

The Project Gutenberg eBook of In a Mysterious Way, by Anne Warner

This ebook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this ebook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you'll have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

Title: In a Mysterious Way

Author: Anne Warner

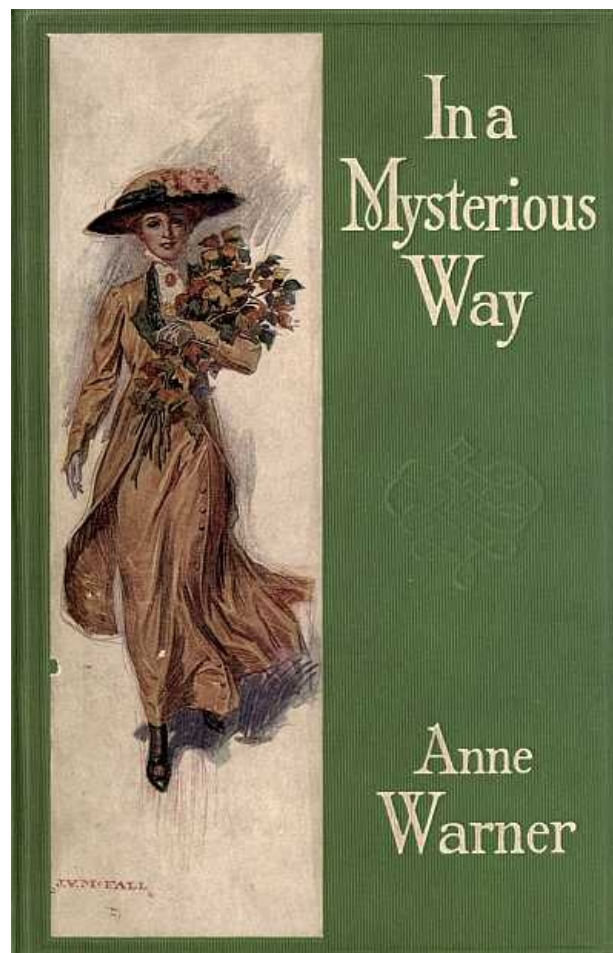
Illustrator: J. V. McFall

Release date: September 23, 2011 [EBook #37515]

Language: English

Credits: Produced by Suzanne Shell, Matthew Wheaton and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team at <http://www.pgdp.net> (This file was produced from images generously made available by The Internet Archive/American Libraries.)

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY ***



In a Mysterious Way
Anne Warner

IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY



"THE ONLY REAL HOLE IS WHERE HE SAT DOWN ON AN ENGINE SPARK AT THE STATION." (Frontispiece [See p. 129](#))

IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY

BY ANNE WARNER

AUTHOR OF "THE REJUVENATION OF AUNT MARY"
"SUSAN CLEGG AND HER FRIEND MRS. LATHROP"
"AN ORIGINAL GENTLEMAN," ETC.

Illustrated by
J. V. McFALL

BOSTON
LITTLE, BROWN, AND COMPANY
1909

All rights reserved

Published April, 1909

Electrotyped and Printed at
THE COLONIAL PRESS:
C. H. Simonds & Co., Boston, U.S.A.

CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
<u>I.</u>	INTRODUCING MRS. RAY	1
<u>II.</u>	THE COMING OF THE LASSIE	9
<u>III.</u>	INTRODUCING LASSIE TO MRS. RAY	28
<u>IV.</u>	THE DIFFERENCE	43
<u>V.</u>	THAT DISPASSIONATE OBSERVER, MRS. RAY	68
<u>VI.</u>	WHEN DIFFERENCES LEAD TO WHAT IS EVER THE SAME	90
<u>VII.</u>	THE LATHBUNS	104
<u>VIII.</u>	MISS LATHBUN'S STORY	112
<u>IX.</u>	PLEASANT CONVERSE	125
<u>X.</u>	THE BROADER MEANING	137
<u>XI.</u>	THE WAR-PATH	148
<u>XII.</u>	ANOTHER PATH	156
<u>XIII.</u>	AND STILL ANOTHER PATH	161
<u>XIV.</u>	DEVOTED TO COATS AND CASE-KNIVES	170
<u>XV.</u>	LEARNING LESSONS	181
<u>XVI.</u>	THE WALK TO THE LOWER FALLS	195
<u>XVII.</u>	RIGHTEOUS JUSTICE	210
<u>XVIII.</u>	IN THE HOUR OF NEED	218
<u>XIX.</u>	DOUBTS	225
<u>XX.</u>	SHIFTING SUNSHINE AND CLOUDS	238
<u>XXI.</u>	THE POST-OFFICE	250
<u>XXII.</u>	AFTERMATH	259
<u>XXIII.</u>	THE DARKNESS BEFORE	265
<u>XXIV.</u>	DAWN	274
<u>XXV.</u>	THE BREAKING OF ANOTHER DAY AND WAY	284

ILLUSTRATIONS

IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY

CHAPTER I

[1]

INTRODUCING MRS. RAY

"He moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform," sang Mrs. Ray, coming in from the wood-shed and proceeding to fill up the stove, with the energy which characterized her whole person. A short, well-knit, active person it was, too,—a figure of health and compact muscular strength, a well-shaped head with a tight wad of neat hair on top, bright eyes, and a firm mouth.

Mrs. Wiley, a near neighbor, sat by the table and watched her friend with the after-nightfall passivity of a woman who has to be very active during daylight. Mrs. Wiley was not small and well-knit, neither was she energetic. Life for Mrs. Wiley had gone mainly in a minor key composed largely of sharps, and as a consequence she sighed frequently and sighed even now.

Mrs. Ray slammed the stove door and caroled louder than ever, as if to drown even the echo of a sigh in her kitchen. "He moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform," she sang, and then, folding her arms on top of her bosom in a manner peculiarly her own, she spoke to Mrs. Wiley in that obtrusively cheerful tone which we use to those who sigh when feeling no desire to sigh with them: "That's my motto—that song—yes, indeed. It fits everything and accounts for everything and comes in handy anywhere any time, even if I never have wondered myself, but have been dead sure all along. Yes, indeed."

[2]

Mrs. Wiley sighed again, and her eyes moved towards a large, awkward parcel rolled in newspaper, which lay on the end of the table by her. "I'm so glad you feel able to undertake it, Mrs. Ray. I don't know how I ever could have managed it, if you'd said no. Mr. Wiley *will* have a new pig-pen this year, and the pigs never can pay for it themselves. So you were my only way to a new winter coat. I'm so glad you didn't say no. Besides it's father's suit, and I shall love to wear it for that reason, too."

"I never do say no to any kind of work, do I?" said Mrs. Ray, looking at the clock, and then all over the room; "this would be a nice time of life for me to begin to sit around and say no to work. What with Mr. Ray's second wife's children not all educated yet, and his first wife's children getting along to where they're beginning to be left widows with six apiece and no life insurance, I'm likely to want all the work I can get for some years, as far as I can see. Yes, indeed."

Mrs. Wiley sighed heavily.

"Mr. Wiley thinks we'd ought to insure our lives in favor of Lottie Ann," she said, feeling for her pocket-handkerchief at the thought; "she's so dreadful delicate—but I think it's foolish—she's so *dreadful* delicate."

[3]

"Why don't you insure Lottie Ann, then?" Mrs. Ray glanced at the clock again, frowned a little and puckered her lips. "If you don't mind taking that chair the cat's in, Mrs. Wiley, I believe I've got just about time enough to sprinkle the clothes before the mail comes in; it looks so to me."

Mrs. Wiley slowly and gravely exchanged seats with the cat. "Do you take much washing in now? I shouldn't think you had time."

"Time!" Mrs. Ray was dragging a clothes-basket from under the table and filling a dipper with water. "I never stop to think whether I have time or not, any more. 'He moves in a mysterious way—' there's where my motto comes in again. Yes, indeed. I move just the same way myself. I don't see how I get so much done, but I've no time to stop and study over it, or I'd be behind just that much. There's more than you wonder where I get time from, Mrs. Wiley. They asked me if I had time for the post-office. And I said I had. They asked first if I could read and write, and I said

I could; and then they asked me if I had time, and I said I had. And that settled it."

"Why, Mrs. Ray," said Mrs. Wiley, watching the clothes-sprinkling, which was now going forward, attentively, "that's one of the waists from that girl at Nellie O'Neil's, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed. She asked Nellie for a French laundress, and Nellie put her shawl right over her head and run up and asked me if I had time for that, too. I said I was willing to try, so I'm a French laundress too, now. 'He moves'—"

"What do you think of those two young people at Nellie's, anyway?" Mrs. Wiley dropped her voice confidentially. "I was meaning to ask you that, right at first." [4]

"Well, if you ask *me*," said Mrs. Ray, "I can't make him out, and I think she's mooney. I'm a great judge of mooney people ever since I first knew Mr. Ray, and that girl looks very mooney to me. Look at her coming here and hiking right over and buying the Whittacker house next day—a house I wouldn't send a rat to buy—not if I had a real liking for the rat. And now the way she's pulling it to pieces and nailing on new improvements, with the trees all boxed up, as though trees weren't free as air—oh, she's mooney, very mooney—yes, indeed."

"Nellie don't think they act loving," said Mrs. Wiley; "and Joey Beall says they don't act loving even when they're alone together. He's been building a culvert for Mr. Ledge, and he's seen 'em alone together twice. Joey knows how people ought to act when they're alone together. He always knows when folks are in love, before they know themselves. He tells by seeing them alone together. Why, he knew when you was going to be married—he saw you and Mr. Ray alone together that day you walked to the Lower Falls."

"But it wasn't through our acting loving that he knew it," said Mrs. Ray, energetically ruminative between the dipper of water and the clothes to be sprinkled; "my, but I was mad that day! It was the first and last time anybody ever fooled *me* into walking to the Lower Falls. Yes, indeed. I like to of died! If Mr. Ray hadn't asked me to marry him, I'd never have forgiven him getting me to go on that walk. Those flights of steps! And those paths! All the way down I was wanting to turn round and go back. I made up my mind never to take Mr. Ray's word for nothing again. And I never did. He fooled me into that walk, but he never fooled me again. Yes, indeed. Never!" [5]

"But Joey Beall saw you that day," said Mrs. Wiley, whose mind was of that strength which is not to be swept beyond its gait by any other mind's rapidity, "and he said right off that night you'd marry him."

"Maybe he saw Mr. Ray take his first and second wife down to the Lower Falls, and knew it from his looks with them—Mr. Ray took 'em both down there, and asked 'em each to marry him coming back. All the way down he was telling me what they each said to everything they saw. And coming back he showed me where he asked 'em each. Mr. Ray never made any secret of his first and second wife to me. I'll say that for him. Yes, indeed. And like enough Joey was around then. He's always round when people are alone together."

"But he doesn't think these young people act loving," Mrs. Wiley went on, recurring to the main issue under discussion. "Joey says they don't have the right way at all. He says they don't disagree right, either. They're on opposite sides of the dam, the same as if they were married folks, but they don't seem to feel interested in their discussing. Nellie says they're real pleasant, but she can't understand them; Nellie's very far from making them out."

"Oh, Nellie can't make nothing out. She and Jack is dead easy. Look at those other boarders they've got. She says she can't make them out, either. I should think not." [6]

Mrs. Wiley's standpoint refused to stretch to the other boarders. She sighed again.

"She seems a very nice girl," she said, sadly.

"Oh, yes, nice enough—but mooney," said Mrs. Ray. "I know the kind as soon as I see 'em. I could almost tell 'em by their legs, when they get down from the train on the side away from me. She's got ideas about souls and scenery, that girl has; but that young man's got his living to earn, and he hasn't no time for any ideas. I like him! We both work for the United States Government, and that's a great bond. Yes, indeed. That young man knows if the dam goes through here, he'll be fixed for life digging it, and the girl's just the kind he wants, for he's practical and she's mooney—she's so mooney she's bought a house to live in while he digs the dam, and yet she's solemnly hoping there won't be no dam. She says so."

"Perhaps she don't mean it," suggested Mrs. Wiley.

"Yes, she does mean it," said Mrs. Ray; "yes, indeed, she means it. I'm a great judge of character and that girl means what she says."

"About the dam?"

"Yes, about everything. She's very friendly with me. She buys lots of stamps, and cancels up like a lady. I'm very fond of her."

"What did she say about the dam?"

"Oh, lots of things. She said it was a desecration for one thing, and then I was singing one day and she said I was very right, for the Lord did move in a very mysterious way, and He would save the falls."

"Was she as sure as that?" asked Mrs. Wiley, appalled.

[7]

"She seemed to be. Oh, but she's very mooney."

"She's expecting a friend on to-night's train," said Mrs. Wiley; "Nellie says it's a girl younger than she is."

"There'll be trouble then," said Mrs. Ray, with the calmness of all prophets of evil; "a girl younger than she is is going to make her look awful old."

"I wonder how long they'll stay!"

"I don't know. You never can tell how long any one will stay here. Some come and say 'Oh, it's so quiet,' and the next morning the express has got to be flagged to take 'em right away; and others come and say 'Oh, it's so quiet,' and send for their trunks and paint-boxes that night. You never can tell how this place is going to strike any one. Mr. Ray's first wife cried all the time, till she died of asthma brought on by hay-fever; and his second wife liked to be where she could go without her false teeth, and she just loved it here! Yes, indeed."

"It isn't so very long till the train now," said Mrs. Wiley; "I guess I'll go down to the station. I always like to see the train come in. It's so sort of amusing to think it's going to Buffalo. Lottie Ann says it's so funny to think of something being right here with us, and then going right to Buffalo. I wish Lottie Ann could travel more. Lottie Ann would be a great traveller if she could travel any."

Mrs. Ray took up the lamp. "Well, if you must go," she said, "I'll put the light in the post-office and get down cellar, myself. I'm raising celery odd minutes this year, and getting the beds ready to lay it under is a lot of work."

Mrs. Wiley rose and moved slowly towards the door. "I wonder how long those other two will stay at Nellie's," she said.

[8]

Mrs. Ray's lips drew tightly together. "I can't say I'm sure," she said; "I know nothing about them. Folks who never write letters nor get letters don't cut any figure in my life. Good night, Mrs. Wiley,"—she opened the door as she spoke—"good-by."

"They've been there—" murmured Mrs. Wiley, but the door closing behind her ended her speech.

[9]

CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF THE LASSIE

On that same evening Alva and Ingram, the main subject of Mrs. Ray's and Mrs. Wiley's discourse, sat in the dining-room of the O'Neil House, waiting for train time. They had the dining-room to themselves, except for occasional vague and interjectional appearances of Mary Cody in the door, to see "if they wanted anything." Ingram had been eating,—he was late, always late,—and Alva sat watching him in the absent-minded way in which she was apt to contemplate the doings of other people, while she talked to him with the earnest interest which she always gave to talking,—when she talked at all. The contrast between her dreamy eyes and the intentness of her tone was as great as the contrast between the first impression wrought by a glance at her colorless face and simple dress, and the second, when, with a start, the onlooker realized that here was some one well worth looking at, well worth studying, and well worth meditating later. Perhaps she was not beautiful—I am not quite sure as to that—but she was surely lovely, with the loveliness which a certain sort of life brings to some faces.

Ingram, on the other side of the table, was just the ordinary good-looking, professional man of thirty to thirty-five. Tall, straight, slightly tanned, as would be natural for a civil engineer who had spent September in the open; especially well-groomed for a man sixty miles from what he called civilization, fine to see in his knickerbockers and laced shoes, genial, jolly, and appreciative to the limit, apparently.

[10]

The contrast between the two was very great, and was felt by more than Mrs. Ray, for there had been many who had watched them during the week of Alva's stay. "He's a awful nice man," Mrs. O'Neil had said to Mrs. Ray, "but I don't see how she ever came to fancy him. They seem happy together, but it's such a funny way to be happy together."

This had been the original form of the statement which Mrs. Ray had later repeated to Mrs. Wiley.

It was true that they seemed very far apart, but were nevertheless apparently happy together. The week had been a pleasant week to both. Not, perhaps, as the town supposed, but pleasant anyway.

"I'm selfish enough to wish that it wasn't at an end to-night," Ingram said, as he took his piece of blackberry pie from Mary Cody; "you're a godsend in this place, Alva."

"But you'll like Lassie," his companion replied; "she's a charming little girl,—and I love her so. I always have loved the child, and just now it seemed to me as if it would do both her and me good to be together. Life for me is so wonderful—I don't like to be selfish with these days. My thoughts are too happy to keep to myself. I want some one to share my joy."

Ingram looked at her quizzically. "And I won't do at all?" he asked.

"You,—oh, you're away all day. And then, besides, you're still so material, so awfully material. You can't deny it, Ronald, you're frightfully material—practical—commonplace. Of the world so very worldly." [11]

He laughed lightly. "Just because I don't agree with you about the dam," he said; "there, that's it, you know. Why, my dear girl, suppose all America had been reserved for its beauty, set aside for the perpetual preservation of the buffaloes and the scenery,—where would you and I be now?"

She looked away from him in her curious, contemplative way. "If you knew," she said, after a minute, "how silly and petty and trivial such arguments sound to thinking people, you'd positively blush with shame to use them. It's like arguing with a baby to try to talk Heaven's reason with the ordinary man; he just sees his own little, narrow, earthly standpoint. I wonder whether it's worth while to ever try to be serious with you. You know very well that the most of your brethren would be willing to wreck the Yellowstone from end to end, if they could make their own private and personal fortunes building railways through it."

Ingram laughed again. "Where would the country be without railroads?" he asked.

She withdrew the meaning in her gaze out of the infinite beyond, where it seemed to float easily, and centred it on him.

"Just to think," she said, with deep meaning, "that ten years ago I might have married you, and had to face your system of logic for life!"

"Is it as bad as that?"

"It might have been. We might have made it so before we knew better. That's the rub in marriage. Every one does it before he or she has settled his or her own views. I wasn't much of an idealist ten years ago, and you were not much of anything. But if I could have married any one then, I should have married you." [12]

A shadow fell upon his face. He turned his chair a little from the table. "If I was not the right one, I wish that you had married some other man then,—I wish it with all my heart. You would have been so much happier. You're not happy now—you know that. It would have been so much better for you if you had married."

She smiled and shook her head. "Oh, no. It is much better as it is. Infinitely better. It's like coming up against a great granite wall to try and talk to you, Ronald, because you simply cannot understand what I mean when I say words, but nevertheless, believe me, I'm on my knees day and night, figuratively speaking, thanking God that I didn't marry then. I wasn't meant to marry then. I've been needed single."

He took out his cigarette case. "What were you meant for, then, do you think?" he queried; "nothing except as a convenience for others?"

"I was meant to learn, and then later, perhaps, to teach."

"To learn?" He looked his question with a quick intensity. "To teach?—" the question deepened sharply.

She smiled. "Yes. To learn so that I could teach. I feel some days that I was born to teach, and of course no one may hope to teach until he has learned first."

He shrugged his shoulders and laughed a little. She smiled again. "You great, granite wall, you don't understand a bit, do you? Never mind, light your cigarette, and then tell me what time it is. We must not forget Lassie, you know." [13]

He looked at his watch. "Ten minutes yet."

"Dear child, how tired she'll be. Never mind, she'll have a good rest during the next ten days."

"Will she stay ten days? She'll be here as long as you will then, won't she?"

"Yes; I'm going when she does."

"You think that the house will be done by that time?"

"I know that it will be done. It must be done."

He took his cigarette up in his fingers, turned it about a little, and then looked suddenly straight at her. "Alva, tell me the mystery, tell me the story, please. What is the house for?"

She looked at him and was silent.

"Why won't you tell me?"

Still silence. Still she looked at him.

"You'll tell her when she comes. Why not me?"

She spoke then: "She'll be able to understand, perhaps. You couldn't."

Ingram compressed his lips. "And am I so awfully dense?" he asked, half hurt.

"Not so dense, but, as yet, too ignorant. Or else it is that I am still too little myself to be able to rise above some human sentiments. And there is one point where endurance of the world's opinion is such refinement of torture, that only the very strongest and greatest can go willingly forward to meet and suffer the inevitable. The inevitable is close to me these days; it is approaching closer hourly, and there is no possible way for me to make you or the world understand how I feel in regard to it all. And I shrink from facing the kind of thing that I shall soon have to face any sooner than is absolutely necessary. And so I won't tell you."

[14]

She stopped. Although her voice was firm, her eyes had again become far away in their expression, and she seemed almost to have forgotten him even while making this explanation for his sake. He was watching her with deepest interest, and the curiosity in his eyes burned more brightly than ever.

"But if it is all as terrible as you make out," he said, "how can you make that young girl understand what you suppose to be so far beyond me?"

"Because I can teach her."

"How?"

"She'll be with me night and day for ten days. We'll have a good deal of time together. And then, too, she is a woman. Women learn some lessons easily. Easier far than men."

"Is it right to teach her such a lesson as this?"

"Why do you ask that, when you do not know what my lesson will be? How can you dare fancy that it could possibly be wrong?"

Ingram paused for a minute, a little staggered. Then he said, bluntly: "The world is made up of reasonable men and women, and it seems to me best that all men and women should be reasonable. What isn't reasonable is wrong. Forgive me, Alva, but you don't sound reasonable."

"You think that I am not reasonable? Therefore I must be wrong. That's your logic?"

He hesitated. "Perhaps I think you wrong. I must confess that to me you often seem so."

[15]

She thought a minute, considering his standpoint.

"Ronald," she said then, "'reasonable' is a term that is given its meaning by those in power, isn't that so? 'Reasonable' is what best serves the ends of those who generally seek to serve no ends except their own. It's true that I don't at all care what a few selfish and near-sighted individuals think of me. I have thrown in my lot with the unreasonable majority, the poor, the suffering, and those yet to be born who are being robbed of their birthright. To leave my mystery and go back to our familiar difference, there's the dam to illustrate my exact meaning. The 'reasonable' use of the river out there is to build a dam, and so make a few more millionaires and give employment for a few years to a few thousands of Italians. The 'unreasonable' use to make of the river is to preserve it intact for tired, weary souls to flee to through all the future, so that their bodies may breathe God and life into their being again, and go forth strong. You know you don't agree with me as to that view of that case, so how can I expect you to disagree with the general opinion that the 'reasonable' thing for me to do personally is to take my life and get all the pleasure that I can from it? The 'unreasonable' view, the one I hold myself, is that I have elected to take it and give—not get—all the pleasure that I can with it. Of course you don't understand that unreasonableness, and so you don't agree with me; but I can tell you one thing, Ronald," she leaned forward and suddenly threw intense meaning into her words, "and that is this. My story—my mystery as you call it so often—is at once a very old mystery and a very new one. I have suffered, and I am to suffer, most terribly. The happiness to which I am looking forward is going to be an ordeal for which all that I have undergone until now will be none too much preparation. But in the hour of my keenest agony I shall be happier and more hopeful than you will ever be able to realize in your life. Unless you change completely. Take my word for that."

[16]

She rose as she spoke, and he rose, too, looking towards her with eyes that plainly subscribed to Mrs. Ray's opinion as expressed in the simple vernacular.

"Oh, no, I can't understand, and I don't believe," he said: "but I am able to meet trains, anyhow."

A large cape lay on an empty chair near by, and she took it up now.

"But I'm going alone," she said, as she slipped into it.

"What nonsense. Of course I am not going to let you go alone."

She looked at him, buttoning the woolen cross-straps upon the cape as she did so; then she threw one corner back over her forearm and laid that hand on his, speaking decidedly.

"I'm going alone to meet her. You know what I asked you to promise when I came here a week ago, and you know that you gave me your word that you'd never interfere with me. Lassie is almost a stranger to you, and after you have learned to know her as a young lady there will come years for you two to talk together, but for me this meeting is something that I don't want to share. Don't say any more."

"But what will she think," he queried, "when she and you return together, and here sits a cavalier who didn't trouble himself to accompany one lady through the dark night to meet another's train?"

[17]

"She will think nothing, because she will not see the cavalier. When we come in, we shall go straight up-stairs."

Ingram more than smiled now. "Forgive me, Alva, but you and I are such old, such near, such dear friends, that I can say to you frankly, as I do say to you frankly over and over again, I don't understand you."

She laughed at that, and turned towards the door.

"I know—I know. I'm very queer, most awfully queer, in the eyes of every one. But I can tell you, as I tell them, that the worst of it is only for a little while. Just a few brief weeks and I shall be again, in most ways, a normal woman. A woman just like all the rest again," her back was towards him now, "in most thing—in most things."

"Never! You never have been like other women,—you've always been different from other women; you always will be."

"Have I? Shall I? Well, perhaps it's so. I'm rather glad of it. Most women are stupid, I think. Poor things!" she sighed.

He followed her as she moved towards the door, half-vexed, half-laughing:

"And men, Alva, and men. Are they all stupid in your eyes?"

She had her hand on the knob, and her great cape was gathered about her in heavy folds.

"Oh, Ronald," she said, looking into his look, "if you had any idea how fearfully stupid they seem to me. Often and often in the last three years. Even yourself. And ten years ago, when we were eighteen and twenty-five, I thought you so interesting, too."

[18]

He burst out laughing at that,—it wasn't in him to take her seriously enough to really mind her "ways" long.

"But what are we to do, when we are such mere ordinary creatures? And you know, my dear, that if the transcendentalists like to muse on bridges by moonlight, some well-educated, commonplace individuals must build them the bridges first."

"Ah, there you go again. Yes, that's true. One should never forget that, of course. Particularly when talking with a man who uses a man's logic."

Then she opened the door, passed quickly into the hall, and let it close after her.

A lantern was resting on the floor outside, as if in waiting, and she picked it up and went at once into the night—a dark night through which the station lights and signals, red and yellow, sparkled brightly.

It was a brisk October air that filled that outer world, and the superabundant vitality of God's country came glinting, storming, down, up, and across earth, sky, and ether in between.

"This glorious night!" she thought prayerfully. "If one might only realize just all it means to be existing right now." She held the lantern behind her, and saw her shadow spread forth into space and fade away beyond. "The train isn't in the block yet," she thought, glancing at the signal; "that means minutes long to wait." Quickly she ran down the cinder-path beside the tracks, and entered the little station where a crowd of men lounged.

"Is the train on time to-night?" she asked one.

[19]

He shook his head. "Half an hour late," he said; "wreck on the road. Wheel off a car of thrashing-machines at Kent's."

"A whole half hour?"

"Well, I heard Joey Beall say they was making it up," said the man; "the station agent's gone home to supper, or you could ask him."

"Thank you very much," Alva said, and turned and went out.

The night appeared even fairer than before. Her eyes roamed widely. She thought for a minute of going back to the hotel and bidding Ingram come out with her, but then her own mood cried for relief from the labor of his companionship. We do not give our spirits credit for what they learn through adapting themselves to uncongenial companionship. Alva felt hers craved a rest. "I'll go out on the bridge and wait there," she told herself; "that will be the right thing,—to stand above the gorge and say my evening prayers."

So, stepping carefully over the switch impedimenta, she walked on, following the embankment that led out to the Long Bridge.

It is very long—that Long Bridge—and very high as well. I believe that the first bridge, the wooden one, was close to a world's wonder in its days. Even now the skilfully combined network of iron, steel, joist and cable seems a species of marvel, as it springs across the great cleft that the glacier sawed through several million layers of Devonian stratum several million years ago. I forget how many tons of metal went into its structure, but so intricate and delicately poised is the whole, that while trains roar forth upon its length and find no danger, yet does it echo quick and responsive to the light step of a lithe treading woman or even of the littlest child. On this night Alva, wrapped close in her cape, fared fearlessly out into the black beyond. The high braces and beams creaked all along its vanishing length, and she smiled at the sound. "I wonder if sometime, years from now, I shall return and walk out here again, and find the bridge crying me a welcome!" she thought; "I wonder!" A narrow, boarded way led to the right of the rails, and she was soon directly over the gorge. It was far too dark to see the ribbon of river hundreds and hundreds of feet below, or the steep picture-crevasse that encased the water's way. Beyond and below, to the left, she could have seen the windows of Ledgeville, had she turned that way, but she did not do so. It was the gorge that always claimed her, whether by day or by night, and now she leaned upon the steel guard and stared below. "I can see it plainly, even in the dark," she murmured to herself. "I can see every rock and eddy down there, the great curve of whirlpool, and the place where the water slides so smoothly off and then goes mad and foams below. It is all distinct to me. I remember the day that I first saw it, years ago, when—right here, where I stand to-night—he came to me for the first time, and we knew one another directly. And I shall see it just so plainly in the years to come, when it will never enter into my daily life any more, and yet will be the background of all my living."

[20]

She stood there for a long time, wrapped in the depth of her own thoughts. The shadows below seemed to shift and drift in their variations of intensity, and her eyes found rest in their profundity. "It's like drawing water out of a well when one is very thirsty," she said, at last, straightening herself and sighing; "it's unexplainable, but oh, it's so good,—the lesson of darkness and water and trees and sky. How grateful I am to be able to spell out a little in that primer!"

[21]

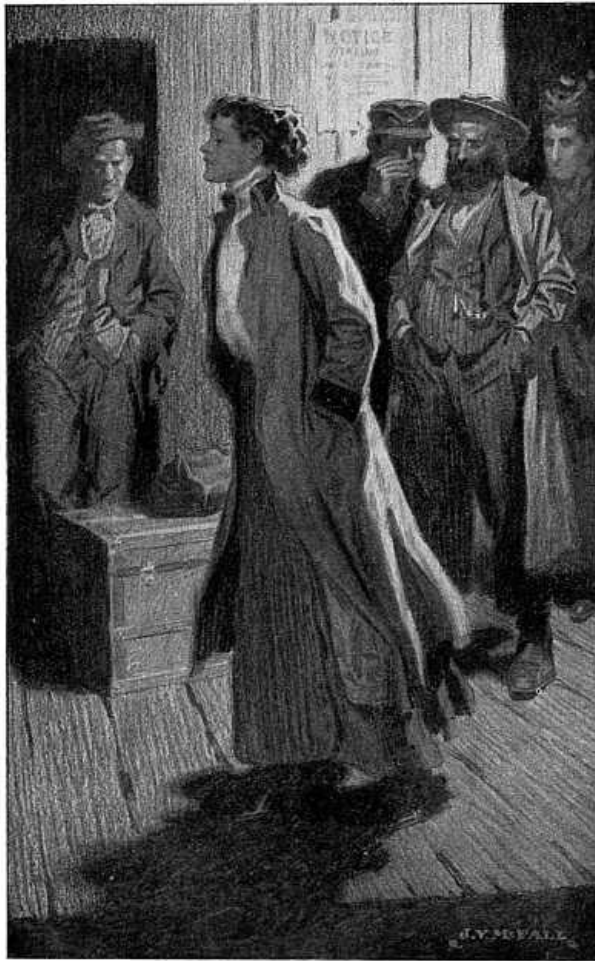
Then she clasped her hands and said a prayer, and as she finished the signal flashed the train's entrance within the block. That meant only two minutes until its arrival, and so she turned herself back at once. The crowd at the station had perceptibly increased and began now to surge forth upon the platform. Mrs. Dunstall was there and Pinkie, and Joey Beall and Mrs. Wiley, and Clay Wright Benton, and old Sammy Adams, and Lucia Cosby.

"Been out on the Bridge, I suppose?" Mrs. Dunstall said pleasantly to Alva.

"Yes; it's lovely to-night," the latter replied.

Every one smiled. They all felt that any one who would go out on the bridge on a pitch black night must be mildly insane, but they looked upon Alva as mildly insane anyhow. Mrs. Ray had many beside Ingram to uphold her opinion.

"It's her that bought the old Whittacker house and is putting a bath-tub in it," Joey Beall whispered to a man who was waiting to leave by the last train out.



"IT'S HER THAT BOUGHT THE OLD WHITTACKER HOUSE."

"I know it," said the man; he was one of those men who never let Joey or anybody else feel that he had any advantage of him, in even the slightest way.

Just then the train charged madly in beside them.

Lassie, out on the Pullman's rear platform, preparatory to climbing down the steep steps the instant that it should be allowable, saw a well-known figure wrapped in a dark cloak, and gave a little cry of joy—

"Alva! Here I am—all safe."

[22]

Then she was enwrapped in the same dark cloak herself, for the space of one warm, all-embracing hug, her friend repeating over and over, "I'm so happy to have you—so happy to have you." And then they moved away through the little group of bystanders, and started up the cinder-path towards the hotel.

"I'm so happy to have you!" Alva exclaimed again, when they were alone. She did not even seem to know that she had said so before.

"It was so good of you to ask me! How did you come to think of it? And oh, Alva, what are you doing here, in this lonely place?"

"It will take me all your visit to properly answer those questions, dear; but I'll tell you this much at once. I asked you because I wanted to have you with me, and because I thought that you and I could help one another a great deal right now. And I am here, dear, because I am the happiest woman that the world has ever seen, and because the greatest happiness that the world has ever known is to be here in a few weeks."

Lassie stopped short, astonished.

Alva went on, laughing gaily: "Yes, it is so! Come on,—or you will stumble without my lantern to guide you. I'm going to tell you all about everything when we get alone in our room, but now, little girl, hurry, hurry. Don't stop behind."

So Lassie swallowed her astonishment for the time being, and followed.

The hotel stood on the crest of the hill above the station and the railway's path curved by it. They were there in a minute, and in another minute alone up-stairs in their room—or rather, rooms—for there were two bedrooms, opening one into the other.

[23]

"Why, how pretty you have made them," the young girl cried; "pictures, and a real live tea-table.

And a work-stand! How cosy and dear! It's just as if you meant to live here always."

Her face glowed, as she absorbed the surprising charm of her new abode. One does not need to be very old or to have travelled very extensively to recognize some comforts as pleasingly surprising in the country.

Alva was hanging up her cloak, and now she came and began to undo the traveller's with a loving touch.

"Why, in one way I do mean to live here always, dear. I never am anywhere that I do not—in a certain sense—live there ever after. People and places never fade out of my life. Wherever I have once been is forever near and dear to me, so dear that I can't bear to remember anybody or anything there as ugly. The difference between a pretty room and an ugly one is only a little money and a few minutes, after all, and I'm beginning to learn to apply the same rule to people. It only takes a little to find something interesting about each. We'll be so happy here, Lassie; how we will talk and sew and drink tea in these two tiny rooms! I've been just feasting on the thought of it every minute since you wrote that you could come."

Lassie hugged her again. "I can't tell you how overjoyed I was to think of coming and having a whole fortnight of you to myself. Every one thought it was droll, my running off like this when I ought to be deep in preparations for my *début*, but mamma said that the rest and change would do me good. And I was so glad!"

Alva had gone to hang up the second cloak and now she turned, smiling her usual quiet sweet smile as she did so. [24]

"It's a great thing for me to have you, dear; I haven't been lonely, but my life has been so happy here that I have felt selfish over keeping so much rare, sweet, unutterable joy all to myself,—I wanted to share it."

She seated herself on the side of the bed, and held out her hand in invitation, and Lassie accepted the invitation and went and perched beside her.

"Tell me all about it," she said, nestling childishly close; "how long have you been here anyway?"

"A week to-day."

"Only a week! Why, you wrote me a week ago."

"No, dear, six days ago."

"But you spoke as if you had been here ever so long then."

"Did I? It seemed to me that I had been here a long time, I suppose. Time doesn't go with me as regularly as it should, I believe. Some years are days, and the first day here was a year."

"And why are you here, Alva?"

"Oh, that's a long story."

"But tell it me, can't you?"

"Wait till to-morrow, dearest; wait until to-morrow, until you see my house."

"Your house!"

"I've bought a house here,—a dear little old Colonial dwelling hidden behind a high evergreen wall."

"A house here—in Ledge?"

"No, dear, not in Ledge—in Ledgeville. Across the bridge—" [25]

"But when—"

"A week ago—the day I came."

"But why—"

Alva leaned her face down against the bright brown head.

"I wanted a home of my own, Lassie."

"But I thought that you couldn't leave your father and mother?"

"I can't, dear."

"Are they coming here to live?"

"No, dear."

"But I don't understand—"

"But you will to-morrow; I'll tell you everything to-morrow; I'd tell you to-night, only that I promised myself that we would go to a certain dear spot, and sit there alone in the woods while I told you."

"Why in the woods?"

"Ah, Lassie, because I love the woods; I've gotten so fond of woods, you don't know how fond; trees and grass have come to be such friends to me; I'll tell you about it all later. It's all part of the story."

"But why did you come here, Alva,—here of all places, where you don't know any one. For you don't know any one here, do you?"

"I know a man named Ronald Ingram here; he is the chief of the engineering party that is surveying for the dam."

"Is he an old friend?"

"Oh, yes, from my childhood."

Lassie turned quickly, her eyes shining:

"Alva, are you going to marry him?"

Her face was so bright and eager that something veiled the eyes of the other with tears as she answered:

"No, dear; he's nothing but a friend. I was looking for a house—a house in the wilderness—and he sent for me to come and see one here. And I came and saw it and bought it at once; I expect to see it in order in less than a fortnight."

"Then you're going to spend this winter here?"

Alva nodded. "Part of it at any rate."

"Alone?"

Alva shook her head.

Lassie's big eyes grew yet more big. "Do you mean—you don't mean—oh, what do you mean?"

She leaned forward, looking eagerly up into the other's face. "Alva, Alva, it isn't—it can't be—oh, then you are really—"

Two great tears rolled down that other woman's face. She simply bowed her head and said nothing.

Lassie stared speechless for a minute; then—"I'm so glad—so glad," she stammered, "so glad. And you'll tell me all about it to-morrow?"

"Yes, dear," Alva whispered, "I'll tell you all to-morrow. I'll be glad to tell it all to you. The truth is, Lassie, that I thought that I was strong enough to live these days alone, but I learned that I am weaker than I thought. You see how weak I am. I am weeping now, but they are tears of joy, believe me—they are tears of joy; I am the happiest and most blessed woman in the whole wide world. And yet, it is your coming that leads me to weep. I had to have some outlet, dear, some one to whom to speak. And I want to live, Lassie, and be strong, very, very strong—for God."

Lassie sat staring.

"You don't understand, do you?" Alva said to her, with the same smile with which she had put the same question to Ingram.

But Lassie did not answer the question as Ingram had answered it.

"You will teach me and I shall learn to understand," she said.

CHAPTER III

INTRODUCING LASSIE TO MRS. RAY

The next morning dawned gorgeous.

When Lassie, in her little gray kimono, stole gently in to wake her friend, she found Alva already up and dressed, standing at the window, looking out over the October beauty that spread afar before her. It was a wonderful sight, all the trees bright and yet brighter in their autumn gladness, while the grass sparkled green through the dew that had been frost an hour before. The view showed the radiance fading off into the distant blue, where bare brown fields told of the harvest garnered and the ground made ready for another spring.

Lassie pressed Alva's arm as she peeped over her shoulder, and the other turned in silence and kissed her tenderly.

Side by side they looked forth together for some minutes longer, and then Lassie whispered:

"I could hardly get to sleep last night—for thinking of it all, you know. You don't guess how interested I am. I do so want to know everything."

Alva turned to regard her with her calm smile.

"But when you did get to sleep, you slept well, didn't you?" she asked; "tell me that, first of all."

"Why, is it late? Did I sleep too awfully long? Why didn't you call me?"

[29]

"Oh, my dear, why? It's barely nine, and that isn't late at all for a girl who spent all yesterday on the train. I let you sleep on purpose. What's the use of waking up before the mail comes? And that isn't in till half-past under the most favorable circumstances; and even then it never is distributed until quarter to ten. I thought we'd get our letters after our breakfast, and then carry them across the bridge with us. Would you like to do that? I have to cross the bridge every morning."

"Cross the bridge? That means to go to your house?"

"Yes, dear."

"How nice! I'm crazy to see your house. Is it far from here to the post-office? Will that be on our way?"

"That is the post-office there—by the trees." Alva pointed to a brown, two-story, cottage-like structure three hundred yards further up the track.

"The little house with the box nailed to the gate-post?"

"It isn't such a little house, Lassie; it's quite a mansion. The lady who lives in it rents the upper part for a flat and takes boarders down-stairs."

"Does she take many?"

Alva laughed. "She told me that she only had a double-bed and a half-bed, so she was limited to eight."

"Oh!"

"I know, my dear, I thought that very same 'Oh' myself; but that's what she said. And that really is as naught compared to the rest of her capabilities."

"What else does she do?"

"I'm afraid I can't remember it all at once, but among other things she runs a farm, raises chickens, takes in sewing, cuts hair, canes chairs and is sexton of the church. She's postmistress, too, and does several little things around town."

[30]

Lassie drew back in amazement. "You're joking."

"No, dear, I'm not joking. She's the eighth wonder in the world, in my opinion."

"She must be quite a character."

"Every one's quite a character in the country. Country life develops character. I expect to become a character myself, very soon; indeed I'm not very positive but that I am one already."

"But how does the woman find time to do so much?"

"There is more time in the country than in the city; you'll soon discover that. One gets up and dresses and breakfasts and goes for the mail, and reads the letters and answers them, and then its only quarter past ten,—in the country."

Lassie withdrew from the arm that held her. "It won't be so with me to-day, at all events," she laughed. "What will they think of me if every one here is as prompt as that?"

"It doesn't matter to-day; we'll be prompt ourselves to-morrow. But you'd better run now. I'm in a hurry to get to my house; I'm as silly over that house as a little child with a new toy,—sillier, in fact, for my interest is in ratio with my growth, and I've wanted a home for so long."

"But you've had a home."

"Not of my very ownest own, not such as this will be."

The young girl looked up into her face. "I'm so *very* curious," she said, with emphasis; "I want so to know the story."

[31]

Alva touched her cheek caressingly, "I'll tell you soon," she promised, "after you've seen the house."

Lassie went back into her room and proceeded to make her toilet, which was soon finished.

They went down into the little hotel dining-room then for breakfast, and found it quite deserted, but neat and sweet, and pleasantly odorous of bacon.

"Such a dolls' house of a hotel," said Lassie.

"It's a cozy place," Alva answered. "I like this kind of hotel. It's sweet and informal. If they forget you, you can step to the kitchen and ask for more coffee. I'm tired of the world and the world's conventionality. I told Mrs. Lathbun yesterday that Ledge would spoil me for civilization hereafter. I like to live in out-of-the-way places."

"Mrs. Lathbun is the hostess, I suppose?"

"No, Mrs. O'Neil is the hostess, or rather, she's the host's wife. You must meet her to-day. Such a pretty, brown-eyed, girlish creature,—the last woman in the world to bring into a country hotel. She says herself that when you've been raised with a faucet and a sewer, it's terrible to get used to a cistern and a steep bank. She was born and brought up in Buffalo."

By this time Mary Cody had entered, beaming good morning, and placed the hot bacon and eggs, toast and coffee, before them.

"I'm going for the mail after breakfast, Mary," Alva said; "shall I bring yours?"

"Can't I bring yours?" said Mary Cody. "I can run up there just as well as not." Mary Cody was all smiles at the mere idea.

"No, I'll have to go myself to-day, I think. I'm expecting a registered letter."

[32]

"I'll be much obliged then if you will bring mine."

"If there are any for the house, I'll bring them all," Alva said; "will you tell Mrs. Lathbun that?"

"I'll tell her if I see her, but they're both gone. They went out early—off chestnutting, I suppose."

"Oh!"

"Who is Mrs. Lathbun?" Lassie asked, when Mary Cody had gone out of the room.

"I spoke of her before and you asked about her then, didn't you? And I meant to tell you and forgot. She's another boarder, a lady who is here with her daughter. Such nice, plain, simple people. You'll like them both."

"I thought that we were to be here all alone."

"We are, to all intents and purposes. The Lathbuns won't trouble us. They are not intrusive, only interesting when we meet at table or by accident."

"Every one interests you, Alva; but I don't like strangers."

Alva sighed and smiled together.

"I learned to fill my life with interest in people long ago," she said simply; "it's the only way to keep from getting narrow sometimes."

Lassie looked at her earnestly.

"Does every one that you meet interest you really?" she asked.

"I think so; I hope so, anyway."

"Don't you ever find any one dull?"

Alva looked at her with a smile, quickly repressed. "No one is really dull, dear, or else every one is dull; it's all in the view-point. The interest is there if we want it there; or it isn't there, if we so prefer. That's all."

[33]

There was a little pause, while the young girl thought this over.

"I suppose that one is happiest in always trying to find the interest," she said then slowly; "but do tell me more about the Lathbuns."

"Presupposing them in the dull catalogue?"

Lassie blushed, "Not necessarily," she said, half confusedly.

Alva laughed at her face, "I don't know so very much about them, except that they interest me. The mother is large and rather common looking, but a very fine musician, and the daughter is a pale, delicate girl with a romance."

Lassie's face lit up: "Oh, a romance! Is it a nice romance? Tell me about it."

"It's rather a wonderful romance in my eyes. I'll tell it all to you sometime, but that was the train that came in just now, and I want to get the mail and go on over to the house, so we'll have to put off the romance for the present, I'm afraid."

"I don't hear the train."

"Maybe not—but it went by."

"Went by! And the mail! How does the mail get off by itself?"

"Oh, my dear, I must leave you to learn about the mail from Mrs. Ray. She'll explain to you all about what happens to the Ledge mail when the train rushes by. It's one of her pet subjects."

"Do you know you're really very clever, Alva; you seem to be plotting to fill me full of curiosity about everything and everybody in this little out-of-the-way corner in the world? Nobody could ever be dull where you are."

