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by Will N. Harben**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NORTHERN GEORGIA SKETCHES ***

NORTHERN GEORGIA SKETCHES

By Will N. Harben

Chicago

A. C. McClurg & Co.

1900

NORTHERN GEORGIA
SKETCHES



Original

Northern Georgia Sketches

BY
WILL N. HARBEN



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DEDICATION

TO JOEL CHANDLER HARRIS IN GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGMENT
OF THE KINDLY ENCOURAGEMENT

WHICH MADE THIS BOOK POSSIBLE.

THE AUTHOR

I am indebted to the publishers of The Century Magazine, Lippincott's Magazine, The Ladies Home Journal, Book News, The Black Cat, and to the Bachelier Syndicate for the courteous permission to reprint the sketches contained in this volume.

WILL N. HARBEN.

Dalton, Ga.

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A HUMBLE ABOLITIONIST

Andrew Duncan and his wife trudged along the unshaded road in the beating sunshine, and paused to rest under the gnarled white-trunked sycamore trees. She wore a drooping gown of checked homespun, a sun-bonnet of the same material, the hood of which was stiffened with invisible strips of cardboard, and a pair of coarse shoes just from the shop. Her husband was barefooted, his shirt was soiled, and he wore no coat to hide the fact. His trousers were worn to shreds about the ankles, but their knees were patched with new cloth.

"I never was as thirsty in all my born days," he panted, as he looked down into the bluish depths of a road-side spring. "Gee-whilikins! ain't it hot?"

"An' some fool or other's run off with the drinkin'-gourd," chimed in his wife. "Now ain't that jest our luck?"

"We 'll have to lap it up dog-fashion, I reckon," Andrew replied, ruefully, "an' this is the hardest spring to git down to I ever seed. Hold on, Ann; I 'll fix you."

As he spoke he knelt on the moss by the spring, turned his broad-brimmed felt hat outside in, and tightly folded it in the shape of a big dipper. He filled it with water, and still kneeling, held it up to his wife. When their thirst was satisfied, they turned off from the road into a path leading up a gradual slope, on the top of which stood a three-roomed log cabin.

"They are waitin' fer us," remarked Duncan. "I see 'em out in the passage. My Lord, I wonder what under the sun they 'll do with Big Joe. Ever' time I think of the whole business I mighty nigh bu'st with laughin'." Mrs. Duncan smiled under her bonnet.

"I think it's powerful funny myself," she said, as she followed after him, her new shoes creaking and crunching on the gravel. To this observation Duncan made no response, for they were now in front of the cabin.

An old man and an old woman sat in the passage, fanning their faces with turkey-wing fans. They were Peter Gill and his wife, Lucretia.

The latter rose from her chair, which had been tilted back against the wall, and with clattering heels, shambled into the room on the right.

"I reckon you'd ruther set out heer whar you kin ketch a breath o' air from what little's afloat," she said, cordially, as she emerged, a chair in either hand. Placing the chairs against the wall opposite her husband, she took a pair of turkey-wings from a nail on the wall and handed them to her guests, and with a grunt of relief resumed her seat. For a moment no one spoke, but Duncan presently broke the silence.

"Well, I went an' seed Colonel Whitney fer you," he began, his blue eyes twinkling with inward amusement. "An', Pete Gill, I'm powerfully afeerd you are in fer it. As much as you've spoke agin slave-holdin' as a practice, you've got to make a start at it. The Colonel said that you held a mortgage on Big Joe, an' ef you don't take 'im right off you won't get a red cent fer yore debt."

"I'm prepared fer it," burst from Mrs. Gill. "I tried my level best to keep Mr. Gill from lendin' the money, but nothin' I could say would have the least influence on 'im. The Lord only knows what we 'll do. We are purty-lookin' folks to own a high-priced, stuck-up quality nigger."

The two visitors exchanged covert glances of amusement.

"How did you manage to git caught?" Andrew asked, crushing a subtle smile out of his face with his broad red hand.

Peter Gill had grown quite red in the face and down his wrinkled, muscular neck. As he took off his brogans to cool his feet, and began to scratch his toes through his woolen socks, it was evident to his questioner that he was not only embarrassed but angry.

