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Title: The Wiving of Lance Cleaverage

Author: Alice MacGowan

Illustrator: Robert Edwards

Release date: May 12, 2015 [EBook #48937]

Language: English

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## **The Wiving of Lance Cleaverage**

**By**

**Alice MacGowan**

**Author of**

**"Judith of the Cumberlands,"**

**"The Last Word," "Huldah,"**

**"Return," etc.**

**With Illustrations in Colour by**

**Robert Edwards**

**G. P. Putnam's Sons**  
**New York and London**  
**The Knickerbocker Press**  
**1909**

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ALICE MacGOWAN

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

TO

EMMA BELL MILES

WHO COULD WITHOUT DOUBT HAVE WRITTEN

MUCH BETTER THIS STORY OF HER OWN HOME COUNTRY

THE BOOK IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED

BY

THE AUTHOR

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# The Wiving of Lance Cleaverage

## CHAPTER I.

### A PAIR OF HAGGARDS.

NOON of summer in the highlands of Tennessee; the Cumberlands, robed in the mid-season's green, flashed here and there with banding and gemming of waters. The two Turkey Track Mountains, Big and Little, lying side by side and one running so evenly from the other that only the dweller upon them knew where to differentiate, basked in the full glow of a Sabbath morning radiance.

A young fellow of twenty-three, crossing the crown of a higher hill, tonsured years ago by the axe of some settler, but offering half way up its side resistance of undergrowth and saplings, paused a moment in the open to look down. Below him the first church bell had just rung in the little gray structure across the creek. Shining above the ocean of woods and the cabin homes that, like islets, dotted the forest at wide intervals, the Sabbath sun caught and lightened upon something bright, swung upon the newcomer's back. Himself as yet unseen, he gazed down upon this his world, spread map-like below him. He could pick out everybody's home. Each one of those cabins wore to-day, from porch floors hollowed with much scouring to inner cupboard niche, an air of Sunday expectancy that lacked little of being sanctimonious. Only the house-mother remained in charge of each, preparing the Sunday company dinner with even more outlay of energy than the preceding six had required. The men had, by common consent, adjourned to spring, barn, the shelter of big trees in the yard; he caught glimpses of the young folks below him on the woods-paths, attired in their brightest frocks and shirts, and whatever finery they could command, sauntering by twos and threes toward preaching. His smiling, impersonal gaze was aware of Callista Gentry sitting on a rock above the spring, holding a sort of woodland state like a rustic queen. The time of roses was past in this southern land, but every dooryard in the Turkey Tracks was painted gay with hollyhocks, while in ravine and thicket flamed the late azaleas, ranging from clear pale yellow, through buff and orange, to crimson. These lay piled in a sheaf beside the big gray rock, and the girl who sat there was showing her mates how to trim their hats with them, while several boys looked on and presumably admired.

The curious feature of Callista Gentry's following was, that it included as many young women as young men, and the chariot wheels of her mates looked robbed always, because, inferentially, the man who courted any other would rather have Callista Gentry if he might.

Coached and forwarded, exploited and made the most of ever since she could remember; a bright, pretty child, and a dutiful student, during her brief days of country schooling; her mother had from infancy enforced all the rural arts of beauty culture to make her what she was. Long home-knitted yarn gloves were worn to protect the shapely hands and whiten them. The grand big mane of ashen-blond hair was washed in fresh-caught rainwater, clipped in the dark of the moon, combed and tended and kept as no one else's hair was. Her sunbonnets were never the long-caped ungainly affairs commonly seen; they took on, whether by accident or design one could hardly say, the coquetry of a wood violet half-blown; and when these were not in use, a broad hat shaded the exquisite fairness of the oval cheek. Callista had grown up a delicate court lady, smooth and fine to look upon, pink and white and golden, like one of those rare orchids, marvelously veined and featured, known only to the bees of the wood, whose loveliness is always ashiver with peculiar vitality. This Sunday morning the lepidopteral flutter of gay calicoes, and the bee-like murmur of young male voices in her court of youths and maidens, carried out well the figure of the rare, moth-bewitching blossom.

"I wish't Lance Cleaverage'd come—then we'd see fun!" cried Buck Fuson, rising to his knees and gazing across the slope. "I'd ruther hear him and Callista fuss as to eat my dinner. Them two has the masterest arguments I ever heard outside of a law-court."

Brown little Ola Derf, sitting slightly apart from the others braiding pine needles into a ring, looked up suddenly. A woman at the spring below scooping a drink for a fat child, lifted a long drab face and sighted in the same direction. This was the Widow Griever, elder sister of Lance Cleaverage. Sour censor of public morals that she was, Roxy Griever considered eighteen-year-old Callista the young woman perfect, and found her own brother quite unworthy of the paragon. Only the central figure of the group appeared to take no notice, while the girls about her, at the mere mention of Lance, all fluttered and resettled themselves with a certain vague air of expectancy.

"You boys ought to be ashamed of yo'se'fs," Roxy Griever reproved. Then apart to young Fuson, "Callista's got more sense than to pay any attention to such a light-headed somebody as that fool brother o' mine. Let me tell you, Callista Gentry has more sense than any of you men persons give her credit for. She's a serious-minded gal. You Mary Ann Marthy, you quit treadin' over yo' Sunday shoes." And she raised her small daughter a bit from the pathway and set her down sharply, as though to indicate the correct manner of walking in Sunday foot-gear.

The infant of the triple name—her Uncle Lance said she sounded like twins if she didn't look it—put up a mutinous red mouth and lowered from under flaxen brows.

"Me wants to hear 'em fuss," she muttered as she progressed reluctantly toward the little church on the hill-side.

"Well, you ain't goin' to hear 'em fuss, and they ain't goin' to fuss, and you couldn't hear 'em if they did," admonished her mother lucidly, accelerating the infant's pace from the rear. "The big spring ain't no place for chillen like you, and old women like me. Let the light-minded and the ungodly do about in such ef they will. You and me is goin' into the church house and set thar till preachin'."

Fathers and mothers were herding their broods of lesser children in, but boys and girls of older growth, young men and women of an age to be thinking of mating, strolled by twos or sat on the bank above the big spring that supplied the baptismal pool of Brush Arbor church. Callista Gentry was wearing a new print frock—and looking quite unconscious of the fact.

"That ain't no five cent lawn," whispered Ola Derf enviously, as she eyed it from afar. The Derf girl was an outsider at most gatherings, and particularly so at church affairs. Everybody knew she came to Brush Arbor only on a chance of

seeing Lance Cleavage.

"Thar comes Lance now!" announced Fuson, and then winked at his companions.

Callista never raised her glance, nor did the even tenor of her speech falter, though something told the onlooker that she was aware. A swift slight contraction of plumage like that of a hawk suddenly on the alert, a richer glow on the softly oval cheek, a light in the down-dropped eyes which she jealously hid, a rearrangement, subtle and minute, of her attitude toward the world, showed that she needed no sight nor hearing to advise her of the coming of the lithe young fellow who approached from the ragged second growth of the abandoned hillside clearing. He came straight through, paying no attention to paths—that was Lance Cleavage. His step was light and sure, yet it rent and crushed what was in his way. On his back swung the banjo; his soft felt hat was off in his hand; as he moved, the sleeves of his blue hickory shirt fluttered in the breeze that stirred his hair, and he sang to himself as he came. What he sang was not a hymn. His hazel eyes were almost as golden as the tan of his cheek, and there was a spark in the depths of them that matched the audacious carriage of his head. At his advent the Widow Griever turned and let the fat child find her way alone.

"You Lance," she began in a scandalized tone, "don't you bring that sinful and ungodly thing into the house of the Lord. You know mighty well and good the preacher is about to name you out in meetin'; and here you go on seekin' the ways of the Evil One. Pack that banjo straight back home this minute."

She evidently had as little expectation of Lance obeying her as he had of doing so. Her words were plainly intended merely to set forth her own position—to clear her skirts of reproach. The young folks about her giggled and looked with open admiration at the youth who dared to bring such a worldly object to Sunday preaching.

"Banjo'll let the preacher alone, if the preacher'll let it alone," smiled Lance, unconcernedly pulling the instrument around to get at the strings, and touching them lightly. "You go 'long into the church and get your soul saved for Heaven, Sis' Roxy. I reckon they need representatives of the Cleavage family in both places."

"Well, that's whar you're a-goin'—er more so," asserted the widow with dignity, as she turned her back once more on the young folks and moved away.

Lance took the ribbon of his banjo from his neck and flung it over a blossoming azalea bush.

"I'll hang my harp on a willer tree,  
And away to the wars again,"

he hummed softly just above his breath.

"I don't aim to hurt the preacher's feelings. I won't take my banjo into his church—sech doctrine as Drumright's is apt to be mighty hard on banjo strings. Don't you-all want to have a little dance after the meeting's out—on the Threshin'-floor Rock up the branch?"

The girls looked duly horrified, all but Ola Derf, who spoke up promptly,

"Yes—or come a-past our house. Pap don't mind a Sunday dance. You will come, won't you, Lance?" pleadingly.

Callista Gentry did not dance. She had always, in the nature of things, belonged to the class of young people in the mountains who might be expected at any time to "profess" and join the church. The musician laughed teasingly.

"I reckon we'd better not," he said finally. "Callista's scared. She begged me into bringing my banjo to-day (you don't any of you know the gal like I do), and now she's scared to listen to it."

Callista barely raised her eyes at this speech, and spared to make any denial.

"You-all that wants to dance on a Sunday better go 'long there," she said indifferently. "It's mighty near time for preaching to begin, and you've got a right smart walk over to the Derf place." Dismissing them thus coolly from her world, she addressed herself once more to pinning a bunch of ochre and crimson azaleas into the trimming of her broad hat.

"Lance," drawled Buck Fuson, "I hear you' cuttin' timber on yo' land. Aimin' to put up a cabin—fixin' to wed?"

The newcomer shrugged his shoulders, but made no reply.

"When I hearded it, I 'lowed Callista had named the day," persisted Fuson.

"Have ye, Callista?" Rilly Trigg put in daringly, as neither of the principals seemed disposed to speak.

"The names that the days have already got suits me well enough," Callista observed drily. "I don't know why I should go namin' ary one of 'em over again."

There was a great laugh at this, of which Cleavage appeared entirely oblivious.

"Yes," he began quietly, when it had subsided, "I'm about to put me up a house—I like to be a-buildin'—a man might as well improve his property. There's one gal that wants me mighty bad, and has wanted me for a long while; sometimes I'm scared she'll get me. Reckon I might as well be ready."

"Ye hear that, Callisty?" crowed little Rilly Trigg. "Ye hear that! Have ye told him adzackly the kind of house ye want? I 'low ye ort."

"Put a little yellow side o' that red," advised Callista composedly, busying herself wholly with the hat Rilly was trimming. "There—don't you think that looks better?"

Rilly made a face at Fuson and Cleavage, and laughed.

"No need to ask her which nor whether," said Lance nonchalantly. "Any place I am is bound to suit Callista. I intend that my house shall be the best in the Turkey Tracks; but if it wasn't she'd never find it out, long as *I* was there."

Again there was a chorus of appreciative laughter.

"How's that, Callista—is it so for a fact?" inquired Fuson, eager to see the game go on.



Callista opened her beautiful eyes wide, and smiled with lazy scorn.

"Truly, I'm suited with whatever Lance Cleaverage builds, and wherever and whenever he builds. Let it be what it may, it's nothing to me."

"You Rilly!" called a shrill feminine voice from the direction of the church. "Bring the basket."

"Help me with it, Buck," said Aurilla, and the two started down the slope together.

"Now," suggested Lance, with an affectation of reluctance, "if the rest of you-all don't mind giving us the place here, I reckon Callista's got a heap that she wants to say to me, and she's ashamed to speak out before folks."

The mad project of a Sunday dance, which nobody but Ola Derf had entertained for a moment, was thus tacitly dropped. There was a general snickering at Lance's impudent assumption. Again Callista seemed too placidly contemptuous to care to make denial. Boys got up from their lounging positions on the grass, girls shook out their skirts, and two and two the young folks began to straggle toward the gray little church.

"You're a mighty accommodatin' somebody," observed Lance, dropping lightly on the grass at Callista's feet. "I have been told by some that you'd make a contentious wife; but looks to me like you're settin' out to be powerful easy goin'. Ain't got a word to say about how many rooms in the house, nor whar the shelves is to be, nor nothin'—eh?"

Reckless of time or place he reached up, put a finger under her chin, and turned her face toward him, puckering his lips meditatively as though he meant to kiss her—or to whistle. He got a swift, stinging slap for his pains, and Callista faced around on the rock where she sat to put herself as far from him as might be.

"Who said anything about wives and husbands?" she demanded. "I was talking about you building on yo' land. Hit's nothin' to me. I never expect to live in the houses you build, nor so much as set foot in 'em. When you named that girl that was tryin' to wed you, I shorely thought you must have been meanin' Ola Derf. As for me, if you heard me talkin' of the house I expected to *live* in, you'd hear a plenty—because I'm particular. I ain't a-going to put up with no puncheon floor in my best room. Hit's got to be boards, and planed at that. I ain't a-goin' to break my back scouring puncheons for no man."

Lance nodded, with half closed eyes. It was plain he got her message. One guessed that the house would be made to please her, and, too, that he liked her the better for being fastidious.

The two were apparently alone together; but neither Ola Derf nor Flenton Hands was among the young people moving away down the further slope. Lance gazed after their retreating friends and heaved a lugubrious sigh.

"Well, looks like they've all started off and left me for you and you for me," he commented sadly.

"Have they?" inquired Callista without interest. "They show mighty poor judgment."

"Same sort of judgment I'm showing, settin' here talking to you, when I might as well spend my time with a good-lookin' gal," retorted Lance promptly.

"The Lord knows you waste yo' time talking to me," Callista sent back to him with a musing, unruffled smile on her finely cut lips. "Your settin' up to me would sure be foolishness."

"Settin' up to you?"—Lance took his knees into an embrace and looked quizzically at her as she reclined above him, milk-white and pink, blue-eyed and flaxen-haired, a creature to cuddle and kiss one would have said, yet with a gall-bag under her tongue for him always. "Me settin' up to you?" He repeated the words with a bubble of apparently unshunnable amusement in his tone. "I reckon you're a-doin' the settin' up; everybody seems to understand it so. I just mentioned that the rest of the folks had left you and me alone together, and I was goin' on to say that I began to suffer in the prospect of offerin' you my company up to the church-house. Lord, some gals will make courtin' out of anything!"

A subdued snicker sounded from the screen of leafage behind the spring. Several young people lingered there for the fun of hearing Lance Cleaverage and Callista Gentry fuss. The red began to show itself in the girl's smooth, fair cheeks. She caught her wide hat by its strings and got suddenly to her feet.

"Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Lance Cleaverage," she said coldly, "I never took enough notice of you to see was you courtin' me or some other girl; and I'll thank you now to step yourself out of my way and let me get on to the church-house. I've got to lead the tribble, come service time. I can't stand fooling here with you, nor werry my-self to notice are you courting me or somebody else."

She held her graceful head very high. If she swung the hat by its strings a thought too rapidly, it was the only sign she gave of any excitement as she gained the path.

Cleaverage ranged himself beside her, leaving the banjo in the bushes. "All right—all right," he remarked in a pacifying tone. "I'm willin' to walk up to the door with you, if that's what's troublin' you so greatly; but I don't want to go in and sit alongside of you on the middle seats. You take your place on the women's side, like a good gal, and let me have some peace, settin' over with the men."

For a moment she was dumb. Half a dozen had pushed into view, and were listening to them now. They all understood that Lance knew well enough she must sit with the singers, yet his open refusal to accompany her to the middle seats, where the courting couples generally found place, was not the less galling.

"Tell him you won't never step yo' foot in church beside him, Callista," prompted a man's voice, and Flenton Hands stepped out on the path, twisting a bit of sassafras in his fingers and looking from one to the other with quick shiftings of his gray eyes.

Lance laughed radiantly but soundlessly, his face and eyes shining with mirthful defiance. The girl looked down and trifled with her hat ribbons.

"Why don't you say it?" inquired Cleaverage at length. Hands leaned forward and stared eagerly at her, his mouth a little open and his breath coming quick. He had always been the most pertinacious of Callista's followers; an older man than any of the others, he brought to bear on his wooing the persistence and determination of his years.

Callista just glanced at the younger man, and let her gaze rest on Hands.

"What's the use of telling him what he already knows mighty well and good?" she said finally.

"Give me the pleasure of walking up with you this morning, then," Hands encroached eagerly.

With negligent composure Callista looked about her. She was not willing to walk with Lance—she doubted if he would ask her again. She was not willing to discredit him and go with Hands. She was determined that Cleaverage should not walk with another girl.

"Come on, Ola," she coolly addressed the figure plainly to be seen behind Hands. "Let's you and me hurry over and see what hymns Brother Drumright is going to use. You sing mighty good counter, and I'd like to have you next to me."

Ola Derf could not refuse. It was almost equal to social rehabilitation to be allowed to walk with Callista Gentry from the spring to the church, to sit beside her in the singing seats; yet the brown girl cast uneasy glances backward till she saw Lance, whistling melodiously, turn to the blooming azalea bush and catch up his banjo from it. She stopped in her tracks, holding Callista back.

"Whar—whar ye gwine, Lance?" she inquired anxiously. If Cleaverage was not coming to church it would scarcely be worth while for her to torture herself with an hour of old Preacher Drumright's holding forth. "Whar ye gwine?" she reiterated, as the other girl pulled her sleeve and attempted to hurry on.

"Whar you and Callista ca'n't come," returned Lance, speaking over his shoulder unceremoniously.

"Ain't ye gwine to stay to preachin'?" persisted the brown girl. "I—I thought ye was, or I—ain't ye gwine to stay?"

"No," drawled Cleaverage. "I just brought the banjo to please Callista—because I promised her I would, when she begged me to. I had no notion of staying to listen to Drumright."

"Come on—if you're a-coming," Callista admonished the Derf girl with a little flash of temper which Lance did not fail to observe, any more than she missed the chuckle with which he received it.

"Well, I'm a-goin' with ye," announced Ola. She let go Callista's arm, and turned back to where Lance was taking a shadowy path into the forest.

"I told you, gals couldn't come," Cleaverage bantered her. But Ola persisted.

"I can go wherever you can go. Lance—wait! Wait for me—I'm a-comin'."

"Callista'll be mad," objected Cleaverage. "She begged and begged me, and I wouldn't leave her come along of me; now if I take you, she'll be mad."

"Like I cared where you went or who went with you!" Callista retorted, eyes shining blue fire, head crested. "Come on, Mr. Hands, it's time we were stepping, if we want to get in to go through the hymns."

"And you will sit alongside of me?" Hands's voice pleaded close to her ear.

Ola and Lance were of the same age; the blond girl, lingering half indignant, could remember how hardy, free little Ola Derf used to play with the boys, always singling Lance Cleaverage out as the companion for her truant expeditions. Now in mute denial of Hands's petition, Callista shook her head, and in doing so managed to glance round and get a tormenting glimpse of Ola and Lance disappearing together between the trees. Under the green domes of oak and liriodendron, the latter starred all over now with orange-tawny tulips, she saw them pass. Wine of summer was in the veins of the forest. Even the sober oaks, wreathed like bacchanals, overflowed with sweetness from their wrappings of wild grape. The two with the banjo took their way down a steep path toward a jade-green pool, a still reach of water arched over by fantastic tangles of laurel and rhododendron, black as the tents of Kedar, lighted only by the flash of a water-fall that caught the sun. This was the baptismal place.

The daughter of the house of Gentry turned her face resolutely toward respectability and the church, albeit there was no joy in the countenance. Strung out over a quarter of a mile were courting couples bent toward the same destination. To these young hearts it seemed well worth while to have lain under the heel of winter to attain this marvelous summer morning with its green-clothed forest, its wreathing of blossoms where they passed. Clean and cool as a bell's note, the song of a thrush deep in the wood spilled jeweled drops of sound through the trembling branches overhead. A catbird's sonata rippled boldly out upon the very path. A canopy of bloom was woven and flung over the spring by the black, knotty fingers of the laurel. Bees tumbled happily in the bosom of the fairest drooping clusters, their hum nearly drowned by the heavy gurgle of the creek water.

Callista drew in her breath sharply. Summer and sun and light and love everywhere—and she was walking up to the church-house with Flenton Hands, while back on some forest by-path, with music at his finger ends and Ola Derf beside him, Lance Cleaverage forgot her with a laugh.

## CHAPTER II.

### THE UP-SITTING.

GRANNY YEARWOOD—the grandmother of Flenton Hands and his sisters—was dead. The work-hardened old body had parted with its flame of life reluctantly; for nearly a year she had been declining toward the end; and during the last months the family had cared for her almost day and night. They were worn out with the toil of it before she herself wore out. But now it was all over. The first outburst of noisy lamentation, which is fairly conventional in the Southern mountains, was past. The corpse had been decently composed on a rude plank scaffold, while Octavia Gentry and Roxy Griever took charge of the household and began to order things in that curious half-ecclesiastical fashion which follows the footsteps of death.

It was near noon, and Octavia dished up the dinner, while Roxy paid more attention to the impending funeral arrangements. Before the meal was over, young people began to come in, though none could quite say how they had received word. The girls made proffer of assistance, and swiftly the table was cleared away, the dishes washed, and the house and surroundings put in immaculate order. Work in the fields was stopped, that messengers might be sent, one on horseback to notify distant-dwelling kin, another with a wagon to buy the coffin down in Hepzibah, a third afoot to

arrange with the strong young men of the family connection about helping to dig the grave. All the flowers in the dooryard were gathered and laid round the corpse. The withered old face was covered with a damp cloth, and then a borrowed sheet was drawn smoothly over the whole mound. The Widow Griever was so deeply versed in the etiquette of such occasions, and so satisfyingly exacting on all points, as to make an undertaker even more highly superfluous than he would usually have been among those simple folk. What with garments and accessories she had brought from her own scant widow's wardrobe, and articles hastily borrowed from the nearer neighbors, she managed inside of two hours to have Little Liza and her two sisters—the mother of the family was dead some years ago—clad in black and seated in state inferior only to that of the dead.

More flowers were brought by girls and small boys from the neighbors' yards—yellow and purple and red were the colors mostly in bloom now, and those which would have been favored for this occasion. Roxy gravely arranged them and set them in place. She had veiled the looking-glass and stopped the clock as soon as she came into the house.

"A body cain't be too careful about all these here things," she said with a solemn sniff. "Hit's easy at a time like this for something to be did that crosses the luck."

Women came and went through the open doors, silent almost as the little breeze that played between. Everybody wore the same expression of mournful acquiescence in the natural order of things. Greetings were exchanged in low tones. Callista, carrying a basket of garden asters, came up the front walk, looking openly for her mother, guarding a little warily against Flenton Hands's approach. Some girls hurrying out to seek ferns in the low places of the wood met her, and she turned back with them, joining her activities to theirs and making a wreath of the flowers she had brought.

Flenton Hands was thirty years old. To have arrived at this age unmarried is, in the mountains, in some measure a reproach. True, he aligned himself sharply with the religious element of the community, and this, when youthful masculinity is ever apt to choose the broad way where there is more company, bespoke for him a certain indulgence or toleration that would have been denied a typical old bachelor.

He was cantankerous old Preacher Drumright's right hand at all times, and Drumright was safe always to approve him. He was the kind of man who seeks the acquaintance and company of those well-to-do and older than himself, paying a sober court to respectability and money, and thus coming eventually to be rated as one of the elders, while he yet held the dubious position of an unmarried male who shilly-shallied in the matter of wedding.

No actual scandal ever attached to Flenton Hands. If there were improprieties to be debited against him, he kept such matters out of the sight of Turkey Track people, and only a vague rumor of something discreditable associated itself with his Valley connections to warrant young girls in pouting their lips and referring to him as "that old Flenton Hands"; while their mothers reproved and told them that he was one of the best young men, as well as one of the best matches, in the neighborhood.

So far as personal appearance went, he was well enough, yet with a curious suggestion of solidity as though his flesh might have been of oak or iron. The countenance, too, with its round, high cheek-bones, had an unpleasing immobility, resting always in a somewhat slyish cast of expression which the odd slant of the light gray eyes gave to it. For the rest, he was thin-lipped, with thick, straight, dark hair, and an almost urban air of gentlemanliness, an effort at gentility which, in a shorter and more cheerful individual, would have been smug.

"Flenton's gone for the coffin," Sallie Blevins said. "He always tends to it when there's anything to do that calls for money to be spent."

"I reckon he's got a plenty," supplied little Rilly Trigg; "but someway I never could like his looks greatly. There, I oughtn't to have said that—and his granny laying dead in the house that-a-way."

Callista did not add her opinion to this discussion, but finding that she was in no danger of meeting Flenton, hurried the others promptly up to the house. As soon as she came in sight, Little Liza, six feet tall, with a jimber-jaw and bass voice, came and fell upon her neck and wept. Little Liza Hands got her descriptive adjective from being the third of the name. To-day she was especially prominent, because Granny Yearwood, the first Eliza, ninety pounds of fiery energy and ambition, had at last laid down the burden of her days. Her daughter, Eliza the second, had lain beside her husband, Eliphalet Hands, in churchyard mold these twenty years; and *her* big daughter, with the bovine profile, the great voice, and the timid, fluttered soul of a small child, remained in the world, the only Eliza Hands—yet still Little Liza to those about her. And for her name's sake, Little Liza was chief mourner.

The Hands girls all had a sort of adoring attitude toward Callista Gentry. Flenton wanted her, and they had been trying to get Flenton everything he wanted since he was small enough to cry for the moon, and strike at the hand which failed to pluck it down for him. Callista had not intended to stay. She was to be over later in the day—or the same night, rather—with the young people who sat up. But Little Liza managed to detain her on one pretext or another until the coffin arrived and Granny was finally placed therein.

"Just look at them thar shiny trimmin's on that thar coffin," admired Little Liza, jogging Callista's elbow. "That's Flent. That's my brother Flent. They ain't a thing he grudges to them he loves."

Callista uttered a soothing and satisfactory reply, and was making her escape, when Hands himself overtook her at the door. His features were drawn to an expression of great solemnity, one which suited them ill, for he had the upslanting brow, the pointed face and the narrow eye that, lightened by mirth, may be antic, but without the touch of humor is forbidding and even sinister.

"You're not going to leave us, air you?" he inquired in a carefully muffled tone, as though indeed Granny was sleeping lightly and might be easily wakened.

"Mother's going to stay now, and I'm coming back to-night," Callista hastened to say.

"I'm mighty glad you air," returned Flenton, with a heavy sigh. "In these times of affliction, hit's a powerful comfort to me to have you in sight."

Callista edged closer to the others. She was not unwilling to be seen standing whispering with Flenton. He was a good match, a creditable captive of any girl's bow and spear; yet she did not enjoy his love-making, least of all now that it was mingled with this ill-sorted solemnity.

"Flenton, have they sent word to your Uncle Billy's folks?" asked Octavia Gentry, making her appearance in the doorway behind the two.

"Yes'm," returned Flenton, not pleased to be interrupted, yet necessarily civil to the woman whom he hoped to have for a mother-in-law.

"And does the Bushareses and Adam Venable and his wife know hit? Is Mary a-comin'?" she pursued the catalog. "What about the Aspel Yearwoods out in Big Buck Gap—has anyone went out there? And Faithful Yearwood, that married Preacher Crowley—ain't they livin' down in the Tatum neighborhood?"

"Yes'm, they air," confirmed Flenton. "Cousin Ladd 'lowed to send one o' his chaps on a nag to Faithful Crowley's folks; and Ab Straley was to let them at Big Buck Gap know." Though impatient, he made a decent end. When he looked around, Callista had quietly moved away.

The day's work was over; men and boys began to arrive at the Hands place, some carrying lanterns. From early candle lighting till near the turn of the night the house would be full; then the elders, men and women on whose day labor a family must depend, would begin to slip away, except a few old widowers and bachelors who might remain smoking on the steps outside; and a circle of young folks who would be left sitting in the lamplight and fireshine of the main room. Flenton knew of old experience just how the night would go. He longed inexpressibly to be one of those up-sitting young people that he might push his chair close to Callista Gentry's and whisper to her in the privilege of the hour. Yet he was held back by a consideration for his dignity as one of the bereaved.

"Miz. Gentry," said Roxy Griever, "will you stay and he'p with the supper—they aim to have a reg'lar meal put on the table at about midnight—settin' up with the dead is mighty wearin'."

"I 'low the gals would rather tend to that theirselves," deprecated Octavia, mildly. "I mind how it was when I was a gal. I never did want some old women pesterin' around at sech a time."

She cast a swift glance to where Callista sat, her fair head bent, the lamplight upon its bright burden of corn-colored braids, Lance Cleaverage, his hands in his pockets, standing before the girl regarding her, and evidently about to say something.

The Widow Griever's look followed Octavia's to the front room in which half-a-dozen couples had paired off, whispering, giggling a bit if the truth must be told, with an occasional undernote of hysteria in the giggles.

"That's jest the reason," she announced, straightening up from the hearth where she had been stirring a vast boiler full of very strong coffee. "The gals that lets tham men have their way is foolish. They'll rue the day they done so. Men persons would always have the old folks leave, and the young folks run things to suit theirselves; but I don't believe in sech."

On the mental horizon of the Widow Griever there hovered ever a vast, dun, evil-promising cloud known as "tham men." She never alluded to the opposite sex in any way other than collectively, and named them in this manner, which held in it all of reproach. Her father—gentle soul—presented himself to her under the name of Poppy, as somewhat set apart from the raging mass of predatory males addressed more or less openly and directly to destruction. Poppy and a young brother, Sylvanus, though belonging to the vicious sex and thereby under suspicion, were possible; but Lance, the lawless and debonair, was not only one of the enemy—he was Roxy Griever's horrible example. The church-house where "tham men" were kept on the one side so that the gentler half of creation might sit peacefully on the other, was to her thinking the only safe and proper place of public gathering.

"I tell you, Miz. Gentry," she now pursued, her reprehending eye going past the person she answered to fasten itself on Lance's lounging figure and note the careless, upward fling of his head, "I tell you that I ain't never been back to the Settlement sence I left it a widder. What would I be doin' down thar amongst all tham men? But Lance, he goes down, and every time he goes, I think he gits more of the Old Boy in him, 'caze evil is a-walkin' around at noonday down in tham settlements, and you cain't be safe anywhars."

"Might just as well quit being scared then," drawled Lance's soft voice. He had stepped noiselessly to the door, at Callista's suggestion to see if the coffee were ready.

"You Lance Cleaverage!" returned his sister in a carefully suppressed tone that was sufficiently acid to make up for its lack of volume, "I ain't a-goin' to quit bein' scared for yo' say-so. You ought to be ashamed to name such—in the house with the dead this a-way. No, the coffee'll not be ready for somewhile yet. When hit is, you'ns can fetch cheers and he'p yourselves to it. I'm a-goin' to show Miz. Gentry my gospel quilt that I brung with me to lay over Granny."

Roxanna Cleaverage had married rather late in life. Girlhood had been but an unsatisfactory season to her; young women in a primitive society are not given much prominence, and Roxy had neither beauty nor charm to command what was to be had. Lacking these, she made a great point of religion, which led incidentally to her marriage with John Griever, an itinerant preacher, and brought her two blissful years and Mary Ann Martha. As the wife of a preacher she had been able to assume some dignity, to instruct, to lay down the law, to keep herself measurably in the public eye.

When she was widowed, it was bitter to her to go back to Kimbro Cleaverage's poor home and drop once more into obscurity. She yearned desperately to wear some mark of distinction, to have at least some semblance of social power. And in direct response to this longing, there came a vision in the night, and Roxy rose up and took her bits of quilt pieces and began to fashion a new thing. Other women might have the Rising Sun, the Log Cabin, the Piney-blow, the Basket of Posies; she had conceived and would execute a master work in the way of quilts, quite outside the line of these. Roxy lacked entirely that crude art sense which finds its expression in the mountain woman's beautifully pieced quilt; she only burned to startle admiration, to command respectful attention by some means. The big square of muslin was bought at the expense of considerable pinching and saving, and she began to set upon it those figures which had occupied her mind, her time and her fingers through the years since. Clumsily done, with no feeling whatever for form, proportion, or color, she poured into it a passion of desirous energy which yet produced its effect. The quilt was always at hand for such occasions as this, or when the Presiding Elder came on one of his rare visits. And it was useful to bring out if there were trouble, if someone needed to be overawed or to be threeped down. But that member of the Cleaverage Clan who in her eyes most needed threeping was proof against the gospel quilt. She had never put it forth for Lance's confusion since the day he took such an expressive interest in the undertaking, and advised—in the

presence of Preacher Drumright—the adding of a sightly little border of devils around the semi-sacred square.

"A fine row o' davils would help the looks of it mightily, Sis' Roxy," he had argued. "They're named frequent in the Bible, and I'd cut 'em out for you. I would sure enough," he laughed, as she looked heavy reproach at him. "You give me a sharp pair o' shears and I can cut out as fine a lookin' davil as you or anybody need wish for!"

After that she let him alone, aware that his more gifted eye criticized her failures, even when he did not seek the circle about the exhibited quilt and wilfully mistake her angels for turkey buzzards.

The two older women now passed into that cool, shaded little chamber where lay the dead. The windows were open, and the white curtains blew gustily in the night breeze, making the candle Roxy carried flicker. She set it on a high shelf, and got out a thick roll of stuff, unwrapping and spreading forth her contribution to the solemnity of the occasion.

"Hit's jest the top on it," she communicated in a hoarse whisper. "I hain't got the heart to put it in frames and quilt it, 'caze I keep thinkin' of something else that ort to go on it, time I say I'm done. Cur'us that I ain't never showed it to you before." (This was a common formula with the widow, and nobody ever disputed it). "See, that's Adam and Eve, to begin on," and she indicated a pair of small, archaic figures cut from blue checked gingham, their edges turned neatly in and whipped to the white domestic background—when one thinks of it, a domestic background is fairly proper for Adam and Eve. "That ginghams they' cut out'n was a piece o' John's shirt—the last one I made him."

"Tut, tut," responded Octavia, making that little clicking sound with the tongue which does duty variously to express sympathy, reprehension, surprise, or deprecation. She regarded the artistic achievement before her with attention and respect. One could readily distinguish Eve from Adam, because Eve was endowed with petticoats, while Adam rejoiced in legs. Of course Eve had feet; but it would have taken someone less well acquainted with the moral character of the Widow Griever than was Octavia Gentry to deduce legs from those feet.

"What's that thar?" she made the customary inquiry, putting her finger on a twisty bit of polka-dotted calico. "That must be the serpent."

"Hit air." Roxy returned the expected answer solemnly.

The Ancient Evil was represented as standing sociably on his tail, facing the tempted pair.

"My! Don't he look feisty?" commented Octavia, with courteous admiration. "Watch him jest a-lickin' out his tongue in Eve's face. Lord," she sighed conventionally, "how prone women air to sin!"

"Women? Huh!" snorted Mrs. Griever. "Not nigh so prone as tham men. Look-a-here," turning the quilt to get at the Tree of Good and Evil; "look at them thar apples. Now I made some of 'em out of red calico, and some out of yellow. Do you think I ort to have a few green, Miz. Gentry? Look like green apples is mighty sinful and trouble makin'."

"I don't know," Octavia debated, as she ran her fingers over a brave attempt at one of the Beasts of Revelation. "You might add a few green ones. Hit does stand to reason that the Old Boy is in green apples more than in ripe ones; but of them that Eve tempted Adam with had been green—do you reckon he'd 'a' bit?"

The scandal was such an old one, that Roxy was evidently a little irritated at its revival.

"Well, o' course," she said with some asperity, "a body cain't gainsay what's in the Bible; but I have my doubts about that thar apple fuss. Hit's men that prints the Good Book, and does about with it—not women; an' I've always had a feelin' that mo' likely hit was Adam got into that apple business first."

"Well, I don't know," repeated Octavia doubtfully. "I always 'lowed the Bible was the Bible. But what's a-goin' to be here?" pointing to a sizable blank space.

"Why, that's a part that I ain't got to finish yet," explained Roxy. "Miz. Abner Dowst given me the prettiest piece o' goods last time I was at her house, and I been studyin' whether to use hit a-depicturin' the Queen of Sheba or Phar'oh's daughter; and then I thought I'd do better to show up Joseph a-dreamin', and the sun and the moon and eleven stars jist over his head—see, they'd set around sorter biassin' this-a-way, betwixt Adam-an'-Eve and this golden harp. Hit's a piece of that dress her gals all had on a-Sunday—you know Dows the always gits a bolt, and time her and the gals all has a dress out of hit, and him a shirt and the boys a shirt apiece, why the bolt's about gone. Well, this time that The'dory May, she axed for something bright, and he was bent on pleasin' her, so he picked for the brightest thing in the store. Hit looked sort o' gay a-comin' into church, one behind another; but now hit'll do fine for Joseph's coat. Ah, law, Miz. Gentry, hit'll be right here in my quilt long after their dresses is wore out and forgot about."

"Yes, indeed, hit will that, Sister Griever," her listener assented, a good deal impressed. "Is these sorter round things—"

"Them's the loaves an' fishes," Roxy hastened to elucidate. "They ain't so very well done, ye see. I was a-workin' on them when I hearn that Granny Yearwood was about to go, an' I hurried 'em up, 'caze I'd promised her that I'd spread the quilt over her when she was laid out. You he'p me with it now, Miz. Gentry, and we'll fold it back this-a-way so as not to show the part that ain't done."

"Laws, Miz. Griever," said Octavia, as the great square, with its many small, gaily colored figures, whipped laboriously into place, was spread out between their hands, "I don't see how you ever did think of all them things."

"I reckon it comes from havin' a preacher for a mate," returned Roxy. "Mr. Griever, he was always a cotin' scriptur' round the house, and now he's gone I remember his words—and put 'em down on the quilt, as a body may say. I love to have it by me to work on in time of trouble, an' I love to put it on the bed if a preacher sleeps the night at our house. Looks like a body ought to have good dreams un'neath the gospel that-a-way. Thar, ain't that fixed all right now? Cain't we leave here? I 'low them young folks out in the other room might need attention."

Octavia glanced through the slightly open door and saw that Lance and Callista had gone into the kitchen alone to look after the supper. They were talking together, and the mother noted hopefully that neither of them was laughing, and that the girl's color had risen, while her eyes looked troubled.

"Law honey," she said smiling, "sho'ly they can manage for theirselves one while. I'm plumb tired, an' I know good an' well you air. Le's sit here a spell whar it's cool an' quiet, an' have a little visit."

This was a sort of invitation which Roxy Griever could not refuse, and the courting couples were spared her surveillance for a little longer.

"Callista," Lance began abruptly, when they were out of earshot of those in the front room, "I raised the roof-beams of my cabin to-day—two big rooms and a porch between, with a cooking place for summer. Ain't that about right?"

Callista looked toward the other room uneasily. She had no audience now—how should she act, how demean herself so as to seem indifferent? Lance's undecipherable, clear hazel eyes were on her; they rested carelessly in what seemed a passing glance; yet at the back of that regard looked out a demand which she could scarcely comprehend.

"I—I don't know," she faltered. "Lance, won't you please lift that there coffee off o' the fire? It's boiled enough."

Lance bent lithely to the hearth and did her bidding.

"I've got me two horses now," he said in the same even undertone. "I matched Satan with a little black filly that Derf brought over from the Far Cove neighborhood. They're jest of a size, and they step together like a couple of gals with their arms around each other's waists. Derf said the filly was named Cindy; but I call her Sin—how do you like that?—Satan and Sin?"

"Well, I think it sounds right wicked, if you ask me," Callista plucked up courage to say. "But I don't reckon you care whether I like it or not."

Lance shook his head and smiled.

"Nope," he agreed easily. Then he added, "Havin' two horses helps out a good deal. I've been doing haulin' on Derf's contract. I'll have a right smart of money left, even after my house is all done. There'll be a-plenty laid up by next spring; and I'm goin' to put in the winter clearing land. I reckon we'll be good ready by April."

By April! A sweet perturbation took possession of Callista's breast. She dared not raise her eyes lest he should read in them what she yet jealously sought to conceal. He was not like the other boys; with all the raillery and badinage that went on between them—famous in their circle; with all the unusual parade, in the open play of courtship, he had never really approached her as a lover, never laid his hand on her in tenderness, nor offered her a caress, save as a public, saucy threat. Nor had he asked for her, as the mountain phrase goes; but surely now he meant her to understand that he expected to be married in the spring. If only he would ask her—if only! She had always meant—if she dared—to refuse him—at least the first time; to reluctantly give in under repeated importunities—but that was past. With her heart beating in her throat, she made shift to say,

"I hope you'll be better to your horses than most of the men that hauls. I do love a good horse."

"You goin' to ride with me to the buryin' tomorrow?" Lance inquired casually. "If you want to, we could leave the buryin' ground after the funeral's over and go up Lance's Laurel, to my place, and on round to your home the long way. I could show you whether I was good to my horses or not."

The color glowed softly in Callista's cheeks and her veiled eyes were bright. But before she could say yes or no, the Widow Griever came in.

"Good land, Lance Cleavage!" she began on her usual formula. "Why hain't you bidden out all them folks in thar? This here coffee's done, an' a-gittin' cold. The biscuits ain't no better. They got to eat now, 'caze I want 'em to sing a good wake of hymns—I promised Granny I'd tend to pickin' 'em out."

With a grimace of good-natured acquiescence, Lance went to execute his sister's orders. Out on the porch a half-dozen young boys had succumbed to drowsiness, one by one, stretched on the boards, taking elbow or saddle for a pillow. The crickets and katydids were loud in the grove. Lance passed through the front rooms, speaking to the couples there, and called in those outside. The supper of good warm food, and hot, strong coffee was eaten gratefully. Then all went into the front room and the hymns were sung. Finally the up-sitting was over, and Callista had made no opportunity for further speech with Lance. He had not sought one, and chance had not offered it. She regretted a little that she really wanted so much to ride at his side to-morrow. If she did not, she would quite enjoy treating that cavalier invitation as though she had never heard it. But the very thought brought a quick apprehension of failure, and she resolved to be ready and waiting, so that she might seem to be carelessly picked up at the last moment, lest Lance himself anticipate her in this game of indifference.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE BURYING.

DAWN was gray in the sky, a livid light beginning to make itself felt rather than seen above the mountains, while vast gulfs of shadows lingered in their folds, when Callista climbed the stairs to a loft room, set apart for the Hands girls, and, partially undressing, lay down for a few hours of sleep. Her mother and Roxy Griever had gone home shortly after midnight. Coming and going increased with the rising day. Roxy Griever had now returned, bringing with her a hastily ruffled cap of cheap lace.

"Sylvane," she called, coming out to the porch where the men were standing about conversing in undertones, "you got to ride over to Miz. Gentry's and git a black veil and a belt for Jane. Little Liza ain't a-goin' to be able to go to the buryin' at all, and Jane has obliged to have a veil and belt, her bein' a mourner that-a-way."

Already, along the fence there was a string of dingy, unkempt teams and wagons; while in the horse lot were more, those who had come earlier having unhitched. Granny Yearwood was near ninety—Eliza Hands had been her youngest—and she was known to the whole region around. Roxy stood in the door shading her eyes, picking out this one and that among those in attendance. The gathering looked much like any other, except that one missed the shouts of hail and farewell, the effusive welcoming and hearty speeding of guests.

The stir outside waxed. By some subjective movement, Callista, sleeping in the loft room, was aware of it, wakened, rose, dressed and made ready herself.

"I don't know what we-all ever would a' done without you, honey," Little Liza told her, gazing across from the bed on which she lay. "Looks like to me some folks is born comforters."

The pale eyes of the big woman took in Callista's sweet, significant beauty, with an appreciation that was hardly vicarious. She did love Callista for her brother's sake; and much, too, for her own.

"You come up and tell me jest how Granny looked before you-all go, won't you?" she urged. "I want to see you before you start, anyhow."

Callista promised and hurried downstairs. Those who had remained over night were standing about a table, eating a hasty breakfast. By eight o'clock the gathering was ready, and the hitching up began. After a great deal of consultation and argument as to where each one should ride, the procession began to arrange itself. There were to be no services at the house, but it was hoped that Preacher Drumright would be able to meet the funeral party at the burying ground and conduct the ceremonies there—the funeral sermon would be at the church on some later Sunday.

"Who you goin' to ride with, Callista?" inquired the Widow Griever, a weighty frown on her brow. "We got to git this thing all straightened out so the family an' friends won't be scrouged from they' places, like is mighty apt to happen at a funeral. There is them that's bound to have a ride, whoever gits to go."

Roxy's quilt had been removed from the coffin and draped over a near-by stand. Six bronzed, heavy-breathing, embarrassed looking men were marshalled in by the widow, and instructed how to lift the black-painted pine box, carry it to the waiting buckboard, and place it safely there with one end wedged under the seat. Then Roxy turned to Flenton.

"Go git Ellen and Jane," she prompted.

He hastened to the house and up stairs, and soon returned with a sister on each arm, black-draped and wailing, clinging to him. He helped them into their seats in his own vehicle. But when Ellen made room for him, he drew back and motioned Kimbro Cleaverage forward.

"Couldn't you drive, Mr. Cleaverage?" he said in an undertone. "Sylvane can take yo' team, with Miz. Griever and the chillen; and I've got to go in—" he reddened with embarrassment—"in another place."

The crowd was pretty much all in the yard now, clambering into ox-carts and board-seated wagons. Roxy Griever, with Mary Ann Martha and Sylvane, were waiting in Kimbro Cleaverage's small wagon drawn by an old mule, while half-a-dozen undesired additions were offered to their party. Callista looked about her vainly for Lance. She had already defended herself two or three times from being thrust into some vehicle and carried away from the possibility of riding with him, when she finally saw him approaching down the road. He was on one black horse and leading another. She could not know that he had been over to Derf 's that morning to get the filly.

"Callista," said Flenton Hands's voice at her shoulder, "Little Liza sent me down to see would you come up to her right quick. She's mighty bad off."

With one last, furtive glance toward the black horse and his rider, Callista turned and hurried up to Liza.

"Air they gittin' off," inquired the ailing woman, eagerly lifting her head with its camphor-drenched cloths. "Did Ellen and Jane cry much? Looks to me like they wasn't much takin' on—I never heard much. There wasn't nigh the fuss that they was at old Enoch Dease's buryin'. I wish't to the land I could have been down there—the Lord knows I'd 'a' cried. Granny ought to be wept for. Think o' livin' to be ninety years old—and then havin' to die at last! Oh, ain't it awful, Callista? How did she look, honey? Was Vander Blackshears here? Set right down there on my bed and tell me."

One might almost have guessed that the lengthened inquiries were dictated by someone who wanted Callista detained. The girl answered them hastily, with her heart galloping, her ears alert for sounds from below.

"Don't you be uneasy," Little Liza soothed her. "Flenton said he'd wait and take you in his new buggy that he bought when he got the coffin a-yesterday. You'll be the first one to ride in it—ain't that fine? Flent's jest that-a-way. He don't grudge anything to them he loves. You hadn't promised somebody else to ride with 'em, had ye, Callisty?"

She brought the point-blank question out after a little halt, reddening a bit at the boldness of it. Plainly this was at another's dictation. Callista shook her head. Words were beyond her at the moment; for, looking down from the tiny window of the loft room, she saw the procession getting underway, one clumsy vehicle after another falling into line behind the buckboard that was now slowly disappearing beyond the bend of the road. And at the fence. Lance Cleaverage was helping awkward little Ola Derf to mount the black filly!

"I said Granny deserved to be wept for," Little Liza intoned, as she saw the tears that slipped down Callista's pink cheeks. "I didn't know you cared so much about her, honey, but I know you've got a mighty tender heart."

"Is that all, now, Liza? Are you all right till the folks get back?" questioned Callista. "Well, then I'll leave you—they're a-going," and with an effort for composure, she turned and made her way down to Flenton Hands and the new buggy. Her mother was staying to get dinner for everybody—a piece of genuine self-sacrifice, this—and as Callista passed her in the kitchen, she made a half-hearted offer to change places.

"No, honey," said Octavia, resolutely. "You go right along. I don't mind this. I"—she lowered her tone to a whisper of furtive pleasure—"I seen Lance bringing up the prettiest little black mare for you to ride." With unwonted demonstrativeness she bent forward and kissed the young, smooth, oval cheek. "We ain't got each other for always," she said gently. "Let's be kind and lovin' while we have. Go 'long, honey, an' ride with Lance. Granny Yearwood wouldn't begrudge it to ye."

Flenton met the girl at the door, and walked with her down to the gate. It was an almost shocking breach of etiquette for him to let the entire procession get away without him, yet neither mentioned it. Callista's eyes were on two mounted figures that closed the train, and she scarcely spoke as she seated herself in the new vehicle.

The graveyard was a stony, briery patch of ground, as desolate a spot as could well be found. In a country where the houses were so scattered that the word "neighborhood" had scarcely any meaning, there was no public sentiment concerning the care of the abandoned God's acre; but each, when a grave was dug in it for one of his clan, resolved on making some effort toward its improvement, and, in the struggle for existence, promptly forgot. It was guarded partly by a rail fence that Derf's Old Piedy, a notorious rogue, could lay down with practised horns any time she liked; and

partly by a crooked, crumbling wall of stones, picked up off the land itself and laid there by hands which had long been dust. A wide place it was, for its scanty tenantry, with hollows hidden in liana-woven thickets and straggling knolls yellowed with sedge-grass. As is usual where a hard-wood forest has been cleared, young pines were springing up all over the waste; one could see, between their dark points, the blue rim of the world; for this land lay high, on a sort of divide or shed, where nothing would grow.

The unmended road was full of vehicles, the graveyard filling with people, as Callista and Flenton came up. The ride had been one of discomfort to the girl. She liked to have her conquests to display before others; but she always shrank from being alone with Flenton Hands, and to-day his insistent love-making had filled her with cold distaste.

"And you are certainly the sweetest comforter ever a man had in time of affliction," he told her over and over again, with sanctimonious inflections. "If I had you always by my side, looks like to me the world's sorrows wouldn't have no power on me."

It was a relief to her when they reached the fence, and he stepped out to help her down and tie his horse. There had been some uncertainty up to the last as to whether Preacher Drumright could be got for the occasion, but the sound of his voice from the press of calico-clad and jeans-covered shoulders and backs, reassured Flenton.

"I'm mighty glad Drumright's thar," he said to Callista, as he lifted her down. "He'll preach Granny's funeral come Sunday, he said; but thar ain't anyone can pray like he can. I do love a good servigorous prayer."

Callista's anxious eyes were searching the animals tethered about for sight of the two black horses that stepped together "like a couple of gals with their arms around each other's waists." At last she found them in the grove, and hastily turned with her escort to go through the gap in the fence to where the preacher was, where yawned the open grave, and stood the coffin. A tangle of dewberry vines, with withering fruit on them, here and there, and beginning even in their mid-summer greenness to show russet and reddened leaves, scrambled all over the poor soil. Most of the graves were unmarked, some had a slab or block of wood; only here and there gleamed a small stone.

Callista passed that of her father, good-looking, ne'er-do-well Race Gentry, whom the romantic young Octavia Luster had run away to marry. A honeysuckle vine covered it with a tangle of green, offering now its bunches of fawn and white, heavy-scented blossoms from a closely compacted mound.

"I'm a-goin' to have a real monument put up for Granny," Flenton whispered to her as they went forward together. "I wish't she'd lived to be a hundred, so I could have put that on the stone; but we're mighty proud of her holdin' out to ninety."

Quite against her will, Callista found herself taken up to the front of the gathering, placed between Ellen and Flenton Hands beside the coffin. Preacher Drumright was speaking with closed eyes; he had embarked on one of those servigorous prayers which Hands admired. The two girls, Ellen and Jane, were sobbing in long, dry gasps. After the prayer came a hymn, the lulls in the service being filled in by the sobs of the Hands girls, little responsive moans from some woman in the assembly, and the purr of the wind in the young pines, where scared rabbits were hiding; and by the far, melodious jangle of Old Piedy's bell—Old Piedy, dispossessed and driven away.

With the appearance of Callista and her escort on the scene, a young fellow who had been lying full length on the top of the ruining stone wall tilted his hat quite over his eyes and relaxed a certain watchfulness of demeanor which had till then been apparent in him. When the girl was finally ensconced in the middle of the lamenting Hands family, this person leaned down and whispered to Ola Derf, whose square little back was resting against the wall close beside him,

"Come on, let's go. Haven't you had about enough of this?"