[34]

A sudden shadow fell over the older's face at that; a wistful wonder crept to her eyes.

"I wish I could believe that," she said.

"But you can, dear. You've always seemed to me to be just like that French woman who was the only one who could amuse the king, even after she'd been his wife for forty years. You'd be like that."

Alva rose, laughing a little sadly. "God grant that it may be so," she said, "there are so many people who need amusing after forty years. But, dear, you know I told you last night that I sent for you to come and teach and learn, and you are teaching already."

"What am I teaching?" Lassie's eyes opened widely.

"You are teaching me what I really am, and that's a lesson that I need very much just now. It would be so very easy to forget what I really am these days. My head is so often dizzy."

"Why, dear? What makes you dizzy?"

"Oh, because the world seems slipping from me so fast. I could so easily quit it altogether. And I must not quit it. I have too much to do. And I am to have a great task left me to perform, perhaps. Oh, Lassie, it's hopeless to tell you anything until I have begun by telling you everything. You'll see then why I want to die, and why I can't."

"Alva!"

"Don't be shocked, dear; you don't know what I mean at all now, but later you will. Come, we must be going. No time to waste to-day."

They went up-stairs for hats and wraps, and then came down ready for the October sunshine. It was fine to step into the crispness and breathe the ozone of its glory. On the big stone cistern cover by the door a fat little girl sat, hugging a cat and swinging her feet so as to kick caressingly the brown and white hound that lay in front of her.

[35]

"A nice, round, rosy picture of content," Alva said, smiling at the tot. "I love to see babies and animals stretched out in the sun, enjoying just being alive."

"I enjoy just being alive myself," said Lassie.

They went up the path that ran beside the road and, arriving at the post-office, turned in at the gate and climbed the three steps. The post-office door stuck, and Alva jammed it open with her knee. Then she went in, followed by Lassie.

The post-office was just an extremely small room, two thirds of which appeared reserved for groceries, ranged upon shelves or piled in three of its four corners. The fourth corner belonged to the United States Government, and was screened off by a system of nine times nine pigeonholes, all empty. Behind the pigeonholes Mrs. Ray was busy stamping letters for the outgoing mail.

"You never said that she kept a grocery store, too," whispered Lassie.

"No, but I told you that I'd forgotten ever so many things that she did," whispered Alva in return.

The lady behind the counter calmly continued her stamping, and paid not the slightest attention to them.

They sat down upon two of the three wooden chairs that were ranged in front of a pile of sacks of flour and remained there, meekly silent, until some one with a basket came in and took the remaining wooden chair. All three united then in adopting and maintaining the reverential attitude of country folk awaiting the mail's distribution, and Lassie learned for the first time in her life how strong and binding so intangible a force as personal influence and atmosphere may become, even when it be only the personal influence and atmosphere of a country postmistress. It may be remarked in passing, that not one of the letters then being post-marked received an imprint anything like as strong as that frame of mind which the postmistress of Ledge had the power to impress upon those who came under her sceptre. She never needed to speak, she never needed to even glance their way, but her spirit reigned triumphant in her kingdom, and, as she carried her governmental duties forward with as deep a realization of their importance as the most zealous political reformer could wish, no onlooker could fail to feel anything but admiration for her omniscience and omnipotence. Mrs. Ray's governmental attitude towards life showed itself in an added seriousness of expression. Her dress was always plain and severe, and in the post-office she invariably put over her shoulders a little gray shawl with fringe which she had a way of tucking in under her arms from time to time as she moved about.

[36]

Lassie had ample time to note all this while the stamping went vigorously forward. Meanwhile the mail-bag which had just arrived lay lean and lank across the counter, appearing as resigned

as the three human beings ranged on the chairs opposite. Finally, when the last letter was post-marked, the postmistress turned abruptly, jerked out a drawer, drew therefrom a key which hung by a stout dog-chain to the drawer knob and held it carefully as if for the working up of some magic spell. Lassie, contemplating every move with the closest attention, could not but think just here that if the postal key of Ledge ever had decided to lose its senses and rush madly out into the whirlwind of wickedness which it may have fancied existing beyond, it would assuredly not have gotten far with that chain holding it back, and Mrs. Ray holding the chain. It was a fearfully large and imposing chain, and seemed, in some odd way, to be Mrs. Ray's assistant in maintaining the dignity necessary to their dual position in the world's eyes.

[37]

The lady of the post-office now unlocked the bag and, thrusting her hand far in, secured two packets containing nine letters in all from the yawning depths. She carefully examined each letter, and then turned the bag upside down and gave it one hard, severe, and solemn shake. Nothing falling out, she placed it on top of a barrel, took up the nine letters, and went to work upon them next.

When they were all duly stamped, she laid them, address-side up, before her like a pack of fortune-telling cards, folded her arms tightly across her bosom, and, standing immovable, directed her gaze straight ahead.

Now seemed to be the favorable instant for consulting the sacred oracle. Alva and the third lady rose with dignity and approached the layman's side of the counter; Lassie sat still, thrilled in spite of herself.

Alva, being a mere visitor, drew back a little with becoming modesty and gave the native a chance to speak first.

"I s'pose there ain't nothing for me," said that other, almost apologetically, "but if there's anything for Bessie or Edward Griggs or Ellen Scott I can take it; and John is going down the St. Helena road this afternoon, so if there's anything for Judy and Samuel—"

[38]

"Here's yours as usual," said Mrs. Ray, rising calmly above the other's speech and handing Alva three letters as she did so; "the regular one, and the one you get daily, and then here's a registered one. I shall require a receipt for the registered one, as the United States Government holds me legally liable otherwise, and after my husband died I made up my mind I was all done being legally liable for anything unless I had a receipt. Yes, indeed. I'd been liable sometimes legally in my married life, but more often just by being let in for it, and I quit then. Yes, indeed. When they tell me I'm legally liable for anything now, I never fail to get a receipt, and I read every word of the President's message over twice every year to be sure I ain't being given any chance to get liable accidentally when I don't know it—when I ain't took in what was being enacted, you know. Here,—here's the things and the ink; you sign 'em all, please."

Alva bent above the counter obediently and proceeded to fill out the forms as according to law. Mrs. Ray watched her sharply until the one protecting her own responsibility had been indorsed, and then she turned to the other inquirer:

"Now, what was you saying, Mrs. Dunstall? Oh, I remember,—no, of course there ain't anything for you. Nor for any of them except the Peterkins, and I daren't give you their mail because they writ me last time not to ever do so again. I told Mrs. Peterkin you meant it kindly, but she don't like that law as lets you open other people's letters and then write on 'Opened by accident.' Mrs. Peterkin makes a point of opening her own letters. She says her husband even don't darst touch 'em. It's nothing against you, Mrs. Dunstall, for she's just the same when I write on 'Received in bad order.' She always comes right down and asks me why I did it. Yes, indeed. I suppose she ain't to blame; some folks is funny; they never will be pleasant over having their letters opened."

[39]

Alva bent closer over her writing; Lassie was coughing in her handkerchief. Mrs. Dunstall stood before the counter as if nailed there, and continued to receive the whole charge full in her face.

"But I've got your hat done for you; yes, I have. I dyed the flowers according to the Easter egg recipe, and it's in the oven drying now. And I made you that cake, too. And I've got the setting of hens' eggs all ready. Just as soon as the mail is give out, I'll get 'em all for you. It's pretty thick in the kitchen, or you could go out there to wait, but Elmer Haskins run his lawn-mower over his dog's tail yesterday, and the dog's so lost confidence in Elmer in consequence, that Elmer brought him up to me to take care of. He's a nice dog, but he won't let no one but me set foot in the kitchen to-day. I don't blame him, I'm sure. He was sleepin' by Deacon Delmar's grave in the cemetery and woke suddenly to find his tail gone. It's a lesson to me never to leave the grave-cutting to no one else again. I'd feel just as the dog does, if I'd been through a similar experience. Yes, indeed. I was telling Sammy Adams last night and he said the same."

"There, Mrs. Ray," said Alva, in a stifled voice, straightening up as she spoke, "I think that will set you free from all liability; I've signed them all."

[40]

"Let me see,—you mustn't take it odd that I'm so particular, because a government position is a responsibility as stands no feeling." She looked at the signatures carefully, one after the other. "Yes, they're right," she said then; "it wasn't that I doubted you, but honesty's the best policy, and I ought to know, for it was the only policy my husband didn't let run out before he died without telling me. He had four when I married him—just as many as he had children by his first wife—he had six by his second—and his name and the fact that it was a honest one, was all he left me to live on and bring up his second wife's children on. Goodness knows what he done with his money;

he certainly didn't lay it by for the moths and rust, for I'm like the text in the Bible—wherever are moths and rust there am I, too. Yes, indeed, and with pepper and sapolio into the bargain; but no, the money wasn't there, for if it was where it could rust it would be where I could get it."

Alva smiled sympathetically, and then she and Lassie almost rushed out into the open air. When they were well out of hearing, they dared to laugh.

"Oh, my gracious me," Lassie cried; "how can you stand it and stay sober?"

"I can't, that's the trouble!" Alva gasped. "My dear, she felt strange before you, and was rather reticent, but wait till she knows you well—until to-morrow. Oh, Lassie, she's too amusing! Wait till she gets started about the dam, or about Niagara, or about her views on running a post-office, or anything—" she was stopped by Lassie's seizing her arm.

[41]

"Look quick, over there,—who is that? He looks so out of place here, somehow. Don't he? Just like civilization."

Alva looked. "That? Oh, that's Ronald—Ronald Ingram, you know, coming across lots for his letters. You remember him, surely, when you were a little girl. He was always at our house then. You'll meet him again to-night. I'd stop now and introduce you, only I want to hurry."

"I suppose that he knows all about it?"

"All about what?"

"The secret."

"Ronald? Oh, no, dear. No one knows. No one—that is, except—except we two. You will be the only outsider to share that secret."

"For how long?"

"Until I am married."

"Until you are married! Why, when are you to be married?—Soon?"

"In a fortnight."

"And no one is to know!"

"No one."

"Not his family? Not yours?"

"No one."

"How strange!"

Alva put out her hand and stayed the words upon her friend's lips. "Look, dear, this is the Long Bridge. You've heard of it all your life; now we're going to walk across it. Look to the left; all that lovely scene of hill and valley and the little white town with green blinds is Ledgeville; and there to the right is the famous gorge, with its banks of gray and its chain of falls, each lovelier than the last. Stand still and just look; you'll never see anything better worth looking at if you travel the wide world over."

[42]

They stopped and leaned on the bridge-rail in silence for several minutes, and then Alva continued softly, almost reverently: "This scene is my existence's prayer. I can't make you understand all that it means to me, because you can't think how life comes when one is crossing the summit—the very highest peak. I've climbed for so long,—I'll be descending upon the other side for so long,—but the hours upon the summit are now, and are wonderful! I should like to be so intensely conscious that not one second of the joy could ever fade out of my memory again. I feel that I want to grave every rock and ripple and branch and bit of color into me forever. Oh, what I'd give if I might only do so. I'd have it all to comfort me afterwards then—afterwards in the long, lonely years to come."

"Why, Alva," said her friend, turning towards her in astonishment, "you speak as if you didn't expect to be happy but for a little while."

A sad, faint smile crept around Alva's mouth, and then it altered instantly into its usual sweet serenity.

"Come, dear," she said; "we'll hurry on to the house, and then after you've seen it we'll go to my own dear forest-seat, and there I'll tell you the whole story."

"Oh, let us hurry!" Lassie said, impetuously; "I can't wait much longer."

So they set quickly forward across the Long Bridge.

[43]

CHAPTER IV

THE DIFFERENCE

On the further side of the Long Bridge the railway tracks swept off in a smooth curve to the right, and, as there was a high embankment to adapt the grade to the hillside, a long flight of steps ran down beside it into the glen below.

A pretty glen, dark with shadows, bright with dancing sun-rays. A glen which bore an odd likeness to some lives that we may meet (if we have that happiness), lives that lead their ways in peace and beauty, with the roar and smoke of the world but a stone's throw distant.

Lassie's eyes, looking down, were full of appreciation.

"Is it there that you are going to live?" she asked.

Alva shook her head. "Oh, no, not there; that is Ledge Park, the place that all the hue and cry is being raised over just now."

"Oh, yes," Lassie turned eagerly; "tell me about that. I read something in the papers, but I forgot that it was here."

"It is 'here,' as you say. But it concerns all the country about here, only it's much too big a subject for us to go into now. There are two sides, and then ever so many sides more. I try to see them all, I try to see every one's side of everything as far as I can, but there is one side that overbalances all else in my eyes, and that happens to be the unpopular one."

[44]

"That's too bad."

"Yes, dear," Alva spoke very simply; "but what makes *you* say so?"

"Why? Why, because then you won't get what you want."

Her friend laughed. "Don't say that in such a pitying tone, Lassie. Better to be defeated on the right side, than to win the most glorious of victories for the wrong. Who said that?"

Lassie looked doubtful.

Alva laughed again and touched her cheek with a finger-caress. "I'll tell you just this much now, dear;—all of both the river banks—above, below and surrounding the three falls—belong to Mr. Ledge, and he has always planned to give the whole to the State as a gift, so that there might be one bit of what this country once was like, preserved. He made all his arrangements to that end, and gave the first deeds last winter. What do you think followed? As soon as the State saw herself practically in possession, it appointed a commission to examine into the possibilities of the water power!" Alva paused and looked at her friend.

"But—" Lassie was clearly puzzled.

"The engineers are here surveying now. Ronald Ingram is at the head and the people of all the neighborhood are so excited over the prospect of selling their farms that no one stops to think what it would really mean."

"What would it really mean?"

"A manufacturing district with a huge reservoir above it."

[45]

"Where?"

"Back there," she turned and pointed; "they say that there was a great prehistoric lake there once, and they will utilize it again."

"But there's a town down there."

"Yes, my dear, Ledgeville. Ledgeville and six other towns will be submerged."

Lassie stopped short on the railroad track and stared. She had come to a calamity which she could realize now.

"Why, what ever will the people do then?"

"Get damages. They're so pleased over being drowned out. You must talk it over with Mrs. Ray. You must get Mrs. Ray's standpoint, and then get Ronald's standpoint. Theirs are the sensible, practical views, the world's views. My views are never practical. I'm not practical. I'm only heartbroken to think of anything coming in to ruin the valley. Mr. Ledge and I share the same opinions as to this valley; it seems to us too great a good to sell for cash."

"You speak bitterly."

"Yes, dear, I'm afraid that I do speak bitterly. On that subject. But we won't talk of it any more just now. See, here's the wood road that leads to my kingdom; come, take it with me."

They turned into a soft, pine-carpeted way on the left, and in the length of a bow-shot seemed buried in the forest.

"Lassie, wait!"

Turning her head, Lassie saw that Alva had stopped behind, and was standing still beside where a little pine-tree was growing out from under a big glacial boulder. She went back to her.

[46]

"Dear, look at this little tree. Here's my daily text."

"How?"

"Do you see how it has grown out and struggled up from under the rock?"

Lassie nodded.

"You know very little of what makes up life, dear. I've sent for you to teach you." She lifted her eyes earnestly to the face near hers, and her own eyes were full of appeal. "Lassie, try to understand all I say to you these days; try to believe that it's worth learning. See this little tree—" she touched her fingers caressingly to the pine branches as she spoke—"it's a very little tree, but it has taught me daily since I came, and I believe that you can learn of it, too."

Lassie's big eyes were very big indeed. "Learn of a tree!"

Alva lifted one of the little stunted uneven branches tenderly in her fingers. "This is its lesson," she said; "the pine-cone fell between the rocks; it didn't choose where it would fall, it just found itself alive and under the rocks; there wasn't much earth there, but it took root and grew. There was no room to give out branches, so it forced its way crookedly upward; crookedly because there was no room to grow straight, but always upward; there wasn't much sunlight, but it was as bravely green as any other tree; the big rock made it one-sided, but it put out thickly on the side where it had space. My life hasn't been altogether sunlit. I was born between rocks, and I have been forced to grow one-sided, too. But the tree's sermon came home to me the first day that I saw it. Courageous little tree, doing your best in the woods, where no one but God could take note of your efforts,—you'll be straight and have space and air and sunshine in plenty next time—next time! Oh, blessed 'next time' that is to surely right the woes of those who keep up courage and continue fighting. That's the reward of all. That's the lesson."

[47]

Lassie listened wonderingly. "Next time!" she repeated questioningly, "what next time? Do you believe in a heaven for trees?"

"I am not sure of a heaven for anything," said Alva, "not an orthodox heaven. But I believe in an endless existence for every atom existing in the universe, and I believe that each atom determines the successive steps of its own future, and so a brave little pine-tree fills me with just as sincere admiration as any other species of bravery. 'Next time!' It will have a beautiful 'next time' in the heaven which means something so different from what we are taught, or here again on earth, or wherever its little growing spirit takes form again. I'm not wise enough to understand much of that, but I'm wise enough to know that there is a next time of so much infinitely greater importance than this time, that this time is really only of any importance at all in comparison just according to how we use it in preparation. That's part of the lesson that the tree teaches. But you can't understand me, Lassie, unless you are able to grasp my belief—my fixed conviction—that this world is only an instant in eternity. I couldn't live at all unless I had this belief and hope, and it's the key to everything with me; so please—please—give me credit for sincerity, at least."

Lassie looked thoroughly awed. "I'll try to see everything just as you do," she said.

[48]

Alva pressed her hand. "Thank you, dear."

Then they went on up the road.

Presently the sound of hammer and saw was heard, and the smell of wet plaster and burning rubbish came through the trees.

"Is it from your house?" Lassie asked, with her usual visible relief at the approach of the understandable.

"Yes, from my house," Alva answered. "They are very much occupied with my house; fancy buying a dear, old, dilapidated dwelling in the wilderness, and having to make it new and warm and bright and cheerful in a fortnight! Why, the tale of these two weeks will go down through all the future history of the country, I know. Such a fairy tale was never before. I shall become the Legend of Ledge, I feel sure."

The road, turning here, ended sharply in a large, solid, wooden gate, set deep in a thick hedge of pine trees.

"It is like a fairy tale!" Lassie cried delightedly; "a regular Tourangean *porte* with a *guichet*!"

"It is better than any fairy tale," said Alva; "it is Paradise, the lovely, simple-minded, Bible-story Paradise, descending upon earth for a little while." She pushed one half of the great gate-door open, and they went through.

A small, old-fashioned, Colonial dwelling rose up before them in the midst of dire disorder. Shingling, painting, glass-setting, and the like were all going forward at once. Workmen were everywhere; wagons loading and unloading were drawn up at the side; mysterious boxes, bales and bundles lay about; confusion reigned rampant.

"Not exactly evolution, but rather revolution," laughed Alva, ceasing transcendentalism with great abruptness, and becoming blithely gay. "And oh, Lassie, the joy of it, the downright childish fun of it! Don't you see that I couldn't be alone through these days; they are too grand to be selfish over. I had to have some one to share my fun. We'll come here and help every day after this; the pantries will be ready soon, and you and I will do every bit of the putting them in order. Screw up the little hooks for the cups, you know, and arrange the shelves, and oh, won't we have a good time?"

Lassie's eyes danced. "I just love that kind of work," she said, fully conscious of the pleasant return to earth, "I can fit paper in drawers beautifully."

"Which proves that after all women stay women in spite of many modern encouragements to be men," Alva said. "You know really I'm considered to be most advanced, and people look upon me as quite intellectual; but I'm fairly wild over thinking how we'll scrub the pantries, and put in the china—and then there's a fine linen-closet, too. We'll set that in order afterwards, and put all the little piles straight on the shelves."

By this time they had gone up the plank that bridged over the present hiatus between ground and porch, and entered the living-room, which was being papered in red with a green dado and ceiling.

"How pretty and bright!" Lassie exclaimed.

"It's going to be furnished in the same red and green, with little book-shelves all around and the dining table in the middle," Alva explained. "Oh, I do love this room. It's my ideal sitting-room. It has to be the dining-room, too, but I don't mind that."

"Won't the table have to be very small?"

[50]

"Just big enough for two."

"But when you have company?"

"We shall never have any company."

"I mean when you have friends with you here."

"I shall never have any friends with me, dear."

"Alva! Why—I can come—can't I?—Sometime?"

Alva shook her head.

"That's part of the story, Lassie, part of the story that I am going to tell you in a few minutes now. But be a little patient, dear; give me a few minutes more. Come in here first; see—this was the dining-room, but it has been changed into—I don't know what. A sort of bedroom, I suppose one would call it. I've had it done in blue, with little green vines and birds and bees and butterflies painted around it. Birds and bees and butterflies are always so lively and bright, so busy and cheerful. All the pictures here are going to be of animals, either out in the wild, free forest or else in warm, sunshiny farmyards. I have a lovely print of Wouverman's 'Im Stall' to hang in the big space. You know the picture, don't you?—the shadowy barn-room with one whole side open, and the hay dripping from above, and the horses just ridden in, and the chickens scratching, and some little children playing in the corner by the well. It's such a sweet *gemuthliche* picture—so full of fresh country air—I felt that it was the picture of all others to hang in this room. There will be a big sofa-bed at one side, and my piano, and pots of blooming flowers. And you can't think, little Lassie, of all that I look forward to accomplishing in this room. I expect to learn to be a very different woman, every atom and fibre of my being will be altered here. All of my faults will be atoned for—" she stopped abruptly, and Lassie turned quickly with an odd impression that her voice had broken in tears.

[51]

"Alva!" she exclaimed.

"It's nothing, dear, only that side of me that keeps forgetting the lesson of the tree. Don't mind me,—I am so happy that you must not mind anything nor must I mind anything either; but—when I come into this room and think—" her tone suddenly turned dark, full of quivering emotion, and she put her hand to her eyes.

"Alva, tell me what you mean? I feel frightened,—I must know what's back of it all now. Tell me. Tell me!"

"I'm going to tell you in just a minute, as soon as I've shown you all over the house." She took her handkerchief, pressed it to her eyes, made a great, choking effort at self-control, and then managed to go on speaking. "See," pushing open a door, "this is a nice little dressing-room, isn't it? And then around and through this narrow back hall comes the kitchen. There is an up-stairs, but I've done nothing there except make a room comfortable and pleasant for the Japanese servant who will do the work, that is, all that I don't do myself."

"Won't you want but one servant?"

"I think so. A man from outside will take the extras, and really it's a very small house, dear. The laundry will be sent out. Dear me, how I do enjoy hearing that kind of speech from my own lips. 'The laundry will be sent out!' That sounds so delightfully commonplace, so sort of everyday and

like other people. I can't express to you what the commonplaces, the little monotones of ordinary lives, mean to me here. You'll divine later, perhaps. But fancy a married life where nothing is too trivial to be glorified! That is how things will be with us."

"Are you so sure?" Lassie tried to smile and speak archly. Tried very hard to do both, because an intangible atmosphere of sorrow was beginning to press heavily on her spirits.

"Very sure,—really, quite confident. You must not think that, because I sob suddenly as I did just now, I am ever weak or ever doubt myself or any one else. I never doubt or waver. It is only that no matter how hard one tries, one can hardly rise completely out of the thrall of one existence into the freedom of another at only a week's notice."

"Is that what you are trying to do?"

"Dear, I'm not only trying to do it, but the greater part of the time I do do it. It's only very seldom that my soul faints and the tears come. I am really happy! You are not going to be able to comprehend how happy I am. Every one who wants anything in this world always wants it in such a narrow, finite way,—no one can understand joy too limitless to be finite. The difficulty is that occasionally I get blind myself, or else in mercy God sometimes veils the splendor for a few minutes. When I faint or struggle, it is just that my soul is absent; you must not mind when you see me suffer, for the suffering has no meaning. It's just a sort of discipline,—it doesn't count." She smiled with wonderful brightness into Lassie's troubled face, and then, pushing open the outer door,—“You don't quite see how it is, but be patient with yourself, dearie; it will come. All things come to him who waits."

"Oh, but I don't understand, not one bit," Lassie cried, almost despairingly.

They were in the yard now; Alva looked at her and took her hand within her own. "Come," she said, "we'll go down through the woods to a certain lovely, bright spot where the view is big and wide, and there I'll tell you all about it."

"I so want to know!"

"I know you do, dear, and I want to tell you, too. I'm not purposely tormenting you, but there is no one else to whom I can speak. And that human, sobbing part of me needs companionship just as much these days, as the merry, house-loving spirit, or the beatifically blessed soul. Can't you see, dear, that with all my affection for you, I dread telling you my story, and the reason for that is that it will be too much for you to comprehend at first, and that I know perfectly well that it is going to shock and pain you." The last words burst forth like a storm repressed.

"Shock and pain me!" Lassie opened mouth and eyes.

"Yes, dear, of a certainty."

They were in the woods, quite alone.

Involuntarily Lassie drew a little away; a common, cruel suspicion flashed through her head. "Alva, is it—is it that you do not mean to marry the man?"

Alva laughed then, not very loudly, but clearly and sweetly. "No, Lassie, it isn't that. I am going to be married in the regular way and, besides, I will tell you in confidence that I fully believe that I have been married to the same man hundreds of times before, and shall be married to him countless times again. Does that help you?"

"Alva!"

"There! I told you that you wouldn't understand, and you don't."

"No, I certainly don't, when you talk like that."

"It's natural that you shouldn't, dear; but at the end of the week you will, perhaps. We'll hope so, any way. Oh, Lassie, how much we are both to live and learn in the next week."

Lassie turned her eyes to the eyes of the other.

"It's queer, Alva; you talk as if you were crazy, but I know you're not crazy, and yet I'm worried."

"You don't need to be worried,—"

"I'll try not to be." She raised her sweet eyes to her friend's face as she spoke, and her friend bent and kissed her. "Don't keep me waiting much longer," she pleaded.

They were passing through the little, tree-grown way which led out on the brow of the hill. All the wide, radiant wonder of that October morning unrolled before them there. For an instant Lassie stood entranced, forgetting all else; and then:

"Tell me now!" she cried.

"Let us sit down here," Alva said, pointing to a rough seat made out of a plank laid across two stumps. They sat down side by side.

"Alva, it seems as if I cannot wait another minute; I must know it all now. Tell me who he is, first; is it some one that I know?"

Alva's eyes rested on the wide radiance beyond.

"You know of him, dear," she replied quietly.

"Who is it?"

The woman laid her arm around the girl and drew her close and kissed her gently. Then she whispered two words in her ear.

With a scream, Lassie started to her feet. "Oh—no!—no!—*no!*"

Alva looked straight up at her where she stood there above her and smiled, steadily.

"No, no,—it can't be! I didn't hear right."

"Yes, you heard quite right."

The girl's hands shook violently; tears came fast pouring down her face. "But, Alva, he is—he can't—"

Tears filled the other's eyes, too, at that, and stole thickly out upon her cheeks. "I know, my dear child, but didn't I tell you how to me—to us—this life is only a small part of the whole?"

"Oh, but—but—oh, it's too horrible!" She sank down on the seat again and burst out sobbing.

"No, dear," Alva exclaimed, her voice suddenly firm, "not horrible, just that highest summit of life of which I spoke before—the point toward which I've lived, the point from which I shall live ever afterwards,—my point of infinite joy,—my all. For he is the man I love—have always loved—shall always love. Only, dear, don't you see?—he isn't a *man* as you understand the word; the love isn't even *love* as you understand love. It's all so different! So different!"

A long, keenly thrilling silence followed, broken only by the sound of the younger girl's repressed weeping.

It was one of those pauses during which men and women forget that they are men and women, that the world is the world, or that life is life. Every human consideration loses weight, and one is stunned into heaven or oblivion, according to his or her preparation for such an entry to either state.

The two friends remained seated side by side, facing the wonderful valley in all its rich beauty of varied colorings; but neither saw valley or color, neither remembered for a little what she was or where she was. Alva, with her hands linked around her knees, was out and away into another existence; Lassie, her eyes deadened and darkened with a horror too acute for any words to relieve, sat still beside her, and knew nothing for the time being but a fearful throbbing in her temples—a black cloud smothering her whole brain—and tears.

It was Lassie who broke the silence at last, trying hard to speak evenly. "But, Alva, I never knew ... when did you learn to love him ... why—" her voice died again just there, and she buried her face on the other's shoulder.

Alva laid her hand upon the little hand that shook under a fresh stress of emotion, and said gently, her tone one of deepest pity: "Shall I tell you all about it? Would you like to know the whole story?"

"Oh, yes, yes,—so much."

"You'll try to be patient and give yourself time to really see how things may be to one who is altogether outside of your way of thinking, won't you, dear? You won't pass judgment too quickly?"

"I'll try. Indeed, I will, as well as I can—"

Alva pressed the hand. "Dear little girl," she said, very tenderly, "you see I look at even you with quite different eyes from those with which the ordinary person sees you. If you could only see things as I do, you'd see everything so much more clearly. How can I put it all straight for you? When even my love for you is not at all what any other gives you."

Lassie lifted up her head. "How do you mean?"

"There are two Lassies to me, dear,—the pretty, sweet-looking girl, and the Lassie who loves me. Most people confuse the two, and think them one and the same; I don't. No matter what happened to you, the Lassie whom I love could never alter—she is unchangeable. She is not subject to change; she doesn't belong to this world; she cannot die. And just as I feel about you, I feel about everybody. What I can see and touch in those I love is what I love least in them."

"Oh, Alva!" it was like a little moan—the girl's voice.

"That is my earnest belief. Bodies and what they suffer don't count. That has come to me bit by bit under the pressure of these last years. But it has come in its completest form in the end. I am entirely satisfied as to the only truth in the universe being the fact that only Truth is eternal. Please try to remember all this, while you listen to my story; try not to forget it. You will, won't you?"

"I'll try, but it isn't clear to me."

"No, I don't suppose so—" Alva sighed—"but do your best, my dear;" she paused a moment, then drew the hand that she held close between her own two, and went on slowly; "I must tell you first of all that I have never seen him but three times in my life. Just think—only three times!"

"Only three—" Lassie looked up in surprise.

"Only three times. And hardly any one knows that I saw him even those times. No one knows today that we love one another, or that we are to be married, except the surgeons and nurses, who had to be told, of course. It's a very great secret."

[58]

"Tell me how it all began, Alva."

"I don't know when I first heard his name. It all began here, dear, five years ago. When I stopped off for a few days to visit the Falls. I've always loved this country, and from the time that I was born I've always been here for a few days now and then. I always had a queer feeling that something drew me here. I have those queer feelings about things and places and people, you know, and out there on the bridge has always seemed to me a sort of pivot in my life. Every time I go there, the clock seems to strike some hour for me—" she stopped.

Lassie opened and shut her free hand with a sensation of being very uneasy; the suspicion that Alva was not quite sane just lightly crossed her mind. It certainly was not sane to talk as she did.

"So I came here again, on my way home from New York, just five years ago now. And he was here then, staying at Ledge Park, and I saw him for the first time; we met out there on the bridge;" she stopped for just a second or so, then went steadily on. "I think I read about him in the papers. I had learned to admire him intensely—who could help it?—but of course I'd never for one instant thought of loving him. He was like a sort of a story-hero to me; he never seemed like a man; I never thought of any woman's loving him. He just seemed to be himself, all alone—always alone. He had seemed quite above and apart from all other men to me. He interested me; I wanted to learn all that I could about him and his work, and I did learn a great deal, but I'd never dreamed of meeting him face to face, of really speaking to him, of having his eyes really looking at me; he seemed altogether beyond and away from my existence. As if he lived on another world. And then I met him that evening on the bridge, in just the simplest sort of way. Oh, it was very wonderful."

[59]

"Did you know him right off?"

"Yes, he looked just like his picture; but then I knew him in another way, too. I can't describe it; it was all very—very strange. It doesn't seem strange to me now, but it would seem almost too strange to you."

"Won't you try to tell me?"

"I will some day, dear, perhaps. I can't tell you now, I couldn't explain it all to you; but, anyway, we met and I looked at him and he looked at me—" she pressed the hand within her own yet closer, adding simply, "I believe that love—real love—comes like that, first of all that one look, and then all the past rushes in and makes the bridge to all the future. Oh, Lassie," her voice sank to a whisper, "when I think of that meeting and of all that it brought me, I am so happy that I want to take the whole wide world into my confidence, and beg every one not to play at love or to take Love's name in vain; but to be patient, and wait, and starve, or beg, or endure anything, just so as to merit the joy which may perhaps be going to be. I never had thought of what love might be; at least I had never been conscious of such thinking. My life all these years had been bound so straitly and narrowly there at home. How could I think of anything that would take me from those duties! And yet I see now that it was all preparation, all the getting ready. If I had only known it, though,—if I had only known it then! It would all have been so much easier."

[60]

The whisper died away; she sat quite still looking out over the hills. Lassie's eyes gazed anxiously upon her; nothing in her own spirit tuned to this key; instead, flashes of recollection kept lighting up the present with forgotten paragraphs out of the newspaper accounts of the accident. She shivered suddenly.

Alva did not notice. After a while she went on again.

"Some day you'll learn to love some one, and then you'll know something of what I feel. I don't want you to suffer enough to know all that I feel. But, believe me, whatever one suffers, love is worth it. In that first instant I learned—that first look showed me—that it can mean all, everything, more even than happiness itself; oh, yes, a great, great deal more than happiness itself. In one way they're not synonymous at all, love and happiness. I have been happy without love all my life, and now I shall love without being what the world calls 'happy'; but I *shall* be happy—happy in my own way, just as I am happy now in something that makes you tremble only to think of."

She paused; her eyelids fell over her eyes and the lashes quivered where they lay on her cheeks, but her hand continued to hold Lassie's, warm and close. There was another long pause. And then another sigh.

"So in that first hour—it was only one hour—I learned the beginning of life's biggest lesson—what life may be, what love may be, and also what for me could never be. For just as soon as I really saw him, I saw why he had remained alone. It was perfectly plain to me. It was that he didn't live for himself; he lived to carry out his purpose. One reads of such people, but I never had met any one who was unable to see himself in his own life before. It was a tremendous lesson to me. It

[61]

was like opening a door and looking suddenly out upon a new order of universe. Everything whirled for the first minutes, and then I saw that my own life had been sufficiently unselfish to have made me capable of comprehending his. It rose like a flood through my soul, that everything has a reason, and that my blind, stupid, hopeless years there at home had all been leading straight up to that minute. It was such a revelation, and such a new light on all things. I was born anew, myself; I have never been the same woman since. Never, never!"

Lassie's brows drew together; the revelation did not appeal to her personal reason as reasonable.

"We talked for quite a while—not about ourselves—we understood each other too well to need do that. It seems to me now that we were almost one then, but I didn't know it. All I knew was that I could measure a little of what he was, and that there was a bond between us of absolute content in working out God's will rather than our own. I believe now that that is really the only true love or the only true basis for any marriage, and that when that mutual bond is once accepted, nothing can alter, not even an ocean rolling between—not even ten oceans. He spoke of the Falls, and he spoke of his own work. I listened and thanked God that I knew what he meant, and comprehended what it meant to me. At the end of the hour we parted, and I came back to the hotel and started for home the morning after.... He went away, too, and it was later—when we began to write letters—that our life together, our beautiful ideal life together, began. You can't realize its happiness any more than you can measure all that my words really mean. I can't explain myself any better, either. After a while it will all come to you, I hope. I went on with the work at home, and he continued his labors which allowed him neither home nor family. Nobody knew and nobody would have known, even if he or she thought that they knew. The very best and loveliest things lie all around the most of us, and the best and loveliest of all treasures are within our own hearts—and yet very few of us know anything about them. Perhaps better that the world in general shouldn't understand the joy of my kind of love, anyhow; it isn't time for that yet."

[62]

"How, Alva?"

She smiled almost whimsically, "Dearest, as soon as the whole world understands that sort of life, its own mission will be fulfilled, and then there will be no more of this particular world. You see!"

"Oh!"

"So then, dear, time went on and on, and I was happy, very happy. And he was very happy, also. There was something truly childlike in his happiness; he had never expected love in his life, because he had never thought of meeting any one who would be able to adapt herself to his circumstances. We never met, because it didn't seem best or wise. We just loved, and I don't believe that any two people have ever been happier together than we were, apart, for these five years—these happy, happy five years."

[63]

Lassie felt a deepening misery; the last horrible part must be going to come now.

Alva passed her hand over her eyes and drew a long breath.

"It's so difficult to be different from other people, and then to bear their way of looking at things. It's so hopeless to try to translate one's feeling into their language all the time. How can I go on, when I know just how it all looks to you. It's fearfully hard for me."

"I won't say a word,"—the girl's cry was pitiful.

Alva threw both arms quickly about her and held her close. "Bless you, darling, I know it. But you'll suffer and I know that, too; and I feel your suffering more than you guess. I know just how it all seems to you. There is that within me which shudders too, sometimes, and would shrink and weep only for the strong, divine power that fills me with something better than I can describe, something big enough and high enough to fight down the coward. You have that same divinity within you, dear, and you can't tell when or where it will be called out, but once it is called out, you never will be weak in the face of this earth's woes."

Lassie was weeping softly again.

"One morning—you know when—I opened the paper to read it to papa after breakfast, and I saw on the first page, across the top in bright red letters, that he had been killed."

There was a little sharp cry—"But he wasn't?"—and then a great sob.

"No, dear, but that was the first report."

"And you thought—"

"Yes, of course I believed it. But, Lassie, try to calm yourself—because it wasn't to me what you think. I was calm; I had learned so much, he had taught me so much, during the five years, that I astonished myself with my strength; really, I did. I went about all that day just as usual, only thinking with a white sort of numbness how long the rest of life would seem; and then, in the evening, the paper said that he was still alive. Then I telegraphed and the next day I went to him. I knew that I must go to him and see him once more, so I arranged things and went. I was surprised all the journey at my own courage; it was like a miracle, my power over myself. It was a long journey, but I knew that I should see him again at the end. I knew that he would not leave me without saying good-bye, now that he was conscious that he was going. I was sure of that. So confident can love and strength be in love and strength."

[64]

"I arrived—I went to the hospital—they had the room darkened because—well, you can guess. I went to where the bed stood and knelt down beside him, and laid my hand on his bosom. I felt his heart beating—ever so faintly, but still beating,—and I heard his voice. Only think, I had not heard his voice for five years! To you or to any one else it might have all been frightful, because, of course, the reality was frightful. The man, as you understand men, was mangled and dying, and could not possibly be with me except for a few brief days. But, oh, my dearest,—with me it was so different; it was all so absolutely different. The man that *I* loved was unhurt, and the evil chance had only made us nearer and dearer forever. I don't say that I was not trembling, and that I was not almost unnerved by the shock; but I can say, too, and say truly, that the Something Divine which had filled me from the first day, filled and upheld me and made me know that all was good even then, even in that dark hour and in that dark room, where he whom I held dearest on earth was chained to pain beneath my hand. The nurses were very kind. They left me there beside him while he was conscious and unconscious for some hours. They saw very quickly that it was different with us from most people; and when I went out two of the surgeons took me into a room alone and told me the truth.

[65]

"I think that then was the greatest moment of my life—when I comprehended that one who was not killed outright by such a shock might live even months until—until—Well, if a man so injured has vitality enough to live at all, he may—live—"

"Don't go on, Alva, please,—I don't want to know how long he may live."

"No, dear, I won't go into that. Only you must think that to me it was such unexpected heaven. Instead of death, he was alive. Instead of separation for this life, we were to have some days of absolute companionship. It was something so much more than I had ever thought of hoping. A life—even for a day—together! Companionship! Not letters, but words. I to be his nurse, his solace, to have him for my own. I stayed awake all night thinking. I knew what being swept suddenly away meant to him. I knew of his life plans, and what made death hardest to him. It came to me that I might ease that bitterness. That his need could go forth through the medium of my love and interest. That his work would pass on into other hands through mine. That all the golden web of Fate had been woven directly to this end."

[66]

Lassie continued sobbing.

"I saw what we could do. In the morning I went to the surgeons, and they said that each day added a week of possible life, and that although it would be many days before anything could be done, after that, he could be moved and wait for the end—with me. I went to him then, and again I knelt there by the bed, and this time I told him how I was going to spend the weeks, and what he must look forward to. He was unable to talk, but he looked at me and—like the first time—we understood one another absolutely. He accepted the happiness that was to be as gratefully as I did myself. As I said before, it was so much more—so much more—than we had ever expected! He took up his burden of agony as cheerfully and courageously as he had taken everything in life, and I came away. There was no use in my remaining there, as he would be either unconscious or—I could not remain there; the surgeons forbade it.

"Then I had to find a place quickly, a place where no one would come or would see. A place where he and I could share life and God, who is Life, without any outsiders breaking in to stare and wonder."

Her voice suddenly became broken and hurried. "Of course I thought of Ledge, where we had first met, and I wrote to Ronald at once. He found me that dear little nest back there, and—" she stopped, for Lassie had suddenly started to her feet. "What is it, dear?"

"Oh, I can't bear it at all. To me it is horrible—horrible! Why, he can never stand up again—he—Oh, I want to be alone. I must be alone. I'll—I'll come back—in time—"

[67]

She did not wait to finish; she gave one low, bitter cry, and wrung her hands. Then she ran down the steep, little path that led to Ledgeville, leaving her friend on the hilltop, with the October sun pouring its splendor all about her.

[68]

CHAPTER V

THAT DISPASSIONATE OBSERVER, MRS. RAY

THERE never was the human tragedy, comedy, or melodrama, yet, which did not have one or more dispassionate observers. This is strictly true because, even if a man goes off into the wilderness to fight his fight out utterly alone, there are moments when one part of his own spirit will dis sever itself from all the rest and, standing forth, tell him of his progress or retrogression with a pitiless, unbiassed truth. The wilderness is advisable for that very reason, but no one makes a greater mistake than when he or she goes to a small far-away village and pleasantly

terms it "the wilderness," supposing soul-solitude an integral part thereof. It is very right, proper, and conventional to view life from one's own standpoint, but the real facts of the case are old and trite enough to warrant me in repeating the statement that all doings in this world have their dispassionate observer.

Mrs. Ray was the natural observer for the town of Ledge. The town was not quite aware that added to her keen powers of observation she was also the Voice of the community. People never expressed themselves fully, without first knowing what she said. Public opinion simmered all over the township, so to speak, and then finally boiled over in Mrs. Ray.

It will be quite impossible to impress upon the ordinary reader the importance of such Public Opinion, unless a few paragraphs are devoted to the town of Ledge and its history. If one fails to properly appreciate the town of Ledge, the tale might just as well have been located in North Ledge, South Ledge, Ledgeville, Ledge Centre, or any of the other Ledges. [69]

Therefore on behalf of the lovely little hamlet of Ledge itself, I will state in as few words as possible that it lies upon a hill overlooking one of the most beautiful and picturesque scenes in all Northeastern America; that it took its name and being from a great and noble-hearted man, who, passing that way by chance, half a century since, paused near its site to sadly contemplate the denuded banks of the little river winding its way amidst the débris and desolation left by the lumber barons of the period. Time was when the same banks had been smiling terraces covered thick with primeval pines, but "civilization" had demanded their downfall and they fell. Fell without warning, and also without discretion. Fell forever, flinging the riches of all the future aside for the plenty of one man's day. Blackened stumps, great beds of unsightly chips, waste which would never have been called waste in any other land, ruthless destruction,—all this disfigured the landscape that stretched before that visitor of fifty years ago. His heart was heavy, for he was one who loved everything good, and trees and beauty are two of man's best gifts from above; but while he gazed over what to him and many others was almost as much desecration as desolation, he saw, forever flowing—however choked—the little river below. Like the thread of idealism which illuminates the most despairing situation, so flowed the silvery stream down through the scene before him. Its bed was clogged with drift, its banks covered with rotting rubbish, yet the promise of its beauty remained; and then and there the traveller formulated a plan for its redemption to the end that unborn generations might revel in the realization of that of which he alone seemed then conscious. [70]

The town of Ledge was a part of what resulted. There had to be a town, and Ledge came into existence. Where there is work to be done, come the workers, and with them come towns. Ledge came and grew. To the call of prosperity many other Ledges gathered a little later; but they never enjoyed the dignity of the one and original. The first Ledge was tenacious of its priority. It held to its privileges as rigidly as any medieval knight held to his. Castled upon the hill above, it simulated power in more ways than one. For many years all the others had to go to Ledge for their mail. Ledge also owned the sheriff, the blacksmith, and the lawyer, and kept a monopoly on the summer excursionist; the express office was its natural perquisite; a bend of the canal took it in, and when the canal went the railroad came to console the losers. Mr. Ledge's plans, which had turned his private estate into a public park for the gently disposed, also held Ledge in high honor. To visit Ledge Park from any of the other Ledges was rendered well-nigh impossible. The little town stood like a sentinel at the end of the Long Bridge, and at the top of the First Fall. Every picnicker had to go through it, had to check such articles as could not conveniently be carried all day, in its hotel; had to get whatever he might feel disposed to drink in the same place. During the summer, visitors were so plenteous that it became the fashion in Ledge to despise them, and that right heartily, too. The people who brought the town most of its means of livelihood received much that species of sentiment with which an irritating husband and father is frequently viewed. It was the fashion in Ledge to despise city people and their ways in all things; even their coming to see the Falls was referred to as special proof of their singularly feeble minds, while the way in which the visitors climbed and walked was the favorite topic of mirthful criticism, all summer long. Criticism is a strange habit. It is contagious, thrives in any soil or no soil at all, and is far more destructive to him or her who gives it birth than it can possibly be to any other person. Not that it really is destructive, but that the weight of criticism rarely falls where it is supposed to be most needed. [71]

The summer visitors evoked so much comment between May and November that a great longing to have something to talk about between November and May followed. It therefore became the fashion in Ledge to talk of everything and everybody, and as the summer visitors were rated low, the rest of the world was pretty freely given over to the same cataloguing. It was usual to rate Ledgeville and all the other Ledges particularly low, and this opinion held firm, until a biting edge was given it by a second railroad which came down the valley's bottom to the unspeakable wrath of the hills on either side and of Ledge in special. It took several years to assimilate the second railroad, and resume the even tenor of life. But the adjustment was finally made, and at the date of this story Ledge was a wee country idyll set like a pearl amidst the beautiful environment of that fairest of country counties. He who was responsible for town and environment lived on his own estate near by, and came in for his share of consideration from the tongues of his namesake. The great philanthropist was busily engaged in his battle to preserve intact, for the good of the many to come, that matchless picture with its open Bible of Nature's Own History. Of the picture and its practical value, Ledge had its own opinion. It had its own opinion of the dam, too. It had its own opinion of Alva. And of Lassie. And of Ingram. And all these opinions flowed freely forth through the medium of Mrs. Ray. As that lady herself put it: [72]

"Whether I'm picking chickens or digging fence-posts, or carting the United States mail down to the train in the wheelbarrow that I had to buy and the United States Government won't pay for,— I never am idle; I'm always taking in something."