"The thousand dollars was all the money we was ever able to save up," he said. "I was laying off to buy the

fast piece o' good land that was on the market, so me 'n the ol' 'oman would have a support in old age. But I didn't see no suitable farm just then, an' as my money was lyin' idle in the bank, Lawyer Martin advised me to put it out at intrust, an' I kinder tuck to the notion. Then Colonel Whitney got wind o' the matter an' rid over an' said, to accommodate me, he'd take the loan. He fust give me a mortgage on some swampy land over in Murray, that Martin said was wuth ten thousand, an' it run on that way fur two yeer. The fust hint I had of the plight I was in was when the Colonel couldn't pay the intrust. Then I went to another lawyer, fer it looked like Martin an' the Colonel was kinder in cahoot, an' my man diskivered that the lan' had been sold long before it was mortgaged to me for taxes. My lawyer wasn't no fool, so he got Whitney in fer a game o' open-an'-shut swindle. He up an' notified 'im that ef my claim wasn't put in good shape in double-quick time, he was goin' to put the clamps on somebody. Well, the final upshot was that I tuck Big Joe as security, an' now that the Colonel's entire estate has gone to flinders, I've got the nigger an' my money's gone."

Duncan waited for the speaker to resume, but the aspect of the case was so disheartening that Gill declined to say more about it. He simply hitched one of his heels up on the last rung of his chair and began to fan himself vigorously.

"I did as you wanted me to," said Duncan, wiping his brow and combing his long, damp hair with his fingers. "I went round an' axed the opinion o' several good citizens, an' it is the general belief ef you don't take the nigger you won't never git back a cent o' yore loan. But the funniest part o' the business is the way Big Joe acts about it." Dun can met his wife's glance and laughed out impulsively. "You see, Gill, in the Whitney break-up, all the other niggers has been sold to rich families, an' the truth is, Big Joe feels his dignity tuck down a good many pegs by bein' put off on you-uns, that never owned a slave to yore name. The other darkies has been a-teasin' of 'im all day, an' he's sick an' tired of it. The Whitneys has spiled 'im bad. They l'arnt 'im to read an' always let 'im stan' dressed up in his long coat in the big front hall to invite quality folks in the house. They say he had his eye on a yaller gal, an' that he's been obliged to give her up, fer she's gone with one of the Staffords in Fannin' County."

Gill's knee, which was thrust out in front of him by the sharp bend of his leg, was quivering.

"Big Joe might do a sight wuss 'n to belong to me," he said, warmly. "I don't know as we-uns 'll have any big hall for 'im to cavort about in, nur anybody any wuss 'n yore sort to come to see us, but we pay our debts an' have a plenty t'eat."

Mrs. Gill was listening to this ebullition, her red nose slightly elevated, and she made no effort to suppress a chuckle of satisfaction over her husband's subtle allusion to the status of their guests.

"I want you two jest to come heer one minute," she burst out suddenly, and with a dignity that seemed to cool the air about her, she rose and moved toward the little shed room at the end of the cabin. Duncan and his wife followed, an expression of half-fearful curiosity in their tawny visages. Reaching the door of the room, Mrs. Gill pushed it open and coolly signaled them to enter, and when they had done so, and stood mutely looking about them, she followed.

"When I made up my mind we'd be obliged to take Big Joe," she explained, "I fixed up fer 'im a little. Look at that bedstead!" (Her hand was extended toward it as steadily as the limb of an oak.) "Ann Duncan, you are at liberty to try to find a better one in this neighborhood. You 'n Andrew sleep on one made out 'n poles with the bark on 'em. Then jest feel o' them thar feathers in this new tick an' pillows, an' them's bran-new store-bought sheets."

This second open allusion to her own poverty had a subduing effect on Mrs. Duncan's risibilities. The ever-present twinkle of amusement went out of her eyes, and she had an attitude of vast consideration for the words of her hostess as she put her perspiring hand on the mattress and pressed it tentatively.

"It's saft a plenty fer a king," she observed, conciliation enough for any one in her tone; "he 'll never complain, I bound you!"