"Uh-huh," agreed Ola in a whisper, "but we mustn't git our horses till the preacher quits prayin'. Hit'll make too much noise."

Again Lance relaxed into his quiescent attitude, and had to be roused when the hymn began, with,

"He's done finished, Lance. Do you want to go now?"

The wind soothed its world-old, sighing monody in the young pines overhead; beneath the waxing warmth of the morning sun faint whiffs, resinous, pungent, came down from their boughs, to mingle with the perfume from the vagrant honeysuckle that flung a long green arm toward the trunk of one of them. Suddenly a woman's tenor, wild and sweet, rose like a winged thing and led all the other voices.

"Huh-uh," grunted Lance, from his sun-warmed couch. "Let's wait awhile now."

After the hymn, Drumright read from the Scripture. Even his rasping voice could not disguise the immemorial beauty of the sombre Hebrew imagery, "Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken."

Lance drew a long quivering breath. Something in the sounds, the hour and the occasion, had appealed to that real Lance Cleavage, of which the man Ola Derf knew was only custodian, to whose imperious needs the obvious Lance must always bend.

Yet, long before poor Callista could be released and allowed to ride home, by her own earnest petition, in the buckboard with Jane and Ellen, the two by the stone wall had found their way across to the black horses in the grove, and were scurrying down the dusty summer road, racing as soon as they were out of sight of the graveyard.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A DANCE AND A SERENADE.

THE Derfs occupied a peculiar position among their Turkey Track neighbors. They had a considerable tincture of Cherokee Indian blood, no discredit in the Tennessee mountains, or elsewhere for that matter. One branch of the family had received money compensation for their holdings from the Government. Leola's father had at that time taken possession of an allotment of land in the Indian Territory. The eldest daughter, Iley, married out there, and brought back her Indian husband when Granny Derf, pining for her native mountains, had to be carried home to Big Turkey



Track.

It was not the blood of another race that set the Derfs apart; but it may have been traits which came with the wild strain. There was a good deal of money going among the clan. Old man Derf was a general trader; also he engaged in tanbark hauling in the season, and some other contracting enterprises such as required the use of ready cash. In the back room of the main house there was quite a miscellaneous stock of provisions, goods, and oddments for sale. Derf was more than suspected of being a moonshiner or of dealing with moonshiners. He gave dances or frolics of some sort at his house very frequently, and there was always plenty of whisky. At one time or another the family had lived in the Settlement a good deal, and come off rather smudged from their residence in that place. Indeed, your true mountaineer believes that sin is of the valley, and looks for no good thing to come out of the low ground. In a simple society, like that of the mountains, the line is drawn with such savage sharpness that the censors hesitate to draw it at all. Yet a palpable cloud hung over the Derfs. While not completely outcast, they were of so little standing that their house was scarcely a respectable place for a young, unmarried woman to be seen frequently. Ola, Garrett Derf's second daughter, a girl of twenty, and a homely, high-couraged, hard muscled little creature, was permitted in the neighborhood circle of young girls rather on sufferance; but she did not trouble them greatly with her presence, preferring as a rule her own enterprises.

Lance Cleaverage, a free, unfettered spirit, trammled by no social prejudices, came often to the frolics at Derf's. He seldom danced himself, whisky he never touched; but he loved to play for the others, and he got all the stimulation which his temperament and his mood asked out of the crowd, the lights, the music, and some indefinable element into which these fused for him.

It was nearly two months after the incident at the church and the funeral of Granny Yearwood, that Ola was redding up and putting to rights for a dance. She had hurried through an early supper; the house was cleared, like the deck of a ship for action, of all furniture that could not be sat upon. What remained—a few chairs and boxes, and the long benches on which, between table and wall, the small fry of the family crowded at meal time—were arranged along the sides of the room out of the way. The girl herself was wearing a deep pink calico dress and a string of imitation coral beads. Generally, she gave little thought to her appearance; but everybody believed now that the time was set for the marriage of Lance Cleaverage and Callista Gentry; neither of the young people denied it, Callista only laughing scornfully, and Lance lightly admitting that there was a mighty poor chance for a fellow to get away when a girl like Callista made up her mind to wed him. In the face of these things, the little brown girl clad her carefully, laboring with the conscienceless assiduity of Nature's self to do her utmost to get her chosen man away from the other woman—to get him for herself. She went out past the wood-pile to view the evening sky anxiously, and seeing only a few cloud-roses blooming in the late light over the hills, came back with satisfaction to attempt once more putting her small brothers and sisters out of the way.

A little after dark her guests began to arrive, coming in by ones and twos and threes, some of the boys in mud-splashed working clothes, some in more holiday attire. About moonrise Lance strolled down the road, and by way of defending himself from the importunities of Ola's conversation, if one might guess, kept his banjo twanging persistently. There was a certain solemnity over the early comers, although Derf roared a hearty greeting from his door of the cabin, and occasionally some of the men adjourned to his special room and came out wiping their mouths.

"Ain't nobody never goin' to dance?" inquired Ola impatiently. "Here's Lance a-playin' and a-playin', and nobody makin' any manner of use of the music."

There was nearly ten minutes of hitching and halting, proposals and counter propositions, before a quadrille was started. It was gone through rather perfunctorily, then they all sat down on the boxes and benches and stared into the empty middle of the room.

"Good land!" cried Ola, coming from the other side of the house, "play 'Greenbacks', Lance—let's dance 'Stealing partners'."

The new amusement—half dance, half play—proved, as she had guessed, a leaven to the heaviness of the occasion. People began to laugh a little, and speak above their breath. Two awkward boys, trying to "shoot dominickers" at the same moment, collided under the arch and went sprawling to the floor. The mishap was greeted with a roar of mirth in which all chill and diffidence were drowned.

And now the arrivals from the far cabins were on hand. Small children who had been allowed to sit up and look on nodded in corners, or stretched themselves across their fathers' knees and were tumbled just as they were upon a pallet in the loft. The usual contingent of bad little boys collected outside the door and began to shout at the dancers by name, calling out comments on personal peculiarities, or throwing small chips and stones under foot to trip up the unwary. These were finally put down by the strong hand.

Clapping and stamping increased as the dancers moved more rapidly; calls were shouted; the laughter was continuous. Lance Cleaverage leaned forward in his place, striking the humming strings with sure, tense fingers, his eyes aglow, and on his mouth a half smile. The fun waxed furious; the figures whirled faster and faster, gathering, disparting, interweaving, swinging and eddying before his eyes. Coats were thrown off, the feet thudded out the measure heavily. This was his dissipation, the draught that the mirth of others brewed for him. Its fumes were beginning to mount to his brain, when Ola's hard brown little hand came down across his strings and stopped the music. There was an instant and indignant outcry and protest.

"Consarn yo' time, Ola! What did you want to do that for?" demanded a tall young fellow who had broken down in the midst of a pigeon wing, as though he drew his inspiration from the banjo and could not move without its sound.

"I want to hear Buck play on his accordion—and I want Lance to dance with me," Ola said petulantly. "What's the use of him settin' here all the time playin' for you-all to have fun, and him never gettin' any? Come on, Lance."

Ola Derf was not used to the consideration generally accorded young women. When she made a request, she deemed it well to see that her requirements were complied with. Deftly she lifted the banjo from Lance's lap and passed it to someone behind her, who put it on the fireboard. Then laying hold of the young man himself, she pulled him out into the middle of the room.

"Play, Buck, play," she admonished Fuson, who had his accordion. "You made yo' brags about what fine music you

could get out of that thar box,—now give us a sample."

Buck played. When a dance has swung so far as this one had, nothing can check its rhythmic movement. The notes dragged wheezily from the old accordion answered as well to the gathering's warm, free, fluent mood as the truer harmonies of Lance's banjo. Hand clasping hand, Ola and Lance whirled among the others, essaying a simple sort of polka. She was a tireless dancer, and he as light footed as a panther. The two of them began to feel that intoxication of swift movement timed to music which nothing else in life can quite furnish, intensified in the girl by a gripping conviction that this was her hour, and she must make the most of it. She was aflame with it. When Buck broke down she instantly proposed a game of Thimble. Boldly, almost openly, she let herself forfeit a kiss to Lance.

There was a babble of tongues and laughter, a hubbub of mirth, a crossfiring and confusion of sound and movement which wrought upon the nerves like broken chords, subtle dissonances, in music. Buck was trying to play again, some of the boys were patting and stamping, others remonstrating, jeering, making ironic suggestions, when Lance, a bit flushed and bright of eye, dropped his arm around the brown girl's waist to take his forfeit. As in duty bound she pulled away from him. He sprang after, caught her by the shoulders, turned her broad little face up to his and kissed her full on the laughing, red mouth.

Then a miracle! Kissing Ola Derf was not a serious matter; indeed common gossip hinted that it was a thing all too easily accomplished. But tonight the girl was wrought beyond herself—a magnet. And Lance's sleeping spirit felt the shock of that kiss. But alas for Ola, it was for her rival's behoof the miracle was worked; it was in her rival's cause she had labored, enlisting all her primitive arts, all her ingenuity and resolution! The lights, the music, the movement, the gayety of others, these had, so far, pleased and stimulated Lance as they always did. But the unaccustomed warmth and contact of the dance; the daring and abandon of the kissing game afterward; finally the sudden ravisher's clasp and snatched kiss—these set free in him an impulse which had slumbered till now. To this bold, aggressive, wilful nature it was always the high mountain, the long dubious road, the deep waters—never the easy way, the thing at hand; it was ever his own trail—not the path suggested to his feet. And so, in this sudden awakening, he took no account of Ola Derf, and his whole soul turned toward Callista—Callista the scornful, whose profile, or the side of whose cheek, he was always seeing; Callista who refused to lift her lashes to look at him, and who was ever saying coolly exasperating things in a tone of gentle weariness. If Callista would look at him as Ola Derf had done—if he might catch her thus in his arms—if those lips of hers were offered to his kiss—!

Without a word of excuse or explanation he dropped the girl's hand as he stood in the ring of players, caught his banjo down from the shelf, and leaving open mouths and staring eyes behind him, strode through the door. A moment later he was footing it out in the moonlight road, walking straight and fast toward the church where protracted meeting was going on, and where he guessed Callista would be with her family. A javelin, flame-tipped, had touched him. Something new and fiery danced in his veins. He would see her home. They would walk together, far behind the family group, in this wonderful white moonlight.

When he reached Brush Arbor church he avoided the young fellows lounging about the entrance waiting to beau the girls. He moved lightly to a window at the back of the building and looked in. There sat Octavia Gentry on the women's side, and old Ajax, her father-in-law, on the men's. Callista he could not find from his coign of vantage. An itinerant exhorter was on his feet, preaching loud, pounding the pulpit, addressing himself now and again to the mourners who knelt about the front bench. Lance cautiously put his head in and looked further. Somehow he knew, all in a moment, that this was what he had expected—what he had hoped for; Callista was at home waiting for him. Yet none the less he carefully examined the middle seats—where might be found the courting couples. He would not put it beyond his Callista to go to church with some other swain and sit there publicly advertising her favor to the interloper.

When he was at last satisfied that she was not in the building, he turned as he had turned from Ola Derf, and made a straight path for himself from Brush Arbor to the Gentry place. Scorning the beaten highway of other men's feet, he struck directly into the forest, and through a little grove of second-growth chestnut, with its bunches of silver-gray stems rising slim and white in the light of the moon. Moonshine sifting through the leaves changed his work-a-day clothing to the garb of a troubadour. The banjo hung within easy reach of his fingers; he took off his old hat and tucked it under his arm, striking now and again as he went a twanging chord.

It was an old story to him, this walking the moonlit wild with his banjo for company. Many a time in the year's release, the cool, fragrant, summer-deep forest had called him by its delicate silver nocturnes, its caverns of shadow and milky pools of light, bidden him to a wild spring-running. On such nights his heart could not sleep for song. Sometimes, intoxicated with the rhythm, he had swung on and on, crashing through the dew-drenched huckleberry tangles, rocking a little, with eyes half closed, and interspersing the barbaric jangle of his banjo with quaint jodeling and long, falsetto-broken whoops, the heritage that the Cherokee left behind him in this land. But now it was no mere physical elation of youth and summer and moonlight. It was the supreme urge of his nature that sent his feet forward steadily, swiftly, as toward a purpose that might not be let or stayed. Speed—to Callista—that was all. He fell into silence, even the banjo's thrumming hushed to an intense quivering call of broken chords, hardly to be distinguished from the insect cries of love that filled the summer wood about him.

All the fathomless gulf of the sky was poured full of the blue-green splendors that flooded the night world of the mountains. Drops of dew spilled from leaf to leaf; down in the spring hollow he was spattered to the knees by the thousand soft, reaching fronds of cinnamon fern. Wild fragrances splashed him with great waves of sweetness. So the lords of the wild, under pelt and antler, have ever been wont to rove to their wooing; so restless are the wings that flutter among summer branches and under summer moons.

Between the banjo's murmuring chords, as he neared the Gentry clearing, once more a melody began to stray, like smoke which smoulders fitfully and must presently burst into flame.—Thrum-dum, thrum-dum, and then the tune's low call. It was a gypsy music, that lured with vistas of unknown road, the glint of water, and the sparkle of the hunter's fire; a wildly sweet note that asked, "How many miles?"—and again, out of colorless drumming, "How many years? . . . how many miles?" . . . a song shadow-like in its come-and-go, rising at intervals to the cry of a passion no mortality has power to tame, and then, ere the ear had fairly caught its message, falling again into dim harmonies as of rain blown through the dark;—a question, and the wordless, haunting refrain for all answer. Just above his breath Lance voiced the words:

"How many years, how many miles,  
Far from the door where my darling  
smiles?  
How many miles, how many years.  
Divide our hearts by pain and fears?"

The melody sank and trailed, drowned in a cadence of minors that sobbed like the rush of storm. Out of this, wild, as the wind's pleading, it rose again;

"It may be far, it may be near,  
The water's wide and the forest drear,  
But somewhere awaiting, surely I  
Shall find my true love by and bye."

The lithe limbs threshed through the dew-drenched, scented undergrowth. The trees grew more openly now; clearing was at hand.

"—My true love—by and bye,"

hummed the light, sweet baritone.

Callista had petulantly refused to go to church with her mother and grandfather. For no reason which she could assign, she wanted to be alone. Then when they were all gone, she wished she had accompanied them. An indefinable disquiet possessed her. She could not stay in the house. Candle in hand she sought an outside cabin where stood the loom. Climbing to the loft room of this she set her light down and began to search out some quilt pieces, which she figured to herself as the object of her present excursion. Though she would have denied it with scorn, the idea of Lance Cleaverage filled her completely; Lance, the man who was preparing to marry her, yet upon whom—of all those who had come near her, in the free, fortuitous commerce of marriageable youth in the mountains—she had, it seemed to her, been able to lay no charm, to exert no influence. He met her; he exchanged cut and thrust with her, and he went his ways after their encounters, neither more nor less than he had been before. He came back seemingly at the dictates of time and chance only, and never hotter nor colder, never hastening to nor avoiding her. A bitterness tinged all her thought... She wondered if she would have seen him had she gone to meeting . . . She reflected jealously that he was much more likely to be at the frolic at Derf's. . . . She wished she knew how to dance.

All at once, on the vague introspection of her mood, she became aware of the recurrent stroke of a soft musical note—the humming of Lance's banjo. Crouching rigidly by the little chest that held her quilt scraps, she listened. It was a trick of the imagination—she had thought so much about him that she fancied him near. Then, with a sudden heavy beating of the heart, she realized that if he had been at the dance and gone home early he might be passing now on the big road. She smiled at her own folly; this tremulous low call could never be heard across two fields and the door-yard.

And it was a banjo . . . it was Lance's banjo . . . he was playing whisperingly, too, as he loved to do.

Then the strings ceased to whisper. Clearer came their voice and louder. Without thinking to extinguish her candle, she ran to the window and knelt hearkening. She looked down on the moonlit yard. All was silent and homely . . . but that was Lance's banjo. Even as she came to this decision. Lance himself broke through the greenery at the edge of the near field, vaulted a low fence, and emerged into the open. He came on in the soft light, singing a little, apparently to himself.

Spellbound she listened, gripping the window ledge hard, holding her breath, choking, wondering what this new thing was that had come to her. Above him she was set like a saint enshrined, with the moonlight to silver her rapt, shining face, and the glow of the candle behind making a nimbus of her fair hair. Yet never at all (or she thought so) did Lance look up. Light footed, careless of mien, he circled the house once, still humming under his breath, and striking those odd, tentative chords on the banjo. Then, abruptly, when she had realized her position and would have hidden herself, or put out the candle which betrayed her, he stopped under her window and with upflung head was smiling straight into her eyes. She rallied her forces and prepared for the duel which always ensued when she and Lance met. She would give him as good as he sent. She would tell him that she had stayed away from church for fear she should see him. If he hinted that she had expected this visit, she would—she would say—

But this was a new Lance Cleaverage looking into her eyes—a man Callista had never seen before. Subtly she knew it, yet scarcely dared trust the knowledge. The young fellow below in the moonlight sent up no challenge to a trial of wits; he offered her no opportunity for sarcastic retort. Tossing aside his hat, making ready his banjo, he lifted his head so that the lean, dark young face with its luminous eyes was raised fully to her in the soft radiance, and struck some chords—strange, thrilling, importunate chords—then began to sing.

The serenade is a cherished courtship custom of primitive societies. Lance Cleaverage, the best banjo player in the Turkey Tracks, with a flexible, vibrant, colorful baritone voice, had often gone serenading with the other boys; but this—tonight—was different. He felt like singing, and singing to Callista; for the moment it was his form of expression. What he sang was his own version of an old-world ballad, with his love's name in place of the Scottish girl's to whom it was addressed three hundred years ago in the highlands of another hemisphere. Unashamed, unafraid—would anything ever make Lance either ashamed or afraid?—he stood in the white moonlight and sent forth his passionate, masterful call of love on the wings of song.

Callista's heart beat wildly against her arms where she rested on the window sill. Her lips were apart, and the breath came through them quick and uneven. Despite herself, she leaned forward and looked back into the eyes that gazed up at her. Was this Lance, the indifferent, taunting, insouciant, here under her window alone, looking up so at her—playing, singing, to her? Oh, yes, it was Lance. He wanted her, said the swift importunate notes of the banjo, the pleading tones of his voice, the bold yet loverlike attitude of the man. He wanted her. Well—a flood of tender warmth rose in her—she wanted him! For the first time probably in her life—misshapen, twisted to the expression of the coquette, the high and mighty, scornful miss who finds no lover to her taste—Callista was all a woman. The fires of her nature flamed to answer the kindred fire of his. The last, teasing note of the banjo quavered into silence. Lance pulled

the ribbon over his head, laid the instrument by—without ever taking his eyes from her face—and said, hardly above a whisper,

"Callista, honey, come down."

No retort was ready for him.

"I—oh, I can't, Lance," was all Callista could utter.

With a "Well, I'm a-comin' up there, then," he sprang into the muscadine vine whose rope-like trunks ran up around the doorway below her. She only caught her breath and watched in desperate anxiety the reckless venture. And when he reached the level of her window, when, swinging insecurely in a loop of the vine, he stretched his arms to her, ready arms answered him and went round his neck. A face passion pale was raised to him, and eager, tremulous lips met his.

They drew apart an instant, then Callista—overwhelmed, frightened at herself—with a swift movement hid her face on his breast. He bent over her, and laid his dark cheek against hers, that was like a pearl. His arms drew her closer, closer; the two young hearts beat plungingly against each other. The arms that strained Callista so hard to Lance's breast trembled, and her slender body trembled within them. Lance's shining eyes closed.



"Callista—honey—darlin'," he whispered brokenly, "you do love me."

"Oh, Lance—Oh, Lance!" she breathed back.

And then his lips went seeking hers once more. She lifted them to him, and the lovers clung long so. The world swung meaninglessly on in space. The two clasped close in each other's arms were so newly, so intensely, blindingly, electrically awake to themselves and to each other, that they were utterly insensible to all else.

Finally Lance raised his head a bit. He drew a long, sobbing breath, and laying his face once more against the girl's murmured with tender fierceness,

"An' we ain't going to wait for no spring, neither. You'll wed me to-morrow—well, next week, anyway"—as he felt her start and struggle feebly.

"Oh, Lance—honey—no," she began. But he cut her short with vehement protestations and demands. He covered her face, her hair, her neck with kisses, and then declared again and again, in a voice broken with feeling, that they would be wedded the next week—they wouldn't wait—they wouldn't wait.

Shaken, amazed by her own emotions, terrified at the rush of his, Callista began to plead with him; and when that availed nothing, save to inflame his ardor, her cry was,

"Yes, Lance. Yes—all right—we will. We will, Lance—whenever you say. But go now, honey, won't you—please? Oh, Lance! They'll be coming home any minute now. If they was to find you here. Lance—Won't you go now, please, honey? Lance, darlin', please. I'll do just like you say—next week—any time, Lance. Only go now."

There was no sense of denying, or drawing herself back, in Callista's utterance. It was only the pleading of maiden terror. When Lance acquiesced, when he crushed her to him in farewell, her arms went round him once more, almost convulsively; with an equal ardor, her lips met the fierce, dominating kiss of his.

He got down from the window, his head whirling. Mechanically he found his banjo, flung the ribbon over his neck and turned the instrument around so that it hung across his shoulders. Thus, and with his hat again tucked under his arm, without ever looking back toward the house, he walked swiftly and unsteadily away, once more through the young chestnut wood, with its dapplings of shadow and moonlight. He dipped into the hollow where the spring branch talked to itself all night long in the silence and the darkness under the twisted laurel and rhododendrons; once more he stood

on the little tonsured hill above the church. The lights were out; they had all gone home.

Below him was spread his world; the practised eye of this free night rover could have located every farm and cabin, as it all lay swimming in this wonderful, bewitched half-light. Those were his kindred and his people; but he had always been a lonely soul among them. The outposts of levity which he had set about the citadel of his heart had never been passed by any. Tonight, with an upheaval like birth or death, he had broken down the barriers and swept another soul in beside him; close—close. He would never be alone again—never again. There would always be Callista. In the intoxication, the ravishment of the moment, he made no reckoning with the Callista he had heretofore known, the Lance that had been; they should be always as now on this night of magic.

## CHAPTER V.

### THE ASKING.

ON the comb of a tall ridge back of the Cleavage place, Ola Derf caught up with Lance at last.

"I got to set down awhile till I can ketch my breath," the girl said jerkily. "I reckon I run half a mile hollerin' yo' name every step. Lance Cleavage—and you never turned yo' head. I believe in my soul you heard me the first time I called."

Cleavage did not take the trouble to affirm or deny. He flung himself back on the fern and pine needles with his hat over his face, and remarking, "Wake me up when you get your breath," affected to go to sleep. Ola Derf was as comfortable a companion as a dog, in that you could talk to her or let her alone, as the humor ran.

A cicada's whirl overhead swelled to a pulsating screech and died away. The woods here opened into calm and lofty spaces which at a little distance began to be dimmed as with vaporized sapphire—the blue that melted the hills into the sky. His eyes were caught by an indigo-bird in the branches—a drop of color apparently precipitated by this marvel of azure held in solution by the summer air.

It was the morning after Lance had sung to Callista under her window, and his mind was yet swimming in dreams of her. He was roused from these by Ola's voice.

"Lance," she began and broke off. "Oh, Lance, I want to talk to you about—about—" Again her voice lapsed. She could see nothing of his face. His chest rose and fell rhythmically. "Lance—air you asleep?"

"Huh-uh. But if you keep on talkin' right good maybe I'll get to sleep."

She paid no attention to the snub, but addressed herself once more to what seemed a difficult bit of conversational tactics.

"Lance," came the plaint for the third time, "I wanted to name Callista Gentry to you. I—I—that thar gal don't care the rappin' o' her finger about you, nor any man."

Cleavage, with the memory of last night warm at his heart, smiled under his hat brim and made no answer, save a little derisive sound which might have meant denial, indifference, or mere good-humored contempt of Ola herself.

"Oh, yes, I know," Ola nodded to her own thought, "they's a heap of 'em lets on not to like the boys; but with Callista Gentry hit goes to the bone. She don't care for nary soul in this round world but her own pretty self. She 'minds me of a snake—a white snake, if ever there was such a thing. You look at her. You ain't never seen her change color, whatever came or went."

The picture evoked of Callista's flushed, tender face lying upon his breast made the pulses of the man on the warm pine needles leap.

"Well," he prompted finally, "what's the trouble? Are you a true friend, that doesn't want me to get snake bit?"

Ola laughed out a short laugh.

"No," she said, drearily, "I'm just a fool that's got yo' good at heart, and don't like to see you get a wife that cares nothin' for you. Thar—I've said my say. Thar's no love in her, and thar's no heart in her. But if a pretty face and high and mighty ways is what takes you, of course you can follow yo' ruthers."

"Uh-huh," agreed Lance, pushing his hat back and sitting up. He cast a laughing, sidelong glance in her direction. "Ola," he said softly, "I'm a goin' to let you into a secret. The gals has pestered me all my life long with too much lovin', and my great reason for bein' willin' to have Callista Gentry is that she seems like you say, sorter offish."

To his intense surprise (he had been wont to jest much more hardily with her than this), Ola's face flushed suddenly a dark, burning red. She jumped to her feet like a boy.

"All right," she said in a throaty tone, her countenance turned away from him. "If that's so, I'm sorry I spoke. Tell Miz. Cleavage all about it—and all about me and the other gals that run after you so turrrible. I don't care."

But half way down the ridge her swift, angry, steps began to lag, and a little further on Lance overtook her.

"They's a-goin' to be a dance at our house a-Wednesday," she said in a penitent voice. "You're a-comin', ain't you, Lance?"

"Nope," returned the invited guest briefly.

He volunteered no excuse or explanation; and so, when the parting of their ways was reached, she demanded with imploring eyes on his face,

"Ye ain't mad with me, air ye. Lance? Why won't you come to my party?"

"Got somethin' else to do," Cleavage returned nonchalantly. "Callista and me is goin' to be married a-Wednesday night."

Ola fell back a step, and clutched the sunbonnet which she carried rolled in her hands.

"You're a—w'y, Lance—you're jest a foolin'," she faltered.

Lance shook his head lightly, without a word.

"But—why, I was over at Gentry's this morning," she exclaimed finally. "Nobody thar said anything about it." She still watched his face incredulously. "They shorely would have said somethin', if Callista had named the day."

"She never named it," said Lance easily. "I named it myself, back there on the ridge whilst you was catchin' your breath—or wastin' it. We had allowed that a week from yesterday would do us, but it sort of come over me that Wednesday was the right time, and I'm goin' along by there right now to settle it all. Reckon if you folks are givin' a dance you won't heed a invite? Good-bye," and he turned away on his own trail.

Swift, unsmiling, preoccupied as a wild thing on its foreordained errand—the hart to the spring, the homing bird—Cleavage made his way to the Gentry place. Callista felt him coming before he turned into the big road; she saw him while yet the leafage of the door maples would have confused any view less keen. She longed to flee. Then in a blissful tremor she could do nothing but remain. Octavia Gentry, carrying hanks of carpet chain to the dye-pot in the yard, caught sight of him and called out a greeting.

"Is Mr. Gentry about the place?" Lance asked her, as he lingered a moment with Callista's eyes on him from the doorway.

"Yes, Pappy's makin' ready to go down to the Settlement, and he ain't been to the field to-day. He's in the house somewhar's. Did you want to see him special, Lance?"

Cleavage made no direct reply; and the widow added,

"Thar he is, right now," as Ajax Gentry stepped out into the open passage with a bit of harness in his hand which he was mending. A certain gravity fell on her manner as the two walked toward the house. It went through her mind that Cleavage had never formally asked for Callista, and that now he was about to do so. She lifted her head proudly and glanced round at him. Lance Cleavage was not only the best match in the whole Turkey Track region, but he had been the least oncoming of all "Sis's love-yers." You never could be sure whether Lance wanted the girl or was merely amusing himself; and Octavia had always been strongly set upon the match. When they came to the porch edge, Lance seated himself upon it and looked past the old man to where Callista's flower face was dimly discernible in the entry beyond.

"Good morning," he said impersonally. "I'm glad to find you at home, Mr. Gentry. I stopped a-past to name it to you—all that Callista and me has made up our minds to be wed a-Wednesday evening."

There was a soft exclamation from within; but mother and grandfather remained dumb with astonishment. Cleavage glanced round at them with a slight impatience in his hazel eyes that held always the fiery, tawny glint in their depths. He detested having people receive his announcements as though they were astonishing—that is, unless it was his humor to astonish.

"Well," Grandfather Gentry began after a time, "ain't this ruther sudden?"

"Marryin' has to be done all of a sudden," Lance remarked without rancor. "I never yet have heard of gettin' married gradual."

"Why, Lance, honey," said the widow in a coaxing tone, "you ain't rightly ready for a wife, air ye? Ef you two young folks had named this to me—well, six months ago—I'd 'a' had Callista's settin' out in good order. Looks like Pappy 's right, and it is sorter suddent."

"What do you say, Callista?" inquired the postulant bridegroom without looking up.

In the soft dusk of the interior the girl's face was crimson. Here came the time when she could no longer pretend to be urged into the marriage by her mother, her grandfather, the course of events; but must say "yes" or "no" openly of her own motion. Last night's startling accost yet shook her young heart; the glamour of that hour came back upon her senses.

"I say whatever you say, Lance," she uttered, scarcely above a whisper.

Ajax Gentry laughed out.

"Well—I reckon that settles it," he said, jingling his harness and turning to leave.

"No—it don't settle nothin'," broke in Octavia anxiously. "Lance ain't got any land cleared to speak of over on his place, and he ain't put in any crop; how air the both of 'em to live? They'll just about have obliged to stay here with us. You can find work for Lance on the farm, cain't ye, Pappy?"

Old Ajax measured his prospective grand-son-in-law with a steady eye, and assured himself that there was not room on the farm nor in the house for two masters. He read mastery in every line of face and figure. Lance got to his feet so suddenly that he might have been said to leap up.

"I've built me a good cabin, and it's all ready. Callista and me are goin' into no house but our own," he said brusquely. "Ain't that so, Callista?"

Again the girl within the doorway answered in that hushed, almost reluctant voice,

"Just as you say. Lance."

And though grandfather laughed, and Mother Gentry objected and even scolded, that ended the argument.

"I'll stop a-past and leave the word at Hands's," Lance told them as he turned to go. "Is there anyone else you'd wish me to bid, mother?"

That "mother," uttered in Lance's golden tones, went right to the widow's sentimental heart. She would have acceded to anything he had proposed in such a way. Old Ajax smiled, realizing that Lance meant to triumph once for all over Flenton Hands.

As Cleavage walked away, the mother prompted, almost indignantly.

"Why didn't ye go down to the draw-bars with him, Callista? I don't think that's no way to say farewell to a young man when you've just been promised."

Gentry looked at his daughter-in-law through narrowed eyes, then at Callista; his glance followed Lance Cleaverage's light-footed departure a moment, and then he delivered himself.

"I ain't got nothing agin your marryin' Lance Cleaverage Wednesday evening," he said concisely to Callista. "I ain't been axed; but ef I had been, my say would still be the same. All I've got to tell you is that thar was never yet a house built of logs or boards or stones that was big enough to hold two families."

"Why, Pap Gentry!" exclaimed Octavia in a scandalized tone. "This house is certainly Callista's home, and I'm sure I love Lance as well as I ever could a own son. If they thought well to live here along of us this winter, I know you wouldn't hold to that talk."

"I reckon you don't know me so well as ye 'lowed ye did," observed Gentry; "for I would—and do. Lance Cleaverage has took up with the crazy notion of marryin' all in haste. He ain't got no provision for livin' on that place of his. Well, I tell you right now, he cain't come and live in my house. No, nor you cain't pack victuals over to 'em to keep 'em up."

A coquette according to mountain ideals, carrying her head high with the boys, famous for her bickerings with Lance, Callista Gentry had always been a model at home, quiet, tractable, obedient. But the face she now turned upon her grandfather was that of a young fury. All her cold pride was up in arms. That secret, still spirit of hers, haughty, unbent, unbroken, reared itself to give the old man to understand that she wanted nothing of him from this on. She—Lance's wife—the idea of her begging food from Grandfather Gentry!

"If you two'll hush and let me speak," she said in an even tone, "I reckon I'll be able to set grandpappy's mind at rest. You can give me the wedding—I reckon you want to do so much as that for your own good name. But bite or sup I'll never take afterwards in this house. No, I won't. So far from carryin' victuals out of it, you'll see when I come in I'll have somethin' in my hand, grandpap. I invite you and mother right now to take yo' Sunday dinners with me when you want to ride as far as the Blue Spring church. But,"—she went back to it bitterly—"bite or sup in this house neither me nor Lance will ever take." Then, her eyes bright, her usually pale cheeks flaming, she turned and ran up the steep little stairs to her own room. Octavia looked reproach at her father-in-law; but Ajax Gentry spat scornfully toward the vacant fireplace, and demanded,

"Now she's a pretty somebody for a man to wed and carry to his home, ain't she? I say, Sunday dinners with her! Can she mix a decent pone o' corn bread, and bake it without burnin' half her fingers off? She cain't. Can she cut out a hickory shirt and make it? She cain't. Could she kill a chicken and pick and clean it and cook it—could she do it ef she was a starvin'? She could not. She cain't so much as bile water without burnin' it. She don't know nothin'—nothin' but the road. She's shore a fine bargain for a man to git. To have a passel o' fool boys follerin' after her and co'tin' her, that's all Callisty's ever studied about, or all you ever studied about for her."

"Well, pappy," Octavia bridled, considerably stung, "I don't think you' got much room to talk. In yo' young days, from all I ever heard—either from you or from others—you was about as flighty with the gals, and had about as many of 'em follerin' after you, as Sis is with the boys."

She looked up at her father-in-law where he lounged against the fire-board. Grandly tall was old Ajax Gentry, carrying his seventy years and his crown of silver like an added grace. His blue eye had the cold fire of Callista's, and his lean sinewy body, like hers, showed the long, flowing curves of running water.

"O-o-o-oh!" he rejoined, with an indescribable lengthened circumflex on the vowel that lent it a world of meaning. "O-o-o-oh! . . . a man! Well—that's mighty different. If a feller's got the looks—and the ways—he can fly 'round amongst the gals for a spell whilst he's young and gaily, and it don't do him no harm. There's some that the women still foller after, even when he's wedded and settled down" (Ajax smiled reminiscently). "But when a man marries a gal, he wants a *womern*—a womern that'll keep his house, and cook his meals, and raise his chillen right. The kind o' tricks Callisty's always pinned her faith to ain't worth shucks in wedded life. Ef I was a young feller to-morrow, I wouldn't give a chaw o' tobaccer for a whole church-house full o' gals like Callisty, an' I've told you so a-many's the time. Yo' Maw Gentry wasn't none o' that sort—yo' mighty right she wasn't! She could cook and weave and tend a truck patch and raise chickens to beat any womern in the Turkey Tracks, Big *and* Little. I say, Sunday dinner with Callisty!" he repeated. "Them that goes to her for a dinner had better pack their victuals with 'em."

Octavia gathered up her hanks of carpet-warp and started for the door.

"All right, Pappy," she said angrily. "All right. I raised the gal best I knowed how. I reckon *you* think the fault—sence you see so much fault in her—comes from my raisin'; but I know mighty well an' good that the only trouble *I* ever had with Sis, was 'count o' her Gentry blood. How you can expect the cookin' o' corn pones and makin' o' hickory shirts from a gal that's always got every man in reach plumb distracted over her, is more'n I can see." Octavia went out hastily before her father-in-law could make the ironic reply which she knew to expect; and after a moment or two, Ajax himself moved away toward the log stable to begin his harnessing.

Callista had hurried to her bedroom, slammed the door, and was alone with her own heart. As for Lance, walking beneath the chestnuts, he had no wish to have her beside him under the old man's humorous, semi-sarcastic gaze and his prospective mother-in-law's sentimental, examining eye. He wanted her to himself. He thought with a mighty surge of rapture of the approaching time when they could shut out all the world and find once more that island of delight where they should dwell the only created beings. He, to share his honeymoon with the Gentry family! He laughed shortly at the thought.

It was Little Liza that opened the Hands door to him, and her light eyes softened unwillingly as they beheld his alert figure on the step. Little Liza was tormented with an incongruously soft heart, painfully accessible to the demands of beauty and charm.

"Howdy," she said. She had not seen Lance Cleaverage since the day of the funeral; but she had heard from her brother and her sisters that his behavior on that occasion was unseemly, if not positively disrespectful.

Lance barely returned her greeting, then he broached his errand.

"Jane! Ellen! Oh, Flent!" she called distressfully, when she had his news, "Come on out. Lance Cleavage is here, waitin' to invite you to his weddin'."

The two sisters came out on the porch, but Flenton did not make his appearance.

"Howdy, Lance. Who is it?" inquired Ellen Hands. "Callista Gentry hasn't took you, has she?"

"Well," drawled Lance, lifting a laughing eye to the line of big, gray-faced women on the rude, puncheon-floored gallery, "you can make it out best way you find. The weddin' is to be held at the Gentry place. If it ain't Callista, it's somebody mighty like her."

Little Liza's lip trembled.

"You Lance Cleavage," she said huskily, "you're a-gettin' the sweetest prettiest thing that ever walked this earth. I do know that there ain't the man livin' that's fit for Callisty. I hope to the Lord you'll be good to her."

Again Lance regarded the doleful visages before him and laughed.

"You-all look like I'd bid you to a funeral rather than to a weddin'," he said, lingering a bit to see if Flenton would show himself.

Hands was just inside the window. He knew well what had been said. Nothing could have been less to his taste than the going out to receive such an invitation.

"Thar—you see now, Flent," said Little Liza tragically, as she encountered her brother when they turned from watching Lance away. "You've lost her. Oh, law! I always thought if I could call Callisty Gentry sister, it would make me the happiest critter in the world."

"You may have a chance so to call her yet," said Hands, who showed any emotion the announcement may have roused in him only by an added tightening of lip and eye. "Wednesday ain't come yet—and hit ain't gone."

"Well, hit'll come and hit'll go," said Ellen heavily. "Lance Cleavage gits what he starts after, and that's the fact."

"Yes," agreed Little Liza, "he shore does. I don't reckon I could have said no to him myself."

"Lance Cleavage!" echoed her brother. "Well, he's born—but he ain't buried. I never did yet give up a thing that I'd set my mind on. I ain't said I've given up Callista Gentry."

The three looked at him rather wildly. Talk of this sort is unknown among the mountain people. Yet they could but feel the woman's admiration for his masculine high-handedness of speech.

At the Cleavage place they were making ready for the noonday meal when Lance brought his news home. The table, with its cloth of six flour-sacks sewed end to end, was set in the cool entry. The Dutch oven, half buried in ashes, was full of buttermilk-dodgers, keeping hot. At the other side of the broad hearthstone, Roxy Griever bent above a dinner-pot dishing up white beans and dumplings. Beside her Mary Ann Martha held a small yellow bowl and made futile dabs with a spoon she had herself whittled from a bit of shingle, trying to get beans into it. Her mother's reproofs dropped upon her tousled and incorrigible head with the regularity of clockwork.

"You, Mary Ann Marthy, I do know in my soul you' the worst child the Lord ever made: Where do you expect to go to when you die? Look at that thar good victuals all splattered out in the ashes. That's yo' doin'. You' jest adzackly like yo' uncle Lance."

Then Sylvane, who was shaping an axe-helve in the doorway, looked up and said, "Here comes Lance himself." And Kimbro Cleavage pushed another chair towards the table.

"Well," said the bridegroom expectant, looking about on the shadowed interior of the cabin, dim to his eyes after the glare outside, "I've got a invite for you-all to a weddin'."

"Not you and Callista?" exclaimed Sylvane, his boyish face glowing. "Oh, Lance—she ain't said yes, has she?"

"No, Buddy," Lance flung over his shoulder, and you saw by his smile the strong affection there was between them, "she ain't said yes—but I have. I've set the time for Wednesday, and the Gentry place is all uptore right now getting ready for it. I reckon"—his eye gleamed with the mischievous afterthought—"I reckon they'll clear the big barn for dancing."

As though the word had been a catch released in her mechanism, Roxy Griever straightened up, spoon in hand, with a snort.

"You Lance Cleavage—you sinful soul!" she began, pointing her bean spoon at him and thus shedding delightful dribblings of the stew which Mary Ann Martha instantly scraped up, "you air a-gettin' the best girl in the two Turkey Tracks—and here you take the name of dancin' on yo' sinful lips at the same time!"

"I reckon you'll not come if there's goin' to be dancin'," remarked Lance, hanging up his hat and seating himself at the table. "I hadn't thought of that. Well—we'll have to get along without you."

Roxy snorted inarticulate reprobation. Suddenly she demanded.

"Sylvane, whar's that branch of leaves I sent you after?"

With the words, Mary Ann Martha, unnoticed by her mother, abruptly dropped her shingle spoon, scrambled across Sylvane's long legs, and galloped wildly out into the bit of orchard beside the house, her mass of almost white curling hair flying comically about her bobbing head, a picture of energetic terror. Her young uncle looked after her, smiling tolerantly, and said nothing.

"The flies'll git more of this dinner than we'uns, if we don't have something. Why'n't you git me that branch o' leaves, Sylvane?" persisted his sister.

"Well, Sis' Roxy, I wanted to finish my axe-helve, so I sub-contracted that order o' yourn," answered Sylvane, deprecatingly. "Sent Ma'-An'-Marth' out to git a small limb."

"For the land's sake! An' her not taller than—" began Roxy querulously. But her father put in, with pacific intention,



"Here's the chap now with her peach-tree branch. Come on, Pretty; let Gran'pappy put it up 'side o' him at the table. Now sons, now daughter, air ye ready? This is a bountiful meal; and Roxy's cooked it fine as the best; we're mightily favored. We'll ax God's blessing on the food."

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE WEDDING.

WEDNESDAY came, a glamorous day in early September. A breath of autumn had blown upon the mountains in the night, leaving the air inspiring—tingling cool in the shade, tingling hot in the sun. The white clouds were vagabonds of May time, though the birds were already getting together in flocks, chattering, restless for migration. Now at night instead of the bright come-and-go of fireflies there was a mild and steady lamping of glowworms in the evening grass. The katydids' chorus had dwindled, giving place to the soft chirr of ground and tree-crickets. There was a pleasant, high-pitched rustle in the stiffening leaves; the dew was heavy in the hollows, gray under the moon.

All day the woods were silent, except for the mocking whirr of grasshoppers rising into the sunshine, and an occasional squabble of crows in pursuit of a hawk.

Wild grapes were ripe—delicious, tart, keen-flavored things. In the pasture hollow a fleece of goldenrod, painted on the purple distance along with the scarlet globes of orchard fruit, was stripped by laughing girls for Callista's wedding decorations. Yes, summer was definitely departed; a new presence was here, an autumn wind in the treetops, an autumn light on the meadow, an autumn haze on the hills—a fine luminous purple, flecked with lights of rose and gold.

The Gentry place, with its central house of some pretensions and its numerous outlying cabins, presented on Wednesday afternoon something the appearance of a village undergoing sack. Open doors and windows, heaps of stuff, or bundles of household gear, or sheaves of garments being carried from place to place, suggested this impression, which seemed further warranted by the female figures emerging suddenly now and again from one cabin or another and fleeing with disheveled hair, wild gestures and incoherent babblings as of terror, to some other refuge. The girls had not come in yet from the pasture with their armloads of goldenrod and wild aster; but all three of the Hands sisters—good, faithful souls, neighborhood dependences for extra help at weddings and funerals—were hard at work in the very heart of the turmoil.

"Liza, have you seed Callista anywhar's?" panted Octavia Gentry, appearing in the main house, laden with a promiscuous assortment of clothing.

"Yes, I did," rumbled Little Liza from the chair on which she stood adjusting the top of a window curtain.

"I thought I heard Lance's banjo awhile ago," added the widow as she folded and disposed of the garments she had brought in, "and then I didn't hear it any more. I have obliged to get hold of Callista to tell me whar she wants these things put at."

"Yes, and you did hear Lance Cleavage's banjo," confirmed Little Liza sadly. "Callisty heard it, too. She come a-steppin' down from her room like as if he'd called her, and she's walked herself out of the front door and up the road alongside o' him, and that's why you don't hear the banjo no more."

"Good land!" cried the mother-in-law that was to be. "I don't know what young folks is thinkin' of—no, I don't. It ain't respectable for a bride and groom to walk side by side on their weddin' day. Everybody knows that much. And I've got to have Callista here. Roxy Griever's sent word that she cain't come to the weddin' because its been given out to each and every that they'd be dancin'. I want Callista to see Lance and have that stopped. Hit's jest some o' Lance's foolishness. You know in reason its got to be stopped. Oh, Sylvane!" as a boyish figure appeared in the doorway. "Won't you go hunt up Callista and tell her I want her? And you tell yo' sister Roxy when you go home that there ain't goin' to be any dancin' here tonight. And just carry these here pans out to the springhouse whilst you're about it, Sylvane. And if you find Ellen Hands there tell her to come on in to me, please. I vow, nobody's been for the cows! Sylvane, whilst you're out you go up to the milk gap and see are they waitin' thar. Let down the draw-bars for 'em if they are."

Fifteen-year-old Sylvalnus Cleavage laughed and turned quickly, lest further directions be given him.

"All right," he called back. "I'll 'tend to most of those things—as many of 'em as I can remember."

A privileged character, especially among the women, Sylvane made willing haste to do Octavia's errands. The boy was like his brother Lance with the wild tang left out, and feminine eyes followed his young figure as he hurried from spring-house to pasture lot. When he found Lance and Callista walking hand in hand at the meadow's edge he gave them warning, so that the girl might slip in through the back door, innocently unconscious of any offence against the etiquette of the occasion, and the bridegroom pass on down the big road, undiscovered.

"I reckon it's jest as well as 'tis," commented old Ajax from the security of the front door-yard, to which he had been swept out and cleaned out in the course of the preparations. "Ef Octavy had been give a year's warnin', she would have been jest about tearin' up Jack this-a-way for the whole time."

As evening fell, teams began to arrive, and the nearer neighbors came in on foot, with a bustle of talk and a settling of the children. Old Kimbro Cleavage brought his daughter, Roxy Griever, with little Polly Griever, a relative of Roxy's deceased husband, and Mary Ann Martha.

"I knowed in reason you wouldn't have dancin' on yo' place," the widow shrilled, as she approached. Then as she climbed out over the wheel, she added in a lower tone to Little Liza Hands, who had come out to help her down, "But that thar sinful Lance is so pestered by the devil that you never know whar he'll come up next, and I sont Miz. Gentry the word I did as a warnin'. Tham men has to be watched."

Callista was ready, dressed in a certain white lawn frock—not for worlds would she have admitted that she had made it with secret hopes of this occasion. The helpers were still rushing to and fro, getting the wedding supper on the long tables, contrived by boards over trestles, on the porch and in the big kitchen, when Preacher Drumright rode sourly up.

It was Octavia Gentry who had been instrumental in bespeaking Drumright's services for the marriage, and indeed he was the only preacher in the Turkey Track neighborhoods at the moment or anywhere nearer than the Settlement itself. The church-going element of the region stood before this somewhat cantankerous old man in the attitude of confessed offenders. He was famous for raking the young people over the coals, and he arrogated to himself always the patriarch's privilege of scolding, admonishing, or denouncing, whenever the occasion might seem to him fit. For ten years Drumright had longed to get a fair chance at Lance Cleavage. Ever since the boy—and he was the youngest in the crowd—joined with a half dozen others to break up a brush meeting which Drumright was holding, the preacher's grudge had grown. And it did not thrive without food; Lance was active in the matter of providing sustenance for the ill opinion of the church party, and he had capped his iniquities by taking his banjo as near the church as the big spring on that Sunday in mid-July. Drumright had prepared the castigating he meant to administer to Lance almost as carefully as he would have gotten ready a sermon.

With the advent of the preacher the last frantic preparations were dropped, and it was suddenly discovered that they were not absolutely necessary for the occasion. The guests gathered into the big front room, where the marriage was to be. Drumright took his stand behind a small table at its further end; Callista came down the stairs, joined Lance in the entry, and the two stepped into the room hand in hand.

That was a daunting front to address with reproof. People said that they were the handsomest couple that ever stood up together in the two Turkey Tracks. But after all, it was something more than physical beauty that arrested the eye in that countenance. Lance's face was lifted, and his eyes apparently saw not the room, the preacher, nor even the girl whose hand he held. He moved a thing apart, his light, swift step timed to unheard rhythms, a creature swayed by springs which those about him knew not of, addressed to some end which they could not understand. And Callista seemed to look only to him, to live only in him. Her fair face reflected the strange radiance that was on his dark, intense young visage.

It was Drumright's custom to make a little talk when about to perform the marriage ceremony, so there was neither surprise nor apprehension as he began to speak.

"Befo' I can say the words that shall make this here man and this here woman one flesh, I've got a matter to bring up that I think needs namin'."

The old voice rasped aggressively, and a little flutter of concern passed over Drumright's hearers.

"The Gentry family air religious, church-goin' people. Why Callista Gentry ain't a perfessin' member in the church this day is more than I can tell you—all here and now. Like enough some will say hit is the influence of the man a-standin' beside her; and supposin' this to be so, hit cain't be too soon named out to 'em."

If Lance heard any word of Drumright's harangue, he gave no sign; but Callista stirred uneasily, her nostrils flickered, and she glanced from the preacher to her bridegroom.

"I wonder in my soul," Drumright went on, "that any God-fearin' family would give they' child to a man that has been from his cradle up, as a body may say, the scoffer that you air, Lance Cleavage."

Thus pointedly addressed, a slight start passed through the bridegroom's taut body, and Cleavage turned a half-awakened eye upon the preacher.

"Are you aimin' to get 'em to stop the marriage?" he inquired bluntly. As he spoke, he dropped Callista's hand, caught it once more in the grasp of his other, and put his freed arm strongly about her waist. Thus holding her, he turned a little to face her mother and grandfather as well as the preacher.

A shock went through, the crowded room; pious horror and amaze on the part of the older people; among the younger folk a twittering tremor not unmixed with delight at the spirit of the bridegroom. You might wince beneath the preacher's castigations; you might privately grumble about them, and even refuse to pay anything toward his up-keep, thereby helping to starve his wife and children; but that you should presume to answer a preacher in the pulpit or elsewhere in the performance of his special office, was a thing inconceivable.

The bridegroom's family drew together at one side of the room, Kimbro Cleavage, in his decent best, looking half affrightedly at the man who was miscalling his son; Roxy Griever, divided between her allegiance to the caste of preachers, all and singular, and tribal pride; Sylvane clutching his hands into fists, and hoping that Buddy would get the better of the argument; while Mary Ann Martha, in the grasp of Polly Griever, glowered and wondered.

"Lance Cleavage," returned Drumright ponderously, "I respect yo' father, for he's a good man. I respect yo' sister—she's one too; for their sake I come here to perform this marriage, greatly agin my grain."

He was taking a long breath, having barely got under way, when Lance stopped him with a curt,

"Well,—are you goin' to do it—or are you not?"

People gazed with open mouths and protruding eyes. Where were the lightnings of Heaven, set apart for the destruction of the impious? Drumright himself was momentarily staggered.

"Er, yes—I am," he said finally, wagging his head in an obstinate, bovine shake. "After I've said my say, I aim to marry ye."

The little points of light that always danced deep down in Lance Cleavage's eyes, flamed up like clear lamps at this statement.

"No, you'll not," he said promptly. "You'll marry us now—or not at all. If I wanted any of your talk, I'd come to your church and get it. I don't want any."

All this time his arm had been round Callista, the hand closed on her slim waist gently, but with a grip of steel. Had she wished to stir from his side, she could scarcely have done so. Now he turned toward the door and moved quietly away from the astonished preacher, taking her with him.

"Whar—whar you goin'?" faltered Drumright, dumbfounded.

"Down to Sourwood Gap to be wedded," the bridegroom flung back in his face. "Squire Ashe is up there from

Hepzibah—he'll marry us without haulin' us over the coals first." And he made his way through the roomful of mute, dazed, unprotesting people. At the door he paused, and, with the air of a man alone with his beloved in desert spaces, bent and murmured something in the ear of his bride, then ran lightly down the steps and out into the dark to where the horses were tethered. He returned quickly, leading his two black ponies.