And it was quite true. Whatever Mrs. Ray was working at, her brain was never idle; it was always absorbing something. It was not uncommon to see a neighbor walking with her while she ploughed, conversation going briskly on meanwhile. She swept the church with company, and she almost never sat alone between mail times. It was a full, busy life, and an interesting one. It was full of importance and responsibility, too. Mrs. Ray liked to be responsible and was naturally important. Her opinions were in the main correct, but sometimes she did draw wrong conclusions. For instance, when she looked down the road the morning after Lassie's arrival, and saw the two friends departing over the Long Bridge.

"Oh, dear," she said to whoever was near by at the minute, "I smell trouble for that oldest one if she's planning to keep that pretty girl here long. That man is going to fall in love with that pretty girl. He never has cared much for her, anyway. He don't even seem to like to go over to their house with her; she goes alone mostly. Yes, indeed."

[73]

The somebody sitting near by at the minute was Mrs. Dunstall. And Pinkie, of course. They had dropped in to see if they had any mail, and had found Mrs. Ray cutting the hair of the three youngest children left her, first by her predecessor and then by Mr. Ray himself.

"Sit down," she had said cordially; "the second train isn't in yet, and it's got to come in and go out and let the mail-train come in, even if the mail ain't late, on account of the wreck."

"Oh, is there a wreck?" Mrs. Dunstall asked anxiously.

"Yes. Forty-four run into a open switch up at Cornell. If the switch is open, I never see why the train don't just run on out the other end and keep right along; but all the accidents is as often open switches as anything, so I guess there's a reason. At any rate, the wrecking-train's gone up and the second mail's going to be late. Tip your head a little, Billy. Yes, indeed."

"I wonder if we'd better wait," said Mrs. Dunstall, unwrapping her shawl somewhat and taking a chair. "What do you say, Pinkie?"

Pinkie was already seated. She weighed two hundred pounds and never stood up when she could help it. "I say 'Wait,'" said Pinkie.

Mrs. Dunstall thereupon sat down, too, and after ten minutes of a most solemn silence Mrs. Ray finished her task and dismissed the children. She faced her callers, then, folding her little gray shoulder-wrap tightly across her bosom as she did so, and tucking the ends in close beneath her armpits. The little gray shawl was one of the first signs of winter in Ledge; Mrs. Ray always donned it at the beginning of October, and never took it off before the last day of May.

[74]

"Well!" she said now; "anything new come up?"

"Millicent come on the same train with that girl," Mrs. Dunstall began at once. "I wasn't really expecting any mail this morning, but I thought I might as well come down about now and tell you how Millicent come on the train with her. You know who I mean, of course?"

"She knows," said Pinkie.

"I s'posed you would. And so Millicent come on the same train with her. Seems too curious of Millicent coming on the same train with her, when Millicent hasn't been on a train but twice in her life before, and then to think that she would come back with that girl. Things do fall out queer in this world. She sit right in the seat behind her, too. That was awful curious, I think."

Mrs. Ray gave the ends of her shawl a fresh tuck, and drew in some extra breath.

"You never can tell," she began; "things do come about mighty strange in this world. Yes, indeed. It's the unexpected that has happened so much that it's got to be a proverb in the end. I always feel when a thing has been coming about till it gets to be proverb, it's no use me disputing it. Dig around in smoking ashes long enough, and I've never failed to find some sparks yet. And what you just said is all true as true can be. It's the unexpected as always happens. Look at me, for instance. Look at how the post-office fell out of a clear sky on me, and Mr. Ray much the same, too. I never had any idea of either of 'em beforehand, and now here I am stamping letters morning and night to keep up the payments on his tombstone. Things do work in circles so in this world. I always say if I hadn't been postmistress no one would have expected to see my husband have a fringed cloth hang on a pillar over his dead body, and if I hadn't been postmistress I never could have paid for such a thing. But where there's a will there's a way, which is another proverb as I've never found go wrong, unless your way is to stay in bed while you're willing."

[75]

"Oh, but you never could have put anything plain on Mr. Ray—not in your circumstances, and him passing the plate every Sunday and you the sexton yourself." Mrs. Dunstall looked almost shocked at the mere fancy.

"Couldn't I! Well, I guess I could if I'd had my own way. But I wasn't allowed my own way. Nobody is. That's what holds us back in this world; it's the being expected to live up to what we've got; and in this country, where the garden is open to the public, most of us has to live up to a good deal more'n we've got. If America ever takes to walls, it'll show it's going to begin to economize. It'll mean we're giving up tulips and going in for potatoes. And you'll see, Mrs.

Dunstall, that just as soon as we really have to economize we'll begin to build walls. There's something about economy as likes walls around the house—high ones."

[76]

"You was raised with walls, wasn't you?" said Mrs. Dunstall.

"I should think I was. I'm English-born—I am."

"How old was you when you come to this country, Mrs. Ray?"

"I've lived here thirty-eight years; that's how old I was."

"You wasn't here before Mr. Ledge?"

"No, I wasn't, nor before the Falls, neither."

"Why, the Falls was here before Mr. Ledge," said Mrs. Dunstall, enlarging her eyes. "Oh, I see, you're making a joke, Mrs. Ray."

"I do occasionally make a joke," said Mrs. Ray, giving her shawl another tuck.

"Well, to go back to the girl," said Mrs. Dunstall, "she sit right behind Millicent too, and what makes it all the stranger, is, she asked Millicent the name of the next station. Millicent told her it was going to be Ledge, and asked her if she was for Ledge, because if she was for East Ledge she ought to stay on one station more. You know, Mrs. Ray, how folks are always getting off here for East Ledge, and having to stay all night or hire a buggy to drive over—two shillings either way; and Millicent asked her, too, if she was for Ledge's Crossing, because if she was for the Crossing the train don't stop there, and Millicent always was kind-hearted and wanted her to know it right off. You know how Millicent is, Pinkie; the last time she rode on a train she threw the two bags off to the old lady who forgot them, and they weren't the old lady's bags; they were the conductor's, and he had to run the train way back for them; he did feel so vexed about them, Millicent said."

[77]

"So vexed," said Pinkie.

"And so then Millicent asked her if maybe she was for Ledgeville, because if she was for Ledgeville she was on the wrong train, and had ought to have took the Pennsylvania, unless she telegraphed from Ledge Centre for the omnibus to come up, which nobody ever knows to do; and then it come into Millicent's head as maybe she was going to visit Mr. Ledge, in which case goodness knows what she would do, for although he gets his mail at Ledge, he gets his company at Castile, and here was that poor child five miles of bridge and walk out of her way, and Millicent's heart just bleeding for her, she looked so tired. But she said she was for Ledge."

"Yes, I could have told you she was for Ledge," said Mrs. Ray; "there was two letters for her here. When I have letters for people without having the people for the letters, it always means one or two things,—either the people are coming or the letters are addressed wrong. I learned that long ago. Yes, indeed."

"Millicent says she liked her looks from the first," pursued Mrs. Dunstall, "only her hat did amuse her. I must say the hats folks from town wear is about the most amusing things we ever see here. One year they pin 'em to their fronts and next year to their backs, and Millicent says this one was on hindside before with a feather duster upside down on top. She never saw anything like it; but she said the girl was so innocent of what a sight she was that she wouldn't have let her see her laughing behind her back for anything. What do you think of city people anyhow, Mrs. Ray?"

"City people are always mooney," responded Mrs. Ray; "such mooney ideas as come into their heads in the country always. Seems like they save all their mooney ideas for the country. Yes, indeed. They take off their hats and their shoes and carry stones around in their handkerchiefs; and when I see 'em slipping and scrambling up and down that steep bank all the hot summer long, and taking that walk to the Lower Falls that's enough to kill any Christian with brains, I most humbly thank our merciful Father in heaven that I've stayed in the country and kept my good senses. Yes, indeed. And then what they lug back to town with them! That's what uses me all up! Roots and stones! Why, I saw some one bring a root from the Lower Falls last year, yes, indeed."

[78]

"That walk to the Lower Falls is terrible," said Mrs. Dunstall, meditatively. "I took it once,—and you, too,—didn't you, Pinkie?"

"Twice," said Pinkie.

"I took it once, too," said Mrs. Ray, who was never loath to discuss that famous promenade. "Mr. Ray and me took it together. It was when we first met. He took me, and we walked to the Lower Falls. It was a awful walk; I never see a worse one, myself. They say it isn't so bad now. Of course, the time I went with Mr. Ray was while he was still alive. It was harder then. He asked me to marry him coming back. Oh, I'll never forget that awful walk!"

"It's bad enough yet," said Mrs. Dunstall. "Mr. Ledge has done all he could to build things to catch hold of where you'd go head over heels to heaven if he hadn't, but it's a awful walk still. And then the steps! Why, Nathan and Lizzie was there last summer, and Lizzie says all the way down she was thinking how she was ever going to be able to get back, and all the way back she was thinking just the same thing. Going, you go down steps till it seems like there never would come the bottom, and coming back you come up steps till you're ready to move to Ledgeville and

[79]

live on the bottoms for life. You know how that is, Pinkie?"

"Yes," said Pinkie.

"It wouldn't do any good to move to Ledgeville to get rid of the Lower Falls," said Mrs. Ray, "because the dam is going to do away with the Lower Falls and drown Ledgeville entirely. That's the next little surprise the city folks will be giving us."

"I shall like to stand on the bridge the day they let the water in over the dam the first time," said Mrs. Dunstall. "It'll be a great sight to see the valley turn into a lake, and South Ledge and Ledgeville go under."

"I wouldn't look forward to it too much if I was you," said Mrs. Ray; "it's going to take three or four years to dig that dam, they tell me. You can't lay out a lake and break up three sets of falls in a minute."

"They haven't got to do something to all the Falls," said Mrs. Dunstall. "Josiah Bates was holding stakes for one of the surveyors yesterday, and he heard him say as the Lower Falls wouldn't need a thing, for it was a mill-race already."

"Well, it's a blessing if there's one thing ready to their hands," said Mrs. Ray, "for I must say the way the State has took hold of us, since Mr. Ledge set out to give it something for nothing, is a caution. If he'd offered to sell the Falls at cost price, we'd of had a petition and our taxes increased and been marked 'keep off the grass,' in all directions; but just because he offered to give it to 'em all cleared up and in order, they must tear around and build a dam and drown five villages and go cutting up monkey-shines generally. Yes, indeed."

[80]

"They do say that the dam will keep the Falls, instead of spoiling them," said Mrs. Dunstall; "they say the Falls is stratifying backward, and is most through being falls, anyway, and if the dam is built, we'll all have that to look at always."

"It'll be all one to me," said Mrs. Ray; "I never get time to look at nothing, anyway, unless it's folks waiting for their mail, and goodness knows they've long ceased to interest me."

Mrs. Dunstall looked a bit uncertain as to how to receive this outburst of confidence. "It does you good to take a little rest," she said at last; "you work too hard for a woman of your time of life, Mrs. Ray."

"Well, I'd like to know how I can help it, with my farm and my chickens and my grocery business, not to speak of the boarders and the children and the post-office. When one's a mother and a farmer and a sexton and an employee under bond to the United States Government one has to keep on the jump."

Mrs. Dunstall rearranged the set of her lips slightly. "The mail's very late, ain't it?" she asked.

"Late! I should think it was late. I guess that open switch has settled Forty-four for to-day. But that train's always late. It isn't in the block yet, and the mail-train follows it."

"If it don't come soon, I can't wait," said Mrs. Dunstall; "this is one of my awful days, and speaking of awful days, what do you think of the doings over at the old Whittaker house, Mrs. Ray?"

"I've heard she's wrecking it completely."

"Josiah Bates' been doing some carting there. He says it's enough to make old Grandma Whittaker shiver in her grave. He says they've turned the house just about inside out. That girl must be crazy."

[81]

"She is crazy," said Mrs. Ray with decision; "she's in love."

"Oh!" said Mrs. Dunstall, "with him, you mean?"

"Of course. But she's crazy two ways, I think, to go bringing that pretty girl here, and she so thin and white herself. You can't tell me that that man doesn't know a pretty girl when he sees her, even if he ain't seen her yet—which he hasn't, for he didn't see 'em this morning. I know that, for I was watching."

"That's the train now, isn't it?" said Mrs. Dunstall, listening.

Mrs. Ray pricked up her ears. "Yes, that's the train, rushing along and sprinkling soot over everything. Picking hops used to be such nice clean work, but now they're all over soot."

"The canal was better, I think," said Mrs. Dunstall.

Mrs. Ray made no answer; she was absorbed in looking out of the window.

"It was cleaner, anyhow," Mrs. Dunstall continued; "but they do say the men swore most awful locking boats through in the night. I never lived on the canal, myself, but you did, Pinkie; did they swear much or not?"

"They swore," said Pinkie.

"Well," said Mrs. Ray, now facing about and making certain active preparations for the reception of the mail, "it must be nice to spend your days ways that lets you lay awake nights listening to

anything swear. I've never had time nor money to lay awake nights. I leave that for those who can, but I can't. Walking to the Lower Falls and laying awake nights is pleasant, I've no doubt, but I need my days other ways. Summer folks is always coming in here and saying, 'Oh, have you seen the gorge this morning, Mrs. Ray,' and me like enough out ploughing in the opposite direction since sun up. I haven't got any time to lay awake or to look at views. If the weeds grew up all around my fence-posts while I was hanging over the bridge looking at the gorge, I guess you'd hear of it, and since I've taken to raising chickens, there's hen-houses to spray and me busier than ever. If I was a hen, my day's work would be over when I'd laid my egg and I could run out with a free mind and look at the gorge, but as it stands now, I ain't got time to look at nothing,"—in testimony whereof she disappeared into the kitchen.

"I'll tell you who's got time," said Mrs. Dunstall as soon as she reappeared; "it's those Lathbuns down at Nellie's. How long are they going to stay around here, do you suppose?"

"I don't know; I don't know anything about them. They don't get any mail, so I've no way of knowing a thing. My own opinion is that if I was Nellie I'd keep a sharp eye on my shawls, for folks who come walking along without baggage, can go walking off without baggage, too. Those are her shawls they're wearing, you know; they haven't got so much as a jacket between them of their own."

"Nellie says they're very nice people," said Mrs. Dunstall; "and the girl has got a love affair. She don't mind their wearing her shawls."

"Why don't he write her, then," said Mrs. Ray; "that's the time even the poorest letter-writer writes letters. Mr. Ray wrote me the first Thursday after he was in love. I've got the letter yet."

"What did he write you for, when you was keeping house for him, anyway?" asked Mrs. Dunstall.

"He was gone to Ledge Centre for the license."

"I never see why you married him," said Mrs. Dunstall; "he paid you for keeping house for him before that, didn't he?"

"Yes, but he had his mind set on marrying some one, and I thought I'd better marry him than any one else. And I was fond of the children, and I didn't know nothing about the mortgages. I always say we was real fashionable. I didn't know nothing about the mortgages, and he thought I had some money in the bank. Well, it was an even thing when it all came out. I guess marriage generally is. Everything else, too."

"I don't see why the mail don't come, if it's in," said Mrs. Dunstall.

Mrs. Ray went to the window and looked out.

"It'll come soon now," she declared, hopefully.

"But I can't wait any longer," said Mrs. Dunstall, rising, "I wasn't expecting anything, anyway. Come, Pinkie."

They both rose and started to go out together.

But just at the door they met one of the surveyors.

"Oh, that reminds me why I come," said Mrs. Dunstall, stopping; "young man, do you know Sallie Busby?"

The young surveyor looked startled.

"Chestnuts in a blue and white sunbonnet, mainly?" said Mrs. Dunstall.

"I don't recollect."

"Well, you might not have noticed, or she might not have had it on, but either way she's been most amused watching your young men pegging those little flags all through her meadow, but she says that when you got through last night you forgot seven, and she saw 'em when she went out to pick the two trees up the cow-path this morning, and run down and got 'em, and has 'em all laid by for you whenever you want to send for 'em."

The young man stood speechless.

Finally he said: "But they were meant to be left there."

"Were—were they?" said Mrs. Dunstall, in great surprise; "well, you ought to have told her so then. She saw you pull some up, so she thought you meant to pull them all up. Too bad! Now you'll have to get your machine and go peeking all over her land again, won't you?"

"We will if she's pulled up the flags, certainly."

"Well, she's pulled up the flags. If Sallie set out to pull them up, they'd up, you can count on that! How's the dam coming on, anyway?"

The young man laughed. "Why, there's no question of the dam yet. You all seem to think that we're here to build it. We have to make a report to the commission first, and the commission will lay the report before the legislature. That's how it is."

Mrs. Ray folded her arms and joined in suddenly, "So—that's how it is, is it? Well, I don't wonder it's difficult to run a post-office, when anything as plain as a dam has to be fussed over like that. By the way, you're one of the surveyors and you ought to know,—is it true that if they do build the dam, it may get a little too full and run over into our valley or burst altogether and drown Rochester? I'm interested to know."

[85]

"That's what we want to know, too," said Ingram's assistant; "that's what we're surveying for."

"How long will it take you to tell? I've got a friend—maybe you know him, Sammy Adams?—and he owns most of the valley back here. He's the worrying kind, and he's worried. Yes, indeed."

"It wouldn't make so much difference about Rochester," said Mrs. Dunstall; "it's a deal easier to go for our shopping to Buffalo from here; but wouldn't it be awful for Sammy Adams! Why, his house is right in the valley."

"Yes," said Mrs. Ray, "and as a general thing Sammy's right in his house. It's bad enough now, with the freshets scooping sand all over the farm every other spring, but if the dam goes and scoops Sammy Adams, the legislature'll have something else to settle besides the Capitol at Albany. Sammy Adams looks meek, but he'd never take being drowned quietly; he's got too much spirit for that. Yes, indeed!"

"We're going to do away with the freshets, Mrs. Ray," the young man said; "the dam—if it comes—will be the biggest blessing that ever came this way, let me tell you. In the summer you'll have a beautiful lake to sail on, and no end of excursions."

"Why, I thought they were going to store up the water in spring, and draw it off in the summer," said Mrs. Dunstall. "A man told my husband that that was what they wanted the dam for,—to save the high water in the spring so as to use it in the summer. Wasn't that what Ebenezer said, Pinkie?"

[86]

"Yes, it was," said Pinkie.

"How do you explain that?" asked Mrs. Ray, turning an inquisitorial eye sternly on the surveyor. "Where's your beautiful lake going to be by July? Marsh and mosquitoes, that's what we'll have left. Don't tell me; I've seen too many kind thoughts about making folks happy end that way, and I've seen one or two reservoirs, too. The dam'll drown Sammy Adams, that's what it'll do, and Ledge'll be left high and dry with a lot of dead fish lying all over the fields. I know!"

"Well, we'll see!" said the young man, laughing.

"But I thought you was all for the dam, Mrs. Ray," said Mrs. Dunstall, a little surprised. "Whatever has changed you so?"

Mrs. Ray shut her mouth tightly and then opened it with a snap. "I've been thinking," she said abruptly; "and I don't mind changing my opinion when I must. Any one who wants to hold a position under the United States Government has got to have brains and use 'em freely in changing their opinion."

"But you said—" began Mrs. Dunstall.

"What if I did? Like enough I'll say it again. I will, if I feel like it. Yes, indeed. 'He moves in a mysterious way,' you know, and I'm one of His ways, and I've got a right to keep my own counsel about my own work. But—speaking of work—the mail-train was in before you come up. I wonder what's become of the bag!" She went to the window and looked down towards the station. "I do have such trouble to get hold of that bag. That's one of the hardest things about keeping a post-office, is the getting hold of the bag. They don't have any sort of understanding of what a United States Government position means, down at our station; they kick the mail-bag around like it was a crate of hens. Once they asked me if they couldn't have the key at the station, and open the mail because there's always more inhabitants in the station than in the post-office. They seemed to think that was a glory to the station, and a reflection on me. But I don't want to have men sitting around here. I won't have it. The only man who has any legal right to sit around me is in heaven, and just because I'm the postmistress is no reason why I should take chances. If you don't want men sitting around, you can easily keep 'em from doing it by having no chairs for them to sit on. I never have."

[87]

"Don't you want me to go down and get the mail?" suggested the young surveyor, somewhat uneasily.

Mrs. Ray turned a severe eye his way. "Have you go down and get the mail! Well, young man, I guess you don't know that it's a penitentiary offence to lay hands on a mail-sack, unauthorized by the United States Government! Yes, indeed. It is, though, and I've had such hard work getting it into people's heads that it is, that I wouldn't authorize no one. *No one!* Why, when we first was a post-office, I had the most awful time. Everybody coming this way brought the bag with 'em. It's a penitentiary offence to touch the bag, and here Sammy Adams forgot he had it in his buggy one night, and drove home with it. It was when Mrs. Allen's cousin Eliza was dying, and she was so anxious, and no mail-bag at all that night. I tell you I took a firm stand after that; I made the rule and made it for keeps, that no matter if there wasn't but one postal, and all the men in the station had felt the bag to see that there wasn't, the bag must come up to me just the same. You'll find, young man, that if you hold a United States Government position, you'll be expected to uphold the United States Government, and if you're building the dam and employ the men around here,

[88]

you'll find that to impress them you must keep a bold front. That's why I have my arms folded most of the time."

The young surveyor listened with reverent attention.

"Whose business is it to bring the bag, anyway?" asked Mrs. Dunstall. "I can't wait much longer."

"It isn't anybody's business,—that's what's the trouble. The United States Government don't provide nothing but penalties for touching the mail-bag. That's another hard thing about holding a government position when your hands are as full as mine. At first I couldn't get the mail-bag respected, in fact they used it to keep the door to the station open windy days; and then, when I got it respected by explaining what we was liable to if we didn't respect it, I couldn't get no one to touch it any more. I had to wheel it up and down in the baby-carriage for a while, and then I looked up the law and found I could delegate my authority; so since then Mr. Hopkins has delegated for me except when he goes to Ledge Lake, and when he does that I take it in a wheelbarrow. I give the baby-carriage to Lucy. She had that baby, you know. Well, of course a baby needs a carriage, so I give her ours."

"A baby's lots of trouble," said Mrs. Dunstall, thoughtfully.

"Yes, but we're here for trouble," said Mrs. Ray, cheerfully. "I've got the post-office, Lucy's got the baby, and poor Clay Wright Benton's got his mother and the parrot. Everybody's got something!"

[89]

"Well, I can't wait any longer," said Mrs. Dunstall; "good-bye. Come, Pinkie."

They went out.

"Who is Pinkie?" the young man asked, when he was alone with Mrs. Ray. "I d'n know," said Mrs. Ray, "she don't, either. They adopted her when she weighed six pounds and named her Pinkie, and that's what come of it."

"I see." Just then the mail-bag was brought in.

[90]

CHAPTER VI

WHEN DIFFERENCES LEAD TO WHAT IS EVER THE SAME

Lassie fled down the path. Not even that primeval river which once rushed wildly across the old Devonian rocks just here was more thoughtless as to whither it was going. All that she was conscious of in that instant was irresistible revolt against the horror of what she had just heard, and which bred in her a sudden and utter rebellion. A vivid imagination will have already pictured the possible effect of Alva's story upon her friend, and that vast majority whose imaginations are not vivid will be happy to be spared such details. It is sufficient to say that tears, pain, groans, and a coffin suspended, like Damocles' sword, above all the rest, was Lassie's background to her friend's romance; and the picture thus held in her mind was so benumbing to her other senses that as she ran she tripped, stumbled, almost fell, down the hill, so blind and careless of all else had she become. The restraint of Alva's presence was now removed; nothing stood between the young girl and her sensation of appalling wretchedness. As she ran she shook, she shuddered; the path was steep, and her knees seemed to crumble beneath her; twice she almost went headlong, and at the minute she felt that a broken neck was but a trifle in comparison to coming face to face with anything like what she had just been told. "Of course he was a great man," she gasped half aloud; "but he'll never be able to even feed himself again—it said so in the paper. Why, at first it said his back was broken. Oh, oh, if Alva can be so crazy as that, who is sane, and what can one believe? Oh, dear—oh, dear—oh, dear! And she calls it love, too!"

[91]

The village of Ledgeville lay below, and a few more minutes of precipitous flight brought Lassie in sight of its houses. Still a few more minutes, and she was in the middle of the village—a very small village, consisting of two streets composing the usual American town cross, and half a dozen stores. Every one whom she met knew just who she was (for had she not arrived upon the evening previous?), and they all regarded her with earnest scrutiny. The inhabitants of Ledgeville themselves were never in the habit of coming down from the Long Bridge with tear-stained faces, heaving bosoms and a catch in their breath, but that Lassie did so, caused them no surprise. Was she not of that unaccountable multitude called "city folks?"

Lassie herself neither thought nor cared how she appeared to the ruminative gaze of Ledgeville at first, but as soon as she did notice the attention which she was attracting, she wanted to get away from it as quickly as possible, eyes being quite unbearable in her present distress. She stopped and asked a kindly looking old man where the bridge—the lower bridge—might be,

knowing that it would take her to solitude again. The kindly old man pointed to where the bridge could be seen, a block or so beyond, and she thanked him and hurried on. It was a wooden bridge, very long; and the river here glided in wonderful contrast to that other aspect of itself which plunged so furiously from cataract to cataract, a quarter of a mile further down the course. How curious to think that all smooth-flowing rivers have it in them to foam and rage and gnaw and rend away the backbone of the globe itself, if driven in among narrow and hard environment. Is there ever any simile to those conditions in human lives, I wonder! And then to consider on the other hand that there is no volume of watery menace which, if spread between banks of green with space to flow untrammelled, will not become the greatest and most beneficial of all the helpers of need and seed! That is also a simile—one more cheerful and happy than the former, praise be to God.

[92]

The river by Ledgeville is one of those flowing smoothly and broadly between banks of green. So smoothly and sweetly does it flow just there that it might well have brought some quieting mood, some gracious, even current of gently rippling peace, into poor Lassie's throbbing heart, had she but been able to receive any comfort at that moment. But meditation was as far from her at this juncture as her mental attitude was from Alva's, and more than that cannot be said for either proposition.

So the river carried its lesson unread, while the girlish figure traversed the bridge as quickly as it had flown through the town, and, hurriedly turning at the forking of the road beyond, started up the hill. She knew that that way must lead to Ledge, and eventually her own little hotel bedroom, that longed for haven where she would be able to sit down quietly, away from the sunlight and omnipresent people, away from everything and everybody. Oh, but it was freshly awful to think of Alva, her beautiful Alva, and of what Alva was going to do! Marry that man! Why, he would never even sit up again; he could hardly see, the paper had said—the newspapers had said—everybody had said.

[93]

She stopped suddenly and stood perfectly still. A choking pain gripped her in the throat and side. Her spiritual torment had suddenly yielded to her physical lack of breath.

Beyond a doubt there is nothing that will curb any sentiment of any description so quickly as walking up hill. Without in the slightest degree intending to be flippant, I must say that in all my experience, personal and observed, I have never yet felt or seen the emotion which does not have to give way somewhat under that particular form of exercise. In Lassie's case she found herself to be so suddenly and completely exhausted that she could hardly stand. Her knees, which had seemed on the verge of giving out as she hurried down the opposite bank, now really did fail her and, looking despairingly about and feeling tears to be again perilously near, she turned off of the road into the woods that stretched down the bank and, treading rapidly over soft turf and softer moss, came in a minute to a solitude sufficiently removed to allow of her sinking upon the ground and there giving out completely.

Oh, how she cried then! Cried in the unrestrained, childish way that gasps for breath, and chokes and then sobs afresh and aloud. She thought herself so safely alone in the depths of the wood that she could gasp and choke and sob to her heart's uttermost content, not at all knowing that Fate, who does indeed weave a mesh of the most intricate patterning, had even now begun to interweave her destiny with that of—well, let us say—of the dam at Ledgeville.

[94]

Alva's talk about the dam had gone in one ear and out the other; Alva's words regarding Ingram had been driven into the background of Lassie's brain by the later surprises; but now things were to begin to alter. We never can tell, when we weep over the frightful love affair of a friend, what delightful plans that same little Cupid may have for our own immediate comforting, or how deftly he and the dark-veiled goddess may have combined in future projects.

Sorrow is sorrow, but sometimes it comes with the comforter close upon its heels, and when the sorrow is really another's, and the comforter is unattached and therefore may quite easily become one's own!—

Ah, but all this is anticipating. It is true that disinterested parties (like Joey Beall) always know everything before those most interested have the slightest suspicion of what is going on; but still it seems to me unfair to take any advantage of two innocent people as early in the game as the Sixth Chapter.

Therefore it shall only be said here that the party of surveyors had employed that morning in sighting and flagging up and down the banks beneath the Long Bridge, and Ingram, having spent two hours in their company, was now climbing the hillside for pure athletic joy, being one of those who prefer a scramble to a smooth road any day. As he came lightly up the last long swing that measured the bank for him, he surely was looking for nothing less in life than that which he found at the top,—and yet that which he found at the top was not so disagreeable a surprise, after all. For Lassie, even now when indubitably miserable, pink-eyed and wretched, was still a very pretty girl. A pretty girl is very much like a rose in the rain—a few drops of water only add to its charm; and so when Ingram came suddenly upon her, crying there under a tree, and caused her to look up with a little scream at the man crashing out of the bushes with such a force of interruption as made her jump to her feet and shrink quickly away—why, really it was all far less startling and alarming than it sounds to read about. For he at once exclaimed, "Surely you remember me." And she saw who it was, stared at him dazedly for an instant, and then dropped her face in her hands again, realizing that he was the first of the big world that "hadn't been told," and that he would ask what was the matter, and that she must not tell him. And so—and so

[95]

—there was nothing to do but hide her face—and collect her wits—and listen.



"SURELY YOU REMEMBER ME."

"What is it?" he said, and as she felt for her handkerchief she could but think how hard it was to resist sympathy when one's dearest friend was doing such unheard-of things, and one had just learned about them. Not that she would tell him why she was crying, of course.

"What is it?" he asked again then—he was very near now. "You know who I am. I used to know you when you were a little girl. You remember?"

She was still feeling for her handkerchief, and he put a great white one into her seeking hand. She wiped her eyes with it and thought again that he must not be told, and so said, with quivering lips:

"Oh, please leave me, please go away. Nothing is the matter, but I must be alone. I want to be alone. Please go away and leave me."

[96]

Ingram looked down upon her and, laying his hand on her arm with a grasp that was so firm as to feel brotherly (to one not yet a *débutante*), said in a tone of fascinating authority (to one not yet a *débutante*):

"What is it? What is the trouble? You've had a letter with bad news?" In his own mind he set it down that she and Alva had had a misunderstanding of some sort, but that opinion he would not voice.

"Oh, no," sobbed Lassie; "it isn't a letter—it is Alva!" She paused and Ingram had just time enough to reflect how quickly a man could see straight through any woman, when Lassie could bear the burden of reserve no longer, and with a wild burst of accelerated woe cried: "She has told me her secret, and I listened 'way through to the end and then—then when I really understood and realized what it all meant, then I could not bear it, and so—and so—I ran away from her and down the hill and across the bridge and came here to be alone. And I wish you would go away and leave me alone; oh, I want to be alone so very, very much, for I cannot keep still unless I am alone; I am too unhappy over it all. Too unhappy. And I have promised her not to tell."

Ingram looked his startled sympathy. "What is the trouble?" he asked. "Tell me; perhaps I can help you. Why should you keep 'it' a secret? I'm her friend, too, you know."

"But it isn't my secret, it's hers," Lassie sobbed; "and I've promised; and, anyway, nobody or nothing can help her. Nothing! Nobody!"

[97]

"Is it really as bad as that?" said the man, looking very serious.

Lassie was wringing her hands. "Oh, it's ever so much worse than that; it's the very worst thing I ever heard of. And that shows how bad I am; for Alva is good, and it makes her happy!"

Naturally Ingram could not follow the reasoning which caused her terminal phrase to serve as a sort of mental apology for her way of looking at the affair, but he was not alarmed by the breadth of her confession of guilt, only unspeakably distressed by her distress, and its mysterious cause.

"But what *is* it?" he asked. "What has Alva done?"

"I musn't tell."

"Alva's not in any difficulty across the river there, is she?" he hazarded.

"Oh, no; she isn't in any difficulty; she is very, very happy. That's what seems so awful about it."

"What? I can't understand."

"I can't explain, either. And I musn't tell you. It's going to drive me crazy to keep still, but I must not tell."

"You can tell me;" his tone was suddenly authoritative again (quite thrilling its young listener).

"No, I can't. I can't tell any one," but *her* tone was wavering, with a catch in its note.

Ingram became instantly imperious.

"Yes, you can tell me! You must tell me! It will relieve your mind, and perhaps I can help Alva."

"No, you can't help her; she doesn't want to be helped."

[98]

"Well, I can help you, anyway. Just telling me will help you."

Lassie choked.

"Tell me at once," said Ingram, sternly; "I insist upon knowing."

She looked up at him.

"Don't stop to think," he commanded; "tell me."

Oh, the intense relief of having a burdensome secret torn from your keeping! Lassie felt that when in trouble, a man was the friend to find—even before one's *début*.

"You won't ever let her know that I told?" she faltered.

"Of course not."

"She didn't ask me really to promise; she only said that I should be the only one to ever know."

"Never mind, I don't count. Go on."

"Well, she is going to marry—" and then she told him, with many halts and gasps, who; and then she told him further, when.

Ingram listened, silent, turning white all about his mouth. "She can't do it," he said, after a minute. "That man may die any hour. It said so in last night's paper."

"She is going to do it," Lassie said; "she doesn't mind his dying—that is, she doesn't mind his dying as most people do."

"Oh, but that's horrible," he said then; "you were right—it is awful. No wonder you were frightened and ran away. She must be insane. I never heard of such a thing." He went to the edge of the bank and looked off for a little, standing there still, and then, after a while, "Oh, my God!" he said; and then again "Oh, my God!" and came back beside her. His action, his evident emotion, quieted her own strangely.

[99]

"Isn't it terrible?" she asked, almost timidly, when he was close again; "it seems to me the most terrible thing that I ever knew about."

"Very terrible," said the man, briefly. "We will walk on up the hill," he added, after a little; "it's near dinner time." She did as he said.

"You won't tell Alva that I told you?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No, indeed," and then both were silent.

Towards the top, he asked: "How long shall you be with her?"

"A week."

"That means until she leaves to marry him?"

"Yes."

"That's good; I am glad that you can stay."

She tried to say something then, and her voice died in one of those same strange gasps, but she tried a second time and succeeded. "I suppose that nothing could be done?" she questioned.

"What would you do?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said.

He smiled a little oddly. "I am afraid that we should be fools," he said; "those fools that rush in, you know. It is beginning to come back to me how Alva looked and how she spoke when I took her to see the house. It all had no meaning to me then, but it has meaning now. It comes back to me more and more. Perhaps you and I are—are—not up to seeing it quite as she does. Perhaps. It's possible."

[100]

"That is what she says over and over—that I cannot understand," Lassie said, faintly.

"I can't understand either, but—perhaps she does. I *can* understand *that*."

"I am glad that you know, anyway;" her tone was sweet and confiding. He looked down into her pretty eyes.

"I am, too," he said, heartily.

"But I hope that it wasn't very wrong for me to tell you; it seemed as if I could not bear it alone!"

"Don't worry about that; Alva shall never know. And now, if you cannot bear it (as you say) again, you know that you can come to me and say what you like. We shall have that comfort."

She smiled a little. "You don't seem like a stranger; you seem like an old, old friend."

"I'm glad. Because I am an old, old friend in reality, you know."

"But, if—if I—when I want—" she hesitated.

"Oh, you don't know where to find me if you want me?" He laughed. "It's true that I am an uncertain quantity, but I take supper at the hotel every evening, and sometimes I go to the post-office afterwards." He smiled roundly at that, and she smiled, too. "We must go to the post-office together, sometimes," he added; "it's the great social diversion of Ledge." He was glad to see her face and manner getting easier. That was what he was trying for—to lift the weight from her.

"Alva took me there this morning," she said.

They came now to the Soldiers' Monument and the tracks.

"I hope that she isn't going to mind the way that I left her!" the young girl exclaimed suddenly, smitten with anxiety. "I ran away, you know; I couldn't bear it another minute."

[101]

"She won't mind that," said Ingram; "all the little things of life won't cut any figure with her any more, if she's the kind that has made up her mind to do such a thing. That's what I've been thinking all the time that we were coming along; a woman who has decided to marry in the way that Alva has, must of course look at everything in life by a different light from that of the rest of us; I don't know really that we have the right even to criticize her. We don't understand her at all; that's all it is."

Lassie looked astonished. "You don't mean to say that you think that she isn't crazy?" she said.

Ingram smiled again, "I mean that I hardly think it possible to judge what one cannot measure; savages reverence the Unknown, you know, and I'm not sure that reverence is not a fitter attitude towards mystery than condemnation or ridicule, although of course it isn't the civilized or popular standpoint."

"But do you think it's—it's—it's the thing, to do—" Lassie could not get on further.

"I think it's just as awful as you do," he said quietly; "but I've had time since you told me to see that just because it seems awful to me, it's very plain to me that I see it differently from the way in which she does. She isn't a girl, she's a woman; and she's a very good and sweet and true woman at that. If she is making this marriage, the really awful part isn't the part that you or I or the world are going to think about, it's something else."

Lassie's glance rose doubtfully upward. "You think that it's all right for her to do it, then?" she asked miserably.

[102]

"I think that we aren't wise enough to talk about it at all," said Ingram with determined cheerfulness. "Let's change the subject. I am going to be here on and off for a year, likely, and digging holes to hold little flags, and drilling to keep track of what one drills through isn't the liveliest fun in the world to look forward to; so when Alva doesn't need you, do give me some of your time and make me some jolly memories to live on later, when I'm alone—will you?"

"You won't ever be able to go and see Alva in her house afterwards, will you?" said Lassie, her mind apparently unequal to changing the subject on short notice; "because no one is ever to go there, she says."

"I shall never go unless she asks me, surely."

They were now quite near the little hotel.

"Before we part, let us be a little conventional and say that we are glad to have met one another," Ingram suggested; "will you?"

"I'm glad that I met you," she said; "it will be a great comfort—as you said."

Ingram was looking at her and that turned his face towards the gorge. "I see Alva coming across the bridge," he exclaimed; "go and meet her. Go to her quite frankly, openly,—as if nothing had happened. That will be easiest—and kindest—and best all around."

She flashed a grateful glance to his eyes, and ran at once down the tracks and out upon the bridge.

Alva came towards her, with a rapid step, her open coat floating lightly back on either side. She smiled sweetly as she saw the girlish figure. "You beat me home," she called out, gaily. [103]

Lassie swallowed the lump in her throat and smiled, too. "It's such a beautiful day, and I'm so happy and so glad that you are happy!"

The pretty young voice rang fresh and true. The next instant they were close, side by side.

Alva stood still. What Ingram had said proved most truly true; she did not seem to hold any recollection of that parting an hour before. She drew Lassie close beside her and pointed over the bridge-rail. A rainbow was spanning the Upper Falls, and its brilliant, evanescent promise seemed to reflect in the face above. What is so fragile, illusive, uncertain as a rainbow? And yet it is the mirrored mirage of all the Eternal Purpose's immutable law. Form is there, and color; hope is there, and the will-o'-the-wisp of human struggles evolving continually and, in their evolution, fading to human eyes as they take their place up higher. From the foaming, dashing water, which during the centuries was strong enough to eat into the rock, arose the light, lovely mist that in cycles of time was in its turn strong enough to wear it away. Through the mist floated the impalpable radiance that, in æons to come, when rock should again flash fiery through unending space, and water should have evaporated to await fresh form, would still continue to illuminate the Divine Will. [104]

CHAPTER VII

THE LATHBUNS

Mrs. Wiley, dropping into the post-office that evening along about seven, was frankly disappointed at finding her newspaper bundle still undisturbed on the table in the adjoining kitchen.

"Why, I made sure you'd have laid 'em out, anyhow," she said, looking at Mrs. Ray, who was busily beating batter; "you haven't even made a start." And she sighed, seating herself in unwilling resignation.

"Made a start," said Mrs. Ray, glancing at her placidity with an air of tart exasperation, "made fifty starts, you mean. This has been what I call *a day*. Mrs. Catt came in early this afternoon to ask me to make Sally's wedding-cake, and Clay Wright Benton was here about the parrot. He's awful tired of that parrot 'cause it keeps his mother so tired and cross from getting up nights to wait on it. It routs her up at all hours for things, and if she don't hurry it calls her names in Spanish that it learned on the ship coming from Brazil, and, oh, they're having an awful time of it. And then Sammy Adams was here too; he was here from four o'clock on, asking me to marry him again. I don't know as anything gives me a lower opinion of Sammy than the way he sticks to wanting to marry me. The older I get, the worse he wants to marry me, which shows me only too plainly as it ain't me at all he wants—it's just my work." [105]

"You ain't even unrolled it," said Mrs. Wiley, fingering the bundle sadly. "I've been fixing onion-syrup for Lottie Ann and thinking of you unrolling all day. And you wasn't ever unrolling, even."

"He set right where you're setting now," said Mrs. Ray, beating briskly. "I was stoning raisins, so he wasn't in my way, but I do get tired of being asked to marry men. They don't make no bones about the business any more, and even a woman of my age likes a *little* fluff of romance. Sammy always goes into how we could join our chickens and our furniture. Like they was going to be married, too. Oh, Sammy's very mooney—he's very much like Mr. Ray. Most men are too much like Mr. Ray to please me. There was days when Mr. Ray 'd sit all day and tell me how he had yellow curls and blue eyes before he had smallpox. Those were his mooney days. When Mr. Ray wanted to be specially nice, he always used to tell me how pretty he was when he was a baby. Men are so awful silly. It's too bad I ever married. I had so many pleasant thoughts about men before. But now all I think is they're all spying round for women to work for 'em."

"I never shall know no peace till I know whether you can get my two backs out of these legs," said Mrs. Wiley, handling the bundle. "Father was such a sitter the last year, his legs was very wore at the top." She sighed.

"Mr. Catt was here this afternoon, too," continued Mrs. Ray, never ceasing to beat; "he wants to get up a petition about the dam. He's afraid they won't pay him for his orchard. He's against it. He says Mr. Ledge is right. He says if he's going to lose money, he'd rather see the Falls preserved for the blessings of unborn generations. He says he doesn't believe we think enough about unborn generations in this country. He says his orchard is worth a lot."

[106]

"If they're too wore out to cut over, I suppose we'll have to give it all up," said Mrs. Wiley. "Oh, Mrs. Ray, Lottie Ann's so thin! I don't know what to do! I say to her 'Lottie Ann, do eat,' and then she tries and chokes. I think she ought to go to Buffalo and be examined with a telescope. Rubbing her in goose-grease don't do a bit of good, and it does ruin her flannels so."

"I was sorry for Clay Wright Benton," pursued Mrs. Ray; "he kind of wants me to take his mother and the parrot for the winter. He says besides the nights, his mother and the parrot quarrels so days that he's afraid Sarah just won't have 'em in the house much longer. She's losing all patience."

"If you *can't* get my fronts out of his legs, do you suppose there'll be any way to get them out of his fronts?" Mrs. Wiley propounded.

"I told Clay I'd see," continued Mrs. Ray. "I'm pretty full now, but there's a proverb about room for one more, and if I can't do nothing else my motto'll help me out. 'He moves in a mysterious way' you know, and maybe I can put her in my room with Willy and move into the kitchen myself with the parrot. Yes, indeed. Only I won't get up and wait on it. I don't care what I get called in Spanish, if I'm once asleep for the night, that parrot won't get me up again; or there'll be more Spanish than his around."

[107]

"You'll be able to use the same buttons, anyhow," mused Mrs. Wiley. "Oh, Mrs. Ray, we've had a letter from Uncle Purchase and the colt didn't die. It'll be lame and blind in one eye, but anyway it's alive and it's such a valuable colt. The father cost six thousand dollars, and if it lives to have grandchildren maybe they'll race. Uncle Purchase does so want a race-horse in his stock. He says a race-horse even raises the value of your pigs and cattle."