"Big Joe won't have to tech his bare feet to the floor while he's puttin' on his clothes, nuther," reminded Mrs. Gill. She raised her eyebrows as an admiral might after seeing a well-directed shot from one of his guns blow up a ship, and pointed at a piece of rag carpet laid at the side of the bed. "An' you see I've fixed 'im a washstand with a new pan thar in the corner, an' a roller towel, an' bein' as they say he's so fixy, I'm a-goin' to fetch in the lookin'-glass, an' I've cut some pictur's out 'n newspapers that I intend to paste up on the walls, so as—"

Mrs. Gill paused. Experienced as she was in the tricks of Ann Duncan's facial expression, she at once divined that her words were meeting with amused opposition.

"Why, Mis' Gill," was Ann's rebuff, "shorely you ain't a-goin' to let 'im sleep in the same house with you-uns!"

"Of course I am, Ann Duncan; what in the name o' common sense do you mean?"

"Oh, nuthin'." Mrs. Duncan glanced at her husband and wiped a cowardly smile from her broad mouth with her hand. "You see, Mis' Gill, I'm afeerd you are goin' to overdo it. You've heerd me say I have good stock in me, ef I am poor. I've got own second cousins that don't know the'r own slaves when they meet 'em in the big road. I've heerd how they treat their niggers, an' I'm afeerd all this extra fixin' up will make folks poke fun at you. To-day in town the niggers started the laugh on Big Joe theirselves, an' the white folks all j'ined in. It looked like they thought it was a good joke for the Gill lay-out to own a quality slave. Me 'n Andrew don't mean no harm, but now it *is* funny; you know it is!"

"I don't see a thing that's the least bit funny in it." Mrs. Gill bristled and turned almost white in helpless fury. "We never set ourselves up as wantin' to own slaves, but when this one is saddled on us through no fault o' our 'n, I see no harm in our holdin' onto 'im till we kin see our way out without loss. As to 'im not sleepin' in the same cabin we do, whar in the Lord's creation would we put 'im? The corn-crib is the only thing with a roof on it, an' it's full to the door."

"Oh, I reckon you are doin' the best you kin," granted Mrs. Duncan, as she passed out of the door and went back to where Peter Gill sat fanning himself. He had overheard part of the conversation.

"I told Lucretia she oughtn't to fix up so almighty much," he observed. "A nigger ain't like no other livin'

cre'ture. A pore man jest cayn't please 'em."

Ann Duncan was driven to the very verge of laughter again.

"What you goin' to call 'im?" she snickered, her strong effort at keeping a serious face bringing tears into her eyes. "Are you goin' to make 'im say Marse Gill, an' Mis' Lucretia?"

"I don't care a picayune what he calls us," answered Gill, testily. "I reckon we won't start a new language on his account."

Through this colloquy Mrs. Duncan had been holding her sun-bonnet in a tight roll in her hands. She now unfurled it like the flag of a switchman and whisked it on her head.

"Well, I wish you luck with yore slave," she was heard to say, crisply, "but I hope you 'll not think me meddlin' ef I say that you 'll have trouble. Folks like you-uns, an' we-uns fer that matter, don't know no more about managin' slaves raised by high-falutin' white folks than doodle-bugs does." And having risen to that climax, Ann Duncan, followed by her splay-footed, admiring husband, departed.

The next morning, accompanied by Big Joe and the man who had been overseer on his plantation, Colonel Whitney drove over in a spring wagon.

"I decided to bring Joe over myself, so as to have no misunderstanding," he announced. "The other negroes have been picking at him a good deal, and he is a little out of sorts, but he 'll get all right."

The Gills were standing in the passage, a look of stupid embarrassment on their honest faces. Despite their rugged strength of character, they were not a little awed by the presence of such a prominent member of the aristocracy, notwithstanding the fact that their dealings with the Colonel had not, in a financial way, been just to their fancy.

"I'm much obliged to you, sir," Peter found himself able to enunciate.

