all keyed to the highest pitch of effort, all living at white heat of emotion and passion, of joy and of sorrow—the city and its ways—we may not know these unless we, too, embark on Number Five.

In the silk-lined recesses of one of the city's greatest hostelries, where anything in the world may be bought, there sat, soon after the arrival of Number Five at the metropolis, the traveling man, Ben McQuaid of Spring Valley, and a little milliner from a town east of Spring Valley which Ben McQuaid "made" in his regular travel for his "house." He had bought for her now the most expensive viands, the most confusing and inspiring wines that all the city could offer. Soft-footed servants were attending them both. They were having their little fling. To the city that was a matter of small consequence.

Nor, when it comes to that, was all the city itself of so much consequence. The great fact is that, while Ben McQuaid and the little milliner were speeding east on Number Five, at midday, when the dusty maples of Spring Valley still were motionless under the heat of the inland summer day—old Nels Jorgens' wife was walking across the way with a covered dish in her hands.... In the dish, you say, there was only some crude cottage cheese for Aurora Lane? Was that all you saw? Seek again: for you, too, are human and neither may you escape the great things of life, nor ought you to miss its great discoveries.

Mrs. Nels Jorgens had on no hat. Her gown was God knows what—gingham or calico or silk or cloth of gold, who shall say? She was a woman of fifty-eight. Her sunken stomach protruded far below her flattened and withered bosom as she walked. Her stringy hair was gray and uncomely. But her face—now her face—have you not seen it? Perhaps not in the city. But the little supper in the city (not yet come to the time of sack-cloth) was by no means so great a thing as the service of Mrs. Nels Jorgens, the wagon-maker's wife, when she carried across to Aurora Lane a dish of something for her luncheon.

And others came. From the byways of this late cruel-hearted village came women, surely not cruel-hearted after all. They seemed to have some common errand. They were paying off the debt of years, though what they brought was not in silver dishes and there was no bubbling wine. So far from calling this a merciless, ignorant town, a hopeless town, at noon of that day, had you been there and seen these women and their ways, you would have called it charitable, kindly, beautiful; though after all it was and had been only human.

Over the breathless maples there seemed now to hang a stratum of another atmosphere, as sensible, as appreciable, as though a physical thing itself. The sympathy of Spring Valley was awake at last—after twenty years!

"Rory, I just thought I'd come over and bring you a dish of this—I had some already made. I said to myself, says I, if we can eat this all the time, maybe you can just once"—it was the old jest, humble but kind. It sounded wondrous sweet to Aurora Lane—after twenty years.

After these had gone away again, a little awed by the white, sad dignity of Aurora Lane—even nature seemed to relent. Ben McQuaid and the little milliner were cooled by swiftly revolving electric fans yonder in the city. But along in the evening of this summer day in Spring Valley the leaves of the maples were stirred by softly moving breezes done by nature's hand.

"Aaron," said old Silas Kneebone to his crony, "seems like we're goin' to get a change of weather. Maybe the hot spell's broke at last."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, Silas," said his friend suddenly, straightening up on his staff. "I'll tell you what I'll do with you, Silas. Even if it *is* goin' to be cool before long—I'll just take you over to the drug store and buy you a drink of ice-cream sody at the fountain!"

"Time comes," he continued after a time, "when a fellow's been feelin' kind of stirred up, some way—when he feels just like he didn't care a hang for no expense. Ain't that the truth?"

CHAPTER XXV

BECAUSE SHE WAS A WOMAN

The blessed change in the weather came on apace. The sultry air softened and became more life-giving. Folk moved into the open, sat out upon the steps of the front galleries, rich and poor alike, willing to take the air. There was an unusual silence, an unwonted scarcity of callings back and forth across the fences. The people of the town did not care to revive the memories of the last two days.

But the narrow little porch in front of the millinery shop on Mulberry Street held no occupant. There was a light within, but the blinds were close drawn. None who passed could hear any sound.

Aurora Lane had sat for hours, almost motionless, at the side of the table where customarily she worked. She made no pretense to read in her Bible now. Her little white bed was unrumpled by any pressure of her body bowed at its side in prayer, although it was her hour now for these things.