"Does a parrot sleep on its side or sit up all night, do you know? I forgot to ask Clay."

"Oh, that reminds me, speakin' of sleepin'," exclaimed Mrs. Wiley, suddenly arousing to the realization of other woes than her own, "do you know Cousin Granger Catterwallis was over this morning, and he says those Lathbuns stayed at Sammy's the night afore they came here. You know they come in a pourin' rain. Did Sammy ever tell you about it?"

Mrs. Ray stopped her beating. She stood seemingly transfixed.

"Cousin Granger says they wanted to stay all night, with him, but he's too afraid of a breach of promise suit since his wife died, so he wouldn't keep them, but he took his spy-glass and watched them through the gap and they clum Sammy's fence," (Mrs. Ray's face was a sight), "and then he went up to his cupalo and watched them through a break in the trees, and he says he knows they went in the house!"

Mrs. Ray folded her arms firmly. "Well," she said, "I never heard the beat! Sammy never said one word to me!"

"And Cousin Catterwallis says he doesn't believe they've got any trunks or any money or any real love affair, except what they may manage to pick up along the way. He says he wouldn't trust the young one as far as you can throw a cat, and he says he wouldn't trust the old one as far as that. Hannah Adele, indeed! He says he don't believe she's even Hannah."

[108]

Mrs. Ray drew a long breath. "Oh, well, I wasn't meaning to marry him, anyhow," she said, a little absent-mindedly. "I told him that to-day. Sammy's mooney, and I've been married to one mooney man. There were days when Mr. Ray would upset everything, from the beehives to his second wife's baby—those were his mooney days. I don't want to have no more of that!"

"Cousin Catterwallis says it wasn't just proper taking them in that way, either," Mrs. Wiley continued; "he's going to see Jack O'Neil this afternoon, and tell him his opinion. Cousin Catterwallis says the dam is bringing very queer folks our way. He doesn't take no interest in the dam because he's so far inland, but he says when the canal was put through the Italians stole one of his father's hens, and he hasn't any use for any kind of improvements since then."

Mrs. Ray began slowly beating her batter again. Her lips were firm and her attitude painfully decided.

"The old lady says she's Mrs. Ida Lathbun," Mrs. Wiley went on; "I wonder if their name is really Lathbun."

"I d'n know, I'm sure."

Mrs. Wiley turned her eyes on the bundle.

"When do you think you can get at my coat, Mrs. Ray?" the tone was sadly earnest.

"To-morrow, I guess. I haven't much on hand to-morrow, except to sweep out the church and do some baking. I was planning to dig potatoes and go to South Ledge to fit a dress, but I'll leave that till early Monday. Think of his keeping them all night and never telling me!"

[109]

"I guess I'll go down to Nellie's," said Mrs. Wiley, rising slowly; "the Lathbuns sit in her kitchen evenings, and I'll just throw a few hints about and see how they take it."

"I wish I could go, too," Mrs. Ray's eyes suddenly became keenly bright, "but I can't. The mail's due."

Mrs. Wiley shook her head with the air of understanding the weightiness of her friend's excuse. "I'll stop in on my way back, and tell you what I find out," she said, kindly.

She went away and was absent all of an hour. When she returned, Mrs. Ray's duties, both as postmistress and stepmother, were over for that day, her cake was safe in the oven, and she sat by the lamp, knitting.

"What'd you find out?" she said, as the door yielded to Mrs. Wiley's push.

"Well, not much." Mrs. Wiley came in and sat down. "They was both there in the kitchen, and there's no use denying it's hard to find out anything about folks when they're looking right at you. But I did hear one thing you'll like to know, Mrs. Ray?"

"What was it?"

"Why, those two girls went off walking this morning, and the young one came back with the man."

"Don't surprise me one bit," said Mrs. Ray. "I've been saying that was what would happen from the minute I knew she was coming."

"I'm sort of sorry for the older one," said Mrs. Wiley; "she's real nice. I'm sorry for any one who's thinnish—Lottie Ann's so thin." [110]

"Those kind of blind-eyed people always have trouble, and nobody can help it for 'em," said Mrs. Ray; "they make their own troubles as they go along—if they don't come bump on to them while they're stargazing. That girl's made for trouble; you can see it in her eyes. But didn't you ask anything about Sammy?"

"I just couldn't—with them right there. The old lady sits with her feet in the oven the whole time. I don't see how Nellie cooks."

"Feet in the oven! I should say so! Well, I'll ask Sammy just as soon as I see him—I know that! Did you hear anything new about the dam?"

"No; Nellie says the surveyors say it'll be six months before any one can tell anything."

"Huh!" Mrs. Ray's note was highly contemptuous.

"Why, Mrs. Ray, don't you believe the surveyors?"

"I never say what I believe, Mrs. Wiley, it's enough for me to say what I think; but I *will* say just this, and that is that if we get the dam, it's precious little good it'll ever do us here in Ledge. It's fine work talking, but the legislature and the Dam Commission aren't working day and night for our good. It's men in Rochester and Buffalo who'll get the good out of the dam, and we'll be left to find ourselves high and dry as usual."

"Why, Mrs. Ray, you talk as if you was against the dam, or is it only because Sammy took those women in that night?"

Poor Mrs. Wiley! She had inadvertently hit the bull's-eye. Mrs. Ray laid down her knitting and rose at once.

"No, Mrs. Wiley, it *isn't* because Sammy took those women in that night. As if I'd care whether Sammy took two women in or not! Did I ever care about Mr. Ray's other two wives? or about their children? I guess if I can stand all I've stood from Mr. Ray's first wife's children, I won't care who Sammy Adams takes in out of the wet. I'm surprised at you, Mrs. Wiley." [111]

Mrs. Wiley got up in great confusion. "I hope you'll excuse what I said, Mrs. Ray; you see I wasn't really thinking what I did say. And it may not have been them, anyhow. I must be goin', I guess; I don't like to leave Lottie Ann alone like that. Good-by, Mrs. Ray."

Mrs. Ray folded her arms severely.

"Good-by, Mrs. Wiley," she said, with reserve. [112]

CHAPTER VIII

MISS LATHBUN'S STORY

Curiously enough, just as Mrs. Wiley abruptly terminated her call on her friend Mrs. Ray, owing to the unpleasant twist given their conversation by the Lathbun family, Lassie and Alva were speaking of the same two ladies, whom Lassie had met in the dining-room an hour before. Alva had introduced her to both with that pleasant courtesy which was given to none too careful social scrutiny. It was Alva's habit to deal with all humanity on a broad footing of equality—a habit which her well-born friends politely termed a failing, and which those of other classes accepted as the thirsty accept water, just with content.

"Well, I'm glad I've seen them; now I feel as if I'd seen everything, except the Lower Falls." Thus spoke Lassie, when the bedroom door was shut, and she and her friend seemed well away from all the rest of the world for the next ten hours, at least. Lassie, be it said, *en passant*, had now sufficiently digested her first shock of surprise over her friend's future, to be able to be pleasantly happy again.

"What did you think of them?" Alva answered, half absent-mindedly. She held in her hand a letter which the belated mail had brought, and her thoughts seemed to quit it with difficulty. [113]

"I thought that they were rather common," said Lassie, frankly. Lassie was well-born, and had judged Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter by no higher standard than that of their blouses.

"Do you know, I thought so, too,—at first," her friend replied, putting the letter down and going to the window where she remained with her back to Lassie, looking out into the dark. "I thought at first that Mrs. Lathbun looked like a cook—"

"She dresses exactly like one," interposed Lassie.

"But I've come to like them very much, indeed. Of course so few days are not enough to really know any one, but the night before you came such a curious thing happened. You know I told you that the daughter had a love affair? Well, that was the night that I learned about it. I never had anything come to me more strangely. Do you know, dear, I am continually more and more convinced that nothing happens by chance, never."

"What did she tell you?"

Alva turned from the window and sat down by the lamp-table. "I'll tell you; only you mustn't misjudge Miss Lathbun for confiding in me. People become friends very quickly in a lonely place like this, you know."

"I won't misjudge her; I'll be glad to change my opinion of her. She looks so like a restaurant girl."

"Lassie, you're incorrigible."

"But that dress, with that black cotton lace over that old red silk."

"I never even noticed it."

"Do you mean to say you've never noticed that dirty red silk front?" [114]

Alva shaded her eyes with her hand. "Lassie," she said, almost sadly, "why does nothing count in this world except the front of one's frock?"

Contrition smote the young girl. "Oh, forgive me, forgive me," she pleaded; "I didn't think. I am interested! Play I didn't speak in that way; I won't again. Indeed, I won't."

"Of course I'll forgive you, dear; it's nothing to forgive, anyway; but it makes it so hard to tell anything serious when one sets out in such a way. I wonder how many good and beautiful thoughts have died unexpressed, just because their first breath was met with mocking!"

"Don't say that; I won't be that way—I'll never be that way again. I do like Miss Lathbun—truly I do; I think she has sort of a sweet face, and she must be clever to have been able to make a front of any kind out of that lace. See, I'm quite serious now; and so interested. Do go on!"

Alva looked at her for a minute with a smile.

"You can't possibly overlook the front, can you?" she said; "but I will go on, and you will learn never to judge again, as I learned myself; for I must tell you, Lassie, that all you feel about them, I felt at first—until I learned to know better. I didn't notice the front, but I noticed some other things—little things like grammar; but American grammar isn't a hard and fast proposition, anyway, you know."

"They just call it 'dialect' in so many places," said Lassie, wisely.

Alva smiled again. "Yes, they do," she assented.

"And now for Miss Lathbun's story?" suggested the girl. [115]

"Yes, certainly. Well, my dear, you see, I was sitting here alone one evening, and she came to the door and—and somehow she came in and we fell to talking. You know how easy it is for any one to talk to me, and after a while she told me her romance."

Lassie's eyes opened. "To think of a girl like that having a romance! Please go on."

Alva hesitated, then smiled a little. "I suppose I can trust you to keep a secret?" she asked.

Lassie began: "Why, of—" and then stopped suddenly, remembering the morning's betrayal, and blushed crimson.

Alva leaned forward and touched her cheek with one petting finger.

"Dear," she said, "don't feel distressed. I know that you told Ronald and I don't mind."

"You know!" cried Lassie, astonished.

"Yes, dear, I know. I saw it in both your faces when I came across the bridge. I don't mind—I think it's better so. Truly, I do."

"Oh, Alva—" the young girl's tone was full of feeling.

"But you mustn't tell him Hannah Adele's love affair," Alva went on, smiling; "remember that, my dear."

"I promise. Now tell me all about it." Lassie drew close, her face full of eager curiosity mixed with content over being pardoned so simply.

"It's just like a story," Alva said, thoughtfully; "it's more wonderful—almost—than my own. I never heard anything quite so wonderfully story-like before. Tell me, did you notice at supper how Mrs. Lathbun watched every one that came off of the train? She can see the station through the window from where she sits, you know."

[116]

"No, I didn't notice. Does it matter?"

"Oh, no; only I used to notice it and now I know why she does it."

"Is she looking for the lover?"

"She's afraid of him, dear."

"Afraid!"

"Yes, afraid he'll find them."

"Goodness, are they hiding from him?"

"Mrs. Lathbun thinks that they are."

"And aren't they?"

Alva lowered her voice to a whisper. "He watches outside of this house every night!" she said impressively.

Lassie quite jumped. "Watches! Outside this house! Oh, is he there now?"

"I don't know, perhaps so."

"What fun! Who does he watch for?"

"For Miss Lathbun, of course."

"But why does he do it?"

"She doesn't know; she only knows that he watches there."

"And her mother doesn't know that he is there?"

"No."

"How perfectly thrilling! Do go on!"

"It's really a very long story."

"I'll be patient."

"It taught me a big lesson, Lassie; it taught me not to judge. Just see how quiet and simple these two look to be, and yet that plain, ordinary appearing woman is trying to hide her daughter from a rich man."

"A rich man!"

"He's a millionaire."

"Who told you so?"

"She did."

Lassie stared. "Alva!—you don't believe that! That woman's never hiding that girl from a millionaire. It isn't possible!"

"But she is, my dear. She's a true, good mother; she doesn't want her daughter to marry him, because he is so dissipated."

[117]

"But I should think that they would run away and get married. I'd marry a man, anyway, if I loved him."

"Ah, Lassie, you don't know what you'd do if you were in the position of that poor girl. Her mother has taken her away and is stopping here in this very quiet and unassuming way to avoid all notice or being found out."

"But he has found them out!"

"Yes, but Mrs. Lathbun doesn't know it."

Lassie looked almost incredulous. "Mrs. Lathbun doesn't look a bit like a woman who would hide her daughter away from a millionaire," she said, obstinately.

"You see how easy it is to misjudge any one, Lassie; because that's what she's doing."

"Mrs. O'Neil says they haven't any trunks or any clothes. She said so this afternoon."

"I know; I've heard her say that before."

"Well, tell me the whole story."

Alva looked at her for a long dozen of seconds and then her lips curved slightly. "I'm going to tell you," she said; "but, do you know, it just comes over me that you are surely going to disbelieve it."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because it's so strange."

"But you believed it?"

"But I can believe anything. Believing is my forte. Once 'heretic' and 'unbeliever' meant the same thing; well, I am a believer."

Lassie laughed a little. "Go on and tell me the story," she said, "I'll try to believe;" then, her face changing suddenly, she added, "it can have a happy ending—can't it? Sometime?"

Alva flashed a quick, sad flash of understanding at her. "All stories will have that some day," she said, gently. It was the first reference on the lips of either to that morning's revelation.

"Do tell me the story," Lassie begged, after a minute's pause; "tell me the whole. Do you think that perhaps he is out there now?"

Alva shook her head in protestation of ignorance as to that. "It seems very medieval and devoted for him to be out there at all, don't you think? And these nights are so cold, too."

"I should think that some one would see him sometimes?"

"I should, too."

"Well, go on. Has she known him always?"

"No; it seems that he lives in Cromwell where her mother was born, and she met him there two years ago when they went there to visit."

"Did he fall in love with her at first sight?"

"I think so. She said the first thing that she knew he was talking about her all the time, and then he began watching outside of their house at night."

"Didn't he ever talk to her, or come inside the house?"

"Oh, Lassie, what makes you say things like that? They make the story seem absurd; and I began it by telling you that her mother was bitterly opposed to him on account of his reputation."

"I forgot," said Lassie, contritely; "is he so very bad?"

"I'm afraid so. He drinks and gambles and does everything that he shouldn't, she says."

"But if he's rich he can afford it, can't he?"

Alva turned quickly. "How can you say a thing like that? As if money can condone sin. Don't you know that a thoroughly bad man is a soulless thing, and that to marry a man like that is either heroic or deeply degrading, just according to whether one does it for love or for money."

"But you said that she loved him."

"Yes; but you said he could afford to be wicked!"

Lassie clasped her hands meditatively. "To think of that girl having a millionaire watching outside her window, nights! And Mrs. O'Neil says she hasn't even a nightgown with her, so she can't possibly get up in the cold to peep out through the blinds."

"I suppose she couldn't do that, anyway," said Alva; "you see her mother doesn't know he's there, so she couldn't get up to look."

[118]

[119]

"How does she know herself that he is there, then? perhaps he tells her he watches and really stays in bed at some hotel."

"Lassie!"

"What's the use of his watching, anyway? Does it do any good? I should think that she'd be afraid that he'd take cold. I—"

"Lassie, don't you see that it's his only way to prove his devotion? He can't write her, so he watches outside her window, nights. She says that he takes a handful of sand and throws it against the side of the house, and she hears it and knows that he's there."

[120]

"Do you believe that?"

"I believe the whole story."

Lassie regarded her friend with amazement.

"I don't see how you can," she said; "why, those two women would go almost wild for joy if any man wanted to marry either of them."

"No, dear," Alva said, smiling; "no, they wouldn't. The world isn't altogether worldly; there are simple, true, wholesome natures in it that look at life in a straightforward way without any illusions. And Mrs. Lathbun is one of those. Poor she may be, but she knows very well that no possible happiness can come to her child from marrying a bad man who has money."

"But her daughter wants to marry him, and he wants to marry her."

Alva paused before replying; then she said slowly:

"Lassie, there's the puzzle. Does he want to marry her?"

Lassie looked startled. "Doesn't he?" she asked.

"She doesn't know," said Alva; "you see, they have hardly ever exchanged a word."

"Well," said the young girl, "this is the craziest love story I ever heard in my life. Do you mean to say that you believe that a man who had never heard a girl speak would go and stay outside her window, all night long? What does he do all night, anyhow; walk about, or sit down? Alva, you can't believe that story? Not possibly!"

"Yes, I believe it," said Alva, cheerfully. "I believe it for two or three very good reasons. One is that there is no reason why the girl should construct such a silly lie for my benefit; another is that truth is always stranger than fiction; and the third is that she has a little picture of him, and as soon as I saw the picture I saw why Fate brought the Lathbuns and me together, and why the man waited outside her window all night."

[121]

"Why?" Lassie's tone became suddenly curious.

"My dear, the man is the image of the man that I love. They might be twin brothers. And men of such strength put through whatever they lay their hands unto."

Lassie appeared dumbfounded.

"He looks like—" she stammered and halted.

"Yes, dear," Alva said, simply; "he looks exactly like him! Now you see why I am interested. Now you see why I find it easy to believe. A bad man—a thoroughly bad man—is a creature that for some reason has not come into his heavenly birthright. If that girl, plain and pale and unassuming as she looks, has the power to draw him from nights of dissipation to nights in the cold outside her window, she has the power to call a soul to him or waken his own that is but sleeping. It takes a great deal of living and learning to attain to the faith which I have, but I have it and I am firm in it, and I believe the story and I believe that good is brewing for that man. I'm sure of it."

Alva spoke with such energetic earnestness, such dominating force, that Lassie was silenced for the minute.

"I suppose that I am just stupid," she said, after a little; "I've had so much that was different to try and learn to-day."

There was a pathos in her tone that led the older girl to lean quickly near and take one of her hands, drawing her close as she did so. "I know it, dear, I know it. And I appreciate it all more than you guess. We won't talk of Miss Lathbun any more just now, and, dear, believe me when I say that I'm truly very glad that you met Ronald just as you did this morning and told him what I had told you. I see all this from all its sides, and the views that differ from mine don't hurt me—believe me, they don't. I understand exactly how Ronald's fine, robust manhood would revolt quite as you yourself revolted; but, you and he, with all the possibilities of your gorgeous, glorious youth, can no more measure the joy of these days to my love and myself, than the gay little birds measure what life is to you. To us, you two and your ideas are very much like the birds; we are glad to see you enjoy the sunshine, and our better gladness we know is quite beyond you."

[122]

Lassie turned her face upward to the earnest look and tender kiss, and then they sat still for a little until Alva rose and began to make ready for bed.

"Tell me," she said, as she loosened her hair; "it was like this, wasn't it? At first Ronald was almost angry; and then his feeling changed and he felt that because it was I, it was rather a different thing from what it would have been if it had been any one else."

"Yes," said Lassie, in an awestruck tone, "it was just like that. How did you know?"

Alva laughed. "Not because I am a witch," she said, "but just because I know Ronald. You see, Lassie, I am much stronger than Ronald; I am stronger than Ronald, just as Ronald is stronger than you. He could not condemn me; he has to own I am right. Right is a might so great that wherever it holds good it rules its kind. Ronald gives me my due; you will, too, after a while. Only I must not drive either of you forward too quickly." She laughed a little. "I must give you time," she added. [123]

Lassie was taking down her own hair. She shook it apart now, and looked forth from between the parted waves, her expression one of deeply stirred interest. "I believe that this is going to be the most wonderful time in my life," she said; "I feel as if everything were getting deeper around me."

"Ah, dearest," said her friend, with a sigh that was not sad—only a long breath; "that's very true. I should not have sent for you, only that I knew that when you came to leave me and go back to the world to wear your white gown and make your *début*, you would have become a stronger, better, wiser, sweeter woman all your life through, for this experience. You see, dear child, the rarest thing in the world of to-day is sincerity—absolute truth. I am not especially gifted or very remarkable in any way, but I have learned the value of being sincere. It isn't a small thing to learn in life, Lassie, and it isn't a small privilege to live for a few days with one who has learned the lesson. When you see what truth really is, and what it may really do for one, you won't be revolted by my marriage; you will never wonder over me any more, and you'll learn to look at strange stories with a new light of comprehension."

Lassie went close to her, put up her lips and kissed her.

"And I can tell Mr. Ingram about Miss Lathbun, too?" she asked very simply; "or must I keep that secret, as you said at first?"

Alva put her arms fondly about the pretty young thing. "Lassie," she said, "you are a dear, and I don't mind how much you discuss me with Ronald; but you musn't tell him Miss Lathbun's secret. It wouldn't be right." [124]

"Very well, then, I won't," said Lassie; "and I will keep my word, too."

"Thank you," Alva said, patting her face caressingly; "thank you, and heaven bless you and give you a good understanding."

Lassie looked up with a smile. "You think I may learn to look at things in your way?"

"I think so," said Alva; "looking at things in my way has made me a very happy woman, and so I desire the same for you."

Then she kissed her good night. [125]

CHAPTER IX

PLEASANT CONVERSE

"Well, what did I tell you?" said Mrs. Ray to Mrs. Catt, a day or so later, when that lady had dropped in for a little call. "Those two young people up at Nellie O'Neil's have fallen in love just as sure as beans are beans. Not that he's so young, either, but a man's always able to fall in love whenever he gets a chance. Age don't matter. There was Mr. Ray. He was always in love unless he was married. Yes, indeed."

"If he's engaged to that other one, I shouldn't think he'd find it very easy to fall in love right under her nose, so to speak," said Mrs. Catt.

"She wouldn't notice," said Mrs. Ray, adjusting her shawl, and turning the needlework in her hands; "she's the kind who don't even see the things they go headlong over. She's the mooney kind. I know. Yes, indeed. Mr. Ray had mooney days. There were days when Mr. Ray called me by his first wife's name all day. Those were his mooney days."

"My cousin Eliza thinks she's crazy too. She says she's seen her time and again setting on stumps in the woods, and she turns out in the road for sparrows. And then that house. They're at it tooth

and nail from dawn to dark. I never see nothing like it."

"Yes," said Mrs. Ray; "there's others say that, too. She is queer! Nellie says she often doesn't eat breakfast—nor any meat either. And she talks about the dam as if we was all heathens laying the axe at the root of our own mothers. She says all the trees ought to belong to the United States Government. As if we wasn't singing 'Pass under the rod of the Republican party' from dawn to dark now. Such a country!"

[126]

"She goes down to see Mr. Ledge, too," pursued Mrs. Catt; "of course he don't want the dam, and he makes her more so. Josiah Bates was driving home from Castile the other day, and he saw her coming from there. Josiah said he was sure she'd been to see Mr. Ledge, 'cause she wasn't ten feet from the house, and they was waving their hands to her from the window. You can always depend on Josiah Bates knowing what he's talking about."

"Yes," said Mrs. Ray, turning her work about; "yes, Josiah Bates is a very careful observer. He'll never die of no fish-bone in his throat for want of watching the fish."

"Speaking of fish-bones," said Mrs. Catt, "have you seen Lottie Ann Wiley lately? There's a bag of bones for you!"

"Not for a week or so. Why? Is she thinner than she was?"

"Thinner! Well, I should say so. I don't know what the Wileys will do with that girl if she keeps on getting thinner and paler."

"She isn't any paler than that girl at Nellie O'Neil's."

"Which one?"

"That Lathbun girl. Do you know anything about them?"

"That's what every one's asking."

[127]

Mrs. Ray threaded her needle. "They're a queer pair," she remarked.

"Well, I should say so. They don't eat any breakfast, either; make it up on chestnuts. They're picking chestnuts all over. Lizzie says she never saw people making so free. Folks don't know what to say, but it riles a good many. They pick that little gray bag they've got full three or four times a day."

"Well, I declare," said Mrs. Ray; "do you suppose they eat 'em all?"

Mrs. Catt rose. "I only stopped for a minute," she said. "Oh, I don't know, I'm sure. Chestnuts is hearty, but seems to me they ought to ask at the houses, anyway. Mrs. Wiley says if they come to her trees again, she'll turn the bull in the lot."

"Must you go?" Mrs. Ray asked. "I thought Mrs. Wiley was afraid of the bull."

"Yes, I must. What you making?"

"I'm putting a new lining in this vest for Elmer Hoskins. His dog chewed it up, while he was asleep."

"Did he have it on?" Mrs. Catt asked in great surprise.

"No; he had it on the chair and it fell off."

"Fell off! I s'pose you've heard about Gran'ma Benton's parrot falling off?"

"Falling off what? No, I haven't heard."

"Fell off the perch. I saw poor Clay this morning, and he's half mad. The parrot and Gran'ma Benton have been discussing most all night lately, and the parrot gets so mad he hops all over and last night he got in a rage and fell off the perch. Broke the perch, too."

"Well, I declare," said Mrs. Ray; "why don't Clay show some spirit and put a stop to all that? I would."

[128]

"He can't. Gran'ma Benton's so fond of discussing, and if she didn't have the parrot she'd soon wear them all out."

"I thought she was wearing them out as it is."

"Well, yes—" Mrs. Catt looked cornered, "but, anyhow, they don't have to do the talking now—the parrot does it. I'd like to see my husband's mother have a parrot—that's all!" Mrs. Catt twitched her shawl expressively.

"Poor Clay Wright Benton," said Mrs. Ray. "Just to look at him you'd know it all. I do despise men who haven't got any spirit; but if they have spirit of course they're almost worse to get on with. Yes, indeed."

"Yes, indeed!" said Mrs. Catt with meaning; "well, good-by, Mrs. Ray."

"Oh! Good-by."

Mrs. Catt went out.

It was only a few minutes later that Mrs. Wiley arrived, with another large bundle wrapped up in newspaper.

"Don't stop your work," she said, putting it down with a sigh. "Oh, you ain't sewing on my coat," she added, in a tone of deep disappointment, evidently seeing interruption in a changed light at once.

"No, but I've cut it out. What you got there?"

"I've got another suit of father's."

Mrs. Ray eyed the bundle with thoughtfully compressed lips, and gave her shawl a fresh tuck.

"What you want made out of this one?"

Mrs. Wiley hesitated. "It's such a handsome piece of cloth," she said, "I'm willing to leave the cut to you, but I thought maybe you could get a winter jacket for Lottie Ann out of this one?"

[129]

Mrs. Ray compressed her lips more, and frowned. "I don't know about that," she said, shaking her head. "I've had trouble enough with the last."

"This was his new when he died. After he reached three hundred. And it isn't worn anywhere. You can get her big sleeves out of the hips, I think."

"There's a good deal to a coat beside the sleeves," said Mrs. Ray; "that coat of yours has most drove me mad. I never thought of your bringing me another. Well, unroll it and let me look at it."

Mrs. Wiley began to unfasten the package.

"Any moth-holes in this one?" Mrs. Ray asked, with professional interest.

"None to speak of. The only real hole is where he sat down on a engine spark at the station, the day of his last shock."

"It isn't the suit he had on when the oil-tank exploded, then?"

"No," said Mrs. Wiley; "that was the last but one. The oil-tank was the middle one of his three shocks."

She unfolded the garments and spread them out. Mrs. Ray watched her, and continued her work at the same time.

"How's Lottie Ann?" she asked, presently.

"Oh, she's poorly," said Mrs. Wiley. "We're getting awful worried over Lottie Ann. I thought maybe you could get her fronts out of his fronts; you see, she's slimmer than I am."

"But her big spread will come lower than yours," said Mrs. Ray; "is there any up and down to the cloth? How much does she weigh, anyhow?"

[130]

"Yes, there is an up and down. Ninety-six last time. That's mighty little for her height. She only wanted it short, anyway."

"It'll have to be short. Yes, indeed. Why you must have weighed most double that at her age. It's too bad men always have pockets."

"He would have them; you know how father always set store by pockets. There, that's the engine spark. I don't know, I'm sure, what we'll do about her. Mr. Wiley says his grandmother went just so—" Mrs. Wiley's voice broke suddenly; she took out her handkerchief and dried her eyes. "Do you see any way to getting the fronts out?" she asked, falteringly, after a minute.

"You musn't look to the worst that way," said Mrs. Ray, soothingly; "those thin girls pick up wonderfully. The only way I see is if you've got braid. If you've got any braid, I can piece it back of the braid. She may marry and be as well as any one. Look at her great-grandmother you just spoke of. Yes, indeed."

"I haven't got any braid. But I can buy some. Judy was up from the St. Helena road yesterday, and she said to give her milk—all she'll drink."

"Turn it over so I can see the back," said Mrs. Ray; "will she drink it, though? That's the question. She was up for the mail two nights ago, and I thought she looked pretty well-willed. That's a nice piece of cloth. My, but you were lucky he didn't have it on when the oil-tank exploded. Yes, indeed. It's better cloth than the other."

"Yes, that's what I think. That's just the trouble, Mrs. Ray; she will *not* drink it."

"You never was severe enough with her. Not but what if it hadn't burnt through you could get the oil out, maybe."

[131]

"I know it, but she's my only girl. I thought you could use the same buttons. Eleven boys, and then that one girl. She's named for Mr. Wiley's mother and my mother. Charlotte, you know. See, Mrs. Ray, there's six of each size, one on each cuff, too. And all so stout but her. The boys and their father got together on the hay scales the other day, and they went up over two thousand pounds. Did you hear about it?"

Mrs. Ray stopped sewing and scanned the new proposition with one eye half closed.

"I'd have to piece the sleeves; you'd have to make up your mind to that. Were they in the wagon?"

"No, just standing on the scales. You think you can manage it if you piece them—don't you?"

"Yes, I can manage it then. I can get my backs out below the knee, and get her sides out of his backs."

"Oh, Mrs. Ray, you've taken a load off my mind. I'm so glad to get these awful sad remembrances done some good with. I made pillow-slips out of his nightshirts, but his flannels will haunt me till I die. Eddy's the only one of the boys that is ever going to grow to them, and Eddy never wears flannel."

"I should think you could use 'em up to cover the ironing-table. Who did you say was picking chestnuts,—Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter?"

"I haven't said a word about them." Mrs. Wiley opened her eyes widely. "But I'm hearing about them all over. I don't believe she's her daughter any more than you are. They're a nice pair, those two. Chestnuts six dollars a bushel, and they picking them morn, noon, and night. Have you seen Sammy Adams? He took them in the night before they got here, you know. You heard of that." [132]

"Yes, I did." Mrs. Ray's lips came together; "I shall ask him all about that taking them in, the first time I see him. Never bought a stamp yet! Such doings! They're not respectable. Don't tell *me*."

"You're terrible prejudiced in your opinions, Mrs. Ray; you judge everybody by the stamps they buy."

"It's all I have to judge strangers by," said Mrs. Ray, "and it's a pretty good guide, too. Mrs. Lathbun don't buy stamps and nobody can't tell me that she's on the square. Wait till I see Sammy!"

"When do you think you can try mine on?" asked Mrs. Wiley.

"Will next Thursday do?"

"Yes, I don't want to wear it till Thanksgiving; I won't go to Buffalo till Christmas. Lottie Ann won't want hers till then."

"I can do them both by Thanksgiving," said Mrs. Ray. "I've got a few little jobs to do for others, and I want to build a new back fence, and I guess I'm going to get the contract for whitewashing the church cellar, I'm bidding on it. But after that, except for my house-cleaning and my boarders and my regular duties under the United States Government, I haven't got anything particular on hand."

"I'll be so glad," said Mrs. Wiley, moving towards the door. "We're all so kind of upset about not knowing whether Uncle Purchase will come and live with us or not if the dam goes through, that I want to have my things in order, anyhow. He wrote, you know."

"No, I didn't know, but I guess he'll come and live with you, anyway," said Mrs. Ray; "good-by." [133]

Mrs. Wiley went out, and before long there was another caller,—Clay Wright Benton himself this time, usually called "poor Clay Wright Benton" by his friends, for the simple reason that he was Sarah Benton's husband, and his mother's son.

"How d'ye do," he said, opening the door a few inches and looking in through it. "No, I won't come in; I only stopped to speak about the hay. You said I could have it, you know."

"Yes, I know," said Mrs. Ray; "but I said, if you came before October first. That's past now, and Elmer took it off yesterday. Him and his dog was here at sun up and away again by noon. You see now what it is to take your own time."

Clay Wright Benton stood still, turning his cap about and about.

"I thought you knew I wanted it," he said, finally; "I couldn't come sooner."

"I did know. But I thought you needed a lesson. Nobody that wants to get ahead in this world can take their own time. You've got to be a little ahead of other people's time if you really want to make your mark. How's Susan? Got back from her father's yet?"

"No," said the man; "she's going to stay till Thanksgiving. She was so awful tired of the parrot."

"Look out you don't leave her too long—same as the hay," said Mrs. Ray, cheerfully. "Who's that coming up the steps behind you? I can feel the draught as long as you stand there in the crack, but I can't see through your body."

Clay Wright Benton moved aside, and Mrs. Dunstall pushed past him. "I'm sorry I was late about the hay," he said then, and went slowly away. Mrs. Benton and his mother had left very little spirit in him. [134]

"What did he come for?" asked Mrs. Dunstall, shutting the door tightly. "I'm sorry for Susan. She married him for his looks, and looks is all he ever had to give her." The attitude of the community was that of larger communities towards the humbly unsuccessful in life.

"He ain't giving her even looks, any more," said Mrs. Ray; "she's gone home, and his looks is gone heaven knows where. No man was ever so handsome yet that he could rise above needing to shave."

"He'll make his fortune if the dam goes through, though," observed Mrs. Dunstall; "he owns all the land above Ledgeville."

"He'll never see her for dust then," said Mrs. Ray, drily. "She'll leave him to keep house for Gran'ma Benton and the parrot. Well, what did you come for?"

"I was walking by, and I thought I'd just stop and ask you if you'd heard about that Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter staying all night with Sammy Adams? Josiah Bates was up that way for a load of apples and he heard of it."

Mrs. Ray became rigid. "I have heard of it," she said; "but not from Sammy. He was here and never said a thing about it, but some one else told me. So it's all over town now, is it?"

"They was walking across country and there came on a rain and they stopped for shelter and it was Sammy's where they stopped."

Mrs. Ray sewed very fast. "I always said they were tramps anyway," she said, haughtily; "now you'll all see."

[135]

"Seems funny Sammy never told you about it."

"Well, he never did."

"He tells you everything—don't he?"

"I thought so."

"It couldn't be he really took a fancy to either of 'em," reflected Mrs. Dunstall; "I don't think they're good-looking."

"Good-looking!"

"But you know, men are queer, Mrs. Ray. There was Mr. Ray. He was queer."

Mrs. Ray gave her thread a jerk that broke it.

"They never get any letter, do they? You said they never did, didn't you?" Mrs. Dunstall was all query.

"No, they never get any letters."

"They claim to come from Cromwell, don't they?"

"I don't know. I never heard. I wouldn't believe anything they said. No trunks and stealing chestnuts all over. I never!"

"Wouldn't it be a funny thing if, after all these years, some stranger like those two was to come in from saints-know-where and marry Sammy?"

"Yes, it would be funny," said Mrs. Ray, "very funny. Yes, indeed. Yes, it would be *very* funny!"

"I thought I'd just stop and tell you," said Mrs. Dunstall. "I knew you'd be interested. I know you're such a friend of Sammy's. I thought if you knew, maybe you could look 'em up a little. Nathan's got an aunt living in Cromwell. If I was you I'd look 'em up, Mrs. Ray."

Mrs. Ray opened her scissors like the jaws of a shark.

"I *am* looking 'em up," she said, and the scissors closed with a snap full of meaning; "they'll soon find what it means to get no letters and write no letters and stop with Sammy Adams when it rains. Yes, indeed."

[136]

Two hours later every one in the township—that is, every one except the boarders of the O'Neil House—knew that Mrs. Ray was actively advocating an investigation into the Lathbuns' history.

"I guess she'll find out a good deal," said Samuel Peterkin to Judy, as they drove home towards the St. Helena road.

The scene far and near was one maddest autumn blaze of beauty.

"Mrs. Ray will never let up on him till she does," said Judy; "she's awful mad at Sammy."

The road bent between giant pines, and revealed the gray facade of the High Banks beyond, stretching in gigantic grandeur between the black shadows below and the bewildering colors above.

"If these trees was down, what a long ways we could see along the river," said Samuel.

"Yes," said Judy, "trees is dreadfully in the way when you want to see. And to think that Mr. Ledge is always talking about having planted ten thousand of them. People are curious."

The sun came out upon the horizon behind them at that minute, and shot a shaft of glory down the cañon, illuminating all the gray rock with silver.

"There, now," said Judy; "it's late when it's like that. It's right in our eyes, too. We must hurry."

"I told you you were staying too long," said Samuel; "and you know as well as I do that nobody can trot the St. Helena hill."

[137]

CHAPTER X

THE BROADER MEANING

It is surprising how quickly any situation can be assimilated. Be it ever so pleasant or ever so painful, we get accustomed to its demands surprisingly soon, and whether it is the fact that one has just gotten a fortune, or just gotten the toothache, in either case it seems as if one had had it always, before one has hardly had it at all.

Lassie learned this with great rapidity. Before three days had passed by, she discovered that the deep and earnest joy in Alva's mind had eradicated all the horror in her own. Alva's love ceased to seem shocking—it seemed, instead, more like some beautiful, mysterious wonder. Lassie came to hear her friend talk without any distress—only with a sort of wistful ignorance—a longing to fathom depths not before even apprehended.

"It doesn't strike me as it did at first at all," she said to Ingram one night, as they went for the mail together. "All that I think of now is how happy she looks. Did you ever see any one look as happy as she does?"

"She's very happy, surely," said Ingram; "but what uses me up is that she is looking forward so. Why, that man is dying—he may die any day—and she thinks that he will come here. He can't ever come here, not possibly!"

[138]

"Oh, can't he?" Lassie cried, in real distress, "are you sure of that?"

"Of course. He knows it, too."

"But she doesn't know it?"

"No."

"Don't you think that he ought to tell her, then?"

Ingram did not speak for a minute. "Perhaps some miracle may come to pass, and he may live," he said then; "you see, he has lived three weeks longer than any man in his circumstances ought to expect to live."

"Oh, then he hasn't got to die soon?"

Ingram knit his brows in the dark. "I can't explain myself clearly," he said; "but it seems to me that he and Alva sort of rise above rules, so to speak. Part of the time she's as she always was—just as we are—and then again I feel as if she herself had gone and left me sitting with just a figure of some sort.—" He paused. "I expect he's the same way," he added, after a second; "it's all beyond me."

"It's strange, isn't it?" Lassie spoke thoughtfully. "She's very sweet and lovely, and dear with it all. But I know just what you mean; I've seen it, too. She is talking, and then she stops and that white look comes over her face, and I never speak then until she does. Do you know," she said, almost timidly, "I keep thinking of things I've read in books about the Middle Ages,—about saints; about 'ecstasy,' they called it. We say 'ecstasies' about hats, or little dogs, or the flowers at Easter; but when Alva has been talking about her life in that house and stops to think, and I see her face, I feel as if I understood what the word really and truly meant."

[139]

"I suppose there's no danger of her converting you," said Ingram; "it's all very well for her, but I should hate to have you that way."

"Why?" asked the girl, in surprise.

"It isn't human, that's why," the man declared, energetically. "We're past the Middle Ages," he added, with a little laugh, "far past now."

"You think that people can be too good?"

"Yes, I do. I wouldn't marry a woman like her for anything!"

"But you thought differently once," said Lassie, shyly.

"Yes," he said, easily, "I wanted to marry her once, but she wouldn't have it at all. Droll— isn't it?"

"We're ever so far by the post-office; do you know it?" she said.

"So we are; I'd forgotten all about the mail."

They turned back.

"But I don't believe that Alva ever could make you see life in the way that she does," Ingram said, tentatively; "does she ever try?"

"I don't think so," said Lassie; "she just talks to me of her happiness."

"What would become of the world, I wonder, if every one adopted her views," suggested the man.

They turned in at Mrs. Ray's gate just here. The mail was distributed, and every one else had taken theirs and gone.

"Well, you're a little late," said Mrs. Ray, cheerfully. "Mary Cody run up for the house letters when she saw you go by. Have a nice walk?"

[140]

"Yes, very," said Ingram.

"You're great walkers down your way. Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter walk all day long, seems to me."

"They do walk a good deal," said Lassie.

Then she and Ingram went back to the hotel. They found Alva standing by the dining-room door with her lamp and her letters in her hand. Mrs. O'Neil stood close before her.

"I wouldn't worry," said Alva to Mrs. O'Neil; "I don't believe one word of it."

"When they're out to-morrow I shall sweep the room *myself*," said Mrs. O'Neil, decidedly; "you can learn a good deal about people by sweeping their room." Then they all separated, Ingram going to his letters, their hostess to her husband, and Alva and Lassie to their cosy nest up-stairs.

"What was the matter?" Lassie asked, directly their doors were shut.

"Nothing especial," Alva said, laughing; "it was just that Mrs. Ray came here this afternoon and rather upset Mrs. O'Neil by talking about Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter."

"What did she say?"

"She didn't say anything in particular—she just talked."

"What did she talk, then?"

"She talked all sorts of things; she doesn't like them at all. She doesn't consider them nice."

Lassie was silent. She was conscious of a painful lack of admiration for either Mrs. Lathbun or her daughter, herself.

A freight train began to roll by and ended conversation for the time being. Alva went to the window and stood there. After a while she spoke musingly.

[141]

"Everything must have a purpose. Every action has to have a thought behind it. If we could only see through the veil!"

The train, which had come to a standstill, now began to move again, cracking and straining at first, then going on with a terrific roar.

"They serve their purpose surely—the freight trains," Alva said; "even if they did nothing else, their noise accomplishes something. One might forget life so easily in this corner of the world, if it were not for them."

Lassie laughed. "But they serve a few more purposes than that."

"Yes, of course. I never deny the broader meaning in life—if the world's view *is* the broader one—but trains mean such a great deal besides what they carry, in a little bit of a town. I used to think that they came pretty close to being all the meaning that life had to the people there, and I still wonder sometimes if it isn't so. I've lived here well over one week now, and really it seems to me that the trains, their comings and goings, and whether they do them on time or not, are the only topics of conversation that are ever broached."

"Perhaps they talk about other things when we're not around," suggested Lassie, wisely.

"I hadn't thought of that. Or perhaps they think the trains our only mutual interest. You know, Lassie, there really is no one that is stupid, unless you do your half towards being stupid, too. It's like the crash in the wilderness, which doesn't mean sound unless there are ears to hear it."

[142]

"I never thought of that," said Lassie; "isn't there really any sound in the wilderness? What happens when the tigers roar?"

"But of course they do talk about other things here," Alva continued, paying no attention to her friend's flippancy. "They talk about the dam, and they talk about me."

"What do you suppose they say about you?" Lassie asked, curiously.

"I know exactly what they say," Alva replied, a real amusement curling her lips; "they say that Ronald and I are going to be married and live in that house while he builds the dam."

"Oh!"

"Yes, indeed."

"But I didn't know that the dam was decided on."

"It isn't, my dear, and I don't believe myself that there ever will be any dam. I can't believe that this State, even in her grossest materialism, will have the face to accept a royal gift and then turn around and give it away in direct contradiction of the terms of its acceptance."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"It's very bad. That dear old gentleman has made the preservation of this wonder of nature the realized dream of his whole life. He's carried through no end of other big philanthropic schemes, but he never for one instant allowed anything to turn him aside from this one. He told me himself how he had rewooded the banks—he has planted thousands and thousands of trees—and now to have the whole threatened. It's shameful, shameful!"

"Does every one know how you feel?"

[143]

"Yes, every one knows how I feel."

"What do they think themselves?"

"I believe the predominant sentiment in Ledge is that it will be entertaining to see Ledgeville drowned for good and all."

Lassie laughed.

The freight train was all gone by now. Alva turned from the window and came back to a seat beside her friend, sinking upon it with a little sigh.

"All this goes very near with me, dear," she said, gently; "loving Nature and fighting for the future has been *his* life-work, you know."

"Yes," Lassie said, softly.

Suddenly the older one leaned close and put her arms about the young girl. "It's so heaven-blessed to have you here,—it makes me so happy."

"I'm very happy, too," said Lassie. "I never had just the feeling before in my life that I have with you these days—it's as if nothing could ever come between us. Sort of as if we had been sealed to a compact."

Alva patted the brown waves of hair. "That's the understanding of true friendship, dear," she said; "nothing ever can come between us. Once two people realize mutual truth, how can anything come between them again? All the trouble in the world arises out of falseness. Search in your mind, and see if it isn't so?"

Lassie reflected. "You're putting so many new ideas into my head," she said, "I suppose I'll go home with nothing of my old self left in me."

"Not quite that," said Alva. "Your old self wasn't so bad, Lassie, dear. But the world has a way of hammering all its votaries into a certain set of molds, and I'd like to see you casting, instead of cast,—do you know the difference?"

[144]

"Alva," said Lassie, with sudden appealing earnestness, "you weren't like this when I saw you last; what changed you?"

"I had the convictions then, but not the courage. Now I have the courage, too."

"What gave you the courage?"