The Colonel lighted a cigar and began to smoke. A sad, careworn expression lay in his big blue eyes. He had the appearance of a man who had not slept for a week. His tired glance swept from the Gills to the negro in the wagon, and he said, huskily:

"Bounce out, Joe, and do the very best you can. I hate to part with you, but you know my condition—we've talked that over enough."

Slowly the tall black man crawled out at the end of the wagon and stood alone on the ground. The expression of his face was at once so full of despair and fiendishness that Mrs. Gill shuddered and looked away from him.

"Well, Gill," said the planter, "I reckon me and you are even at last. I'm going down to Savannah, where I hope to get a fresh start and amount to more in the world. Goodbye to you—good-bye, Joe."

He had only nodded to the pair in the passage, but he reached over the wagon-wheel for the hand of the negro, and as he took it a tender expression of regret stamped itself on his strong features.

"Be a good boy, Joe," he half-whispered. "As God is my heavenly judge, I hate this more than anything else in the world. If I could possibly raise the money I'd take you with me—or free you."

The thick, stubborn lip of the slave relaxed and fell to quivering.

"Good-bye, Marse Whit'," he said, simply.

The Colonel took a firmer grasp of the black hand.

"No ill-will, Joe?" he questioned, anxiously.

"No, suh, Marse Whit', I hain't got no hard feelin's 'gin you."

"Well, then good-bye, Joe. If I ever get my head above water, I 'll keep my promise about you and Liza. She looked on you as her favorite, but don't raise your hopes too high. I'm an old man now, and it may be uphill work down there."

The negro lowered his head and the overseer drove on. As the wagon rumbled down the rocky slope a wisp of blue smoke from the Colonel's cigar followed it like a banner unfurled to the breeze. For several minutes after the wagon had disappeared Big Joe stood where he had alighted, his eyes upon the ground.

"What's the matter?" asked Gill, stepping down to him.

"Nothin', Marse—" Big Joe seemed to bite into the word as it rose to his tongue, then he shrugged his shoulders contemptuously and looked down again.

The Gills exchanged ominous glances, and there was a pause.

"Have you had anything to eat this morning?" Gill bethought himself to ask.

The black man shook his head.

"I ain't teched a bite sence dey sol' me; dey offered it to me, but I didn't want it."

Once more the glances of the husband and wife traveled slowly back and forth, centering finally on the face of the negro.

"I reckon it's 'cause yore sick at heart," observed Gill, at first sympathetically, and then with growing firmness as he continued. "I know how you feel; most o' yore sort has a way o' thinkin' yorese'ves a sight better 'n pore white folks, an' right now the truth is you can't bear the idee o' belongin' to me 'n my wife. Now, me 'n you an' her ought to come to some sort of agreement that we kin all live under. You won't find nuther one of us the overbearin' sort. We was forced to take you to secure ouse'ves agin the loss of our little all, an' we want to do what's fair in every respect. I'm told you are a fust-rate shoemaker. Now, ef you want to, you kin set up a shop in yore room thar, an' have the last cent you kin make. You 'll git plenty o' work, too, fer this neighborhood is badly in need of a shoemaker. Now, my wife will fry you some fresh eggs an' bacon an' make you a good cup o' coffee."

But all that Peter Gill had managed to say with satisfaction to himself seemed to have gone into one of the negro's ears and to have met with not the slightest obstruction on its way out at the other. To the hospitable invitation which closed Peter's speech, the negro simply said:

"I don't feel like eatin' a bite."

"Oh, you don't," said Gill, at the end of his resources; "maybe you'd feel different about it ef you was to smell the bacon a-fryin'."

"I don't want to eat," reiterated the slave. "Well, you needn't unless you want to," went on Gill, still pacifically. "That thar room on the right is fer you; jest go in it whenever you feel like it an' try to make yorese'f at home; you won't find us hard to git along with."

The Gills left their human property seated on a big rock in front of the cabin and withdrew to the rear. There they sat till near noon. Now and then Gill would peer around the corner to satisfy himself that his slave was still seated on the rock. Gill chewed nearly a week's allowance of tobacco that morning; it seemed to have a sedative effect on his nerves. Finally, Ann Duncan loomed up in the distance and strode toward the cabin. She wore a gown of less brilliant tints than the one she had worn the day before. It had the dun color of clay washed into rather than out of its texture, and it hung from her narrow hips as if it were damp.