He found that in the few moments of his absence the company had awakened to the enormity of what was going on. There were a half-dozen people round Callista, most of them talking. Little Liza, who evidently believed that the finger of the Lord was in it, and that her brother Flenton was at last going to get the girl of his choice, clung to Callista's hand and wept. Flenton himself stood squarely in the bride's path, speaking low and eagerly. At the upper end of the room Octavia Gentry was almost in hysterics as she labored with the preacher, trying to get him to say that he would marry the pair at once if they would come back. Old Ajax had retired to his corner by the big fireplace, where he stood smiling furtively, and slowly rubbing a lean, shaven jaw, as he glanced from his daughter-in-law to his granddaughter in leisurely enjoyment. After all, there was much he liked well in Callista's chosen.

Roxana Griever had flown to supplement Octavia's entreaties with the preacher. Kimbro made his way toward the door, evidently with some half-hearted intention of remonstrating with his son. Sylvane had slipped out to help Lance with the horses—he guessed that his brother never meant to ride away from the Gentry place alone.



"He ain't fitten for you, Callisty," Hands was whispering over and over. "He ain't fitten for you. A man that will do you this-a-way on yo' wedding day, what sort o' husband is he goin' to make? Here's me, honey, that's loved you all your life, an' been a member o' the church in good standin' sence I was twelve years old. Callisty, I'd be plumb proud to lay down for you to walk over. You take me, and we'll have a weddin' here sure enough."

The words were breathed low into the bride's ear; yet attitude and air were eloquent, and Hands's position and intentions were so notorious, that the proposition might as well have been shouted aloud.

"Lance—you Lance! Callista, honey!" implored the mother's voice distressfully above the moving heads of the crowd. "You chillen wait till I can get thar. Preacher says he'll wed you now. Come on back in here."

"Yes, and when you git that feller back in here a-standin' before Preacher Drumright to be wedded, you'll toll a wild buck up to a tainted spring," chuckled old Ajax Gentry.

Lance only smiled. The lover, all aglow, rejected with contempt this maimed thing they would thrust upon him for a marriage. He was leading Callista's horse to the porch edge that she might mount, when he glanced up and found how strongly the pressure was being put upon his girl. The sight arrested his hurrying steps, and turned him instantly into the semblance of an indifferent bystander.

"Honey, they say a good brother makes a good husband," Little Liza was booming on in what she fondly believed was a tone audible only to Callista. "I tell you Flenton is the best brother any gals ever had."

Cleavage stood gazing at them with eyes indecipherable, then—turned his back.

"And look at Lance Cleavage," exhorted Little Liza, "a drinkin', coon-huntin', banjo playin' feller that don't darken the doors of a church—his own sister cain't never name him without tellin' how wicked he is. Let him go, honey—you let him go, an' take Flent."

Lance, standing with his back to them, holding his horses, had begun to whistle. At first the sound was scarcely to be heard above the babel of voices in the lighted room—but it came clearly to Callista's ears. Flenton's hand reached hers; Ellen joined her entreaties to those of Little Liza. Callista, while not a church member, had always aligned herself with the ultra-religious element; she had been the companion and peer of those eminently fitted and ever ready to sit in judgment on the unworthy. Now she heard all these joining to condemn Lance.

The tune outside went seeking softly among the turns and roulades with which Lance always embellished a melody. It was the song he had sung under her window. Her heart remembered the words.

"How many years, how many miles,  
Far from the door where my darling  
smiles?  
How many miles, how many years . .  
.?"

His musing, eyes were on the far line of mountains, velvety black against the luminous blackness of the sky; his gaze rested thoughtfully on a great star that hung shining in the dusk over the horizon's edge. He seemed deaf to the clatter and squabble, blind to the movement in the room behind him. Softly he whistled, like a man wandering pensive beside a lonely sea, or in some remote, solitary forest, a man untouched by the more immediate and human things of life. The two horses after snorting and pulling back at first sight of the unaccustomed lights and the noisy voices, put down their noses toward the long, lush dooryard grass.

"He ain't lookin' at you. He ain't a-carin'," Flenton whispered to her.

For the first time Callista glanced directly to where her bridegroom stood. His back was to her—yes, his back was to her. And though the little whistle went questing on with its "How many miles—how many years?" even as her eye rested on him he made a leisurely movement toward one of the horses, like a man who might be about to mount. Swift as a shadow she slipped through the hands of those around her and down the steps.

"Lance," she breathed. "Lance." Then she was in his arms. He had lifted her to the saddle.

"Good land!" wailed Octavia Gentry, "if you've got to go, Sis, they's no use ruinin' yo' frock. Here's your ridin' skirt," and she flourished the long calico garment and struggled to get down to the mounted pair.

Lance was on the other horse now. He paid no attention to any of them, but let his smiling gaze rove for the last time over the lighted windows, the noisy people, the long tables.

"What time will you-all be back?" called the still secretly chuckling old Ajax from the doorway, as he saw them depart.

"Never," answered Lance's clear hail.

"Oh, Lance—ain't you a-goin' to come back and have the weddin'?" began Octavia.

At this the bridegroom turned in his saddle, reining in thoughtfully. He would not accept this mutilated ceremony, yet the wedding of Lance Cleaverage should not be shorn in the eyes of his neighbors. Slowly he wheeled his horse and faced them all once more.

"Callista and me ain't coming back here," he assured them, without heat, yet with decision. "But I bid you-all to an infare at my house tomorrow night."

Then once more he wheeled his pony, caught at Callista's bridle, and sweeping into the big road, started the two forward at a gallop. His arm was round Callista's waist. Her head drooped in the relief of a decision arrived at, and a final abandonment to her real feeling that was almost swoon-like, on the conqueror's shoulder. The horses sprang forward as one.

"Callista—sweetheart," he whispered with his lips against her hair, "we don't want nothin' of them folks back there, do we? We don't want nothin' of anybody in the world. Just you and me—you and me."

## CHAPTER VII.

### LANCE'S LAUREL.

THE inheritance of Lance Cleaverage came to him from his maternal grandfather. Jesse Lance had felt it bitterly when his handsome high-spirited youngest daughter ran away with Kimbro Cleaverage, teacher of a little mountain school, a gentle, unworldly soul who would never get on in life. His small namesake was four years old when Grandfather Lance, himself a hawkfaced, up-headed man, undisputed master of his own household, keen on the hunting trail, and ready as ever for a fight or a frolic, came past and stopped at the Cleaverage farm on the way from his home in the Far Cove neighborhood down to the Settlement to buy mules, and, incidentally, to arrange about his will. He was not advanced in years, and he was in excellent health; but there were a number of married sons and daughters to portion, he had a considerable amount of property, and his wife was ailing. It had been suggested that both should make their wills; so the documents, duly written out, signed and attested, were being carried down to Jesse Lance's lawyer in Hepzibah.

He had seen almost nothing of his one-time favorite, Melissa, since the marriage twelve years before with Cleaverage that so disappointed him; and he had not now expected to remain the night in her house. But the little Lance, a small splinter of manhood, at once caught his grandfather's eye. The child stirred Jesse Lance's curiosity perhaps—or it may have been some deeper feeling. The first collision between these two occurred as the visitor, having dismounted, approached the Cleaverage gate. He had his favorite hound with him, and four-year-old Lance, leading forth old Speaker, his chosen comrade, observed the hair rise on the neck of grandfather's follower, and listened with delight to the rumble of growls the dogs exchanged.

"Ye better look out. If Speaker jumps on yo' dog he'll thest about eat him up," the child warned.

The tall man swept his grandson with a dominating gaze that was used to see the people about Jesse Lance obey. But things that scared other children were apt to evoke little Lance's scornful laughter or stir up fight in him.

"You call off yo' hound," the newcomer said imperiously. "I don't let my dog fight with every cur he meets."

The small boy wheeled—hands in trouser pockets—and gazed with disappointed eyes to where the two canines were

making friends.

"I wish they would jump on each other; I thest wish't they would," he muttered. "I know Speaker could whip."

Grandfather Lance looked with interest at the child. Such a boy had he been. This was the spirit he had bequeathed to Lance's mother, and which she had wasted when she married a schoolteacher.

Melissa Cleavage, come down in the world now, paid timid court to her father without much success; but in the middle of the afternoon, her four-year-old son settled the question of the visitor remaining for the night. Jesse Lance had been across the gulch to look at some wild land which belonged to him, up on the head waters of the creek called Lance's Laurel, a haggard, noble domain, its lawless acres still tossing an unbroken sea of green tree-tops towards the sky. As he returned to the Cleavage place, he traversed a little woods-path without noticing the small jeans-clad boy who dragged a number of linked objects across the way.

"You gran'pap!" came the shrill challenge after him. "You quit a-breakin' up my train."

Jesse glanced toward the ground and saw a great oak chip dangling by a string against his boot. He turned an impassive countenance, and thrust with his foot to free it from its entanglement.

"Watch out—you'll break it!" cried the child, running up. Then, as a second jerk shook and rattled the dangling bit of wood, "Ain't you got no sense?" he roared. "That's the injine to my train that you done stepped on and broke all up, and it cain't go a lick with you, big, lazy loafer, standin' right in the middle of it!"

For a moment the fierce baby eyes looked up into eyes as fierce above them. Such a glance should have sent any youngster weeping to its mother's skirts; but the tiny man on the woods-path stood his ground, ruffling like a game cock.

"Uh-huh!" jeered the grandfather, "and who might you be, young feller?"

"I'm cap'n of this train," Lance flung back at him, scarlet of face, his form rigid, his feet planted wide on the mold of the path.

Grim amusement showed itself in the elder countenance. Yet Jesse Lance was not used to permitting himself to be defied. Not since Melissa had run rough-shod over him and held his heart in her little grubby hands, had another been allowed such liberties.

"Oh, ye air, air ye? Well, that's mighty big talk for little breeches," he taunted, to see whether the spirit that looked out at him from his grandson's eyes went deep, or was mere surface bravado.

He got his answer. With a roar the baby charged him, gripped the big man around the knees and swung.

"Git off'n my injine!" he bellowed, contorting his small body to hammer with his toes the offending legs he clung to. "I told you once civil, and you didn't go. I'm cap'n of this train, and I can throw rowdies off when they won't go."

The lines of the man's face puckered curiously as he looked down at the small assailant. Without another word he freed his foot from the chip-and-string "train," moving circumspectly and with due regard to flimsy couplings. Without another word he stepped slowly on, looking across his shoulder once, to note that Lance instantly joined his train into shape and, turning his back on his big adversary, promptly forgot all about him. Where the woods-path struck the big road, the grandfather stood a long moment and studied his grandson; then he made his way to the house where eleven year-old Roxy sat sorting wild greens on the porch edge.

"How old is that chap back thar?" he inquired of her brusquely.

"Brother Lance? W'y, he ain't but fo' year old," Roxana returned sanctimoniously. "Gran'pap, you mustn't hold it agin' him that he's so mean—he's but fo' year old. An' Poppy won't never whip him like he ort. If Poppy would jest give him a good dosin' of hickory tea, I 'low he'd come of his meanness mighty quick."

Jesse Lance merely grunted in reply to these pious observations, and in his mind there framed itself a codicil to be added to that will. Melissa—Melissa who married Kimbro Cleavage—had been left out of both testaments so far; but she was his favorite child, and it had been in her father's mind to bequeath to her the wild land up in the Gap. Yet of what use would such a piece of timber be to a woman? And it would be of less account to a man like Kimbro Cleavage. They would but sell it for the meagre price someone might offer their necessities now. No, the dauntless captain of the train back there on the path was the one to own the Gap hundred. Such a man as he promised to become, would subdue that bit of savage nature, and live with and upon it. The lawyer in Hepzibah should fix the will that way.

Susan Lance died in her husband's absence; and the pair of mules Jesse had bought in the Settlement ran away with him on his journey home, pitching themselves, the wagon and driver, all over a cliff and breaking his neck. So it was that the codicil to the will left "to my namesake Lance Cleavage, the Gap hundred on Lance's Laurel," not then of as much value as it had now become. High on the side of the slope it lay, as befitted the heritage of a free hunter. The timber on it was straight, tall and clean, mostly good hardwood. Here was the head of Lance's Laurel, a bold spring of pure freestone water bursting out from under a bluff—a naked mass of sandstone which fronted the sky near his boundary-line—in sufficient volume to form with its own waters the upper creek. A mile down, this stream joined itself to Burnt Cabin Laurel, and the two formed Big Laurel. This water supply, unusually fine even in that well-watered country, added greatly to the value of the tract as a homestead. Coal had been found on the other side of the ridge, and Lance, who believed in his star, thought it reasonable to expect that coal would be discovered on his own land.

Meantime, though he had cleared none of it for crops—not even the necessary truck-patch—he made a little opening on a fine, slightly rise, with a more lofty eminence behind it, and set to work building his cabin. Scorning the boards from the portable sawmill which would have offered him a flimsy shanty at best, hot in the brief, vivid summer and cold in winter, he marked the best timber for the purpose, and planned a big, two-penned log house, with an open porch between. Lance, his father and Sylvane, spent more than ten days getting out the trees. It took forty boles to build a single pen ten logs high; and as Lance had decided to have the rooms measure fourteen feet inside, each must be cut to fifteen foot length. Then, since he was fastidious in the matter of a straight wall, Lance himself measured and lined each one and scored it to line, his father coming behind him with a broad-axe and hewing it flat on the two sides, leaving the log perhaps about five inches through, whatever its height might be, and thus securing a flat wall of even thickness. For the kitchen at the back, it was thought good enough to snake the logs up in the round, with the bark all on, and merely

skelp them roughly as they were put up one by one.

It took only a day to raise the walls of the cabin on Lance's Laurel, for the owner was tremendously popular, and there was help enough offered in friendly country fashion that day to have raised another pen, had the logs been ready. Roxy Griever and little Polly came across the gulch with dinner for the men; but the best things the laughing jovial party had, Lance cooked for them on an open camp-fire.

The roof was of hand-rived clapboards which Lance and Sylvane got out; but all the flooring was of tongued and grooved boards, brought from the Hepzibah planing mill, narrow, smooth, well-fitted, well-laid.

There were not in all the Turkey Track neighborhoods such door-and window-frames, nor doors of such quality, all hauled up from the planing mill.

When it came to the chimney, Lance was the master hand, a mason by trade, and sent for far and near to build chimneys or doctor one which refused to draw. He had chosen the stones from the creek-bed, water-washed, clean, offering traceries of white here and there on their steely, blue-gray surfaces. He debated long over the question of a rounded arch with keystone for the front of his fireplace, as is the manner of all the older chimneys in the mountains; but finally he and Sylvane found one day a single straight arch rock so long that it could be laid across the jambs, and this he shaped a bit and hauled up for the purpose. The day he set in the chimney-throat the iron bar from which to hang the kettles, Sylvane lay watching him.

"Now, that's what Sis' Roxy's been a-wantin' ever sence I can remember," the younger brother commented, as Lance manipulated the mortar and set stone upon stone with nice skill.

"Uh-huh," assented the proprietor of Lance's Laurel lightly. "She wants it too bad. If she'd just want it easier, maybe she'd get it, one of these days."

He laughed drolly down at the boy lying on the grass, and both remembered the long dreary tirades by which poor Roxy had tried to get her brother to so amend the home hearth that cooking should be rendered less laborious for her.

And it was to this home that Lance Cleavage brought his bride. Here it was that he hoped to build that true abiding place which such spirits as Lance seek, and crave, and seldom find. The hearthstone he had himself laid, the skilfully built chimney, with its dream of Callista sitting on one side of the hearth and himself on the other—these were gropings after the answers such as he always asked of life.

"This ain't what Pap calls a sojourning place—this here's going to be a real home, Callista," he said eagerly, as the two young creatures went about it examining their new habitation the next morning. "It'll be cool in the summer, and good and warm in the winter. That chimney'll draw—just look at the fire. I never have built a chimney that smoked."

"Did you build the chimney, Lance?" Callista asked him, leaning on his arm.

"I did that," he told her. "They're always after me to build other folks' chimneys and lay other people's hearthstones, and I ain't so very keen to do it—and it don't pay much—up here. But my own—one for you and me to sit by—"

He broke off and stared down at her, his eyes suddenly full of dreams. Oh, the long winter evenings; they two together beside the leaping hearth-fire. They would be as one. Surely into this citadel he had bulided for his life, the enemy—the olden lonesomeness—could never come.

They had their bit of breakfast, and Lance was about to go down to the Settlement to purchase the wherewithal for the impromptu infare. It was hard to leave her. He went out and fed the black horses and came back to say good-bye once more. His team was his hope of a subsistence, seeing that there was no cleared land to farm. He and they together could earn a living for two or three months yet. After that, there would be small opportunity throughout the winter for teaming. Through the summer he had been hauling tan-bark on the contract for old man Derf. Nearly all of this money he had spent upon the house; and he felt he had now to draw upon what remained—though it was not yet quite due—for the expenses of the infare. Callista was down at the hearth as he entered, the tiny blaze in its center warming the whiteness of her throat and chin where she bent to hang a pot on the bar his skill and forethought had placed there for her. Something mighty and primal and terribly sweet shook the soul of Lance Cleavage as he looked at her kneeling there. She was his—his mate. He would never be alone again. He ran to her and dropped his arm about her. She turned up to him that flushing, tender, responsive countenance which was new to both of them.

"Hadn't I better buy you a pair of slippers?" he asked her, just for the pleasure of having her answer.

"I reckon I don't need 'em, Lance," she said soberly, getting to her feet and moving with him toward the door. "If I could dance—or if I ever did dance—I might have need of such."

"Dance!" echoed her husband with quick tenderness, looking down at her as they paused on the doorstone. "If you was to dance, Callista, there wouldn't any of the other gals want to stand up on the floor beside you. I'm goin' to get the slippers."

He rode away on his black horse, her fond eyes following him; and the sight of her standing in the door waving her hand was his last vision of home.

At the gate, far down the slope, he stopped for some imaginary investigation of his accoutrements, but really to have an excuse to turn and wave to Callista, cupping his hands and calling back, "I'm going to bring you the finest pair of slippers I can buy."

For in his pocket was one of her shoes, and in his mind the firm intention of getting so light and flexible a pair of slippers that his girl should be coaxed into learning to dance. Callista not dance—it was unthinkable! Of course she would dance. Vaguely his mind formed the picture of her swaying to the rhythm of music. His eyes half closed, he let black Satan choose his own gait, as his arms felt somehow the light pressure of her form within them, and he was dancing with Callista. On—on—on through the years with Callista. She should not grow old and faded and workworn, nor he hardened, commonplace, indifferent. There should be love and tenderness—beauty and music and movement—in their lives. And she should dance for him—with him—Callista, who had never yet danced with anyone.

Early morning shadows lay cool across the road; ground-squirrels frisked among the boulders by the way. The far mountains were of a wonderful morning color, not blue, but a blend of the tint of the golden sun-warmed slopes with

that of the air; a color of dream, of high romance—a color of ideals.

At one time he was roused from his thoughts by a bee-like drone of voices, accompanied by jangling cowbells. Around the turn ahead of him came a herd of spotted yearlings, their shaggy hides clustered with the valley's wayside burrs. They took the road, crowding stupidly against his horse, and shuffled by; then followed two riders, driving the bunch to mountain pastures to find their own living until winter should set in—an old man in a faded hat and shawl, gaunt, humped over his saddle-bow; and his son beside him on a better horse, but colorless of feature as himself.

"Howdy," said Lance, smiling, and they answered him, "Howdy."

But he was moved to a new pity for these men, whom he did not know, and for all their kind who are born and live, God knew why, without the eagle power of soaring into blue gulfs of dream. He rode with his head high, eye bright, his cheek glowing, his whole body tingling in the exquisite flow of the frost-sweetened morning air upon it. The horse, too, felt the touch of last night's frost, and fretted against the bit until Lance, with a shout, let him go. Then the road underfoot rushed past with the wind as the two splendid, exultant creatures flew over it, for the moment so far in sympathy that they seemed one. They found themselves reluctantly slowing down at the front fence of the Derf place. The pack of hounds burst from under the porch, and ran baying out to meet Lance. Iley Derf's Indian husband crouched at the corner of the cabin picking up something, and moved noiselessly away with an armful of wood. The clamor of the hounds brought Derf himself out, and Lance had a glimpse of women moving about at household work in the cabin.

"Light—light and come in," Garrett Derf greeted him. "I hear you and old Jeff Drumright had it up an' down last night, and that you beat the old hypocrite out."

"Much obliged, I ain't got time to get down," Lance answered, ignoring the rest of Derf's speech. "I just stopped as I was passing to get some money."

Derf's eyes narrowed to slits. He lounged forward, bent and secured a bit of wood from the chip pile and commenced to whittle. Such rapid and abrupt negotiations are quite foreign to mountain business ethics, where it takes a half a day to collect a day's wages.

"Want some money," Derf repeated contemplatively. "You mean that thar money for the haulin', I reckon."

"Yes," returned Lance impatiently, "I couldn't very well mean any other."

"Well, Lance, you shorely ain't forgettin' that that thar money ain't due till next month," Derf said, setting a foot on the chopping block and proceeding to pick his teeth with the toothpick he had shaped. "The haulin' ain't all done yet."

"No, I ain't forgot that; but I knew you had money by you, and I didn't reckon you'd object to paying some of it ahead of time."

Cleaverage forced himself to speak civilly, though his temper was rising. Derf chuckled.

"Now see here," he shifted the raised foot, and set forth evidently on a long argument. "Thar ain't no man livin' that likes to pay money afore hit's due. Ef I've got the cash by me, that's my good fortune. Ef you want payment ahead of time, it's worth somethin'. What do you aim to take for the debt as it stands, me to pay you today? Of course I'm good for it; but this here business is the same as discountin' a note, and that calls for money. What'll you take, Lance?"

"Whatever you'll give me, I reckon," Lance came back quickly, with light scorn. "Looks like you've got it your own way. What are you offering?"

"Oh, I ain't offerin' nothin'," Derf receded from his proposition. A shrewd enjoyment was evident beneath the surface stupidity and reluctance. "It's you that wants the money. Looks like you must want it pretty bad."

Nothing but the fact that he conceived it necessary to have the funds, kept Lance from breaking out wrathfully and leaving his tormentor.

"See here, Garrett Derf," he said at last, divided between scorn and angry dignity, "I made you one offer—and I'd think the meanest man would call it good enough—I'll take what money you choose to give me. Now you can say the rest."

"See here, Lance," echoed Derf, grinning, and glancing toward the cabin, "you ort not to trade so careless these days and times. Yo're a married man now; you've got to look out for yo' spare cash, or yo' ol' woman'll be in yo' hair. What you needin' all this here money for, anyway?"

The day before, Derf durst not for his life inquire so closely into Lance Cleaverage's affairs. Now he felt that he held the boy in a cleft stick. Something of this Lance understood; also, the allusion to Callista's right to vise his bargains stung him beyond reason. No doubt he knew at bottom that what he was now engaged on was unfair to her.

"If you're going to pay, you'd better be about it," he said to Derf. "I've got some buying to do when I get my money, and Frazee's store is a right smart ways from here."

Derf came through the fence and laid a detaining hand on Satan's mane, getting nipped at for his pains.

"You ain't got the time to go down to the store and buy, and git back home by night," he argued. "Better trade with me, Lance. I brung up a wagon load of goods last time I was down. I aim to put in shelving and set up regular next month."

A quick change went over Lance's face.

"Have you got any women's slippers—that size?" the bridegroom asked eagerly, drawing Callista's shoe from his pocket.

Derf took the shoe in his hand and fingered it, bending so his countenance was concealed. Lance became aware of a heaving of the man's shoulders, a gurgling, choking sound that at length resolved itself into a fierily offensive chuckle.

"Buyin' shoes for her the fust day!" snickered Garrett Derf.

The young fellow bent from his saddle and swooped the bit of foot-gear out of the other's fingers—it looked so much as though he would clout Garrett Derf on the side of the head with it that the latter dodged hastily.

"Are you going to trade, or are you not?" he asked with blazing eyes. "I got something else to do besides stand here talking."

"I'll give you half," bantered Derf, still holding discreetly out of range, but wiping the tears of delicious mirth from the corners of his eyes.

"I'll take it," returned Lance sharply, thrusting forth his hand. "Have you got it with you?"

The chance was too good to lose. Derf instantly ceased chuckling, reached down in a capacious pocket and hauled up a great wallet, out of which he began to count the money, looking up furtively every moment to see if Lance had been only jesting, or if his temper and that reckless spirit of his were sufficiently roused to carry through the outrageous trade. But when the few bills and the bit of silver were ready, Lance took them, put them carelessly into his pocket without the usual careful fingering and counting, and wheeled Satan toward the road.

"Ain't you goin' to tell a body 'howdy'?" came a treble hail from the cabin as he did so, and Ola Derf's small face, still disfigured from her tears of last night, presented itself at the doorway. "Lance, wait a minute—I want to speak with you," the girl called; and then she came running down to the fence and out into the road. "Was you and Pap a-fussin'? Ye ain't goin' to be mad with us becaze Callista and her folks never was friendly with us, air ye?" she inquired doubtfully, looking up at him with drowned eyes.

Pity stirred Lance's heart. Poor little thing, she had always been a friendly soul, since the two were tow-headed tykes of six playing hookey together from the bit of summer school, as devoted as a dog, observant of his mood and careful of all his preferences. It was rare for her to thrust upon him her own distress, or to let him see her other than cheerful, eagerly willing to forward his plans. And he remembered with resentment that both at his own home and Callista's after some heated discussion of his proposition to invite the Derfs, he had said they could have it their own way, and no invitation had been given.

"Well, you and me ain't going to fuss, anyhow, are we, Ola?" he said heartily. "I bid you to the infare at my house to-night. I was just gettin' the money from your father to buy some things that Callista'll need for it."

Square, stubbed, the little brown girl stood at the roadside shading her gaze with one small, rough hand, looking up at the mounted man with open, unchanged adoration. Her eyes—the eyes of an ignorant little half savage—enlightened by love, valued accurately the perfect carriage of his shapely head on the brown throat, the long, tapering line from waist to toe, as he sat at ease in the saddle. Who of them all was the least bit like Lance, her man of men, with his quizzical smile, his blithe, easy mastery of any situation?

"Hit's too late now for you to go away down yon to the store, ain't it. Lance?" the girl asked him timidly. "Don't you want to come in and see the new things Pappy brung up from the Settlement? I believe in my soul he's got the prettiest dancin' shoes I ever laid my eyes on—but Callista don't dance," she amended.

Lance sighted at the sun. He was entirely too late for a trip to Hepzibah—he knew that. The shoe in his pocket nudged him in the side and suggested that this was the place for buying Callista's slippers. Without more ado he sprang from Satan's back, flung the reins over a fence post, and followed Ola into the big shed where the goods for the new store were piled heterogeneously on the floor.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE INFARE.

WHEN Callista's gaze could no longer distinguish Lance on Satan, when the thick woods had swallowed up his moving figure at last, she turned to make ready the house for the evening. He had lived in the place, off and on, for several weeks, during the long period of finishing up work. Every evidence of his occupancy showed him a clever, neat-handed creature. Callista was continually finding proof of his daintiness and tidiness. She admired the bits of extra shelving—a little cupboard here or there—a tiny table that let down from the wall by means of a leathern hinge, to rest on its one stout leg—all sorts of receptacles contrived from most unlikely material. Throughout the forenoon, the girl worked, using the implements and utensils that his hands had made ready for her, drawing upon the store of girlish possessions which had come over in her trunk the day before, for wherewithal to grace and beautify the place for the evening's festivities.

Early in the afternoon Lance himself came riding slowly in. She had not expected him much before dark, and she ran to meet him with eager welcome. She watched him while he unsaddled and fed his horse, and then the two went gaily into their new home, their arms full of the carefully wrapped purchases he had bought. The pretty slippers were got out, displayed and tried on; the curtains for the front windows were spread forth, and the bright table cover for the little stand; the lamp with its wonderful gay shade was cautiously unpacked and set up, the silverplated spoons counted, almost awesomely. Lance had had no dinner, and Callista had been so engrossed in her work about the cabin that she had cooked none for herself, stopping only to snatch a bite of the cold food left from breakfast. So now when all had been gone over again and again, admired and delighted in, he put her in a chair and peremptorily bade her, "rest right there whilst I make you some coffee and cook some dinner for the both of us."

Lance cooked just as he played the banjo, or danced, or hunted possums. Callista watched him with joy in the sure lightness of his movements, the satisfactoriness and precision of his results.

It was after three o'clock, and they were just finishing their coffee and cornbread, when little Polly Griever came running in at the door and announced,

"Cousin Lance, A' Roxy says tell you ef they's a-goin' to be dancin' here to-night, ne'er a one of us shain't step foot in the house."

"You go tell yo' Aunt Roxy that they's sure goin' to be dancin' in my place this night," Lance instructed her, throwing his head back to laugh. "Say Polly, you tell her I aim to have her do the callin' off—you hear? Don't you forget, now. Tell her I'm dependin' on her to do the callin' off, and—"



"Now, Lance!" remonstrated Callista. Her face relaxed into lines of amusement in spite of herself. Yet she resolutely assumed a wifely air of reproof that Lance found irresistible. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself. If you ain't, why, I'm ashamed for you. Polly, you go tell Miz. Griever that they won't be a thing in the world here in my house that she'd object to."

"Huh! *yo'* house!" interpolated Lance, and he made as though he would have kissed her right before Polly, whereat her color flamed beautifully and she hastily moved back a bit, in alarm.

"You tell yo' Aunt Roxy, please come on, Polly, and to come early," she continued with native tact. "Tell her I'll expect her to help me out. Why, I don't know how I'd get along without Sis' Roxy and Pappy Cleavage and Brother Sylvane."

Polly stood near the door, like a little hardy woods-creature, and rolled her gaze slowly about the interior, noting all the preparations that were on foot. She observed Lance shove back a little from the table and reach for his banjo. While Callista lingered over her cup of coffee, Polly saw, with the tail of her eye, that Lance drew a little parcel from his pocket and began to put a new string on the instrument. That settled it; he had spoken the truth: he was going to have dancing there that night. The thin-shanked wiry little thing watched him continually till she caught his eye. Then with the freemasonry there always was between Lance and youngsters, she raised her brows in an interrogatory grimace while Callista's eyes were in her cup. Lance grinned and nodded his head vigorously. Still Polly looked doubtful. Lance moved his foot wickedly to emphasize his meaning. Polly was convinced. There would be no legitimate coming to the infare—not if she took that word home to Aunt Roxy.

But instead of turning to leave with her message, Polly slowly edged into the room. Presently Lance and Callista together cleared the table, making play of it like a pair of children. Together they set out the provisions that Lance had brought, and began to prepare the supper for the infare. And all the time Polly's eyes were upon the good things to eat, the marvelous lamp with its gay shade, the new curtains which they tacked up at the windows, all the wonders and delights that were to be exploited that evening. She had enjoyed herself hugely at the wedding, in spite of the fact that the bridegroom, whom she especially delighted in and admired, left in so unceremonious and theatric a manner early in the evening. If a wedding without Lance was like that, what would the infare be in Lance's own house? She grappled with the problem of how to escape Aunt Roxy and get to this festivity. She could only think of one possible method—that was to stay at Lance's now she was there. She looked down covertly at her old homespun dress, soiled and torn, her whole person unkempt and untidy. Well—she gulped a bit—better this than nothing at all. She would rather appear thus among the guests of the infare than not to be able to appear in any guise; but when she considered her bare feet, she gave up in despair. If she only had her shoes and stockings out of Aunt Roxy's house, the joys of the infare were as good as hers—let come after what must.

Gaily Lance and Callista went forward with their preparations. To their minds, they were the first who had ever felt that pristine rapture of anticipation when two make ready a home. Dear children! Did not Adam, when Eve called him to help her with fresh roses for the bower she was decking, know the same? It is as old as Paradise, that joy, and as legitimate an asset of happiness to humanity as any left us. Suddenly, upon the quiet murmur of their talk, came the sharp slam of the door, and they heard little Polly's bare feet go spattering down the trail.

"Well, hit's time she left," commented Callista gently, "if she's goin' to take word to Sister Roxy."

But Polly had been stricken with an inspiration. Down the steep cut-off which crossed the ravine with Lance's Laurel brawling in its depth, and led to the Cleavage place, she ran full pelt. It was two miles by the wagon road around the bend; but it was little over a mile down across the gulch, and Polly made quick work of the descent, scarcely slacking on the steep climb up again. She galloped like a frightened filly over that bit of path on which the original owner of the Gap hundred had met young Lance with his chip train nineteen years ago, and burst headlong in upon Roxy Griever.

"A' Roxy!" she gasped, "Callisty's a-goin' to have preachers at the infare—an'—an'—she wants yo' gospel quilt. Pleas'm git it for me quick—Callisty's in a bi-i-g hurry."

Polly's instinct carried true; and the Widow Griever was borne by the mere wind of her fictitious haste. Before she had stopped to consider, Roxy found herself taking the gospel quilt out of the chest where it was kept. Back in the room where she had been sitting, little Polly dived under the bed and secured her shoes, a convenient stocking thrust in the throat of each. With the swiftness and deftness of a squirrel or a possum, she concealed these in her scanty skirts and stood apparently waiting when the widow returned, bundle in hand. But now Roxy Griever's slow wits had begun to stir.

"What preachers is a-comin'?" she inquired sharply. "Brother Drumright, he's out preachin' on the White Oak Circuit—an' he wouldn't be thar nohow—a body knows in reason. Young Shalliday, he—What preachers did Callisty say was a-comin'?"

"I never hearn rightly jest what ones," stammered Polly, making a grab for the quilt and missing it. "But thar's more'n a dozen comin'," she gulped, as she saw her aunt's face darken with incredulity.

"You Polly Griever," began the widow sternly, "you know mighty well-an'-good thar ain't no twelve preachers in this whole deestrick. I'll vow, I can't think of a single one this side of Hepzibah. I believe you're a-lyin' to me. Preachers at Lance Cleavage's house, and him apt to break out and dance anytime! What did he say—you ain't never told me that yit—what did Lance say 'bout the dancin' anyhow?"

Keen-visaged, alert Polly had possessed herself of the precious bundle, and now she hopped discreetly backward, shaking the ragged mane out of her eyes like a wild colt.

"W'y, Lance, he says he's a-goin' to have dancin', and a plenty of it," she announced with impish gusto—there would never be any hanging for a lamb with Polly; she was somewhat of Lance's kidney. She backed a pace or two outside the door, stepping as warily as a wildcat might, before she concluded, "An' he 'lowed to have you do the callin' off, A' Roxy! He said be shore an' come—that he was a-dependin' on you to call off for 'em to dance!"

The Widow Griever made a dive for the bundle gripped in Polly's stringy little arm. But the girl, far too quick for her, backed half way to the gate. She must make a virtue of necessity.

"Well, you can take that thar quilt over to Callisty," she harangued. "I won't deny it to her, and I hope it may do good. If thar men is a-goin' to git up a dance, you tell her she needn't expect to see me nor mine; but the quilt I'll send."

You give it to her, and come right straight back to this house. You hear me, you Polly Griever?—straight back!"

The last adjuration was shouted after Polly's thudding bare feet as they went flying once more down the short cut into the gulch.

"Yes'm," came back the faint hail. "I will, A' Roxy."

Deep in the hollow where the waters of Laurel gurgled about the roots of the black twisted bushes that gave it its name, where ordinarily a body would be fearfully afraid at such a time—blind man's holiday, and neither dark nor light in the open, while here the shadows lay like pools of ink—Polly Griever sat herself down in great content to put on her shoes and stockings. She was puffing a little, but the success of her enterprise had so fired her that all thoughts of ha'nts and such-like were banished. She hauled up the home-knit hose over her slim shanks and knobby knees, girding them in place with a gingham string, and hastily laced on her cowhide shoes. Being then in full evening dress, she made a more leisurely way up the steep to Lance's cabin, prepared to take in and enjoy all the festivities of the occasion.

She found the house alight and humming. Octavia Gentry and old Ajax had arrived, and the latter was throned in state as usual by the chimney-side—the evening was cool for September, and the flickering blaze that danced up the broad throat was welcome for its heat as well as for light. The mother-in-law was everywhere, looking at the contrivances for housekeeping, full of fond pride in what she saw, anxious to convince the young people that she did not resent their unceremonious behavior of the night before. She pinched the new window curtains between her fingers, and advised Callista to pin newspapers behind them in ordinary times lest the sun fade their colors. She helped at the lighting of the new lamp, and finally settled down in the kitchen among the supper preparations.

"Looks right funny to be here to an infare this night, when we-all helt the weddin' without you last night," Octavia commented amiably. "I did wish the both o' you could have been thar to see the fun. The gals and boys got to playin' games, and sorter turned it into a play-party. Look like they hardly could stop theirselves for supper. Big as our house is, hit ain't so suited to sech as yourn." Again she looked commendingly about her. "I tell you, Callista," she said over and over again, "I think yo' Lance has showed the most good sense in his building and fixing up of any young man I ever knew."

But she need not have troubled greatly; Lance had no consciousness of offense in him; and he was busy welcoming guests, going out to help the men unhitch, showing those who had ridden where they might tether their horses; or, if they liked, unsaddle and turn them loose in his brush-fenced horse lot, which was later to be a truck-patch; greeting his father and Sylvane, and grinning over the fact that Roxy was not with them, while Mary Ann Martha was.

"Roxana had got it into her head someway that you-all aimed to dance, and come she would not," Kimbro said plaintively.

"She was bound an' determined that Ma'-Ann-Marth' shouldn't neither," Sylvane took up the story. "But the chap helt her breath—didn't ye, Pretty?—an' looked like she'd never ketch it again; so Sis' Roxy give in."

"Hey, Unc' Lance's gal!" the bridegroom hailed her, as the fat little bundle was passed down to him from the old buckboard, and instantly caught around his neck, hugging hard, and rooting a delighted face against his cheek.

It was nearly eight o'clock when Ola Derf rode up alone and came in. Mountain people are so courteous to each other as to make those who do not understand call them deceitful. Ola was received as amiably as such an invader might have been in the best of urban society. She looked with round, avid eyes at everything about her, and finally at the bride, her hostess.

"An' you a-wearin' them slippers," she commented. "I told Lance I knowed in reason you would." The remark was made in the further room, where the girls were laying off their things and putting them down on that bed where Callista, a little bewildered by the unsolicited loan, had spread forth the wonderful gospel quilt.

"Did you he'p Lance to choose Callisty's slippers?" asked Ellen Hands.

Rilly Trigg and Little Liza stopped in the door to listen. Octavia Gentry turned from the shelves she was examining. Even Polly ceased to stare across the open entry into the other room where most of the men were.

"Yes," said Ola, composedly, seating herself on the floor to adjust her own footwear. "He was at our house a-wantin' to buy dancin' slippers for Callisty, and 'course he knowed I would understand what was needed. I reckon Callisty couldn't tell him, so he brought one of her shoes in his pocket, and axed me. Do they fit ye, Callisty?"

A curious change had come over the bride's face, yet it was calm and even fairly smiling, as she answered indifferently,

"No. I wasn't aimin' to wear 'em. I just tried them on. They' too big for me." And she closed the door and went resolutely to a chest in the corner, from which she took her heavy, country-made shoes to replace the slippers Lance's love had provided.

The Derf girl regarded her askance.

"Ain't you afeared you'll make him mad ef you take 'em off?" she asked finally. "I know he aims to have you dance befo' he's done with it, and you cain't noways dance in them thar things," looking with disfavor at the clumsy shoes.

"Callista doesn't dance, and she ain't a-goin' to," Octavia Gentry was beginning with some heat, when her daughter interrupted.

"Never mind, Mother," she said with dignity. "I ain't aimin' to dance, and I reckon you're not. Maybe Ola's mistaken in regards to Lance."

The Derf girl laughed shortly, deep in her throat. Before she could speak, the closed door jarred open, revealing Roxy Griever, with a stout switch in her hand.

"Whar's Polly," the newcomer inquired wrathfully.

"Mighty glad to see you, Sis' Roxy," cried Callista, welcoming the diversion, but looking with surprise at her sister-in-law's draggled gingham on which the night dews of Laurel Gulch lay thick, her grim visage, and her switch. "Polly—she was here a minute ago."

But Polly, wise with the wisdom of her sex, had flown to Lance, and now she hid behind him, clinging like a limpet.

"Come in, Sis' Roxy. We're proud to see you here," shouted Lance, with an impudent disregard of anything amiss, and a new householder's enthusiastic hospitality.

"Did you send me word that you was a-goin' to have me call off the dances?" the widow demanded in an awful voice.

Her scrapegrace brother laughed in her face.

"That was jest a mighty pore joke, Sis' Roxy," he explained. "We-all was goin' to play some games, and I know you' a powerful good hand to get us started. Come on; fix the boys and gals like they ought to be for that"—he hesitated a little, frowning—"that play we used to have sometimes where they all stand up in couples, and—Wait, I'll get my banjo and play a tune and you'll see what I mean."

Lance had not lived his twenty-three years with his sister Roxy to fail now in finding her weak side. She loved lights, a crowd, as he did. True, she wished to harangue the crowd, and the lights must be to reveal her, playing the pictorially pious part; yet a Virginia Reel, disguised as a game, answered well to give her executive powers scope and swing, and they were in the thick of the fun when the women came from the other room.

In the moments of her detention in that room, Ola had begun to find whether being bidden to a festivity really made one a guest. Rilly Trigg whispered apart to Callista, and looked out of the corners of her eyes at the newcomer. Lance's wife evidently reprovved her for doing so, but a smile went with the words. Octavia Gentry spoke solemnly to the Derf girl, asking after the health of her parents in a tone so chilly that the outsider felt herself indefinitely accused.

"I don't keer," she muttered to herself rebelliously, "hit's Lance's house. Lance ain't a-goin to th'ow off on old friends just becaze he's wedded."

On the instant she entered the other room, and had sight of her host, flushed, laughing-eyed, his brown curls ruffled, the banjo in his lap, swaying to the rhythm of "Greenbacks," as Roxy Griever struggled to keep the boys and girls in an orderly line while she showed them how to "Shake hands acrost-like."

The dull little face lighted up. Here was something at which Ola felt she could help, a ground upon which she was equal to the best of them.

"Hit's a reel!" she exclaimed joyously. "I'll call off for ye, Lance."

As though her words had been some sort of evil incantation, the pretty group dissolved instantly. The girls fled giggling and exclaiming; the boys shouldered sheepishly away; only the Widow Griever remained to confront the spoilsport with acid visage and swift reproof. Roxy wound up the hostilities that ensued by declaring,

"You can dance, and Brother Lance kin, ef them's yo' ruthers; but ye cain't mix me in. That thar was a game I played when I went to the old field hollerin' school. Call hit a reel ef ye want to—oh, call hit a reel—shore! But ye cain't put yo' wickedness on me."

"Yes," returned Ola hardily, "I played it at school, too. But it's the Virginia Reel, and Lance said he was goin' to have dancin' here to-night. Ain't ye. Lance? I brung my slippers."

Roxy Griever turned and flounced out. Lance smiled indulgently at Ola. His sister's warlike demonstrations amused him mightily and put him in a good humor.

"Sure," he agreed largely. "You and me will have 'em all dancin' before we're done. I wish't we had Preacher Drumright here to pat for us."

The sedate guests, though they laughed a little, fell away from these two, leaving them standing alone in the centre of the floor, while some of the boys and girls lingered, staring and giggling, wondering what they would do or say next.

"Pears like they ain't nobody but you and me to do the dancin'," Ola began doubtfully, "an' if you have to play—"

She broke off. In the doorway that led to the little back room appeared the solemn countenance of the Widow Griever. This worthy woman fixed a cold eye upon her brother and beckoned him silently with ghostly finger.

"I'll be back in a minute, Ola," he told his unwelcome addition to the company, the wedge he had driven into their ranks, and which seemed about to split them asunder.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE INTERLOPER.

LANCE found his father and Octavia Gentry awaiting him in the lean-to kitchen, Kimbro Cleavage anxious and deprecating. Old Ajax had dodged the issue, and Sylvane was out in the other room trying to get the boys and girls to playing again. But Callista was there—not beside her mother—she stood near the door, a little pale and looking anywhere but at her bridegroom. Lance Cleavage's eye, half scornful, swept the scattered group and read their attitude aright.

"Anything the matter with you-all?" he inquired suavely.

"Yes, they's a-plenty the matter with us, and with all decent and respectable persons here in this house gathered this night," the Widow Griever began in a high, shaking, unnatural voice.

"I reckon all that means Ola Derf, for short," cut in Lance, not choosing to be bored with a lengthy harangue.

"Yes, it does," Roxy told him. "That thar gal would never have been bidden to Miz. Gentry's house. Callisty would never have been called on to even herself with sech, long as she staid under her gran'pappy's roof. And when it comes to what it did out in 'tother room, it's more than Callisty that suffers."

"Suffers!" echoed her brother with a contemptuous grin. "Well, if that don't beat my time! I reckon Ola Derf cain't eat any of you-all. She's just a little old gal, and you're a good-sized crowd of able-bodied folks—what harm can she do you?"

"Well, Lance," began his mother-in-law, with studied moderation, though she was plainly incensed, "I do not think, hit's any way for you to do—evening Callista with such folks. She ain't used to it."

Lance looked to where Callista yet held aloof near the door, pale and silent, avoiding his eye.

"A man and his wife are one," he said, with less confidence than would have been his earlier in the day. "What's good enough for me is good enough for Callista."

He got no sign of agreement from his bride—and he had expected it.

"Son, I think you made a mistake to bid that Derf gal here," spoke old Kimbro mildly. "But don't you let her start up any foolishness, and we'll all get through without further trouble."

"Yes," broke in the Widow Griever's most rasping tones. "She called the game I was a-showin' the boys and gals a Virginia Reel, an' 'lowed she'd call off for us. Call off!" Roxy snorted. "A lot of perfessin' Christians to dance—dance to Ola Derf's callin' off!"

Once more Lance's eye swept the circle of hostile, alien faces. His sense of fair play was touched. Also, he felt himself pushed outside and set to defending his solitary camp, with the whole front of respectability arrayed against him. This, so far as the others were concerned, was the usual thing; it daunted him not at all. But when he looked to Callista, and saw that at the first call she had left him—left him alone—arrayed herself with the enemy—a new, strange, stinging pain went through his spirit. He smiled, while odd lights began to bicker in his eyes.

"O-oo-oh," he said in a soft, careless voice, "didn't you-all know that I aim to have dancin'? Why, of course I do." And he walked away with head aslant, leaving them dumb.

It was but a retort, the usual quick defiance from the Lance Cleaverage who would not be catechized, reproved; yet when he entered the outer room and found Ola drawn over at one side, unfriended, while a knot of whispering girls, quite across the floor from her, cast glances athwart shoulders in her direction, the good will of old comradeship, the anger of the host who sees his guest mistreated, pushed forward his resolution.

"I reckon I'd better be goin' home," Ola said to the pale Callista, who followed her husband from the back room. "Looks like I'm in the way here; and mebbe Lance ort not to have bid me—hit's yo' house."

The bride looked from her bridegroom to the brown girl strangely. In her own fashion, she was as unwilling to be outdone as Lance himself. "This here is Lance's house," she said coldly. "He bids them that he chooses to it. But I reckon he don't aim to have any dancin'."

Roxy Griever paused in the doorway and peered in.

"I reckon the trouble is that none of the folks here know how to dance," Ola was saying doubtfully. "Let's you and me show 'em, Lance. Come on."

Wildly, the sister cast about her for aid. Old Ajax regarded the scene with the same covert enjoyment he had given another domestic embroglio. Her father had slipped through a back door under pretense of seeing to the horse. Her glance fell on Flenton Hands. This was the man for her need.

Earlier in the evening, when Flenton made his appearance in Lance Cleaverage's house, accompanying his sisters, Octavia had murmured, "Well, I vow! Ef I'd 'a' been him, ox chains and plow lines couldn't have drug me here, after what was said an' done last night." Even Roxana had wondered at the cold obtuseness that could prompt the acceptance on Flent's part of that general invitation Lance had flung back over his shoulder to the deserted wedding guests, and looked in vain to see what it was that Hands expected to gain by his attitude. There was some whispering and staring among the other guests, but Flenton Hands was admitted to be "square," and his connection with the Settlement offered a ready means of accounting for his not doing things like other people. Now the Widow Griever felt that Providence—it is wonderful how people of her sort find Providence ever retained on their own side of the case—had dictated the attendance of this exemplary and godly person, second only in authority concerning church matters to Brother Drumright. She hastily dragged him aside, pouring out the whole matter, in voluble, hissing whispers, with many backward jerks of the head or thumb toward where Ola and Lance, in the midst of a group of boys and girls, still laughed and joked.

"I don't know as I ort to mix into this here business," Hands began cautiously—the man was not altogether a fool. "The way things has turned out, looks like I ain't got no call to interfere."

"Course you have," Roxy Griever told him. "Preacher Drumright ain't here—ef he was, I'd not even have to name it to him; he'd walk right up to Lance Cleaverage in a minute—spite o' the way Lance done him last night—an' tell him what he ort an' ort not to do. An' yo' the next after Preacher Drumright. Go 'long, Flenton. Speak to him. Mr. Gentry won't, an' Poppy's done left to git out of hit. Poppy never would do what he ort where Lance was consarned. He wouldn't give that boy discipline when he could have kivered him with one hand—an' now look at the fruits of it!"

Thus urged, Flenton made a somewhat laborious progress toward the middle of the room. Deep in that curious, indirect, unsound nature of his was the hankering to brave Lance Cleaverage in his own house, to insult and overcome him there before Callista; but the pluck required to undertake the enterprise was not altogether moral courage; in spite of the laws of hospitality, there might be some physical demand in the matter, and this Flenton was scarcely prepared to answer.

He halted long at his host's shoulder, seeking an opportunity to enter the conversation. Ola paid no attention to him; Callista stood a little apart from the two, looking down, playing with a fold of her skirt. Finally, most of the people in the room noted something strained and peculiar in the situation of affairs, and began to stare and listen. Flenton cleared his throat.

"Brother Cleaverage," he essayed in a rather husky voice.

Lance wheeled upon him with eyes alight. Thrusting his hands far down in his pockets, he stared at Flenton Hands from head to foot. Then his glance traveled to the widow behind Flenton's shoulder.

"We-e-ell, well," he drawled, with a lazy laugh in his voice, "have you and Sis' Roxy made a match of it? That's the only way you'll ever get to be kin to me, and name me brother, Flenton Hands."

Roxy's long drab face crimsoned darkly, and she fluttered in wild embarrassment. Hands laughed gratingly, but there was no amusement in the sound.

"No," he returned in his best pulpit manner—he was sometimes called upon to officiate at small gatherings when the preacher could not be present—"no, yo' worthy sister an' me hain't had our minds on any such. But we have been talking of a ser'ous matter, Brother Cleaverage."

The form of address slipped out inadvertently, and Hands looked uncomfortable. Lance shook his head.

"I ain't yo' brother," he demurred, with exaggerated patience. "You' gettin' the families all mixed up. Hit was Callista I married."

The boys and girls listening were convulsed with silent mirth. Rilly Trigg snickered aloud, and little Polly ventured to follow along the same line. Flenton's pale face reddened faintly.

"I know mighty well—an'-good you ain't brother of mine, Lance Cleaverage," he said doggedly. "Ef you was, I'd—I'd —"

"Say it," prompted Lance, standing at ease and surveying his adversary with amusement. "Speak out what's in you. You got me right here in my own house where I'd be ashamed to give you yo' dues. Now's the time to free yo' mind. I ain't fit to have Callista, is that it? She could a' done better—that's what you want to tell me, ain't it?"

There was a perfect chorus of approving giggles at this, extending even to the male portion of the company. The tinge of color left Flenton's sallow cheeks, and they were paler than usual; but he hung to his purpose.

"I've been axed by them that thinks you ought to be dealt with, to reason with you." He finally got well under way. "Callista Gentry belongs to a perfessin' family—she's all but a church member. You fussed with the preacher last night and tuck her away from in front of him, an' married her before a ongodly Justice of the Peace, an' now you air makin' motions like you was a-goin' to dance here in her house. Yo' sister said that yo' father wouldn't do nothin', and she axed me would I name these things out to you; and I said I would. Thar. I've spoke as I was axed. Looks like the man that's got Callista Gentry could afford to behave hisself."

With each new accusation, Lance's lids had dropped a bit lower over the bright eyes, till now a mere line of fire showed between the lashes, and followed the movement of Flenton's heavily-swung shoulders, as he emphasized his words with uncouth shruggings. Yet when all was said, only the conclusion seemed to stay in Lance's mind. He was asked to do and be much because he had Callista. But what of the bride? Was not something due from Callista because she had him?