"Surely you can divine?"

"Love."

"Yes, dear, love. Love for him. All courage has its root in love of some kind."

"Alva, you teach me more each day."

"Yes, and I'll teach you more and more and more yet, and so on and so on until we part, and then I'll go on learning myself."

"Hasn't your lesson any end?"

"Love hasn't any end, dear, any more than it has any beginning. And so my lesson hasn't any end, either."

"But—"

"I know what you are going to say, but that isn't real love. That which can end has never been,—all the real things in existence are eternal."

"But they—the people that—well, you know, they thought that it was love—didn't they?"

"Yes, dear, and little children think that there are bears in dark closets, and ever so many people think that money buys happiness. The world is full of lies, Lassie, but if one puts the test to them they all fade away. You don't understand yet—but wait."

"I want to understand."

"But you are not ready to understand yet."

[145]

"But I am ready, I will learn to be ready."

"Yes, and I'm going to teach you. But I have to go slowly because I have to hunt for the words. You are such a little thing—such a baby—to be trusted with life; because you see most people never live—they just exist. They are only a few steps up on the staircase, and when they are dragged or pushed above the place that they are in by nature, they are apt to be dizzy. I want to teach you life, Lassie; but I don't want to make you dizzy." She paused, and a whimsical little smile danced across her face; "and besides, dear, we must get undressed. It is after ten o'clock."

"Just a minute more, Alva; it seems as if I cannot break off right here. And I won't be dizzy. I know that whatever you think and do must be right and best. I want to learn to think just as you do. I want to be told how you learned. I always knew you were so very good, and truly, dear, I wouldn't have been surprised if you'd chosen to marry a missionary or to go to that island where the lepers are—not after the first minute, you know; it would have been just like you."

"Oh, no, Lassie, it wouldn't have been like me at all. For ever so many reasons. My first duty in life—the duty that comes before every other—is to my father and mother. No claim could be strong enough to justify my leaving them; and then, besides, I'm not a Christian, except in the sense that I believe with Christ, and that isn't enough for any mission or any leper nowadays."

There was a little pause; then Lassie said: "But you are going to leave your father and mother now, aren't you?"

Alva smiled. "But for such a little while, dear," she said, gently; "you forget how short the time is to be!" There was an instant's pause and then she turned suddenly and her face had the bright color of deep emotion flaming in it. "Lassie, Lassie," she exclaimed, with a strength of feeling that startled the other into a sudden cry, "I'm trying to be calm, I'm trying to talk to you quietly,—I don't want you to think me a mad woman,—but I am so much closer to some other keener, sharper world of soul and sensation than you or any one can realize, that I can hardly curb myself to the dull, unknowing, unfeeling, throb, throb, of this one. Don't you know, Lassie, that people are getting married every day,"—she stopped and pressed her hands tightly together, her eyes starring the pallor of her face with that curious radiance of which the young girl had spoken to Ronald. "Oh," she went on, "to think that people are getting married every day because they need cooks or because they need care, or because the man has money or because the girl is pretty, and they go forth un-understanding, and they live along somehow; and the word that means their sort of companionship is all that I can use to speak of the evening that I shall return here, his wife, and fall on my knees beside him and realize that all my loneliness and waiting and hoping has ended, and that at last—at last—we are to be together, even if only for a few weeks, a few days, a few hours. A foretaste of eternity! A memory of what was in the beginning of all things!"

[146]

Ceasing to speak, she clasped her hands more tightly yet, and her eyes closed slowly. Lassie sat still and trembling. Her breath came unevenly, but she saw that Alva's swept in and out of her bosom with a wide evenness that belies unconquered emotion. After a minute the other opened her eyes and laid her hand lightly upon the girl's head. "I frighten you, I know that I frighten you," she said; "you think that I am crazy after all."

[147]

"No, I don't, Alva; but I can't think what kind of a man the man can be to make you feel that marrying him will be so different from marrying any other man."

"You can't think, because you don't know what love can mean to people—what it has meant to him or what it has meant to me."

Then she sprang up and began to undress herself rapidly.

"I don't see how you can bring yourself back to earth, Alva, after you have felt like that."

Alva smiled. "But we must live on the earth, Lassie, and be of the earth. We are made for the earth. God gave us our souls, and he gave us our bodies, too. And he meant both to work together."

Lassie sat still and meditative. She had herself been carried out beyond her depth and could not get back easily. She was, in truth, a little dizzy.

[148]

CHAPTER XI

THE WAR-PATH

Mrs. Ray in the post-office managed to keep track of Mrs. O'Neil's personal sweeping of the Lathbun bedroom until it was terminated. Then she left the United States Government's appointment in charge of Mr. Ray's first wife's youngest daughter, and hid herself down the hill.

Mary Cody and Mrs. O'Neil were in the kitchen discussing the results of the investigation when she entered.

"Well, you'll never guess what I found," said the landlord's wife; "you'd never guess if you guessed till Doomsday."

"What did you find?" Mrs. Ray tucked in the ends of her shawl with fierce joy,— "a pistol?"

"No;" Nellie O'Neil's brown eyes glowed and her face shone; "guess again."

"Oh, I can't guess," said Mrs. Ray, impatiently. "A monkey? A love-letter from the king of England? A lot of stamps? I don't know,—I can't guess."

Mrs. O'Neil nodded her head very slowly, and with deeply seated meaning.

"Go on," said Mrs. Ray, "tell me. I'm in a hurry. Yes, I am."

"I found six case-knives!"

"Six case-knives!"

[149]

"Yes, that's what I found."

"Six case-knives! Well, of all the—What did they want them for?"

"One was broke off short."

"Any blood on it?"

"Oh, Mrs. Ray!"

"Well, I just asked."

"They were all clean."

"And one broke off?—hum!"

"What do you think about it, Mrs. Ray?"

"I hope it'll be a lesson to Sammy Adams never to take two strange women in on a rainy night again. The Bible, even, is severe on strange women."

"Did he take them in?" Mrs. O'Neil opened her brown eyes widely.

"Take them in! He kept them all night. Haven't you heard about it? And never told me, either. That's just like a man. Flattering himself that I'd give a second thought to any woman living. Six, you say, Nellie, and one broke off?"

"The broken one is one of the six."

"They could have broken it off in his heart, just as easy! My, to think of the chances that man took! Didn't they have anything else? Did you look under the mattress?"

"Yes,—I looked everywhere. There's a hair-brush that I'd have thrown into the gorge a year ago if it had been mine, and a bent pin and a broken mirror, and that's all."

"I declare. Well, it's a very good thing that I set you to looking them up. Yes, indeed. I shall look them up in all directions now, myself. I shan't leave a stone unturned that I can even tip up on one side. To think of those case-knives! And one broke off! And Sammy Adams taking them in like that! But then, it isn't for you to criticize him, Nellie, for you've taken them in yourself. You can thank your stars you haven't had a case-knife stuck in you before now. How do they carry them, anyway?"

[150]

"They were wrapped in a piece of red flannel."

"Red flannel! Why, you said all they had beside the knives was the hair-brush and the mirror. Red flannel,—hum! So blood wouldn't show on it, I expect. Was the edge of the blade of the broken one rusted at all?"

"Not that I noticed."

"Noticed!"

"Don't you want to come up and see for yourself, Mrs. Ray?"

"I don't know. They might come in. It wouldn't look well for any one in the employ of the United States Government to be found spying about, you know. I'm always having to consider my

country. Yes, indeed. But what do you suppose they have those knives for? I never heard of such a thing in all my life. Even if they used them for tooth-brushes, they'd only want one apiece."

"I think you'd better come up-stairs."

"And Sammy Adams taking them in like that! That poor innocent! Not but what he was a fool; think of me opening my doors to two tramps!"

"Come on up-stairs. They won't be back till noon. They've gone chestnutting in the Wiley wood. They can't be back till noon."

The door opened just here, and Alva came in with Lassie behind her.

[151]

"Have you told them?" Mrs. Ray asked.

"What is it?" Alva asked.

"We don't know what to think about Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter," said Mrs. O'Neil.

Alva glanced quickly into both their faces and then at Lassie.

Mrs. Ray tucked the ends of her shawl in, folded her arms, and closed her lips tightly for a second before opening them to speak. "I never did like their looks," she declared. "I'm not surprised over what's come out!"

"I never liked their looks, either," said Lassie, "but what is it? Has anything happened?"

"No," said Mrs. Ray, "nothing in particular, only we're beginning to find them out. You can't pretend to be somebody forever without any trunks. Case-knives are good in their way, but they don't take the place of trunks."

"Case-knives!" Alva exclaimed. "Oh, what do you mean?"

"There, Nellie, you see how they strike any one," said Mrs. Ray, with deep meaning.

"But have they case-knives with them?" Alva asked,— "not really?"

Then Mrs. O'Neil told her story.

"You'd better all lock your doors nights after this," said Mrs. Ray; "you don't want to take Sammy Adams' chances if you can help it."

"But what should they have the knives for?" Lassie asked.

"They have their reasons," said Mrs. Ray, darkly; "you know you told me the other day, Nellie, that the reason why they sat in the kitchen with their feet in the oven so much was because their shoes was all wore out; they've got their reasons for everything they do, depend on it. If they're honest, why don't they have their shoes patched when they're wore out? If they were respectable, why didn't that girl buy some black laces instead of wearing brown ones. I always keep black shoe-laces in my grocery business."

[152]

"Maybe she doesn't know that," suggested Lassie.

"Yes, she does know," said Mrs. Ray, "for I told her so one day when she played come for mail."

"I didn't know you kept shoe-laces," said Mrs. O'Neil. "I've always bought them in Buffalo."

"Well, I do. Yes, indeed. I keep pretty nearly everything—except case-knives. There's nothing out of place in keeping shoe-laces in a grocery business, not until after you begin to wear them, and for my own part they seem to me just as decent as shoe buttons which all the town would be up in surprise if I didn't have them in my grocery business."

"Yes, I knew you kept shoe buttons," said Mrs. O'Neil.

"I keep everything, except strange women travelling after dark. My store is a general one. I thank heaven there's nothing of the specialist in me. I'd of starved if there was, or been obliged to charge very high for very little work, which would mean starving in a while anyhow, so being no doctor I couldn't stay a specialist long even if I tried."

"I think you ought to come up-stairs and see their room, Mrs. Ray," Mrs. O'Neil said, going back to the main question.

"What is it about their room?" Lassie asked.

"There isn't anything about it—that's what it is," said Mrs. Ray; "respectable people always have things about their room. Yes, indeed. But of course women walking across country nights can't carry much fancy fixings even if they don't mind stopping all night wherever the rain catches them."

[153]

"Did they stop over night anywhere?" Lassie asked.

Mrs. Ray adjusted her shawl. "Such doings!" she muttered; "I never heard the like. That's one way to work the game. I never had any game. I just had the work. Whenever there came up something as had to be done that nobody in town could do, I was glad to learn how for the money. Yes, indeed. And now they come along and live on the fat of the land, case-knives and all."

"Do let's go up and see the room," pleaded Mrs. O'Neil.

Mrs. Ray wavered. "Well, if Mary Cody will stand in the hall and watch?" she stipulated.

"And you must come, too," said Mrs. O'Neil to her two guests; "there isn't anything to see—it isn't prying—it's just the wonder how they can get along without anything at all that way."

Alva was rather pale.

"Do let's go," Lassie whispered.

Alva smiled sadly. "Yes, we'll go," she said.

Mrs. O'Neil called Mary Cody and stationed her below. Then they all four mounted the stairs and went along the plain hall to the plain door at the end.

"You keep everything very neat, Nellie," said Mrs. Ray; "it's a pity you don't stick to nice people who can appreciate nice things. If you go taking in people like the Lathbuns too often, you might just as well give up and get the name for it. I wouldn't dare stay under the same roof with them, myself."

[154]

Mrs. O'Neil made no answer, simply pressing the door at the end of the hall and—as the door yielded—entering first.

Mrs. Ray and Lassie were next. Alva did not go in, but stood still in the doorway.

It is hard to conceive the special effect of that interior on each of the four.

"Did you have any little things around before you swept?" Mrs. Ray asked, standing in the middle like the head of some royal commission in the days of the Dissolution.

Mrs. O'Neil—in the capacity of the layman left to represent the monks flown—replied that she had found all as bare as now.

"Well, you told the truth, Nellie," her friend remarked; "there's the hair-brush and here's the mirror. But where are the knives?"

Mrs. O'Neil pulled open the upper drawer, and in one corner lay the roll of red flannel.

Mrs. Ray unrolled the knives and examined them with care. A case-knife is rather limited as to its power of revelation, however, and she soon laid them down.

"Well, I never!" she said, with heaviest emphasis.

"What do they sleep in, or wash with?" Mrs. O'Neil suggested.

"The towels are yours, of course, Nellie?"

"Of course."

Lassie looked around the simple bedroom with its absolute bareness. She felt pitiful.

"They're comin' over the post-office hill!" Mary Cody suddenly yelled below. The effect was magical.

[155]

Lassie and Alva fled into their room.

"I feel like a burglar myself," exclaimed the young girl, as she shut their door.

Mrs. Ray was going down the stairs in the hall outside. "There," she exclaimed, "did you hear that? That's the way it goes when you harbor criminals. They're very catching."

"Oh, do you really think they're criminals?" Mrs. O'Neil asked, in great distress.

"Well, Nellie, put the case-knives and Sammy Adams together, and then the way they pick up other folks' chestnuts and having no comb and only half a brush for the two of 'em—it looks bad in my eyes."

"But what shall I do?" Mrs. O'Neil asked.

"Ask Jack if they pay their board regularly; that'll help you to know some," propounded the postmistress solemnly, and then she returned to her government duties forthwith.

[156]

CHAPTER XII

ANOTHER PATH

As Lassie closed the door, Alva moved to her favorite post by the window and stood there looking out; the young girl looked anxiously towards her friend. "What happens to those people doesn't really matter to us, does it?" she asked after a minute, some atmosphere of trouble permeating her.

"Everything matters, dear."

"But, Alva, you hardly know them, and they *are* common."

"Perhaps so, dear, but that room,—two weeks in that room with nothing, no comforts such as we think absolutely essential—oh, it makes me feel terribly. Life is such a puzzle. Ledge seemed such a simple-hearted, secluded little nook,—and first I ran into the big, soul-wringing problem of the dam, and now here are these two lives. Lassie, whatever else they may or may not be, they are human. It can't be joy to live like that. There must be some reason for their doing as they do, and I can see no reason except the one the girl told me."

Lassie began to wash and brush for dinner; Alva continued to stand at the window.

"That was the first time that I ever went into a room where I was possibly not wanted," she continued, presently. "It seemed so strange. And such a room, too. Oh, it all has made me fairly heart-sick. I wonder what the end is to be. As I say so often, there are no accidents, no chance happenings in life; if anything enters within my circle, there is a reason for it. Either they are to do for me, or I am to do for them, and I wish I knew which it were to be. I am so sorry for them!"

[157]

"Then you don't think that they can be doing wrong—are perhaps bad?"

"No," said Alva, firmly; "I'll never think that of any one. Nobody is ever bad. The word is too complete. It says more than it means to express."

"They couldn't be going to do anything for you."

"How can you tell, Lassie? Sometimes in doing for others we do a thousand times more for ourselves. Haven't you learned that yet?"

"No, not yet—not with people of that sort."

"They don't look to be so wrong," Alva spoke half-musingly. "They just look like plain, quiet people. I'm sure there's no evil in them!"

"Perhaps she made up the love affair?"

"She never made that man up, Lassie; that man is a real man. You can't 'make up' men like that."

"But if he is rich and loves her, would he let her be living this way and chasing her around that way. That does seem so awfully funny, to me,—for a rich man to spend the nights outside the window of a girl who hasn't even a change of pocket-handkerchiefs,—and she isn't pretty either, you have to admit that, Alva?"

"Lassie, you do look at everything from such a petty, worldly standpoint. Of course it isn't your fault, but you judge too easily. How do you know what rule governs that man; there are some men that no one can understand,—they seem to be a race apart. All their springs of action differ from the usual sources. I've been in love with such a man—I'm in love with him now—I am going to marry him. The ordinary woman wouldn't care much for a love that had to be set aside for bigger things, as his for me was at first. But I understood. I accepted the situation. All situations have their key—their clue—if one can get a little way outside of body and senses, and then study them thoughtfully."

[158]

"Well, but if the man is an exceptional man as yours is, what can interest him in such a girl?"

Alva shook her head. "You don't find her interesting, and you will never go near enough to her spirit to change your view; but she interests me, and some day you'll come to see that every human being is full of interest, if we will but take the trouble to hunt the interest out. I have learned that lesson, and all that I can think of is the apparent trouble and need of these two."

"Would you have a man as great as the man you love, marry such a girl with such a mother, Alva?"

"I would have people who love sincerely always marry, whoever they love."

"But if he is so wild that a woman who hasn't even an extra hairpin wants to hide her daughter from him, do you think he'll make her happy?"

There was a pause.

"Lassie," her friend said, presently, "do you know I used to be just like you. I saw only the finite, too."

"Yes?"

[159]

"Yes, and I often wonder what would have become of me if I had not learned through love to finally escape out of the bonds and shackles of ordinary conditions, and to contemplate them only as either behind or below me. How can we judge in the case of another? All that I know absolutely in this case is that I have strayed into the midst of a pitiful story. All I can do is to try

to help that pain. That poor girl is nothing but a passing ghost to you; to me she is a link in the chain-armor of life that covers my spirit during its earthly war. As I said before, there are no chance meetings, there are no accidents; there's nothing trivial in life after one once grasps the greatness of the whole. You can make things trivial by belittling them, or you can make them great. I make Miss Lathbun great because a man who is great is interested in her."

"But how do you know that he's great? Or that he is interested in her? She may have made it all up; I think that she did, myself."

Alva turned from the window.

"My dear child," she said, approaching the girl and laying her hand on her shoulder, "I feel as if there were a thick veil between us; how can I tell you what I think, when you don't want to understand what I try to say? Suppose she did make it up? Suppose she and her mother are anything you please? Still, I'd be glad that I believed in them. One little grain of real belief may possibly be the seed of a new life for them; and even if it isn't, think what it means to me to be able to believe in people. It means that I am looking for good, instead of looking for evil. Can't you see how much better that must be for me personally?"

Lassie lifted her eyes to see what she called "the white look," on Alva's face. She felt ashamed of her own standpoint. [160]

At that instant the dinner-bell rang loudly below.

"Oh, we'll see them now!" Lassie exclaimed, all other thoughts fading.

Alva gave her a quiet glance. "Yes, we'll see them now," she said, turning towards the door. [161]

CHAPTER XIII

AND STILL ANOTHER PATH

It is difficult for one who has never taken an ocean voyage or lived in a small village to realize the tremendous strides which interest, friendship, love, or confidence can make in a very few days, or even hours. I met three girls once whose kind parents had provided them with a chaperon and sent them abroad to improve their minds. They met men on the Lusitania (a record trip, too) going over, and all three were engaged when they landed. Instead of improving their minds in Europe, they bought their trousseaux, and then came home (another record trip) and were married. A small village is just the same; one is introduced and after that it goes like the wind. Women tell each other everything that they shouldn't, and virtues which would never be noticed in a city beget the deepest and sincerest admiration and affection. The dearth of conventionality and variety draw spirits easily together. Perhaps the purer air is a universal solvent for pride and prejudice. At any rate, to make a long story short, Lassie and Ingram were in love with each other before Alva had finished having the porch of her house painted, or before Mrs. Ray had succeeded in tracking the case-knives to their suspicious lair of crime.

It's delightful to fall in love on the sea or in the country, quite as delightful as to fall in love anywhere else. It is too bad that fickleness is rated so low, for really the emotion of slowly discovering that one is entering Elysium should be too great an experience to be foregone forever after. However, we must not forget that fickleness is rated low because humanity long since discovered that being in Elysium is still better than making an entrance there, and furthermore that of all sharp edges known, Love is the one most easily dulled by usage. Therefore it is best to adhere to the dear old rules for the dear old game, and only thank Fate with special reverence when sea-breezes or country zephyrs float around one's own personal setting-out. [162]

Lassie didn't know that she was in love; she only knew that she was very happy. Ingram didn't know that he was in love; he only knew that he was very happy. Alva, whose soul sank daily deeper into the near approaching abyss of her profound longings, noticed nothing. But every one else knew, of course. Joey Beall, the invisibly omnipresent, saw them alone together somewhere nearly every day. Mrs. Ray watched them come and go together for mail. Mrs. O'Neil, who never had believed that Ingram was in love with Alva, wished them well with all her heart. For she felt sure that Alva wasn't in love with Ingram, either.

"I'm glad to have something pleasant before my eyes just now," she said to Mary Cody, and Mary Cody knew that she referred to the feeling over the dam, which daily grew keener, and to the Lathbuns, who, it was now openly known, had never paid any board since their arrival, but merely referred to their banker in Cromwell, who, it appeared, was out of town, and could not send on their October check until his return. [163]

"I don't know what there is about looking at them," said Mary Cody, who was fifteen and grown

up at that (and who did not refer to Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter); "but every time he looks at her while I'm waiting on them, I feel as if I'd just about die of joy if Ed Griggs would look at me once that way."

"Don't talk nonsense," said Mrs. O'Neil, severely.

The days which bore such momentous happenings upon their bosom flowed swiftly on, and the week was speeding by—was gone, in fact.

"It doesn't seem possible, does it?" Lassie said, as she came across the bridge with Ingram one afternoon. He had happened to return from the long-distance telephone in Ledgeville by way of Alva's house; and she had happened to be ready to go home, and Alva had happened not to be ready. "It doesn't seem that it can be only a week. I feel as if it were months, instead. Do you remember that first day, when Alva told me, how I cried and how horrible I thought it was. And now I feel as if it were too sad for words, but something so great and lovely and sacred, that I'm sort of hushed in joy to have seen it all. I can see her side now, and when I go back to the world and hear people say the things that I thought myself when she first told me, I know that they are going to hurt me awfully. And yet she says that they will not hurt her."

"No," said Ingram, thoughtfully, "she seems to be quite beyond being hurt. I never saw any one who impressed me just as Alva does."

"It's very wonderful to be with her all the time," Lassie went on; "nothing seems to affect her for herself, but only things about other people. She doesn't seem to think her thoughts for herself any more, but just for others. It's how she can study and learn and carry on some part of his work for him after he's gone; it's how she can teach the people around here that Ledge won't profit in the end by being turned into a big lake or a big manufacturing district; it's how she can only prove to people that those two queer women are really honest, and really nice to know."

[164]

"And do you agree with all her views now?" Ingram asked, recalling the first of their meetings and the difference in Lassie's views from her friend's then.

"I think it's very splendid how she loves. I thought it was terrible at first, but now I—" she hesitated; "I"—she stopped altogether.

"Go on," said Ingram; "what were you going to say?"

The girl looked down the cañon of gray, barren beauty, and then up towards the sunlit valley of sweet, sunshiny, farming country. "Perhaps you won't believe me," she said, her eyes for the minute almost as distant in their withdrawal as Alva's own; "but now, I—truly—I envy her. I would give anything to love as she does. I would almost give the world to see life as she sees it. You see, I have begun to understand what she means when she says things."

Ingram was deeply stirred by pathos of which Lassie herself was ignorant. The young desire to learn to drink of bitter waters! The longing towards the crown of thorns stirs them, because they can appreciate the sublimity of martyrdom, and cannot measure the agony!

She had stopped and laid her hand upon the bridge-rail. Involuntarily he laid his hand upon it, holding it within his strength and warmth.

[165]

"When she talks to me of him," Lassie went on, seeming unconscious of the hand and looking far ahead, "I forget myself, I forget Mamma, I forget my début; I live only in her and her hope. I never saw love like hers; she lives in him—in it—not in the world, and she's so sure of the next world and of their future. It goes all through me, the wonder of it. I can't tell you how I envy her. She said when I came that she would send me back home all different, and I see now that she will do it."

"But I don't want you different." The words burst from the man's lips. Mountain tops are serene and glorious and very close to the clouds, but oh, the good warmth, the dear, cosy loveliness of those soft green slopes far—so far—below.

Lassie was too deeply engrossed to notice. "I shall go back to my home a better girl," she said; "and I shan't let myself forget what I've learned here."

Ingram thought that she had heard, and felt himself silenced.

There was a minute of stillness, and then they walked on. The October evening was falling chill, and the night wind came winding up the gorge.

"Do you agree with her about the dam, too?" the man asked finally, as they approached the end of the bridge, striving against an echo of bitterness.

"Oh, yes, she has converted me about that, too. She took me down to call on Mr. Ledge, and when I saw that dear, courtly, old gentleman, and heard how quietly and earnestly and sadly he and Alva talked about it, I came to see how different all that was, too."

[166]

Ingram waited a second or two; then he said:

"And Mrs. Lathbun,—do you believe in her too, now?"

Lassie laughed. "No, I don't," she said, very positively; "I'm awfully sorry for them both, but I cannot believe in them."

"Alva does."

"Yes,—but Alva—"

"Yes, well,—go on."

"I mustn't. Indeed I mustn't. I promised, and this time I must keep my word. But Alva has a reason for believing in them."

"Is it a good reason?"

Lassie reflected. "No," she said, finally; "I don't think that it is a good reason at all."

They were at the hotel door now.

"Well, I'm sorry for Alva," said Ingram, "because I hate to see ideals shattered."

"Oh, but they may justify her faith."

"I am more inclined to think that they will justify your doubts."

Lassie looked pleased. She valued Ingram's opinion highly.

A little later Alva herself came home, pale as she always was, but more weary looking than nightfall usually found her.



ALVA.

"Lie down before supper," Lassie suggested; and her friend accepted the suggestion.

"Come and sit beside me," she said, in a tone that was almost pleading; "give me your hand. I'm really quite used up."

Lassie perched beside her on the bed, and took the long slender hand between her own pretty little white ones.

"You are a wise little maiden," Alva said, smiling into her face. "I shall fight this away quickly. I know much better than to be weak. I understand the scientific, spiritual reasons for it quite well—it is that I am under a double strain these days, and also—" she hesitated—"I think that I am really under a triple strain," she said, "you do not guess how close to my heart that poor girl has

come through her description of her lover. I think of her so often, and such a strange undercurrent sweeps up in me. I try to understand it, and I can't; but I wonder if it can be some troubling of myself because the one whose life is so valuable must go, and the one whose life has no value will remain. I do not begrudge any one anything, God knows; but my heart winces when I think that his soul will go on and leave me alone, while a body that is the same as his will live and live for another. I am brave, I am strong; my higher self has courage and understanding to cope with any problem that may come, but it seems as if this one laid me on a rack, because—because—" she stopped, and then in a low cry: "Lassie, she doesn't seem to me to be worthy of even his body. Perhaps I misjudge her, but even the human presentment of such a man should have a wife of greater caliber. Somehow it hurts me, somehow everything hurts me to-night. You see, dear, you were right. In some ways. Yes, you were right."

There was a pause, during which Lassie just gently stroked the hand between her own.

"Do you know what I believe?" Alva continued. "Some crisis is preparing. I don't at all know what it is, but I feel it coming. I am certain—confident—that God has some new wisdom close in hand for me. Happy or sad—it is coming very close to-night. And whatever it is, I must go bravely forward to meet it."

[168]

Lassie shuddered ever so slightly.

"Ah, you think that it is some sorrow," Alva said; "my dear, would you credit me with telling you the truth, if I told you that there is a comfort in understanding that verse about whom He loveth He chasteneth? He doesn't call upon the weak among His children to bear what He has sent to me, to us. And if there is some heavy sorrow,"—she stopped, and presently added quite low,—"not my will, but Thine be done!"

Lassie was deeply touched. She felt tears rolling down her cheeks. The dusk had closed in and she could not see Alva's face, but she felt that she, too, was weeping.

Presently a freight train, going by, drowned everything by its roaring clank for five minutes, and when all was still again, Alva said: "Come, let us dress for supper!"

She rose at once and lit the light, and Lassie saw with astonishment that she was smiling and bright as usual. Alva caught her surprised look. "I'm a creature of strong belief, dear," she said, laughing, "and I know that whatever is hard, is worth itself. That is what one must try never to forget. I wouldn't wish any one else my life to live, but it is its own reward. The best thing in the world is to measure the real standards of earth and heaven. That is what I am doing."

[169]

"Don't you think perhaps you're overdoing, Alva?" the girl said, putting the question in the way of timid suggestion. "Don't you think you crowd even yourself too fast?"

"Can any one learn to be good too fast? And then the great strain is for such a little while, dear. Don't you see that in the world's eyes my giving will be limited to these few weeks, and that in heaven's eyes I shall then give all that I have and all that I am. Like him, I have pawned my existence for a purpose. I shall redeem both." The look of ecstasy that had opened to Lassie the gate of Medieval faith, flooded her face. "What a life I shall live in those few brief days," she said, softly; "how we shall enjoy our little oasis of bliss in the desert of loneliness. I shall learn so much—so much. And the best of the learning will be that I shall learn it from him."

Lassie watched the uplifted look. The enthusiasm of the novice was hers. As she had confessed to Ingram, envy dwelt at her heart. I wonder whether envy is a vice or a virtue when it stirs a longing to emulate one whom we recognize as better than ourselves?

[170]

CHAPTER XIV

DEVOTED TO COATS AND CASE-KNIVES

"He moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform," chanted Mrs. Ray, briskly, turning from the stove, with a hot iron in her hand, towards the visitor then entering the door. "Yes, I'm just pressing the seams. The mail was awful late—they had a bad wreck on the road, killed three pigs—and the crowd is just gone. When the mail's late I'm always late, too. Yes, indeed. Those two in love come up for the hotel mail, while that poor, blind thing went over alone to look at what she fondly supposes is going to be her happy home. Take a chair. How's Lottie Ann? And, Mrs. Wiley, what do you think about those case-knives in the bureau drawer?" for the case-knives were now the main topic of conversation all over Ledge and its attendant villages.

Mrs. Wiley had dropped in to see how her new winter jacket, now in process of active manufacture, was getting on. She sank down on a seat with a sigh which the chair echoed in a groan.

"Oh, I don't know what to do," she said, wearily. "Uncle Purchase came yesterday for a week, driving his colts, and last night one of the colts had colic; and Lottie Ann gets thinner every day. Seems like I do have so much trouble. Sister Anna got so tired with the improvements she's making, that she just up and off for Buffalo Wednesday, and that left Eliza to run things; and Eliza up and bit a chestnut and broke two teeth, so she had to go off to Rochester yesterday early. That leaves me with the whole thing now, and I'm running back and forth between houses from dawn to dark. I wanted to make the dress for Cousin Dolly's graduation, too, and the sewing machine always does for my legs; and yesterday here come Uncle Purchase!"

[171]

"Joey Beall is all used up over those case-knives," said Mrs. Ray, pressing assiduously; "he won't say what he thinks."

"How's it getting on?" asked Mrs. Wiley, hitching her chair nearer to the ironing-board. "Oh, Mrs. Ray, you'll never know the sacred feelings this coat will give me in church. Father was a true Christian, I always have that to remember. He had his faults, but he was a true Christian. Whatever went through his hands in the week, it was the plate at church that they held on Sunday."

"You don't need to worry over your father, Mrs. Wiley," said Mrs. Ray; "nobody doubted his religion—it was only that he charged such awful interest."

Mrs. Wiley sighed. "I know," she said; "it wasn't so much what he charged as bothered—"

"No," said Mrs. Ray, "it was his way of insisting on being paid."

Mrs. Wiley sighed again.

"Well, thanks to the braid, the land is saved," Mrs. Ray went on cheerfully. "Mrs. Wiley, do tell me, what do you think of all this at the O'Neil House,—and did you bring the buttons?"

"Why, I thought you said you could use the buttons on the suit," Mrs. Wiley answered, with an unhappy start; "you ain't going to tell me that you can't, are you?"

[172]

"No, I ain't," said Mrs. Ray, "it's only that it's so common for folks to forget to bring me their buttons that I forgot that you had brought yours. It's awful, isn't it, about those two Lathbuns?"

"I thought you'd lost 'em by accident," said Mrs. Wiley, seating herself again with a huge relief; "I don't know what I'd of done if you had, for my money is all in the chickens, and I never saw anything like the way my chickens have acted lately. I wondered if it could be that the surveyors upset them. They haven't been a bit regular, and so many weasels!"

"Perhaps the surveyors keep the weasels stirred up. I must say it would stir me up to have the sharp end of one of their little flags suddenly driven into the bosom of my family. Not but what a flag is better than a case-knife. You've heard about the case-knives, of course?"

"Yes, I heard about the case-knives. Mrs. Ray, don't you want me to try it on? What do you think they had 'em for, anyway?"

"Well, I don't know; you might on account of the sleeves, maybe. I don't know what to think—of course they never got any mail; when any one never gets any mail, it blocks my observation in all directions. I never saw any strangers that stayed so long, that never got any mail before. Why, those other girls are getting letters by the dozens. Such nice mail, too,—thick white paper and thin blue paper, and little prints of flags, such real, pretty mail. There, what do you think of that,—that's your back; like it?"

"Wait till I get out my glasses. But of course they must of bought postals, didn't they? Mrs. Ray, you have done that fine! You're the only one in the world that could ever fit me like that out of a suit of father's. I take such a number of under-the-arm pieces."

[173]

"Well, that isn't your fault, Mrs. Wiley; you come of a large family and you ought to be very grateful, because if you hadn't you'd never have had this jacket. If there hadn't been close on to two full breadths in each of his legs, I never could have got it out. There's nothing takes more skill than making a man's clothes over for any one but a boy. Yes, indeed. Very few can think how difficult it is to adapt a man's legs with the knees bagged, to either the front or back of a coat for you. No, they never even bought postals. They never write at all. What would they write with? You can't write with a case-knife."

"No, that's so. I must say I think you've put that braid on beautiful. Do you want me to slip it on now, or shall I wait? Uncle Purchase is up at the house always, you know, and I mustn't be gone too long, but Lottie Ann's there, so it don't matter much, after all."

"I'll be ready in a second. I'd be further along, only Sammy Adams was in last evening, and he hates to see me sew every minute. I sewed a good deal of his visit—I don't know why I should consider Sammy Adams's ideas when he don't consider mine. Taking in any one nights that way! I tell you I had that out with him once for all. There,—that's your pocket; big enough?"

"Well, I wouldn't make it any bigger. What did he tell you about his taking 'em in? Mrs. Ray, I took your advice and tried milk on Lottie Ann, and she can't take any but buttermilk. Will that do her as much good as milk in its first?"

[174]

"I don't know why it shouldn't. I tell you frankly, Mrs. Wiley, you'll need every inch of the room in this pocket. You may have your prayer-book and a box of peppermint, and two or three other

little things, and you'll find this pocket very handy; the way I've got it cut it'll hold as much as a small valise. I wouldn't cut it off, if it was my coat. I always need all my pockets. But then I always have to carry so many things, a corkscrew and a monkey-wrench and the key to my hens. He said the rain was pouring down, and he didn't see anything to do but take them in. Of course, if you're Sammy's easy kind, and it's raining, too, you can see how that would be. He'd take a snake in, if it asked him with a smile."

"What do you think of cutting off about a half inch? I don't wonder that he took them in, myself. But, Mrs. Ray, she don't like milk, anyhow, and shouldn't you think morning and night was enough?"

"I'll do it if you say so, of course, Mrs. Wiley. But I can't see myself cutting them off, if they were mine. Of course, two glasses is better than none, but two isn't six. I only know if it was me I'd never of let them in, in this world."

"I'll try to get her to take four. Shall I slip it on now? Do tell me what else he said?"

"If she was my girl, I'd see she took what I told her; I don't believe in spoiling children. No, you'll have to wait. Why, Mrs. Wiley, would you believe that that poor innocent didn't know a thing about the case-knives till I told him. You know he don't often come to town."

"Well, I never! I told Uncle Purchase all about it, and he promised me he'd never take any one in. I thought I'd better be on the safe side, even if Uncle Purchase hasn't let any one come into his house for twenty years. Isn't it strange? But then Uncle Purchase is strange. The last time I was in his house was when Abner was a baby. He had a dozen tissue-paper hyacinths planted in real pots with the earth watered, to make them look real. Uncle Purchase's quite a character."

[175]

"Sammy said they rapped—that was how he came to first know that they were at the door."

"Uncle Purchase never goes to the door. He's so deaf he couldn't hear a peal of thunder if it stood outside rapping all night, and that last time I was there he had his trunk all packed standing in the hall. He never unpacked it after he went to the Centennial. He said it would be all ready for the next Centennial. They have them so often now, you know. He's so odd. He went to the Insane Asylum once for a little while, you know, but it didn't do him a bit of good, so he came back home. Uncle Purchase is so odd."

"Sammy said they were a sight. He said two drowned rats washed up by a spring flood would be dry and slick beside them. Sammy always did talk just like a poet. Yes, indeed."

"Uncle Purchase says very pretty things, too. He's so loving to Lottie Ann, he said yesterday she winged her way about the house like an angel. I thought that was a sweet way of putting it, but it kind of depressed me, too, she's so awful thin. Shall I slip it on now?"

"Not yet. Don't you think maybe he just meant a fly? The last ones go so slow that they might make him think of an angel."

"No, he meant Lottie Ann. Uncle Purchase always says what he means. He brought Lottie Ann a daguerreotype of his mother. It's so black you can't see a thing, but it showed his kindness. I thought Lottie Ann would bring the chimney down trying to thank him—he's so awful deaf. He thought she was asking who it was, and he just roared about it's being his mother, until I called Lottie Ann for her milk. He's always been so fond of Lottie Ann. If she outlives him, I'm most sure he'll leave her the farm. I wish she'd drink more milk."

[176]

"I was speaking about her to Nathan and Lizzie when they were up yesterday. You know Lizzie was delicate, too. Nathan thinks the Lathbuns had those knives to pry open windows."

"Oh, my heavens!"

"He says you can pry open any window-catch with a case-knife. Yes, indeed."

Mrs. Wiley opened her eyes. "Any window?"

"Yes, that's what he said. And poor Clay Wright Benton was in here, too, and I spoke to him about them, too, and he said that you could, too."

"My!" Mrs. Wiley's tone was appalled. "Did Clay seem frightened? I suppose they aren't afraid of anything,—they've got the parrot, you know."

"I don't know how that would help them. It hangs upside down, yelling 'Fire, Fire,' rainy days, until nobody can possibly think it means it."

"Well, but it wouldn't make any difference what it said, would it, if it woke them?"

"But they're so tired being woke, it can't wake 'em any more. Clay says nothing wakes 'em now. Even Gran'ma Benton falls asleep while it's calling her names."

[177]

"Dear me," said Mrs. Wiley, seriously. "I wouldn't care about having one for myself. I never let the children call names, and I just couldn't be called names by a parrot."

"Clay says his mother don't like it. She's tried to teach it Bible verses. But names are so much easier. Bible verses are so long. And they don't come in where they make sense. The short ones are worse yet. There's 'Jesus wept'—that's the shortest verse in the Bible, and that never would make sense. The parrot says 'Twenty-three,' and that always makes sense. This world is meant to

go wrong, seems to me. Case-knives just swim along without paying board, while an honest woman has to scrub her church once a week on her knees and labor like a heathen Chinese in between times."

"Well, Mrs. Ray, what are we coming to?"

"I told Edward Griggs what Nathan said, but Edward thinks they're government spies sent out to keep track of the surveyors, and they have the knives to dig with."

"To dig with!" Mrs. Wiley was full of amazement.

"You know they do scour the country pretty freely, and that would account for one being broke."

"There's more strength in a broke knife than in one that isn't, of course. Government spies!"

"It would account for a lot of things. Edward Griggs is a pretty smart man; he was at the Chautauqua last year."

"Didn't they used to call them scouts, Mrs. Ray? Seems to me I've heard of them in the war."

"Oh, they call a spy anything—spies don't mind what they're called as long as nobody knows who they really are. If they are government spies, I'm glad to know it, because they'll be having an eagle eye out in every government direction. I think I'll wash the post-office to-morrow, just on the chance. I didn't want to wash it till after I'd filed my bond. I sort of like to get my bond off my mind first, and clean up afterwards."

[178]

"I'll ask Abner if he's heard anything from Josiah Bates lately. Joey Beall is going over to Foxtown to-morrow or next day, and he says his cousin there married a Cromwell girl; he's going to ask all about them there. Mrs. Ray, seems like those women must be something out of the ordinary. It would be too barefaced never to pay your board, otherwise."

"Well, whatever they are, we'll soon know now. People are looking them up in all directions. Mrs. Kendall's got an aunt in Cromwell, and she's written her about the case-knives. But she says her aunt never writes letters, so she don't expect to find out much that way; still, you never can tell."

"Well, Joey may find out a good deal. My cousin Eliza always says you'll find out all there is to find out, if you get hold of Joey Beall. Mrs. Ray, can't I slip it on now? I've *got* to go back to Uncle Purchase, Lottie Ann is so weak she won't be able to make him hear a thing by this time; and if he can't hear, it always worries him because he's so afraid of growing deaf."

Mrs. Ray thoughtfully regarded the jacket. "I'd like to of got the collar on," she said; "but you can put it on now, I guess."

Mrs. Wiley stood up and donned the garment.

"The sleeves are short," said Mrs. Ray; "but that's fashionable this year. There was no other way, anyhow. I had to get 'em out from the knee down, and he was short there—like an elephant."

[179]

"How does it look in the back?"

"It's a little short in the back, but nothing to speak of. You see I had to swing the backs to get the coat skirts free of his side-seams; it sets very well, considering that."

"Yes, I like it," said Mrs. Wiley; "and I have my fur to sort of piece it up at the neck, anyway. You know, Mrs. Ray, if those two women are spies, I should think they'd wear nightgowns. I shouldn't think they'd want to attract so much attention, and of course not wearing nightgowns attracts lots of attention."

Mrs. Ray—having her mouth full of pins—made no reply.

"Lucia Cosby thinks they're tramps and nothing better," Mrs. Wiley continued; "nobody can understand Jack's keeping them so long."

Mrs. Ray continued silent.

"Ellen Scott says she's afraid of them; she thinks it's so queer they're not having any coats. But Ellen was always timid. She never got over that time the boys dressed up like Indians and kidnapped her on April Fool's Day when she was little."

Mrs. Ray stuck in the last pin and freed her mouth. "Well, all I can say is, we'll soon know now," she said; "all the wheels in the gods of the mills is turning now, and in the end the Lathbuns will be ground out exceeding small I hope and trust and am pretty sure of."

Mrs. Wiley looked down over herself with an air of intense satisfaction. "I don't see how you ever got it out," she repeated with deeply appreciative emphasis.

"You know those are Nellie O'Neil's shawls they wear," Mrs. Ray went on, beginning to unpin the new winter coat from its owner. "Nellie's an awful idiot to let them have those shawls; they'll walk off some day, and leave her without shawls or pay,—that's the kind they are. Yes, indeed."

[180]

"Nellie's too good-hearted."

"She and Jack are both too good-hearted."

Mrs. Wiley went to the door and took hold of the knob. "Well, I must go now. Lottie Ann will be all

tired out if I stay any longer. And we never leave Uncle Purchase alone. He always takes the clock to pieces or does something we can't get together again, if he's left alone. He asked after Susan Cosby last night, and I told him she was dead four times and then I got Lottie Ann and the boys in, and they took turns telling him she was dead till nine o'clock, and then Joey brought our mail and we got him to tell him she was dead, and then all Uncle Purchase said was: 'Is she, indeed? When did she die?' Oh, my heavens!"

"Well, if you must be going," said Mrs. Ray, "we may as well part now. The Giffords are coming here for dinner, and I've got to begin to cook it."

Mrs. Wiley thereupon departed.

[181]

CHAPTER XV

LEARNING LESSONS

The wide range of standpoints is one of the most interesting studies in this world. A man on a hill can look to the horizon in all directions, and wonder about all the little black specks which he may see thereon, and all on the horizon can see the little black speck on the hill and draw their own conclusions as to what it may be. Ledge thought city people lacking in intellect because of the way they "took the Falls," and the visitors thought the townspeople lacking because of the way in which they "took the Falls." Mrs. Ray knew that Ingram and Lassie were in love, and Ingram and Lassie didn't know it; and Ingram and Lassie had been told by Mrs. O'Neil that Mrs. Ray would eventually marry Sammy Adams, while Mrs. Ray herself not only didn't know that, but had declared herself to be "dead set" against the proposition. The State had appointed a commission, and Mr. Ledge was troubled over its results; and all the while Creation, in the first of its creating, had settled the outcome of the commission's task definitely and forever. And so they all went merrily, blindly forward, Alva, like the evening star, moving serenely in the centre, almost as unconscious of her own position in people's eyes as the evening star is unconscious of telescopes. She was happy in her ideal existence, and always hopeful of good to come for others. Her aims were high and true, her sincerity splendid, and Lassie was learning a great deal—more than either of them guessed, in fact. And the second week was now going blithely forward, while Alva worked and waited, hoping each hour for the telegram that should summon her to bring her lover into the haven her love was building. But the telegram came not.

[182]

"Lassie," she said, one noon, as they stood on the bridge looking down into the tumbling waters below, "I wonder if I were ever like you, and I wonder if you will ever be like me!"

"How so?"

"If you will ever be really in love? I can't believe that very many people really know what love means,—that is, in the way that I mean it. If they did, it could not possibly be a shock to any one to see me doing what I am going to do. It would seem the only thing to do."