"Well, he *did* come," she remarked, introductively.

Mrs. Gill nodded. "Yes; the Colonel fetched 'im over this mornin'."

"So I heerd, an' I jest 'lowed I'd step over an' see how you made out." Mrs. Duncan's rippling laugh recalled the whole of her allusions of the day previous. "Thar's more talk goin' round than you could shake a stick at, an' considerable spite an' envy. Some 'lows that the havin' o' this slave is agoin' to make you stuck up, an' that you 'll move yore membership to Big Bethel meetin'-house; but law me! I can see that you are bothered. How did he take to his room?"

"He ain't so much as looked in yit," replied Mrs. Gill, with a frown.

Thereupon Ann Duncan ventured up into the passage and peered cautiously round the corner at Big Joe.

"He's-a-wipin' of his eyes," she announced, as she came back. "It looks like he's a-cryin' about some 'n'."

At this juncture, a motley cluster of men, women, and children, led by Andrew Duncan, came out of the woods which fringed the red, freshly plowed field below, and began to steer itself, like a school of fish, toward the cabin. About fifty yards away they halted, as animals do when they scent danger. Heads up and open-mouthed, they stood gazing, first at the Gills, and then at their slave. Peter Gill grew angry. He stood up and strode as far in their direction as the ash-hopper under the apple-tree, and raised both his hands, as if he were frightening away a flock of crows.

"Be off, the last one of you!" he shouted; "and don't you dare show yorese'ves round heer unless you've got business. This ain't no side-show—I want you to understand that!"

They might have defied their old neighbor Gill, but the owner of a slave so big and well dressed as the human monument on the rock was too important a personage to displease with impunity; so, followed by the apologetic Mrs. Duncan, who blamed herself for having set a bad example to her curious neighbors, they slowly dispersed.

At noon Mrs. Gill went into the cabin and began to prepare dinner. She came back to her husband in a moment, and in a low voice, and one that held much significance, she said:

"I need some firewood." As she spoke she allowed her glance to rest on Big Joe. Gill looked at the sullen negro for half a minute, and then he shrugged his shoulders as if indecision were a burden to be shaken off, and mumbling something inaudible he went out to the woodpile and brought in an armful of fuel.

"A pore beginning," his wife said, as he put it down on the hearth.

"I know it," retorted Gill, angrily. "You needn't begin that sort o' talk, fer I won't stand it. I'm a-doin' all I can." And Gill went back to his chair.

The good housewife fried some slices of dark red ham. She boiled a pot of sweet potatoes, peeled off their jackets, and made a pulp of them in a pan; into the mass she stirred sweet milk, butter, eggs, sugar, and grated nutmeg. Then she rolled out a sheet of dough and cut out some open-top pies.

"I never knowed a nigger that could keep his teeth out of 'em," she chuckled.

Half an hour later she called out to Gill to come in. He paused in the doorway, staring in astonishment.

"Well, I never!" he ejaculated.

She had laid the best white cloth, got out her new knives and forks with the bone handles, and some dishes that were never used except on rare occasions. She had placed Gill's plate at the head of the table, hers at the foot, and was wiping a third—the company plate with the blue decorations.

"Whar's he goin' to set an' eat?" she asked.

"Blast me ef I know any more 'n a rat," Gill told her, with alarmed frankness. "I hain't thought about it a bit, but it never will do fer 'im to set down with me an' you. Folks might see it, an' it would give 'em more room for fun."

Mrs. Gill laid the plate down and sighed.

"I declare, I'm afeered this nigger is a-goin' to stick us up, whether or no. I won't feel much Christian humility with him at one table an' us at another, but of course I know it ain't common fer folks to eat with their slaves."

Gill's glance was sweeping the table and its tempting dishes with an indescribable air of disapproval.

"You are a-fixin' up powerful," was his slow comment; "a body would think, to look at all this, that it was the fourth Sunday an' you was expectin' the preacher. You'd better begin right; we cayn't keep this up an' make a crop."