"'Pears to me like you're in a mighty curious place, Flenton Hands," he began in a silky, musing voice. "Ef you was wedded to anybody—jest anybody—I'd shorely keep out o' your way and let you alone. Is this yo' business? Have I asked yo' ruthers? Has Callista? I got just the one word to say to you—an' it can't be said here in my house. But it shall be spoken when and where we meet next—you mind that!"

A sudden, tense hush fell on the room. Did this mean the declaration of war which amounts to a one-man feud in the mountains, and which finally reaches the point where it is kill or be killed on sight? Flenton dropped back with a blanched, twisted countenance. He had not bargained for so much.

The young host looked around. His company had separated itself swiftly into sheep and goats, the elders and the primmer portion of the young people whispering together apart, while the bolder youthful spirits gathered in a ring about himself and Ola Derf. One of these, Rilly Trigg perhaps, took up the banjo and commenced laboriously to pick chords on it.

"Now, if Callisty could only dance, we'd shore see fun," Ola Derf suggested.

Lance looked to where his bride stood, aloof, mute, with bitten lip, listening to what her mother whispered in her ear. Yes, he was alone once more; she was with the enemy. His glance took the girl in from head to foot. He saw that she had removed his first gift, the slippers.

"Callista can dance about as much as you can play, Rill," he said mockingly.

The bride lowered white lids over scornful eyes and turned her back. Rilly laid down the banjo. A couple of the boys began to pat.

"Come on, Lance," whispered Ola defiantly. "I dare ye to dance. I bet yo' scared to."

A dare—it was Lance Cleaverage's boast that he would never take a dare from the Lord Almighty. He flung himself lightly into position. "Pat for us. Buck, cain't you?" he suggested half derisively. Then, with a swift, graceful bending of the lithe body, he saluted his partner and began.

The Derf girl was a muscular little creature; she moved with the tirelessness of a swaying branch in the wind; and Lance himself was a wonder, when he felt like dancing. The circle of young people mended itself and grew closer. The two in the middle of the floor advanced toward each other, caught hands, whirled, retreated, and improvised steps to the time of Fuson's spatting palms.

It was a pretty enough sight, and innocent, except for what had gone before. Roxy Griever had retired in some disarray, upon Lance's sarcastic coupling of her name with that of Flenton Hands. Now, coming into the room with the supposition in her mind that everything was settled in a proper way, she caught sight of the two and stiffened into rigidity. For a moment she stared; then, as the full meaning of the scene burst upon her, she made three long steps to where the youthful Polly stood, taking in everything with big, enjoying eyes, seized her by the scant, soiled homespun frock, and hauled her backward from the room, Polly clawing, scrabbling, hanging to the door frame as she was snatched through.

"Poppy," shrilled the widow, in the direction of peaceful old Kimbro, using the tone of one who cries fire, "you kin stay ef yo're a mind—an' Sylvane can do the same. The best men I ever knowed—'ceptin' preachers—has a hankerin' for sin. Ma'y-Ann-Marth', she's asleep, an' what she don't see cain't hurt her. But as for me, I'm a-goin' to take this here child home where she won't have the likes of that to look at. I feel jest as if it was some ketchin' disease, and the fu'ther you git away from it, the safer you air."

The last of these words trailed back from the dark, into which the Widow Griever and her small, reluctant charge were rapidly receding.

Kimbro and his son remained, intending to remonstrate with Lance when he should have finished his dancing. Octavia Gentry came and made hasty farewells, hoping thus to stop the performance. Callista stood looking quietly past the dancers to some air-drawn point on the wall, and her expression of quiet composure was held by all observers to be remarkable.

"Oh, no, Mother," she said quietly. "You and Gran'pappy are never goin' out of my house before you have eat. Come taste the coffee for me and see have I got it about right. When I was gettin' my supper for to-night, I found out that there was many a thing you hadn't learned me at home; so you'll have to show me now."

With a dignity irreproachable, apparently quite oblivious to the dancers, the patting, the laughing, shouting onlookers, Callista smilingly marshalled her forces and put forward her really excellent supper. Here her pride matched Lance's—and overmatched it. He might dance, he might fling the doing of it in her face and the faces of her kindred; she would show herself unmoved, and mistress of any situation which he could contrive.

And the supper was a strong argument. People in all walks of life love to eat; those who danced and those who held dancing sinful, were alike in their appreciation of good victual. It was only a few moments before this counter movement broke up the saltations in the front room and the infare appeared, from an observer's point of view, a great success, as the happy, laughing crowd circled about the long tables, those who had joined to forward the dance coming out looking half sheepish, altogether apologetic and conciliatory.

"I'm mighty sorry Sis' Roxy had to go home," Callista said composedly, as she served her father-in-law with a steaming cup of coffee. "I'm goin' to make a little packet of this here cake and the preserves Mammy brought over, and send them by you. I want her to taste them."

The host was the gayest of the gay. But unobserved, his eye often followed the movements of the bride, and dwelt with a warm glow upon the graceful form in its womanly attitude of serving her guests. She had fairly beaten him on his own ground. A secret pride in her, that she could do it, swelled his breast and ran tingling along his veins.

So much for the company at large, for what Callista would have called "the speech of people." When the last guest was gone the bride faced the bridegroom alone in the house which had seemed to her so fine. Cold, expectant of some apology, offended, bewildered, yet ready to be placated.

Lance offered no excuses, but plenty of kisses, praise, and an ardor that, while it did not convince, melted and subdued her. The breach was covered temporarily, rather than healed.

## CHAPTER X.

### POVERTY PRIDE.

IT was inevitable that Callista should find promptly how impossible is the attitude of scornful miss to the married wife, particularly when her husband's daily labor must provide the house whose keeping depends upon herself. Lance, too, though he continued to give no evidence whatever of penitence, was full of the masterful tenderness whose touch had brought his bride to his arms. The girl was not of a jealous temper; she was not deeply offended at the reckless behavior which had disturbed the infare, any more than she had been at his conduct on the wedding evening. Indeed, there was that in Callista Cleavage which could take pride in being wife to the man who, challenged, would fling a laughing defiance in the face of all his world. It remained for a very practical question—what might almost be termed an economic one—to wear hard on the bond between them.

They had married all in haste while September was still green over the land. The commodious new cabin at the head of Lance's Laurel was well plenished and its food supplies sufficient during the first few weeks of life there; in fact. Lance gave without question whatever Callista asked of him—a thing unheard of in their world—and Callista's ideas of asking were not small nor was she timid about putting them into practice. The pair of haggards might have seemed, to the casual onlooker, safely settled to calm domestic happiness.

Day by day the gold and blue of September inclined toward the October purple and scarlet. The air was invigorated by frost. The forest green, reflected in creek-pools, was full of russet and olive, against whose shadowy background here and there a gum or sourwood, earliest to turn of all the trees, blazed like a deep red plume. Occasional banners of crimson began to show in the maples and plum colored boughs in sweet-gums. The perfect days of all the year were come.

Mid-October was wonderfully clear arid sweet up at the head of Lance's Laurel; the color key became richer, more royal; the sunset rays along the hill-tops a more opulent yellow.

It was not till the leaves were sifting down red and yellow over her dooryard, that Callista got from Lance the full story concerning their resources, and the havoc he had made of them to get ready money from Derf. He had been hauling tanbark all this time to pay the unjust debt. When she knew, even her inexperience was staggered—dismayed. So far, she had not gone home, and she shut her lips tight over the resolution not now to do so with a request for that aid which her grandfather had refused in advance.

"We'll make out, I reckon," she said to her husband dubiously.

"Oh, we'll get along all right," returned that hardy adventurer, easily. "We'll scrabble through the winter somehow. In the summer I can always make a-plenty at haulin' or at my trade. I'm goin' to put in the prettiest truck-patch anybody ever saw for you; and then we'll live fat, Callista." He added suddenly, "Come summer we'll go camping over on the East Fork of Caney. There's a place over on that East Fork that I believe in my soul nobody's been since the Indians, till I found it. There's a little rock house and a spring—I'm not going to tell you too much about it till you see it."

Callista hearkened with vague alarm, and a sort of impatience.

"But you'll clear enough ground for a good truck-patch before we go," she put in jealously.

"Uh-huh," agreed Lance without apparently noting what her words were. "I never in my life did see as fine huckleberries as grows down in that little holler," he pursued. "We'll go in huckleberry time."

"And maybe I can put some up," said Callista, the practical, beginning to take interest in the scheme.

"Shore," was Lance's prompt assent. "I can put up fruit myself— I'll help you."

He laughed as he said it; those changeful hazel eyes of his glowed, and he dropped an arm around her in that caressing fashion not common in the mountains, and which ever touched Callista's cooler nature like a finger of fire, so that now, almost against her will, she smiled back at him, and returned his kiss fondly. Yet she thought he took the situation too lightly. It was not he that would suffer. He was used to living hard and going without. She would be willing to do the same for his sake; but she wanted to have him know it—to have him speak of it and praise her for it.

The season wore on with thinning boughs and a thickening carpet beneath. The grass was gone. Men riding after valley stock, sent up to fatten on the highlands, searched the mountains all day with dogs and resonant calls. They stopped outside Callista's fence to make careful inquiries concerning the welfare or whereabouts of shoats and heifers.

"Yes, and they've run so much stock up here this year," Lance said resentfully when she mentioned it to him, "that there ain't scarcely an acorn or a blade of grass left to help out our'n through the winter. I'm afraid I'm goin' to have to let Dan Bayliss down in the Settlement take Sate and Sin in his livery stable for their keep. The time's about over for haulin'. I can't afford to have them come up to spring all ga'nted and poorly."

Days born in rose drifts, buried themselves in gold; groundhogs and all wild creatures of the woods were happy with a plentitude of fare; partridges were calling, "wifey—wifey!" under wayside bushes; the last leaves had their own song of renunciation as they let go the boughs and floated softly down to join their companions on the earth. One evening, gray and white cirri swirled as if dashed in by a great, careless brush, and the next morning, a dawn strewn with flamingo feathers foretold a rainy time. All that day the weather thickened slowly, the sky became deeply overspread. At first this minor-color key was a relief, a rest, after the blaze of foliage and sun. A rain set in at nightfall, and a wind sprang up in whooping gusts; and on every hearth in the Turkey Tracks a blaze leaped gloriously, roaring in the chimney's throat, licking lovingly around the kettle. These fires are the courage of the mountain soldier and hunter. Only Callista, warming her feet by the blaze in the chimney Lance had built, thought apprehensively of the time when she should have no horse to ride, so that when she went to meeting, or to her own home, she must foot it through the mud.

It was an austere region's brief season of plenty. Not yet cold enough to kill hogs, all crops were garnered and stored; there was new sorghum, there were new sweet potatoes, plenty of whippoor-will peas—but Callista's cupboard was getting very bare indeed. She looked with dismay toward the months ahead of her.

It was in this mood that she welcomed one morning the sight of Ellen Hands and Little Liza going past on the road below.

"Howdy," called Ellen, as the bride showed a disposition to come down and talk to them. Each woman carried a big, heavy basket woven of white oak splints. Little Liza held up hers and shook it. "We're on our way to pick peas," she shouted. "Don't you want to come and go 'long? Bring yo' basket. They' mighty good eating when they' fresh this-a-way."

Callista would have said no, but she remembered the empty cupboard, and turned back seeking a proper receptacle. At home, they considered field-peas poor food, but beggars must not be choosers. She joined the two at the gate in a moment with a sack tucked under her arm. It was a delightful morning after the rain. She was glad she could come. The peas were better than nothing, and she would get one of the girls to show her about cooking them.

"Whose field are you going to?" she asked them, carelessly.

"Why, yo' gran'-pappy's. Didn't you know it, Callisty?" asked Little Liza in surprise. "He said he was going to plow under next week, and we was welcome to pick what we could."

Callista drew back with a burning face.

"I—I cain't—" she began faintly. "You-all girls go on. I cain't leave this morning. They's something back home that I have obliged to tend to."

She turned and fairly ran from the astonished women. But when her own door was shut behind her, she broke down in tears. A vast, unformulated resentment surged in her heart against her young husband. She would not have forgone anything of that charm in Lance which had tamed her proud heart and fired her cold fancy; but she bitterly resented the lack of any practical virtue a more phlegmatic man might have possessed.

She shut herself in her own house, half sullenly. Not from her should anyone know the poor provider her man was. She had said that she would not go home without a gift in her hand, she had bidden mother and grandfather to take dinner with her—and it appeared horrifyingly likely that there might hardly be dinner for themselves, much less that to offer a guest. Well, Lance was to blame; let him look to it. It was a man's place to provide; a woman could only serve what was provided. With that she would set to work and clean all the cabin over in furious zeal—forgetting to cook the scanty supper till it was so late that Lance, coming home, had to help her with it.

Things looked their worst when, one morning, little Polly Griever came running up from the gulch, panting out her good news.

"Oh, Callisty, don't you-all want to come over to our house? The sawgrum-makers is thar, an' Poppy Cleavage has got the furnace all finished up, and Sylvane and him was a-haulin' in sawgrum from the field yiste'dy all day."

Sorghum-making is a frolic in the southern mountains, somewhat as the making of cider is further north.

"Sure we'll come, Polly," Callista agreed promptly, with visions of the jug of "long sweetening" which she should bring home with her from Father Cleavage's and the good dinner they should get that day.

"Whose outfit did Pappy hire?" asked Lance from the doorstep where he was working over a bit of rude carpentry.

"Flenton Hands's," returned the child. "A' Roxy says Flenton drove a awful hard bargain with Poppy Cleavage. She says Flenton Hands is a hard man if he is a perfesser."

Callista laid down the sunbonnet she had taken up.

"I reckon we cain't go," she said in a voice of keen disappointment. Anger swelled within, her at Kimbro for having dealings with the man against whom Lance's challenge was out.

"I couldn't 'a' gone anyhow, Callista," Lance told her. "I have obliged to take Sate and Sin down to the Settlement and see what kind of a trade I can make to winter 'em; but there's no need of your staying home on my accounts."

Callista looked down at his tousled head and intent face as he worked skilfully. Was he so willing to send her where she would meet Flenton Hands? For a moment she was hurt—then angry.

"Come on, Polly," she said, catching up sunbonnet and basket, and stepping past Lance, sweeping his tools all into a heap with her skirts.

"I don't know what Father Cleavage was thinking of to have Flenton on the place after all that's been," Callista said more to herself than the child, when they had passed through the gate. Her breakfast had been a failure, and she was reflecting with great satisfaction on how good a cook Roxy Griever was; yet she would have been glad to forbear going to any place where the man her husband had threatened was to be met.

Polly came close and thrust a brown claw into Callista's hand, galloping unevenly and making rather a difficult walking partner, but showing her good will.

"Hit don't make no differ so long as Cousin Lance won't be thar," she announced wisely. "Cousin Lance always did make game of Flent. He said that when Flent took up a collection in church, he hollered 'amen' awful loud to keep folks from noticin' that he didn't put nothin' in the hat hisse'f. I wish't Lance was comin' 'long of us."

With this the two of them dipped into the gay, rustling gloom of the autumn-tinted gulch, with Lance's Laurel reduced to a tiny trickle between clear little pools, gurgling faintly in the bottom.

Before they came to the Cleavage place they heard the noise of the sorghum making. A team was coming in from the field with a belated load of the stalks, which should have been piled in place yesterday; Ellen Hands and Little Liza appeared down the lane carrying between them a jug swung from a stick—everybody that comes to help takes toll.

When Callista arrived, half-a-dozen were busy over the work; Hands feeding the crusher, Sylvane waiting on him with bundles of the heavy, rich green stalks, and Buck Fuson driving the solemn old horse his jogging round, followed by fat little Mary Ann Martha, capering along with a stick in her hand, imitating his every movement and shout.

The rollers set on end which crushed the jade-green stalks were simply two peeled hardwood logs. Flenton had threatened for years to bring in a steel crusher; but, up to the present, the machine his grandfather made had been found profitable. The absinthe-colored juice ran down its little trough into a barrel, whence it was dipped to the evaporating pan, about which centered the hottest of the fray. In the stone furnace under this great, shallow pan—as long and broad, almost, as a wagon-bed—old Kimbro himself was keeping a judgmatic fire going. Roxy Griever, qualified by experience with soap and apple-butter, circled the fire and kept up a continual skimming of froth from the bubbling juice, while she did not lack for advice to her father concerning his management of the fire.

Flenton handed over to Fuson his work at the crusher, calling Polly to mind the horse, and came straight to Callista.

"I'm mighty proud to see that you don't feel obliged to stay away from a place becaze I'm thar," he said in a lowered tone, and she fancied a flicker of fear in his eyes, as though he questioned whether her husband might be expected to follow.

"Lance was a-goin' down to the Settlement to-day," she said bluntly, "and I'd have been all alone anyhow; so I 'lowed I might as well come over."

Hands looked relieved.

"I hope you ain't a-goin' to hold it against me, Callisty," he went on in a hurried half whisper, "that Lance is namin' it all around that this here scope o' country ain't big enough to hold him and me."

Callista shook her fair head in a proud negative.

"I've got my doubts of Lance ever having said any such," she returned quietly. "Yo' name has never been mentioned between us, Flent; but if Lance has a quarrel, he's mighty apt to go to the person he quarrels with, and not make threats behind they' back. I think little of them that brought you such word as that."

"That's just what I say," Hands pursued eagerly. "Why can't we-all be friends, like we used to be. Here's Mr. Cleavage that don't hold with no sech," and he turned to include Kimbro, who now came up to greet his daughter-in-law. Again Callista shook her head.

"You men'll have to settle them things betwixt yourselves," she said, sure of her ground as a mountain woman. "But, Flent, I reckon you'll have to keep in mind that a man and his wife are one."

"Oh," said Hands dropping back a step, "so if Lance won't be friendly with me, you won't neither—is that it?"

"I should think yo' good sense would show you that that would have to be it," said Callista doggedly. She had no wish to appear as one submitting to authority, and yet Flenton's evident intention of seeking to find some breach between herself and Lance was too offensive to be borne with.

"Now then, why need we talk of such this morning?" pacified Kimbro. "My son Lance is a good boy when you take him right. He's got a tender heart. If he ever quarrels too easy, he gets over it easy, as well. Flenton, you'll have to tend to the crusher; I got to keep the fire goin' for Roxy.

"Hit 'minds me of that thar lake that it names in the Bible, Callisty," the Widow Griever said meditatively, looking at the seething surface as she wielded her long-handled spoon. "And then sometimes I study about that thar fiery furnace and Ham, Sham *and* Abednego. Poppy, looks like to me you ain't got fire enough under this eend."

"I've just made it up there," said Kimbro mildly. "I go from one end to the other, steady, and that keeps it as near even as human hands air able to."

"Flenton, he was mighty overreachin' with Poppy," the widow lamented. "He's a mighty hard-hearted somebody to



deal with, if he is a perfesser, and one that walks the straight an' narrer way. Poppy has to furnish all the labor, 'ceptin' Flent and Buck Fuson, and we've got to feed them men and their team, and then they git one third of the molasses. With three meals a day, an' snacks between times to keep up they' stren'th, looks like I never see nobody eat what them two can."

The gray little cabin crouched in a corner of the big yard; a shed roof, running down at one side of it, looking comically like a hand raised to shut out the clamor. Everybody shouted his opinion at the top of his voice. Nobody thought anybody else was doing just what he ought. Roxana hurried from group to group of the workers, advising, admonishing, trying to bring some order out of the confusion. And in the midst of it, Callista watched the bubbling juice enviously. It seemed everybody had something to harvest, care for and put away, except herself.

## CHAPTER XI.

### LONG SWEETENIN'.

MARY ANN MARTHA GRIEVER was notorious all over the Big and Little Turkey Track neighborhoods, as "the worst chap the Lord A'mighty ever made and the old devil himself wouldn't have." The mildest dictum pronounced upon her was "Spiled rotten." Her energy, her unsleeping industry, would have been things to admire and wonder at, had they not been always applied to the futherance of iniquitous ends. To-day she pervaded the sorghum-making, not like a gnat, but like a whole swarm of gnats. Providing herself with a weak-backed switch, she followed the movements of Fuson, or Polly, or Sylvane, whichever chanced to be told off to tend the old horse. She pursued the beast with a falsetto screech of peculiar malignance, and tickled his heels with her switch whenever the exigencies of the work forced his stoppage. To the infinite surprise of everybody, notably his owner, the gaunt sorrel, after looking around and twitching his ears and hide as though a particularly troublesome flock of flies were on him, finally heaved up the whole after portion of his anatomy in one elephantine kick, which very nearly cost his small tormentor the entire top of her head.

Chased away from the horse and the crusher, Mary Ann Martha turned her attention to the furnace, with its more seductive and saccharine activities. The skimming hole on this occasion was not the small, ordinary excavation made for the purpose, but a sizable pit, dug at some previous time for a forgotten use. Brush had been thrown into it, vines had grown and tangled over the brush, till it was a miniature jungle or bear-pit. Tin cans hid among the leafage, and the steady drip-drip of the skimmings pattered on one of these hollowly. This spot had a peculiar fascination for the child. Perched on its edge she thrust forward her face and attempted to lick a branch over which the skimmings had trickled deliciously. The distance was considerable. Mary Ann Martha's tongue was limber and amazingly extensible; her balance excellent; but also she was in unseemly haste for the syrup that stood in great drops just beyond reach. In her contortions, she overbalanced herself and fell shrieking in, going promptly to the bottom, where quite a pool of sticky sour-sweetness had already collected.

"The good land!" shouted Roxy, passing the ladle of office to Callista and reaching down to grab for her offspring. "If they's anything you ort not to be in, of course you're in it. Now look at you!" she ejaculated, as she hauled the squalling child out dripping. "You ain't got another frock to yo' name', an' what am I a-goin' to do with you?"

Mary Ann Martha showed a blissful indifference to what might be done with her. Her howls ceased abruptly. She found her state that agreeable one wherein she was able to lick almost any portion of her anatomy or her costume with satisfaction.

"Don't want no other frock," she announced briefly, as she sat down in the dust to begin clearing her hands of skimmings, very like a puppy or a kitten.

"Well, I'm a-goin' to put boy clothes on you," declared the mother. "You act as bad as a boy." And she hustled the protesting delinquent away to execute her threat.

Five minutes after, burning with wrongs, Mary Ann Martha came stormily forth to rejoin her kind, pent in a tight little jeans suit which had belonged to the babyhood of Sylvane, and from which her solid limbs and fat, tubby body seemed fairly exploding. Humiliated, alienated, and with her hand against every man, she lowered upon them all from under flaxen brows, with Lance's own hazel eyes, darkened almost to black.

"You Ma'y-Ann-Marth'," admonished Fuson, as the small marauder raided the cooling pans and licked the spoons and testing sticks so soon as they were laid down, "you got to walk mighty keerful around where I'm at, at least in sawgrum-makin' time."

Mary Ann Martha held down her head, and muttered. She was ashamed of her trousers as only a mountain-born girl child could be ashamed.

"You let them spoons alone, or I'll fling you plumb into the bilin'-pan, whar you'll git a-plenty o' sawgrum," Fuson threatened. "You hear now? The last man I he'ped Hands make sawgrum for had ten chillen when we begun. They set in to pester me an' old Baldy jest like yo' adoin', and when we got done thar was ten kaigs of sawgrum and nary chap on the place. Yes, that's right. Ef thar wasn't a chap bar'llled up in every kaig we turned out, I don't know sawgrum from good red liquor."

Inside the house, Ellen Hands and Little Liza were delaying over an errand. They had brought a piece of turkey red calico as an offering for the gospel quilt.

"Don't you trouble to git it out," Little Liza said, rather wistfully. "I know in reason you've got all on yo' hands you want this mornin'; but when you come to workin' it in, Ellen an' me we talked considerable consarnin' of it, and mebbe we could he'p ye."

"Callisty's a-skimmin'," announced the widow, running for a hasty glance toward the sorghum-making activities. "Hit won't take me mo'n a minute to spread the thing here on the bed, and try this agin it. Land! ain't that pretty? Red—I always did love red."

The cherished square was lifted from its chest, unrolled, and spread upon the four-poster bed in the corner of the living room.

"You been a-workin' on it some sence last I seed it," Ellen Hands remarked with interest. "This here thing with birds a-roostin' on it—I ain't never seed this before."

"That thar's Jacob's Ladder, Ellen—don't you see the postes, and the pieces a-goin' acrost?" Roxy explained rather hastily. "Lord, the trouble I had with them angels. I don't wonder you took 'em for birds. Time and again I had a mind to turn 'em into birds. I done fine with Noey's dove; see, here 'tis; an' a ark—well, hit ain't no more than a house with a boat un'neath."

She pulled the folds about, to get at the period of the deluge.

"Course I see now jest what it was intentioned for," Ellen professed eagerly. "If I'd looked right good I could 'a' made out the angels goin' up an' down. How"—she hesitated, but the resolve to retrieve herself overcame all timidity—"how nateral them loaves an' fishes does look!"

"That thar's the ark," explained the widow, putting her finger on the supposed loaf. There was a moment of depressed silence; then Roxy, willing to let bygones be bygones, observed,

"Over here is the whale and Joney." These twin objects were undoubtedly what Ellen had taken for the fishes.

"Ye see I had to make the whale some littler than life," the artist deprecated. "I sort o' drawed him in, as a body may say, 'caze 'course I couldn't git him all on my quilt without. I didn't aim to git Joney quite so big, but that thar sprigged percale that he's made outen was so pretty, and the piece I had was just that length, an' I hated to throw away what wouldn't be good for anything, an' I'd already got my whale, so I sort o' len'thened the beast's tail with a few stitches. Would you call a whale a beast or a fish?"

"Well, I should sure call anything that could swaller a man a beast," opined Little Liza.

"An' yit he's sorter built like a fish," suggested Ellen.

"That's true; an' he lives in the water," admitted her sister.

"Here's a right good big open place," observed Ellen. "Ef you was a-goin' to make—whatever—out of that turkey red, hit could come in here."

"It could that," said the widow thoughtfully. "Did you-all have any idee as to what it would suit best for?"

The two looked at each other in embarrassment. As unmarried women, the subject that they had discussed was in some degree questionable.

"Well, hit's in the Bible," Ellen began defensively. "An' yit—Sis' an' me didn't know whether you'd care to—to give room to sech as the Scarlet Woman."

It was out. The idea evidently fascinated Roxy.

"That turkey red shore fits the case," she agreed with gusto. "As you say, hit's in the Bible. An' yit, anything that's what a body might call ondecient that-a-way—don't ye reckon a person'd be sort o' 'shamed to—I vow! I'll do it."

"Oh, Miz. Griever!" exclaimed Little Liza of comical dismay at the prompt acceptance in their idea. "I believe I wouldn't. There's the crossin' o' the Red Sea; you could use the turkey red for that jest as easy."

But the widow shook her head.

"Good lands!" she cried, "what you studyin' about, Liza? I say, the crossin' o' the Red Sea! I ain't a-goin' to do no sech a thing. Hit'd take me forever to cut out all them Chillen of Is'rul. And I never in the world would git done makin' Egyptians! No, that turkey red goes into a scarlet woman—to reprove sin."

"Laws, Miz. Griever," began Ellen Hands, solemnly, "looks like yo' family ort to be perfectly happy with that thar quilt in the house. I'm mighty shore I would be. I tell you, sech a work as that is worth a woman's while."

"There's them that thinks different," responded Roxy, with a sort of gloomy yet relishing resentment. "There has been folks lived in this house from the time I started work on it, an' made game of my gospel quilt—made game of it!"

"I reckon I know who you mean," nodded Ellen. And Little Liza added, "*She's* here to-day, ain't she?—God love her sweet soul! But yo' pappy wouldn't bid Lance, with Buddy here an' all—we know that. They'd be shore to fuss. Man persons is that-a-way."

"Well," Ellen Hands summed the case up, "ef anybody made game o' that quilt to my face, I'd never forgive 'em."

"I never will," agreed Roxy. "Them that would make game of sech is blasphemious. Mebbe hit ain't adzactly the Bible, but hit's—"

"Hit's mo' so," put in Ellen swiftly. "The Bible is pertected like, but yo' gospel quilt is standin' up alone, as a body may say, and you've got to speak for it. No, ef I was you, and anybody made game of that thar quilt, I never would forgive 'em."

Outside, Callista stood and skimmed and skimmed, from time to time emptying her pan into the skimming-hole, the bland October breeze lifting her fair hair. Everything was sour-sweet and sticky from the juice. Heaps of pomace were already beginning to pile tall beside the crusher, reeking, odorous, tempting to the old cow, who went protestingly past, and had the bars put up after her. Kimbro looked up from his task and spoke to his daughter-in-law.

"You look sort o' peaked, Callista," he said gently. "Air you right well?"

"Oh yes, Father Cleavage," she returned, absently, her eyes on Mrs. Griever and the Hands girls approaching from the house.

The unsexed and hostile Mary Ann Martha turned upon the world at large a look of mute defiance, and completed an enterprise which she had set up of laying fresh sorghum stalks side-by-side, pavement-wise, over the skimming-hole.

Women and children were settling like flies about the pan and its attendant bowls, ladles and testing plates, hoping for a taste of the finished product. The Hands girls greeted Callista and joined the others. Fuson's poor little seventeen-year-old sister-in-law was there with her six months baby, and a child of two. Roxy took the skimmer from Callista and

set to work. Sylvane relieved his father at the firing. Mary Ann Martha sidled into the house, whence, a moment later, came a shrill cry in Polly's thin little pipe.

"Aunt Roxy! Mary Ann Marthy's in here puttin' molasses all *over yo'* gospel quilt!"

"Good land!" snorted Roxy, straightening up from her task of skimming. "Take the spoon, Sylvane." She cast the ladle toward him without much care as to whether the handle or the bowl went first. "Looks like I do have the hardest time o' anybody I know," she ejaculated.

"You better git here quick, A' Roxy," Polly urged. "She's just a *wipin'* her spoon on em'."

"Ain't," protested the infant, appearing suddenly in the doorway, a "trying spoon" in her hand, over which she was running her tongue with gusto. "I thest give a lick o' long-sweetnin' to Eads," thus she named the first of womankind. "Po' old Eads looked so-o-o hongry."

"She's done a heap more'n that," Polly maintained. Mary Ann Martha's mouth began to work piteously.

"Give Eads some," she pursued in a husky, explanatory voice. "An'—th'—ol' snake licked out his tongue, and I must put a teenchy-weenchy bit on it. 'Nen Adams, he's mad 'caze he don't git none; an'—Mammy," with a burst of tears, "is I thest like my uncle Lance?"

She had heard this formula of reproof so often; she knew so well that it befitted the gravest crimes.

"You air that!" said Roxy wrathfully. "You little dickens! I don't know of anybody in this world that would have done sech a trick—but you or Lance Cleaverage."

She wheeled from the furnace toward the house, and set a swift foot in the middle of the sorghum-stalk pavement Mary Ann Martha had laid over the skimming pit. The stalks gave. She attempted to recover herself and have back the foot, but her momentum was too great. On she plunged, pitching and rolling, descending by degrees and with ejaculatory whoops among the sticky sweetness, part of which was still uncomfortably warm.

There was a treble chorus of dismay from the women. Sylvane leaped to his feet, and ran to the pit's edge. Buck Fuson held his sides and roared with mirth, and Flenton Hands stopped the crusher by tying up his horse so that he too, might go to their assistance.

"Oh land!" gasped the widow, coming to the surface, yellow and gummy of countenance, smudged and smeared, crowned with a tippy wreath of greenery, like a sorghumnal bacchante. "I believe in my soul that little sinner aimed to do this. She's jest adzactly like her Uncle Lance—that's what she is! I mind—ow!" The rotten branch under her foot had snapped, letting her down into a squelching pool of skimmings.

"Take hold of my hand, Sis' Roxy," cried Sylvane. "No, I don't reckon the baby aimed to make trouble; chaps is always doin' things like this, an' meanin' no harm. There—now I've got you."

But Roxy was a big woman, and the first pull nearly dragged him in.

"Let me ketch ye round the waist, Sylvane!" roared Little Liza in her fog-horn bass. "Ellen, you hold to my coats, and let the others hang on to you, if they have to. Thar, now, pull, Sylvane; try it agin—now, all of you—pull!" And with a tremendous scrabbling and scrambling, the Widow Griever "came," hurtling up from her sweet retreat and spattering molasses on her rescuers.

Over went Sylvane and Little Liza; Ellen and slim Lula Fuson were nearly dragged down by their fall. Roxy Griever landed on top of the first two, and liberally besmeared them all with sorghum juice before they could be got to their feet.

"You let me lay hand on that young 'un," she panted, "and I'll not leave her fitten to do such as this."

"Never mind, Ma'y-Ann-Marth'," Little Liza admonished. "You git in and git yo'se'f washed up. For the good land's sake—ef thar don't come Miz. Gentry an' her pa down the road! Mak' 'as'e!" And the sorghum bespattered women hurried toward the house, the widow still fulminating threats, the Hands girls giggling a bit. Callista, trying to carry forward their part of the work, saw that a team stopped out in front. She was aware of her grandfather on the driver's seat, and her mother climbing down over the wheel.

"Well, Callista," complained the matron, making straight for the side yard and her daughter, "I reckon if I want to see my own child, I can go to the neighbors and see her there. Why ain't you been home, honey? Pappy axes every morning air you comin', and every night I have to tell him, 'Well, mebbe to-morrow.'"

Callista looked over her mother's shoulder, and fancied that she caught a gleam of grim amusement in old Ajax's eye.

"I've been mighty busy," she said evasively. "Looks like I don't finish one thing before another needs doing. I'm a-comin' one of these days."

"So's Christmas," jeered her grandfather from the wagon.

Callista remembered the last time her homecoming had been discussed with him. Her color deepened and her eye brightened.

"Yes, and I'm comin' same as Christmas with both hands full of gifts," she called out to him gaily. How dared he look like that—as though he knew all her straits—the shifts to which she was now reduced?

There had sounded from the house, on Roxy's arrival there, wails of lamentation in Mary Ann Martha's voice—wails so strident and so offensively prolonged as to convince the least discriminating hearer that their author was not being hurt, but was only incensed. Now, Roxy Griever, hastily washed, made her appearance.

"I'm mighty proud to have you here to-day, Miz. Gentry," she said hospitably. "Won't you come into the house? Have you-all fixed for pumpkin cutting? I just as soon as not come over and he'p you, oncet I git this mis'able sawgrum out of the way."

"Thank you, Miz. Griever, I won't go in for a spell yet," Octavia said, seating herself on a bench. "No, we ain't had a chance to think o' pumpkin cuttin'. I been dryin' fruit. And Pappy's had everybody on the place busy pickin' field peas."

Callista harkened restively to this talk of the harvest activities, the season's plenty—she who had nothing to garner, nothing to prepare and put away. She heard her mother's voice running plaintively on.

"Looks like I got to have somebody with me, since Sis is gone. I've been aimin' to git over to the Far Cove neighborhood where my cousin Filson Luster lives. I know in reason Fil could spare one of his gals, an' I'd do well by her."

The words were softly, drawlingly, spoken, yet Callista, mechanically working still about the furnace, heard in them the slam of a door. Her girlhood home was closed to her. The daughter's place there, which she had held so lightly, would be filled.

## CHAPTER XII.

### WHAT SHALL HE HAVE WHO KILLED THE DEER?

WINTER was upon the cabin in the Gap. Through the long months much bitter knowledge had come to Callista. She found that she knew nothing a mountain wife ought to know. Finically clean about her housekeeping, she spent days scouring, rubbing, putting to rights and rearranging that which none used, nobody came to see; but she could not cook acceptably, and their scant fare suffered in her inept hands till she nearly starved them both.

Here, with some show of reason, she blamed her mother. Having never seen the time when she could go back to the Gentry place with a gift in her hand, she had not been there at all since her marriage. And here she blamed Lance. Between her incapacity and his earlier recklessness, they were desperately pinched. The season for hauling closed even sooner than he had feared. After it was past, he got a bit of work now and again, often walking long distances to it, since he had been obliged, as he had foreseen, to leave Satan and Cindy in the Settlement; and when the black horses came no more to the log stable behind the cabin, Callista accepted it as the first open confession of defeat.

Lance was one who sought a medicine for his spiritual hurts with as sure an instinct as that by which the animals medicate their bodies, creeping away like them to have the pain and wounding out alone. With the first cold weather he was afoot, his long brown rifle in the hollow of his arm, tramping the ridges for game. The wide, silent spaces spoke restfully to his spirit. Half the time he left the cabin ill provided with firewood and other necessities, but he brought back rabbits, quail, an occasional possum—which latter Callista despised and refused to cook, even when Lance had carefully prepared it, so that the dogs got it for their share. The undercurrent of the material struggle to make a living was always the pitiful duel between these two, who really loved well, and who were striving as much each for the mastery of self, as for the mastery of the other, could they but have realized it.

In late November, the days began to break with a thin, piercing sleet in the air, under an even gray sky. On the brown sedge, dry as paper, it whispered, whispered through the clinging white-oak leaves, with a sharp sibillance, as of one who draws breath at the end of a pageant; for the last flickerings of the gold and glory of Autumn were gone; the radiance and warmth and beauty of life all circled now around a hearth-stone.

"If we get much more weather like this, I'll go out and bring ye in a deer," Lance told his Callista; "then we'll have fresh meat a-plenty."

"Well, see that there's firewood enough to cook your deer after you've killed it," Callista retorted, resentfully mindful of Lance's having forgotten to provide her with sufficient fuel the last time he went on an unsuccessful hunting trip.

"You don't roast a deer whole," Lance told her tolerantly. "We'll dry some of the meat, and some we'll salt."

To Callista's exacting, practical nature, this figuring on the disposal of a deer one had not yet killed was exasperating. She wanted Lance to know that she lacked many things which she should have had. She wished him plainly to admit that he ought to furnish those things, and that he was sorry he could not. She had a blind feeling that, if he did so, it would in a measure atone.

"Well, it wouldn't take much wood to cook all the deer you brought home last time," she said with a little bitter half-smile.

Taunt of taunts—to reproach the unsuccessful hunter with his empty bag! Lance was not one to give reasons for his failure, to tell of the long, hard miles he had tramped on an unsuccessful quest. He merely picked up his gun and walked out of the house without looking to right or left, leaving his young wife breathing a little short, but sure of herself.

So far as he was concerned, he could find good counsel in the wild to which, he fled. This morning there was come over everything a blind fog, which was gradually thinning a little with the dawn, showing to his eyes, where it lifted, hundreds of little ripples fleeing across the pond from icy verge to verge, with a mist smoking to leeward. The forest swam about him in a milky haze; the trees stood, huge silver feathers, soft gray against the paler sky, their coating not glassy, like real sleet, but a white fringe, a narrow strip of wool, composed of the finest pointed crystals, along every twig. The yard grass, as he crossed it, was a fleece; the weeds by the garden fence, where he vaulted over, a cloud.

Dulling one sense, the obscuring fog seemed to muffle all others. Lance was shut in a little white world of his own, that moved and shifted about him as he went forward. In his heart was the beginning of self-distrust; a very small beginning, which he cried down and would none of; yet the mood sent him seeking a spot he had not seen for months. Straight as an arrow he went through the forest, guiding himself by his sense of direction alone, since he could neither see far nor recognize any familiar landmark in its changed guise.

An hour after he and Callista had parted in the kitchen of his own home, he was before that outside cabin of the Gentry place, at whose casement he had first held her in his arms, looking up at the blank square of closed panes. It was so early that none of the household was yet astir. The dogs knew him, and made no clamorous outcry. Shut in by the wavering walls of mist which clung and chilled, he stood long beneath her window, staring fixedly up at it. Something ominous and symbolic in the change which had come upon the spot since he last stood there, checked the beating of his heart, strive as he might to reject its message. The yard grass, green and lush on that September night,

stood stark, dry, white wool; the bullace vine, whose trunk had borne his eager love up to her kiss, gleamed steel-like along its twisted stems; the sill itself was a bar of humid ice. All looked bleak, inhospitable, forbidding; the place was winter-smitten, like—like—

Some blind rage at the power which makes us other than we would be, which gives us stones for bread, stirred within him. He shivered. She was not there now—she was at home in his house—his wife. What had he come here for? This was a gun in the hollow of his arm—not a banjo; he was out trying to find some wild meat to keep them alive. She was waiting at home to—no, not in the gropings of his own mind, would he complain too bitterly of his bride. Heaven knows what the disillusioning was when Lance found for the first time that he and Callista could seriously quarrel—their old days of what might be termed histrionic bickerings for the amusement of an audience, he had put aside, as of no portent. When he discovered that Callista could look at him with actually alien eyes, and say stinging things in an even tone, the boundaries of his island drew in till there was barely room for his own feet amid the wash of estranging waters. But he turned resolutely from the thought. His concern should be all with his own conduct, his own failings. Callista must do what she would do—and he would play up to the situation as best he might.

Somebody moved in the house and called one of the hounds. He laughed at himself a bit drearily, and struck off across the hill, assured in his own mind that he had merely taken this as a short cut to the glen at the head of the gulch, where he hoped to find his deer. The clean winds of Heaven soothed the pain that throbbed under his careless bearing. He had not been five hours afoot, he was but just preparing to make his noon halt and eat the bit of cold pone in his pocket, when he was ready to smile whimsically at the ill-made, ill-flavored thing and decide that it would be "just as fillin'," even though Callista had not yet learned the bread-maker's art.

He must needs consider it rare good luck that he found a deer at all; but it was five miles from home, in the breaks of Chestnut Creek, that he finally made his kill. He had no horse to carry the bulk of wild meat; and, in his pride refusing to leave a part swung up out of harm's way, he undertook to pack the whole deer home on his shoulder—a piece of exhausting, heart-breaking toil, though the buck was but a half-grown one. He was not willing to risk the loss of a pound. There were no antlers; but he would make Callista a pair of moccasins out of the soft-tanned skin. Sunday he was due at old man Fuson's for a couple of days, to repair a chimney; but, come Tuesday or Wednesday, he would return and be ready to look after the venison. It ought to keep so long in this cold.

Callista, pent indoors all day, chained to distasteful tasks for which she was incompetent, had not won to as serene a temper as her mate. She saw him approaching, laden, through the grove, and hurried into the cold, closed far room to be busy about some task so that she need not meet him as he entered. When she emerged, he had skinned the deer and hung up the meat safely between two trees, and was already washed and sitting in the chimney-corner. His clear eyes went swiftly to her face with its coldly down-dropped lids. The man who can bring home a deer and not boast of it has self-control; but when Lance noted the line of his wife's lips, he reached for his banjo without a word, and began to hold his communications with it.

She knelt at the hearth to continue her supper preparations. For the first time since they had quarreled, she wished that she could make some advance toward a reconciliation. Yet there was Lance; look at him! Head thrown back a little, chin atilt, his eyes almost closed, showing a bright line under the shadowing lash, the firelight played on her husband's face and painted the ghost of a flickering smile about his mouth as he strummed lightly on the strings. Was that a countenance asking sympathy, begging for quarter? And listen to the banjo; it was no wistful, questing melody of "How many miles, how many years?" now; a light, jigging dance-tune rippled under his finger ends. Callista wondered angrily if he wished he were at Derf's. No doubt they would be dancing there to-night, as commonly on Saturday.

Lance, the man who wouldn't take a dare from the Lord A'mighty Himself, answered her silence with silence, and her unconcern with a forgetfulness so vast as to make her attitude seem actually resentful.

By and by she called him to supper, and when he came she refused to eat, dwelling angrily on the thought that he should have regarded her bidding as an overture to peace, and have made some answering movement himself.

In short, she was not yet done interrogating this nature, fascinating, complex, inscrutable, to know what was the ultimate point, the place where he would cry "Enough!"

The next morning saw him leaving early for Fuson's, and he went before Callista was out of bed. When she rose, she looked remorsefully at the tidy, small preparations for breakfast which he had made. It suddenly came home to her that, for a man in Lance's situation, the marrying of a wholly inept wife was daily tragedy. She decided that she would learn, that she would try to do better; and, as a first peace-offering, she hurried out to the grove and possessed herself of Lance's venison, that she might cure and prepare it.

After she had dragged the big, raw, bloody thing into her immaculate kitchen, she felt a little sense of repulsion at it, yet her good intentions held while she hacked and hewed and salted and pickled, on some vague remembrance of what she had heard her grandfather say concerning the curing of wild meat. It was noon when she went into the other room, leaving the outer door open so that the hound carried away the only portion of the meat which she had left fresh for immediate use. Tired, ready to cry, she consoled herself with the reflection that there was plenty remaining; she could freshen a piece of that which she had salted, for Lance's supper when he should return. For herself, she felt that she should never want to taste venison again.

Under her handling the meat deteriorated rapidly, and was in danger of becoming an uneatable mess. At last she turned a weary and disgusted back upon it, and left it soaking in weak brine. Ever since Saturday night the weather had been softening; it was almost warm when Lance came hurrying home Tuesday evening, meaning to take care of his prize at once. He arrived at supper time, ate some of Callista's bread and drank his coffee eagerly, turning in mute distaste from the hunk of ill-prepared meat upon the table. Supper over he hastened out to where he had hung the deer. His wife had a wild impulse to stop him; he might have guessed from the venison she had cooked that the meat was attended to. She resented the dismay in his face when he came back asking:

"Do you know what's come of that deer? I got Jasper Fuson to let me off sooner, so's I could make haste and tend to it."

The sense of failure closed in on Callista intolerably.

"I fixed it," she returned without looking up.

"All of it?" inquired Lance sharply. "Fixed it like that, do you mean?" indicating the untouched piece on the platter.

"Yes," returned Callista with secret despair; "all but what the dogs got."

"The dogs!" echoed Lance.

"Yes," repeated Callista with a sort of stubborn composure. "I left about a third of it fresh whilst I was putting the rest in the brine, and that old hound of yours came in and stole the fresh piece." She looked at his face and then at the meat. "I reckon you think that even a dog wouldn't eat this—the way I've got it."

The two young people confronted each other across the ruined food which his skill and labor had provided, her bungling destroyed. The subject for quarrel was a very real one, terrifyingly concrete and pressing. They were afraid of it; nor did they at that moment fail to realize the mighty bond of love which still was strong between them. Both would have been glad to make some advance toward peace, some movement of reconciliation; neither knew how to do it. In Lance, the torture of the thing expressed itself only in a fiery glance turned upon his wife's handiwork. To Callista, this was so intolerable that she laid about her for an adequate retort.

"Well," she said, affecting a judicial coolness, "it's true I don't know much about taking care of wild meat. We never had such in my home. There was always plenty of chickens and turkeys; and if we put up meat, it was our own shoats and beef."

Deer are growing scarce in the Cumberland; not in half a dozen cabins throughout the Turkey Tracks would venison be eaten that season. But Lance adduced nothing of this.

"I think you might as well let the dogs have the rest of it," he said finally, with a singular gentleness in his tone. Then he added with a sudden upswelling of resentment, "Give it to 'em if they'll eat it—which I misdoubt they'll never do."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### BROKEN CHORDS.

AFTER the episode of the ruined venison, Callista tried sulking—refusing to speak. But she found in Lance a power of silence that so far overmatched her own as to leave her daunted. He returned now from his long expeditions, to hang up his wild meat in the grove, and thereafter to sit bright-eyed and silent across the hearth from her, whistling, under his breath, or strumming lightly on his banjo.

Callista was a concrete, objective individual, yet she grew to recognize the resources of one who had for his familiars dreams that he could bid to stand at his knee and beguile his leisure or his loneliness. But dreams, so treated, have a trick of strengthening themselves against times of depression, changing their nature, and wringing with cruel fingers the heart which entertains them; so that those who feed the imagination must be willing to endure the strength of its chastisements.

Yet if Lance Cleavage suffered, he kept always a brave front, and took his suffering away from under the eye of his young wife. To do him justice, he had little understanding of his own offences. An ardent huntsman, he had by choice lived hard much of his life, sleeping in the open in all weathers, eating what came to hand. Callista's needs he was unfitted to gauge, and she maintained a haughty silence concerning them. Since she would not inquire, he told her nothing of having been offered money to play at dances, but began to be sometimes from home at nights, taking his banjo, leaving her alone.

An equable tempered, practical woman might have trained him readily to the duties of masculine provider in the primitive household. But beautiful, spoiled Callista, burning with wrongs which she was too proud and too angry to voice, eaten with jealousy of those thoughts which comforted him when she refused to speak, always in terror that people would find out how at hap-hazard they lived, how poor and ill-provided they were, and laugh at her choice—Callista had her own ideas of discipline. If Lance went away and left no firewood cut, she considered it proper to retort by getting no supper and letting him come into a house stone cold. This was a serious matter where a chunk of fire may be sent from neighbor to neighbor to take the place of matches.

In this sort the winter wore away. In April there came one of the spring storms that southern mountaineers call "blackberry winter." All the little growing things were checked or killed. A fine, cold rain beat throughout the day around the eaves of the cabin. The wind laid wet, sobbing lips to chink and cranny, and cried to her that she was alone—alone—alone; she, Callista, was neglected, deserted, shunned! For Lance had a day's work at re-lining fireplaces at Squire Ashe's place. Busy with the truck-patch he had at this late day set about, and which he must both clear and fence, he had somewhat overlooked the wood-pile; and before noon the fuel was exhausted. Instead of gathering chips and trash, or raiding the dry spaces under the great pines for cones and crackling twigs,—as any one of her hardy mountain sisters would have done, and then greeted her man at night with a laugh, and a hot supper—Callista let the fire go out, and sat brooding. Without fire she could cook herself no dinner, and she ate a bit of cold corn-pone, fancying Lance at somebody's table—he never told her now where he was going, nor for how long—eating the warm, appetizing food that would be provided.

As evening drew on the rain slacked, and a cloud drove down on the mountain-top, forcing an icy, penetrating chill through the very substance of the walls, sending Callista to bed to get warm. She wrapped herself in quilts and shivered. It was dark when she heard Lance come stumbling in, cross the room, and, without a word, search on the fire-board for matches.

"There ain't any," she told him, not moving to get up. "It wouldn't do you any good if there was—there's no wood."

He did not answer, but, feeling his way, passed on into the little lean-to kitchen, and Callista harkened eagerly, believing that sight of the bowl of meal and the pan of uncooked turnips on the table by the window would bring home to her husband the enormity of her wrongs and his offences. Leaning forward she could discern a vaguely illuminated silhouette of him against this window. He appeared to be eating. She guessed that he had peeled a turnip and was making a lunch of that.

"Would you rather have your victuals raw?" she demanded finally, desperate at his silence. "I reckon I'd better learn your ruthers in the matter."

"I'd rather have 'em raw as to have 'em cooked the way you mostly get 'em," came the swift reply in a perfectly colorless tone. "I ain't particularly petted on having my victuals burnt on one side and raw on the other, and I'd rather do my own seasoning—some folks salt things till the devil himself couldn't eat 'em, or leave the salt out, and then wonder that there's complaints."

Her day of brooding had come to a crisis of choking rage. Callista sat up on the edge of the bed and put her thick hair back from her face.

"I cook what I'm provided," she said in a cold, even voice. "That is, I cook it when I'm supplied with wood. And I fix your meals the best I know how; but it would take one of the sort you named just then to cook without fire."

She had expected that he would go out in the dark and cut firewood for her. As for the matches, starting a flame without them was an easy trick for a hunter like Lance. She remembered with a sudden strange pang his once showing her how he could prepare his pile of shredded tinder, fire a blank charge into it, and have a blaze promptly. She heard him fumbling for something on the wall—his gun, of course. But the next instant there came the whine of the banjo; it hummed softly as it struck against the lintel. That was what he was getting—not the gun to light a fire—he was leaving her alone in the cabin! She guessed that he was going over to Derf's to play for a dance; and for a strenuous moment she was near to springing after him and begging him to stay with her.

But habit prevailed. She huddled, shivering, under her covers and went back to the sullen canker of her own wrongs. She might have had the pick of the countryside, and she had taken up with Lance Cleaverage. She had married him when and how he said—that was where she made her mistake. She should have told him then—she should have—but, in the midst of all this rush of accusation, she knew well that she took Lance when and how she could get him, and at this moment her heart was clamoring to know where he was and what doing.