Lassie made no reply for a little, then she said, slowly: "When we love, we look forward to life together generally; that is why people won't understand you." She hesitated again. "I mean—that seems to me to be the reason; perhaps I'm wrong."

Alva reflected, too, her eyes upon the autumn glory flaunting its color over the deep gray shadows before her. "Even if one puts it all on the material plan, I should think that the whole world would recognize by this time that it isn't the man that a woman loves that fills her soul with ringing joy; it's the way in which she loves the man. It's herself and the effect of himself upon her thoughts that counts. It isn't the house, but the life within the house that makes a home, you know."

[183]

Some shy, latent color rose up in Lassie's face. "I never thought about it in just that way," she said; "but I suppose it's the truth."

"My dear, it is the truth. Of course it is the truth. No one to whom sufficient has been revealed can doubt it. If you can't see it so, it is because you are not yet old enough to comprehend. When I say 'old enough' I don't mean the Lassie who is eighteen; I mean the Lassie who began long before this mass of rock became even so stable as to be shifting ocean sand. I mean the Lassie who departed out of God to work in His way until she shall return to Him in some divine and distant hereafter."

"Oh, Alva, you do say such queer things!"

"Perhaps; but you see I *know* all this. It came to me through dire hours of need. I've demonstrated its truth, step by step. Try to grasp the idea."

"Do people ever think you crazy?" The question came timidly.

"Every one always thinks any one or anything that they can't understand, crazy. Mrs. Ray thinks me crazy, and it's very difficult for me not to consider her so."

"Alva!"

"Yes, really."

"I'll try to consider you sane."

"Thank you very much, dear." She smiled brightly. "Oh, Lassie, it's such joy to have you to speak to. I was so choked and crowded with thoughts before you came. It was so blessedly good that if I could not stay with him, I could come to this quiet spot and have the house and you to help me wait the days away. You see, Lassie, one has to be part body in spite of everything, and it's so hard to keep your body up to your soul. Sometimes it seems to me that all of a sudden I am drawn into a whirlpool and cannot get hold of anything solid. I don't know just what it is, but I imagine that I feel as they say the Saxons felt when they saw the comet flaming in the year of the Conquest, that something portends. And it seems to me so hard that I could not have stayed with him. But they wouldn't hear to that."

[184]

Lassie pressed her hand. "I don't wonder at the way you feel," she said, sympathetically; "there must be so much that is hard in your mind these days."

"Words are poor to tell what I feel," said her friend; "that is what binds me to him,—it is that he and I do not need to speak. We can feel without translation."

"I wonder if I shall ever be loved like that," Lassie murmured wistfully, and at her words the delicate flame illumined her face again.

Alva did not notice; she was looking down into the cleft beneath, and watching the little river fret itself into foam and spray.

"Look!" she said suddenly. "Isn't it lovely in the noon sunlight? Fancy the countless centuries on centuries that it must have taken the river to cut itself this path. There was once a great lake on the other side—the side above the bridge—and it is with the idea of restoring that lake that the State is having this survey made. The difficulty is that the State isn't geologist enough to know that the lake's outlet flowed out there to our left, and that this river is comparatively a new thing. If they remade the lake, the lake would be desperately likely to remake its old outlet."

[185]

"Would it hurt?"

"Hurt! My dear, it would be another Johnstown Flood."

"Oh, dear! Do many know that?"

"Yes, dear; but it wouldn't drown the men who will own the water-power, so what does it matter to this world of yours."

"But is that right—to look at anything in that horribly selfish way?"

"In what other way do rich financiers look at anything? But there will come a time when a change will dawn. Look, dear, down there; see the rainbow dancing on the spray. Well, that's the way that public opinion is going to come in among us soon—in a rainbow of truth."

"It will be beautiful everywhere then?" Lassie asked, smiling.

"Very beautiful!" Alva stared down upon the writhing, leaping waters below; "and I shall have given my all towards the dream's fulfilment. And I shall have learned from him how to devote my life to the same great ends that he served. Lassie, when one comprehends that not happiness but usefulness is the end to be worked towards, then one begins to see what living really means."

"How much it is all going to mean to you!"

"How much? Ah, only he and I can guess at that! There will be something quite different from all the imaginings, in our sweet, sad days of work and suffering and comforting. I dare not try to picture it to myself. I only think often of how I shall pause here in my walks to come, and steal a long look over this scene, so as to go home and describe it. He loves beauty and he loves wood and water."

[186]

"You'll go back and forth across the bridge often then, won't you?"

"When I'm married, you mean?"

"Yes, when you're married."

"My dear, fancy what a joy Mrs. Ray will be to us. I shall go for the mail expressly so as to tell all that Mrs. Ray said to me when I went for the mail." She paused and smiled and sighed. "Lassie, I wish I were strong enough not to mind one thing. I know so well—so very well—just how it will look to every one,—above all to my parents, who are to be driven half mad, even though I shall only ask a few months' freedom, in return for all my life before and after. I wish that I might be spared the sharp, keen realization of all that."

Lassie's eyes sought hers quickly. "But you have a right to do as you please, Alva."

"Have I, dear? It seems to me sometimes as if I were the one person who had no right to do as

she pleases, not even in that which concerned her most. You know that every one thinks that if a woman marries with a prospect of years of happiness taken or given, she is justified in going her own way. Any one would feel that, would understand that view. I never could have done that, because my life was too heavily loaded with burdens and responsibilities; and his was the same. It was because we were so hopeless of happiness for so long that we do not cavil over the wonder of what is offered us. Because if it had come in the form that it comes to others, we must have refused it. It did come to us in that form, and we did refuse it. It was only when it returned in a guise that the world calls tragic, that we could accept it for our own."

[187]

"Yes, Alva, I understand," her tone was a cry, almost.

"Lassie, remember one thing, and don't forget it during any of these hours that we shall spend together. If I read life by another light than yours, it isn't because it was natural to my eyes. Once I might have recoiled even more than you did, when I first told you. God's best purposes for humanity require that we recoil from what seems unnatural. But there are exceptions to all rules, and in return for two human lives freely offered up on the altar of His world, He gives, sometimes, a few days of unutterable happiness to their spirits. Lassie, he was big, he was splendid; you know all that he was as every one else does. If I had been young, if I had been ignorant enough to dare to be selfish, and if he had been young and ignorant enough not to know how necessary he was to thousands,—why, then, we might have been happy in the way that two people out of a million sometimes are. But we had gone beyond all that, or else we passed beyond it the instant we realized; at any rate, we knew too well that I was bound hand and foot on the wheel of my life and he was bound on his. We had to set our faces in opposite directions and go on. Straight ahead. The world for which we sacrificed ourselves will never even be grateful. The world could not have understood why we should make any sacrifice; the world generally disdains those who do the most for it. Isn't that so? If you tell any one in these days that your first duty is to do right by your own soul, and that that means doing what is best for all other souls, they stare. If I say to you that I could bear to live alone and he could bear to live alone, because we both knew absolutely that we had had centuries of one another and should win eternity united, you'd stare, too."

[188]

"I wouldn't quite—" faltered Lassie.

"Don't try to, dear; only think how it is to him and to me now, when we are to have this short, this pitifully short space of time together—to have to take it in the face of such an outcry as will be made. When I creep back into life again, with my heart broken and my dress black always from then on, I shall be so notorious, such an object of curiosity for all time to come, that my friends will prefer not to be seen in public with me. When I think of my home-going to tell them, my very soul faints. My father abhors any form of physical deformity; what he is going to say to my marrying one who is so maimed and crushed that he can not use his right hand, I can't think. And then there is my mother, to whom sentiment and religion are alike quixotic. What will she say?"

She was silent, and then she suddenly left the rail and moved on.

"Ah, well, if it could only stay bright like this until we came back together! But that is impossible. What we shall see together will be the snow lying softly over all, and the brown, curving line of the tree-tops and the pink sunset glow in the west. He will lie in his chair and I shall sit on a cushion thrown close beside him, and with that one hand that they have left him pressed to my face, we shall look out over all the wide, still world and talk of that future which no one can bar us out of, except our own two selves. God can say 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant,' but He proves in the saying that the doing and the goodness and the faith all emanated from the one who served. Religion is such a grand thing, Lassie; I can't understand any one with intelligence choosing to be an atheist. And lately, since I have realized that the real trinity is two who love and their God, I have been overcome at the mysticism of what life really means. Oh, I'm truly very, very happy. As I look over these hills and valleys, I think how all my life long I shall be coming back here—not to weep, but to remember. I shall be left lonely to a degree that hardly any one can comprehend, because for me there will be no possible chance of any earthly consolation; but in another sense I shall never know grief at all, for I know, with the absolute knowledge that I have attained to, that grief like all other finite things is unreal, and that my happiness is eternal."

[189]

They were now on the tracks quite near the hotel.

"I wonder if Mrs. Lathbun got a letter from her lawyer to-day," Lassie said, changing the subject suddenly.

They went up the steps and opened the door, and there in the hall, on her hurried way out to meet them, was Mrs. O'Neil, her face quite pale with excitement.

"Oh, what do you think?" she cried, opening the door into the dining-room; "come right in here. What *do* you think?"

"What is it?" both asked together.

"The biggest surprise you ever got in your life. They're swindlers!"

Alva stepped in quickly and shut the door. "What?" she stammered; "who?"

"They're swindlers, both of them! It's all in the Kinnecot paper." She held out a paper which she had in her hand to Alva. "You can read it; it isn't a bit of doubt but what it's them."

[190]

Alva, turning quite pale, took the paper and read:

A PRETTY FOXY PAIR

Two women, claiming to be mother and daughter, came to the Walker House in this village a few nights ago and inquired for supper and a night's lodging, claiming they were very tired, as they had walked over from Warsaw. Landlord Walker thought it a little strange that they should have walked over when there were two railroads that run from that village through here, but said nothing and gave them supper and furnished them a room. They remained in their room until about noon the next day, when they paid their bill and left, taking the overland route for Ledge, or in that direction. They registered at the Walker House as Mrs. Ida M. Lathbun and Miss H. A. Lathbun, which are the same names given by a pair who had been spending the summer in the vicinity of Silver Lake and Perry. As stated above, they came here from Warsaw, and our esteemed brother editor in that place paid them the following compliment in a recent issue:

'A woman and daughter who are going from town to town, boarding in one place until compelled to seek another because of their inability to pay their board, have been found to be in this town, coming here from Perry and Silver Lake, where their record is one of unpaid bills. They are smart, clever, female tramps, who have no income and no visible means of support.'

It is said at Silver Lake they stated they were expecting some money, and would stay at one boarding-place as long as they could, and when fired out would settle at another. They finally went to Perry, and, when compelled to leave there, walked across the country to Warsaw, stopping at Mr. Samuel Adams's overnight, while en route.

[191]

The older Mrs. Lathbun is said to be an own cousin of Arthur Rehman, who has been before the public for one escapade or another for many years. She is said to have been well-to-do at one time, and is living in expectations of more money from some relative. The couple were fairly well dressed and intelligent looking women.

Alva's hand holding the paper fell limply at her side. She looked at Mrs. O'Neil and Mrs. O'Neil looked at her; while Mary Cody, who had come in from the kitchen, and Lassie looked at them both.

"Well, what do you think of it?" Mrs. O'Neil said, finally.

"I can't believe it," Alva gasped; "it can't be true!"

"Just what I said! You know I said that right off, Mary Cody? But Jack believes it. He's gone to Ledge Centre to see Mr. Pollock."

"Who is Mr. Pollock?"

"The lawyer."

"And where are they now?"

"Up-stairs. They never get up till noon, you know."

"How long have they been here?"

"Two weeks and a little over."

"Haven't they paid you anything?"

"Not a cent."

[192]

Alva became more distressed. "And the girl is so delicate, too," she said.

"Delicate! I should think that she was. Every third day the old lady has all my flat-irons wrapped in towels to put around her. And then, think of it! October, and not a coat or a flannel have either of them got."

A slight shiver ran over Alva.

"You're cold," said Mrs. O'Neil; "come into the kitchen. Mary Cody, you stand at the door and listen, for that old lady is a sly one."

Mary Cody stood at the door, and the other three went into the kitchen.

"Won't Mrs. Ray be pleased," said Mrs. O'Neil. "She was down at the church, or I'd have gone right up to her with the paper. It was she that set every one after 'em, because she was so crazy over their staying at the Adams farm that night. She's so jealous of Sammy."

"Ow!" exclaimed Mary Cody, interrupting; "I hear the stairs creaking!"

Mrs. O'Neil grabbed the newspaper and thrust it back of a clothes basket. The next instant Mrs. Lathbun, with an empty pitcher in her hand, came in through the dining-room door.

The large, heavily-built woman, not stout but very robust in appearance, had on her usual dress, and smiled pleasantly at them all in greeting.

"Was there any mail?" she asked, going to the stove and beginning to fill her pitcher from the reservoir as she spoke.

"No," said Mary Cody; "I went myself."

"Dear me, how annoying," said Mrs. Lathbun; and then, having finished filling her pitcher, she quietly retired again. [193]

"To think maybe she'll be in the jail at Geneseo to-morrow!" Mary Cody exclaimed, in an awestruck whisper.

Alva turned interrogative eyes towards Mrs. O'Neil.

"Yes, Jack is going to have them arrested," she said.

"Merciful heavens!"

"Isn't it awful? I'm sorry for them, myself."

"But—but suppose there's some mistake?"

"There can't be, Jack says."

Alva shut her eyes and stood still for a few seconds. "The poor creatures," she said, softly and pitifully,—then: "How did you say you came to find out about it?"

"A man from Kinnecot had the paper in the station, and Josiah Bates brought him over to our bar this morning and asked Jack if he could see how folks like that could get trusted. Jack said yes, he could see, and then he told the man from Kinnecot that just at present he was trusting the same people, himself."

"Oh, dear," Alva passed her hand wearily across her forehead; "it's awful."

"Yes, isn't it? The man gave him the paper then. And Jack's first idea was to take it right up-stairs to them, but then he thought they might skip before he could have them arrested, so he decided to drive over and see Mr. Pollock first."

"I can't make it seem true."

"No, I can't, either. Of course they never paid anything, but they're nice people. I've liked them."

"Then they won't know anything about all this until they are really arrested?" [194]

"No," said Mrs. O'Neil; "they'll eat dinner just as calm as they've eaten all their other dinners."

"Come, Lassie," said Alva; "that reminds me that we must get ready for dinner, ourselves."

"Do you want to take the paper up-stairs with you?" Mrs. O'Neil asked; "right after dinner I want to take it up to Mrs. Ray, but you can keep it till then if you like."

"No, thank you," said Alva, with her strange, white smile; "I read it all through."

When they were up-stairs Lassie exclaimed:

"There, now you see—"

But her friend stopped her with a gesture. "It's too terrible to talk about," she said, simply. "I must think earnestly what ought to come next."

Lassie became silent. [195]

CHAPTER XVI

THE WALK TO THE LOWER FALLS

"I certainly am going with Mrs. O'Neil when she carries that paper to the post-office after dinner," Lassie exclaimed, as soon as they reached their rooms. "Oh, Alva, this is the most interesting experience I ever had. I'm just wild. It's such fun!"

Alva came straight to her, laid her two hands on the girl's shoulders and looked into her face.

"Lassie!" she said, in a tone of appalled meaning, "Lassie!"

Lassie laughed a little, just a very little. "I didn't make them bad," she said; "it's just that I enjoy the fun of the developments."

"The fun!" said Alva, "the fun! When there isn't anything except tragedy, misery, and shame!"

"But, Alva, if they are that kind of women, isn't it right that they should be found out?"

Her friend dropped her hands and turned away.

"Oh, dear—oh, dear," she said, with a sigh that was almost a moan.

Later they went down to the dining-room. Ingram had not come that noon, and Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter were sitting placidly at their table. Alva and Lassie took their own seats as usual.

There are not many sensations so complexly curious as to be obliged to eat your dinner within five feet of two ladies who perhaps are to be arrested as soon as a man who drives a fast horse can get back from Ledge Centre with the sheriff. [196]

Mrs. O'Neil's criminal code, reinforced by such stray bits of procedure as she could recollect on short notice, led to a supposition on her part that the case would go almost in a bee-line from Mr. Pollock the attorney to the Geneseo jail. Therefore Mary Cody's eyes were full of rounded curiosity as she waited at table, and Lassie could not forbear to glance often at the quiet and simple-looking pair,—the mother in her dark blue print, with its bands of stitched silk, and the daughter with the red silk front that had so impressed her from the beginning. Alva could not look at them,—her mind was full of devious wondering. Mrs. O'Neil glanced in from time to time, her pretty face darkened by vague distress, mixed with some righteous indignation.

The door opened and Ronald Ingram entered. It was a surprise and a great relief, for of course he knew nothing and was consequently under no constraint.

Mary Cody rushed to lay a place for him.

"This would be a grand day to walk to the Lower Falls," he said, as he sat down; "why don't you do it? You haven't been yet, have you?"

"No," Alva said; "there hasn't ever been time."

"Why don't you go this afternoon, then? I'll go with you, if you like. I'm free."

"I can't go this afternoon; take Lassie. That will take care of you both at once."

"I think that would be fine," said Ingram, heartily, "if Lassie will like to go."

Lassie looked helplessly from Alva to the Lathbun family. "I couldn't go right after dinner," she said, hesitatingly, and stopped short to meet Alva's eyes. [197]

"Why not?" the latter asked; "wouldn't you like the walk?"

"Oh, I should like it very much," Lassie declared, her face flushing. It seemed to her very cruel that no such delightful plan had ever been broached before, when it was only just to-day that she wanted to stay at home. She looked at Ingram, and the wistful expression on his face was weighed in the balance against the thrill to come at the post-office when Mrs. Ray should read the Kinnecot paper. Such was the effect of the past week in Ledge upon a very human young girl.

"Why can't you come, too?" Ingram asked Alva.

Alva lifted her eyes to his, and in the same second Miss Lathbun at the other table lifted hers, and fixed them on the other's face.

"I can't this afternoon," she said, very stilly but decidedly; "I have something that keeps me here."

Lassie looked at her reproachfully. She was going to stay and hear Mrs. Ray! For the minute Lassie felt that she could not go herself.

"I think I'll stay with Alva," she said, suddenly.

"Lassie!" Alva exclaimed.

"Oh, come," urged Ingram; "it's such a grand day. You both ought to go. Come, do."

Alva shook her head. "I've a letter to write," she said; "I—" she stopped. There was a noise outside. It was Mr. O'Neil, driving up the hill towards the house! Mary Cody gave an exclamation in spite of herself, and darted into the kitchen. Mrs. Lathbun, who faced the window, said calmly: [198]

"Why, there's Mr. O'Neil, just in time for his dinner."

Alva turned her head, feeling cold, and saw there was no sheriff with him. Mrs. Ray could be seen standing out on her back porch, shading her eyes to make out anything visible. Of course Mrs. Ray did not know full particulars, but Josiah Bates had been to Ledge Centre on horseback and had seen the O'Neil mare hitched in front of Mr. Pollock's. The postmistress knew that something was up.

Alva drew a breath of relief. The sheriff had not come back, so they could not be arrested at once. Or else they could not be arrested at all. There seemed to be a hush of suspense in the room, but Mr. O'Neil did not enter to relieve it. Only Mary Cody entered, and Mary Cody's face was as easy to read as a blank book.

"Then you'll go?" Ingram asked again.

Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter rose and went up-stairs, leaving the other three alone.

"Of course she'll go," Alva answered; "go, dear, and get your wraps."

Lassie cast one last appealing look towards her, and then she also left the room.

"Ronald," Alva then said, hurriedly, "Lassie will tell you what has happened here. I feel confident that there is some error in it all, but whatever you think, try to be charitable, merciful. Don't be narrow in your judgment."

"Are you referring to your own affairs?" he asked in surprise.

"I am not the only one who craves mercy," she said, smiling; "there are many others."

[199]

"Sharing your views?" he asked, smiling in his turn.

"Lassie will tell you," she repeated.

"Alva," the man said suddenly, earnestly, "don't teach her too many ideals. We are mortal, and life is a real thing."

"I understood that perfectly," she replied; "but the world is not immortal and immortality is a real thing, too. A desirable thing, too."

"To be achieved by working on the mortal plane, remember."

"I have worked all my life upon the mortal plane; I shall be back there next summer, you know. Yet Lassie has learned to see only beauty in my immortal winter to be between."

"Ah, there is your error," said Ingram; "you expect to live this winter and return to your old life in the summer. But that's something that you never will be able to do."

"What do you mean?"

"You won't be able to go back next summer."

She looked at him sadly. "But I shall have to go back next summer," she said; "do not deceive yourself as to that. And now excuse me, I want to speak to her before she goes."

She left him and ran up-stairs. Lassie was putting on the hat that looked to the eyes of Ledge like a feather duster upside down.

"You're going to stay here and have all the fun," she protested; "oh, I'd give anything to see Mrs. Ray read that paper."

"But I shall not see her."

"You won't see her!"

[200]

"No, dear;" then she went and stood at the window in her favorite posture. "Oh, Lassie," she said, "I like to hear Mrs. Ray talk and I enjoy the funny things she says, but do you think that to look on at the hunting down of these two women is any pleasure for me? When I know why they are destitute—why they are in hiding."

"Alva," cried Lassie, "you don't mean you still believe that story?"

"Yes, I do."

"You're crazy!"

"I expect so. But I still believe the story."

Lassie stood still, staring at her friend's back. Then she went hastily forward, seized her impetuously in her arms and kissed her.

"Oh, little girl," Alva said, turning, "don't you see that it's charity, and if they really are not what they pretend to be and if it all really is a lie, it may be long before charity will cross their path again?"

"Alva," Lassie said, with her little whimsical smile, "you've taken all that nice, agreeable, aching desire to go to the post-office and see the paper read, completely out of me."

"Well, are you sorry for that?"

Lassie lifted her pretty brown eyes. "No," she said, frankly; "I'm not."

Then she ran down to Ingram and they set forth at once, for it is a long walk to the Lower Falls.

The day was magnificent. The bright autumn sun shone on the lines of steel that glistened beside their way across the bridge, and there was a silvery glisten dancing in all the world of earth and heaven and in the rainbow of the mist, too,—a glisten that bespoke the approach of the Frost King and the further glory soon to be. The glints of brown and yellow here and there amidst the red presaged that Nature's festival was daily drawing nearer to its white close. Ingram, looking ahead towards the trees that hid the little Colonial house, wondered and wondered, but was recalled by Lassie's bursting forth with the whole story of the fresh developments which they had left behind them.

[201]

"Oh, by George," Ingram exclaimed; "I'd like to have seen Mrs. Ray get the news myself."

Lassie felt herself fall with a crash back into the pit of ordinary views.

"Would you?" she asked eagerly; "oh, but we couldn't go back now; Alva would be too disgusted."

"Of course we can't go back now, but we've missed a lot of fun."

"Yes, I thought it would be fun."

Quite a little pall of gloom fell over both, in the consideration of what they had missed, and both stared absent-mindedly up and down the valley, seeing nothing except the vision of Mrs. Ray perusing the Kinnecot paper.

"Alva is so serious over everything," Lassie said presently, with a mournful note in her voice.

"She's too serious," declared Ingram.

"She's looking forward to so much happiness that she says she can't bear to add even a breath to any one's misery."

"And she isn't going to have any happiness at all."

"Don't you think there's any hope?"

"Of course there isn't any hope."

"What will become of that house?"

[202]

"I don't know, I'm sure."

"Shall you be here this winter?"

"I don't know about that. I don't know just how long it will take for the survey."

"But you will be here while they build the dam, too, won't you? And that will take years. Won't you live here a long time?"

"The dam is not a fixed fact as yet, you know; far from it."

"Isn't it? Every one talks as if it were,—that is, every one except Alva."

"But I couldn't live in that house, anyway; I wouldn't live there for anything, would you?"

"No, it would be full of ghosts to me. I'd feel about it just as you—" the words died on her lips, as she suddenly realized how their unconscious phrasing sounded. It was the first sunburst of the idea to her, and it stormed her cheeks with pink.

"No," said Ingram, unobserving, "that house would not affect any one but you or I, in that way; but for us—" thereupon he stopped; the idea which had come over the girl like a sunburst came over the man like a cloudburst. He was almost scared as he tried to think what he had said.

"Alva is—is—so set against it—the dam, I mean," he stammered, hurriedly; "she—she has—told me all her views."

"But she's different," said Lassie, catching her breath. "I don't know very much, but I know that it doesn't look just that way to others."

"The ultra-altruistic vaccine is already beginning to work again," Ingram said, trying to laugh; "but you must not attack me, you know—"

[203]

"I'm not attacking you," Lassie interposed, hoping her face would cool soon.

"Because, you see, I am nothing in the world but a mere ordinary, humble, civil engineer, sent up here by a commission to see what the situation is in feet and inches, and sand and gravel. I wholly refuse to take sides as to the controversy;" he had regained composure now.

"I suppose that you haven't really anything to say about it, anyhow."

"Nothing except to make a report. That's all."

Both felt relieved to be back on firm, friendly ground, but both were saturated through and through by the wonderful new conception of life bred by the accidental speeches. They did not look at one another, but went down the steps and along the curving road with a sort of keyed up determination not to let a single break come in the flow of language.

"But you must be glad to work on a popular project," Lassie said.

"But it isn't altogether popular," Ingram rejoined; "it's only popular in spots, you see. If every one around here was as wild as I have seen some people become when the business threatened their trees or their river, we might be mobbed."

"Why, I thought that every one wanted it. Alva said that the difficulty was that all the people who would do anything to save the Falls were not born yet."

"She was partly right, but not altogether. The difficulty is that, with the exception of Mr. Ledge, the people who are interested in preserving the Falls do not live here, and the people who will make money by the destruction of the Falls are right on the spot and own the land."

[204]

"Why, you talk as if you didn't want the dam, either."

"It is no use discussing my views; the dam will be a great thing. Very possibly there will be no more Falls, but the high banks will remain—until commercial interests demand their quarrying—and all we can do is to go with the tide and remember that while man is destroying in one place, Nature is building in another. There will always be plenty of wild grandeur somewhere for those who have the money and leisure to seek it."

"But Alva says that Mr. Ledge is trying to save this for those who love beautiful spots, and haven't time or money to go far."

"America isn't made for such people," said Ingram, simply.

Lassie thought seriously for a moment, until a glance from her companion hurried her on to say: "I suppose that we are too progressive to let anything just go to waste, and that's what it would be if we let all this water-power flow unused."

"Of course," said Ingram; "here would be this great tract of woodland, which might be making eight or ten men millionaires, and instead of that one man tries to save it for thousands who never can by any chance become well-to-do. No wonder the one man has spent most of his life investigating insane asylums; he is evidently more than slightly sympathetic with the weak-minded."

"Are you being sarcastic?"

"No, not at all. I like to look at the Falls, but then I like to look at a big dam, too; and sluice gates always did seem to me the most interesting wonder in nature." [205]

They were deep in the quiet peace of Ledge Park by this time, and only the squirrels had eyes and ears there. (They didn't know about Joey Beall.)

"Oh, how still and lovely!" Lassie exclaimed; "how almost churchlike."

The broad, evenly graded road wound away before them, and the double rank of trees followed its course on either side.

"I used to camp out here summers, when I was a boy. You've read Cooper's novels?"

"'Deerslayer' and all those? Oh, yes."

"Their scene was not so far away from here, you know; only a few score miles."

"There must be all sorts of stories about here, too?"

"Did you ever hear tell of the Old White Woman?"

"No."

"She lived around here. She was stolen by the Indians and grew up and married one."

"How interesting! I wonder how it would seem to really love an Indian?" Then Lassie choked—blushing furiously at this approach of the painful subject.

"You speak as one who has had a wide experience with white men." (Ingram felt this to be fearfully daring.)

"I've never been in love in my life." (Lassie felt this to be fearfully pointed.)

"How funny," said the man, "neither have I! Not really in love, you know."

Such thin ice! But the lure of the forest was there, and the lure of the absence of interruption, too. Lassie felt very remarkable. This was so delightful! So novel! Better than Mrs. Ray and the Kinnecot paper even. Why, this was even better than all Alva's love affair. Ten thousand times better! How stupid she had been. [206]

"How funny!" she said, looking up.

"Why do you say that?" Ingram asked, quickly.

He seemed quite anxious to know why she thought it funny that he had never been in love before, and that was so delightful, too. A big, handsome man anxious as to what she thought! She felt as wise as if she had already made her *début*.

"I don't know why I said it," she answered, laughing; "it just came to me to say it. Was it silly to say? If so, please forgive me, because I didn't mean it."

"There's nothing to forgive," said Ingram; "only I never expected you to say anything of that sort. You don't know anything about me and you haven't any right to judge me." He spoke in quite a vexed, serious way, and Lassie felt as wise now as if she had made two *débuts*.

"But you were in love with Alva years ago, you know," she said.

"I wasn't really in love; I only thought that I was."

"Oh!"

There followed a silence for a little while. Lassie was much impressed by the statement just made. Of course it wouldn't be polite to repeat to Alva, but it was very interesting to know, oneself. The road ran sweetly, greenly on before them, all strewn with piney needles. There was no sound except a little breeze rustling overhead, and the occasional fall of an acorn or pinecone.

[207]

"How does Alva's story affect you, now?" the man asked, suddenly.

"Differently from at first. When she first told me what she meant to do, it just pounded in my ears that he was going to die in that very house over there; and that they would have to carry him into it just as they would later carry him out of it. Oh, it did seem so terrible to think of this winter, and of her, sitting there beside him,—so terrible—so terrible!"

"And doesn't it seem terrible at all to you now?"

"Not in the same way. She has talked to me so much; she has made me know so much more of her way of looking at it. You know—"she hesitated a little—"she feels about death so strangely,—it doesn't seem to count to her at all. She feels that in some way he will be always near her; she says that he promised her not to leave her again."

"Poor Alva!"

"I suppose that he is such a very great man that he can affect one like that. I am beginning to see what very different kinds of people there are in the world."

"Thank God for that!" Ingram exclaimed.

"Alva says that he is one of the greatest men that ever lived. She says that to share even a few days of life with a man who has been a world-force for the world-betterment, would overpay all the hardship and loneliness to come."

They emerged into the sunshine just here, and the roar of the Middle Falls burst upon their ears. The fence of Mr. Ledge's house-enclosure stretched before them, and to the right, along the bank, towered two groups of dark evergreens.

[208]

"We can go through here," Ingram said, unlatching the gate.

So they entered the private grounds and passed around the simple, pretty home and out upon the road beyond.

"Everything is as sweet and quiet here as in the forest," said Lassie.

"Yes, it's a beautiful place," Ingram assented.

They went on and entered the wood path that goes to the Lower Falls.

"I cannot understand one thing," the man said, suddenly; "if they loved one another so much, why didn't they marry long ago? If I loved a woman, I should want to marry her."

Here was the thin ice again—delight again.

"They never thought of it," Lassie said, revelling in the sense of danger; "they couldn't. They recognized other claims."

Ingram walked on for a little, and then he said: "I suppose that what you say is true, and that with people like them everything is different from what it is with you and me."

(You and me!)

"Yes," said Lassie, "Alva doesn't seem to have minded that his work meant more to him than she did, and I suppose that he thought it quite right that she should do her duty unselfishly."

"It makes our view of things seem rather small and petty—don't you think? Or shall we call her crazy, as the world generally does call all such people?"

"I know that she's not crazy," the girl said.

"Shall we have to admit then that she is right in what she is going to do, and that instead of its being horrible, it is sublime?" He looked at her, and she raised tear-filled eyes to his. But she was silent.

[209]

"I think that we must admit it—for Alva," he added; "but not for ourselves."

The girl was silent and her lips trembled. Finally she said: "I believe that what she said is coming true, and that I am changing and that you are changing, too."

"Oh, I'm changed all the way through," he admitted.

It was a long walk to the Lower Falls, and yet it was short to them. Very short! But too long to follow them step by step. It was a beautiful walk, and one which they were to remember all their lives to come. It was such a walk as should form a powerful argument in favor of the preservation of the Falls.

[210]

CHAPTER XVII

RIGHTEOUS JUSTICE

Leaving Mary Cody to watch over the house, Mrs. O'Neil, the instant dinner was over, threw something over her head and hurried to the post-office.

Mrs. Ray met her at the door. "What is it?" was her greeting; "I know it's come out about the case-knives! Hasn't it?"

"You'll never guess what they are," said Mrs. O'Neil, entering the house and closing the door behind her. "Mrs. Ray, they're swindlers!"

"I knew it; I knew it all the time. How did you find it out?"

Mrs. O'Neil told her.

"Give me the paper."

The paper was unfolded, but as she unfolded it Mrs. Dunstall and Pinkie came running in one way, and Mrs. Wiley rushed panting up the other steps.

"Have you heard?" Mrs. Dunstall cried.

"Heard! I've heard it a dozen ways." Mrs. Ray was devouring the article as she spoke. "Sit down," she said briefly, without looking around.

"They can't be arrested till Saturday," Mrs. O'Neil said. "There isn't a mite of doubt but what it's them, but Mr. Pollock told Jack that the law is that he must give them notice, and then he must let them go before he can arrest them."

[211]

"Why, I never heard the equal," exclaimed Mrs. Wiley. "I didn't know that you must let anybody who'd done anything go, ever! What will Uncle Purchase say to that!"

"Well, if that isn't the greatest I ever heard, either," said Mrs. Ray, never ceasing to read; "that's a funny law. If the United States Government run its business that way, every one would be skipping out with the stamps."

"And Mr. Pollock said," broke in Mrs. O'Neil, "that no matter how big swindlers they were, we couldn't arrest them until some one whom they'd swindled swore to the fact."

"Well, why don't you swear, then?" interrupted Mrs. Ray still reading.

"Because Mr. Pollock says they haven't actually swindled us, till they really leave without paying, you see," explained Mrs. O'Neil.

"Lands!" commented Pinkie.

"Which means," said Mrs. Ray, always reading, "that the law is that you mustn't try to catch 'em until after you let 'em go."

"Seems so," said Mrs. O'Neil.

"I never hear the beat!" exclaimed Mrs. Ray. "Why, this paper says they'd been jumping their board all summer!"

"All summer?" said Pinkie.

"Well, I always knew they were no good," said Mrs. Ray, still reading; "they never got any letters. They come to the post-office sometimes to try to give themselves a reputation, but they didn't fool me, for they never got any letters. I don't misjudge folks if they don't get many, and if they cancel up good it says just as much for their characters as if they got a lot—maybe more, for a lot of letters may be just duns—but when there's no income and no outgo, better look out, I say. Yes, indeed. Do they owe you much, Nellie?"

[212]

"About thirty-five dollars," said Mrs. O'Neil; "but oh, dear! Why, they've made fudge and worn my shawls and roasted chestnuts—"

"Nellie, Nellie," it was a strange voice at the kitchen door. Everybody looked up to see Mrs. Kendal, almost purple from rapid walking. "I've just heard! Lucia Cosby ran down to tell me. We've got a Foxtown Signal that's got some more about them in. I run right over to bring it to you. I was sure I'd find you here. That's why the old lady always wore her rubbers—her shoes were clean wore through with walking, skipping out, all the time."

Mrs. Kendal sank on a seat, and the Foxtown Signal was spread out upon the table with the other paper.

"I thought that was a funny story about the trunks," said Mrs. Wiley.

"They've worn the same clothes for three weeks, to my certain knowledge," said Mrs. O'Neil,

"and not so much as an extra hairpin!"

"And they haven't any toilet things except a hair-brush that isn't good enough to throw at a cat, and a mirror that's broken," interposed Mrs. Ray; "you said so, Nellie, and I saw it, too."

"A broken mirror's bad luck," said Mrs. Wiley; "I hope you'll see that it's bad luck for you too, Nellie. Your husband's too soft-hearted to keep a hotel as we always tell every one who goes there to board."

"Well, he isn't soft-hearted this time," said his wife; "he's mad enough to-day, and he says he'll pay for his own ticket to Geneseo to bear witness against them."

[213]

Just here Mrs. Wellston, who lived in the first house over the hill from the schoolhouse, came rushing in.

"Oh, I just heard!" she panted, "they left a lot of bills at King's and at Race's Corners, where my sister Molly lives, they left a board-bill of eighteen dollars! They're known all over!"

"What do you think of that?" Mrs. Ray said, turning to Mrs. O'Neil.

Mrs. O'Neil gasped.

"The man who told Jack told Nathan and Lizzie that the old woman's husband died in the penitentiary," she said. "That's a nice kind of people to have around your house."

Mrs. Wiley gasped this time. Mrs. O'Neil gasped again.

"Jack said we must tell you all the first thing for fear she'd try to borrow money of some one. I told him he was foolish, because if they borrowed money of any one then they could pay us."

"He was only joking," said Mrs. Ray; "if they paid you, you wouldn't really take the money, for you'd know that they must have gotten it from some of us."

"On the contrary, you ought to have taken it, I think," said Mrs. Dunstall solemnly, "and then returned it to whoever give it to them."

Lottie Ann and Uncle Purchase now arrived to add to the festivity of the occasion.

"I guess nobody need worry over that pair's paying anybody any money they get their hands on," observed Mrs. Ray, fetching a chair for Uncle Purchase. "What are you going to do about it, when they come down and want to go out to walk next time, Nellie? Give 'em your shawls the same as usual, I suppose."

[214]

"Why, we've got to let 'em go or they can't skip and make themselves liable to arrest, of course, but the old lady said she could surely get money by to-morrow, and Jack has hired a boy to hang around the house and if they go out, track them."

"My sakes, ain't it interesting?" said Mrs. Dunstall. "And to think that they're up there this minute and have no idea of it all."

"I dare say they have been laughing at you all the time they were off chestnutting our chestnuts," said Mrs. Wiley. "My husband says if they'd sold all they've picked up, they could have paid their board honestly."

"But they weren't honest, you see," said Mrs. Ray; "honest people all get letters, or anyhow they buy postal cards of the Falls. And you ought to have taken my word for it when I suspected them, Nellie; those case-knives ought to have set you on to them."

"Well, well, and us seeing them walking all around for a fortnight," said Mrs. Dunstall; "and we so innocent, and they swindlers, and you boarding them for nothing,—dear, dear!"

"Well," said Mrs. Ray, "here's your paper, Nellie; what will happen next, I wonder?"

"Yes, I do, too," said Pinkie.

"You'd better all come down about five, and see if they did go out," said Mrs. O'Neil, with the air of extending an invitation to a party. "Why, that old lady told me that she'd been to the Boston Academy of Music."

"Boston!" said Mrs. Dunstall with a sniff; "they never saw Boston. Not those two. Not much."

[215]

"Oh, but they have," said Mrs. O'Neil; "I know that they have, for I've been there myself, and we talked about it."

"Well, I guess Boston has its crooks as well as other places," said Mrs. Ray, pacifically; "I guess if we can harbor swindlers and not know it, Boston can, too."

"I wouldn't believe it," Mrs. O'Neil said again. "But these papers make me have to; you see, there's the names, and Hannah Adele, and no paper would dare to print that if it wasn't true."

"True! Of course it's true," said Mrs. Ray; "I never would be surprised over anything anybody 'd do that would wear brown laces in black shoes and go in out of the rain at a strange house at midnight."

"Did she have brown laces in black shoes?" asked Lottie Ann, in a tone penetrated with horror.

"She did, and what's more, she pinned herself together. I see the pins sticking out of her, time and again, when she come in to stand around and wait for mail like a honest person would. No man is ever going to marry a girl who bristles with pins like that,—it'll be a job I wouldn't like myself to be the sheriff and have to arrest her. He'd better look sharp where he lays his hand on that girl, I tell you."

"Will she really be arrested?" Lottie Ann cried.

"Why, I should hope so," said her mother.

"As a law-abiding citizen yourself, who may take boarders some day, you wouldn't wish her not to be, would you?" said Mrs. Ray.

"I don't know," said Lottie Ann; "it seems to me very—very terrible to think that two women should go to jail."

"But they haven't any money, and they're swindlers," said Mrs. Dunstall; "they belong in jail. That's why we have jails."

[216]

"If they'd had money, they'd have received at least two or three letters," said Mrs. Ray. "If people have any money at all, there's always some one who wants to keep posted as to their health. Yes, indeed. No, they haven't any money. People that have money and never get up till noon is generally buying tea and matches, at any rate, but they didn't even do that. No, they ain't got any money."

"I couldn't believe it myself at first," repeated Nellie O'Neil; "and they certainly ate like people that aren't holding anything back. Two helps of everything, and didn't she go and take half a loaf of gingerbread up-stairs yesterday afternoon? As cool as a cucumber."

"They were both cool as cucumbers," said Mrs. Ray; "that's why they borrowed your shawls all the time, I guess. Cooler than cucumbers they would have been without them, I reckon."

"Jack went up and gave the old lady warning right after dinner," said Mrs. O'Neil. "He only stopped to just get a bite first."

"Well, I hope he didn't get a bite last, too," said Mrs. Ray, tucking in the ends of her shawl. "That pair was too comfortable with you to want to be warned to leave. Making fudge, indeed! I'm surprised at you, Nellie; I'd no more think of letting my boarders make fudge than I would of keeping them for nothing. You and Jack don't belong in the hotel business. You can't possibly make boarding people pay, unless you make them pay for their board."

"No, you can't," said Pinkie.

"Josiah was driving down to North Ledge yesterday, and he saw them getting over a fence in that direction," said Mrs. Wiley, rising. "He said they seemed to be learning the country by all means, fair or foul."

[217]

"Well, I don't want to seem unfriendly," said Mrs. Ray; "but I guess you'll all have to go. I found some ants in my grocery business this morning for the first time, and while I'm give to understand it's the regular thing in most grocery businesses, no ant need flatter himself that it is in mine. I'm going to clean out the whole of the three shelves this afternoon and sprinkle borax everywhere where it can't taste. So I must have this room. I'll be down to-night after mail, Nellie; good-by."

Thereupon they all departed.

[218]

CHAPTER XVIII

IN THE HOUR OF NEED

In the meantime Alva, left alone in her room, felt troubled, vastly troubled, by the sorrow and shame gathering so close to her. The emotions of those near by affect one keenly attuned, in a degree that the less sensitive would hardly believe possible.

She went and locked the door after Lassie left, and going to a chair that happened to stand close to the bureau, sat down there, leaned her face on her hand and thought earnestly of the whole matter.

"Why must I trouble so?" she said to herself, presently; "no one else does," and then she smiled sadly. "It is because I have set my face in that direction," she said; "I have vowed myself to service, just as he has vowed himself, for the love of God and God in humanity."

A light tap on her own door sounded, and she started, crying "Come in," quite forgetting that the

door was locked.

Some one tried the door and then Alva sprang up and unfastened it. It opened, and Miss Lathbun stood there in the crack.

"May I come in for a few minutes?" she asked, pale and with frightened eyes.

"Yes, come in," Alva said quickly; "come in and sit down." She drew a chair near to the one that she had been occupying. [219]

"I have come to you on a—" began the girl, "on a—on a—" she stammered and stopped.

"You are in trouble," Alva said gently; "tell me all about it."

"I am going to tell you; I have come on purpose to tell you. You were so kind and friendly the other day, and I—I—wasn't truthful; I didn't tell you everything."

Alva rested her face on her hand again and looked straight at her. "Then tell me everything now," she said.

Miss Lathbun returned her look. "Mr. O'Neil has just been up to tell Mother that we must pay our bill here, or leave," she said. "Mother is desperate. She doesn't know what to do, and I don't know what to do. I told you so little of the whole story. The truth is that he is actually driving Mother and me into poverty. The truth is that I don't know whether he ever really has thought of marrying me. Mother never has believed that he has. She doesn't think that he would put us to such straits if he was honest. Of course she doesn't know about his watching nights. I can't tell her. She'd go mad."

Alva contemplated her quietly. "But you love him?" she said.

Miss Lathbun's eyes filled with tears. "I do love him, and I believe that he loves me."

"You feel sure of it, don't you?"

The girl looked at her earnestly. "Doesn't one always know?" she asked.

Alva smiled a little. "One ought to," she assented; "well, then, how can he bear to make your life so miserable?" [220]

The white girl clasped her delicate hands tightly in her thin black merino lap. "I don't know," she said, in a voice almost like a wail; "but oh, we have been very miserable! We have such little income and it comes through the lawyer. He sent the lawyer to Seattle on business in July, and Mamma and I haven't had any money since. We have gone from place to place—we have almost fled from place to place; our trunks are held for bills; we are penniless, winter is coming, and—oh, I don't know what to do; I don't know what to do!" She bit her lip so as not to cry, but her pale face worked pitifully.

Alva looked at her in a curiously speculative but not at all heartless way. "Isn't it strange," she murmured, "that the resolution that drives one man to any heights will drive another of the same calibre to any depths?" She rose and went to her table. "Tell me," she said, taking a framed picture from before the mirror, "is he really like this? You said so before. Say it again."

Miss Lathbun took the picture in her two hands. "Oh, yes, yes!" she said, eagerly; "it is the same. They are just the same."

"What did you say his name was?" Alva asked, taking the picture from her and restoring it to its place.

Miss Lathbun told her: "Lisle C. Bayard."

Alva sat down again, and rested her chin on her hand as before. "I wonder how I can really help you. I am trying to be big enough to see."