Her eyes flashed angrily.

"You had no business to bring Big Joe heer, then," she fumed. "You know well enough he's used to fine doin's, an' I'm not a-goin' to have 'im make light of us, ef we *are* pore. I was jest a-thinkin'; the Whitneys always tied napkins 'round the'r necks to ketch the gravy they drap, an' Big Joe's bound to notice that we ain't used to sech."

It was finally agreed that for that day at least the slave was to have his dinner served to him where he sat;

so Mrs. Gill arranged it temptingly on a piece of plank, over which a piece of cloth had been spread, and took it out to him. She found him almost asleep, but he opened his eyes as she drew near.

Drowsily he surveyed the contents of the cups and dishes, his eyes kindling at the sight of the two whole custards. But his pride—it was evidently that—enabled him to manifest a sneer of irreconcilability.

"I ain't a-goin' t'eat a bite," was the way he put it, stubbornly.

For a moment Mrs. Gill was nonplussed; but she believed in getting at the core of things.

"Are you a-complainin'?" she questioned.

The big negro's sneer grew more pronounced, but that was all the answer he gave.

"Don't you think you could stomach a bit o' this heer custard pie?"

Big Joe's eyes gleamed against his will, but he shook his head.

"I tol' um all ef dey sol' me to you, I wouldn't eat a bite. I'm gwine ter starve ter death."

"Oh, that's yore intention!" Mrs. Gill caught her breath. A sort of superstitious terror seized upon her as she slowly hitched back to the cabin.

"He won't tech a bite," she informed Gill's expectant visage; "an' what's a sight more, he says he's vowed he won't eat our victuals, an' that he's laid out to starve. Peter Gill, I'm afeerd this has been sent on us!"

"Sent on us!" echoed Gill, who also had his quota of superstition.

"Yes, it's a visitation of the Almighty fer our hoardin' up that money when so many of our neighbors is in need. I wish now we never had seed it. Ef Big Joe dies on our hands, I 'll always feel like we have committed the unpardonable sin. We've talked ag'in' slave-holdin' all our lives tell we had the bag to hold, an' now we've set up reg'lar in the business."

Gill ate his dinner on the new cloth in morose silence. A heavy air of general discontent had settled on him.

"Well," he commented, as he went to the water-shelf in the passage to take his afterdinner drink from the old cedar pail, "ef he refused 'tater custards like them thar he certainly is in a bad plight. If he persists, I 'll have to send fer a doctor."

The afternoon passed slowly. The later conduct of the slave was uneventful, beyond the fact that he rose to his full height once, stretched and yawned, without looking toward the cabin, and then reclined at full length on the grass. Another batch of curious neighbors came as near the cabin as the spring. Those who had been ordered away in the forenoon had set afloat a report that Gill had said that, now he was a slave-holder, he would not submit to familiar visits from the poor white trash of the community. And Sid Ruford, the ringleader of the group at the spring, had the boldness to shout out some hints about the one-nigger, log-cabin aristocracy which drove the hot blood to Gill's tanned face. He sprang up and took down his long-barreled "squirrel gun" from its hooks on the wall.

"I 'll jest step down thar," he said, "an' see ef that gab is meant fer me."

"I wouldn't pay no 'tention to him," replied Mrs. Gill, who was held back from the brink of an explosion only by the sight of the weapon and a knowledge of Gill's marksmanship. However, Gill had scarcely taken half a dozen steps down the path when he wheeled and came back laughing.

"They run like a passle o' skeerd sheep," he chuckled, as he restored his gun to its place.

This incident seemed to break the barrier of reserve between him and his human property, for he stood over the prostrate form of the negro and eyed him with a dissatisfied look.

"See heer," he began, sullenly, "enough of a thing is a plenty. I'm gettin' sick an' tired o' this, an' I 'll be dadblasted ef I'm a-goin' to let a black, poutin' scamp make me lose my nat'ral sleep an' peace o' mind. Now, you git right up off 'n that damp ground an' go in yore room an' lie down, if you feel that-a-way. Folks is a-passin' along an' lookin' at you like you was a stuffed monkey."