So she lay shivering, cold to the knees, her hands like ice, her teeth locked in a rigor that was as much spiritual as physical, till she could bear it no longer. Then she got hesitatingly up from the bed and stood long in the middle of the darkened room, turning her head about as though she could see. She knew where each article of furniture stood. It was her room, her home, hers and Lance's. Lance had built it; she had somehow failed pitifully, utterly, to make it hers; and she was well aware that she had failed to make it home for him—yet it was all either of them had. Back over her mind came memory of their wedding morning, when, his arm about her waist, her head half the time on his shoulder, they had visited every nook of the place and discussed between tender words and kisses all its scant furnishings. Then suddenly, without having come to any decision whatever, she found herself out in the cold rain, running through the woods toward the big road and the Derf place.

Down the long slope from the Gap she fled, then past the old quarry, past Spellman's clearing, and around the Spring hollow. She had never set foot on Derf land before. Through the fine rain Callista—spent, gasping, wet and disheveled—at last saw the windows, a luminous haze; caught the sound of stamping, thudding feet, and heard the twang of Lance's banjo. She had approached through the grove, and stood at the side fence. The place was so public that its dogs paid little attention to comers and goers. When Callista came to herself fully, she realized that it was the bars of the milking place she leaned upon. Slowly she withdrew the upper one from its socket, stepped over, then turned and replaced it. With ever-increasing hesitation she faltered toward the house, avoiding the front and approaching the light at the side, where she hoped to be unobserved.

Shivering, shrinking, her loosened wet hair dragging in against her neck, she stared through the window into the lighted room. They were dancing in there. The sounds she had heard were from Lance's banjo indeed, but held in other hands, while Lance himself sat at a little table near the hearth, a steaming supper before him, Ola Derf waiting on him hand and foot, stooping to the coals for fresh supplies of good hot coffee, or smoking, crisp pones.

"Now you just hush!" she shrilled in response to somebody's importunities, as Callista hung listening. "Lance cain't play for no dancin' till he gits through his supper. And he's a-goin' to have time to eat, too. You Jim, put that banjo down—you cain't play hit. Pat for 'em if they're in such a hurry to dance."

The Aleshine girls from Big Buck Gap, a young widow who lived half way down the Side, two cousins of the Derf's themselves—these were the women in the room. Callista was desperately afraid lest one of the loud-talking, half-intoxicated men in there should come out and discover her; yet she could not drag herself away from sight of Lance sitting housed, warm, comforted and fed—a home made for him. Something knocked at the door of her heart with a message that this scene carried; but fiercely she barred that door, and set herself to defend her own position.

Grasping a trunk of muscadine vine, which, when she shivered, shook down icy drops upon her, Callista rested long, regarding the scene before her. What should she do? To return to her home and leave her husband there seemed a physical impossibility. To go in and play the high-and-mighty, as she had been wont to do in her free girlhood, to glance over her shoulder with dropped eyelids and inform Lance Cleaverage that she cared not at all what he did or where he went—this were mere farce; her time for that sort of mumming was past.

Lance had finished his supper now, and turned from the board. It seemed to Callista that he looked well pleased with himself, satisfied, even gay. The sight set her teeth rattling in fresh shivers. Still he did not play for the dancers, who continued to make what headway they might to the time of Jim's patting.

Callista saw Ola bring the banjo and lay it in Lance's lap. Then the little brown girl seated herself close beside him. He bent and placed the instrument properly in Ola's grasp, disposing the short, stubbed fingers on the strings. In the positive throes of jealousy that this sight brought, Callista must needs, for her own self-respect, recall that Lance had offered more than once to teach her to play, and that she had refused—and pretty shortly, too—to learn, or to touch the banjo, which she had come to hate with an unreasoning hatred. Now the dancers grew tired of Jim and his patting, and the call was for music.

"See here, Lance Cleaverage," said Buck Fuson, "we-all throwed in to get you to play; but we ain't a-goin' to pay the money and have you fool away yo' time with Ola."

This was the first that Callista knew of Lance earning money by his banjo-playing.

"All right," said Cleavage laconically, not looking up from his instructions. "I've had me a good supper, and I've got a warm place to stay, and that's all I want. Go on and dance."

He addressed himself singly to Ola and her chords, moving her fingers patiently, taking the banjo himself to show her just how the thing was done. She was a dull pupil, but a humbly grateful one; and after a while it seemed to Callista that she could no longer bear the sight. She was debating starkly between the desperate course of returning home alone and the yet more desperate enterprise of going in, when a deeper shadow crossed the darkness behind her, and she turned with a smothered scream to find Iley Derf's Indian husband moving impassively through the glow from the window and making his way to the back door.

At the sight she wheeled and fled across the yard toward the front gate and the road. She gained that doubtful refuge just as a man on a horse came splattering up out of the muddy little hollow below the Derf place. With another cry she flung about and ran from him, stepped on a round stone, and fell.

For a moment she crouched, shivering, wet, bruised, trying to get to her feet, the breath sobbing through her parted lips; then somebody set a not-too-gentle grasp on her shoulder, and she looked up to divine in the dimness Flenton Hands's face above her. There was sufficient light from the noisy cabin behind to allow him to recognize her.

"Lord God—Callista!" he whispered, lifting her to her feet and supporting her with an arm under hers. "What in the world—"

"I—I—something scared me," she faltered. "It was that old Indian that Iley Derf married. He came right a-past where I was and, and—he scared me."

"Whar was you at?" inquired Hands blankly.



"In there," returned Callista, pointing toward the Derf yard, beginning to cry like a child. "I was looking through the window at them dance, and—and that old Indian scared me."

Twang—twang—twang, across the gusty blackness of the night came the jeer of Lance's banjo. There was no whisper now of "How many miles—how many years?" but the sharp staccato of "Cripple Creek," punctuated by the thudding of dancers' feet as they pounded out the time. Callista felt her face grow hot in the darkness. She knew that Flenton was listening, and that he must guess why she should hang outside the window looking in.

"Come on," said Hands suddenly, almost roughly. "This ain't no fit place for you,—a woman like you,—my God! Callista, I'll put you on my horse and take you home."

There was a new note in his voice, a new authority in his movements, as he lifted her to the saddle and, plodding beside her in the dark, wet road, made no further offer of question or conversation.

In spite of herself, Callista felt comforted. She reached up and gathered her hair together, wringing the rain from it and redding it with the great shell comb which always held its abundant coils in place. She could not in reason tell Flenton to leave her—she needed him too much. When they turned in at the ill-kept lane which led to Lance's cabin. Lance's wife caught her breath a little, but said nothing. Flenton lifted her gently down at her own door-stone, and, opening the door for her, followed her in and, with a match from his pocket, lit a candle. He looked at the cold ash-heap on the fireless hearth, whistled a bit, and went out. She heard him striking matches somewhere about the wood-pile, and directly after came the sound of an axe. It was not long before he returned, his arms piled high with such bits of dry wood as he could find, split to kindling size.

"It looks like it's a shame for me to have you waitin' on me this-a-way," Callista began half-heartedly. She had taken counsel with herself, during his absence, and resolved to make some effort to keep up appearances.



"Hit don't look like anything of the sort," protested Flenton Hands. "You needed me, and that's all I want to know."

He had laid his fire skilfully, and now the blaze began to roar up the big chimney.

"My feet ain't been warm this whole blessed day," Callista said, almost involuntarily, as she drew nearer the fascinating source of both warmth and light. "My, but that does feel good!"

"You pore child!" Flent muttered huskily, turning toward her from the hearth where he knelt. "You're e'en about perished."

He went out then, only to come hurriedly back, reporting,

"I cain't find any wood—whar does Lance keep it?"

Lance's wife hung her head, lips pressed tight together, striving for resolution to answer this with a smooth lie.

"He don't go off and leave you in this kind of weather without any wood?" inquired Hands hoarsely.

"Yes—he does," Callista choked. And, having opened the bottle a bit, out poured the hot wine of her wrath. All the things that she might have said to her mother had she been on good terms with that lady; the taunts that occurred to her in Lance's absence and which she failed to utter to him when he came; these rushed pell-mell into speech. She was white and shaking when she made an end.

"There," she said tragically, getting to her feet. "I reckon I had no business to name one word of this to you, Flenton; but I'm the most miserable creature that ever lived, I do think; and I ain't got a soul on this earth that cares whether or not about me. And—and—"

She broke off, locking her hands tightly and staring down at them.

Flenton had the sense and the self-control not to approach her, not to introduce too promptly the personal note.

"Callista," he began cautiously, assuming as nearly as possible the tone of an unbiased friend to both parties, "you ort to quit Lance. He ain't doin' you right. There's more than you know of in this business; and whether you stay thar or not, you ort to quit him oncet and go home to yo' folks."

Callista made an inarticulate sound of denial.

"I never will—never in this world!" she burst out. "I might quit Lance, but home I'll never go."

Flenton's pale gray eyes lit up at the suggestion of her words, but she put aside the hand he stretched out toward her.

"I've been studying about it all day, and for a good many days before this one," she said with slow bitterness. "Lance Cleaverage gives me plenty of time to study. If I leave this house, I'm goin' straight to Father Cleaverage."

Hands looked disappointed, but he did not fail to press the minor advantage.

"If you want to go to-night, Callista," he suggested, "I'd be proud to carry you right along on my horse. Lance needs a lesson powerful bad. You go with me—"

"Hush," Callista warned him. "I thought I heard somebody coming. Thank you, Flent. You've been mighty good to me this night. I'll never forget you for it—but I reckon you better go now. When a woman's wedded, she has to be careful about the speech of people; and—I reckon you better go now, Flent."

The rain had ceased. A wan moon looked out in the western sky and made the wet branches shine with a dim luster. Callista stood in the doorway against the broken leap and shine of the firelight. Hands went to his horse, and then turned back to look at her.

"And you won't go with me?" he repeated once more. "Callista, you'd be as safe with me as with your own brother. I've got that respect for you that it don't seem like you're the same as other women. I wish't you'd go, if for nothin' but to learn Lance a lesson."

The girl in the doorway knew that there was no wood for any more fire than that which now blazed on the hearth behind her; she was aware that there was scarcely food in the house for three days' eating; yet she found courage to shake her head.

"Thank you kindly, Flent," she said with a note of finality in her tone. "I know you mean well, but I cain't go."

Then she closed the door as though to shut out the temptation, and, dressed as she was, lay down upon the bed and pulled the quilts over her.

She listened to the retreating hoofs of Flenton's horse, dreading always to hear Lance's voice hailing him, telling herself that his presence there at that hour alone with her was all Lance's fault, and she had no reason for the shame and fear which possessed her at thought of it. But the hoofs passed quite away, and still Lance did not make his appearance. She could not sleep. She judged it was near midnight. Pictures of Lance teaching Ola Derf her chords on the banjo flickered before her eyes. Pictures of Lance dancing with Ola as he had at the infare followed. She had a kind of wonder at herself that she was not angrier, that she was only spent and numbed and cowed. Then all at once came a light step she knew well, the sudden little harmonious outcry of the banjo as Lance set it down to open the door, and Lance himself was in the room.

She thought she would have spoken to him. She did not know that the Indian had gone in and announced her presence outside the window at the Derfs. As she raised her head she got his haughty, lifted profile between herself and the light of the now dying fire. She knew that he was aware of her presence; but he looked neither to the right nor to the left; he made no comment on her fire, but strode swiftly through the room, across the open passage, and into the far room. She heard him moving about for a few moments, then everything was silent.

All that numbing inertia fell away from her. She sat up on the edge of the bed as she had once before that evening, and her eyes went from side to side of the room, picking out what she wanted to take with her. A few swift movements secured her shawl and sunbonnet. Without stealth, yet without noise, she opened the door and stepped forth.

She stood in the open threshing-floor porch between the two rooms, a very gulf of shadow, into which watery

moonlight struggled from the world outside. A long while she stood so, looking toward the far room, her hands clenched and pressed hard against her breast. Those hands were empty. She had shut the door of her girlhood home against herself unless she returned, a gift in them. No—she would not go back there.

All at once she became aware of a rhythmic sound, which made itself heard in the utter stillness of the forest night—Lance's deep breathing. He slept then; he could go to sleep like that, when she—. Callista faltered forward toward the front step; and as she did so, another sound overbore the slighter noise; it was the hoofs of an approaching horse.

She checked, turned, flung the sunbonnet from her and dropped the shawl upon it, then, with a quick, light step, crossed the porch and noiselessly pushed open the door of the room in which Lance lay. The little pale moon made faint radiance in the room, and by its light she saw her husband lying on that monster spare bed which is the pride of every country housewife. He had folded and put aside the ruffled covers of her contriving, and lay dressed as he was, with only his shoes removed. On tiptoe she drew near and stood looking down at him. They said if you held a looking-glass over a sleeping person's face and asked him a question, he'd tell you the truth. What was it she wanted to know of Lance? Not whether he loved her or no, though she said to herself a dozen times a day that he cared nothing about her, and had never really cared.

The sleeper stirred and turned on his pillow, offering her a broader view of that strangely disconcerting countenance of slumber, as ambiguous well-nigh as the face of death itself.

She wheeled and fled noiselessly, as she had come in. The light, approaching horse's hoofs had ceased to sound some moments now. At the gate a mounted figure stood motionless within the shadow of the big pine. She ran down the path to find Flenton Hands.

"I—Callista," he faltered in a low voice, "don't be mad. I—looks like I couldn't leave you this-a-way. I was plumb to the corner of our big field, and—I come back."

He glanced with uncertainty and apprehension toward the house; then, as he noted her shawl and bonnet, got quickly from the saddle, saying hurriedly, eagerly,

"I 'lowed maybe you might change your mind—and I—I come back."

"Yes," said Callista, not looking at him. "I'm ready to go now, Flent."

## CHAPTER XIV.

### ROXY GRIEVER'S GUEST.

IT was a strange day whose gray dawn brought Callista to her father-in-law's door. Where she had wandered, questioning, debating, agonizing, since she dismissed Flenton Hands at the corner of old Kimbro's lean home pasture, only Callista knew. The Judas tree down by the spring branch might have told a tale of clutching fingers that reached up to its low boughs, while somebody stood shaking and listening to the sound of the creek that came down the gorge past that home Callista was leaving. The mosses between there and the big road could have whispered of swift-passing feet that went restlessly as though driven to and fro over their sodden carpet for hours. The bluff where a trail precariously rounds old Flat Top kept its secret of a crouching figure that looked out over the Gulf, black in the now moonless night, of a sobbing voice that prayed, and accused and questioned incoherently.

The household at Kimbro Cleavage's rose by candle-light. Sylvane, strolling out to the water bucket, barely well awake, caught sight of his sister-in-law at the gate, gave one swift glance at her face as it showed gray through the dim light, wheeled silently and hurried ahead of her into the kitchen to warn his sister not to betray surprise. So she was received with that marvelous, fine courtesy of the mountaineer, which proffers only an unquestioning welcome, demanding no explanations of the strangest coming or of the most unexpected comer. She answered their greeting in a curious, lifeless tone, said only that she was tired, not sick at all, and would like to lie down; and when Roxy hastened with her to the bed in the far room and saw her safely bestowed there, the girl sank into almost instant slumber so soon as she had stretched herself out.

"She's went to sleep already," whispered Roxy to Sylvane, stepping back into the kitchen, and, while she quietly carried forward the breakfast preparations, the boy crept up to the loft where Mary Ann Martha and Polly slept and whence the little one's boisterous tones began to be heard. Later he came down with the two, holding the five-year-old by the hand, imposing quiet upon them both by look and word; maintaining it by constant watchfulness.

They ate their breakfast, speaking in subdued voices, mostly of indifferent matters. Roxy, who, woman fashion, would have made some comment, inquiry or suggestion, was checked whenever she looked at the faces of her men folk. The meal over, Sylvane and her father went out to the day's work. Roxy cleared away the dishes and set the house in order, returning every little while to hover doubtfully above that slim form lying so silent and motionless in the bed. She was frightened at the way the girl slept, unaware that Callista had not closed her eyes the night before, and that she was worn out, mind and body, with weeks of fretting emotions.

The morning came on still, warm and cloudy. There was silence in the forest, the softened loam making no sound under any foot, last year's old leaves too damp to rustle on the oak boughs. It was a day so soundless, stirless, colorless, as to seem unreal, with a haunting sadness in the air like an undefined memory of past existences, a drowsiness of forgotten lands. Even the hearth fire faded faint in that toneless day, which had neither sun nor moon nor wind, neither heat nor cold indoors or out. Again and again, as the hours wore on, the Widow Griever stole in and looked upon her sleeping guest with a sort of terror. She sent Polly away with Mary Ann Martha to look for posies in the far woods that the house might be quiet. Quiet—it was as if the vast emptiness which surrounds the universe had penetrated into the heart of that day, making all objects transparent, weightless, meaningless, without power of motion. She would stand beside the bed, noting the even breathing of the sleeper, then go softly to the door and look out. The trees rose into the stillness and emptiness and spread their branches there, themselves thin shadows of a one-time growth and life. The water of the pond below lay wan and glassy, unstirred by any ripple. The very rocks on its edges appeared devoid of substance. From ten o'clock on seemed one standstill afternoon, lacking sign of life or the passage of time, until the imperceptible approach of dusk and the slow deepening of a night which might to all appearances be the shadow of

eternal sleep.

Kimbrow and his son had taken their bit of dinner with them to their work of clearing and brush-burning in a distant field. At dusk they came quietly in to find the supper ready, Polly still herding Mary Ann Martha to keep her quiet, Roxy Griever putting the meal on the table, worried, but saying nothing. On their part, they asked no questions, but each stole an anxious glance at the shut door behind which was the spare bed. As they sat down to eat, Roxy said to her father:

"I don't hardly know, Poppy—She's a-sleepin' yit—been a-sleepin' like that ever sence she laid down thar. Do you reckon I ort—"

"I'd jest let her sleep, daughter," put in the old man gently. "I reckon hit's the best medicine she can get. The pore child must be sort of wore out."

After supper, while Roxy, with Polly's help, was washing the dishes, Kimbro and his younger son held a brief consultation out by the gate, following which the boy moved swiftly off, going up Lance's Laurel.

A little later Callista waked briefly. She sat listlessly upon the side of the bed, declining Roxy's eager proffer of good warm supper at the table, and took—almost perforce—from the elder woman's hand the cup of coffee and bit of food which Roxy brought her.

"No, no, nothing more, thank you, Sister Roxy!" she said hastily, almost recoiling. "That's a-plenty. I ain't hungry—just sort o' tired." And she turned round, stretched herself on the bed once more, and sank back into sleep.

The next morning, when the breakfast was ready, although Roxy had listened in vain for sounds from the small far room, Callista came unexpectedly out, fully dressed. She sat with them at the table, pale, downcast, staring at her plate and crumbling a bit of corn pone, unable to do more than drink a few swallows of coffee. She did not note that Sylvane was missing. Later the boy came back from Lance's Laurel, to tell his father and sister that he had spent the night with his brother, that the cabin in the Gap was now closed and empty, and Lance gone to work at Thatcher Daggett's sawmill, some twelve miles through the woods, out on North Caney Creek, where several men of the neighborhood were employed.

"That's the reason Callista come over here," old Kimbro said mildly. "She and Lance have had a difference of opinion, hit's likely, about whether or no he should go there. Well, I'm sure glad to have her with us. She'd 'a' been right lonesome all to herself."

"Would you name it to her?" asked the widow anxiously.

Kimbrow shook his head. "Don't you name nothin' to the girl, except that she's welcome in this house as long as she cares to stay—and don't say too much about that—she knows it."

"Lance has fixed it up with old man Daggett so that Callista can get what she wants from the store—Derf's place," put in Sylvane.

An expression of relief dawned upon Roxy's thin, anxious face. The Kimbro Cleaverages were very poor. Truly, Callista, the admired, was welcome, yet the seams of their narrow resources would fairly gape with the strain to cover the entertainment of such a guest. If she could get what she wanted from Derf's, it would simplify matters greatly.

"Well, you'll tell her that, won't ye, Buddy?" his sister prompted Sylvane.

He nodded.

"I've got some other things to tell her from Lance," he said, boyishly secretive. "I'm goin' over to see him at the mill come, Sunday, and she can send word by me. I'll be passin' back and forth all the time whilst he's workin' there."

But when this easy method of communication was brought to the notice of Callista, she made no offer toward using it.

It was mid-afternoon of the day following her arrival. The rain was intermitted, not definitely ceased; there would be more of it; but just now the air was warm and the sun brilliant. Mountain fashion, the door of the cabin stood wide. Mary Ann Martha had a corn pone, and she took occasional bites from it as she circled the visitor, staring at her with avid, hazel eyes, that troubled Callista's calm whenever she caught the fire of them, so like Lance's. Marauding chickens came across the door-stone and ventured far on the child's trail of crumbs; the light cackle of their whispered duckings, the scratch of their claws on the puncheons, alone broke the stillness. Callista sat by the doorway, a dead weight at her heart. The pallor, the weariness of it, were plain in her face.

"Good land, Polly—cain't you take this chap over yon in the woods and lose her?" demanded the widow in final exasperation, as Mary Ann Martha turned suddenly on the chicken that was stalking her, and shooed it, squalling, from the door. "I want to get out my quilt and work on it."

All unconscious that these things were done on her behalf, Callista saw the unwilling Mary Ann Martha marched away. She beheld the gospel quilt brought out and spread on the widow's knees quite as some chatelaine of old might have produced her tapestry for the diversion of the guest. Over the gulf of pain and regret and apprehension—this well of struggling, seething emotion—lightly rippled the surface sounds of life, material talk, bits of gossip, that Callista roused herself to harken to and answer.

Roxy spoke in a solemn, muffled tone, something the voice she would have used if her father or Sylvane were dead in the house. She would have been more than human, and less than woman, had she not to some degree relished the situation. She remembered with deep satisfaction that, though she was his own sister, she had always reprehended Lance publicly and privately, holding him unfit to mate with this paragon. Callista had the sensation of being at her own funeral. She drooped, colorless and inert, in her chair, and stared past everything the room contained, out through the open door and across the far blue rim of hills.

"I believe in my soul these here needles Sylvane got me is too fine for my cotton," Roxy murmured, by way of attracting attention. "I wonder could you thread one for me, Callisty? Your eyes is younger than mine."

Callista took the needle and threaded it, handing it back with a sigh. As she did so, her glance encountered Roxy's

solicitous gaze, then fell to the quilt.

"You—you've done a sight of work on that, haven't you, Sis' Roxy?" she asked gently.

The widow nodded. "An' there's a sight more to do," she added.

"This is a pretty figure," Callista said, pointing at random, but producing a kindly show of interest.

Roxy brightened.

"Can you make out what it's meant for?" she inquired eagerly. Then, for fear Callista should attempt and fail, "I aimed it for a Tree of Life, with a angel sorter perched on it, an' one standin' un'neath. But," deprecatingly, "hit looks mo' like a jimpson weed to me. An' pears like I 'don't never have no luck with angels."

Callista's absent gaze rested upon the unsatisfactory sprigged calico and striped seersucker version of members of the heavenly host.

"Them Jacob's-ladder angels—you hain't never seen them, Callisty, sence I sorter tinkered they' wings. Look! 'Pears to me like it's he'ped 'em powerful. But these—I vow, I don't know what is the matter of 'em, without it's the goods. That thar stuff, is 'most too coarse for angels, I reckon. Or it might be the color. 'Warshed whiter'n snow—without spot or, stain—' that's what the Good Book says, whilst all these is spotted and figured. But ye see white on white wouldn't never show. I might 'a' used blue-and-white stripe. And then again, the sayin' is, 'Chastised with many stripes'—that'd never be angels, no how."

Once more Callista made an effort to bring her mind to the problem in hand.

"The sky is blue," Roxy adduced somewhat lamely. "Do you reckon blue angels would be more better?"

"Maybe purple," hesitated the visitor. "The Bible names purple a heap in regards to Heaven—purple and gold. I've got a piece of purple calico at—at home." Her voice trailed and faltered huskily over the words. Then she set her lips hard, crested her head in the old fashion, and went on evenly. "I've got a piece of mighty pretty purple, and one as near gold as ever goods was, that you're welcome to, Sis' Roxy, if—if you or Polly would go over and get 'em."

Again thought of where those treasured rolls of calico were to be found lowered the clear, calm, defiant voice. Roxy noted it; but the magnum opus, brought out to cheer and divert Callista, had laid its unfailing spell upon the widow; the lust for quilt pieces, rampant in all mountain women, wakened in her, aggravated in her case by the peculiar needs, the more exacting demands of her own superior artistry.

"Yes—shore, honey; I'll be glad to go any time," she said, "ef you'll jest tell me where to look."

So life went on at the Kimbro Cleavage place, a curious interlude, and still no word was said to Callista of the strangeness of her advent, and no explanation vouchsafed, till on the evening of the third day the girl herself sought her father-in-law and opened the matter haltingly, timidly. They were out at the chip-pile where Kimbro was cutting the next day's wood for Roxy's use. He dropped his axe to the chopping log and stood leaning on it, peering at her with mild, faded, near-sighted eyes.

"Well now, Callisty," he began gently, "I'm glad you named this to me, becaze I've got a message for you from Lance, and I didn't want to speak of it for fear it would seem like hurrying you away, or criticising any of your actions. I want you to know, daughter, that I don't do that. Lance is a wild boy, and he's got wild ways. But he has a true heart, honey, and one of these days you'll find it. Now, I reckon, you might be having some trouble with him."

"A message," repeated Callista in a low tone. "Is he gone away?"

"Well, he's out on North Caney," old Kimbro told her, "a-workin' at Thatch Daggett's sawmill. Lance can make good money whenever he'll work at his own trade, and I doubt not he'll do right well at this sawmill business, too. He hain't got the land cleared over where you-all was livin' that he ought to have, an' I think it's better for you to stay on with us a while—we're sure proud to have you."

Callista's eyes filled with a sudden rush of tears. Kimbro did not explain to her that Sylvane had gone to see his brother. He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a little roll of money.

"Lance sent you this," he said. "He never had time to write any letter. My son Lance is a mighty poor correspondent at the best; but he sent you this, and he bade Sylvane to tell you that you was to buy what you needed at Derf's store, an' that he'd hope to send you money from time to time as you should have use for it."

Callista looked on the ground and said nothing. And so it was settled. The comfortable, new, well-fitted home at the head of Lance's Laurel was closed, and Callista lived in the shabby, ruinous dwelling of her father-in-law. The help that she could offer in the way of provisions was welcome. To Roxy Griever, she had always been an ideal, a pattern of perfection, and now they made a sort of queen of her. The widow begrudged her nothing and waited on her hand and foot. Polly followed her around and served her eagerly, admiringly; but most astonishing of all, Mary Ann Martha would be good for her, and was ready to do anything to attract her notice. Sometimes Callista seemed to want the child with her; and sometimes when the little girl looked at her with Lance's eyes, and spoke out suddenly in his defiant fashion, Callista would wince as though she had been struck at, and send Mary Ann Martha away almost harshly.

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE STUBBORN HEART.

CALLISTA never referred to what Kimbro Cleavage had told her; but she presently began, of necessity, to buy some things at the store for her own use, where she had formerly purchased only that which would make good her stay with her father-in-law.

The wild, cool, shower-dashed, sun-dappled, sweet-scented, growing days of spring followed each other, passing into weeks, months, until midsummer, with its pause in rural life, was come. Octavia Gentry, who was a little out of health, had sent word again and again that she wanted Callista to come home. It was a Sunday morning in the deep

calm of July when she finally came over herself to the Cleavage place to try to fetch her daughter.

The thrush's song that waked Callista that morning at sunrise, rang as keenly cool as ever; but the frogs were silenced, and the whirr of the "dry-fly" was heard everywhere instead. Gloss of honey-dew was on the oak and hickory leaves, and the blue air veiling the forest shadows spoke of late summer. The morning was languid with heat; the breakfast smoke had risen straight into the dawn, and the day burnt its way forward without dew or breeze; hills velvet-blue, clouds motionless over the motionless tree-tops, toned with mellow atmospheric tints that were yet not the haze that would follow in autumn. One or two neighbors had strolled in, and about mid-forenoon Ajax Gentry and his daughter-in-law drove up in the buckboard and old Kimbro and Sylvane went out trying to pretend surprise, yet Callista knew all the time that the meeting had been arranged—that her people were expected.

"Honey!" Her mother took her into a reproachful embrace, and then held her back and looked at her, tears streaming down her face, "honey—I've come for you. Me and gran'pappy is a-goin' to take you right home with us when we go this evenin'. Git your things a-ready. Me with but one child on this earth, and her a-lookin' forward to what you air, and to stay with—well, of course, not strangers—but with other folks!"

But Octavia Gentry's pleadings were hushed in her throat—the preacher's tall old gray mule and dilapidated wagon was seen stopping at the gate. He had not been expected, and his arrival brought a sense of apprehension—almost of dismay. Every one dreaded lest the dour old man comment openly and bitterly upon the pitiful state of Callista's affairs. Not often had he been known to spare the "I told you so." Drumright had brought his wife and brood of younger children, and from the moment of their advent the house was vocal with them from end to end. Elvira Drumright inevitably reminded one of a small clucking hen with a train of piping chickens after her. The deep male note was missing in the whiffle of sound that fretted Callista's ear; after unhitching the preacher's mule and turning him in the lot, the men had loitered—no doubt because of a lingering dread of the women's activities in the house—to lean against trees and the fences, talking of neighborhood matters. Some of the elders sauntered over to inspect a wrongly dished wheel on a new wagon, and talked for twenty minutes of this phenomenon alone. They were joined here by Flenton Hands, who came riding down the road, and went so wistfully slow as he passed the place that Kimbro could not forbear to hail him and bid him light and come in.

It was a typical summer Sunday at Kimbro Cleavage's, and did its part at explaining the always cruelly straitened means of the household. Boys were pitching horseshoes in the open space beyond the barn, uncertain whether or not to quit on account of the preacher. The hot, white dust lay in the road; the hot, clear air brooded above the tree-tops.

Inside the house, the women in the kitchen compared quilt patterns and talked chickens, combining much gossip with the dinner getting.

Finally it became unbearable to Callista to feel that her affairs were being more or less covertly inspected from all the different angles and points of view possible to the visitors. Passing through the kitchen, she possessed herself of the water bucket and slipped off down to the far spring. People did not often bring water from this place. Its clear, cool trickle had a medicinal tang, and there was red iron-rust around the edges of its basin. She sat down in the spring hollow on the cool moss with big ferns coming up about her. Remembrance was strong within her of that black, raw morning in April when she had lingered desperately here, and she looked long at the Judas tree beneath which she had stood.

The alders raised a tent over the basin, a tenderly shadowed dome, through the midst of which the little-used spring-path made a bright green vista like a pleached alley. And down this way she was presently aware of Sylvane walking, his head thrown back, his clear whistle coming to her before she got the sound of his feet. She shivered a little. The tune he whistled had in it reminiscences of Lance's "How many years, how many miles?"

"You here, Callisty?" asked the boy, parting the branches, and finally coming shyly closer to seat himself on the bank below her.

"I wanted to get shut of all the folks," she said, her brooding eyes on the ground at her feet. "Oh, not you, Sylvane—the rest of them talk so much."

The boy smiled uncertainly.

"Well, I—reckon I was aimin' to sorter talk, too, Callisty," he began timidly. "I 'lowed to tell you about that place where Lance is a-workin'. Hit's been some time now, an' I ain't never said nothin' to ye—I didn't want to pester ye."

Poor Sylvane was trying, in the mountain phrase, "to make fine weather, an' hit a-rainin'." She made no movement to hush him, and he even thought she listened with some eagerness.

"They," he began with hesitation, watching her face, "they're a-gettin' out railroad ties now. That makes the work mighty heavy. It takes Lance and Bob and Andy to run the mill—and sometimes they have to have help. They've got generally as many as eight or ten loggers and woodsmen. They just get the logs up any way they can. Last week Lance got his foot hurt in a log bunk that he fixed up on the running gears of two wagons. They wanted me to come and drive. They do a lot of snaking out the logs without any wagon at all. Reelfoot Dawson is the best teamster they've got. That yoke of steers he has can snake logs out of places where a team of mules or horses couldn't so much as get in."

Callista sighed and turned impatiently towards her young brother-in-law.

"Where do the men live?" she asked finally, very low, as though half-unwilling to do so.

"Well, Daggett ain't makin' what he expected to, and first they had to camp and cook and do for theirselves. Now they've built shacks—out'n the flawed boards, you know—and all of 'em fetched a quilt or a blanket or such from home, so they can roll up at night on the floor. Fletch Daggett's wife is cooking for 'em. The day I was there they had white beans and corn bread—and a little coffee. She's a mighty pore cook, and she's got three mighty small chaps under foot."

Callista's mind went to the new, clean, well-arranged little home on Lance's Laurel. Did old Fletch Daggett's slovenly, overworked young wife cook any worse than she, Callista, had been able to?

"It's hot in them board shacks," Sylvane went on reflectively; "the hottest place I ever was in. Somebody stole Lance's comb. There ain't but one wash pan—he goes down to the branch—and he hid his comb. It's a rough place. They fight a good deal."

And this was what Lance had preferred to her and to the home he had built for her. She fell into such a study over it that Sylvane's voice quite startled her when he said,

"I—I aimed to ask ye, Callisty—did you want me to take word for Lance to come home?"

"No," she answered him very low. "It ain't my business to bid Lance Cleavage come to his own home. Don't name it to me again, Sylvane, please."

The lad regarded her anxiously. More than once he opened his lips to speak, only to close them, again. Slowly the red surged up over his tanned young face, until it burned dark crimson to the roots of his brown hair.

"I—you—w'y, Callisty," he faltered in a choked, husky whisper, his eyes beseeching forgiveness for such an offense against mountaineer reserve and delicacy.

Her own pale cheeks flushed faintly as she began to see what was in the poor boy's mind; but her eyes did not flinch, while in an agony of sympathy and burning embarrassment he whispered,

"After a while—Sis' Callie—you'll have obliged—after a while you'll surely send such word."

There was silence between them for a long minute, then,

"I never will," said Callista, in a low, dreary, implacable voice. "You can fill my bucket and carry it up for me if you're a mind, Sylvane, I'll set here a spell."

Callista appeared only briefly at the dinner table, where she said little and ate less, soon slipping away again to her retreat by the far spring.

After the meal, the dark court-like vista of the entry invited the guests; from thence a murmur of conversation sounded through all the drowsy afternoon,—the slow desultory conversation of mountaineers. Even the play of the children was hushed. It was one of the few hot days of the mountain season. All the forest drowsed in a vast sun-dream. The Cleavage place itself, for all its swarming life, seemed asleep too. Chickens picked and wallowed in the dust; there were no birds, except a cardinal whistling from the hill. The loosed plow-horses drooped in the stable shadow, listless and *ennuyé*, looking as if they would rather be at work. Only wandering shotes seemed undisturbed by the broad white glare of the sunlight.

Octavia Gentry went home that day from the Cleavage cabin in tears. She waited long and patiently an opportunity to speak alone with her daughter; but when, toward evening, enormous flowers of cumuli blossomed slowly, augustly, in the west, flushed petal on petal opening, to be pushed back by the next above it, and rolling gently away into shadows delicately gray, she went uneasily out into the yard and called to old Ajax. While they were talking a heavier cloud, crowding darkly against the western sun, began to send forth long diapason tones of thunder. Drumright got suddenly to his feet and hurried to "ketch out" his mule, while his wife rounded up the children. At noon the heat had been palpitant. Now a shadow bore relief over all the land; a breeze flew across the wood, turning up the whitish under sides of the leaves; and before they could get started there was a quick thrill of rain—tepid, perpendicular— and then the sun looking out again within twenty minutes.

The shower brought them all indoors. Callista came reluctantly from the thicket by the far spring-branch where she had been lingering. Octavia made her last appeal publicly, since it might not otherwise be spoken—and was denied. As old Ajax helped her into the buckboard, something in her tear-disfigured face seemed to anger him.

"Well, ye spiled the gal rotten!" he said testily, without introduction or preface, climbing meanwhile to his seat beside her. "Ye spiled Callisty rotten, that's what ye did! And then ye give her to one of the cussedest highheaded fellers I ever seen—a man that'd as soon take a charge o' buckshot as a dare—a man that'd die before he'd own he's beat. Lance Cleavage ain't the meanest man in the world, and Callisty would do very well if she could be made to behave; but the two of 'em—"

He sighed impatiently, shook his head, and flogged the old horse gently and steadily without in the least affecting its gait. Suddenly he spoke out again with a curious air of unwillingness and at much more length than Grandfather Gentry usually did.

"Them two was borned and made for each other. Ef they can ever fight it out and git to agree, hit'll be one o' the finest matches anybody ever seed. But *whilst* they're a fightin' it out—huh-uh,"—his face drew into a look of wincing sympathy—"I don't know as I want ary one of 'em under my roof. I used to raise a good deal of Cain o' my own—yes, I played the daval a-plenty. I got through with that as best I might. I'm a old man now. I like to see some peace. I did tell you that you could bid Callisty come home with us; but she's done told you no—an' I ain't sorry. She's the onliest gran'child I've got left, an'—I think a heap of her. If she was to come on her own motions—that would be different. But having spiled her as you have did, Octavy, best is that you should let her and Lance alone for a spell."

His daughter-in-law looked at him mutely out of her reddened eyes, and the balance of the drive was made in silence.

And so the slow summer drew forward, Callista in her father-in-law's house, never going back to the cabin at the head of Lance's Laurel, sending Polly or the Widow Griever to get things which she now and again needed from the place; Lance over in the sawmill camp, working brutally hard, faring wretchedly, and eating his heart out with what he hoped was a brave face.

Sylvane brought him almost weekly news. He understood that Callista's foot never crossed the threshold of the home he had built for her. Ola Derf hinted that the young wife bought recklessly at the store—and got snubbed for her pains. She rode out once or twice to try to get him to come and play for a dance; but he shunned the neighborhood as though pestilence were in it, and gave her short answers. No one else importuned him. Lance, the loath, the desired and always invited, found that in his present mood people fell away from him. He was good company for nobody, not even for the rough and ready crowd amongst which he found himself. True, he had lived hard, and been a famous hunter, able to care for himself in any environment; but the squalid surroundings of the sawmill camp were almost as foreign to his fastidious man's way of doing things, as they would have been to a neat woman.

So he grew to avoid and to be avoided; to sit at a little distance from his mates in the evening; to drop out of their crude attempts at merrymaking, to hold aloof even from the fighting. He was neither quarrelsome nor gay, but sat

brooding, inert yet restless, interrogating the future with an ever sinking heart. Here was come a thing into his life at which he could not shrug the shoulder. He could not fling this off lightly with a toss of the head or a defiant, "Have it as you please." What was he to do? Was he not man enough to rule his domestic affairs? Could he not command the events and individuals of his own household by simply being himself? To go to Callista and exert authority in words, by overt actions, by use of force—this was not his ideal. It was impossible to him. Well, what then? Must his child be born under the roof of another?

Summer wore to autumn with all its solemn grandeur of coloring, all its majestic hush and blue silences over great slopes of tapestried mountains, and still the question was unanswered. Callista herself was in the mood when she found it hard to think of anything beyond her own body, the little garment she was fashioning, the day which rounded itself from morning into night again.

And now came a new complication. Daggett asserted that he had no money to pay. "I'm a-dickerin' with the company," he told his men. "I've got good hopes of sellin' out to 'em. Them that stays by me, will get all that's due an' comin'; but I hain't got a cent now; an' a feller that quits me when I cain't he'p myse'f—I'll never trouble to try to pay him."

Now what to do. Credit at the store was all very well for Callista's present needs; but Lance Cleaverage's wife must have a sum of money put at her disposal for the time which was approaching. Lance walked from North Caney to Hepzibah one Saturday night to offer Satan for sale, and found the black horse lame. The man who had agreed to buy him expressed a willingness to take Cindy in his place—the black filly which he had, in the first days of their marriage, given to Callista for her own use—presented with sweet words of praise of his bride's beauty and her charming appearance on the horse—a lover's gift, a bridegroom's. Yet the money must be had, and the next time Sylvane came across to the lumber camp, he carried back with him and put into his young sister-in-law's listless hand the poor price of the little filly.

Nothing roused Callista these days, not even when Flenton Hands went down to the Settlement and bought Cindy from the man who had purchased her. That was his account of the transaction, but Sylvane said indignantly to his father that he believed Flenton Hands got that feller to buy Lance's filly. Flenton rode up on his own rawboned sorrel, leading the little black mare who whinnied and put forward her ears to Callista's caresses.

"Yes, I did—I bought her," he repeated. "I hadn't nary bit of use for such a animal, but I couldn't see yo' horse—yo's, Callista—in the hands of a man like Snavely."

Callista held a late apple to the velvety, nuzzling mouth that came searching in her palms for largess. She made no inquiry, and Flenton Hands went on.

"Snavely's the meanest man to stock that I ever did see. He overworks and he underfeeds, and he makes up the lack of oats with a hickory—that's what he does. He'd nigh about 'a' killed this little critter, come spring."

And still Callista had nothing to offer.

"How's all your folks, Flent?" she said finally.

"Tol'able—jest tol'able," Hands repeated the formula absently. "Callisty, ef you'll take the little mare from me as a gift, she's yourn."

Lance's wife drew back with a burning blush.

"Take Cindy—from you?" she echoed sharply. There rushed over her heart, like an air from a kinder world, memory of that exquisite hour when Lance had given Cindy to her—Lance whose words of tenderness and praise, his kiss, the kindling look of his eye, could so crown and sceptre her he loved. Her lips set hard.

"I'd be proud to have ye take her," Flenton repeated.

"Thank you—no," returned Callista, briefly, haughtily.

Her small head was crested with the movement that always fascinated the man before her. That unbending pride of hers, to him who had in fact no real self-respect, was inordinately compelling. He had felt sure she would not take the horse, and he was the freer in offering the gift.

"Well, ef ye won't, ye won't" he said resignedly. "But ef you ever change yo' mind, Callisty—remember that Cindy and me is both a-waitin' for ye." And with this daring and enigmatic speech, he wheeled the sorrel and rode away, the little black's light feet pattering after the clumsier animal.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### LANCE CLEAVERAGE'S SON.

SUMMER lasted far into fall that year, its procession of long, fair, dreamful days like a strand of sumptuous beads. At the last of November came a dash of rain, frost, and again long, warm days, with the mist hanging blue in the valleys as though the camp-fires of autumn smoked in their blaze of scarlet and gold, their shadows of ochre and umber.

"But we're goin' to ketch it for this here," Roxy Griever kept saying pessimistically. "Bound to git about so much cold in every year, and ef you have summer time mighty nigh on up to Christmas, hit'll freeze yo' toes when it does come."

Callista held to her resolution to send no message to the sawmill on North Caney. But the family had debated the matter, consulting with Lance himself, and agreeing to summon him home, if possible, in ample season. At his sister's gloomy weather predictions, Sylvane grew uneasy lest the time arrive and Lance be storm-stayed in Dagget's camp. He almost resolved to go and fetch him at once, and run the chance of good coming from it. But the spell of pleasant weather and a press of work put it out of his mind. Then came a day when the sun rose over low-lying clouds into a fleece of cirri that caught aflame with his mounting. The atmosphere thickened slowly hour by hour into a chill mist that, toward evening, became a drizzle.

"This here's only the beginning of worse," said Kimbro at the supper table. "Looks to me like we're done with Fall.

To-morrow is the first day o' winter—and you'll see it will be winter sure enough."

At dawn next morning the wind rose, threshing the woods with whips of stringing rain. Stock about the lean little farms began to huddle into shelter. Belated workers at tasks which should have been laid by, found it hard to make head against the wild weather. The men at the sawmill kindled a wonderful radiance of hickory fire in the great chimney which Lance had built more to relieve his own restlessness than with any thought of their comfort.

"Why, consarn yo' time!" Blev Straley deprecated as he edged toward it. "A man cain't set clost enough to that thar fire to spit in hit!"

Sylvane knew when this day came, that he must go for his brother. About noon the rain ceased, and, with its passing, the wind began to blow harder. At first it leaped in over the hills like a freed spirit, glad and wild, tossing the wet leaves to the flying clouds, laughing in the round face of the hunter's moon which rose that evening full and red. But it grew and grew like the bottle genii drunken with strength; its laughter became a rudeness, its pranks malicious; it was a dancing satyr, roughly-riotous, but still full of living warmth and glee. It shouted down the chimney; it clattered the dry vines by the porch, and wrenched at everything left loose-ended about the place; it whooped and swung through the straining forest. But by night it sank to a whisper, as Sylvane finally made his way into the camp. The next morning dawn walked in peace like a conquering spirit across the whiteness of snow, wind-woven overnight into great laps and folds of sculpture. As the day lengthened the cold strengthened. Again the wind wakened and now it was a wild sword song in the tree tops. Ice glittered under the rays of a sun which warmed nothing. It was a day of silver and steel. The frost bit deep; under the crisping snow the ground rang hard as iron. Wagons on the big road could be heard for a mile. As the two brothers passed Daggett's cow lot on setting forth, with its one lean heifer standing humped and shivering in the angle of the wall, Sylvane spoke.

"Reckon we'll have pretty hard work gettin' crost the gulch." He glanced at Lance's shoes. "This here snow is right wet, too—but hit's a freezin'. Maybe we'd better go back an' wait till to-morrow—hit'll be solid by then."

"I aimed to go to-day," said Lance, quite as if Sylvane had not come for him. "I'll stop a-past Derf's and get me a pair of shoes, Buddy."

No more was said, and they fared on. There was no cheerful sound of baying dogs as they passed the wayside cabins. The woods were ghostly still. The birds, the small furry wild creatures crept into burrow and inner fastness, under the impish architecture of the ice and snow. Going up past Taylor Peavey's board shanty, they found that feckless householder outside, grabbling about in the snow for firewood.

"My wife, she's down sick in the bed," he told them; "an' I never 'lowed it would come on to be as chilly as what it is; an' her a-lyin' there like she is, she's got both her feet froze tol'able bad."

The Cleavage brothers paused in their desperate climb to help haul down a leaning pine tree near the flimsy shack. They left the slack Peavy making headway with a dull axe whose strokes followed them hollowly as they once more entered the white mystery and wonder of the forest.

Arrival at Derf's place was almost like finding warmer weather. The half dozen buildings were thick and well tightened, and the piles of firewood heaped handy were like structures themselves.

"It's sin that prospers in this world," jeered the gentle Sylvane, blue with cold, heartsick as he looked at his brother's set face, poor clothing and broken shoes. Lance stepped ahead of the boy, silent but unsubdued, bankrupt of all but the audacious spirit within him.

Garrett Derf admitted them to the store, which was closed on account of the bitter weather that kept everybody housed. But there was a roaring fire in the barrel stove in its midst, and after a time the silent Lance approached it warily, putting out first one foot and then the other. Derf, in an overcoat, stood across by the rude desk, fiddling somewhat uneasily.

"I hain't figured out your account, Cleavage," he observed at last; "but I reckon you hain't much overdrawn. Likely you'll be able to even it up befo' spring—ef Miz. Cleavage don't buy quite so free as what she has been a-doin'."

There was a long, significant silence, the wind crying at the eaves, and bringing down a fine rattle of dry snow to drum on the hollow roof above their heads. At first, neither of the half-perished men looked up, but Sylvane instinctively drew a little nearer to his brother.

"W'y—w'y, Mr. Derf," he began, with an indignant tremble in his boyish voice, "I've fetched every order for Sis' Callie, and packed home every dollar's worth she bought. Hit don't look to me like they could amount to as much as Lance's wages. Lance is obliged to have a pair of shoes."

Lance cast a fiery, silencing glance at his brother.

"I ain't obliged to have anything that ain't comin' to me," he said sharply. "Callisty's bought nothin' that wasn't proper. Ef she needed what was here—that's all right with me," and he turned and walked steadily from the room.

"Hey—hold on, you Lance Cleavage!" Derf called after him. "Thar you go—like somebody wasn't a-doin' ye right. I'll trust you for a pair of shoes."

In the wide-flung doorway, Lance wheeled and looked back at him, a gallant figure against the flash of snow outside—gallant in spite of his broken shoes and the tattered coat on his back.

"Go on, Buddy," he said gently, pointing Sylvane past him. Then he turned to Derf.

"You will?" he inquired of the man who, he knew, was trying to rob him. "You'll trust me? Well, Garrett Derf, it'll be a colder day than this when I come to you and ask for trust." And without another word he stepped out into the snow and set his face toward his father's house. He even passed the boy with a kind of smile, and something of the old light squaring of the shoulder.

"It ain't so very far now. Buddy," he said.

Sylvane followed doggedly. The last few miles were merely a matter of endurance, the rapid motion serving to keep the warmth of life in their two bodies.



Octavia Gentry, coming to the back door of the Cleaverage home, found Lance sitting on a little platform there, rubbing his feet with snow, while Sylvane crouched on the steps, getting off his own shoes.

"I thought I'd be on the safe side," Lance said in an unshaken voice. "They might be frost-bit and then they might not. No need to go to the fire with 'em till I can get some feeling in 'em. How"—and now the tones faltered a little—"how is she?"

Octavia's horrified eyes went from the feet his busy hands were chafing with snow, to his lean, brown, young face, where the skin seemed to cling to the bone, and the eyes were quite too large.

"She's doin' well," choked the mother. "The doctor's been gone five hours past. It's a boy, honey. They're both asleep now. Oh, my poor Lance—my poor Lance!"

A sudden glow shone in the hazel eyes. Lance turned and smiled at her so that the tears ran over her face. He set down the lump of snow he had just taken up in his hand, and rising began to stamp softly.

"It's all right, mother," he said, in a tone that was almost gay. "I'm 'feared Sylvane's worse off."

But it appeared on inquiry that Sylvane's shoes had proved almost water tight, and that a brief run in the snow was all he wanted to send him in the house tingling with warmth. Roxy Griever, hearing the voices, had hurried out. Her troubled gaze went over Lance's half perished face and body, the whole worn, poor, indomitable aspect of him, even while she greeted him. With an almost frightened look, she turned and ran into the house, crying hastily,

"I'll have some hot coffee for you-all boys mighty quick." And when he came limping in, a few minutes later, there was an appetizing steam from the hearth where Polly crouched beside Mary Ann Martha, whispering over a tale.

Dry foot-wear was found for the newcomers, and when they were finally seated in comfort at their food, both women gazed furtively at Lance's thin cheeks, the long unshorn curls of his hair, and Octavia wept quietly. When he had eaten and sat for a little time by the fire, he caught at his mother-in-law's dress as she went past, and asked with an upward glance that melted her heart,

"How soon may I go in thar?"

They both glanced toward the door of the spare room.

"I reckon you could go in right now, ef you'd be mighty quiet," Octavia debated, full of sympathy. "What do you say, Miz. Griever?"

"Well, we might take him in for a spell, I reckon," Roxy allowed dubiously, more sensible to the importance of the occasion, when men are apt to be hustled about and treated with a lack of consideration they endure at no other time.

Lance rose instantly; his hand was on the knob of the door before Roxy and Octavia reached him. When they did so, he turned sharply and cast one swift look across his shoulder. Without a word his mother-in-law drew the Widow Griever back. Lance Cleaverage entered alone the chamber that contained his wife and son.

Closing the door softly behind him, he came across the floor, stepping very gently, lest he waken the sleepers in the big four-poster bed. When he stood at last beside the couch and looked down at them, something that had lived strong in him up to this moment died out, and its place was taken by something else, which he had never till then known.

He gazed long at Callista's face on the pillow. She was very thin, his poor Callista; her temples showed the blue veins, the long oval of her cheek was without any bloom. Beside her, in the curve of her arm, lay the little bundle of new life. By bending forward, he could get a glimpse of the tiny face, and a sort of shock went through him at the sight. This was his son—Lance Cleaverage's son!

With deft fingers he rolled the sheet away from the baby's countenance, so that he had a view of both, then sinking quietly to his knees, he studied them. Here was wife and child. Confronting him whose boyish folly had broken up the home on Lance's Laurel, was the immortal problem of the race. A son—and Lance had it in him, when life had sufficiently disciplined that wayward pride of his, to make a good father for a son. Long and silently he knelt there, communing with himself concerning this new element thrust into his plan, this candidate for citizenship on that island where he had once figured the bliss of dwelling alone with Callista. Gropingly he searched for the clue to what his own attitude should now be. He had lived hard and gone footsore for the two of them. That was right, wasn't it? A man must do his part in the world. His own ruthers came after that.

He recognized this as the test. Before, it had been the girl to be won; the bride, still to be wooed. In outward form these two were already his; could he make and hold them truly his own? Could he take them with him to that remote place where his spirit abode so often in loneliness?