Miss Lathbun's lips parted slightly; she looked at her breathlessly, and held her peace. [221]

"Even if you were lying to me still," Alva said presently, "I should want just as much to help you. If you cheated me and laughed at me afterwards, I should still want to help you. If you are an adventuress and I succored you, what would count to me would be that I tried to do right."

She spoke in a strange, meditative manner; Miss Lathbun continued to watch her, always white, and whiter.

"I cannot see why you and your mother came into my life," Alva went on; "but you have come, and I have been interested in you. Our paths seemed ready to diverge and yet just now they join again. Do you know, that a week or so ago I knelt in a church and took two vows; one was to accept without murmur whatever life might bring because for the moment I was so superlatively blessed; the other was to never again pass any trouble by carelessly. No matter what is brought to me, I must deal with it as earnestly and justly as I know how,—as I shall try to deal with you."

She got up, took a key from the pocket of a coat hanging on a hook near by, unlocked her trunk, opened a purse therein, and extracted some bills.

The girl watched her like one fascinated.

Alva came to her side and put the roll in her hands and closed her fingers over it. "It will settle everything," she said; "there, take it, go. Be honest again. Surprise every one. God be with you."

Hannah Adele looked down at her hand as if in a dream. "I was going to ask you for a little money," she faltered; "but this—this—"

"I know," said Alva, "I knew when you came in. Now, please don't say any more. Go back to your mother and tell her. I shall not say one word about it, you can depend upon me." [222]

The girl rose in a blind, stupid kind of way and left the room. When she was gone, Alva went to the window for a minute and looked out. The glisten of coming cold was in the air. The thistles were loosing their down and it floated on the wind like ethereal snow. She stood there for a long time. "Something is to be," she murmured, "I feel it coming. What is it?"

Then she went to her table, picked up a pen and wrote:

LISLE C. BAYARD,

Dear Sir:—I am acting under an impulse which I cannot overcome. It may be only a folly, but it is too strong within me to be resisted.

You may or may not know two ladies of the name of Lathbun; you may or may not be interested in them; but if by any chance you are interested in them, you ought to know that both have been threatened with terrible trouble. If the story which I have been told be really true it ought to make you not sorry, but very glad, to learn that in their hour of stress they found a friend.

Yours very truly ...

and she signed her full name.

After that she wrote another letter, with full particulars of the story. And when that letter, too, was finished, she slipped on her wraps and walked up the cinder-path to the post-office.

She found Mrs. Ray just in the fevered finale of her chase after ants.

"Put the letters on the counter," said the postmistress; "I'm standing on the post-box, and the Republican party is getting one good, useful deed to its credit this term, anyhow. I tried a soap box and bu'st through, and I haven't had a worse shock since I stepped down the wrong side of the step-ladder last spring, when I was kalsomining for Mrs. Clinch. But the post-box is as steady as the Bank of England and I feel as if for this one occasion, at least, my grocery business was coming out on top. Well, has anything new come up down your way since noon? Haven't paid their bill yet, have they?" [223]

"I think they'll pay it," said Alva, smiling.

"Pay it! Those two? Well, not much! You're from the city and don't get a chance to judge character like I do, but I tell you every one that is honest has got to have a change of undershirts, at least. I've heard of people as turned them hind side before one week, and inside out the next, but they washed 'em the week after that, if they had any reputations at all to keep up."

"Do you want to bet with me as to Mrs. Lathbun's paying her bill, Mrs. Ray?" Alva asked.

Mrs. Ray turned and looked sharply down from her government perch. "My goodness me," she said, "you surely ain't been fool enough to lend her money, have you?"

Alva was too startled to collect herself.

"Well, you deserve to lose it then," said Mrs. Ray, climbing down abruptly; "see here, it isn't any of my business, but I'm going to make it my business and tell you the plain truth, and if you take offence I'll have done my duty, anyhow. Now you listen to me and bear in mind that I'm twice your age and have got all the experience of a postmistress and a farmer, and a sexton and a grocery business and a married woman and a widow and a stepmother; if you've lent money to the Lathbuns you're going to lose it, for they're just what the paper said—they're a foxy pair and no mistake, and furthermore, with all the money you're spending on that house, you'd better be keeping your eyes open, mark my words." [224]



"IF YOU'VE LENT MONEY TO THE LATHBUNS YOU'RE GOING TO LOSE IT."

"Why, Mrs. Ray, what makes you say that?"

"Because I've got eyes of my own," said Mrs. Ray; "and I've been married too. I've been married and I walked to the Lower Falls beforehand, too. I saw 'em come up the road the first day, and I saw 'em going down it to-day. I'd send her packing, if I was you."

Alva laughed ringingly. "Oh, Mrs. Ray," she exclaimed; "I'm not going to marry that man, and besides, let me tell you something else; I haven't *lent* any money to the Lathbuns."

Mrs. Ray stared fixedly into her face for a long minute, then she said abruptly: "You tell Nellie not to send up for mail to-night. I'll bring the letters down. I'll be out filin' my bond, and I can just as well bring 'em down. It won't do any good your coming for 'em, because the post-office will be closed and me gone, so you couldn't get 'em if you did come."

Alva smiled. "We'll wait at the house," she said, laying her hand on the door-knob.

Mrs. Ray watched her take her departure.

"I'm glad she's give up the man so pleasant," she said; "and she's give up the money just as pleasant. Poor thing! She thought she was smart enough to keep me from seeing how she meant it. As if any one from a city could fool me!"

[225]

CHAPTER XIX

DOUBTS

Alva was sitting in her room, her hands clasped behind her head in her favorite thinking attitude when Lassie returned from her walk to the Lower Falls. The face of the older friend wore its habitual look of far-away absorption as the young girl entered, but the look was almost rivalled by Lassie's own look—for Lassie had returned from the Lower Falls with what was to be her own private and personal absorption forever after.

"Had you a pleasant time?" Alva asked.

"Oh, it was beautiful!" the young girl exclaimed, "we had such fun, too," she stopped, and hesitated; then something in the other's face made her ask: "Are they gone?"

Alva shook her head. "No, dear, they've received their warning, but they've not gone."

"Oh," said Lassie, relieved, "then they won't be in jail this night, anyway."

"No, nor any other night," Alva said, quietly; "I shall not let those women suffer shame and humiliation when a little money can prevent it."

"You are going to pay their bills!"

"No, but I am going to help them pay them."

"You are going to give them money?"

"I have given it."

[226]

Lassie stood still in surprise, and yet, even surprised as she was, there was a perfunctory aspect which had not been present in the morning.

"And I have written a little letter to the hero of Miss Lathbun's romance, too."

Lassie came close. "Alva!" she asked, "then you really believe that there is such a man?"

Alva put out her hand and pulled the girl down upon her lap. "I do believe it," she said. "I may be deceived in some ways, but the man is real, I know. As I said before, one cannot invent that kind of character."

"And you wrote him? What did you say?"

"Only a few simple words. I felt that it was the right thing to do; I did it for the same reason that I do all things. Out of the might of my love. If you ever come to love as I do, you'll understand how wide and deep one's interest in all love can become—yes, in all love and in all things."

Lassie leaned her cheek upon her friend's hair for a moment and did not speak.

"I know what you're thinking," Alva went on then (but she did not know, really). "But do you know what I have been thinking? I have been wondering. Surely no two people could seem further out of my realm than these two forlorn women, but I always said there must be a reason and a strong one, or else they would not interest me so, and now you see what it was. They were brought to me to succor, and that is almost the greatest joy that I know now."

Lassie felt real life slipping from her, just as it always did when Alva talked. She was silent and thoughtful, even her new sensation in abeyance for the minute. Love was drawing back a step and letting Mercy have its hour.

[227]

"But if they deserved punishment?" she asked finally, in a timid voice.

"Perhaps they do deserve it, but not at my hands. If I, feeling as I do, suffered them to go down yet deeper into the pit, I should do a cruel wrong. I can't do such a wrong, I must do right in so far as I know how,—and it's their good luck to have met me just now." She smiled.

"Alva," said Lassie, kissing her, "that's a very new view to me. The evil-doers deserve to be punished, but others ought to be doing good; so on account of those others and on their account mainly we are taught forgiveness of sins;" she laughed softly.

Alva opened her eyes. "What a forward leap your intellect has taken this afternoon," she commented. "I never dreamed that Ronald was such a Jesuit. Come now, jump up, we must go down to supper."

"But you'll just tell me what Mrs. Ray said when she saw the paper."

"My dear, I really haven't asked."

"Oh, dear; then perhaps she took it calmly! Have you seen her since?"

"Yes, she took this afternoon to clean ants out of the government precincts. She seemed calm to me."

"Goodness! Then I'm glad that I went."

Alva laughed a little. For some odd reason the laugh caused Lassie to blush deeply, although the laugh was absolutely innocent of innuendo.

Down-stairs, Ingram awaited them. At the other small table Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter sat as placidly as ever. The long table was full as usual, but there was a keen subtlety of interest abroad which rendered the conversation there fitful and jerky in the extreme. The mother and daughter began to feel uneasy, and before Mary Cody had placed the soup for the later comers, they rose and went quietly up-stairs.

[228]

"Do you know what they said when Mr. O'Neil gave them warning?" Lassie asked, when the others had also left the room.

"They said they'd pay the money just as soon as a letter could get to Cromwell and back," Alva replied. "They had been waiting for their own lawyer to return from day to day, but if it came to the question of real necessity they could get money from some one else."

The squeak of the outside door was heard; it was Mrs. Ray, and the next second she was in their midst.

"Good evening," she said briskly.

At the sound of her voice Mrs. O'Neil hurried in from the kitchen and Mary Cody followed her as far as the door and stood there, spellbound with eager interest.

Mrs. Ray was out of breath and had her shawl over her head and her bond under her arm. "I just run down before the mail to get Jack to sign this and find out if anything more 's come up. Sammy Adams was in to see me about five, and he's scared white over their being swindlers. He says to think of them swindling around his house all that night long! He's afraid to stay in his house now, and he's afraid to leave it. He was running to the window to look out that way all the time. I'm afraid Sammy's getting mooney. There were days when Mr. Ray used to be always looking out the window. Those were always his mooney days."

"Nothing new 's come up," said Mrs. O'Neil; "the old lady took her two cups of coffee same as usual, didn't she, Mary?"

[229]

"She took three to-night," said Mary Cody.

"Loading up to skip," said Mrs. Ray, significantly; "well, Nellie, where's your husband? He's got to sign this before I can go back. The United States Government won't trust me after seventeen years without my bondsmen are still willing to support their view."

"Jack's in the bar," said his wife; "I'll go and fetch him."

"Do sit down, Mrs. Ray," Alva begged. Ingram jumped up and drew out a chair. Mrs. Ray seated herself.

"Are they up-stairs, Mary?" she asked.

"Yes, went right up after supper," said Mary Cody.

"I thought they looked troubled," said Lassie.

"Well, they did post a letter, after all," said Mrs. Ray, turning to Alva. "I never malign any one, so I wanted to tell you that. They didn't come in and lay it on the counter, like honest people, but they put it in that box that the United States Government requires me to keep nailed up outside and unlock and peek into twice every day of the year around. Theirs was the first letter any one ever put in, I guess, because although folks feel I'm honest enough to be postmistress, they don't think I'm silly enough to look in that box twice a day, just because I said I would on my oath. The boys put June-bugs and garter-snakes in to try if I do; but I always find 'em before they've quit being lively."

"What did you do with the letter?" Mary Cody asked.

"Do with it! Don't I have to put any letter into the next mail and lock the bag, no matter what my feelings are? Yes, indeed."

[230]

"Where was it addressed?" asked Ingram, leaning back and putting his hands in his pockets.

"That I can't tell you," said Mrs. Ray; "my oath keeps my mouth closed on all business connected with the United States Mail, but I'll tell you what I did do. I copied the address off, and then I looked through the little book of post-office regulations and I couldn't find one word to prevent my bringing you a copy, so here it is."

She opened her hand as she spoke and showed a piece of paper. Lassie, who was nearest her, took it eagerly.

"Oh!" she exclaimed disappointedly, "this is the letter that she told Mr. O'Neil she'd write. It's to their lawyer. It isn't anything new."

"Well, give it back to me so I can tear it up," said Mrs. Ray; "I meant to tear it up, anyway. But where is Mr. O'Neil? I want to get my bond filed. By the way," she said, turning to Ingram, "you owe me two cents."

"Two cents!"

"Yes; the stamp come off of one of your letters, and I put on a new one. I've saved the other for you. It was a letter addressed to New York. You'll have to buy some glue if you're ever meaning to get your money's worth out of that stamp. I licked it good, but it won't stick. Too many been at it before you and me, I guess. That's the way with most stamps that won't stick, I always think."

"Here's the two cents," said Ingram.

"Thank you very much. Well, every one in town is wondering what the lawyer will answer them. He's a real man, for Nathan says he got beat for the Legislature once. But will he send them any money? That's the question!"

[231]

"What do you think?" asked Ingram.

"I can't have any opinion. Any one who's had anything to do with the Government closes my lips as a servant to the United States. It was very hard for me to give up having opinions when I first came into politics, but I'm so used to it now that I wouldn't feel easy if I could speak freely any more."

"But if you weren't postmistress what would you think?" Ingram queried.

"Wouldn't think anything; I'd know they'd skip! They'll skip to-night; mark my words."

"Oh, but they won't," said Alva, smiling; "they'll pay their bill—wait and see."

"Yes, I will wait and see," said Mrs. Ray, darkly. "I'll wait a long while and see very little. Yes, indeed. What sticks in my mind is poor Sammy Adams. He says he's afraid to sleep alone in his house, and he's too afraid of dogs and cats to have any to watch. He's going to put two hens in his kitchen to-night and roll a sofa against the front door. He says he knows every time the hens stir he'll go most out of his senses. Sammy says he wasn't meant to live alone."

"What did you say to that?"

"Said it didn't look to me as if he was meant to live with hens, neither. But where is your husband, Nellie?" (Mrs. O'Neil had just re-entered the room). "I've got to get hold of him. I'm in a awful hurry to get home. There's the mail, and I've got Sally Catt's dress to finish, too."

[232]

"He'll be in in just a minute," said Mrs. O'Neil; "did Sally decide to line it, after all?"

"No, she didn't decide to line it; but she decided to have me line it, which is more to my point. I'm sure I'm glad not to be Joey Beall and have to adapt myself to Sally; but then, if folks are still calling a fellow Joey after he's forty, I don't know that it matters much who marries him, and Sally hasn't changed her mind as to liking the house on the hill since he moved it up on the hill to please her."

"I'm sorry for Joey," said Mrs. O'Neil, warmly.

"Well, I'm not," said Mrs. Ray. "I'm not sorry for any one who's a fool. Speaking of fools, if they don't pay to-morrow, how much longer are you intending to keep them for nothing? I'd just like to know that."

"They can't get an answer to the letter before to-morrow night."

"Huh! So you're going to feed them all day to-morrow, too! Well, I don't know how you and Jack keep clothes on your backs the way you go on. I never saw people like you two. If I ever want to live free, I know where to come."

"Indeed you do, Mrs. Ray," said Mrs. O'Neil, her bright eyes filling suddenly; "indeed you do. You come right down here any day you want to, and you can stay here till you die. You know I've told you that a thousand times."

"You're easy," said Mrs. Ray, drawing herself up with great dignity. "I just believe you mean it, too, Nellie, and I just suppose if I was to come and borrow a hundred dollars without witnesses, Jack would be plenty idiot enough to give it to me, too."

[233]

"Well, I should hope so," said his wife; "who'd he trust sooner?"

Mrs. Ray looked around the table. "And it's this sort of people that those two up-stairs are cheating," she said; "well, it's a queer world. But if I ain't signed and witnessed and back up at my house before long, the United States Government will likely go swearing out something against me; where *is* your husband, Nellie?"

"He said he'd be right in. Mary Cody, you go and tell him to hurry."

Mary Cody disappeared obediently.

"Joey Beall says you won't have her, long," said Mrs. Ray, significantly; "he saw her and Edward Griggs climbing down the bank Sunday. He saw you two walking to the Lower Falls, too," she added, turning suddenly on Ingram and Lassie.

The inference fell like a sledge-hammer. Alva started violently, and looked from one confused face to the other.

But before any one could say anything Mr. O'Neil walked into the room.

"Well, there you are at last," said Mrs. Ray. "I am glad to see you! Here I sit, filing away at my bond and can't make any headway because you're the first to sign."

"It's hard to get away from the bar to-night," said Mr. O'Neil, bringing pen and ink. "They're betting I never see my money."

"We'll never see it in the world, Jack," said his wife; "everybody says so."

"Except me," interposed Alva, her eyes on Lassie.

"And you haven't had any experience with swindlers," said Mrs. Ray; "that's easy seen. You ain't any more fit to be trusted with a pair of sharpers than Mr. and Mrs. O'Neil, or poor Sammy

[234]

Adams alone in his house to-night, relying on hens in the hour of need."

"Perhaps not," Alva said sighing. She was deeply shaken by the new conception of what was transpiring around her, in the discovery of how much might go on without her ever noticing. Lassie in love with Ingram! And the girl was not even out yet! What would her mother say!

"There, there's my name for another year for you, Mrs. Ray," said Jack O'Neil, pushing the bond towards its owner.

"And remember, Mrs. Ray," added his wife, laughing, "remember, if you ever want a place to live or to borrow any money, you come straight here."

"I'll remember," said Mrs. Ray, rising and adjusting her shawl. "Well, it's back to duty and the mail-bag, now. So good night."

She went out and Ingram felt an intolerable longing to avoid Alva's eyes until she should have had a little time to think. Lassie shared the feeling; she, too, was greatly upset by Mrs. Ray's loquacity.

"Let us go out and walk until it's time to get the letters," the man suggested to the girl. His tone was curiously imperative, and she welcomed its command and jumped up quickly to fetch her wraps.

"Ronald," Alva said, gently, then, "she's very young."

He met her eyes squarely. "I know," he said; "but I'm not." She said no other word, but sat silent until they were gone. Mr. O'Neil returned to the bar at once, and in a minute—when Alva was alone—his wife came and sat opposite her. Alva was supporting her chin on her hands, trying to disentangle three urgent trains of thought.

[235]

"I'll be so glad when they're gone," Mrs. O'Neil said, with a sigh. "They've worn on me terribly, and now that I know what they are, it's awful. There's no possible chance of their being straight any more. They wear their heels off on the outside, and Mary Cody says Edward Griggs worked in a shoe store once, and knows for a fact that that's the sign of dishonesty."

"But have you ever seen their shoes?" Alva asked, with a slight smile.

"Why, I haven't put anything into the oven without having to take their heels out first, since they came."

"I'd forgotten," Alva sighed.

Mrs. O'Neil glanced at her quickly.

"You musn't take them so much to heart," she said, gently. "They could be good if they wanted to."

"It isn't them, altogether," the other replied. Mrs. O'Neil looked at her in a sort of blind sympathy. She thought that the youth and sweetness of the young girl was what weighed so heavily on the young woman opposite. "But men will be men," she reflected, and tried to think of something to say, and couldn't.

The evening freight went roaring by.

"Why, I thought it went up before," Alva said.

"I did, too, but that must have been the wrecking-train; there must be a wreck on the road."

"Let's go out on the bridge!" Alva suggested. "I feel choked; I want fresh air, and there is a moon."

"Shall I go with you?"

"Yes, do."

"I'll tell Mary Cody."

[236]

While Mrs. O'Neil went for a shawl and to tell Mary Cody, Alva sought her big cape. Then they went out together into the frost, for the frost was sharp in the air.

"The woods will soon end being beautiful," the little woman said.

Alva walked swiftly on and made no reply. In less than five minutes they stood out over the gorge and looked down on its matchless glory of silver illuminating blackest shadow.

"I hope that the dam won't spoil all this," the girl said suddenly.

"You like to look at it, don't you?" Mrs. O'Neil said softly.

"Living here on its banks, as you do, I don't believe you can appreciate it!" Alva exclaimed. "Can it possibly mean to any one what it does to me, I wonder."

"I think it's pretty and I love so to look at it," said Mrs. O'Neil in gentlest sympathy.

Alva caught her hand and pressed it hard in both her own. "Do you know, Mrs. O'Neil, if I were very happy I should love best to be happy here, and if more sorrow were to be, I would choose to

have that here, too. I am so close to God when I live in His country."

She took the warm hand that she held and pressed it close against her heart.

"I wish that every one was so good as you are," Mrs. O'Neil said, impulsively.

"Every one is better than we give them credit for being."

"Even those two?"

"Yes, even those two."

"I can't quite believe that," said the little woman.

"Wait and you'll see."

[237]

Then they stood quiet, until a cold wind, coming down the gorge, smote them bitterly.

"We must go in," Alva said, regretfully; "the wind comes so strongly here."

They turned and were only a few steps on their way when Alva stopped suddenly.

"Do you believe in signs?" she asked.

"Why—I don't know."

Alva put both hands up to her head. "That cold wind was a sign," she said, her voice trembling. "Oh, I feel so strangely. Something strong and fearful is sweeping into my life to-night."

In her heart she hoped that it was only the shock of learning that Lassie loved.

But in her soul she knew that it must be something else. The long strain of the waiting days had worn anxiety to its sharpest edge. When Truth mercifully veils itself, Time—the softener—wears the veil thin until at last, when we have gained strength enough to bear, we have learned to know.

[238]

CHAPTER XX

SHIFTING SUNSHINE AND CLOUDS

Ingram and Lassie went out but not on the bridge; they did not even turn their heads that way.

"Alva says that she can see the gorge even when it's pitch-dark," Lassie said. "She says she shall see it plainly to the end of her life, wherever she may be in the world." She felt quite safe now that they were alone; she didn't even mind that embarrassing speech of Mrs. Ray's.

"Yes," said Ingram; they went calmly and happily up the road. He didn't mind the speech either, now.

"Alva and I never walk this way," Lassie said after a minute. "We always walk the other, except just a little bit to the post-office, of course."

"Yes," said the man again, and they went on, up the hill.

The peculiar charm of the ordinary mode of falling in love is that it is so simple; it requires so little effort, so to speak. If it was harder work, it might produce bigger results—results nearer the millennium than those we are now getting. Perhaps, however, the results are a lesson to be learned, and we are still so deep in the primer of that learning, that love remains the cheapest, easiest, and most common of all its tasks.

[239]

Ingram thought Lassie's remarks fascinating, and she thought his two "Yes's" both clever and original. They were each thoroughly satisfied with one another, and were deeply interested each minute. Ingram had never tramped along a country road in starlight with this pretty young girl before, and Lassie had never walked anywhere, with any man, in all her life. It was not perhaps remarkable that what had happened was happening. Not at all.

"How fast the time has gone," Lassie said, as they mounted the Wiley hill; "to think that I have been here over a week!"

"And to think of all that has happened," said Ingram.

"I know; isn't it strange?"

"I shall be awfully lonesome after you go."

This sounded so mournful and pathetic that it brought a lump into her throat and she could not

speaking for a minute.

"Alva will go, too," Ingram went on, presently.

"But she'll come back."

"Let us hope so."

They walked over the Wiley hill.

"Poor Mrs. Lathbun and her daughter won't go chestnutting any more after to-morrow," Lassie said, after they passed under the heavy shadows cast by Mrs. Wiley's huge trees. "I think that we ought to go back now, the mail will be in."

They turned around to walk back and enjoyed every step of the way. There is really nothing that lights up a lack of conversation like being in love.

As they passed the post-office they saw Mrs. Ray standing on the porch, tucked up in her shawl.

[240]

"There was a wreck," she called; "the mail's late."

"All right!" Ingram called in response.

Mrs. Ray watched them vanish out of the light cast by her open door, and then turned, went inside, and shut it. "I like that young man," she said to herself; "he's got a good face. I wish we were as sure of getting the dam as he is of getting that girl. We need the dam full as much as he thinks he needs her. It'll bring men and lots of money to this section, and this section needs men and money. All we've got around here is women and land, and women and land can't get very far without men and money. It's about time we was getting some show at prosperity. I do wonder how Sammy's getting along with his hens!"

Arrived at the hotel, Ingram bade Lassie good night and she went up-stairs, one trembling tumult of tangling sentiments as to the conversation now to ensue.

Alva's room was dark, but when Lassie whispered her name at the door, the answer came quickly.

"Is that you, dear? come to me. Lassie, how I have wanted you!"

Lassie crossed to the bed, from whence the voice came. She thought she knew why she was wanted, but she only said: "What is it, dear?"

"I am in the grip of an awful fear."

The girl stood still, much startled.

"Alva! What do you mean? What has happened?"

"I don't know. I went out on the bridge for a minute after you left, and it came blowing down the gorge—a wind of horrid presentiment; oh, I am beside myself, I don't know what to do. There is no mail to-night—" she stopped, and Lassie felt that she was weeping. Finally she added: "I ought to have stayed there at the hospital. I should not have obeyed his wishes or what the surgeon said. I ought to have obeyed my own heart. I ought to have stayed with him!"

[241]

The young girl was frightened, silent.

Finally she managed to stammer:

"But you said that he was not conscious—that it was not possible for you to stay there—that no purpose could be served. Oh, what do you fear? What do you think may have happened?"

Alva controlled herself and drew Lassie down beside her upon the bed. "Dear, I don't know; but I do know that I shall go away to-morrow!"

"To-morrow!"

"I shall, dear. I must see him; I have telegraphed—" Again tears choked her.

"You think something has happened?" Lassie faltered.

"Yes, something warns me. It has come over me heavily to-night. I must go and face it. What is the reason of my love, if it seems to fail him when the strain comes. It shall not fail. They shall not trick me into failing. Perhaps they are trying to spare me or shield me, but I'll go to receive the blow. An instant swept him out of his life-work—I saw his spirit of resignation—I will be resigned, too—"

Lassie felt the bed shaken by the fierceness of sobs. She was dumb, not knowing what to say. The orbit of Alva's love was so infinitely greater than that of her own, that the feebler suffered eclipse in that hour. She saw herself and Ingram completely swept aside, and was not even conscious of the fact.

[242]

"It is my heart that suffers," Alva pressed on after a minute, "only my heart, Lassie; my soul is strong, very strong. There is nothing else for my spirit to learn, but half of my being still suffers; it cannot remember every second how it was when I knelt beside him and he told me in whispers that he was content and that if I loved him I also would be content. I have tried to be content, I

have been content until to-day—until to-night. But now, as I lay here in the dark, it seemed as if content had fled not only me but the whole universe. I feel as if content had ceased to exist. Rebellion is in the air. In some strange way I'm sure that he has abjured resignation and renunciation; I feel that he is in the throes of something—he is suffering, suffering agony; and I want to be with him. *I must* be with him! I shall leave to-morrow!"

Lassie trembled; she had never seen any one like this before.

"When do you want me to go, Alva," she whispered, presently.

"Could you go to-morrow at four, and I will take the train the opposite way at eight?"

"I'll be ready; don't mind about me a bit, dear."

"We must go. Oh, listen to that wind coming down the gorge; doesn't it sound as if some spirit were in travail? So sad, so melancholy! Something tremendous is taking place, and I am far from him while he endures."

The wind was surely rising, and its moan shook the window sash.

"I'm going mad," Alva exclaimed, springing from the bed; "why did I leave him? No matter what they said, I should have stayed there. My place was there. Oh, I have been cast in so many moulds these last years; I have taken so many prizes, only to find them dust in my hands; and now God will not—must not take this one from me! I have learned the folly of the material, I have bent my head beneath the yoke enough to be spared another lash of the goad. I pray—oh, I pray—that this cup may pass me by."

[243]

Lassie sat still, now quite terrified.

Alva paced up and down the little room. "I have been dragged—or I have managed to drag myself—up one step above the ordinary. I had accepted the loneliness that comes when one gets where no one else stands. I learned not to expect companionship. But we are not the less lonely because we go our way alone,—we are not the less lonely. And that same rule holds all through. Lassie, I tell you, that one does not crave companionship the less because one chooses to marry a dying man; one does not crave caresses the less when one loves as I do." She wrung her hands miserably. "I'm weak—weak—weak! This is the test and I am failing. I, who have worked so far, am being carried down—down—down—now—to-night. Oh, the struggle, the tragedy, the lesson! Life's lessons are always so terrible." Then, her emotions seeming for the moment to exhaust all her strength, she came back to the bed, and said, with some approach to calmness:

"Perhaps it is that I preached too much to you, dear, or was too sure of myself. Perhaps my joy was a selfish joy, or perhaps I did wrong in planning to leave my parents, even for a little while. Just in proportion as one rises, so do the subtlety of their problems increase. To love a man whose life was too big for any one to share unless she could give herself wholly—that was hard but I learned that lesson; I would have given my life wholly. Then to have my duty chain me away from him—that was terrible but I accepted that, too. Then to have him struck down—I thought that that was the worst of all, but something held me up through that. But—but," she broke out in a wail of absolute, heartbroken desolation, "but if he is going to leave me before we—" and there she stopped short, shivered violently, and became stilly rigid.

[244]

Lassie dared to put her arms about her.

"Why do you think such dreadful things? You don't know that anything has happened."

Alva drew a long, sharp breath. "But I do know it," she said; "something has happened. You will see in the morning. Oh, I would have given up my life while he was giving up his, and minded it so little; but to have to give him up! What shall I do? I wanted those weeks, even if they shrank to days—to hours. It seemed to me that we had earned the right to a little, so little, happiness. The memories would have given me strength to bear the hereafter. If I could only be a soul, and a brave one, like him,—but to-night I am all heart, all quivering fear." She paused to control her voice again.

"But, Alva, let me give you back your own speeches in comfort. How often you've told me how only his soul counted, and how that was yours for eternity, and how, because of that, you found yourself equal to all things. And you've told me, too, dear, how his renunciation, how his exchange of power, strength and life for weakness and death—and all without a murmur—made you quite confident that you would never fail, either."

[245]

"Yes," Alva murmured, "yes, I remember, but—"

"And you said that the way that he ignored his poor, crushed body and looked straight towards another future life of fresh labor made you full of courage, too. You remember."

"Yes, yes, I remember." Then she tried to dry her eyes. "I won't admit that the world has a right to shudder, and yet I am shuddering myself," she said, sadly. "I must learn to be braver. I can't fight down foreboding, but I must be braver. But, dear, I do so love him—I have so wanted him—he is so dear to me. I have so lived upon the picture of our hours together. That little house across the river is full of him for me. I saw him in it well and strong of spirit, fighting against the desecration of the gorge, and showing me how I might help on the work when he was gone. I meant to give him the joy of one more crusade, and one more victory to his credit. He would have known how to act, even if his only sympathizers were the poor and those yet to be born. He

understood the claims of the poor and the unborn; he gave his life for them."

Lassie enfolded her in her tender arms; the little star was in eclipse, yet even in eclipse it was gathering power on high. Alva leaned her cheek against the head on her shoulder.

"How I suffer," she murmured. "Lassie, I feel that I have entered into a maelstrom—a whirlwind. I seem to hear a dirge in that wind outside. I must go to-morrow—we must go to-morrow."

"Yes, we'll go," said Lassie, soothingly.

"It is my heart, just my heart. It is so hard to strike an even balance between the heart and the soul. My poor, thin, trembling flesh has ruled to-night, truly."

[246]

"Let me sleep with you," Lassie pleaded; "let me hold you fast and love you dearly."

Alva smiled in the dark. "Come, then," she said; "I fancy that I shall sleep if my hand clasps yours—and if I know that we leave to-morrow."

Later, after Lassie had slept thus for some hours, she was awakened by Alva's rising and going to the window.

"What is it, dear, you are not faint?"

Alva turned, the pale, early sunrise illuminated her face.

"Some riddle has been solved somewhere, dear," she said; "I'm quite calm now. The struggle for him as well as for me is over."

"Then come back and sleep with my arms tight round your neck," said the friend, stretching forth her arms.

Alva came back like an obedient child, crept in close beside her, and in a few minutes was sleeping as a child sleeps.

Later, when the real morning came and the real, enduring wakefulness with it, it was Alva who roused first again, and, sitting up in bed, put back her hair with both hands and smiled into her friend's eyes.

"You're all right, now?" Lassie said, joyfully.

"Very right, dear; the crisis is over. Forget last night. I shall never be like that again."

Lassie turned her face towards the window; looking out from where she lay she could see the valley one burst of flame, its wave of color sweeping off afar and the hoar frost sparkling over all the glory. "I feel as if I never had seen anything so beautiful in all my life before," the girl exclaimed; "I don't know what it makes me think of, but it is as if my soul were growing, I am so happy to see you happy again."

[247]

Alva sat there with the white coverlet heaped about her and smiled. "Thank you, dear," she said, with simplicity. "I am happy, and last night and this morning have caused both our souls to grow."

"It's too beautiful!" the girl said, after a long pause; "the valley is more beautiful than I ever realized before."

Presently Alva left the bed and went to close the window. "There's a mist lying low in the valley," she said then; "it lies there like an emblem of peace. Omens are curious. That cold, sad wind last night had its message, and the morning mist has another. I know that some change is at hand, but I know that whatever it is its burden is good. I feel equal to anything this morning. I feel as if God had come to me in the night and told me that he was charging Himself with my care."

Lassie looked at her with freshly awakened anxiety.

"Oh, don't look at me that way," she begged; "that is the very hardest of all—to have those to whom you talk regard you as if you were mad."

"But you astonish me so. Last night you were so frightened."

"Last night some struggle was on, my dear; this morning it is settled." She stopped and spoke very slowly. "I think, perhaps, that he knows now that he can never come to the house," she said, and although her lips quivered slightly her voice was clear and composed.

[248]

"Alva," Lassie cried, in sudden horror, "you think that he is dead—that is what you think."

As soon as the words had passed her lips, she was frightened at her own temerity; but Alva, whose back was towards her, now turned towards her smiling.

"He is not dead," she said; "he was thinking of me all last night and this morning. He is not dead. That I know."

"How can you be sure?"

"When people love as we do, they can be very sure. I was awfully shaken last night, Lassie; I confess it. Something big, that we shall know all about later, hung in the balance and I trembled. But it's settled now."

There came a tap at the door just then, announcing Mary Cody with their hot water.

"They're still asleep," she said in a whisper; "if the letter from the lawyer don't come in this morning's mail, Mr. O'Neil is going to eject them. Only think!"

Naturally this remark gave quite a new turn to the conversation.

"Unless they pay, you know," Alva reminded Mary Cody.

"How do you eject people?" Lassie asked, rejoicing in the cheerfulness of the commonplace. "If he puts them out the front door and they just walk around and come into the kitchen, what can any one do?"

"I don't know," said Mary Cody, apparently thunderstruck at the mental vision of the O'Neil House besieged by Mrs. and Miss Lathbun, trying to get in again. "I don't know what we could do. There's seven doors to this house."

"Will Mr. O'Neil pull them out, or push them out?" Lassie asked further; "or will he just drive them out?"

[249]

"I don't know," said Mary Cody; "everybody in town'll be up at the post-office waiting to see if the letter from the lawyer comes, I expect. If it doesn't come, Mr. O'Neil is going to Ledge Centre and get a warrant."

"Oh, dear," said Lassie.

"You won't get any mail this morning," said Mary Cody; "there's a wreck on the road. Two coal trucks and a car of cabbages. There'll be no eastern mail till noon."

Then Mary Cody went away again.

"Isn't it strange that all this should happen just during the little time that we're here?" Lassie said; "it's made it very exciting."

Alva went on brushing her hair.

Lassie looked at her then, and saw that she bore many traces of her violent emotion of the night before.

"You won't try to go to-day, will you?" she said, suddenly.

"Oh, yes, I shall go." Then she turned and looked straight into the girl's eyes. "I *must* go," she said; "something has happened."

[250]

CHAPTER XXI

THE POST-OFFICE

From 8.30 A.M. on, the tide of travel in Ledge always tended towards the post-office, but on the famous morning when Mrs. Lathbun expected to hear from her lawyer, the post-office's vicinity resembled nothing so much as its own appearance upon Election Day. Every one that ever had received a letter intended to be there to see if Mrs. Lathbun would get hers. Long before train time not only the office itself, but the adjoining rooms and the porch outside, were comfortably crowded with a pleasantly anticipative collection of interested observers.

"The United States Government doesn't allow me to interfere in politics, or I'd come right square out with my views," said Mrs. Ray, who held public interest with a tight rein, while awaiting the mail. "My views may be uninteresting, but I hit enough nails on the head to box up a good many people a year."

"What *do* you think?" some one asked.

"I don't think anything," said Mrs. Ray; "I know!"

"Well, what do you know, then?"

"I know that a letter-getter stays a letter-getter, and the reverse the reverse. Just as I know that case-knives are suspicious and that picking chestnuts may be a bunco game as easy as anything else. I've found it nothing but a bunco game, myself. I've never made my chestnuts pay, just because they were so easy picked up by other people; and you can't hire boys to do your nutting for you,—boys eat up all the profits and most of the chestnuts into the bargain. Yes, indeed. And as for those two up at Nellie's—they'll get no letter. Wait and see."

[251]

"But what will happen to them then?" asked Joey Beall, aching to discuss the details of the arrest

and the journey to Geneseo.

"I don't know, but I can tell you one piece of news, and it isn't gossip either; it come straight from Nellie O'Neil herself; she's been here this morning."

"Have they found out anything new?"

"Not about them; but her other two is leaving."

"What!"

"Yes, going this afternoon." Mrs. Ray folded her arms and leaned back against the shelves containing her grocery business.

The sensation caused by this extra and wholly unexpected bit of news was thorough and sincere. Everybody looked at everybody else.

Mrs. Dunstall pressed forward. "Haven't they paid, either?" she asked, with horror in her voice.

"Oh, yes, they've paid." Mrs. Ray was quickly reassuring on this point. "But with them, it's something else. I don't know for sure just what, but I guess that eldest one's beginning to see that it's no use as far as she's concerned; but she'll have to do something with that house she was fixing up to live in. Sarah Catt told me she never heard anything so crazy as building a house to live in while a dam that Mr. Ledge don't want built is being built. She says her husband says that dam never will be built. She says Mr. Ledge is very quiet, but he's very sensible and he says there's quicksands all under us."

[252]

This statement caused another flutter of sensation.

"Can't you dam a quicksand? I thought it run just like water." Thus Joey Beall's fiancée from the back.

"No, you can't," said Pinkie. "I know."

"I'd be sorry to see the dam go," said Mrs. Wiley. "Cousin Catterwallis Granger looked to see it raise all the property around here."

"Drown all the property around here, you mean," said Mrs. Ray. "I thank heaven it's the Dam Commission and not me who'll have to adjust all that dam's going to drown before it gets done. Josiah Bates says he heard that they'll have to take up all the cemeteries from here to Cromwell."

"Why?" asked Pinkie.

"Why? Why, because no matter what powers a commission can hold over the living, no legislature can find a law for drowning the dead, I guess. They've all got to be moved and set out in rows again in a new place. Seems like I never will see the last of Mr. Ray's two wives! But I shan't have to pay for their new start in life this time, anyway."

"Where will they put them next, do you suppose?" said Mrs. Dunstall, referring to the cemeteries—not to Mr. Ray's former wives.

"I guess we'll all want to know that," said Mrs. Ray, turning her head as if she heard the train (the tension in the room was increasing momentarily,—so was the crowd). "I'm sure I wonder what will become of Mr. Ray. I never could feel that I really was done with him, and now it seems maybe I ain't. I wish they'd buy my three-cornered cow pasture for a new cemetery. Then I could cut his grass when I went to milk my cow."

[253]

"The dam'll have to pay for the new cemeteries, won't it?" asked Lucia Cosby in some trepidation.

"The dam'll pay for everything. That's why every one wants it so bad," said Mrs. Ray.

"Yes, it is," said Pinkie.

"Which room have the Lathbuns got?" some one asked, looking down towards the O'Neil House.

"The end one," said Mrs. Dunstall.

"The curtains are down," said Nathan, elbowing his way to the window.

"They never get up till noon."

There was a hush,—sudden but intense. The train was approaching.

"Yes, that's the train," said Mrs. Ray; "well, we'll soon know now." She tucked her shawl tighter than ever, and got the key ready.

"Mrs. O'Neil'll be pretty lonesome to-night with them all gone at once," hazarded a bystander.

"She'll miss those girls," said Mrs. Dunstall; "they're real nice young ladies, she says. But she won't miss the Lathbuns."

"We'll miss the Lathbuns," said Mrs. Wiley; "they've been so interesting to talk about. We've even got Uncle Purchase to where he knows they live at Nellie's. I tell you that was work. He's so deaf now." She sighed.

"I guess it wasn't any worse than what the Bentons went through with Gran'ma Benton teaching

the parrot when they lived at Nellie's," said Mrs. Ray. "Poor Clay Wright Benton was in here yesterday to see if I'd board Gran'ma Benton and the parrot again. He says Sarah says she won't come home till the parrot leaves, and he's most wild. Gran'ma Benton's been teaching the parrot to say something new. She says 'Where's the Lathbuns, Polly?' and the parrot says 'Out chestnutting,' only it won't say it days. It just says it nights. And nights it's wild over saying it. Last night no one in the house got one wink of sleep. Clay sit up till midnight to ask it where the Lathbuns was, and then Gran'ma Benton sit up and asked it where they was till morning. Poor Clay! He says it's too awful how she's spoiled that parrot. It's afraid of spiders, and it's so afraid of them at night that they have to keep a night-light burning so it can see all over whenever it wakes."

[254]

"Such doings!" said Mrs. Wiley, in disgust.

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Ray. "I'd like to see myself burning a night-light for a parrot. If it boards with me, it'll take its spiders just as they come."

"That's right," said Pinkie, with decision.

"Well, we don't need any parrot," said Mrs. Wiley. "We've got Uncle Purchase. Not but what I'm amused hearing about the parrot. But then, I've been amused hearing about the Lathbuns, too," she sighed heavily.

"Something else'll come up," said Mrs. Dunstall, cheerfully, "and you don't really need anything to talk about while you've got your Uncle Purchase, you know."

"Well, I suppose maybe not," said Mrs. Wiley, and sighed again.

"Well, thank Heaven," said Mrs. Ray, "I'm never short of two things,—work and talk." She began to finger the key as she spoke, and all ears were at once strained to listen for the sound of the feet of the bearer of the mail-bag.

[255]

Deathly silence reigned. In a few seconds the footsteps did approach, the gate creaked and then banged. Mrs. Ray stepped with majestic haste to the window and called out:

"Wipe your feet!"

The obedience that ensued whetted curiosity to more ravenous desire than ever. People had lost sight of the main issue and were all riveted to the single question—would Mrs. Lathbun get her letter?

The door opened and Clay Wright Benton came in with the bag.

"Lay it here," commanded Mrs. Ray, and Clay Wright Benton laid it there and fell back into the crowd behind. Mrs. Ray put on her spectacles and adjusted her shawl. In the intense excitement of the moment, nobody said a word. The room was as full as it would hold, and people who had apparently been secreted in other portions of the house now came pouring in through the doors connecting therewith. The one window facing the porch had turned into a mere honey-comb of faces.

Mrs. Ray took up the key. A thrill went around as she inserted it in the padlock and slowly turned it. Then she took it out of the padlock and the padlock out of the lock. She laid key and padlock carefully aside. "Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note," as she slowly drew the lengthwise iron from the rings and laid that aside. A sort of fresh intenseness pervaded the atmosphere as she opened the mouth of the bag and inserted her arm. While her arm was in and her hand was feeling for the mail, a boy sneezed and every one turned and looked at him witheringly. This little incident was taken in the same light as the inter-mission between two numbers of a concert, for all who were at the doors at once took advantage of it to squeeze inside. The small room, which had been unpleasantly full before, was now packed to suffocation. Mrs. Ray drew out her arm. The interest was mounting each second. She laid two packages, tied each with United States Government twine, upon the counter, turned the bag upside down and shook it. If a pin had fallen out, any one could have heard it, but nothing fell out. Mrs. Ray folded the bag carefully and laid it on the floor behind her. The atmosphere was breathless in every sense of the word. Mrs. Ray untied the first package, taking a full minute to pick out the knot. She hung up the string. The string fell off from where she hung it, and she picked it up and hung it up a second time, this time more slowly and carefully. Then she took out the postmarking machine. A sudden sigh went around; every one had forgotten the necessity of the postmark. Mrs. Ray turned the package face down and post-marked every piece carefully without reading a single address. Then she turned them over, gave her shawl a fresh and most careful adjustment, and proceeded to sort the mail. When it was sorted, she called the roll of names amidst a hush that was awe-inspiring. The few who had letters crowded to the fore, received them and stayed there, greatly to the aggravation of those who had none, and got shoved to the rear accordingly.

[256]

Mrs. Ray now untied the second package, and hung up that string. Both strings fell off together. She took up both strings at once, smoothed them out and hung them up again. They stayed hung this time. Then she post-marked the second package. It was a never-to-be-forgotten scene,—the wrought-up faces, the fixed calm of Mrs. Ray herself. Then she called the roll for the second batch. Each time a name was read off, a wave of psychic emotion swept the room. One has to get into the real true life of the country to appreciate the tremendous tumult which gossip had erected upon which to rear the monument of this moment. One by one the names were all called; one by one the pile of letters in Mrs. Ray's hand diminished. When it came to the last one, and

[257]

the last one was for Joey Beall, Joey received it almost as if it were some species of sacrament.

"Is that all?" some one in the back asked.

"That's all," said Mrs. Ray.

All turned to go. The outburst of pent-up feelings was tremendous.