She was trying to think. Her mind had been crushed. She sat dazed. It seemed to her an age since these women—these strangely kind-hearted, newly charitable women—had been here. Or, had she only dreamed that they were here? Had it been a passage of angels she herself had witnessed here?

She had told Miss Julia not to let Don come to see her just yet. So, though she had heard the great news of his release, she had not met him. "I'll have to think, Julia," she said. "I don't know what I'll do. I must be alone."

The window of her shop was still unmended. The red hat which had been so long, in one redressing or another, the sign of her wares, now was bent and broken beyond all possibility of restoration. The walls were bare, the furniture was broken. It was wreck and ruin that lay about her, as dully she still was conscious.

Twenty years of it—and this was the climax! What place was there left for her in all the world? As she sat, hour after hour, alone, Aurora Lane was thinking of the dark pool under the bridge, of how cool and comforting it might be. Her bosom rose, torn now and then with deep, slow sobs, like the ground swell of a sea moved by some vast, remote, invisible cause. She had been sobbing thus for some twenty-four hours.

She had not moved about very much today in her household, had not often left her chair here at the table. The mob had destroyed most of her pitiful store of gear, so there was small choice left her.

Somewhere she had found, deep down in a trunk tray, an old and faded garment, its silken sleeves so worn that the creases were now open—a blouse which she had put away long, long ago—twenty years and more ago. She wore it as best she might; and over the neck where the silk was gone she had cast a white shawl, also of silk, a thing likewise come down, treasured, from her meager girlhood days. This would serve her, so she thought, until she could find heart to go to bed and endeavor to find sleep.... Yes. They may have been of her own mother's wedding finery. Yes. Perhaps she one day had planned they might be parts of her own wedding gear.... But she had had no wedding.

She had done her hair, with Miss Julia's weeping aid, as simply as might be—as she had when she was younger. It lay now in long, heavy, deep rolls, down the nape of her white neck, along the sides of her head, covering her little ears, still shapely. Her face was white as death, but still it held traces in its features, sharpened and refined, of what once was a tender and joyous beauty of its own—a beauty now high and spiritual. In her time Aurora Lane had been known far and wide as a very beautiful girl; self-willed, yes; wild—but beautiful. She did not remember these things now, not in the least; and there was no mirror left unbroken in the place.

The evening waxed on, approaching nine of the clock, at which time good folk began to turn up the porch chairs against the wall so that the rain might not hurt them if it came, and to draw back into the stuffy rooms and to prepare for the use of the stuffy beds. Fathers of families now drank deeply at the pitcher of ice water left on the center table. One little group after another, visible here and there on the porches or the stairs along the little street, lessened and gradually disappeared. One by one the lights went out all over the town. By ten o'clock the town would have settled down to slumber. It was Monday, and on Monday night not even the most ardent swains frequent hammocks or front parlors at an hour so late as ten o'clock in our town, Saturday night and the Lord's day being more especially set apart for these usages.

But the light in Aurora Lane's house still burned. She did not know how late it was. The clock on the mantel was silent, for it had been broken by the men who had been there the night before. She sat motionless as a woman of stone. Not even her boy was there—not even Miss Julia was there. She was alone—with her future, and with her past.

It must have been toward midnight when at length Aurora Lane raised her head, turned a little. She had heard a sound! A sharp pang of terror caught at her—sheer, unreasoning terror. Were they coming again? But no, it was not the sound of many footfalls, not the sound of many voices.

What came to her now was a single sound, not made up of others—a low, definite sound. And it was not at her door in front—it was at the side of the house—it was at her window!

It was a slight sound—a sort of tapping rhythmically repeated—a signal!

Aurora Lane stopped breathing—her heart stopped in her bosom. The face was icy white which she turned toward the window back of which she heard this sound, this signal. She thought she had gone mad. She believed that at last her mind had broken under all the trials that had been heaped upon it. Then her eyes began to move about, startled, like those of a wild deer, seeking which way to leap.

It seemed to her she heard now another sound in addition, a sort of low call, a word.... Yes, it was her name:

"Aurora! Aurora!"

What could it mean? It was some visitor come there in insult—it could be no more than that. And yet what impiousness, what mockery! Because, what she heard, she had heard before! It had been twenty years since, and more—but she had heard it then.

Resolved suddenly to brave the worst, whatever it might be, she rose and swiftly stepped to the side door which made out upon the narrow yard.