Callista's eyes, wide and clear, opened and fixed themselves on his. For some time she lay looking. She seemed to be adjusting the present situation. Then with a little whispered, childish cry, "Lance—oh, Lance!" she put out feeble arms to him, and he bent his face, tear-wet, to hers.



## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE COASTS OF THE ISLAND.

LANCE Cleavage remained at his father's house for a week, saying little, assisting deftly and adequately in the care of Callista, wondering always at the marvelous newcomer, and so rutable, so helpful and void of offense, that Roxy had her rod broken in her hand, and was forced to an unwilling admiration of him.

"Looks like Sis' Callie is about to be the makin' o' Lance," she told her father. "I believe in my soul if she was a church member she'd have him convicted of sin at the next quarterly."

Conviction of sin was always sadly lacking in Lance; he was aware that the cards sometimes went against him in the game of life, but to hint that he could himself be blamed with it was to instantly rouse the defiant devil that counseled his soul ill. At the end of the week, there was a little family conference, very sweet and harmonious, with Callista lying propped in her bed, the baby beside her, and old Kimbro sitting by the fire, while Octavia and Roxy worked at a little garment which the former had made and brought over, and which did not quite fit the boy. Mary Ann Martha, absolutely good because absolutely happy, lolled luxuriously in her Uncle Lance's lap, and took the warmth of the fire on her fat legs, while she occasionally rolled a blissful eye toward the face above her, or suddenly shot up a chubby hand to flap against his cheek or chin in a random caress. Uncle Lance had in her eyes no flaw. Others might criticise him, to Mary Ann Martha it was given to see only his perfections.

"Yes, son," old Kimbro concluded what he had been saying, "I surely would go back to Daggett's and work out my time. Derf can't hold to what he said. I had Sylvane bring me every one of those orders before he carried them to the store, and I copied them off in a book. Garrett Derf will have obliged to back down from that talk he had the day you was there—likely he'll say he was jest a-funnin'. As for Thatch Daggett, the Company is behind him now, and he'll have obliged to pay, come Spring. You need the money. You can't do nothin' on your place now. I'd go back and work it out at Daggett's."

Like many another man with the reputation of being impractical, old Kimbro's advice on financial matters was always particularly sound. From his warm place by the fire. Lance flashed a swift glance across at his wife and child. Callista was so absorbed in the baby that she had paid small attention to what her father-in-law was saying. Well—and the color deepened on Lance's brown cheek—if it was a matter of indifference to her, he would not urge it upon her attention. But Sylvane, watching, came to the rescue.

"What do you think about it, Sis' Callie?" he suggested gently.

"About what?" inquired Callista; and then when she was enlightened, "Oh, I reckon Father Cleavage knows best. I shouldn't want to move the baby in cold weather. If you're a mind to go over and finish out, Lance, I'll be in the house and ready for you, come Spring," and she looked kindly at her husband.

And so it was settled. Lance went back to the gross hardships of the sawmill camp, the ill-cooked food, the overworked little woman in the dingy cabin with the fretting children under foot, the uncongenial companionship of the quarreling men.

In early spring he came home, still thin and worn, and even more silent than was his wont. Callista had kept her word; she was domiciled in the cabin on Lance's Laurel, and she had Sylvane get her truck patch almost ready. In the well nigh feverish activity of first motherhood, she had learned in these few months to be a really superior housewife, and a master hand at all that a mountain housekeeper should know. Roxy Griever was but too willing to teach, and

Callista had needed only to have her energies and attention enlisted. She had a sound, noble physique; maternity had but developed her; and she was very obviously mistress of herself as well as of the house when Lance came over from the sawmill cabin to find her there with his son, awaiting him.

He stopped a moment on the threshold. His appreciative glance traveled over the neat interior, and he sniffed the odors of a supper preparing. This was a homecoming indeed. Here, surely, were the coasts of his island; and Callista, bending over his child, drawing the cover around the baby before she turned to greet Lance, a figure to comfort a man's heart.

"You look fine here," he told her, entering, hanging up his hat, and disposing of the bundles he had been carrying.

Callista advanced smiling to him and lifted her face to be kissed. Self-absorbed, wholly pleased with her house and her baby, and her newly discovered gift for work, and for administration, she never noted the quick, wild question of his eyes, which was as swiftly veiled.

"The baby's asleep already," she announced softly. "We got to be right quiet."

Nodding silently. Lance picked up some of the things he had brought, and carried them out to the shed, whence Callista, later, summoned him to supper.

Old Kimbro proved to be right. Lance, having held by his contract till Spring, was able to collect the poor little balance of his wages, and on this they proposed to live while he got the place in the Gap in some shape to support them. Satan was well now, but it fretted Lance unreasonably that he could not buy Cindy back from Flenton Hands.

With characteristic insouciance and unusual energy, he set to work on the gigantic task of subduing his large tract of steep, wild, mountain land. No doubt he worked too hard that summer; people of Lance's temperament are always working too hard—or not working at all. As for Callista, the first eagerness of her mere passion for Lance was satisfied. She was no more the warm, tender, young girl, almost pathetically in love,—even though proud and wilful and somewhat spoiled—but the composed, dignified mother of a son and mistress of a home. She had once been too little of a house-mother for her man, and now she was rather too much.

Yet Lance went no more abroad for consolation. After his settlement with Derf, he had refused to put foot on their place again. This was not the season for hunting. He comforted himself with his banjo, and enjoyed too, in its own measure, the well-kept home, the excellently prepared food, the placid, calm, good-will of his mate.

And the child was Callista over again; big blue eyes, a fuzz of pale gold down, and an air of great wisdom and dignity. As he grew able to sit up alone on the floor and manage his own playthings, one saw laughably enough his mother's slant glance of scorn, that which had been considered her affectation of indifference, reproduced in the baby's manner. Between mother and son, Lance sometimes felt himself reduced to his lowest terms.

Yet they thrived, for the welfare of a primitive; household still depends more upon the woman than on the man. If Lance's restless fancy—that questioning, eager heart of his—lacked something of full satisfaction, his body was well fed, his household comfort was complete, and his material work laid out plainly before him. And Lance could work so well and to such good purpose that at midsummer his clearing had assumed very respectable size, and the small crop he had made was laid by. Even Callista agreed that they might now make the trip Lance had proposed more than a year ago, over to the East Fork of Caney.

That camping trip was well thought of. It instantly reversed the family balance, and sent Lance's end swinging higher. If Callista dominated the house, and her spirit was coming to pervade the farm as well. Lance was supreme in this matter of the gipsying excursion.

"You needn't bother your head about what to pack," he told her. "I reckon I'll know better than you do what we'll need, exceptin' the things for that young man you make so much of."

So Callista concerned herself with the baby's outfit and her own, with assurance that her jars were in order, and that she had enough sugar to put up jam. The other berries could be canned without sugar, and sweetened when they came to use them. A joyous bustle of preparation pervaded the place; that play spirit which was necessary to Lance Cleaverage, and which Callista would quite innocently and unconsciously have crushed out of him if she could, was all alert and dancing at the prospect. He came into his wife's kitchen and packed flour and meal, frying pan and Dutch oven, with various other small matters necessary, observing as the bacon went in,

"We won't need much of that, excepting to fry fish and help out with wild meat. The law's off of pa'tridges in the Valley next month, and it's sure off of 'em up here now."

Callista, sitting on the table, swinging a foot to keep the baby trotted on her knee, looked on smilingly.

"When Blev Straley and his wife camped out and canned blackberries, they hadn't any nag," she commented. "He had to take the things in a wheelbarrow, and it looked like some places he couldn't hardly get acrost; but Miranda said she had the best time she ever had in her life."

Kimbro Cleaverage was teaching school over in the Far Cove. For fifteen years he had taught this little summer school; his pupils now were the children of the first boys and girls who came under his rule. His neighbors held toward the gentle soul a patronizing, almost tolerant attitude. True, he managed the winter school nearer home, having little trouble with the big boys, the bullies, the incorrigibles; while it was well understood that the peaceful, who wanted to learn, could get on powerful fast under his tuition. Yet there were those who deprecated the mildness of his sway, and allowed that he was really better suited to the small children, the anxious-faced little boys, too young yet to follow the plow, the small girls who had just finished dropping corn or "suckering the crop." That these dearly loved the master was held to be an unimportant detail, and his aversion to plying the hickory was always cited in regard to Lance's misdoings.

When his father was away teaching, the management, and all the labor of the wornout little farm fell on Sylvane's young shoulders. Lance had promised his brother the use of Satan for the week when they should be in camp. The boy came over to help them pack.

It was a July morning without flaw, blue and green and golden, and brooded upon by the full-hearted peace of ripe summer. Bedding and kitchen supplies were put in two big bundles arranged pannier fashion on the black horse, and

firmly lashed in place by a pair of plow lines.

"Why don't you put it up on his back?" Callista asked them, coming out with her eight month's old baby, all in order for the journey.

"That's to leave place for you to ride part of the time," Lance told her. "It's a right smart ways we're going, and that son of yours is tol'able heavy, and half the time you won't let me tote him."

So they set off, Sylvane walking ahead at Satan's bridle, whistling and singing by turns, Lance with his banjo on his back, Callista at first carrying the boy because he wanted her to, and afterward relinquishing him to Lance or Sylvane. The route lay over springy leaf-mold, under great trees for the most part, leaving the main road, and taking merely an occasional cattle-path, while always it wound upward. After a time, the timber became more scattered, and from going forward under a leafage that shut out the rising sun, there were patches of open, meadow-like grasses, called by the mountain dweller, balds, interspersed with groups of cedars and oaks. The last mile was up the dry bed of Caney, and it consisted of a scramble over great boulders, where only a mountain-bred horse might keep his footing. Turning suddenly and scaling a bank that was like a precipice, one came on Lance's find, a cup-like hollow between the cleft portions of a mountain peak, where the great gray rocks lay strewn thick, the ferns grew waist high, and the trickling spring-branch was so blue-cold that it made your teeth ache to drink of it even on a summer's day.

The three stood for a moment silent, on the edge of the miniature valley, studying its perfections with loving eyes; the mountaineer leads all others in passionate admiration for the beauty of his native highlands.

"Oh, Lance!" Callista said at length, very softly. "You never told me it was as sightly as all this."

"Couldn't," murmured Lance, pleased to the soul. "I ain't got the words by me."

Sylvane helped them unpack, waited for a hasty dinner for himself and Satan; then having agreed to return for them at the end of a week, he went back, leading his black horse, looking with boyish envy over his shoulder at the happy little group in the hidden pocket of the hills. When he was out of sight of them, he could still see the blue smoke of their camp fire rising clear and high, and stopping to mount Satan, when the trail became fit for it, he hearkened a moment, and thought he heard the sound of the banjo.

It was Lance who made the camp, deftly, swiftly; Callista looked after her baby and explored their new domain, moving about, girlish, light-footed, singing to herself, so that the eyes of the man bending over his task followed her eagerly. Two great boulders leaning together made them a rock house. Lance soon had a chimney up, of loose stones to be sure, but drawing sufficiently to keep the smoke out of your eyes unless the wind was more perverse than a summer breeze is apt to be. That evening they ate a supper of the cooked food they had brought and rested as the first pair might have done in Eden, sleeping soundly on their light, springy couch of tender hemlock tips. But next day Lance fished in the little stream and came up with a wonderful catch of tiny silver-sided, rainbow trout, cleaned and laid in a great leaf-cup ready for the frying pan.

"Lance, oh Lance!—ain't it too bad?" Callista greeted him from the fire where she had her cornbread nearly ready to accompany his fish. "I believe in my soul we've come clean over here and forgot the salt—the salt! I put some in my meal, or the bread wouldn't be fit to eat. Do you reckon the meat fryings will make your fish taste all right? No—of course it won't. I'm mighty sorry. Looks like that is certainly the prettiest fish I ever saw in my life, and they're so good right fresh from the water."

"It is too bad," agreed Lance, with a very sober countenance, going ahead however with his preparations. "Pears as if somebody in this crowd is a pore manager."

"It's me. Lance," Callista hastened to avow, kneeling by their primitive hearthstone to tend her bread. "It was my business to see that the salt was in; but I got so took up with the baby that I left everything to you; and a body can't expect a man—"

She broke off; Lance, kneeling beside her, engaged in his own enterprise of fish-frying had suddenly turned and kissed her flushed cheek. There was always a sort of embarrassment in this unusual demonstrativeness of her husband's; and yet it subdued her heart as nothing else could, as nothing had ever done. That heart beat swiftly and the long fair lashes lay almost on the glowing cheek above where Lance had kissed.

A few moments later, when the primitive meal was spread under the open sky, Callista tasted her fish.

"Lance!" she looked at him reproachfully. "You rogue! You had salt along with you all the time! Why didn't you tell me, and put my mind at rest?"

"I'm not so terrible sure that a restful mind is what's needed in your case," Lance teased her. "I thought you looked mighty sweet and sounded mighty sweet, too, when you was a blamin' yourse'f."

Lance had spoken truly when he praised the huckleberries that grew in the little valley where nobody came to pick them. They stood thick all over its steep, shelving sides, taller bushes than those of the lowland, with great blue berries, tender of skin, sun sweetened, bursting with juice. Callista was almost wearisome in her triumph over the fruit. Forest fires and drought had made the berry crop nearer home a failure this year; she would be the only woman in the neighborhood with such canned huckleberries to boast of. She picked them tirelessly, making work of her play, Callista fashion, spreading her apron under the bush and raking down green ones, leaves and all, into it, then afterward harrying Lance into helping her look them over while the baby played near by or slept. This gipsying was not her plan; she had come along in mere complaisance; yet in the simple outdoor life she throve beautifully; her cheeks rounded out, and her temples lost their bleached look; she was the old delicious Callista, with an added glow and bloom and softness.

It was in the early days of their stay, that Lance, with the air of a boy disclosing to some chosen companion a long-cherished treasure, took her by a circuitous way up the steep wall of their little valley, and helping her around a big boulder and through a thicket of laurel, showed her the opening of a cave. Man-high the entrance was, with a tiny cup of a spring in its lap; but six or eight feet in there was an abrupt turning so that the cave's extent was entirely hidden. He stood smilingly by, enjoying her astonishment.

"Why, Lance!" she cried. "Well, I vow! Why, no one in the world would ever suspicion there was a cave here!"

The two turned to look back at their camp, only to find themselves wholly screened by the oblique side of the great

boulder and the laurel bushes, cut off from sight and sound of all that went on in the little valley.

"They sure never would," Lance assented. "And I've never told a soul— but Sylvane—about the place. I was even kind o' duberous about showing you," and he laughed teasingly. "Might need a hide-out some time, that nobody didn't know where to find."

There was a Phoebe-bird's nest just at the opening of the cave. Lance drew Callista back, both of them standing half crouched, while the mother, returning home, flitted past them and fed her babies.

"Mighty late for that business," whispered Lance.

"Second brood, I reckon," Callista murmured back.

"Or maybe got broke up with the first brood," Lance added.

The little dell was so remote that the birds were less shy than where they have been intruded upon by man and civilization, and the mother betrayed little uneasiness when the two visitors crept closer.

"My, ain't it scary!" Callista said, peering beyond into the cave. Then, as they descended the bank once more, "Hit looked like there might be wildcats in it."

"I aimed to explore it this time and get to the end if I could," Lance replied. "I was fifteen year old when I found that place, and I used to scheme it out, like a boy will, that if I'd ever go with the Jesse James gang, or kill a man, or anything to get the law out after me, I'd hide there; and then, oncet Caney was up, all the world couldn't find me."

"What'd you eat?" objected practical Callista.

Lance smiled. "I could take care of myself in the woods about as well as any of the critters," he told her.

"I reckon I'd have to come and bring you a pone," bantered Callista. And they turned and smiled happily into each other's eyes, all in the blue, unclouded summer, with the baby asleep back in the rock house, and the two of them climbing down to him and their gipsy home hand in hand.

And now perfect day followed perfect day. The work of the camp was frolic to Lance; he did it laughing, as he would have gone through a game, and then tolerantly helped Callista with the play of which she made work. The high noon of summer brooded over the mountains, with a wonderful blue haze and a silence that was almost palpable. In their little cup of the hills, there was a hoarded wine of coolness. The drowsy tinkle of the tiny branch that ran from their spring backgrounded the rare sound of their voices. And Lance would lie full length on the earth as he loved to do, strumming sometimes on his banjo, drowsing a little, amusing and being amused by the baby. Callista, her head bent, her face intent above the work, would be picking over her berries. The boy was intensely, solemnly interested in the banjo; but when its music ceased, he would roll away from his father's arm and creep to his mother's skirts, there to cuddle down and sleep, a dimpled picture of infantile perfection.

Lance would regard them both from under his lashes. Beauty-worshipper that he was, they satisfied every whim and caprice of longing, so far as the eyes spoke. And they were his. Callista was his own, she had come with him to the place he found for her; she was an amiable, complying companion. And yet—and yet—

The birds were all silent now, except for an occasional chirp or twitter in among the leafage. The little breeze that seemed to live only in their high eyrie went by softly, making its own music. "How many miles, how many years?" But there were no longer miles and years between him and his beloved. No, she was within hand-reach. He could stretch forth his fingers and touch the hem of her skirts. With an impatient sigh he would turn over and take up his banjo.

"Don't play now, Lance—you'll wake the baby," Callista would murmur half mechanically, in that hushed tone mothers learn so soon.

One day Lance snared a couple of partridges, and, cleaning and salting them, roasted them with the feathers on, by daubing each with the stiff, tough blue clay of the region, and burying the balls in the embers. They came out delicious. When the clay coating was broken off, feathers and skin went with it, leaving all the delicate juices of the meat steaming. His helpmate praised his skill generously.

"Ola Derf showed me that trick," Lance said, in fairness, clearing a dainty little drumstick with his teeth. "We was fishing over on Laurel one day, and we didn't get no fish. So she caught a couple of chickens, and cooked them that-a-way. Good, ain't they?"

Callista nodded.

"Whose chickens were they—them you and Ola Derf caught?" she asked, after a moment's silence.

Lance laughed long and uproariously.

"Whose chickens?" he repeated. "Our'n, I reckon, oncet we'd cooked 'em and et 'em. I never axed 'em their names. They tasted all right. I ain't got no objections to strangers—in chickens that-a-way."

"I don't think that was right," Callista-told him with great finality. "It's likely some poor old woman had her mouth all fixed for chicken dinner, or was going to have the preacher at her house, and then you and Ola stole her chickens and she never knew what became of them. I think it was right mean."

"So do I," agreed Lance lightly. "That's the reason I enjoyed it. I get mighty tired of bein' good."

"You do?" inquired his wife with gay scorn. "I didn't know you'd ever had the chance."

Yet of this conversation remained the knowledge that such gipsying meals as this had been eaten with Ola Derf before she and Lance cooked for each other. Had he found Ola an entirely satisfactory companion? Evidently not, for he could have had her for the asking. Did she, Callista, compare in any way unfavorably with the Derf girl? Such questionings were new to Callista, and they were decidedly uncomfortable. She resented them; yet she could not quite put them by.

Lance was used to sleeping the deep and dreamless slumber of those who labor much in the open air; but on the last night of their stay in the little hollow by the spring, he lay long awake.

"Callista, air you asleep?" he inquired with caution.

"N—no," murmured Callista drowsily.

"Well, somehow I cain't git to sleep," said Lance. "I feel like this rock house was goin' to fall down on me. I believe I'd like to take my blanket out there on the grass if you won't be scared to be alone. You could call to me."

Callista assented, only half awake. Once sprawled at ease under the stars, sleep seemed definitely to have forsaken him. He lay and stared up into the velvety blue-black spaces above him. His mind went dreamily over the past few days. How good it had been. And yet—he broke off and ruminated for awhile on whether or no a body should ever cherish a plan for years as he had cherished this plan of camping out some time in the rock house with Callista. It seemed to him that if a man had planned a thing for so long, it was better not to bring it to pass, for the reality could never compare favorably with the dream. He sighed impatiently, and turned his face resolutely down against the grass, dew-wet and cool. But there was no sleep for him in the earth, as there had been none in the heavens. Before his eyes, quite as real as daylight seeing, came the vision of Callista and his boy. There was not such a woman nor such a child in all his knowledge. He had chosen well. Idle dreams of Callista as a girl among her mates; of Callista lying spent and white in her bed with his child, new born, on her arm; of Callista kneeling flushed and housewifely by this outdoor hearth to prepare his meal—these strung themselves into an endless, tantalizing line, a shadowy gallery of pictures, a visioned processional, each face in some sort a stranger's. What was it he had thought to compass by coming here with her? Why was the realization not enough?

Through dreams and waking this question followed him, giving him no deep rest; and dawn found him already afoot and busy with the preparations for their return home.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE HEGIRA.

CALLISTA roused that morning, to see Lance moving, light-footed, a shadow between her and the first struggling blaze of the fire he had kindled. With sleepy surprise she noted his activities. When she observed that he was packing her canned fruit, with quick, deft fingers, she inquired,

"What you doin' there. Lance? No use fixin' them up now. Sylvane won't be here till in the morning."

Lance broke off the low whistling which had wakened her, and turned to regard his wife for a moment before he spoke.

"I thought I'd get this packing done," he said non-committally. "If we was to go home to-day I could tote whatever we needed, and Buddy could fetch over the heaviest stuff to-morrow."

Callista dozed a little luxuriously, and woke to a smell of boiling coffee and frying pork.

"You've got breakfast enough there for three people," she commented, when she finally drew near the fire.

"Uh-huh," assented Lance. "I 'lowed Sylvane might come to-day, place of Saturday. Anyhow, we'll need something for a bite on the way." And Callista realized that her husband was indeed making the final preparations for their return.

As they sat down either side the frying pan, and Callista lifted the lid from the Dutch oven to take the bread out, they became aware of the sound of scrambling hoofs and parting branches. Whenever there was high water in Caney, this little valley was cut off, it was a retreat unknown, unvisited; the newcomer could be nobody but Sylvane. A moment later the boy made his appearance, clambering over the rocks, leading Satan by a long line.

"I 'lowed you-all wouldn't mind coming back a day sooner," he apologized, as he gratefully seated himself for an addition to his hastily snatched breakfast eaten by candle-light. "They's a feller that the Company has sent up to look over lands, and he's a-buyin' mineral rights—or ruther, gettin' options—on everybody's farms. They'll pay big prices, and Sis' Roxy said I ought to come and tell Lance of it."

The man listened indifferently, but the woman was all aglow. The touch of practical life had dissolved whatever of the gipsy mood Lance's nature had been able to lend hers. She questioned the boy minutely. Lance listening with ill-concealed impatience; and when the subject was exhausted, began to ask him with great particularity concerning her truck patch at home and whether Spotty, the young cow Lance had traded with Squire Ashe for, was doing well in her milk.

In spite of Lance's packing, there was much to do before camp could be struck, and on account of the canned fruit they moved so slowly that noon saw them still in the wilderness, dropping down by the stream's side to eat the snack they had brought with them. They went around by Father Cleaverage's this time, and stopped there, since Callista intended to present a few of her cherished huckleberries to Roxy, and they reached the cabin at the head of Lance's Laurel late in the afternoon.

For some reason which he could not himself have told you, Lance felt strangely wearied and dissatisfied. He looked back to the week past, and admitted that all had gone well; days of fishing and dreaming, evenings under the open sky with the banjo humming, the not unwelcome fire leaping up, and the baby asleep on Callista's lap. Could a man have asked more?

The son of the house had thriven amazingly on it, and this evening he was assuming airs so domineering that his father professed fear of him.

"Look a here, young feller," Lance said, as the big eight-months-old came creeping across the floor and hammered on his knee to be taken up, "you're about to run me out o' the house." He lifted his son on his arm, and, carrying the banjo in the other hand, beyond reach of the clutching, fat fingers, went to the doorstone with them. "Oh, you're your mammy over again," he admonished the baby. "You don't own up to me at all. I wisht I had me a nice gal o' your size, that would admit I was her daddy."

Callista had her supper nearly ready. Growing now, with motherhood, intensely material,—or, as Lance had more

than once jokingly declared, a trifle grasping,—the selling of the land to the Company for a big price occupied all her thoughts.

"You'll go over to Squire Ashe's soon in the morning, won't you Lance and see about the land?" she questioned. "Sylvane said the man was stayin' at Ashe's."

"I don't know as I want to sell," the owner of Jesse Lance's Gap hundred observed indifferently, running random little chords on his banjo. "I ain't rightly studied about it."

"Well, I wish you would study about it," urged Callista. "I think it's your duty to."

"I think it's your duty to, duty to, dute,"

hummed Lance to a twanging accompaniment from the strings. "Looks like I've heard them words before somewheres. I'll be blessed if that ain't Sis' Roxy's tune you've took up, Callista!"

"Your sister does her duty in this world," asserted Callista tartly. "It's nothing but the mineral rights, they'll want. All that talk you had this mornin' about the land coming from your gran'pappy, and your not wanting to leave it, is just to—to have your own way."

Lance raised his eyebrows.

"Would you say so?" he debated, his voice quiet, but the spark shining deep in his hazel eye. "Well now, I'd have said—if you'd axed me—that I've had my own way most generally without resorting to such. I'm ruther expectin' to have my own way from this time out, and take no curious methods of gettin' it."

"Well, what are you going to do about selling the land?" she persisted.

Lance lifted the baby's fat hand and pretended to pick the banjo strings with the pointed, inadequate fingers, to the young man's serious enjoyment. Callista waited for what she considered a reasonable time, and then prompted.

"Lance. Lance, did you hear me?"

"Oh, yes, I heared you well enough," Lance told her composedly. "I was just a-studyin' on the matter."

Again silence, punctuated by the aimless twanging of the banjo strings, the little sounds from the summer world without, the quick, light tapping of Callista's feet and the little whisper of her skirts as she moved about her task.

"Well—have you studied?" she inquired abruptly at length.

"Uh-huh," agreed Lance negligently, curling himself down on the doorstone a little further, "an' I'm studyin' yet. Ye see that there feller they sent out for an agent met me on the big road one day about a month ago and bantered me to trade. I told him I'd let him know, time I got back."

"And you never named it to me!" Callista said sharply, pausing, dish in hand by the table side, and staring at her husband with reprehending eyes. "You never said a word to me about it; and you went off on that foolish camping trip! For the good gracious, I don't know what men are made of!"

"Some are made of one thing, and some of another," allowed Lance easily, leaning his head back against the door jamb and half closing his eyes.

"Before we went away," repeated Callista reproachfully. "Maybe you've lost your chance."

The spur to Lance Cleaverage, the goad, was ever the hint to go slower; applied recklessly, it was quite sufficient to make him dig heels and toes into the track and refuse to go at all. At Callista's suggestion that he had missed his chance, he balked entirely.

"Well, I don't know as I want to sell," he reiterated. "That's what I told the man—and that's the truth."

"Of course you want to sell," asserted Callista in exasperation, "and you want to sell terrible bad—we all do. Nobody in the Turkey Tracks has got any money. We just live from hand to mouth, and dig what we get out of the ground mighty hard. Oh, I wish't I was a man. I'd go straight down to the Settlement and sell this land before I came back."

A faint color showed itself in her husband's brown cheeks. His lips parted slightly and remained so for a moment before he spoke.

"Not unless the man you was chanced to be me, you wouldn't sell my land," he said at length, speaking softly, almost dreamily.

Callista's temper was slow, but it was implacable. She eyed her husband for a moment and turned to begin dishing up her supper. Lance lifted his son back once more out of reach of the instrument, set him comfortably against the propped open door, took up the banjo and commenced to play a lively air for the boy's diversion.

"Flenton Hands has sold," Callista flung out the words as she bent over the hearth to a pot that stood there. She had the news from Roxy Griever.

"Uh-huh," agreed Lance indefinitely, and offered no question as to what the lands had brought or whether the deal was actually closed.

"Sylvane said Gran'pappy met him in the big road, and he said that them that didn't sell now, or that just give options, would be sorry afterwards. He thinks the Company's mistaken about the coal being on this side o' the ridge, and that they'll soon find it out and quit buying."

"That so?" laughed Lance. "Well, in that case, I sha'n't make no efforts. I'd hate to get anything off the Company that wasn't coming to me, and I reckon—"

He broke off suddenly. Callista had turned to face him, white, angry as he had never seen her before. Her blue eyes rounded meaningly to the downy poll of the baby sitting on the floor between them. This was how much he cared for the up-bringing and the future of the child.

"Lance Cleaverage," she said in a low, even tone, "a woman that's married to a man, and lived with him for two

years, and got his child to raise, ought to quit him for such a speech as that."

This was the ultimate challenge. Here was the gage thrown down. She dared him. He leaned forward to lift back the boy, who was clambering once more for the banjo. Then he straightened up and looked his Callista full in the eye, breathing light and evenly, half smiling, his face strangely luminous.

"All right," he said, and his voice rang keen-edged and vibrant. "If them's your ruthers—walk out. What's a'keepin' you? Shain't be said I ever hendered a woman that wanted to quit me."

Very softly, Callista set down the plate of bread she held. Gazing straight ahead of her, she stood a moment rigid, in a waiting, listening attitude. Out of her mood of cold displeasure, of nagging resentment, flamed, at her husband's words, that sudden fire of relentless rage of which Callista was capable. Her sight cleared, and she became aware of what she was staring at—the wall, with its well-planned shelves of Lance's contriving; the beautifully whittled utensils and small, dainty implements of cedar which he had made for her use. Slowly her glance swept the circle of the room. Evidences of Lance's skill and cleverness were everywhere; proofs that he had persistently tamed both to the service of wife and home. Yet, at this moment, these things made no appeal. Mechanically she inspected her supper table, then turned and moved swiftly across the open passage to the room beyond. Promptly, unerringly, she gathered together a bundle of needments for herself and the child, thrust them in a clean flour sack, and swung it across her arm. Going back, she found her husband still sprawled in the doorway, his side face held to the darkening interior of the room behind him. Banjo on knee, he leaned against the lintel, whistling beneath his breath, his eyes on the far primrose band of light dying down in the west.

Callista gave no further glance at the home which had been much to her. She averted her gaze stonily from the husband who had once been all. Bending, with a single motion she swept the baby up in her arm, raised him to her shoulder and stepped to the open doorway. Lance never turned his head or seemed to note her. He made room for her passage without appearing to move a muscle. Out she went and down to the gate—a real gate, that swung true and did not drag; Lance's planning and handiwork. She unlatched it, passed through, and drew it shut behind her, never looking back.

And with scarcely a change of attitude and expression, except that his fingers twitched a bit and the smile on his lean, brown, young face became set and unnatural, he watched her evenly swaying figure pass on down the road. Head defiantly erect, eyes strangely bright. Lance stared meaninglessly, like a man shot through but not yet crumpling to his fall. The baby fluttered a fat, white, little starfish of a hand over his mother's shoulder and called "Bye-by," the sum of all his attainments in the matter of language.

The man did not look up. His head was bent now, his gaze had forsaken the slender new moon swinging like a boat in the greenish haze of the western sky, where some smoldering coals of sunset yet sent up gray twilight smoke.

Callista vanished between the trees. It was dusk, and deeply still. Down in the alders, beside the spring branch, the whippoorwills were calling. In the intervals of their far, plaintive importunity, the silence was punctuated lightly by the tiny, summer-evening chirpings in the grass.

The moon sank lower, the sunset coals burned into swart cinders; the hosts of the dark marched in upon the still figure on the doorstone where Lance crouched motionless, his face drooped almost to the threshold, his arms flung forward till they touched the nodding weeds by the path. So an hour counted itself out, and there was no change in his posture, no lifting of the head. The little moon finally dropped down behind the hills; dew lay thick on the curls beside the great limestone slab. About ten o'clock a cloud blew in through the Gap, bearing a tiny shower of summer rain. Under the cool pattering that drenched his hair and garments. Lance stirred not at all; but all the noises of the July night were hushed by it, and in the chill which followed, he shivered. Deep in the night's silent heart, a bird cried out; Lance started and raised his face to the darkness with a sort of groan.

"And this time she won't come back," he whispered.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### CALLISTA CLEVERAGE GOES HOME.

CALLISTA reached her grandfather's gate when the old man was just finishing that last pipe he loved to smoke in his big hickory arm chair on the porch before he lay down for his night's rest. In the soft, summer night, beginning to be thick with stars, he was aware that whoever the newcomer was, it was someone well known to the dogs, for the chorus of greetings was distinctly friendly. Yet his keen old hunter's ears noticed the surprised yap of a younger hound born since Callista left the farm; and when his granddaughter emerged into the light of the doorway, he was scarcely surprised.

"Good evenin', Gran'pappy. Where's Mother?" Callista greeted him.

Before Ajax could answer her, his daughter-in-law came hurrying out crying,

"Lord love yo' soul, honey! Did you git home at last to see yo' mammy that's—"

Callista silenced her with a raised hand.

"W'y, Callisty honey," ejaculated Mrs. Gentry, examining her anxiously, "is anything the matter with Lance?"

A slight contraction passed across the visitor's face, as they watched it, but she answered coldly, evenly,

"I reckon there's nothing more the matter of Lance Cleverage than there always has been. I've come home."

Dead silence followed this statement. Then old Ajax knocked the ashes out of his pipe and slowly put it in his pocket.

"Uh-huh," he agreed, "you've come home—and I always knowed you would."

Octavia turned on him crying in a voice more tremulous with tears than anger,

"Now, Pap Gentry—"



But Callista interposed, with the faintest flicker of her old fire,

"Let him have his say. I told you-all once, standin' right here on this porch, that I'd never come home to this house with empty hands—that I'd bring something. Well, I have. I've brought this child."

Octavia was striving to take the baby from his mother's arms, to draw Callista into the house. At this she began to cry,

"Make her hush, Pap Gentry," she pleaded. "Don't set there and let my gal talk that-a-way!"

But old Ajax, remembering the turbulent days of his youth, knowing from his own wild heart in those long past days the anger that burned in Callista, and must have way, wisely offered no interference.

"I've come home to stay," Callista pursued bitterly, "and I've brought my boy. But ye needn't be afraid of seein' us come. Sence I lived here I've learned how to work. I can earn my way, and his, too."

"Callista," sobbed the mother, clinging to her daughter, still seeking to draw her forward, "you're welcome here; and, if anything, the boy is welcomer. We ain't got nobody but you. Pappy, make her welcome; tell her that we're proud to have her as long as she's willin' to stay, and—and—" she hesitated desperately—"we'd be proud to have Lance, too."

She instantly saw her mistake. Callista drew herself sharply from her mother's detaining arms and sat down on the porch edge, hushing the child whom their talk had disturbed. Presently she said—and her voice sounded low, and cold, and clear,

"I have quit Lance Cleaverage. You needn't name his being anywhere that I'm at."

Gentry snorted, and heaved himself up in his chair as though to go into the house.

"I consider that I had good cause to quit him," Callista went on; "but I'm not a-goin' to—"

"I don't want to know yo' reasons!" broke in old Ajax fiercely. "I say, reason! Reason and you ort not to be named in the same day. Yo' mammy spiled you rotten—I told her so, a-many's the time—and now them that wishes you well has to look on and see you hit out and smash things."

The deep, rumbling old voice sank and quavered toward the end.

"I wasn't going to give you any reasons," returned Callista contemptuously. "Them that I've got are betwixt me and Lance—and there they'll always be. I would rather live at home; but I can earn my keep and the chap's anywhere. Shall I go—or stay?"

The old man put down a shaking hand and laid it on her shoulder—a tremendous demonstration for Ajax Gentry.

"You'll stay, gal," he said in a broken tone. "You'll stay, and welcome. But I want you to know right here and now that I think Lance Cleaverage is a mighty fine man. You' my gran'child—my onliest one—I set some considerable store by ye myse'f. But there's nothing you've said or done that gives me cause to change my mind about Lance."

Callista rose, still hushing her boy in her arms.

"If I'm to live with you-all," she said in a tone of authority which had never been hers in the days of her petted, spoiled girlhood, "I may as well speak out plain and say that I never want to hear the name of Cleaverage if I can help it. If you don't agree to that—without any why or wherefore—I'd rather not stay."

"Oh, honey—oh, honey!" protested Octavia tearfully. "Gran'pappy and me will do just whatever you say. Fetch the baby in the house. God love his little soul, hit's the first time he's ever been inside of these doors—and to think he should come this-a-way!"

Callista drew back and eyed her mother.

"If you're going to go on like that," she said, "I reckon it would be just as well for me to live somewheres else. You won't see me shed a tear. I don't know what there is to cry for. Gran'pappy is an old man—he ought to have some peace about him. I won't come in unless you hush."

And having laid her will upon them both, Callista Cleaverage re-entered the dwelling of her girlhood and disposed her sleeping boy on the bed in the fore room.

To the mind of man, which looks always to find noise and displacement commensurate with size, there is something appalling about the way in which the great events of life slip smoothly into position, fitting themselves between our days with such nicety as to seem always to have been there. Little calamities jar and fret and refuse to be adjusted, but matters of life and death and eternity flow as smoothly as water.

Callista might have dropped easily into her old place in the home, but the woman who had returned to the Gentry roof could never have contented herself in that narrow sphere. Strong, efficient, driven to tireless activity by memories which one might guess stung and hurt the mind at leisure, she cleared out the long unused weaving room and set the loom to work.

"Aunt Faithful Bushares learned me to weave whilst I was stayin' at Miz. Griever's, after the baby was born," she told her mother. "I'll finish this rag carpet you've got in the loom, and then I'll be able to earn some ready money. I can weave mighty pretty carpet, and a body can get a plenty of it to do from down in the Settlement. They's things I need from the store now and agin, and this boy's got to have something laid by for him, to take care of him as he grows."

Thus boldly, at the outset—though without mentioning the forbidden name—she made it known to them that she would accept nothing from her husband. Octavia Gentry was always on the edge of tears when she talked to Callista about her plans; at other times, the daughter's presence in the house was cheerful and sustaining. If Callista brooded on the shipwreck of her affairs, she asked no sympathy from anyone. Indeed, so far from seeking it, she resented bitterly any suggestion of the sort.

Lance's own family blamed him more than did Callista's people. Roxy Griever, of course, was loud in her denunciations.

"Hit's jest the trick a body might expect from one of them men," she commented. "He never was fitten for Callisty;

and when a feller plumb outmarries hisself, looks like hit makes a fool of him, and he cain't noways behave."

Old Kimbro gazed upon the floor.

"I reckon it's my fault, Roxana," he said gently. "Lance has a strong nature, and he needed better discipline than what I was able to give him. I had my hopes that he'd get it in his marriage, for daughter Callista is sure a fine woman; but—well, maybe time'll mend it. I don't give up all hope yet."

"Miz. Gentry sent word that she wanted me to help them through fodder-pullin'," Sylvane announced. "If I do, I'm a-goin' to watch my chance to talk to Sis' Callie. She's always the sweetest thing to me. I'll bet I can get in a good word for Buddy."

But it was Roxy Griever who saw Callista before Sylvane did. Octavia, desperately anxious and perturbed, sent word to the widow to drop in as though by accident and spend the day. Callista came into the room without knowing who was present. The two women were fluttering about over her baby, exclaiming and admiring. The young mother greeted the visitor with an ordinary manner, which yet was a trifle cold.

"The boy's mighty peart," the Widow Griever said eagerly. "But," examining Callista with a somewhat timid eye, "you' lookin' a little puny yo'self. Sis' Callie."

"Oh, I'm perfectly well," returned Callista sharply.

There fell a silence, upon which Roxy's voice broke, husky and uncertain.

"Well, I hope you won't harbor no hard feelin's toward any of Lance's kin-folks, for we don't none of us uphold him."

At the name a quiver went through Callista's frame, the blue eyes fixed on Roxy's face flickered a bit in their steady, almost fierce regard. Then she bent and picked up her child.

"I reckon Mother hasn't said anything to you," she explained evenly; "but I have asked each and every in this house not to say—You spoke a name that I won't hear from anybody if I can help it. If you and me are to sit down at the same table, you'll have to promise not to mention that—that person again."

Then she walked out, leaving the two older women staring at each other, aghast, both of them with tears in their eyes.

"But I cain't blame her," Roxana hastened to declare. "I know in my soul that everything that's chanced is Lance's fault. He always was the meanest little boy, and the worst big boy, and the sinfulest young man, that ever a God-fearin' father had! He never was half way fitten for Callista—and I always said so."

"Oh, Miz. Griever—hush!" protested Octavia. "She'll hear you— Sis' ain't but gone in the next room."

"Well, I hope she may," the widow pursued piously, in a slightly raised tone. "I'd hate mightily to have my sweet Sis' Callie think that I held with any sech; or that I didn't know what her troubles had been, or didn't feel that she was plumb jestified and adzactly right in all points and in all ways whatever."

"M—maybe she is," sniffed soft-hearted Octavia; "but I love Lance mighty well. Right now I could jest break down and bawl when I think o' him there in the cabin all alone by himself, and—"

The closing words were lost in the apron she raised to her eyes. If Callista heard the controversy, it had an odd effect; for she treated the Widow Griever with considerable resentment, and, laying a gentle hand on her mother's shoulder, said to her apart:

"I don't want to be a torment to you, Mammy; but I believe when any of those folks are about I'd better just take the baby and stay in my own house."

"But, honey," her mother remonstrated, "Pappy Gentry's aimin' to have Sylvanus here all through fodder-pullin' time. Is that a-goin' to trouble you? Do you just despise all them that's kin to—would you ruther we didn't have the boy?"

Callista shook her head.

"It ain't for me to say," she repeated stubbornly. Then, with a sudden rush of tears in her hard eyes, "I do love Sylvane. I always did. I couldn't have an own brother I'd think more of. But—well, let him come over here if you want him. I can keep out of his way."

The "house" to which Callista proposed to retire was the outside cabin, where the loom stood. This she had fitted up for the use of herself and child, as well as a weaving room, saying that the noise might disturb Gran'pappy if the baby were in the house all the time. And it was at the threshold of that outside cabin that, only a few days later, Sylvane caught his sister-in-law and detained her, the baby on her arm. Little Ajax reared himself in his mother's hold and plunged at his youthful uncle, so that she had no choice but to turn and speak.

"How you come on, Sis' Callie?" Sylvane inquired, after he had tossed the heavy boy up a time or two and finally set him on his shoulder.

"Tol'able," Callista returned briefly. "I've got a lot of weavin' to do and it keeps me in the house pretty steady."

"I—was you leavin' in thar becaze I come?" inquired Sylvane with a boy's directness.

Callista shook her head.

"Didn't I tell you I was mighty busy?" she asked evasively. "You an' me always have been good friends, Sylvane, and I aim that we always shall be, if it lies in my power."

The young fellow looked up at her where she stood above him in the doorway.

"You ain't never a-goin' to fuss with me," he told her bluntly. "Besides, me and this chap is so petted on each other that you couldn't keep us apart," and he turned to root a laughing face into the baby's side, greatly to that serious-minded young man's enjoyment.

Callista smiled down at both of them, and Sylvane found something wintry and desolate in the smile.

"Weavin' is mighty hard work," he broke out impatiently. "Even Sis' Roxy says that, and the Lord knows she's ready to kill herself and everybody else around her with workin'. What makes you do so much of it, Sis' Callie?"

Callista looked past the two and answered:

"Sylvane, a woman with a child to support has to work hard here in the Turkey Tracks. If it wasn't for Mommie and Gran'pappy I'd go down in the Settlement, where I could earn more and earn it easier."

"Callista—honey," Sylvane bent forward and caught her arm. "You ain't got no call to talk that-a-way. Lance shore has a right to support his own son—even if you won't take nothin' from him for yo'self."

Callista removed her gaze from the far sky line and brought it down to her young brother-in-law. Now indeed her smile was wintry, even bitter.

"The man you named, Sylvane," she said explicitly, "has no notion of carin' what becomes of this child. Now that you've brought this up, I'll say to you what I haven't said to any other: it was this that caused me to quit Lance. You're right, I did leave the house in there for fear you should speak to me—and speak of him. If I could be sure that I'd never hear his name again, I'd be better suited. I reckon you'll have to promise not to bring this up again, or they'll sure get to be hard feelings between you and me."

Sylvane dropped back with a face of consternation, his hand fell away from her arm. He reached up and drew the boy down, so that the small, fair face was against his breast.

"Sis' Callie," he began incredulously, "I cain't believe it. Buddy's got quare ways, but them that loves him can understand. His own son—! Why, ef the chap was mine—" He broke off, and stood a moment in silence. "The meanest man there is, looks like to me, ort to be glad to do for his own child."

The words were not so strange on the lips of the tall seventeen-year-old boy with the child's eyes, since in mountain communities youths little older are often husbands and fathers.

"Well, air you going to promise me never to name it again?" demanded Callista, an almost querulous edge to her voice. Sylvane's resemblance to his brother, some gnawing knowledge of injustice toward the absent Lance, wrought upon her mood intolerably.

"No, I'll never name Buddy to you again," said Sylvane soberly. "If you and me ever talks of him, you'll have to mention it first. But if there is anything I can do for you, Sis' Callie, you know you have but to ask."

"I know that, Sylvane," Callista assured him, with a certain eagerness in her tone. "And they is something—something that I reckon nobody could do as well as you could. I need—I just have obliged to get my things from—from up yon in the Gap. Would you go fetch 'em for me, Brother?"

Sylvane, after all, was kin to Lance. He could not keep down a little thrill of pride, that his brother had thus far forced Callista's hand. But he answered gravely—almost sadly,

"I'll go this day, if you say so."

Securing permission from Ajax to absent himself, the boy hitched his old mule to the buckboard and hurried off to the home at the head of Lance's Laurel. Whether or not he found all of Callista's belongings packed and ready, what was said between the two men, no one knew. He returned near nightfall with Callista's trunk and one or two sizable bundles, while Spotty meekly led roped to the rear axle of the buckboard. Callista helped him into her cabin with the bundles; but when he would have untied Spotty she remonstrated.

"I surely thought you were fixing to take the cow over to yo' house," she said shortly. "It doesn't belong here."

"It was said to be yours," Sylvane told her, true to his promise not to mention his brother's name, even inferentially. "I 'lowed that the baby and—and all—would need the milk. Reckon you best leave her stay."

"No," said Callista positively. "The cow's nothing I have any concerns with. Maybe Sis' Roxy could make use of the milk. Take her along home, Sylvane, or drive her back where she came from—or turn her loose, for all of me."

And then Sylvane knew whether his brother had failed in care for the child.

When Callista came in from disposing of this question of the cow, she found her mother standing, inclined, as usual, to be tearful, over the boxes and bundles. Coming on one of these latter with a peculiar knot which Lance always used, and which he had once taught her the secret of, Callista experienced a sick revulsion of feeling.

"I wish you'd undo 'em and put 'em away for me. Mammy," she said with unusual gentleness. "I think I hear the baby."

"All right, honey, go 'long and 'tend to him. I'll see to these," agreed Octavia patiently.

Callista hurried over to the big house where young Ajax lay asleep, and, as chance would have it, found indeed that he had wakened. She was hushing him on her knee a few minutes later, when her mother appeared in the doorway, a little money held in her trembling hands, and her eyes now openly overflowing.

"That pore boy!" Octavia burst out. "Look what he sent you. Sis! Now, he hain't sold anything of his crop—not yet. The good Lord only knows whar he come by this; but what he could get his hands on, he's sent you."

Callista leaped to her feet and ran to the door, pushing her mother aside none too gently, offending Ajax greatly by her rough handling of him.

"Sylvane!" she cried in the direction of the horse lot where Sylvane had gone to exchange the harness for a saddle on the mule. "Whoo-ee—Sylvane!"

"I'm a-comin'," Sylvane's voice answered, and she turned swiftly to the bed and laid the baby down.

"Give me that money!" she demanded.

"What for?" asked Octavia with unexpected spirit, tucking the bills in against her arm and refusing them.

"I want to send it back by Sylvane."

"You ain't a-goin' to do any such thing," Octavia declared. "The good Lord! To think that I ever raised such a gal as you air!"

"Give it to me!" Callista laid hands upon her mother's arm, wrenching at it. "Here's Sylvane. Give it to me now!"

The thud of the mule's hoofs approaching the door came clearly to both of them. Callista could even distinguish the little cow's light feet following.

The two wrestled and swayed a moment, Callista pushing a strong, capable hand into the elbow where the bills and the few coins were held.

"Take it, then. Oh, my Lord!" moaned Octavia. "I think you're the hard-heartedest somebody I ever knew of. Pore Lance—pore Lance!"

Sylvane, riding to the door with the rejected cow, received with something of Lance's stoic grace the despised money. A thankfulness that his "Buddy" was rehabilitated in his eyes made him say, as he stuffed the small wad down in his pocket:

"An' I don't take back my word. Sis' Callie. You wouldn't have these; but whatever I can do is ready and waitin', you know that."

And somehow, in the hour of her victory, Callista tasted defeat.

## CHAPTER XX.

### DRAWN BLANK.

FOR a region of dwellers so scattered as those of the Turkey Tracks, the word neighborhood is a misnomer. Where the distances are so great from house to house, where there is no telephone, no milkman on regular rounds, no gossiping servants, one would have said that Callista might go home to her grandfather's and live a month without anyone suggesting that there had been a serious rupture between herself and Lance. But news of this sort travels in a mysterious way through the singularly intimate life of these thinly settled, isolated highlands. The first comers who saw Callista and her baby at the Gentry place knew in some curious fashion that she had forsaken Lance. Perhaps it was her air of permanence in the new home which was her old one; perhaps it was the fact that she had established her little household of two in that outside cabin. However it may be, Buck Fuson rode straight from the Gentry place to Derf's with the information—and found it there before him.

"Iley's man seen her jest at the aidge o' the evenin', streakin' through the woods 'crost the holler with the chap on her hip, and a bundle over her shoulder," Garrett Derf explained. "Them Injuns is smart about some things. He said to Iley when he come home that Lance's squaw had done shook him. Well!"

Gossip is generally personified as an old woman, but the men of a region like the Turkey Tracks are much thrown back upon it for an interest.

"Looks like Callisty never had been greatly petted on Lance," Fuson put forward, flinging a leg around the pommel of his saddle and sitting at ease.

Derf shook his head.

"I reckon she's like any other womern," he deprecated, with a sort of passive scorn. "You can spile the best of 'em. When Lance come over here the day after him and Callisty was wed and sot up housekeepin', and he showed hisse'f plumb crazy to spend money on her, I says to myse'f, says I, 'Yes, an' there'll be trouble in that fambly befo' snow flies.'"

He nodded with an air of one who utters the final wisdom, and Fuson could but agree.

"That's a fact," assented Buck, as one who knew something of the matter himself. "Man can pay out all he's worth, and still not satisfy a woman."

"Satisfy her!" echoed Derf. "Don't I tell you that it's the ruination of the best of 'em? They'll ax ye for anything, and then when they git it they'll quit ye, or turn ye out and pop the do' in yo' face. Lance was jest that-a-way. He wouldn't take a dare. Ef Callisty said she wanted the moon, and let on like she thought he was able to git it, he'd say nothin' and try to grab it for her."

"Ain't that Flent Hands's hawse?" asked Fuson suddenly, as Cindy trotted across the small home pasture and came to the fence.

"Uh-huh," agreed Derf, and the two men steadily avoided looking at each other. "Flent, he put the nag here with us so as to be handy. Him and me's got a trade up for openin' a store in the Settlement, him to run that end o' the business and me to run this end. Don't know how it'll turn out. He's been a-comin' and a-goin' considerable, and he left the filly with us. Says he aims to take her away to-morrow."

"Alf Dease 'lowed to me that Lance was sort o' pestered 'count of Flent havin' the filly," Fuson murmured abstractedly. "Said Lance wanted him to see could he buy her back. I reckon he couldn't go to Hands himself—Lance couldn't—way things air; but it seems he axed Dease to do it."

Derf was silent a moment, then,

"Some says that Lance Cleavage is fixin' to sell and go to Texas," he opened out categorically. "I've always been good friends with the feller, but I tell you right here and now, I'd be glad to see the last of him. He's got his word out agin Flenton Hands, and, whenever them two meets, there's liable to be interruptions. I'm a peaceful man, and I aim to keep a peaceful place, and I ain't got any use for sech. I wish't Lance would see it that-a-way and move out—I do for a fact."

Slowly Fuson straightened his foot down, sought and found his stirrup; meditatively he switched the mule's withers with the twig he carried, and spoke to the animal, digging a negligent heel into its side, to start it.

"Well, I must be movin'," he said.

Derf stood long, leaning on the rail fence, looking absently after the slow pacing mule in the dusty highway. He turned at the sound of Ola's steps behind him. She had a halter in her hand and was making for the horse lot.