"I told you so," Mrs. Ray said over and over again. "I knew they'd got no letter." The babel all of a sudden rose into so much noise that it was evident that the heights to which popular feeling had risen were going a bit higher yet. The egress from the stifling room ceased. Nobody knew just what it was, but all became aware that something fresh had happened. Nobody knew what had happened, and nobody seemed able to find out. All that was known was that something held every one spellbound and motionless in spite of their individual desire to go on out.

After what seemed a deadlock of long duration but which was in fact a matter of but a few seconds, it developed that the trouble arose around the door leading on to the porch. Then it appeared that while every one in the post-office was trying to get out by that door, Mary Cody was trying to get in by the same way, and Mary Cody was young, strong, and determined. [258]

For a few seconds the battle pressed wildly. Then Mary Cody won out and entered. She was out of breath and disheveled.

"Why, what is the matter?" Joey Beall, who was nearest, asked; "there's something new down your way, I'll bet a peanut."

Mary Cody gasped. "Oh, my," she said, "I run right up to tell you. We've just found out as their room is empty. They must of skipped in the night."

"Skipped in the night!" cried Mrs. Dunstall.

"Skipped!" cried Pinkie.

"Oh, Mrs. Ray," wailed Mrs. Wiley, "how'll we ever be able to tell Uncle Purchase!"

But Mrs. Ray stood forth like a modern Medusa in her rage.

"I've been expecting it all along," she exclaimed wrathfully. "I'm a great judge of character, and I never looked for nothing else. Now, how can they be arrested? We must catch 'em!"

"If we can catch 'em!" said Josiah Bates.

"If we can catch them!" said Mrs. Ray,—*"if! Young man, they'll be caught. You wait and see!"* She hastily threw her shawl over her head, and rushed wildly out with the excited crowd. It is proverbial that there are times when a common sentiment merges all classes into one. [259]

CHAPTER XXII

AFTERMATH

The excitement broke up into wide-spreading waves. All divided at once into two distinct parties,—those who wanted to discuss the matter further, and those who were filled with the hunter instinct and so craved to set off at once in pursuit of "the foxy pair." Mrs. Ray justly remarked that "they couldn't possibly get more than twelve hours' start, in just one night," and as it was incredible to suppose that they would return in the direction from which they had originally come, it followed that there was only two-thirds of the horizon to scour in any case. Elmer Hoskins and his dog lost no time, but set forth at once.

Mary Cody walked back down the hill telling a deeply interested circle the story of how, etc. (and that for the fifth time in ten minutes); another group stood excitedly on Mrs. Ray's porch; another set off to break the news to Ledgeville, and still others spread here and there, after the manner of distracted bees into whose hive some great and disturbing force has suddenly penetrated.

"We won't be able to begin to get this in Uncle Purchase's head for two days, at least," mourned Mrs. Wiley; "and Uncle Purchase is so awful fond of knowing things, too."

"They'll never catch them," said Lucia Cosby; "they know all the roads too well. They know every road there is to know." [260]

"I should think they did!" said Mrs. Dunstall. "They've not got out of practice walking in this locality, I can tell you. Josiah Bates was down at the bottom of the St. Helena hill the other day, and if he didn't see them there. Oh, they know the roads."

"I'm sorry for the girl," said Clay Wright Benton.

"I ain't a bit sorry for her," said Mrs. Ray; "as a woman who works from before dawn to far on into the night to make a honest living by eleven different kinds of sweat on her brow, I ain't a bit sorry for either of them. And Jack O'Neil ain't going to be sorry for them, either; he told me last night if they was men, he'd get hold of 'em and take 'em out behind the wood-pile and he knew what they'd get. To-day isn't going to alter *his* views."

"If I was Mrs. O'Neil, I'd wash that shawl Mrs. Lathbun wore all the time," said Sarah Catt, one of the party escorting Mary Cody back to the hotel.

"It's in the tub already," said Mary Cody.

Mrs. O'Neil came running forth to meet them, her brown eyes shining more than ever.

"Oh, but they were a 'foxy pair,'" she exclaimed; "haven't they gone and left that hair-brush done up in a paper so that it's 'baggage,' and shows they want the room held for them till they come back. Oh, they've got the law at their finger-tips—those two."

The whole crowd entered the house. Alva and Lassie, packing in their room, had heard the news ten minutes earlier from Mrs. O'Neil herself. Lassie had watched her friend's face curiously, but Alva had too much else pressing upon her to be more than simply saddened. [261]

When Mrs. O'Neil had gone Lassie had said almost hesitatingly: "They were adventuresses, weren't they, and Miss Lathbun's romance wasn't true, was it?"

"Let us not judge, even now," said Alva, quietly; "let us try to hope in some way. After all, what little things they were in life—so little, and probably beset beyond their strength. And such great things are pressing on me to-day. What do they matter? God forgive me for saying it."

Lassie was silenced.

When the Eastern mail train arrived about noon, belated as usual, their packing was quite finished. Mary Cody brought up the letters. Alva took hers into her room and a minute later she came to the door.

"Lassie," she said, "there is something here that I must attend to at once. Go down and have dinner, and I'll come a little late."

So Lassie went down to dine alone, and found Ingram waiting for her. She told him that Alva would come in a little.

"Has she had bad news?" he asked, startled by a presentiment of immediate sorrow.

"No, I think not," Lassie said; "she didn't speak so."

But Ingram stayed, distressed. "She has had bad news," he said; "poor girl—her tragedy is closing in fast. I can feel its end, myself."

His eyes went to the window. "Couldn't you go out with me for just an hour after dinner?" he asked wistfully. Then he smiled a little. "We can talk about the dam," he said—"or help hunt the Lathbuns." [262]

She looked at him and they both knew that she would go. It was a very simple, almost childish, romance, theirs—but its lack of stress made it all the more alluring to two who were living under the wings of so much tragedy.

"I'll get my hat," Lassie said, and ran up-stairs. Alva's door was closed. "I'm lying down, please let me sleep. It's nothing but my head," she called from behind it. Lassie slipped on her wraps quickly and ran down; and they went out towards the Falls.

Mrs. Ray saw them go from the post-office window. The excitement having somewhat subsided, she was now left alone with Joey Beall's fiancée, who was there to try on her wedding dress.

"Such is life," Mrs. Ray commented; "that woman's pulled her shades down for a nice nap, and off they skip for a good-by down by the Falls. Oh, my, but those Falls are a blessing to the young! It's too far between roots and rocks for children to get down there, and as soon as anybody's married they never want to have nothing to do with love-making any more; so steep romantic places is just made for the only kind of people that have any reason for wanting to get to them."

"The Falls is full of meaning for lovers," said Joey Beall's fiancée, sentimentally. "Joey and I never get tired of them."

"You wait till you're married," said Mrs. Ray; "you'll find no meaning in climbing up and down those banks and having Joey jerk your arms out of the sockets, then. Yes, indeed. They call it tempestuous affection beforehand, but it comes to a plain jerk in the end. Life is full of learning." [263]

"Gran'ma Benton's learning the parrot a great deal," said Sarah Catt. "I come by there just now and she's beginning already to teach it a new sentence. She says: 'Where are the Lathbuns, now?' and the parrot's got to learn to say 'Skipped,'—she's just set her heart on it."

"I d'n know but what I'm going to end by being sorry for that parrot," remarked Mrs. Ray, thoughtfully. "I think Gran'ma Benton's overdoing it a little, if she means it to keep up with the Lathbuns. You can force even a parrot beyond its strength. She's made it nervous, already. She's got to hold its claw all through every thunderstorm all summer long, and if a fly gets in its milk, it

won't touch either the fly or the milk, which I call spoiling the parrot—not to speak of the fly and the milk, for of course no one else in a house is going to eat a fly or drink milk that a parrot won't look at."

"Sarah told me they had to take away all the looking-glasses every spring, or it cried the whole time it was moulting—over its tail feathers, you know," said the caller, thoughtfully.

"Well, if they come to live here, I shan't spoil it, I know that," said Mrs. Ray. "I shall be pleasant to it and I shall be kind, and it can run after me all it likes and I'll be careful never to step on it for the very simple reason that I don't want to take the time to clean up any sort of smashed creature, but it won't have no night-light here, nor get its claw held when it thunders, nor have the looking-glasses took down to spare its feelings. No one ever took a looking-glass down to spare my feelings, and I can't begin to take them down to spare a parrot's. Well, Sarah, I guess you can try on now. Wait till I fill up on pins. Oh, my lands alive, I wish I knew where those foxy Lathbuns are this minute."

[264]

"I guess Mr. Adams'll be glad to know they're caught," said Sarah Catt; "he's so nervous for fear they'll stop with him to-night. Joey saw him just after dinner. He was more scared even than Gran'ma Benton's parrot in a thunderstorm."

Mrs. Ray was thoughtfully putting pins in her mouth. "There's a great difference between a man's hand and a parrot's claw," she said with some difficulty. "Yes, indeed. Even in a thunderstorm."

[265]

CHAPTER XXIII

THE DARKNESS BEFORE

When Lassie came back from that last walk to the Falls she went straight up to Alva's room, and found her lying on the bed, the faint light from the shaded window throwing a deep shadow upon her face and form. Her head and shoulders were a little propped up against the pillows, and her hands were clasped on her bosom instead of behind her head, as was her favorite position.

Lassie's eyes were shining and her heart was very full and happy with the bubbling joy of that bubbling joyous emotion which Youth in its ingenuous innocence, ignorance, and arrogance has elected to call "love." It had come very vividly to both herself and Ingram during their walk, and instead of discussing Alva's affairs, they had suddenly become more than ever keenly alive to their own. Ingram, conscious of good looks, good health, and a good income, had for some time faced the position very cheerfully and gratefully; but Lassie, conscious of no personal advantages at all equalling those pertaining to her demigod, was, of course, thrilled through and through. Certainly these be topsy-turvy days for chivalric standards, but perhaps a century later, people will quote with reverence from the stories of grandmother's experiences before grandpapa was finally secured.

[266]

Lassie was very happy. She felt sure that nothing so ideally beautiful and altogether remarkable as Ingram's speeches during the walk had ever been heard before. She was not engaged, but she was "as good as engaged." And before her début, too. Fancy the faces of the girls when she really announced it! She would be the first one of the whole set to be married! Life was nothing but vistas of joy. Ingram was absolutely going to take the same train that she did at six o'clock, and go two hours of the way with her. Oh!

And now she was back in Alva's room, standing at the bedside, looking down at her friend. Something in the other's lax position made her look more closely even in the semi-darkness.

"Your head is worse?" she asked, startled.

"No, dear," said Alva, and her voice rang strangely—like a low toned bell, chiming afar.

"Something has happened?"

"Yes, dear."

"Oh—" the young girl could not put the question.

Alva did not speak. Lassie felt her heart freezing harder every instant. It was always so, when one came within the circle of that greater existence. Part of the attraction of Ingram was that he was just so ordinarily human. Alva was never ordinary, and scarcely ever human. Oh, dear! Her lovely dream seemed suddenly slipping out to sea before this tremendous, quiet storm of resistless stress!

"You have had a letter?" she whispered timidly, at last.

"Yes, dear, and he is dead." Alva spoke quite steadily.

"Dead!"

"I had a letter from his friend—his doctor—the one who wrote for him. You were right in what you thought. He died last night, in the night, while I slept. He was unconscious when he died. He struggled first and suffered—while I was struggling and suffering, you remember—and then he grew still when I grew still, and then when I slept he slept and began to die, and while I still slept he died—that is—his body died."

Lassie sank down upon the bed beside her, took the clasped hands into her own, and burst into bitter tears, hiding her face in the four hands at once.

After a little Alva spoke again, still in the same low, ringing voice.

"It came so close that I did believe that it would be, but there are some dreams that may not be realized on earth. Mine was such a one."

Lassie lifted her head to look into her face; she was sufficiently accustomed to the dim light by this time to be able to see distinctly the pure and noble outlines, the large, tragic eyes. She felt herself crushed into speechlessness.

"He wrote me himself," Alva continued presently; "just the merest word. I read it. I read it twice. Then I sat still for a long, long time. Lassie," she pressed the girl's hands warmly, "it was good to think that I had shown my happiness to you, for no one will ever know that I was ever happy, now. Oh, it was so long that I sat here, thinking. I told you once, how, in the first day of my supreme joy, I went into the cathedral near the hospital and thanked God on my knees for all the past and made a vow to accept with courage all that might come to me, in return for that joy. I thought, as I prayed, that I'd go forth and gladly starve and freeze till I died, if it were the purchase price of such happiness. I am remembering that hour. I will not cry out, nor weep, nor say one word. I have had him; we shall be one again. My desire has always been only to be worthy him—to be worthy him—to be worthy him! And now I have the chance to prove myself so; and I will not fail,—though the heart in my body burst, my spirit will not fail."

[268]

Lassie was still, overawed.

"I had to search to be thankful at first," Alva went on, "but now I have found something to be very thankful for. I am so glad that it came before I had told my mother. She is spared. She will never know. Every one is spared except him and me, and we are strong—we can endure. We have endured. We can endure again."

"If you only could have gone and been with him!" wailed the girl, softly.

"Oh, how I have wished that! You don't know how I have wished that! It has been sweeping through me and rending me cruelly, but he did not wish it, or he would have sent for me. And I have tried never even to wish anything unless he wished it, too. You know how I have wished that I might have stayed there with him. But he begged me to go. They would not let me stay. I had to yield!"

"Shall you go as you planned, to-night?"

"No, dear, I want to stay here alone for three or four days, and then go home,—back to my duty to my parents, you know. I never meant to leave for long. Yes," she almost whispered, "I must hurry back home, forever."

[269]

"Never to return here?"

"I think, never. I cannot see how or why I should return."

Lassie's lips quivered. "And your house?" she whispered.

A long, sad breath passed over lips that did not quiver. "Ah, yes, my house," she answered softly; "I thought of going to it this afternoon, and then I could not. Dear little home nest,—there are nothing but happy thoughts there; all my best is there—unselfish dreams, devoted hopes, great aims, longings to make some one and every one glad."

She paused. Lassie leaned close.

"May I lie down beside you, Alva, and put my arms around you and hold you tightly, dear? It will be good-by, for you want me to go just the same, I know."

"Yes, dear, you must go. What time is it?"

"It's over an hour till the train. Let me hold you close, dear, I—I love you."

"Yes, Lassie, come; I'll be glad to have you. Your head will lie on my arm, and I shall like to draw you near as I might have drawn a little child, had life fallen out differently long ago."

Lassie crept up on the bed, clasped her arms about her and tried not to weep.

"You don't mind my talking of him, do you?" the woman asked, presently. "You know after you go I shall never have any one again;" her voice wailed desolate with the last words so that its very sound caused Lassie's sobs to renew their force.

"I don't mind anything that you want to do, Alva."

"It's storming in upon me what life was to have been. What does the world know of love? Love is something too great to comprehend. It costs blood and years and tears. It goes so deep that the very joy in it cuts like a knife. I knew that I was only to have had him a few weeks, that I should have to compress all that I felt for him into them. But what those few weeks would have meant! When to be quiet together was in itself all that we asked! When we should have had a library and a piano, and the gorge to look out over, and one another to talk to,—to be with!" She stopped—her breath failed her.

[270]

There was a pause, as if to let the tide of grief sweep up and out again.

"Oh, Lassie, we had waited so long and hopelessly," she went on finally, her sentences short and tense and broken. "I tried to be so patient. I tried so hard to do well with the bit of life dealt out to me. As much as I could, I followed in his path in the giving of my all to others and neither asking nor expecting for myself. I hoped nothing for us—nothing for us! And then I had to see him stretched out—crushed—maimed, and I had to live still, and smile into his eyes, and tell him that even that was more than I had deserved. And then came our dream—our precious dream—the promise of those few, sweet, perfect days! Oh, but why should I repine? I have been so happy. I have contemplated the heights, even if it was not given me to reach them."

There was another pause.

"Lassie, it is not my soul that is wailing; my soul is very strong and resolute. He left work undone and even this afternoon it came to me that that work was part of him and that in doing it I should do for him. If we could suffer annihilation in a good cause, we should survive in the cause. If I carry forward all that he held in heart, I shall continue to be one with him. I know it. I longed unutterably to be with him, to make his pain lighter, to share his hours at the last. I thought a great deal of our happiness, but I thought also of what he would teach me to do for the world. Oh, I can believe that he suffered last night. It was only the edge of the storm that brushed over me, but I know how *I* suffered. There are some men who cannot die, who are too sorely needed; and he was such a one. He did not want to leave his work."

[271]

She stopped, and Lassie felt the tide of grief rise full and ebb again.

"It wasn't love or marriage as the world understands it; but it was the supreme self sacrifice that my spirit cried for in consecration. I thought that I was to be greatly fitted for a great work."

Lassie whispered: "Perhaps you have been fitted."

"No. No! Heaven ordained that the sacrifice and the consecration should be greater than I had ever imagined. It ordained that he should pass away alone and leave me alone, too; and now it is left me to work out a new salvation. I try not to doubt, I do trust God completely. But I cannot see why—or how! Not yet. But, at any rate, the worst for me is come. I have touched bottom. Battle for me is past."

Then she rose from the bed, went to the window and let up the shade. The night of Nature's world, always full of potency, calmed her suddenly into another mood.

"It is snowing," she exclaimed; "that means that rain is falling on new-made graves." She came back from the window. "Lassie," she said, "my heart is broken, my future is crushed, and yet I feel *so strong*! It floods me fresh. I see now that wherever his soul passed last night, it must have passed in triumph—gone on to further work. I shall work, too. That is the legacy his letter left me—an intense desire to serve. How small I am, how great God is; all life's misery results from setting our little wills in opposition to His plan for our best. It is borne in upon me clearly; I recognize the fact well. Now when I leave this room next time and forever henceforth, so long as I live, I am willing with my whole soul to do whatever work there is laid out for me. I feel in my heart that no stumbling or even ridicule for stumbling can ever again cause me to falter. I have found Truth. I will be strong."

[272]

Lassie looked at her in wonder. The white look of unearthly radiance which men once knew as "Ecstasy" was indeed on her face now—on her pale, sad, worn face, filling it with a glow of wondrous resolution.

"Oh, Alva!" the girl exclaimed, and then, even as the exclamation left her lips, she was conscious of an upleaping of warm, human joy to think of the six o'clock train and Ingram's companionship. The higher plane was very high above her yet.

Alva pressed her hands to her eyes and face. "That was like a lightning flash, dear," she said; "oh, if I may only live by its light forever after. If only!" There was a brief silence; then,—

"I must pick up my things, I guess," the girl suggested.

"Yes, dear," Alva tried to smile; "yes, you must pick up your things. That's what life here means."

Lassie slipped into her own room. She was glad that Alva was quiet and that she could smile upon her again; it was truly what life meant to her. She was very little yet and very blind, and the angels might have been smiling meaningly and mercifully at one another over her pretty, childish head that hour.

[273]

But over Alva the Spirits of Heaven might have wept,—as they weep for any on earth who fancy that they have sounded either the depths or the heights of any design wrought out above.

Above is so far above, and we and all our hopes and joys and sorrows are so far beneath. So far beneath that radiant serenity which moves eternally forward in its fulfilling of the Divine Plan. His Divine Plan for the uplifting of all that He has made.

[274]

CHAPTER XXIV

DAWN

As the train pulled out, a half hour later, Alva, now quite steady and serene, waved her hand, and then turned away so as not to see Lassie, weeping, yet clinging close to the strong arm thrown before her like a guard.

"You'll come home with me, my dear," said Mrs. O'Neil, who had come to the station, too; "you look a little tired and pale, and I'll help you finish your own packing, and then you must have some good hot tea and gingerbread."

Alva laid her hand in the kindly, warm hand of the other. "Yes, let us go home," she said; "but I'm not going to-night, so my packing can wait."

"You aren't going! Oh, I am glad. Then you'll have a little time for rest. You need it." Mrs. O'Neil was so frankly pleased that Alva was forced to thank her kindness in spirit. The racked are so grateful to a tender touch after their sharpest agony.

They went across the tracks and up the little cinder-path. Mary Loretta and the cat came running out to meet them, and Mary Cody had the teakettle boiling.

"She's not going to-night," said Mrs. O'Neil, getting out the tea and handing it to Mary Cody, who was now cutting gingerbread. "I'm so glad; it would be so lonesome without her."

[275]

Mary Cody assented.

"And those two young people are happy, too," Mrs. O'Neil said to Alva, in the dining-room a minute later, "such a nice-looking couple!"

"I hope she'll be happy," said Alva, staring out of the window as she sat by the table waiting idly. "She will have everything to make for her happiness now." Lassie and Ingram had ceased to matter to her. Her brain could not include them in this hour.

Mrs. O'Neil's eyes filled as she glanced that way. The still, quiet face and form by the window had some tragedy written in every line, although the lips stayed closed and the bright-faced hostess felt what she could not know.

"There, my dear, there's the tea; let me pour your cup," she said. "Do put in some cream just for once, it's so nourishing; and why, I declare, if here isn't Mrs. Ray, just in time to have a cup with us!"

Mrs. Ray had passed the window and now opened the door and came in. There was an air of strongly repressed excitement about her.

"So she's gone," she said briskly. "I was peeking out watching the mail-bag to see that no one else stuck a letter in the strap on me, and I saw you all seeing her off. Pretty she is,—and it's plain to be seen what's going to happen next, and I'm very glad for them both."

"Yes," said Mrs. O'Neil, smiling; "we're all that."

"I come down for several reasons," said Mrs. Ray. "First," she turned to Alva, "there's a letter that come this morning, and heaven knows how it happened—with all my care—but it slipped under those pesky government scales and I found it when I dusted out this afternoon. I hope it isn't very important."

[276]

Alva took the letter with its typewritten address and put it in her pocket. "Don't worry, Mrs. Ray," she said, "Lassie's gone; I'm going very soon; nothing can matter much now, can it?" She managed to smile.

"Well, I don't know," said Mrs. Ray. "That's your view because you're going, but I can't say that I shall feel really settled in my mind till the dam's settled."

"But I thought the quicksand was going to settle the dam," said Mrs. O'Neil; "somebody said so."

"You can't settle even a quicksand with a legislature," said Mrs. Ray; "I guess I know. The United States Government is a great eye-opener, especially when you have to tend a post-office according to any new rules it finds time to have printed and mail you. I've had four pages of new rules sent me to-day."

"Here's your tea, Mrs. Ray," said Mrs. O'Neil; "do sit down. Bring some more gingerbread, Mary. And won't you have a little jam? I've a lot of nice fresh this-autumn, plum jam."

"No, I don't want any jam," said Mrs. Ray, seating herself; "but, Nellie, I've been hearing that legally your husband can't do nothing with the Lathbuns."

"Well, that isn't the worst," said Mrs. O'Neil, her face clouding considerably; "what do you think I've up and done? I was so mad I threw that old hair-brush over into the gorge, and I've thereby made Jack liable for a suit of damage for breaking into the luggage a guest leaves without due cause, or else for willful destruction of personal property belonging to another and unoffending party who has reposed trust only to be betrayed. Jack will have to go to the lawyer to-morrow to find out which. Oh, they were slick—those two. They've got the law down fine."

[277]

"Well, did you know they're caught?" Mrs. Ray brought this statement forth as the cannon does the cannon ball.

Mrs. O'Neil jumped in her chair. "Caught? No, I did not know it. When?"

"They just told me over at the station that they were arrested about three o'clock. I guess it's true. I hope so."

"Oh, to think of it," said Mrs. O'Neil, "to think of them sleeping here last night and in Geneseo to-night!"

"The complaints will come pouring in," said Mrs. Ray; "everybody has got a bill against 'em. I don't believe they'll be out of jail in years."

Alva turned her face again to the window. She had not thought much of the two unfortunate creatures during the past few hours, and their misery bore in upon her with a vivid, headlong shock.

"And those case-knives, too," Mrs. Ray continued; "did they have 'em on, I wonder."

"Oh, the case-knives don't count," said Mrs. O'Neil; "they were left here by a travelling man. He was around to-day and asked if it was here that he left them. I meant to tell you, but dear, dear, I've had so much to do, seems like."

Mrs. Ray was much taken aback, but quickly recovered herself.

"Oh, well, they could have used a hat-pin just as well. Anyhow, they might have got up in the night and murdered him some way. Mrs. Lathbun could have held him while Hannah Adele just stuck anything handy into him in every direction. I never could see what they had the case-knives for, anyhow, if it wasn't on the chance of some such game. For two women to carry six case-knives instead of combs and tooth-brushes is very suspicious in itself, I think."

[278]

"But, they weren't carrying them," said Mrs. O'Neil. "Jack thought they had them for opening windows, but to think of them staying here three weeks and no baggage. It makes me wild."

"Well, you and Mr. O'Neil are easy," said Mrs. Ray; "you're very mooney, both of you. You can't deny that, Nellie,—you and your husband haven't got real good common sense, or you'd have nailed their windows on from the outside the day you first mistrusted them."

"Well, we won't be mooney any more, anyhow," said Mrs. O'Neil; "the drillers came to-day with two freight cars of machinery, but Jack had them pay a week in advance. He says he won't even trust the State after this."

"I don't trust the United States any further than I can see 'em," said Mrs. Ray; "but this has been a good lesson for you, Nellie. You won't be letting any sharper that comes along wear your gran'mother's Paisley shawl while he spies out the road he's going to skip out over next, again."

"Indeed and I won't," said Mrs. O'Neil feelingly.

"Sammy Adams was in to spend the afternoon," Mrs. Ray went on. "We talked the question of my marrying him all over again. He always asks me when he comes for the whole afternoon like that, and he had such a hard time getting it all out to-day with people running in to talk about the Lathbuns every second, that I just had to appreciate the way he stuck to it clear through to the end."

[279]

"What did you say?" asked Mrs. O'Neil.

"I didn't say much. I was too busy talking to the others, you know. Yes, indeed. But I was sorry for him. He's *so* scared sleeping alone in his house for fear of maybe being swindled in his bed before he knows it. And now he's worried for fear the dam is going to drown him unexpectedly, too. They say if that dam is built and does bu'st, the Johnstown Flood won't be in it with Rochester. The folks that want the Falls saved 'll get their chance to say, 'I told you so' then; but that won't help Sammy much."

"What did you say?" Mrs. O'Neil asked again.

"Well, when I got a chance, I told him I'd despise a man who'd let me keep on working as hard as I work now, but that if any man was to ask me to give up the church, or the post-office, or my chickens, that would show he didn't know me, right in the start."

"What did he say to that?" Mrs. O'Neil asked with interest.

"He didn't know what to say at first, but then he's the kind of man that never does know what to say. I declare, Nellie, I do think men that want to marry women act too foolish for words. Yes, indeed. If a man wants to do anything else in the world he gets to work and does it; but if he wants to marry a woman he just sits still and looks silly and leaves it to the woman to be done or not."

"Do you think so?" said Mrs. O'Neil.

"Think so," said Mrs. Ray; "I know so. I've had men acting foolish around where I was all my life. I've tripped over 'em while sweeping, cooking, washing, tending Mr. Ray's family by his second wife, sorting mail,—why, I've had men thinking what a good wife I'd make all my life, and looking so like idiots while they thought it that I wouldn't look at it like they did for any money. They stop by the fence when I'm ploughing, and just grin with thinking what a hired man I'd make. I was cleaning the long aisle carpet at the church last Wednesday, and that minister that's visiting our minister couldn't keep away from the window. When I take my eggs and chickens to market, the buyer down there looks at how I've got those eggs packed and pinches my chickens, and then he turns to me and goodness, but his glance is loving."

[280]

"Well, you're a very smart woman, you know," said Mrs. O'Neil.

"I know that; I know it just as well as you do. But I'm a woman, and I'd like to meet one man as was a man. I know men pretty well; I knew Mr. Ray better than he knew himself. Mr. Ray thought he was doing me an honor to marry me, and I knew he wasn't, and I lived with him fifteen years and never threw it in his face once. I let him talk about his ancestors and I never talked about mine. He thought I didn't have any; he never realized I kept still so as to keep from telling such stories as he did. His ancestors! I'd like to know what sort of ancestors he had! If he'd had any ancestors, he'd have been bound to be descended from them, I should think, in which case he wouldn't have been a Ray. The fact that he and his father called themselves Jared and spelt it Jarrod was enough for me; but to make a long story short I'm going to marry Sammy Adams, and I ran down to tell you that at the same time that I brought the letter."

There was an outbreak of exclamations and then a beginning at congratulations, but Mrs. Ray stopped those.

[281]

"I don't want congratulations," she said; "there isn't anything to congratulate me about, for I never tried to get him, so I haven't had a success or anything to be proud of. It's just that the dam is so likely to be going to drown him out that he wants to rent my second floor and pay the rent every first Monday in the month. I'm going to go straight on with my life, and continue to save my own money to finish educating Mr. Ray's children by his second wife. We shall go to church together, and he'll sit with me evenings when I ain't too tired, or when he's nervous over case-knives and swindling. He's going to pay me for all his tailoring and all his hair-cuts, but he's to say when he thinks he needs anything new or it's getting too long. He'll buy our potatoes and chickens of me at the regular price, but I'll furnish my own eggs, like I always have."

"It's settled, then?" said Mrs. O'Neil, with a slight smile.

"Yes, it's settled. I don't believe the dam will ever be dug, but I'll marry Sammy all the same."

"You're right about the dam, Mrs. Ray," Alva said, speaking for the first time. "I don't believe it will ever be built, either; the Falls have too many friends. Besides, there must come a time when the God of All will say to our American Mammon, 'So far and no further shalt thou go,' and I believe the time is now and that the place is here."

"Well, I don't know about all that," said Mrs. Ray; "but Josiah Bates drove the surveyors home yesterday, and he gathered from them that if they built that dam and made that lake, the lake was pretty sure to burst out around back of the Wiley place—that low place you know—and we'd have a new waterfall in through the Wiley cow-pasture, even if we didn't have nothing worse."

[282]

"Goodness me!" cried Mrs. O'Neil, "what would the Wileys say to that!"

"I don't know what the Wileys would say to that," said Mrs. Ray; "but it made me know what I'd say to Sammy. Yes, indeed. If there isn't going to be any dam, the summers here are going to go on exactly as they used to, and I've got to have a man to bring up my ice! You know my motto, 'He moves in a mysterious way,' and I can see now why the Lathbuns and the dam both come. I had a dreadful time last summer getting my ice up, and as long as everybody's been betting all along that I'd always marry Sammy some day, I might as well do it now as any time. Yes, indeed."

"You are very sensible," said Alva, rising, "and I'm sure that you will be very happy. I congratulate you." She held out her hand. "Good-bye."

"I'm sorry you're going so soon," said Mrs. Ray, clasping it warmly, "you've meant such a lot of cancellation, and then I've got very fond of you, too."

Alva smiled. "I'm only going out on the bridge just now for a little," she said, turning to Mrs. O'Neil. "I'll be back shortly."

Mrs. O'Neil glanced towards the window. "It's snowing harder and harder," she said; "wrap up warm."

Alva went quietly out. When they were alone, Mrs. Ray shook her head. "She looks bad," she said; "I'm not sure that she didn't care for him, after all. She's got that mooney look. I know just the look. I'd have looked just that way by spring, if I'd taken Gran'ma Benton and the parrot. I'm glad I've decided to marry Sammy, instead."

[283]

"You won't take them, then?" asked Mrs. O'Neil.

"No, I couldn't stand Sammy and a parrot at once, and then, too, he might quarrel with the parrot, or Gran'ma Benton might make trouble between Sammy and me. I never allowed any one to make trouble between Mr. Ray and me, and I won't allow trouble this time, either. If I'm going to be unhappy married, I won't marry. That's flat."

"I wonder if Jack knows they're arrested!" said Mrs. O'Neil, thoughtfully.

"I stopped in the bar on purpose," said Mrs. Ray, "I thought he ought to know right away."

"Was he there?" asked the wife.

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Ray, calmly, "but I did what I could, Nellie, and nobody can be expected to pass *that*, you know."

[284]

CHAPTER XXV

THE BREAKING OF ANOTHER DAY AND WAY

Alva slipped into her cape, and drawing some fur up round her throat, set swiftly forth upon the Long Bridge—for the last time, she told herself.

The snow was falling fast, but not thickly as yet, and she had it in her heart to steal under cover of the fast-approaching twilight to her house, and look upon that also for the last time. Her sorrow was too deep to leave any room to mourn the background of her dream, but the background was consecrated by the dream and she longed to stand once more close to those walls, even if only to sob her heart out alone under the rustle of dead leaves, amidst the fast deepening snow.

There was in her that awful strength that saves one's reason in the first shock of the otherwise unbearable. Years were ahead and yet her heart did not shrink; endless gray duties stretched between their mile-stones, but to her it mattered not. Nothing mattered, she told herself over and over. Life would go on, other lives in especial would go on; their demands would be hers to meet, their cares and troubles, their joys and sorrows would be hers to reflect, but to her personally nothing would—nothing could—matter more. Her unseeing eyes looked out over the gorge; the matchless beauty, for the preservation of which her dead love had fought so hard, came to a blind market now; she could not see, she could not feel, for her life and all that makes life worth living was over.

[285]

So she swept on, her dark cape fluttering wide like wings on either side of her steady swiftness. The snow crystals clung to the wool and quickly starred its night with stars, but she saw no night except her own, and noted no stars. "And yet I must not give way too much," she thought suddenly, with a quick stabbing sense of proving unworthy; "if I am what I have told Lassie that one should be—if I am what one who has truly loved should surely be—I shall be strong and live resolutely as he lived, even though I have been so crushed. Pain could not crush his spirit; shall sorrow crush mine? I *will* be strong."

The letter which she had brought out with her came to her mind then, and she paused and read it. It was from the surgeon and told her what she had lately mistrusted,—that there had never been the slightest chance of moving him, that she had been sent away as a child is banished from a painful scene, and that she had been beguiled as a child is beguiled. She did not resent the truth, she was too big to resent such a truth; but she felt freshly mournful, and the home that was to have been seemed to fade utterly out of her consciousness, leaving her with no desire to ever see it again.

But there was another sheet within the envelope. She took that out, too. It was printed—in a hand that trembled. Her heart contracted as she saw the crooked lines,—so much ran deep between them.

[286]

ALVA:—I have struggled. I shall not give up. I believe sometimes God has given a new body to serve a needed end. I cannot go. I must come back. Not for your sake. But for theirs—for the sake of those who will never know. If I come, help me again. For you and for me help is the only bond. I am not sure that there is any other that endures. Not in this present world of ours.

She shook a little. Something especially cold and piercing struck to her heart. She raised her eyes quickly, and there, close beside her on the bridge, the dead man stood.

His bright dark eyes looked straight into hers.

"Don't you know who I am?" he said.

She would have fallen but for his quick grasp, and the grasp choked the cry that was rising, for it was the grasp of flesh and of strength.

"Don't you know who I am?" he asked again. "I thought that I saw in your eyes that you knew. I thought that she had described me to you. I'm Lisle Bayard. You wrote to me, you know."

She drew away from him, and leaned heavily against the bridge-rail. If it were true that this were he! A new body to serve a great purpose. If that Mystery that is the rooting of all that is or is to be had been building this man and this hour, and weaving and twisting and shaping both to its ends! She seemed to stand motionless, but within herself she was dizzy and reeling. "He moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform."

"You have freed them?" she said, divining truth with a prescience that startled herself.

"Oh, yes," he said, "I have been to Geneseo. They are free. But you never really believed that I had any interest in them, did you?"

[287]

His voice was no strange voice in her ears, nor was his manner that of a stranger. She had to press her temples hard with her two hands. "You are like the man whom I loved," she said; "he—he died yesterday. That was what drew me to her; she described you and said that you loved her."

"Poor thing," he said, simply.

"And that you pursued her," Alva went on; "you can think that I befriended her then. I tried to help her. Because I, too, loved—and hoped."

"It was good of you," he said; "but they are mere adventuresses—not worth your troubling."

"But you have helped them?"

"I? Oh, yes. But," he hesitated; "I am tired of my life," he added suddenly. "I've turned over a new leaf—I've reformed."

"Since when?"

"Since yesterday."

She held hard to the bridge-rail. "Since yesterday," she repeated; "since yesterday?"

"Yes, since yesterday."

Her eyes were staring into his now. "Tell me about it?" she cried, as the starving cry out for food—"at once."

"I don't know about it. I just turned in disgust from myself. It was all in a minute. I wandered about all day and all last night. I tried to drink—you know I drink?—and then all of a sudden I realized what a beast I'd been, and I turned from it all. Something stronger than myself drew me to Geneseo this morning; something stronger yet drew me here; what led me out upon the bridge was strongest of all. I don't know what it all means, but perhaps you do."

[288]

For a long minute she looked at him, and then she spoke. "The man who died is guiding you," she said; "I know it is that."

He smiled a little. "Can I trust him?" he asked.

"I think so," she answered; "because his appeal is to your better self. You will learn."

"And you will teach me?" he said, quickly.

She was silent.

"You will teach me?" he repeated.

"I am going home," she said. "I live far from here. I have duties which will chain me there for life. You will learn of him alone. You will be guided; do not fear."

He looked at her, and his eyes blazed suddenly. She shrank back with a cry. "Oh, no—not that—not that!" she exclaimed; "I loved him and he is dead. His work descends on us to do, that is all. All!"

The man, looking down at her with the dead man's eyes, was silent.

"I am not able to talk to you," she said, "I can hardly control my voice. He died yesterday, and to-day you speak to me with his voice. And it is so strange,—your coming. It is all so strange."

"Yes, it is all strange," he said; "but it cannot stop here, you know. The Purpose that has brought this about will not cease to exist now."

She felt herself agitated, unnerved, trembling. She took hold of the bridge-rail again. "The Purpose works for great ends," she said; "we must learn that. I have learned it. Even a little respite from daily life is not allowed, when one has once crossed the border and left self behind. I have had to learn that in a bitter school. For God's sake, lift burdens; do not add to them. And do not make my lot harder than it is to be. You are not him, and I know it. Do not seek friendship with me; it is torture."

"But if I were he," he said, "if I do his work, live towards his goal, accomplish his purposes. Who shall say what soul I bear? I never had a soul till yesterday. I have one now. Where did it come from, this new soul of mine. Perhaps from him. I've read stories like that."

"I cannot bear it," she said, suddenly; "my head refuses to understand. All that I have believed is rolling and crashing around me. Let us say good-by. In a few hours I shall be far away. Oh, I shall be glad—so glad—to go."

"But I shall remain," he declared. "I shall take up the battle, and I shall win his unfinished fight. Let us leave the future wrapped in its mystery. I have been impatient all my life, but now I can wait."

She walked away through the snow.

And then suddenly, as she moved, she felt her steps stayed—she stopped. It was not the man who had stayed her; he was standing where she had left him, behind her—there on the bridge. But she was stopped by a thought; at that thought she turned.

"If you are to live here," she said faltering, her voice quite unlike its usual firm, low purpose,— "if you are to live here, you will want a home. There is a house—"

She paused. Her hand had drawn a key from her pocket, and without further explanation she held it out to him.

He approached and took the key. He asked no question. He spoke no word. They did not even exchange a glance.

Five minutes later a veil of snowflakes divided them, and the gorge lay black between.

What is there to be said further? Nothing unless perhaps the single line that can so fitly begin and end all:

"He moves in a mysterious way."



An International Love Comedy

A WOMAN'S WILL

By ANNE WARNER

Author of "Susan Clegg and Her Friend Mrs. Lathrop."

It is a relief to take up a volume so absolutely free from stressfulness. The love-making is passionate, the humor of much of the conversation is thoroughly delightful. The book is as refreshing a bit of fiction as one often finds; there is not a dull page in it.—*Providence Journal*.

It is bright, charming, and intense as it describes the wooing of a young American widow on the European Continent by a German musical genius.—*San Francisco Chronicle*.

A deliciously funny book.—*Chicago Tribune*.

There is a laugh on nearly every page.—*New York Times*.

Most decidedly an unusual story. The dialogue is nothing if not original, and the characters are very unique. There is something striking on every page of the book.—*Newark Advertiser*.

A more vivacious light novel could not be found.—*Chicago Record-Herald*.

**Illustrated by I. H. Caliga. 360 pages. 12mo.
Decorated cloth, \$1.50.**

LITTLE, BROWN, & CO., PUBLISHERS, BOSTON
At all Booksellers'

New Edition with Pictures from the Play

THE REJUVENATION OF AUNT MARY

By ANNE WARNER

Author of "Susan Clegg and Her Friend Mrs. Lathrop," "A Woman's Will," etc.

Illustrated. 12mo. Cloth. \$1.50

Always amusing and ends in a burst of sunshine.—*Philadelphia Ledger*.

Impossible to read without laughing. A sparkling, hilarious tale.—*Chicago Record-Herald*.

The love story is as wholesome and satisfactory as the fun. In its class this book must be accorded the first place.—*Baltimore Sun*.

The humor is simply delicious.—*Albany Times-Union*.

Every one that remembers Susan Clegg will wish also to make the acquaintance of Aunt Mary. Her "imperious will and impervious eardrums" furnish matter for uproarious merriment.... A book to drive away the blues and make one well content with the worst weather.—*Pittsburg Gazette*.

Cheerful, crisp, and bright. The comedy is sweetened by a satisfying love tale.—*Boston Herald*.

LITTLE, BROWN, & CO., PUBLISHERS

254 WASHINGTON STREET, BOSTON

AN ORIGINAL GENTLEMAN

By ANNE WARNER

Author of "The Rejuvenation of Aunt Mary," the "Susan Clegg" books, etc.

Frontispiece by Alice Barber Stephens. Cloth. \$1.50

Merry reading indeed.—*New York Tribune*.

All are humorous.... In none is dialect used.—*New York Sun*.

The book brings out new possibilities in the author's work and will add much to her popularity.—*Springfield Republican*.

Humor and novelty of plot characterize most of the stories, and they are entirely worthy of the creator of "Susan Clegg" and "Aunt Mary."—*Syracuse Herald*.

Crisply told, quaintly humorous.... Only a woman with discernment and tenderness, and only an artist could make characters live and breathe as hers do.—*Boston Transcript*.

Exhibits her cleverness and her sense of humor.... Show much of that humor in the conception and that skill in droll delineation of character which first brought Anne Warner into notice with her "Susan Clegg" stories.—*New York Times*.

LITTLE, BROWN, & CO., PUBLISHERS
254 WASHINGTON STREET, BOSTON

Anne Warner's "Susan Clegg" Books

SUSAN CLEGG AND HER FRIEND MRS. LATHROP

By ANNE WARNER

With Frontispiece, \$1.00

Nothing better in the new homely philosophy style of fiction has been written.—*San Francisco Bulletin*.

One of the most genuinely humorous books ever written.—*St. Louis Globe-Democrat*.

Anything more humorous than the Susan Clegg stories would be hard to find.—*The Critic, New York*.

By the Same Author:

SUSAN CLEGG AND HER NEIGHBORS' AFFAIRS

With Frontispiece, \$1.00

All the stories brim over with quaint humor, caustic sarcasm, and concealed contempt for male and matrimonial chains.—*Philadelphia Ledger*.

SUSAN CLEGG AND A MAN IN THE HOUSE

Illustrated by ALICE BARBER STEPHENS. \$1.50

Susan is a positive joy, and the reading world owes Anne Warner a vote of thanks for her contribution to the list of American humor.—*New York Times*.

LITTLE, BROWN, & CO.,
254 WASHINGTON STREET, BOSTON

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK IN A MYSTERIOUS WAY ***

Updated editions will replace the previous one—the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from print editions not protected by U.S. copyright law means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG™ concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for an eBook, except by following the terms of the trademark license, including paying royalties for use of the Project Gutenberg trademark. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the trademark license is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. Project Gutenberg eBooks may be modified and printed and given away—you may do practically ANYTHING in the United States with eBooks not protected by U.S. copyright law. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

START: FULL LICENSE THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase “Project Gutenberg”), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg™ License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg™ electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. “Project Gutenberg” is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most Project Gutenberg™ electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg™ electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation (“the Foundation” or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is unprotected by copyright law in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg™ mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg™ works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg™ name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg™ License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with

this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg™ work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country other than the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg™ License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg™ work (any work on which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” appears, or with which the phrase “Project Gutenberg” is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere in the United States and most other parts of the world at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org. If you are not located in the United States, you will have to check the laws of the country where you are located before using this eBook.

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is derived from texts not protected by U.S. copyright law (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase “Project Gutenberg” associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg™ trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg™ electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg™ License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg™ License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg™.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg™ License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg™ work in a format other than “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg™ website (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original “Plain Vanilla ASCII” or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg™ License as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg™ works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg™ electronic works provided that:

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg™ works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, “Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation.”
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg™ License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other

copies of Project Gutenberg™ works.

- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg™ works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the manager of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread works not protected by U.S. copyright law in creating the Project Gutenberg™ collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain “Defects,” such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the “Right of Replacement or Refund” described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg™ trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg™ electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you ‘AS-IS’, WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg™ electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg™ work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg™ work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg™

Project Gutenberg™ is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg™'s goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg™ collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg™ and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4 and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org.

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's website and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg™ depends upon and cannot survive without widespread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine-readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate.

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg™ electronic works

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg™ concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg™ eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg™ eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as not protected by copyright in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our website which has the main PG search facility: www.gutenberg.org.

This website includes information about Project Gutenberg™, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.