A man was standing near the door, now turning away from the window—a tall man, slouching down like an old man.

"Who's there?" she cried, intending to call out aloud to give the alarm, but failing to raise her voice above a whisper, such was her fear. Yes, it was someone come here to offer yet another insult.

But the man came into the field of light which shone around her through the door—came closer, reaching out his hands to her. She heard him struggling with his own voice, trying to speak. At last: "Aurora! Aurora! Let me in! Will you let me in?"

She threw open the door so that the light might come. But it was late. The town slept. No one saw the light. No one saw the man who entered her door.

He came on slowly, bending down, groaning, almost sobbing, it seemed to her. He entered the room, sank down into a chair. He was that pitiable thing, a man with his nerves set loose by cataclysm of the emotions.

Not less than this had William Henderson met this day. It had shortened actually his physical stature, had altered every line in his face. He was twenty years and more older now than when she had seen him last. In one short day William Henderson had burned down to a speck in the cosmic plan. He had learned for himself how little is any man. And vanity torn out by the roots—a megalomaniac egotism done away by a capital operation—a life-long self-content, an ingrown selfishness, all wrenched out at once—that sort of thing takes its toll in the doing.

William Henderson was paying his debts all at once—with interest accrued, as Hod Brooks had said to him. It was an old, old, ashen-faced man who turned to her at last, as he came into the little lighted room.

Neither had spoken since he came within. The door now was closed back of him. No one without could have any inkling of what went on within this little room.... The drawn curtains ... the low light ... the man ... the woman ... midnight! All which had been here twenty years before for setting, that same now was here! And if there was ruin now of what here once was fresh and fair, if ruin lay about them now, who had wrought that ruin?

... Yes, it had been here. It was at this very place—when she was just starting, struggling, young—all the vague, soft, mysterious, compelling impulses of youth and life just now hers—so strange, so strong, so sweet, so ineffable, so indispensable, so little understood....

That had been his signal! And when he had rapped before—when he was young and comely, not old and ashen—she could no more have helped opening the door than the white wisps from the cottonwoods could cease to pass upon the air in their ancient seeking, blown by the spirit of life, coming from thither, passing thence, under an impulse soft, sweet, gentle, unsought but irresistible.

"Will!" she said at length. "Will, what's wrong? What have you done? What does this mean?" In some sense, swiftly, the past seemed back again, its twenty years effaced, so that she thought in terms of other days.

He raised his head. "What, you speak to me? You said 'Will'? Oh, Aurie, Aurie, don't!—I can't stand it. I'm not good enough for this."

"What's happened?" she insisted. "Why are you here?"

He sat, his lips loosely working now, his eyes red, his face flabby, his gray hair tumbled on his temples. It was as though all life's excesses and indulgences had culminated and taken full revenge on him in this one day.

"And you can say that to me?" he murmured. It was very difficult for him to talk. He was broken—he was gone—he was just an old man—a shell, a rim, a ruin of a man, now seeing himself as he actually had been all these years—God knows, a pitiable sight, that, for many and many a man of us all.

"I'm—I'm afraid, Will! Last night—it broke me, someway—I don't think much more can happen...."

I can't think—I can't pull together, someway.... I was going down to the bridge tonight.... But I thought of Don."

"But you couldn't think of *me*, Aurora?—Have you ever, in all these years?"

She made him no answer at all.

"No. You could only hate the thought of me," he said. "What a coward I've been, what a cur! Ah, what a coward I've been all these years!"

"I wish you wouldn't, Will," she said. Dazed, troubled, she was trying to think in terms of the present; trying, as she had said, to pull together. "You are Don's father.... Well, you were a man, Will," she added, sighing. "I was only a woman."

She had neither sarcasm nor resentment in her words. It was simply what she had learned by herself, in her own life, without any great horizon in the world.

"It was pretty hard sometimes," said she, after a time, slowly. "I had to contrive so much. Putting the boy through college—it began to cost more the last four years—so much more than we had supposed it would. You know, sometimes I was almost—" She flushed and paused.

"What was it, Aurie?"

"At one time not long ago, the bills were so large that we had to pay—it was so hard to get the money, I was almost on the point of going to you—for him, you know—and to ask you for a little help. But that's all over now."