"I hearn what you and Buck was talkin' about," she said defiantly. "I'm goin' to ketch me out Cindy and ride over to Lance's."

"Oh, ye air, air ye?" demanded her father. "Well," with free contempt, "much good may it do ye!"

But Ola was impervious to his scorn. A stone wall was the only barrier her direct methods recognized. She caught and saddled the filly, brought out her black calico riding skirt, hooked it on over her workaday frock, clambered to Cindy's back, and turned her into the little frequented woodsroad down which Lance used to come with his banjo to play for the dances. Cindy put forward her ears and nickered softly as they neared her old home, and Satan, running free in a field of stubble from which Lance had gathered the corn, came galloping to the boundary to stretch a friendly nose across to his old companion. Ola looked with relief at the black horse. Here was assurance that Lance was at home. Yet, when she got off, tied the filly, and made her way to the cabin, she found it all closed, silent, apparently deserted.

In the mountains, nobody raps on a door. Ola gave the customary hail, her voice wavering on the "hello!"

There was no answer.

Again she tried, drawing nearer, circling the house, forbearing to touch either of the doors or step on the porch.

"Hello, Lance! Hoo-ee—Lance!" she ventured finally. "It's Ola. I got somethin' to say to you."

She stood long after that effort. A wind went by in the oak leaves, whispering to itself derisively. The shabby, stubbed little figure in the dooryard, halting with rusty calico riding skirt dragged about her, choked and shivered.

"I know he's in thar," she muttered to herself resentfully, and then marched straight up the steps and shook the door. The rattling of the latch gave her to understand that the bar was dropped. People cannot go outside and bar a door.

"Lance," she reiterated, "I got somethin' to tell you about Cindy."

The hound who had accompanied Lance and Ola on many a stolen hunting trip or fishing excursion roused from his slumbers in the barn and came baying down to greet her. She paid no attention to the dog.

"Flent he's had the filly at our house for two weeks," she said, addressing the closed and barred door. "He—he's a-aimin' to take her away to-morrow. Do you want me to buy her back for you? Lance—aw, say, Lance—do you? I could."

Outside were the usual summer sounds, the rattle of the dog's feet on the porch floor as he capered about her. Within, hearken as she might, the silence was unbroken, till suddenly across it cut, with a sharp pang of melody, the twanging of banjo strings.

Ola began to cry. Springing forward, she beat fiercely on the door with her palms, then laid hold of its knob once more to rattle it.

Under her touch it swung wide, revealing an empty room, spotlessly clean, in perfect order, with Lance's banjo, yet humming, lying on the floor where it had fallen from its nail.

"I know you' in thar," she sobbed, speaking now to the four walls that mocked her with a semblance of welcome. "This here is jest like you. Lance Cleaverage. This is the way you always treat a friend. You ain't a-lookin', you ain't a-carin'!"

Her voice broke shrilly on the last words, and, whirling, she sat down on the step, flinging her forehead upon her knees, sobbing, catching her breath, and still accusing.

"I don't know why I come here this-a-way, a-hangin' around after you!" she stormed. "Hit's jest like it's always been—I cain't he'p myself. The good Lord! What's Callisty Gentry thinkin' of?—her that had you, and wouldn't keep you!"

Silence. The hound curled down at her feet. Cindy, pulling loose from her tether, cropped the roadside grass with steady, even bites. Callista's hollyhocks nodded by the doorstone. In the room there Callista's hand showed everywhere. The Derf girl sobbed herself quiet.

"Lance," she said heavily at length, getting to her feet, "I'm a-goin' to leave the Turkey Tracks. You won't see me no more. I"—she stood and listened long—"well, good-bye. Lance."

She halted down the steps, her glance over her shoulder in the vacant room, so like the empty expressionless face Lance used to turn to her and her blandishments. She got to Cindy and prepared to mount. Again she waited, with her hand caught in the filly's mane; but there came no answer from the doorway, no sound nor movement in the house. She climbed droopingly to the saddle, and took the homeward trail.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### FLENTON HANDS.

LANCE CLEAVERAGE'S wife had been many weeks in the home of her grandfather when it was noticed that Flenton Hands made occasion to come very frequently to the Gentry place. Ajax was well off, for the mountains, and they had always been hospitable; there was much coming and going about the farm; yet the presence of this visitor could not but be noted.

"I reckon you'll have to speak to him. Pappy," Octavia said finally. "I had it on the end of my tongue to name it to him the other day that hit don't look well for him to come back here a-hangin' around the wife of a man that has threatened him. I know in my soul that Lance Cleaverage would not want more than a fair excuse to—Well, an' I couldn't blame him, neither."

It was evident to all that Octavia Gentry, though now as ever she loved her daughter above everything, could not find it in her soft heart to censure Lance. Indeed that heart bled for him and the sufferings she felt sure were his.

It chanced that Ajax spoke to his frequent guest the next day and in the presence of his daughter-in-law. Flenton had come on one of his aimless visits; he was sitting on the porch edge, and Callista had gathered up her baby and retreated to the weaving room, whence the steady "thump-a-chug! thump-a-chug!" of the loom came across to them. Flenton's slaty gray eyes began to wander in the direction of the sounds, and Ajax, prompted by anxious looks from Octavia, finally addressed him.

"Flenton," he began, removing his pipe from his lips, and examining its filling as he spoke, "you've come here right smart of late."

The visitor looked doubtfully from one to the other.

"Y-yes, Mr. Gentry," he allowed uneasily, "I have."

"Uh-huh," Ajax pursued in deep, even tones. "Yo're welcome in this house, like any other neighbor, and they ain't a man on top o' the Turkey Track mountings that can say I ever shut my door in the face of a friend. But—I'll ax you fa'r and open—do you think hit's wise?"

Again Flenton's eyes went rapidly, almost stealthily, from one face to the other.

"Do I think what's wise?" he finally managed to inquire, with fair composure.

"Well," said the elder man slowly, "in the first place we'll say that Lance Cleaverage ain't a feller to fool with. We'll say that, and we'll lay it by and not name him again."

He paused a moment, then went on:

"Like some several other o' the boys hereabouts, you used to think a heap o' Sis before she was wedded. She's quit her man; and do you think hit's wise to visit so much at the house where she's stayin'? This matter consarns me and the girl's mother, too. I take notice all the rest o' the boys lets Sis alone. How about you?"

This time Flent did not turn his head. He stared out over the hills and made no answer for so long that Octavia spoke up, a tremor of impatience, or of resentment, in her voice.

"Now, Flent, they's no use o' talkin'; of all of Sis's lovyers, you hung on the longest. Look like you wouldn't take 'no' for an answer. Why, the very night her and Lance was married, you done yo' best to step betwixt 'em. And worst is, you don't quit it now that they air wedded."

"Octavy," demurred old Ajax, chafed at seeing a man so bearded by one of the weaker sex, "Flenton may have something to say—let him speak for hisself."

Thus encouraged, Hands faced about toward them.

"No, I ain't never give up Callisty," he said doggedly, "and I ain't never a-goin' to. She's quit her husband." Even in his eagerness he did not find it possible to take Lance's name on his lips. "She's left that thar feller that never done her right, and never was fit for her, to consarn himself with his own evil works and ways; and she's come home here to you-all; and I don't see what should interfere now between her an' me."

Octavia's comely face crimsoned angrily.

"A married woman—a wife—" she broke out with vehemence. But her father-in-law checked her by a motion of the hand.

"Yes, Callisty's quit Lance Cleaverage," agreed Ajax dryly. "An' she's come home. But I reckon she'll behave herself. Leastways, she will while she's in my house."

At the seeming implication, Octavia's fingers trembled in her lap, and she turned a wounded look upon Ajax.

"Well, Pappy! You' no call—" she was beginning, when Flenton, with a manner almost fawning, interrupted her.

"You don't rightly git my meaning, Mr. Gentry—nor you, neither, Miz. Gentry," he said humbly. "I've lived considerable in the Settlement. Down thar, when married people cain't git along, and quits each other, there's—there's ways—Down in the Settlement—"

He broke off under the disconcerting fire of Ajax's eye.

"Oh—one o' them thar *di-vo'ces*, you mean?" the old man said, strong distaste giving an edge to his deep voice.

"Well, they ain't a-goin' to be none sech between Lance and Callisty," Octavia protested indignantly. "If that's what you' hangin' around for, you'll have yo' trouble for yo' pains, Flenton Hands." She got up sharply, went into the house, and shut the door, leaving the two men together.

Yet when she reviewed her daughter's conduct, her mind, ever alert to the interests of the erring Lance, misgave her. Callista seemed hard enough and cold enough for anything. Octavia heard the two masculine voices, questioning, replying, arguing. She had put herself beyond understanding the words they uttered, but presently feminine curiosity overcame her, and she was stealing back to listen, when, through the small window, she saw Flenton Hands get heavily to his feet. A moment he stood so, looking down, then, her head close to the sash, she heard him ask,

"I've got yo' permission, have I, Mr. Gentry, to go over thar and name this all out to Callisty?"

"I don't know as you've got my permission, and I don't forbid ye," Ajax Gentry said haughtily. "I hold with lettin' every feller go to destruction his own way. He gits thar sooner; and that's whar most of 'em ort to be."

"Well, you don't say I shain't go and speak to her of it," Hands persisted. "I'm a honest man, a perfesser and a church member, and what I do is did open and above-boards. I thank ye kindly for yo' good word."

Old Ajax, who certainly had given no good word, merely grunted as Hands made his way swiftly across the grass to the cabin where the loom stood.

"Don't worry, Octavy," he said, not unkindly, as his daughter-in-law's distressed face showed at the window.

"Shorely Sis has got the sense to settle him."

Callista, hard at work, was aware of her visitor by the darkening of the doorway. She looked up and frowned slightly, but gave no other sign of noting his coming. The baby sat on the floor, playing gravely with a feather which stuck first to one plump little finger end and then another. Had Flenton Hands possessed tact, he might have made an oblique opening toward the mother through the child. As it was, he began in a choked, husky voice,

"Callisty, honey—"

He broke off. The concluding word was said so low that Callista could pretend not to have heard it, and she did so.

"Callisty," he repeated, coming in and leaning tremulously forward on the loom, "I want to have speech with you."

"I'm not saying anything against your speakin', am I?" inquired Callista. "But I'm right busy now, Flenton. It isn't likely that you could have anything important to say to me, and I reckon it'll keep."

"You know mighty well and good that what I have to say to you is plenty important," Flenton told her, shaken out of his usual half-cringing caution. "Callisty, yo' husband has quit ye; he's down in the Settlement, and is givin' it out to each and every that he's aimin' to sell to the Company and go to Texas."

He would have continued, but a glance at her face showed him such white rage that he was startled.

"I didn't aim to make you mad," he pleaded. "I know you quit Lance first—good for nothin' as he was, he'd never have given you up, I reckon, till you shook him."

Callista set a hand against her bosom as though she forcibly stilled some emotion that forbade speech. Finally she managed to say with tolerable composure,

"Flenton Hands, you've named a name to me that I won't hear from anybody's lips if I can help it—least of all from yours. If that's the speech you came to have with me, you better go—you cain't take yourself off too soon."

"No," Hands clung to his point, "no, Callisty, that ain't all I come to say. I want to speak for myse'f."

He studied her covertly. He did not dare to mention the divorce which he had assured her grandfather he was ready and anxious to secure for her.

"I,"—he was breathing short, and he moistened his lips before he could go on—"I just wanted to say to you, Callisty, that thar's them that loves you, and respects and admires you, and thinks the sun rises and sets in you."

Lance's wife looked down with bitten lip. Her full glance studied the cooing child playing on the floor near her feet.

"Well—and if *that's* all you came to say, you might have been in better business," she told him coldly. "I reckon I've got a few friends."

She chose to ignore the attitude of lover which he had assumed. After a moment's silence Flenton began desperately,

"Yo' grandfather named to me that I ought not to visit at the house like I do without my intentions towards and concerning you was made clear," twisting Grandfather Gentry's words to a significance that would certainly have amazed the original speaker. "I told him that I was a honest man and a member in good standin' of Brush Arbor church, and that what I wanted of you was—"

He caught the eye of the girl at the loom and broke off. The red was rising in her pale face till she looked like the Callista of old.

"Don't you never say it!" she choked. "Don't you come here to me, a wedded wife, doin' for my child, and talk like I was a girl lookin' for a husband. I've got one man. Him and me will settle our affairs without help from you. I may not let you nor nobody else, name him to me—but I'll take no such words as this from your mouth."

"An' you won't let me come about any more—you won't speak to me?" demanded Hands, in alarm.

"What is it to me where you come or where you stay?" Callista flung back scornfully. "This ain't house of mine—I'm not the one to bid you go or come."

And with this very unsatisfactory permission, Flenton was obliged to content himself. Thereafter he went to the Gentry's as often as he dared. He sent Little Liza when he was afraid to go; and if Callista put her foot off the place, she found herself dogged and followed by her unwelcome suitor.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE SPEECH OF PEOPLE.

AND now gossip began to weave a confusing veil of myth around the deserted man, such as time and idle conjecture spread about a deserted house. One day, visitors to the cabin in the Gap would find the place apparently forsaken and untenanted; the next, Lance would be seen plodding with bent shoulders at the plow, making ready a patch to plant with turf oats for winter pasture, lifting his head to answer nobody's hail, barely returning a greeting. It was evident that in his times of activity he worked with a fury of energy at the carrying forward of the farm labor, the improvements he and Callista had planned in the home. Plainly these were dropped as suddenly as entered upon when his mood veered, and he shut himself up in the cabin, or was out with his rifle on the distant peaks of White Oak, in the ravines of Possum Mountain, or beating the breaks of West Caney. He made more than one trip to the Settlement, too, where he was known to be trying to get Dan Bayliss to buy back Cindy for him. Always a neat creature, careful of his personal appearance, a certain indefinite forlornness came to show itself upon him now—a touch of the wild. He was thin, often unshaven, and his hair straggled long on his coat collar. But the soul that looked out of Lance's eyes, a bayed, tormented thing, was yet unsubdued. No doubt he was aghast at the whole situation; but willing to abase himself or cry "enough," he was not.

Ola Derf, true to her word, left the Turkey Tracks the day after her unsuccessful attempt at an interview with Lance.

When it came to be said that he had sold to the coal company, not only the mineral rights of his land but the acres themselves, and that he was going West, rumor of course coupled the two names in that prospective hegira. There were those who would fain have brought this word to Callista, hoping thereby to have something to report; but the blue fire of Callista's eye, the cutting edge of her quiet voice, the carriage of that fair head of hers, warned such in time, and they came away without having opened the subject.

It was Preacher Drumright who officially took the matter up, and set out, as he himself stated, "to have the rights of it." His advent at the Gentry place greatly fluttered Octavia, who knew well what to expect, and had grown to dread her daughter's inflexible temper. The inevitable chickens were chased and caught; Callista set to work preparing the usual preacher's dinner. Ajax was fence mending in a far field; Octavia entertained the guest in the open porch, since, though it was now mid-October, the day was sunny, and your mountaineer cares little for chill in the air. Drumright's sharp old eyes followed the graceful figure in its journeyings from table to hearth-stone; they stared thoughtfully at the bright, bent head, relieved against the darkness of the cavernous black chimney. Finally he spoke out, cutting across some mild commonplace of Octavia's.

"Callisty, come here," he ordered brusquely.

The young woman put a last shovelful of coals back on the lid of the Dutch oven whose browning contents she had just been inspecting, and then came composedly out, wiping her hands on her apron, to stand before the preacher quite as she used when a little girl.

"I hear you've quit yo' husband—is that so?" Drumright demanded baldly.

Callista kept her profile to him and looked absently away toward the distant round of yellow Old Bald, just visible against an unclouded sky. The color never varied on the fair cheek, and the breath which stirred her blue cotton bodice was light and even. When she did not reply, the old man ruffled a bit, and prompted her.

"I ax you, is it true?"

She drew up her shoulders in the very faintest possible shrug, as of one who releases a subject scarce worth consideration.

"You said you'd heard," she returned indifferently. "I reckon you can follow your ruthers about believing."

Drumright's long, rugged face crimsoned with rising rage. His lean, knotted hands twitched as he started forward in his seat. He could have slapped the delicate, unmoved, disdainful face before him.

"To yo' preacher, that's nothin' less than a insult," he stated, looking from one woman to the other.

"Well, Sis won't let nobody name this to her," Octavia broke in hurriedly. "An' I ort to have warned you—"

"Warned me!" snorted the preacher. "Callisty won't let this and that be named! Well, if she was my gal, she'd git some things named to her good and plenty."

Callista bent to pick up, from the porch floor, an acorn that had fallen with a sharp rap from the great oak over their heads; she tossed it lightly out into the grass, then she made as though to return to her cooking.

"Hold on!" Drumright admonished her. "I ain't through with you yet. This here mammy o' yourn sp'iled you till them that ort to give you good advice is scared to come within reach. But I ain't scared. I've got a word to say. This man Cleavage has got property—and a right smart. Hit's been told all around that he's sold out to the coal company and is goin' West with—well, they say he's goin' West. Now, havin' a livin' wife and a infant child, he cain't make no good deed without you sign; and what I want to know is, has he axed you to sign sech? Ef he has, I hope you had the sense to refuse. Ef he comes to you with any sech, I want you to send for me to deal with him—you hear? Send for me."

The rasping voice paused. Drumright was by no means through with his harangue, but he stopped a moment to arrange his ideas. He dwelt with genuine comfort on the thought of being called in to have it out once for all with Lance Cleavage. Then Callista's voice sounded, clear and quiet.

"Mr. Drumright," she said, "if you're never sent for till I do the sending, you'll stay away from this house the rest of yo' days. I'm a servant here, a-workin' for my livin' and the livin' of my child. Them that my grandfather and my mother bids to this house, I cook for and wait on; but speak to you again I never will. Mammy, the dinner's ready; if you don't mind putting it on the table, I'll go out and see is the baby waked up."

With this she stepped lightly down and walked across to her own cabin.

Drumright turned furiously upon Octavia. She, at least, was a member of his church, and bound to take his tongue-lashings meekly. What he found to say was not new to her, and she accepted it with tears of humiliation; but when he wound up with declaring that she had brought all this about by giving her daughter to an abandoned character, even she plucked up spirit to reply.

"You may be adzactly right in all you say," she told the harsh, meddlesome old man; "but I've got the first thing to see about Lance Cleavage that I couldn't forgive. What him and Sis fell out about I don't know, and she won't tell me; but as to blamin' it all on Lance, that I'll never do."

Then she dished up and set before her irate guest a dinner which might have soothed a more perverse temper. Ajax Gentry came in from his fence mending, and, with the advent of the man, Drumright's tone and manner softened. He made no further reference to Callista's personal affairs, nor to the castigation she ought to receive. The two old men sat eating and talking—the slow grave talk of the mountaineer—about crops and elections and religion. Callista did not come back from the little cabin, whence presently the sound of her loom made itself heard. At this point Drumright ventured a guarded suggestion to his host, in the matter of her affairs. He was met with a civil but comprehensive negative.

"No, sir, I shall not make nor meddle," Grandfather Gentry told the preacher, as he stood finally at the roadside, looking up at that worthy mounted on his mule for departure. "Callista is my only grandchild, and I've always thought a heap of her. She is welcome in my house. If she had done worse, I should still be willing to roof her; but I reckon it's best to tell you here and now, Mr. Drumright, that I have no quarrel with Lance Cleavage, and no cause to meddle in his affairs. I take him to be a good deal like I was at his age—sort o' uneasy when folks come pesterin' around asking



questions—and I don't choose to be one of them that goes to him that-a-way."

The season wore on toward winter. There was frost, and after it a time of exquisite, mist-haunted Indian summer, the clean, wooded Cumberland highlands swimming in a dream of purple haze, that sense of waiting and listening brooding over all. Then again the days were cold enough to make the fire welcome, even at noon, and Callista piled the hearth in her outside cabin room and set the baby to play before it. She had run down to the chip pile for an apronful of trash to build the blaze higher (the vigorous, capable young creature made light work, these days, of getting her own fuel), when she was aware of two people mounted on one mule stopping at the gate. She paused a moment, shading her eyes with her hand, while Rilly Trigg slid down and Buck Fuson swung himself leisurely to earth.

Above the irregular line of the brown-gold trees, beginning to be dingy with the late storms, the sky was high, cloudless, purple-blue. The sweet, keen air lifted Callista's bright hair and tossed it about her face.

"Howdy, Callisty. Me and Buck jest stopped apast to say good-bye," Rilly announced, joining her beside the chopping block, and bending to fill her own hands with the great hickory chips.

"And where was you and Buck a-goin'?" smiled Callista, after she had greeted the young fellow, who tied his mule and came following the girl over to her.

"Buck and me was wedded this morning." Rilly made her announcement with a mantling color, as they all turned in at the cabin door. "We're goin' down to Hepzibah for a spell. Looks like a man cain't git nothin' to do here, and Buck's found work in the Settlement."

Callista looked at them with a steady smile.

"I hope you-all will be mighty happy," she said in a low tone.

Rilly, suddenly overtaken by the embarrassment of making such an announcement to Callista in her present situation, sat down on the floor beside the baby and began to hug him ecstatically.

"Ain't he the sweetest thing?" she cried over and over again. "He ain't forgot me. He ain't a bit afraid of me. Last time him an' me was together I had to make up with him mighty careful. I reckon he sees more strangers and more comin' and goin' over here."

Callista's beautiful mouth set itself in firm lines as she took her chair beside the hearth, motioning Buck to one opposite. Rilly glanced nervously from one to the other, and again looked embarrassed.

"Derf, he's opened his store down in the Settlement," she returned hastily to her own affairs, for the sake of saying something, "and he offered Buck a job with him; but I jest cain't stand that old Flent Hands, and so I told Buck."

"What has Flenton got to do with it?" inquired Callista in a perfunctory tone.

"Why, him an' Derf's went partners," Buck explained. "Didn't you know about it? Flent's to run the town store, an' Derf this'n up here."

Rumor in the Turkey Tracks now declared with a fair degree of boldness that Flenton Hands was getting, or was to get, for Callista a divorce from her husband, and that then they would be married and live in the Settlement. Lance's wife looked her visitor very coolly in the face as she answered,

"I certainly know nothing of Flenton Hands's comings or goings. The man made himself mighty unpleasant here. Hit's not my house, and not for me to say who shall be bidden into it; but I did finally ax Gran'pappy would he speak to Flent Hands and tell him please not to visit us any more. I hate to do an old neighbor that-a-way," she added, "but looks like there are some things that cain't be passed over."

A swift glance of satisfaction flashed between the newly wedded pair. Rilly rose and went timidly to Callista, putting a hesitant arm about the other's neck.

"We come a-past yo' house this morning, Callisty, honey," she whispered, her cheek against the older girl's. "I—Buck an' me wanted to see him; and we hoped—we thort—"

Not unkindly Callista pushed the clinging arm away and looked straight into Rilly's eyes, overflowing with tears.

"You're not thinkin' what you say, Rilly," she told the girl, almost sharply. "You never come a-past no house of mine. You are in the only house I've got on earth right now, and this belongs to Grandfather Gentry. I stay here on sufferance, and work for what I get. I've got no home but this."

"Oh, Callisty—you're so hard-hearted!" Rilly protested. "We come a-past, and he was thar, an' he never hid from us, like he does from most, nor shet the do' in our faces. He let us set on the porch a spell. Oh, honey, he looks mighty porely. Ain't you never scared about what he might do? Heap o' folks tells tales about him now; but he came out jest as kind—jest like he used to be—Oh, Callisty!"

Callista's face was very pale; it looked pinched; she sat staring straight ahead of her, with the air of one who endures the babble of a forward child.

"Rilly," she said finally, when the other had made an end, "you've named something that I don't allow anybody to name in my hearing. If you and me are going to be friends, you've said your last word about it to me."

"Well,—I have, then," returned the visitor half angrily. She searched in a small bag she carried hung on her arm and brought out something. "I've said my last word, then," she repeated. "But—I brung you this."

"This" proved to be a late rose marked by frost, its crimson petals smitten almost to black at their edges. Callista knew where it had grown, she recalled the day that she and her bridegroom had planted it. The root came from Father Cleavage's place; Lance had brought it to her; and he had helped her well, and watered the little bush afterward.

Rilly cast the blossom toward her with a gesture half despair, half reproach. It lodged in her clasped hands a moment, and she looked down at it there. Memory of that October day, the tossing wind that blew her hair in her eyes, the familiar little details of the dooryard, Lance with his mattock and spade, the laughter and simple speech, the bits of foolish jest and words of tenderness—these took her by the throat and made her dumb. She knew that now the cabin which fronted that dooryard was desolate. She could not refuse to see Lance's solitary figure moving from house to

fence to greet these two. Somehow she guessed that it was he who had plucked the rose and given it to the girl—that would be like Lance.

The blossom slipped from her fingers and dropped to the floor. Young Ajax, cruising about seeking loot, discovered it with a crow of rapture, seized upon it and began, baby fashion, to pull it to pieces.

The three watched with fascinated eyes as the fat little fingers rent away crimson petal after petal, till all the floor was strewn with their half withered brightness.

"Well," said Rilly, discouraged, getting to her feet, "I reckon you an' me may as well be goin', Buck."

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### BUCK FUSON'S IDEA.

DOWN in Hepzibah, Flenton Hands and Derf had rented a store building close under the shadow of the Court House. Furtive grins were exchanged among those who knew; since it was expected that, the Derf store on Little Turkey Track Mountain being a depot for wildcat whiskey, the Derf Hands store in the Settlement would be a station along the line of that underground railway always necessary for the distribution of the illicit product. At last Flenton Hands seemed about to give some shape to that cloud of detraction which, with certain of his neighbors, had always hung over his name. As the separation between Lance Cleavage and his wife continued, and appeared likely to be permanent; as Hands felt himself in so far justified in his hopes concerning Callista, his terror of the man whose word was out against him increased and became fairly morbid. This it was which drove him to Hepzibah, where the strong arm of the law could reach, where there were such things as peace warrants, and where fortunately, just at present, Lott Beason, the newly elected sheriff, was his distant cousin and an old business partner, who still owed him money.

To Sheriff Beason, then, Hands went, with the statement that he would like to be a constable, so that, as an officer of the law, any attack Lance made on him might appear at its gravest.

"Constable," debated Beason. "That ain't so everlastin' easy; but I can swear you in as one of my deputies, and a deputy sheriff can pack a gun—you git you a good pistol, Flent, and don't be ketched without it. Yes, you might as well have a peace warrant out against the feller, too. I tell you, down in the Settlement here we don't put up with such. You stay pretty close to town for a spell, Flent. Hit's the safest place."

Hands got out his peace warrant, he armed himself with a pistol, as is right and proper for an officer of the law. He followed Beason's final suggestion as well, and stayed pretty close to town. Lance Cleavage was far away on Little Turkey Track Mountain. The sense of security which Hands drew from all these precautions loosened his tongue. Wincing at remembrance of his former terror, he boasted of the favor with which Cleavage's wife regarded him; he let pass uncontradicted the statement that he had broken up that family, and added the information that he was going to get a divorce for Callista and marry her.

Buck Fuson, working in the woolen mill, had rented a tiny shack where the newly married pair were keeping house. One evening when he came home, Orilla met him with a rather startling story. She had been down to Derf's store to buy molasses and bacon for supper.

"They was all in the back end of the room behind the boxes and the piles of things, Buck," she told her husband. "The old Injun, he waited on me; and when he went back with my bucket, Injun-like, he never give them the word as to who nor what was a-listenin', and they just kept on talkin' re-dic'lous. Flenton was a-braggin', an' after what Callista's said to me and you, I knowed good an' well that every word he spoke was a lie. Emmet Provine bantered him to sell him that Cindy filly that Lance used to own, an' give to Callista. An' Flent said no, he wouldn't sell her for nothin'; he was a-goin' to keep the filly an' git the woman, too. He let on like he was shore goin' to marry Callista—talked like they wasn't sech a man as Lance Cleavage in the world. Then Derf peeked around and ketched sight of me, and they all hushed. But I heard what I heard."

Buck ate awhile in silence and with a somewhat troubled countenance.

"I reckon I've got to send word to Lance," he said finally, looking up. "Lance Cleavage never was one of the loud-talkin', quarrelin' kind; but he sure don't know what it is to be scared; and I'm sartain he would take it kindly to be told of this."

"An' yit I don't know," Rilly debated timidly from across the table. "Looks like you men are always killin' each other up for nothin' at all. 'Course, ef I thought Flent would be the one to git hurt—but like as not it would be Lance. No, honey, I wouldn't send him no word."

"You don't need to," smiled Buck rather grimly. "I have my doubts whether he'd take the word from a gal o' yo' size; but I'm sure a-goin' to lay for him or Sylvane and tell 'em what I know. I'd thank anybody to do the same by me."

During the rest of the meal Buck seemed to be in deep thought; Rilly watched him anxiously.

It was the next Saturday afternoon that Lance was down doing some trading. About dusk Fuson, coming home from his work, found him on the street corner preparing to get his wagon from the public yard and make a night ride up the mountain. In these days Lance made most of his journeyings after dark, shunning the faces of his neighbors.

"I was sorter watchin' for ye, Lance," said his friend. "I wanted to talk to ye—to tell ye somethin'."

Lance shot a swift glance at Fuson; but he answered promptly, and with seeming indifference:

"All right, Buck; come on down to Dowst's with me."

They walked side by side down to the tiny, dingy, deserted office of the wagon yard. Here a small stove, crammed with the soft coal of the region till the molten, smoky stuff dripped from the sagging corners of the gaping door to its firebox, made the room so intolerably warm that the window was left open. On a high desk rudely constructed of plank, an ill-tended kerosene lamp flared and generated evil odors. From nails upon the wall hung harness and whips, horse blankets, and one or two articles of male wearing-apparel. A dog-eared calendar over the desk gave the day of the

month to the blacksmith when he was forced at long last to make out bills.

Alone together, safe from interruptions, the two young fellows faced each other for a moment in constrained silence. Then, hastily, awkwardly, halting and hesitating for a word now and again. Buck gave the information which he thought was due.

"Now, that's what was said," he finally made an end when he had repeated all that Rilly heard, and all that he himself had since gathered from various sources, of Flenton Hands's boasting concerning Callista Cleaverage.

Something agonized in Lance's gaze, something which looked out desperately interrogating, brought Buck to himself with a gasp.

"Rilly and me knowed every word was lies," he hastened to add. "We come a-past the Gentry place to see Callisty as we was on our way down here—you remember, Lance, that day we was at yo' house. Flenton Hands was named betwixt us, and Callisty she said that she didn't know nothing about the man nor his doings. She said she'd went to her gran'pappy and axed him to warn Flent off the place, becaze she wouldn't have the sort of talk be held."

Noting the sudden relief which showed in Lance's countenance, Fuson added, half doubtfully,

"'Course you might pay no attention to it, seein' it's all lies."

The quiet Lance flashed a sword-like look at him that was a revelation.

"Oh, no," he said. "The thing has got to be stopped. The only question is, how soon and how best can I get at Flenton Hands and stop it?"

"Lance," began the other with some hesitation, "I'm a-livin' right here in the Settlement, and aim so to do from this on. If you can git through without bringin' my name in, I'd be obliged to you. If you need me, I'm ready. If you don't need me, it'll save hard feelin's with the man that keeps the store I trade at, and with all his kin and followin'."

"All right," agreed Lance briefly. "I won't give any names—there's no need to."

"Well, I been a studyin' on this thing right smart, and I had sorter worked it out in my mind for you to hear the talk yo'self—just happen in and hear Mr. Hands. Don't you reckon that'd be the best way?" suggested Fuson.

"Yes—good as any," assented Lance. "I'm not lookin' for much trouble with Flent Hands. Here, Jimmy," he called to the sleepy boy who came yawning in, "you take my black horse out of the wagon, and put a saddle on him—you've got one here, haven't you? Put a saddle and a riding bridle on him, and tie him in the vacant lot across from Derf & Hands's store about half-past eight o'clock. I'll bring the saddle back when I'm through with it."

"All right," Jimmy roused himself to assure Lance. "I'll have Sate thar on time. Pap's got a saddle an' bridle o' yo' brother Taylor's here, Fuson. Lance can take 'em back."

As the two friends came out shoulder to shoulder, Buck said quietly,

"Derf, he's got it in for you, too."

Lance nodded.

"Derf ain't never forgive me because he robbed me of money," he added, well aware that his indifference to Ola had given the father perhaps greater offence.

They walked for a little time in silence; then Fuson said a little wistfully,

"I 'lowed I ort to tell you."

"Hit was what a friend should do," Lance agreed with him, putting out a hand.

Presently the other spoke again, out of the dark.

"I wish't thar was time to git word to Sylvane and your father," he hesitated. "Looks like we've got too few on our side."

"Huh-uh, Buck," came back Lance's quiet, positive tones. "This thing is between me and Flent. There it'll stay, and there we'll settle it. I'm not saying that I don't think Pappy and Sylvane would stand by me. They would. My father is one of the best men that God ever made, and he's a religious man; but I know how he'd feel about such as this—I don't need to go ask him. The most I hate in it is that it's bound to bring sorrow to him, whichever way it turns. He's mighty tender hearted."

Fuson debated a moment, but finally forbore to mention having sent word to Sylvane, and being in hourly expectation of the lad's coming. They went to Fuson's home for a belated supper. Rilly found them preoccupied and unusually silent. With big, frightened eyes she waited on them, serving her best, noting that they paid little attention to anything saving the strong cups of coffee provided. The young host glanced from time to time uneasily through the window, and when the meal was over got up, and, telling his wife that they were going down town for a spell, followed his guest out into the dark. Rilly ran after them to the door of the little shanty, and stood breathing unevenly and staring in the direction of their retreating footsteps.

"I hope to the Lord they don't nothing awful happen," she muttered over and over with chattering teeth. "I wonder will Buck be keerful. I wish't they was something I could do. I wish't I could go along. Oh, women do shore have a hard time in this world!" and she retired, shivering, to her bright little kitchen, where the lamp flared and the disordered table mutely suggested her clearing and washing the dishes.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### SILENCED.

UP the street tramped the two young fellows, Lance silent, pulling his hat down over his face, Fuson whistling in an absent, tuneless fashion. When they came to the store, Buck paused and gave the instructions.

"I'll go in. You walk a-past two or three times, and when you see me standin' with my back to you and my hands behind me, that'll mean that Flenton's thar and the talk started. Hit'll be yo' time to come in."

Lance nodded without a word. He passed the lighted doorway. Beyond it was a butcher shop—for days after he could remember the odor of raw meat from the place, the sight of the carcasses hung up in the frosty winter air. At the corner he turned and walked back. There was no sign of Fuson as he glanced swiftly into the store. On the other side of the way was the vacant lot where he had instructed the boy from the wagon-yard to tie Satan. Lance took the precaution to go down in the shadows and see if the black horse had arrived. He found his mount, the bridle rein looped over a bit of scrubby bush. He examined the saddle and equipments, and found all as it should be. When he came back to the store door and once more glanced in, he descried Fuson's figure, standing, hands behind the back, in the aisle between the counters.

Quietly, neither hiding nor displaying himself, Lance entered and made his way down the long room toward the far lighted end. After dark, trade in the main portion of the store was practically dead, and only one smoky lamp on the counter illuminated the entrance. In the rear, half-a-dozen men were grouped around a big, rust-red barrel stove, talking. The whole place back there reeked with the odors of whiskey, of the fiery, colorless applejack that comes down from the mountains, kerosene and molasses, with a softening blend from the calico, jeans and unbleached cottons heaped on the counters, narrowing in the approach to this retreat. He paused beside a tall pile of outing flannel, putting up one hand against the rounded edges of their bolts. Fuson, glancing over his shoulder, was aware of the figure in the shadow, and at once spoke in a slightly raised voice.

"Flent, I hear you've sold yo' filly."

"Well, then, you hearn a lie," returned Flenton Hands's tones drawlingly. "I hain't sold that filly, and I'm not aimin' to. That thar nag belongs to my wife."

He laughed uproariously at his own jest, and some of the other men laughed too. Greene Stribling, down from Big Turkey Track to do a bit of trading, had sold a shoat. Instead of getting the coffee and calico and long sweetening it should have purchased, and carrying them, with the remaining money, up to his toil-worn mother and younger brothers and sisters, he had bought a jug of the Derf & Hands wildcat whiskey; and having borrowed the small tin cup from beside the water bucket, he was standing treat to the crowd.

"Fust time I ever heared you had an old woman," Derf said, accepting the cup from the assiduous Stribling.

It was evident, now that Lance had a view of the faces, that this was a Flenton Hands nobody on Turkey Track Mountain ever met. He had, as it were, come out into the open. Certainly he was not drunk; it would have taken a very considerable amount of stimulant to intoxicate that heavy, dense spirit and mentality; but there was color in his cheek, a glint of courage in his pale eye, a warming and freeing of the whole personality, that bore witness to what he had been drinking.

"I reckon you mean the wife that you're a-*goin'* to have," put in Fuson. "Hit's a good thing to git the pesky old stags like you married off. They have the name of breakin' up families. Bein' a settled man myself in these days, I ain't got no use for such."

Hands turned on him eagerly.

"Well, I have shore broke up one family," he declared. "I am a church member and a man that keeps the law; but that thar is a thing I'm not ashamed of."

"Yet I reckon you ain't a-braggin' about it," suggested Buck.

"I don't know as I'm braggin' about it, but I shore ain't denyin' it," maintained Hands. "I'm ready to tell any person that will listen at me that me an' Callista Gentry aims—"

"I'm a-listenin'," said a quiet voice from the shadows, and Lance stepped into the circle, clear-eyed, alert, but without any air of having come to quarrel.

For a moment Flenton quailed. Then he looked about him. This was not the wild Turkey Tracks. He was down in the Settlement. There was law and order here. He had a peace warrant out against this man Cleavage. He glanced across at his cousin, the sheriff. Beason would back him. Why, he was a deputy sheriff himself, and the feeling of the gun in his pocket reassured him. Lance stood at ease, composed, but definitely changed from the light-footed Lance who had come swinging buoyantly down over the little hill that Sunday morning two years ago. Something told Hands that the other was unarmed.

"Now see here, Cleavage," he began, wagging his head and backing off a little, "I don't want to hurt your feelin's. I may have said to friends, and it may have got round to you, that the part you had did by—that the part you had did was not to your credit. She—"

He hesitated. There was silence, and no one stirred. He went on.

"She's a-workin' for her livin', and a-workin' mighty hard. She's a-supportin' the child. Divo'ces can be had for such as that—you know they can."

"That isn't what I heard you say—what you said you would tell anyone that'd listen," argued Lance, his eyes fixed unwaveringly upon the other. "You've got to take back all that other talk, here before them you said it to. Hit's a pack o' lies. I'm goin' to make you take it back, and beg pardon for it on your knees, Flenton Hands—on your knees, do you hear me?"

The circle of men widened, each retiring inconspicuously, with apprehensive glance toward a clear exit for himself. The two opponents were left in the center of the floor, confronted, their faces glared upon by lamp-shine and the light from the open door of the stove; drawn by passionate hate, and with a creeping terror much more dangerous beginning to show itself in the countenance of the older man.

"You wasn't never fitten for her," Hands cried out finally, his voice rising almost to falsetto with excitement. "She's glad to be shut of you." Then like a fellow making a desperate leap, half in fright, half in bravado, "When her and me is wedded—"

He broke off, staring with open mouth. Lance had scarcely moved at all, yet the crouching posture of his figure had something deadly in it. Flenton's clumsy right hand went back toward the pocket where that gun lay. With the motion, Lance left the floor like a missile, springing at his adversary and pinning his arms down to his sides. It was done in silence.

"Hold on thar!" cried Derf in alarm. "You-all boys better not git to fightin' in my store. Sheriff!—hey, you, Beason!—Why don't you arrest that feller?"

The two wrestled mutely in that constricted place. Hands struggling to get his pistol out, Lance merely restraining him. Beason came forward, watching his chance and grabbing for Cleaverage. He finally caught Lance's arm, and his jerk tore loose the young fellow's grip on Flenton Hands. Swiftly Lance turned, and with a swinging blow freed himself, sending the unprepared sheriff to the floor. As he flung his head up again, he had sight of Hands with a half-drawn weapon. Flenton backed away and stumbled against the stove. The great iron barrel trembled—toppled—heaved, crashing over, sending forth an outgush of incandescent coals, its pipe coming down with a mighty, hollow rattle and a profuse peppering of soot. The strangling smoke was everywhere.

"Name o' God, boys!" yelled Derf, climbing to the counter, to get at a bunch of great shovels that hung on the wall above; "you'll set this place afire! Flent, you fool, we ain't got a dollar of insurance!"

At the moment Lance closed with his man, locked him in a grip like a vise, went down with him, and rolled among the glowing cinders, conscious of a sudden burning pang along the left arm which was under him.

Fuson, watching Hands strain and writhe to draw the pistol, and Lance's effort to prevent him, saw that it was going against his friend. He thrust the haft of a knife into Lance's right hand.

The men were jumping about ineffectually, coughing and choking with the sulphurous fumes, divided between the fascination of that struggle on the floor, and the half-hearted effort to upend the stove by means of a piece of plank. The corner of a cracker box began to blaze.

"Lord God A'mighty!" Derf was protesting, threshing at the burning goods, "We'll be plumb ruined!" Fuson ran for the water bucket. Some fool dashed a cup of whiskey on the coals, and in the ghastly light of the blue blaze. Lance Cleaverage, staggering up, saw a dead man at his feet.



He was not conscious that he had struck at all with the knife, yet there it was in his hand, red. The sleeve was half burned off his left arm, and still smoking. It was dark away from the fire. Beason, stunned, was getting to his feet and hallooing,

"Hold Cleaverage! Somebody hold Cleaverage! He's killed Flent."

And then Lance felt the shoving of a palm against his shoulder. Buck was pushing him quietly away, down between the lines of piled commodities. They were running together toward Satan. Back in the room they could hear the sheriff yelling for lights.

"I thought I might just as well knock them lamps over for good measure," Fuson muttered as they ran. "Here's your horse—my pistol's in that holster, Lance. Air ye hurt?"

"No," Lance returned. "Nothin' but my arm. I reckon I burnt it a little. It's only the left one. Thank you. Buck. You've been a true friend to me this night."

And he was away, down the bit of lamplit street that ran so quickly into country road, past outlying cabins already dark, till he struck the first rise of Turkey Track and slacked rein. A moment he turned, looking over his shoulder at the lights.

Upon the instant the Court House bell back there broke out in loud, frightened clamor.

"Clang! Clang! Clang!" Somebody was pulling wildly on the rope to call out the little volunteer fire company. He heard cries, shouts, and then the long wavering halloo that shakes the heart of the village dweller.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Derf's store must be blazing. He wondered dully if they had dragged Flenton's body away from the flames. Harkening, he suffered Satan to breathe a bit on the rise that would take him to the great boulder where the roads branched, one going up Little Turkey Track, the other leading aside direct to the Big Turkey Track neighborhood.

Suddenly he stiffened in his saddle, cut short a groan wrenched from him by his injury, and listened strainingly. Above the now diminishing noise from the village, he distinguished the sound of hoofs that galloped hard, growing louder with each moment,—the feet of one who pursued him. Looping the bridle rein over the pommel of his saddle horn, he got at the pistol Buck had provided, and thereafter rode warily but as rapidly as he dared, looking back to catch the first glimpse of the shape or shapes which might be following.

He had just rounded the turn at the fork of the way, when somebody burst into it close at hand, coming through the short cut by Cawthorne's Gulch, and he thought he heard his name called.

To be taken now, to be dragged back to the jail, and, if not set upon and lynched by the Beason-Hands following, to rot there till such time as they chose to try him, and possibly pay for his act of wild justice with his own life, this was a vista intolerable to Lance Cleaverage. Raising the weapon he fired at his pursuer.

"Oh, don't!" wailed the unseen; and the next moment Sylvane leaped from the mule he rode, ran forward and caught at Satan's mane, panting, "Lance—Lance! I was a-goin' to you as fast as I could. I struck down thar 'bout the time you must have left. I come Dry Valley way. Is it—have you—"

At the sound of Sylvane's voice, the heritage of Cain came home to Lance Cleaverage. A great upwelling black horror of himself flowed in on the fugitive. To what had he sunk! A murderer fleeing for his life, in his panic terror of pursuit menacing his own brother who came to help and succor!

"Oh, Buddy—Buddy—Buddy!" he cried, doubling forward over the pommel of his saddle, clutching Sylvane's shoulder, and closing his eyes to shut out the face of the dead man which swam before them in that quivering blue light.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE FLIGHT.

THE dark hours of that January night saw the two brothers riding hard up into the mountains toward that tiny cleft in the peaks above East Caney where Lance now remembered the cave that he had once said should shelter him in case he ever killed a man. Sylvane had much of Lance's pride and courage, with little of his dash and perversity. Had the peril been his own, one might have guessed that he would meet it with the gentle stoicism old Kimbro showed. But that Buddy should be in peril, fleeing for his life! The boy's universe reeled around him, confusion reigned where he should have been efficient and orderly; and when they stopped at the cabin in the Gap for supplies, what with the agony of Lance's burn and the disarray of his brother's whole mentality, they made sad work of it. Something to eat, something to keep warm with, something to dress the hurt—these were the things the boy tried to remember, and forgot, and could not find, when he fancied the galloping hoofs of pursuers with every gust that shook the big trees in the dooryard.

He got for the dressing of the arm only a roll of new cloth, rough and unsuitable; while a few extra garments, a blanket, meat, meal, salt, a cooking vessel and some white beans made up the rest of his packet. He came out at the last carrying Lance's banjo and put it on top of the supplies.

"Way up yon they'll be nobody to hear you, and I reckon it might take off the edge of the lonesomeness," he half apologized when Lance looked curiously at it in the light of the lantern his brother held.

The owner of the banjo made no movement to take it and swing it upon his back, neither did he decline it; but indifferently Sylvane was allowed to bring the once cherished possession along.

Through the cold, naked woods, they pushed to East Caney. The creek was up. It was three o'clock, nearly four hours before the wintry dawn might be expected; yet a late moon had risen sufficiently to show them the swollen torrent. These mountain streams, fed by the snows of the higher ranges, clear, cold, boulder checked and fretted, sometimes rise in a night to a fury of destruction, scouring away whole areas from one bank or another. To-night Caney, great with the snows from both of the twin peaks above it which a January thaw had sent down, made traveling in its bed a matter of life and death. Yet the boys must attempt it. Once behind that barrier of roaring water, Lance would be safe. True, mountain streams often subside as abruptly as they rise, so that no one could tell how long this particular safety would last.

"I reckon we can git through better 'n the nags," Sylvane said dubiously, as they divided the pack between them, and started out on the desperate enterprise of leaping from boulder to boulder through the swirling waters. They lost one bundle in the struggle, and they came through fearfully exhausted. Lance with that left arm one surface of exquisite torture, his countenance pinched and his jaw set, his eyes burning in the white face that his brother could dimly discern. But they did get through, and came drenched, dripping, shuddering with cold, into the little valley.

The last time Lance had seen the place it was brimmed with the wine of summer, green, full of elusive forest scents, bird-haunted, drowsing under July sides, and the most beautiful creatures it held in its sweet shelter were Callista and her child. Now his desolate gaze searched its dim obscurity for the black loom of the rock house that had given its roof to their happy gipsying. The blanket and clothing had gone down roaring Caney; but the banjo, carried carefully on Sylvane's shoulders, whined against the bare twigs of the Judas tree he was passing under, whimpered something in its twanging undertone that demanded awfully of Lance, "How many miles—how many years?"

Without waiting for his brother, and the lantern which the boy was relighting, he dashed down the slope, past the stark, empty rock house—swerving a little like a man going wide of an open grave—and gained the steep pathway to the

cave, where Sylvane, panting after, overtook him.

"I'm obliged to get a fire for you, and see can I tie up that there arm," the boy declared pitifully. "Lance, I'm that sorry I lost your blanket and clothes that I don't know what to do!" And his voice trembled.

"It don't make any difference about me," Lance said wearily. "I'd like for you to be dry and warm before you start back—but there's no time. You got to get away from here as quick as you can. If we leave the horses tied down there, and anybody sees 'em—you've got to get away quick, Buddy."

"Where'd I better take Sate?" asked Sylvane, as he had asked before.

"I've been studyin' about that," Lance told him. "They're bound to know I'm in the mountains. We can't get rid of the nag, and if he goes to our house it will seem no more than natural. Best just take him home and put him in the stable."

Sylvane had gathered pitch pine for light and heat. He made a roaring fire and then attempted an awkward dressing of the injured arm. The rough cloths hurt. There was no liniment, not even flour to lay on the burn. Lance locked his teeth in agony and bore it till time seemed to press.

"Go on, Buddy," he urged. "When you can get to me with anything, do it. When you can't—I'll make out, somehow."

"The good God knows I hate to leave you like this," the lad repeated, as he made his final preparations for departure. "Pappy or me will be here inside of two days and bring you news, and something to keep warm with, and something to eat. Lance, please lemme leave ye my coat—"

"No, no, Sylvane, you'd nigh about freeze without it a-ridin' home. It's not cold in the cave here. You go on now, Buddy—that's a good boy." And blindly the younger lad turned and crept down the bank.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### ROXY GRIEVER.

IT was nearly noon when Sylvane, reaching home by an obscure, roundabout trail, half perished from the cold, scouting the place long and fearfully before he dared enter, found that Sheriff Beason with a posse had been at his father's house, searched it, and gone. At the door his sister Roxy met him, clutching his arm, staring over his shoulder with fear-dilated eyes, and whispering huskily,

"Whar is he? Whar's Lance?"

The boy shook his head, pulling the drenched hat from his curls, and moving toward the hearth-stone where his father sat bowed over.

"He's safe," the words came finally in a half-reluctant tone. New lines of resolution and manhood's bitter knowledge had been graving themselves on Sylvane's face the past twenty-four hours. "I helped him to whar they cain't find him nor take him. Let that be enough."

"No—but it ain't enough," his sister rebelled. "Here's Beason has swore him in a posse of six, and he's out a-rakin' the mountings after Lance. Six men." Roxy's face was gray.

"They've started, have they?" said Sylvane in the voice of exhaustion. "Well, what you don't know they cain't find out from you, Sis' Roxy. And I best not tell you whar Lance is hid."

"Sylvane!" The woman's tone was sharp with suffering, rather than anger. "Do you think I'd tell on my own brother? Them men might cut me into inch pieces and get nothin' from me. You don't know me, boy. I'd think little of puttin' one of 'em out of the way! Thar was women in the Bible done sech—and was praised for hit. I want to know whar Lance is at," she choked, "and whether he's hurt, and what he's got for to comfort him—pore soul!"

"Hush, daughter," counselled Kimbro gently. "Sylvanus is right. People do sometimes betray what they aim to cover up. If I can guess whar my son is—and I reckon I could—that's one thing; but for any of us to be told, ain't safe."

Silently, almost sullenly, Roxy hunted out dry clothes for Sylvane, the boy sitting near his father, telling Kimbro in a few brief sentences Lance's version of the night's happenings, the old man nodding his head without a word of comment. She set food on the table and Sylvane drew up to eat.

"I want to go whar my Unc' Lance is at," whispered Mary Ann Martha, suddenly pushing a tow head up under Sylvane's arm and nearly causing him to overturn his coffee. "I'm a-goin' to he'p him fight."

Sylvane lifted the child into his lap, and began to feed her with bits from his plate.

"Its Unc' Lance is all right, Pretty," he said absently. "Unc' Sylvane and Gran'pappy'll look after him. That's men's work. It help its Mammy to keep the house, and soon Unc' Lance is goin' to be back and play the banjo for it."

All day, that strange, brief, silent Sunday in February, Roxy strove to have the secret of Lance's hiding place from her younger brother. Again and again she turned from what she was doing to demand it of him; more than once she quit abruptly her labors about the house, to go and hunt him up, to ask him sometimes half-angrily, sometimes cajolingly, pleadingly, almost with tears. The boy withstood the fire of her importunities as best he could. He answered her in as few words as might be. Without harshness, but only doggedly, he still responded in the negative, and always with mildness and a sort of regret.

As it drew toward dusk, Roxy's face began to harden into grim lines, and she went about her preparations for supper with a gleaming eye. Her father, who had walked to a far pasture to salt cattle, came in, and sat with Mary Ann Martha on his knee by the fireplace. Roxy looked in at the door. Mutely, with only a backward jerk of the head, she called them to their meal. As the child was following, her mother detained her and, giving no explanation, went with her into the far room. A moment later she came to the men sitting at the table.