It may have been the sight of the gun, or it may have been a masterful quality in the Anglo-Saxon voice, that inspired the negro with a respect he had not hitherto entertained for his new owner, for he rose at once and went into his room.

At dusk Mrs. Gill waddled to the closed door of his apartment and rapped respectfully. She heard the bed creaking as if Big Joe were rising, and then he cautiously opened the door and with downcast eyes waited for her to make her wishes known.

"Supper is ready," she announced, in a voice which, despite her strength of character, quivered a little, "an' before settin' down to it, I thought thar would be no harm in askin' if thar's anything that would strike yore fancy. When it gits a little darker I could blind a chicken on the roost an' fry it, or I could make you some thick flour soup with sliced dumplin's."

She saw him wince as he tore himself from the temptation she had laid before him, but he spoke quite firmly.

"I ain't a-goin' t'eat any more in this worl'," he said.

"Well, I reckon you won't gorge yorese'f in the next," said Mrs. Gill, "but I want to say that what you are contemplatin' is a sin." She turned back into the cabin and sat at the table and poured her husband's coffee in disturbed silence.

"I believe on my soul he's goin' to make a die of it," she said, after a while, as she sat munching a piece of dry bread, having no appetite at all. And Gill, deeply troubled, could make no reply.

It was their habit to go to bed as soon as supper was over, so when they rose from the table Mrs. Gill turned down the covers of the high-posted bed and beat the pillows. Before barring the cabin door, she scrutinized the closed shutter directly opposite, but all was still as death in the room of the slave.

For the first night in many years the old pair found they could not sleep, their brains being still active with the first great problem of their lives. The little clock struck ten. The silence of the night was disturbed by the shrilling of tree-frogs and the occasional cry of the whip-poor-will.

Suddenly Gill sprang up with a little grunt of alarm. "What's that?" he asked.

"It sounded powerful like somebody a-groanin'," whispered Mrs. Gill. "Oh, Lordy, Peter, I have a awful feelin'!"

"I 'll git up an' see what's ailin' 'im," said Gill, a little more calmly. "Mebby the idiot has done without food till he's took cramps."

Dressing himself hastily, he went outside. A pencil of yellow light was streaming through a crack beneath Big Joe's door. Gill had not put on his shoes, and his feet fell softly on the grass. Putting his ear to the door of the negro's room, he overheard low groans and words which sounded like a prayer, repeated over and over in a sing-song fashion. Later he heard something like the sobbing of a bigchested man.

"Open up!" cried Gill, shaking the door; "open up, I say!"

The vocal demonstration within ceased, and there was a clatter in the vicinity of the bed, as if Big Joe were rising to his feet. The farmer repeated his firm command, and the shutter slowly opened. The negro looked like a giant in the dim light of the tallow-dip on a table behind him.

"Was that you a-makin' all that noise?" asked Gill.

"I wus prayin', suh," answered Big Joe, his face in the shadow.

"Oh, that was it; I didn't know!" Gill was trying to master a most irritating awkwardness on his part; in questions of religious ceremony he always allowed for individual taste. Passing the negro, he went into the cabin and lifted the tallow-dip above his head and looked about the room suspiciously. "You was jest a-prayin', eh?"

"Yes, suh; I was a-prayin' to de Gre't Marster ter tek me off on a bed o' ease, sence I hatter go anyway. Er death er starvation ain't no easy job."

Gill sat down on the negro's bed. He crossed his legs and swung a bare foot to and fro in a nervous, jerky manner.

"Looky' heer," he said finally to the black profile in the doorway, "you are a plagued mystery to me. What in the name o' all possessed do you hanker after a box in the cold ground fer?"

The slave seemed slightly taken aback by the blunt directness of this query; he left the door and sat down heavily in a chair at the fireplace. "Huh!" he grunted, "is you been all dis time en not fin' out what my trouble is?"

"Ef I *did* know I wouldn't be settin' heer at this time o' night, losin' my nat'ral sleep to ask about it," was the tart reply.