"Oh, I ought to have come through—I ought to have owned it all up!"

"Yes, Will, you ought."

"Why did you keep it—why didn't you name me? I always thought, for a long time, that you would, that you must."

"I don't know. Don't ask me anything. But at least, Don's out now. Thank God! he's clear—he's innocent, and they all know it now. They can't keep him down, can they? He won't have as hard a time as I've had? He'll succeed, won't he? He must, after it all!"

"Yes," said the man, shaking as in a palsy, "after it all, he ought to, and I pray he may." But he could talk no more.

"And he's such a fine boy! I don't see how you could——"

"How I could disown him? Yesterday?"

She nodded. "I can't understand that. I never could. I can't see how you could hesitate. I—I wish you hadn't. I—I can't forgive that." Her voice rose slightly at last, a spot of color came into her pallid cheek.

"I didn't have the courage to come through square, and that's the truth about it. I've never had, all along. Maybe a man doesn't have the same feeling that a woman does about a child—I don't know. But I was worse than the average man—more selfish. I got caught up in politics, in business. Success?—well, I saw how hard it is. I thought I had to keep down the past. Well, it's over now. But as for you——"

"I lived it down for a good many years. Don's twenty-two now."

"But how could you keep that secret—what made you? Why didn't you go into court and force me to do my duty to my own flesh and blood—and to you?"

"I don't know," she answered. "I told you, I don't know. Maybe I was proud. Maybe I thought I'd wait till you shamed your own self into coming. I'm glad you've come now, at last. I don't know—maybe I thought some day you would."

"I'm not Judge Henderson!" he broke out bitterly. "I'm Arthur Dimmesdale! I ought to be in the pillory, on the gallows, before this town. I'm a thief and a coward, and I deserve no pity, neither of man nor of God himself. You've carried all the blame, when I was the one to blame. And I can't see why you didn't tell, Aurie—what made you keep it all a secret?"

"I don't know," said she simply again. "I don't know. It seemed—it seemed somehow to me—*sacred*—what was between us! It was—Don! I have never told anyone. I was waiting, hoping you'd come—for your own sake. Why should I rob you of your chance?"

"Thank God that you did keep the secret!" he broke out at length. "It's all the chance I have left to be a man. At least I'll confess the truth."

"Why, Will, what do you mean? I'll never tell. I told you I wouldn't—I swore I wouldn't."

"I'll be going away before long, Will," she added. "I can't stay here now. I suppose Don and I will go away somewhere. I'm glad he's found a good girl. Ah!—Anne, she's splendid.... I'm not going to make any objections to his marrying *her*. And, you see, I'll know that you came here. And some time he will know—who was his father. He doesn't, yet. In justice, some time he will. God will attend to that, not any of us."

"All the world shall know it, Aurora!" said the man at her side. "I saw them a little while ago, walking together. He was listening to the drums. He was looking at the Flag—and so was she. They are up at my house now. They're happy. God bless them."

"But they don't know—you've not told?"

"No, I've been walking out in the country—all evening. I was up there—on the road to the Calvary Cemetery. I'm going to tell Don the truth tomorrow.

"But look at your house—your poor little home." He cast about him a gaze which took in the ruin that had been made of all her belongings. "Oh, my God, Aurora! It was my own fault. It was *I* who made that mob a possible thing. And you were a good woman. You've been a good woman all the time. I never knew before what a splendid thing a woman can be. Why—strong!... And you called me 'Will' just now. What made you do that?"

"I don't know," said Aurora Lane. "I suppose a woman never does quite forget the—the first man of—of her life."

"But how sweet it all was," he broke out, "in spite of it all, in spite of everything! Oh, Aurie, don't you remember when I'd come and tap there on the window—and you'd come and let me in? I don't deserve even that memory ... a woman like you—and a man like me. But I can't forget it. And you let me come in now—that's my one last joy left for all my life. Why, it's the one thing I can never think of again without a shudder. Yes, I've come without your asking—and you—you've let me in.

"Aurie," he went on, "that's what leaves me so helpless. I know what I deserve—but I don't want to be despised.... I want more than I deserve! I've always had more than I deserved. It's about all any man can say. It's life itself, I suppose. I don't know what it is. But, Aurie, Aurie, I do see a thousand things now I never saw before."