"Well, there's yo' supper," she said resentfully to Sylvane, "sence you 'low that's all I'm fitten to do. Ye can put the things away yo'selves, I reckon. I'm a-goin' on a arrant."

And with the chubby Mary Ann Martha bundled heavily in shawls, silent as a small mummy, and plainly under the hypnotism of impressive instructions from her mother, she turned and went from the room, and they heard the front door close softly after her.

The men looked at each other uneasily, but there seemed nothing to be done.

Outside, Roxy stooped and spoke again to the child. She straightened up and peered long about her, listening intently, then moved obliquely among the yard shrubbery down to the gate. Crossing the road in the deep shade of cedar trees, she struck direct for the Gentry place, going by woods-paths that had so often known Lance's feet. When the short, fat little legs that trotted beside her in silence grew weary, she carried Mary Ann Martha pick-a-back, and always she was whispering to her.

"We're Injuns now, Ma'y-Ann-Marth'. Mammy's a squaw, and you' a little papoose, out a-scoutin' to see can we find Unc' Lance; or head off them that's a-aimin' to do him mischief. Don't it make no noise."

When, in turn, Roxy herself was too tired to carry her daughter longer, she broke a thick willow switch beside a spring branch, and encouraged the little girl to ride a stick horse.

"But remember we' Injuns, honey," she whispered. "Injuns don't make no noise nor let they' nags make none."

In this wise they came to the edge of the timber and surveyed the opening where lay the Gentry farm. Here Roxy left the child, motionless as a little image in her swaddling of thick shawls—stationing her in the grove of young chestnuts from which Lance had emerged the night he came singing to Callista's window—while she scouted with infinite pains the entire circuit of the clearing. She encountered nobody, and heard nothing; yet surely the house where Lance Cleaverage's wife and child were would be subject to espionage. The clear stars hung above the bleak treetops, and by their dim light she could just make out the various buildings, trees and bushes. Once more carrying Mary Ann Martha, she moved down to the corner of a small out-building. Here she gave her last instructions to the child.

"Now, Ma'y-Ann-Marth', you go right up that line of bushes, on the shady side, to yo' Aunt Callisty's house; and don't you speak a word to anybody but her. You say to her that they's somebody—mind, honey, *somebody*, don't you name who—that wants speech with her, a-waitin' out here by the chicken-house. Tell her to slip down here longside o' them same bushes. Can Mammy's gal say all that and say it right?" And she looked anxiously into Mary Ann Martha's solemn little face.

The child nodded her head vigorously, and a moment later the shapeless small figure started worming its way up along the obscuring row of bushes. Finally she stopped on the doorstone of that cabin where she could hear the "thump-a-chug" of Callista's loom. She well remembered that the last time she was over here her Aunt Callie had entertained her in that building, refusing to come out and see her mother. Unacquainted with any such ceremonial as knocking, incapable of achieving the customary "hello," she planted herself on the doorstep and remarked gruffly,

"Huh!"

The sound did not amount to much as a hail or an alarum, yet it reached the ear of the woman who sat at the loom inside working, with what strange thoughts as her companions it were hard to guess. Somehow, it was now known all over both Turkey Track neighborhoods that Lance had killed his man and fled, and that the sheriff and posse were out after him. The face that bent over the web of rag carpet was sharpened and bleached by this knowledge. The blue eyes gleamed bright with it. When that curious, gruff little "huh" came to her ears, Callista stopped her work like a shot and stood long hearkening.

"Hit was nothing," she told herself, half-scornfully. "I'm just scared, and listenin' for something."

She started the treadle again, and the noise of the batten once more checked the silence into a rhythmic measure. But the dogs had become aware of an intruder. Rousing from their snug quarters under the porch of the big log house, they came baying across the frozen ground. At their outburst of clamor, almost with one motion, Callista stopped the loom a second time, turned out her lamp, and was at the door, drawing it open with a swift, yet cautious movement. There in the vague starlight was Mary Ann Martha backed up against it, shaking a small and inadequate stick at the approaching pack. Swiftly Callista caught the little thing and pulled her inside, closed the door and dropped the bar across. She stooped to the child in the uncertain shine of the fire, questioning in amazement,

"Why, Mary Ann Martha! How on earth did you get here—all alone—at night this-a-way?"

"Thest walked," returned the ambassador briefly. "Aunt Callie," she embarked promptly and sturdily upon her narrative, "they's somebody down at the corner of the chicken-house that wants to have speech with you. Don't you tell nobody, and you thest come along o' me and be Injuns, and don't make no noise, an' slip down thar in the shadder o' the bubby bushes, like I done, so nobody cain't see."

Faithful to her trust, Mary Ann Martha the outrageous, the terror of Little Turkey Track, had delivered the entire message without an error. Callista's mind was a turmoil of wild surmise. Who could the "somebody" waiting for her out there be—somebody who arranged all these precautions with such care and exactness? She gave but one glance at the sleeping baby on her bed, caught a heavy shawl from its peg, and, winding it about her head and shoulders, slipped soundlessly from the door, holding Mary Ann Martha's hand. Not a word was spoken between them. When they finally entered the area darkened by the chicken-house, Callista started and her eyes widened mutely at the touch of a hand on her arm.

"H-ssh—Callisty!" came Roxy Griever's thin, scared tones, just above a whisper. "God knows who might be a-watchin' and a-listenin'."

Callista faced about on the older woman staring with sharp inquiry at her in the gloom. Lance's wife found it hard to guess what attitude would be her sister-in-law's now.

"Callisty, honey," began the Griever woman with a sort of wheedling, "I ain't a-goin' to ax one thing of you. Hit's but natural that you don't want to hear mention of my brother's name at this time; but, honey. Pappy and Sylvane has got him hid out somewhars, and they won't tell me whar. I know in reason it's the place you and him camped last summer. Couldn't you lead to it?"

It seemed for a moment as though Callista would spring at her sister-in-law; then she said in a low, distinct voice,



"Well, Roxy Griever, what sort of woman are you, anyhow?"

Roxy studied the horrified countenance turned toward her as well as she could in the half light. She was thick-witted, but eventually she understood.

"You Callisty Gentry!" she ejaculated with a note of passive savagery. "Do you think I'd lead the law to Buddy? What I want to know is whar he's at and how bad hurt is he? Them men won't trust me, but I 'lowed you'd think enough of the father of yo' child to give me the directions so I could git to him. He's got to have good vittles, and someone to—he's got to have care. L—L"—her mouth quivered so that she could scarce go on—"Lance ain't like some folks—he could jest die for want of somebody to tend on him. Don't I know?" A tremor shook her. "I mind after Ma was gone, and Sylvane was a baby, an' Lance he cried bekaze I—oh, my God, Callisty! tell me whar he's at. I got to git to him. Don't be so hard-hearted, honey. I know hit seemed like Lance was a sinner—oftentimes; but the good God Hissself did love sinners when He was here on earth. Hit says so in the Book. He used to git out an' hunt 'em up. Oh! oh! oh!"

Flinging an arm against the trunk of a sapling, Roxy Griever hid her face upon it and began to weep. Mary Ann Martha stood the sight and sound as long as she could, and then added her shrill pipe of woe.

"Sssh! Hush; both of you, for mercy's sake!" besought Callista. "Stay here just a minute, Roxy. I'm going back to the house to get—well, I know about what he'll need. Then I have to tell Mother to look after the baby."

"Air you goin' with me? Oh, Callisty, air you goin' with me now?" the widow quavered.

"No," answered Callista. "I'm going alone. Grandfather can let me have a horse, or not, as he's a mind. If I can't get it from him, I'll slip back with you and see what Sylvane and Father Cleavage can do for me. I'm the one to go and look after Lance."

Roxy and the child waited in stoic silence while Callista returned cautiously to the main house. There was some quiet moving about from one building to another, a stir over at the log stable, and in an incredibly brief time Callista came to them riding on her grandfather's horse and leading the mule, saddled, for the other two.

"We'll go a-past yo' house—hit's as near as any way," was all she said.

Once at the Cleavage place, Lance's wife was persuaded to accept Sylvane's company for the night journey, though she peremptorily—almost impatiently—refused any addition to her ample provision for Lance's comfort. But when the two, all ready to leave, stood reconnoitering in the dark outside the house to see that the coast was clear before starting, Roxy came trembling out with a package which she thrust into her brother's hand.

"Thar," she whispered, "take it to him. I only wish't I'd 'a' got it in the frames and quilted it, so that it might have been some use keepin' him warm."

"It—it ain't yo' gospel quilt, Sis' Roxy, is it?" Sylvane inquired, fumbling with doubtful inquiry at the roll in his hands.

"Hit air," returned his sister, the dignity of a high resolve in her brief response.

"Why, daughter, I think I wouldn't send that," Kimbro deprecated, drawing close in the obscurity. "Of course it's a mighty improvin' thing, but I doubt if Lance has the opportunities to take care of it that a body ought to have to handle such. Don't send it, Roxana. Without doubt it would do him good, if he was whar he could make use of it."

Roxy did not move to receive the bundle which her brother hesitatingly offered back to her.

"I know hit ain't much account," she said disconsolately. "But I 'lowed hit might make him—maybe he'd laugh at it, and hit would cheer him up a leetle. He used to laugh powerful at some of 'em. I've put in my good shears and that Turkey-red calicker, and you tell him, Sylvane, that I want him to cut me out them little davils he was a-talkin' about, as many of 'em as hit'll make."

She looked pathetically from one to the other.

"There ain't nothin' like gittin' a man person that's in trouble intrusted in something. You git him intrusted in cuttin' out davils for my gospel quilt, won't you, Sylvane, honey?—or you do it, Sis' Callie. Maybe hit might make him laugh—po' Buddy, away off to hisself in some old hideout, an' nary soul to—to—an' the sheriff chasin' him like he's a wolf!"

And Callista, wiser than the men, knowing that the gospel quilt would take its own message to Lance, stretched out a hand for the package.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### IN HIDING.

IN the skull-shaped pocket—which was the inner chamber of the cave where Lance lay, was neither light nor life. They were the bare ribs of the mountain that arched above him in that place, blackish, misshapen, grisly in an unchanging chill. The continual dripping which would have seemed music if he had come upon it in a summer's noon, vexed him now, and took on tones that he wished to forget. Sylvane had provided him pitch pine to burn, because it would give more light, and there was a crevice which would lead the smoke away; but he fretfully told himself that the resinous sticks made the place smell like a tar kiln, and put out his fire rather than endure it.

Then in the blank darkness his burned arm pained him intolerably, and presently he crept forth into the entrance which held the tiny spring to steep the cloths in water, hoping to assuage the hurt.

Day filled this outer chamber with a blue twilight, while round the turn was always black obscurity. Summer spread upon it each year a carpet of the finest ferns; now the delicate fronds lay shriveled and yellow on the inky mold; only a few tiny bladderworts remained in the shelter of the remote crevices. In spite of the raw cold he lingered by the little basin, his lifted eye encountering the bird's nest he and Callista had found there in July, full then of warmth and young life and faithful love. It was beneath a breadth never penetrated by the drip. He studied the little abandoned home of the phoebe, built there of moss and leaves plastered together against the rock with clay. He noted absently how beside it remained a portion from the building of the previous year; and by looking closer in the half light he made out at least

five rims of mud, from which the nests of five preceding spring-times had crumbled away.

Then, a caged, fevered animal, he went back into the cave and lay down. It was not freezing cold there—such a place is much like a cellar, warmer than the outside air in winter, as it is cooler in summer—but the sensation of being buried came to wear upon the spirit of the fugitive, and he was fain to creep nearer to glimpses of the sky, out once more into the vestibule of his prison. There were bits of life here, too, humble, and—as his own had come to be—furtive. Plastered upon the limestone walls were the homes of countless mud wasps, and the bell-shaped tents of the rock spiders. Around the edges the dry sand of its floor was pitted with the insect traps of the ant-lion, that creature at the mouth of whose tiny burrow a prehistoric Lance Cleaverage—a Lance whose tousled head would scarce have reached above this man's knee—used to call long and patiently, "Doodle-bug, doodle-bug, come up and get some bread!" As though recalling the childhood of another, he could see that valiant small man, masterfully at home in his world, arrogantly sure of himself, coming to—this. The rock vole, whitish-gray, rat-like, most distinctive of all the small, subterranean life of the cave, peered out at him and reminded him where he lay, and for what reason.

In suffering, half delirious, those earlier hours went by. He had never contemplated killing Flenton Hands. There was none of the bully in Lance Cleaverage, iron as his nerves were, high as his courage. He had gone purposely unarmed to the quarrel, regarding Flenton contemptuously as a coward; believing that he could make the man publicly eat his words and apologize for them. But this open humiliation was as far as his intentions went. The poet in him, the Lance of the island, recoiled desperately from memory of that dead face, the eyes closed, the mouth crookedly a-gape, the ghastly light from the flaming alcohol wavering upon it.

So greatly was he wrought upon by his situation and his hurts, that by the second night his anguish of mind and body had only sunk from that first fierce clamor to a dull ache, which was almost harder to bear, and which kept sleep from him quite as effectually. He scarcely ate at all of the food Sylvane had left; but drank thirstily at the little spring every hour of the twenty-four. In this sort the time had passed, and now Sunday and Sunday night were gone; the morning of the second day was here.

The thought of Callista haunted him continually. What, at such a juncture, would be her attitude? One of reprehension, certainly; but if he knew that mind of hers at all, there would be no hostility. Her pride would lead her to offer, perhaps, some assistance to the man whose name she bore. And then suddenly he was aware of a figure in the mouth of the cave, and Callista's voice whispering,

"Lance—Lance!"

He stumbled to his feet and went gropingly forward, encountering with his right hand—held out as a sort of shield to the burned arm—the bundle she carried,—the great hunter's quilt, wool-padded and well-nigh waterproof, the pair of homespun blankets, and, riding upon them, a basket of cooked food,—while from the other hand swung a tin pail. She was laden like a strong man.

"Who's with you—who packed all this?"—he made his first inquiry quite as though he had expected her. There was no word of surprise or gratitude.

"Sylvane," she answered in the same hushed tone. "I aimed to come alone, but he wouldn't let me. We made it since midnight. He left me yon side the creek, so as to make haste home. He'll be burning brush in the nigh field on the big road where everybody can see him all day. Come night, he'll be back for me. What you got it all dark here for, Lance? I'll make ye a fire that won't smoke."

She felt the earth, to be sure that it was dry, and then, with brusque kindness, refusing all aid from him, flung down her burden. She carried quilt and blankets in and spread a comfortable pallet of them.

"You go back inside where it's not so cold," she commanded briefly. "I'll bring some chestnut chunks and make you a good fire. Go back. Lance."

He turned obediently. Did memory come to either of the chill, inhospitable hearth she had once refused to tend? She was swift and efficient in her preparations, breaking an armful of dry chestnut limbs and twigs for a clean, smokeless fire; and when that was sending forth its flood of clear, hot radiance, she knelt down and dressed his hurt with the liniment and soft old cloths she had provided.

"Brother Sylvane said he'd be at the creek about nine o'clock to-night for me," she told Lance, as she deftly arranged a sling by means of a bandana. "We got to be right careful about comin' here, now that Caney's goin' down. Wish't it had stayed up, like Sylvane said it was when you-all came."

Lance stared at her with the ghost of a laugh in his eyes.

"You never could have got through it in this world, Callista," he said softly. "It was all Buddy and me could do. We was wet to the skin and nigh drowned."

"Oh, yes I could," Callista assured him with that new, womanly authoritativeness which seemed now to make him her own, rather than set him outside her caring, as it had once done. "I'd 'a' found a way to get through to you. If you have to hide out long, I'm goin' to fix it so that I can be nearer you and do for you. Does that arm feel better now?"

There was a large, maternal tenderness about her which appealed powerfully to Lance, upon whose boyhood fretful, chiding Roxy had tended. She seemed a refuge, a comforter indeed.

His haggard gaze still on her face, he answered in a half-voice that the arm did feel better. The food she warmed for him, the coffee that was heated and served steaming, these gave him courage as nothing yet had. He fairly choked, and a mist swam before his eyes, when she suddenly held the fragrant, inspiring beverage to his lips. Her voice drove away at once the haunting noises of the wind howling up the breaks of the creek, the insistent drip-drip of the water; her presence shut out the vast, oppressive loneliness of the place; her bright warm color shone in that dark against which the mere blaze of the pine knots had been so feeble; sounds of her living presence vanquished the silence that had weighed heavier on his spirit than all the rocks in the bluff. The dome of that stone skull at once became a round, cozy cup of sheltered warmth and kindly human cheer; as much a home, there in the heart of the wilderness, as the phoebe's nest had ever been. For the first time the grim fact that had sent him into hiding, the horrid tragedy, seemed to blur a bit in its outlines. Callista made a trip down the bank to the floor of the valley, and brought up from where she had left

them a small kettle and a frying pan.

"I'll cook you a fine dinner," she said in a cheery, practical tone, speaking as though she were in her own kitchen. She maintained an absolutely commonplace note. Neither of them mentioned Flenton Hands nor the reason for Lance's present predicament. "That stuff I brought ready cooked made a pretty good breakfast snack; but when I get me plenty of clean coals here, we'll have some good hot sweet potatoes and bacon. I'm right hungry myself."

Lance sighed.

"I reckon I'm as much perished for sleep as for victuals," he told her heavily. "After Buddy left me, I tried to get dry; but we'd missed out most of the things we ought to have got when we come a-past the place, and lost the rest in the creek; I hadn't scarcely anything to change with. Look like I couldn't get to sleep. Then all day yesterday I thought I'd catch a nap; but my arm sort o' bothered me some, and—well, the water drip-drip-drippin' out there pestered me. It seemed I must sleep when night come again; but I don't think I had to exceed two hours of rest."

Callista glanced keenly sidewise at him where he lay inert. The weeks of their separation were now running into months. What these had done to Lance grieved her generosity and flattered her pride. Always lean and bright eyed, there was now a painful appearance about the extreme fleshlessness of jaw and temple, the over-brilliance of the eye in its deeply hollowed orbit. Sight of what he had suffered for her and by her softened Callista's voice to tenderness when she spoke.

"We'll fix it for you to rest after dinner," she told him positively. "I can set out at the mouth of the cave, so you will be easy in your mind; then you'll get some good sleep."

Lance accepted this as indicating that she was very willing to be rid of him and his talk. It was what might be expected. He asked her a question or two and relapsed into silence. Presently, noticing that his eyes were not closed, she gave him some additional news.

"The baby's about to walk," she said. "He's a-pullin' up by the chairs all the time, and he can go from one person to another, if they'll hold out they' hands."

A swift contraction passed over Lance's features at the picture her words called up.

"Haven't got him named yet?" he suggested huskily.

The color flared warm on Callista's face as she bent to the fire.

"I—why—Gran'pappy's an old man, and I'm the onliest grandchild he's got. He always was powerful kind to me; and the baby—why, he just—"

"You've called the boy Ajax," supplied Lance, in that tired voice which now was his. "That's a good name."

While she cooked the "fine dinner" their talk blew idly across the surface of deeps which both dreaded.

"Pore Roxy!" Lance said musingly. "Hit was mighty kind of her to send me her gospel quilt."

From her work at the fire Callista answered him.

"Your sister Roxy thinks a heap o' you, Lance; you needn't never to doubt it. Course she does, or she wouldn't always have been pickin' at you."

Lance lay tensely quiescent a moment, then he questioned softly,

"Is that a sign?"

Callista glanced at him a bit startled; but the long lashes veiled his eyes, and the face was indecipherable.

"Roxy was bound and determined to come here in my place," she observed. "I reckon I'd never 'a' got the word where you was hid out if it hadn't 'a' been for her. Sylvane wouldn't tell her, and she come to me about it. Sis' Roxy has a kind heart under her sharp speech."

From beneath those shadowing lashes Lance looked long and curiously at her, but made no response. After the meal was served and eaten with a sort of subdued enjoyment, they continued silent, glancing furtively at each other, Callista a bit uneasy, and most urgent that he should try to rest.

When she rose and went lightly about little homely tasks, her husband's eyes followed her every movement. Something he wanted to say—the sum of all those days of black loneliness and nights of brooding in the Gap cabin after she left him there—stuck in his throat and held him silent. A tiny creature, probably the rock vole, nosing about in the obscurity which hid the rear of the cave, dislodged something which fell with a sudden pang of musical sound across the aching silence, to be followed by tiny squeakings and scuttlings. Callista turned, her hand raised to her lip, and stared into the darkness whence the airy chord spoke to her. Lance looked up and caught the shine of the firelight on her white cheek, her bright hair, lighting a spark in the eye which was averted from him.

"It's my old banjo," he said nervelessly. "Go get it, Callista, and break it up and put it on the fire."

She seemed to hear only the opening words of his command, and moved quietly into the shadows behind them, groped for the instrument, found and brought it forward in her hand.

"Break it 'crost your knee, and then burn it," Lance prompted her.

She looked at him with a curious round of the eye, a swift surprise that was almost terror. The banjo, lacking a string and with the remaining four sagging woefully, yet spoke its querulous little protest in her fingers. This was the voice that had cried under her window. Here was the singer of "How many miles, how many years?" and she was bidden to break it and cast it to the flames. This had been Lance's joy of life, the expression of moods outside her understanding and sympathy. She caught the shining thing to her as though she defended it from some menace, cherishing it in a kindly grasp.

"Oh, no," she answered softly. "No, Lance. I couldn't burn it up. It's—the banjo is the most harmless thing in the world. Why should I be mad at it?"

"You used to be," said Lance simply. "I—" he hesitated, then finished with a sort of haste—"I always was a fool about

it. I think you'd better put it in the fire."

Reverently she touched the strings, struggling with something too big for expression.

"I'll never harm it," she told him. "If I thought you would, I'd take it back with me and keep it till—till you could come and play it again. You just don't feel like yourself now."

His arm dropped to the rock beside him. His face, turned away from her, was laid sidewise upon it. She guessed that he feigned sleep.

She had forgiven the banjo. She spoke of his homecoming. She would accept him. She would hold nothing against him! . . . Yet, somehow, he could not find in his sore heart the joy and gratitude which should have answered to this state of affairs. He ought to be thankful. It was more than he deserved. Yet—to be forgiven, to be accepted—when had Lance Cleaverage ever desired such boons?

When all was cleared away with efficient, skillful swiftness, Callista left her patient lying quiescent, and went to the cave, wrapping herself in one of the homespun blankets and sitting where she could look out and see the valley. After a time inaction became irksome, and she went down to gather more chestnut wood for his fire. This she piled in the vestibule, laying it down lightly for fear of disturbing the sleeper. The afternoon wore on. Once she looked around the turn, but the fire had declined, and she could make out nothing save a bulk of shadow where Lance lay. Stealing in, she laid on more wood. The next time she went out the sun was sunk behind the western ranges, and twilight, coming fast, warned her that she must presently get back to her tryst with Sylvane. Returning with the last load of fuel, she found the inner chamber of the cave full of the broken brightness that came from a branch of pine she had ventured to put in place, seeing that the smoke so completely took care of itself. Her husband still lay with his head on his arm. She would not wake him. Doubtfully she regarded the prostrate figure, then knelt a moment at his side and whispered,

"Lance. Lance, I have obliged to go now. Either Sylvane or me—or both of us—will be here a-Wednesday night about moonrise. If anything happens that we can't come Wednesday, we'll be here the next night."

She waited a moment. Getting no response, she murmured,

"Good-by, Lance."

The tone was kind, even tender. Yet the man, whose closed lids covered waking eyes, felt no impulse to let her know that he heard, no desire to respond to her farewell.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### THE SHERIFF SCORES.

LANCE CLEAVERAGE lay in the cavern above the East Fork of Caney for nearly two weeks. The search for him was persistent, even savage, the reason given being that he had attempted the life of an officer of the law. Flenton Hands had been taken to the house of his kinsman the sheriff, and the bulletins sent out from his bedside were not encouraging; yet Lance's people clung to such hope as they might from the fact that the man was not yet dead.

"No, Flent ain't gone yet," Beason would rumble out when questioned on the subject, "but he's mighty low—mighty low. He's liable to drop off any time; and who'd take Lance Cleaverage then, I'd like to know? Not me. No, nor not any man I've met, so far. The thing for us to do is to git that thar wild hawk of a feller while they's nothing agin him more than assault with intent to kill, or some such. When he smells hemp in the business, he's goin' to make it too dangerous for anybody to go after him, and his folks'll git him out o' them mountains and plumb away to Texas, or Californy."

This it was which, urging haste, gave the hunt its flavor of savagery. The empty cabin at the head of Lance's Laurel had been ransacked again and again; it was known to be watched day and night; the espionage on the house of Kimbro Cleaverage and that of the Gentrys was almost as close. But Callista and Sylvane continually evaded it at night, and kept the fugitive in his cave well provided. In spite of their care, Lance pined visibly. His arm was almost healed; he suffered from no definite bodily ailment, save a low, fretting fever; but his manner was one of heavy languor, broken by random breaths of surface irritability.

Then came a Saturday night when Beason's men, watching a trail, surprised and took Sylvane laden with food and necessaries plainly intended for the man in hiding. They rose up from behind some rocks by the roadside and had the boy in their clutches almost before he knew to be alarmed. It was a raw, gray February evening, drawing in sullenly to night, with a spit of rain in the air, freezing as it fell, stinging the cheek like a whip-lash, numbing toes and fingers. The boy looked desolately up the long road which he had intended to forsake for a safer trail at the next turning. He glanced at his laden mule, and answered at random the volleyed questions flung at him. Finally Beason, heavy, black-bearded, saturnine, silenced them all and opened out, with the dignity of his office,

"Now see here, Sylvanus Cleaverage, these gentlemen with me is sworn officers of the law. We know whar you're a-goin' at, and who you're a-goin' to. They's no use to dodge."

"I ain't a-dodgin'," retorted Sylvane, and in the tilt of his head against the weak light of the western sky one got his full resemblance to Lance. "If you know so mighty well and good right where I was a-goin' at, go thar yo'self," he concluded, desperate, at the end of everything. "What you pesterin' me about it for? With your kind leave I'll turn around and walk myself back home."

"No you won't," Beason countered. "Ain't I told you that we're all officers of the law, and I'm sheriff of this here county, and I aim to do my duty as sworn to perform it? What you got to do is to jest move along in the—in the direction you was a-goin', and lead us to Lance Cleaver-age. You do that, or you'll wish you had."

It was a lack of tact to threaten even this younger one of the Cleaverage boys.

"I'll never do yo' biddin'," Sylvane told him with positiveness, "not this side of the grave. As for makin' me wish I had, you can kill me, but that won't get Buddy for you. He's whar you can't take him. You'll never find him; an' if you did, no ten men could take him whar he's at. An' if I was killed and put out of the way, there's them that would still feed him and carry him the news."

"The good God A'mighty! Who wants to kill you, you fool boy?" demanded Beason testily. "There's been too much killin' did; that's the trouble."

"Oh—Flent's dead then?" inquired Sylvane on a falling note, searching the faces before him in the dusk.

"Will you lead us to whar Lance is at, or will you not?" demanded Beason monotonously, dropping the flimsy pretense that they had any knowledge of the fugitive's hiding place.

"I'll go with you to Pappy," Sylvane compromised. "Whatever Pappy says will be right."

So they all turned and went together to the old Cleavage place, the boy on his laden mule riding in their midst. They found Kimbro at home sick. He got up, trembling, from his bed and dressed himself.

"Gentlemen," he said to them, appearing in their midst, humbled, broken, but still self-respecting, "I wish my son Lance would surrender himself up to the law—yes, I do. His health is giving way under what he has to endure. But lead you to him I will not, without I first get his consent to do so. If you have a mind to stay here—and if you will give me yo' word of honor not to foller nor watch me, Sheriff Beason—I will go myself and see what he has to say; and I'll come back and tell you."

Beason held a prolonged whispered consultation with his three men. At the end of it he turned and said to the father half surlily,

"Go ahead, I give you my word to neither foller nor watch."

The men sprawled themselves about Roxy Griever's hearthstone, warming luxuriously, dreading to go forth again into the raw February weather. Roxy followed her father to the door.

"Pappy," she pleaded, clinging to his arm. "Hit'll be the death of you to go abroad this-a-way, sick like you air, and all."

"No, Roxana—no, daughter," Kimbro replied, drawing her gently out to the porch, whence they could see Sylvane getting a saddle on to Satan. "I feel as though I might be greatly benefited if only this matter of Lance's can be fixed up. I consider that they trust me more than another when they consent to let me go this way."

Roxy's eye rolled toward the doorway and dwelt upon the officers of the law who were to remain her guests till her father's return. Across her mind came dim visions of heroic biblical women who had offered deadly hospitality to such. Step by step she followed Kimbro to the gate, whispering,

"Don't you git Lance to give himself up, Pappy—don't do it. You tell him Sylvane is a-goin' to fetch extra ammunition from Hepzibah, and if he can hold out till Spring, these fellers is bound to git tired and turn loose the job. He can slip away then; or they'll be wore out, an' ready to make some sort o' terms with the boy."

"Daughter," said the old man, softly, "your brother would be dead before Spring."

"Well, he'll shore die," cried the poor woman, in a sort of piercing whisper, "ef they take him down to jail in the settlement. Pappy, you know Lance ain't never goin' to live—in *the jail!*"

And Kimbro left her sobbing at the gate, as he rode away on the black horse, his frail, drooping figure a pathetic contrast to the young animal's mettlesome eagerness.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

### THE ISLAND AT LAST.

AFTER his father left him, Lance slept, the sleep of a condemned and shriven man, long and deep and dreamless, the first sound rest his tortured nerves and flagging powers had known since the night in Hepzibah.

Kimbro Cleavage—following Sylvane's directions—had come without difficulty to his son's cave hide-out, arriving at about eleven o'clock. He found Lance sitting wakeful by the fire, the gay folds of the gospel quilt over his knees, played upon by the shimmer and shine of the leaping blaze. The young man's fever-bright gaze was directed with absorbed attention toward his work. He was delicately snipping loose ends with the shears, while a threaded needle was stuck in the lapel of his coat. He had taken the scarlet calico and cut from it a series of tiny Greek crosses, beautifully exact and deftly grouped and related so as to form a border around the entire square. With that sense of decorative effect which was denied his sister, he had set these so that the interplay of red and white pleased the eye, and almost redeemed the archaic absurdities of the quilt itself. Skilled with the needle as a woman, he had basted the last cross in place when his father entered.

The talk which followed, there in that subterranean atmosphere that is neither out-nor in-door, neither dark nor light, was long and earnest. Kimbro spoke freely, and there was always that in his father which took Lance by the throat. Perhaps it was the entire lack of accusation; perhaps something in the old man's personality that appealed with its tale of struggle and failure, its frank revelation of patiently borne defeat.

"I'll go right back with you, Pappy, if you say so," Lance murmured huskily at the last, looking up into the gray old face above him like the child he had used to be. "As well now as any time."

"No, son," said Kimbro slowly. His heart ached with the cry, "The Lord knows there ain't no such hurry—there'll be time enough afterward!" But his habit of gentle stoicism prevailed, and he only paused a little, then added, "I reckon we better not do that—I reckon we couldn't very well. I rode the black nag pretty hard coming up. The going's heavy. He couldn't carry us both back, not in any sort of time; and nary one of us is fit to make it afoot. No, I'll take the word to Beason, and him and his men will likely stay at our house till in the morning—poor Roxy! Sylvane'll ride the mule up here tol'able early, and lead your horse. You go straight home. Beason and his men can come for you to your house. Will that suit?"

"Hit'll suit" Lance answered.

There was along silence between the two. Then the old man moved to the cave's mouth. "Farewell," he said, and

stood hesitating, his back to his son.

Lance followed his father a few halting paces, carrying a chunk of fire, lighting the old man down the bank.

"Farewell, Pappy," he echoed.

"All right, son," came back the faint hail, then after a moment's silence Kimbro's voice added, "Thank you for sending this word by me. Farewell," and there was the sound of his footsteps moving on down the little valley.

Probably six hours later, Lance wakened and lay looking at the embers; he reached out a languid hand to push a brand in place. Presently he rose and built up the smoldering fire, and thereafter sat beside it, head on hand, his hollow eyes studying the coals. His father was gone back to notify the sheriff. Well, that was right—a man must answer for the thing he did; and they said that Flenton Hands was dead. He was not consciously glad of this—nor regretful; he was only very weary, spent and at the end of everything. How could he have done otherwise than he had done? And yet—and yet—

His mind went back the long way to his wooing of Callista. What a flowery path it was to lead to such a bleak conclusion! Then once more his thought veered, like the light shifting smoke above the fire, to Hands. They'd hardly hang him for the killing. It was not a murder. There were those who would testify as to what his provocation had been. But it would mean his days shut away from the sun; a disgraced name to hand down to his boy.

For no reason which he could have given, the sound of a banjo whispered in his memory, "How many miles, how many years?" Ah, the miles and the years then! Callista would be free—and that would be right, too. He had no call to cling to her and claim her. She had never been his, never—never—never! An inconsequent vision of her face lying on his breast the night he had climbed the wild grapevine to her window came mockingly back to tantalize him. He stirred uneasily, and reached to lay another chunk in place, mutely answering the recollection back again—she had never been his.

Then suddenly his head lifted with a start; there was the noise of a rolling stone outside, a thrashing of the bushes, a rush of hurrying feet, and even before he could spring up Callista was in the cave.

But not any Callista Lance had ever known; not the scornful beauty who throned herself among her mates and accepted the homage of mankind as her due; not the flushed, tremulous Callista of that never-to-be-forgotten night at the window. This was not the young wife of the earlier married days—least of all the mother of his son, or the kindly friend, the stanch partner, who had tended on and served him here in the cave. This was a strange, fierce, half-distraught, shining-eyed Callista, a fit adventurer, if she list, to put forth toward his island. A little dark shawl was tied over her bright head; but from under its confining edges the fair locks, usually so ordered and placid, streamed loosely around the face which looked out white and fearful. Her dress was soaked about the edges and all up one side. It was stained with earth, there, too, ripped loose from the waist, and torn till it hung in long, streaming shreds. A deep scratch across her cheek bled unheeded, and a flying strand of hair had glued fast in it. Her shaking hands were bleeding too, and grimed with woods mold, her finger nails were packed with it, where she had fallen again and again and scrambled up. She walked staggering and breathed in gasps.

"They—" she panted, then took two or three laboring breaths before she could go on. "They told me at Father Cleavage's that they was goin' to send here and fetch you in—is that so?"

"I reckon they are," the man beside the fire assented nervelessly.

A wild look lightened over her face. She came stumblingly up to him.

"Lance!" she choked. "Did you sure enough *send* that word by your father to the sheriff?—Did you *say* you'd give up and go in—did you?"

"Yes," he returned somberly. "I did, Callista. That's all that was left me."

"My God!" she breathed. "And I couldn't believe it—not a word of it. But I just slipped out and come. I've got Gran'pappy's horse Maje and the Mandy mule tied down in the bushes below there, and—"

Cleavage glanced about him and, rising, began to roll together the blankets of his bed.

"Yes," he repeated, in a sort of automatic fashion. "Pappy left me before midnight, and he was riding Satan. I reckon I ought to be moving right soon now. It must be sun-up outside, ain't it?"

She looked at him with desperate doubt.

"Lance!" she demanded, clutching his arm with her trembling hand. "What made you send Father Cleavage with such word as that?—and never let me know!—Oh, Lance, what did you do it for? Bring them things and come on down quick. There may be time yet."

He stared at her dumbly questioning for a moment. Long misery had made his wits slow. He plainly hesitated between thinking her the emissary sent from home for him and the understanding that she wanted him to escape.

"Time?" he repeated. "Do you mean—?"

Her lips shaped "yes," her eyes fastened upon his face.

He took it very quietly. Slowly he shook his head.

"I ain't got any right to do that," he said. "I've given my word to Pappy. They'd hold him for it. And if I did go, I'd be running and hiding the balance o' my days. You and the boy would be lost to me—same as you will be as it is. And—and you wouldn't be free. I done the thing. Let me take my punishment like a man, Callista. Oh, for God's sake," he cried out with a sudden sharp cry, "let me do something like a man! I've played the fool boy long enough."

He dropped back into a sitting posture beside the fire. Callista had never released his arm. It was plain that his attitude frightened her more terribly than any violence of resistance would have done. She bent over him now in the tremulous intensity of her purpose, whispering, the low pleading of her voice still interrupted with little gasps.

"You're broke down living this-a-way. Lance. You don't know your own mind—you ain't fit to speak for yourself."

"Oh, Callista," said Lance's quiet tones, "I'm a sight fitter to speak for myself now than I ever was before in my life."

I've got it to do."

Up to this time, the trouble between these two had continued to be a lovers' quarrel. Leaving Lance alone in the house he had builded for her, throwing back into his face such help as he would have followed her with, Callista had but triumphed as she used to when they bickered before an audience of their mates. Angry as she actually was when she broke with him, there could not fail, also, to be a cruel satisfaction in the knowledge of how she put him from his ordinary, how she changed the course of his life, and knew him her pining lover, the man who could not sleep o' nights for thought of her. Perhaps, when his pride was broken, and he came suing to her, personally, she would go home with him and patch the matter up with patronage and forgiveness. From the first this expected consummation had been vaguely shadowed in her mind back of all she did or refused to do. Here and now was the matter sharply taken out of her hands. Lance turned his back on her. He reckoned without her. He promised to others that which would set him at once and permanently beyond her recall. With an impassioned gesture, she flung herself down on her knees before him where he sat. Her arms went around him, her face was pressed against him.

"No, no. Lance," she implored. "You might speak for yourself—but who's to speak for me? What'll I do when they take you from me? I'd sooner hide like a wild varmint all my days. I'd sooner—oh, come on and go with me, Lance. I'll run with you as long as we both live."

"That wouldn't be a fit life for you and the baby," Lance told her.

"The baby!" replied Callista, almost scornfully. "I didn't aim to take him along. It's you and me, Lance—you and me."

Gazing up at him, she saw the look in her husband's face; she saw that his thoughts were clearing, and that the resolute, formulated negative was coming.

"Oh, don't say it, Lance!" she cried, her arms tightening convulsively around his body, the tears streaming down her lifted face, washing away the blood. A great coughing sob shook her from head to foot. "Oh, Lance, don't—don't do it! I know—" she hastened pitifully—"I know I haven't got any rights. I know I've wore out your love. But oh, please, honey, come with me and let's run."

Through the man's dazed senses the truth had made its way at last. He sat wonder-smitten. The weeping woman on her knees before him looking up into his face, with eyes from which the veil of pride and indifference was rent away, eyes out of which the sheer, hungry, unashamed adoration gazed.

"Lance," she began at last, in a voice that was scarce more than a breath, a mere shadow of sound, "I've never told you. Look like I always waited for you to say. But since—long ago—ever since you and me was boy and girl—and girl together—They was never anybody for me but you—you, dear. They's nothing you could do or be that would make it different. I—my heart—If they take you away from me, Lance, darlin', they might just as well kill me."

Lance reached around and got the two hands that were clinging to him so frantically. He held them, one over the other, in his own and, bending his head, kissed them again and again. He touched the loose hair about her forehead, then mutely laid his lips against its fairness. He lifted his head and looked long into her eyes with a look which she could not understand.

"You—you're a-comin', Lance?" she breathed.

He shook his head ever so little.

"Callista," he said very softly, and the name was a caress,— "mine—my girl—my Callista, you're a-goin' to help me do the right thing."

She started back a little; she caught her breath, and her blue eyes dilated upon him.

"The right thing," her husband repeated, with something that was almost a smile on his lips. "And that's to ride over home and give myself up. God bless you, dear, I can do it now with a quiet mind. Oh, Callista—Callista—I'm happier this minute than I ever was before in my life! Whatever comes, I can face it now."

Callista crouched with parted lips and desperate eyes. About them there was silence, broken only by the tiny sibilations of the fire, the hushed voice of the night wind muttering in the outer chamber of the cave, as the air sighs through the open lips of a sea-shell. Her ear was against his breast; with a sort of creeping terror she heard the even beating of his heart. He could say such words quietly! An awful sense of powerlessness gripped her. Lance was arbiter of his own fate. If he chose, he could do this thing. She was like one who waits, the flood at her lips, while the inevitable death rises slowly to engulf. Then it was as if the waters closed above her. With a whispered cry she settled forward against him, and rested so, held close in his embrace. Little shivers went over her lax body. She uttered brief, broken murmurs. Down and down she sank in the arms that clasped her. Lance bent his head to hear.

"Well—if ye won't go with me," she was saying, "I'll go with you. I'll go wherever they take you. What you suffer, I'll suffer, Lance; because the fault was mine—oh, the fault was mine!"

"We ain't got no time to talk about faults, honey," he said to her, slipping a caressing hand beneath her cheek, lifting the bent face, kissing her again and again, offering that demonstrative love for which Callista thirsted, which she had no initiative herself to proffer. "I'll not let you miscall my girl. I wouldn't have a hair of her head different. Come on, darlin', I've got to make good my word."

Strangely stilled as to her grief, Callista rose. She moved silently about the cave and, without any further word of remonstrance, helped him gather his belongings together and make them ready. Lance himself was like a man for whom a new day has dawned. He was almost gay when they turned to take their farewell of the place that had been his home for weeks.

When they stepped forth, they found the sun fully risen upon a morning fair and promising. Callista looked long at the rock-house as, carrying their bundles, they passed it on the way to their mounts.

"And I had you for my own—all my own—and nobody to hinder—while we lived there," she said, speaking in a slow, wondering tone. "Oh, Lord! Foolish people have to learn hard when 'tis that they're blessed."

Lance's free arm went around her slight body and drew her close to his side as they walked. When they reached the animals, he loaded the bedding and other things carefully upon them, then turned to her.

"Sweetheart," he said, with that strange deep glow in his eyes, "folks that love each other like we do are blessed all the time, whether they're free and together—or separated—or in jail. They're blessed whether they're above ground or below it." He kissed her and lifted her lightly to Maje's back and they rode away.

As they followed down Caney and struck eastward toward the Cleavage place, the morning drew on, sweet and towardly. For all the cold, there was an under-note of Spring in the air. February felt the stirring of the year which had turned in its sleep. They rode together, hand in hand, where the trail permitted, both remembering—Lance with an added light in his eyes and a meaning smile, Callista with a sudden burst of tears—that other ride they had taken together. Lance's arm around her, her head on his shoulder, when they went down to Squire Ashe's to be married.

They traveled thus, in silence or with few words spoken, for nearly two hours. Their best road home would take them past the old Cleavage place, and within a mile of the house. As they drew near this point something stirred down deep under Lance's quiet. His breath quickened, his face set in sharp lines. He suddenly strained Callista to him in a grasp that hurt, then released her, touched the patient Maje with his heel and pushed ahead at a good gait. Callista, watching him, followed drooping and mute. Moving so, swiftly and in single file they reached the place whence they could see the chimney of the Kimbro Cleavage house through the trees, and were aware of a woman on a black horse, a child carried carefully in her arms, coming toward them. Callista lifted her hanging head and looked wonderingly around her husband.

"Why, I do believe that's Ola Derf on Cindy!" she said heavily. "Is it? No, I reckon not."

Since the day on which Ola had bidden her strange reproachful adieu to Lance's empty room, no one had seen her on Turkey Track, though it was reported that she was staying with kin no further away than Hepzibah.

"It is Ola," said Callista, as the rider of the black filly came nearer. "And she—she's got my baby! O Lord! What now?"

For a moment the astonishment of it dulled the agony of rebellion which once more surged in Callista's soul as she looked at that chimney through the trees and knew that there by its hearthstone were the sheriff and his men ready to take Lance from her.

"I come a-past the Gentry place and stopped to git the boy," Ola called, as soon as she could make them hear.

It occurred to Callista that this girl, too, supposed that Lance would try to escape, and that they would wish to take the baby with them.

"Sheriff Beason and his men are in yon," Lance told Ola, glancing in the direction of his father's house. "I'm going to my own place to give myself up—they're coming up there for me."

Ola nodded, without making any immediate reply. She looked with curious questioning from husband to wife, shifting the baby to her hip.

"My, but he's solid," she said enviously, the aboriginal mother-woman showing strong in her ugly little brown face.

"I'll take him," Callista murmured, putting out her arms almost mechanically.

But Ola made no movement to hand over the baby. She yet sat her horse, glancing from one countenance to the other.

"I've been a-stayin' down in Hepzibah," she observed abruptly. "My man, he's about to be out of the pen, and him and Flent Hands had dealings that—well, that's what Charlie was sent up for."

"Your man?" echoed Callista; and Lance smiled as she had not seen him for long.

"Yes, Charlie Massengale, my man," Ola repeated. "Heap o' folks around here didn't know I had one. We was wedded in the Territory when I was fo'teen, and he got into trouble in the Settlement—this here trouble that Flent was mixed up in—and Pappy 'lowed that as long as 'yo' old man was in the pen you better not name anything about him."

She was smoothing the baby's garments, making ready, with evident reluctance, to surrender him to them. Ajax the Second shouted inarticulately at his mother, but kept a fairly apprehensive eye upon the man who rode beside her.

"Well, young feller," said Ola finally, lifting the baby and holding him toward his parents, "I reckon I've got to give you up, jest like I had to give up yo' pappy afore ye."

She laughed a little hardily, and looked with a sort of dubious defiance at Callista, who paid no attention, but pushed her mule close in beside Cindy.

"They say that Flenton Hands is—is—Did you go to Flenton's funeral, Ola?" asked Callista fearfully, as the women negotiated the exchange of the baby.

Ola laughed again, and more loudly.

"I say funeral!" she exclaimed. "Flenton Hands has got a powerful lot more davilment to do in this world before they put him un'neath the ground. I—Pappy—they—well, you know I was down there when this all happened, and somehow, I thest got the notion in my head that Flent wasn't so mighty awful bad hurt; and when I heard how Beason was a-carryin' on, I went to their house to see Flent. I named to him that Charlie's time was 'bout to be up an' he'd be out, and that what Charlie had stood for him was a plenty. I axed him didn't he want to send a writin' up to Beason and stop this foolishness up here on Turkey Track, and after I'd talked to him for a little spell he 'lowed he did."

Callista, hearkening in silence, caught the child in so strained a grasp that he made a little outcry, half scared, half offended. Ola pulled from the bosom of her dress a letter which she flung over to Lance with the uncouth yet generous gesture of a savage.

"Course Flent could hang on and make you a little trouble—but he ain't a-goin' to," she said sturdily. "I reckon he's called off his dogs in that writin'. Hit's to Dan Beason."

With the words she wheeled her horse and would have gone, but Callista, at the imminent risk of dropping Ajax, caught at Cindy's bridle rein.

"I've got a heap to thank you for, Ola Derf," she said in a voice shaken with deep feeling.



"You ain't got a thing in the world to thank me for, Callista Gentry," declared the little brown girl, and drew her black brows at Lance's wife. But Callista's whole nature melted into grateful love.

"Where you goin' now?" she asked wistfully. "Looks like you and me ought to be better friends than we ever have been."

Ola considered the proposition, and shook her head.

"I reckon not," she said finally. "I'm a-goin' down to Nashville right soon. Charlie will want me to be right thar when he gits out. He's not the worst man in the world, ef he ain't—"

She turned a sudden swimming look on the pair with their child.

"Good-by," she ended abruptly, and signaling Cindy with her heel, loped off down the road.

The hounds at the Kimbro Cleavage place were evidently away on hunting enterprises of their own. Lance and his wife rode to the gate without challenge, dismounted, tethered the animals, and omitting the customary halloo, opened the door upon the family seated at a late breakfast.

For a moment nobody in the room stirred or spoke. The sheriff paused with a morsel checked on its way to his open mouth. Roxy Griever, coffee-pot in hand, stopped between fireplace and table. Sylvane, who had half risen at the sound of steps, remained as he was, staring, while old Kimbro's eyes reached the newcomer with pathetic entreaty in their depths. Ma'y-Ann-Marth' broke the spell by rushing at her Uncle Lance and butting into his knees, shouting welcome. Then Sylvane hastily leaped up and ran to his brother's side, as though to share as nearly as might be that which must now befall. The men on Beason's either hand nudged him and whispered.

"Do it quick," Roxy heard one mutter.

"Better get the handcuffs on him," admonished the other. "He's a slippery cuss."

Roxy cast a look of helpless fury at the officers of the law, and mechanically advanced to fill their cups once more—gladly would she have poured to them henbane, plague, the venom of adders. Beason jammed into his mouth the bite he had started to take, and speaking around it in a voice of somewhat impaired dignity, began his solemn recitative,

"Lance Cleavage, I arrest you in the name of the law—"

"Hold on a minute," suggested Lance, mildly, bending to pick up Ma'y-Ann-Marth' (both of the deputies ducked as his head went down); "I've got a letter for you, Daniel Beason." He tossed the envelope to the sheriff across the little girl's flaxen head. "Read it before you make your arrest. Read it out, or to yourself."

"Flent ain't dead!" cried Roxy, with a woman's instinctive piercing to the heart of the matter. They all remained gazing at Beason while he tore open and laboriously deciphered the communication. His face fell almost comically.

"No, he ain't dead—an' he ain't a-goin' to die," blustered the sheriff, trying to cover his own pre-knowledge of the fact. "Well, he's made a fool of me one time too many. When I go back to Hepzibah, I'll settle this here business with Mr. Fenton Hands, that thinks he can sick the law on people and call it off, same as you would a hound dog. Ouch! The good Lord, woman! you needn't scald a body."

For in her blissful relief, Roxy had swung the spout of the coffee-pot a wide circle, which sprayed the boiling fluid liberally over the sheriff's thumb. He regarded her frowningly, the member in his mouth, as she set the pot down ruthlessly on her cherished tablecloth of floursacks and ran to add herself to the group about her returned brother.

The deputies got to their feet and came over to shake hands, muttering broken phrases concerning the law, and always having entertained the utmost good will toward their quarry. Even Beason, nursing his painful thumb, finally offered a surly paw. Only old Kimbro wheeled from the table and sat with bent head, his working face turned toward the hearthstone, tears running unchecked, unheeded, down the cheeks that had never been thus wet in the days of his most poignant sorrow.

"No, thank you kindly. Sis' Roxy," Lance refused his sister's invitation when she would have forced him and Callista into places at the table. "We'll be movin' along home." His tones dwelt fondly on the word. "Neither Callista nor me is rightly hungry yet; we'll take our first meal at our own place to-day."

It was bare branches they rode under going home to the cabin in the Gap; but the sap had started at the roots. Winter had done his worst; his bolt was sped; Spring was on the way.

Fire was kindled once more on the cold hearth, a splendid banner of flame wrapping the hickory logs, and Lance sat before it with his son on his knees, warming the small rosy feet chilled from the long ride. For a moment he caught and held both restless, dimpled little members in one sinewy brown hand, marveling at them, thrilling to the touch of their velvet softness.

Outside, a cardinal's note came persistently from the stream's edge, a gallant call. High over the Cumberlands arched the blue, dappled with white cloud. It was a rarely beautiful day, such as nearly every February brings a few of in that region. On every rocky hillside farm of the mountain country harness and implements were being dragged forth and inspected against the beginning of the year's work. Winter's prisoners were everywhere rejoicing in the prospect of release. Doors were left open; girls called from outside announcing finds of early blossoms; the piping voices of children at play came shrill and keen on the cool, sunlit air.

Within Callista's dusk kitchen, the firelight set moving ruddy shine and shadow on the brown walls. Midway one of these she had hung up the banjo, having carried it home across her shoulders. Its sheepskin round showed a misty moon within the gleam of metal band where the blaze struck out a sparkling crescent to rim one side. It made no question now of "How many miles, how many years?" for the answer was come. Later Lance would take it down and string it afresh, and the little feet that kicked their pink heels against his knee, their fat toes curling ecstatically in the heat of the fire, would dance to its strumming. Even Callista would learn the delight of measuring her step by its music. But now it was mute. There was no need of its voice in the harmony that was here. And when Callista, in the pauses of her homely task of dinner making, knelt beside the pair at the fire and encircled them both with her arms, Lance knew that he had at last brought home his own to his island. An island! It stretched away before the eye of his spirit, a continent, a world, a universe! The confines of that airy domain where he had dwelt alone and unaccompanied, were

suddenly wide enough to take in all mankind, though they held just now only the trinity of home—father, mother, and child.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WIVING OF LANCE CLEAVERAGE \*\*\*

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