She still sat, white, dumb. Only, now, her head began to move, slowly, from side to side. He caught the evidence of negation, and a new resolution came to him at last.

"Let it all go!" he said at length—and now indeed he was on his knees at her side. "What I have lost is nothing. I'll never ask for office until I have lived here twenty years, openly, as you have. I must have loved you! I did—I do! I do! I wish I were fit to love you now. Because, in twenty years more.... The years pass, Aurie. Won't they pass? My sentence——"

His gray head was bent down low in her lap now, as her son's had been at this very place but a day before. Her hands—hands stained with needle work, rough on the finger ends, the taper gone there into a little square—were the same long shapely hands that had touched his hair at another time. The eyes that looked down at him now under long, soft, dark lashes were the same. But they were more brooding—tender, yes, but more sad, more wise. There was no passion in her gaze, in her touch. What was hatred or revenge to her?

His face was hid deep in his hands as he knelt. It lay there in that haven, the lap of woman, the place of forgiveness—and of hope, as some vague memory seemed to say to him. Indeed, all the wisdom and all the mercy and all the hope of a world or of a universe of worlds were in the low voice of Aurora Lane as she stroked back his hair—the gray hair of an old man, who knelt beside her. It was the ancient pitying instinct of woman that was in her touch. Hardly she knew she touched him, so impersonal was it all to her.

"Will, you poor boy, you poor boy! Oh, poor boy!" He heard her voice once more. Suddenly he raised his head, he sprang up, he stood before her.

"You do forgive me!" A sort of triumph was in the eager note of his voice. "You say 'poor boy!' You do forgive me!" He advanced toward her.

But Aurora also had risen quickly. Now, suddenly, some shock came to her, vivifying, clarifying. The needle of her heart swung on the dial of Today.

"Forgive you!" she exclaimed, her color suddenly gone high. "Forgive you—what do you mean?—what do you *mean*?"

"You said you pitied me——"

"Pity you, yes, I do. I'm sorry for you from the bottom of my heart. I'd be sorry to see any man go through what you've got to face. Yes, *pity* you—but—love you? What do you mean? Is that what you mean? *Respect* you—is that what you mean? Oh, no! Oh, no! Use for you, in any way in the world?—Oh, no! Oh, no! Don't mistake. *Pity*—that's all! Don't I know what it means to descend into hell? And that's what you must do."

"But, Aurie—Aurie—you just said——"

"I said I was sorry for you, and so I am, in all my heart. But he's our boy. I've paid my share in anguish. So must you."

"Haven't I? Haven't I?"

"Not yet! You're only beginning. It takes twenty years.—Oh, not of hidden and secret repentance—but *open* repentance, before all the world! And square living. And your prayer to God each night for twenty years for understanding and forgiveness!

"Go out and earn it," she said, walking to the door and opening it. "Pity?—yes. Love? No—no—*no!* I've no use for you. I don't need you now. My boy doesn't need you—we're able to stand alone. We've *succeeded!* You? You're a failure—you're a broken-down, used-up, hopeless failure—so much, I'm sorry for you, sorry.

"You didn't really think I'd ever take you back, did you, Will?" she went on, eager to be fair even now. "I was only *sorry* for you, that's all. God knows, I'm sorry for any human being, woman or man, that has to go through hell as I have. Twenty years? That'll leave you old, Will. But—go serve it, in this town, as I have! And God have mercy on your soul!"

She flung the door yet wider, and stumbling, he began to grope toward it. The black wall of the night lay beyond.

Slowly the color faded from the cheeks of the woman now left alone yet again. She sank down, crumpling, white, her face marble clear, her eyes staring straight ahead at what picture none may ask. Then, as the white column of her throat fluttered again, she beat one hand slightly against the other, ere she crushed them both together in her lap, ere she flung them wide above her.

"God! God!" cried Aurora Lane. "If it wasn't right, why did He say, 'Suffer little children'? It was in the Book ... little ... little children ... the Kingdom of Heaven!"

It was more than an hour before she, too, rose and, stepping toward the door, looked out again into the night. A red light showed here or there. Homes—the homes of our town.

By Emerson Hough

The Broken Gate
The Man Next Door
The Magnificent Adventure
Let Us Go Afield
Out of Doors
The Story of the Cowboy
The Girl at the Halfway House

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