The negro grunted again. "Do you know Marse Whit's Liza?" he asked, almost eagerly.

"I believe I've seed 'er once or twice," Gill told him. "A fine-lookin' wench—about the color of a sorghum ginger-cake. Is she the one you mean?"

The big man nodded. "Me 'n her was gwine ter git married, but Marse Whit' hatter go 'n trade 'er off ter Marse Stafford, en Marse Stafford is done give 'er 'er freedom yistiddy."

"Ah, he set 'er free, did he?" Gill stared, and by habit awkwardly stroked that part of his face where a beard used to grow.

"Yes, suh; Marse Gill, he done set 'er free, en now a free nigger is flyin' roun' her. She won't marry no slave now, suh!"

Gill drew a full breath and stood up. "Then it wasn't becuse you thought yorese'f so much better 'n me 'n my wife that you wanted to dump yorese'f into eternity?"

"No, suh; dat wasn't in my min', suh."

"Well, I'm powerful glad o' that, Joe," responded Gill, "becuse neither me nor my wife ever harmed a kink in yore head. Now, the gospel truth is, I was drawn into this whole business ag'in' my wishes, an' me an' Lucretia would give a lots to be well out of it. Now, I don't want to be the cause o' that free nigger walkin' off with yore intrusts, so heer's what I 'll do. Ef you 'll ride in town with me in the mornin' I 'll git a lawyer to draw up as clean a set o' freedom papers as you ever laid your peepers on. What do you say?"

Big Joe's eyes expanded until they seemed all white, with dark holes in the center. For a minute he sat like a statue, as silent as the wall behind him; then he said, with a deep breath: "Marse Gill, is you in earnest—my Gawd! *is* you?"

"As the Almighty is my judge, in whose presence I set at this minute."

The negro covered his face with a pair of big, quivering hands.

"Den I don't know what ter say, Marse Gill. I never expected to be a free man, en I had give up hope er ever seein' Liza ag'in. Oh, Marse Gill, you sho' is one er His chosen flock!"

Gill was so deeply moved that when he ventured on a reply he found difficulty in steadying his speech. His voice had a quality that was new to it. He spoke as gently as if he were promising recovery to a suffering child.

"Now, Joe, you crawl back in bed an' sleep," he said, "an' in the mornin' you 'll be free, as shore as the sun rises on us both."

Then he went back to bed and told his wife what he had done.

"I'm powerful glad we can git out of it so easy," she commented. "It's funny I never thought o' settin' 'im free. It looked to me like he was a-goin' to be a burden that we never could git rid of, an' now it's a-goin' to end all right in the Lord's sight."

They were just dozing off in peaceable slumber when they heard a gentle rap on the door.

"It's me, Marse Gill," came from the outside. "I'm mighty sorry to wake you ag'in, but I'm so hungry I don't think I kin wait till mornin'."

"Well, I reckon you do feel kinder empty," laughed the farmer as he sprang out of bed. He lighted a candle, and following the specter-like signals of his wife, who sat up in bed, he soon found the meal she had arranged for the slave at noon. "Thar," he said, as he handed it through the doorway; "I had clean forgot yore fast was

over."

The next morning the farmer and Big Joe drove to town, two miles distant. Gill was gone all day and did not return till dusk. His wife went out to meet him at the wagon-shed.

"How did you make out?" she asked.

"Tip-top," he said, with a laugh. "As we went to town, nothin' would do the black scamp but we must go by after the gal. She happened to be dressed up, an' went to town with us. I set in front an' driv', while they done their courtin' on the back seat. I soon got the papers in shape, an' Squire Ridley spliced 'em right on the sidewalk in front o' his office. A big crowd was thar, an' you never heerd the like o' yellin'. Some o' the boys, jest fer pure devilment, picked me up an' carried me on their shoulders to the tavern an' made me set down to a hearty dinner. Joe borrowed a apron from the cook an' insisted on waitin' on me, La me, I wisht you'd 'a' been thar. I felt like a blamed fool."

"I reckon you did have a lots o' fun," said Mrs. Gill. "Well, I'm glad he ain't on our hands. I wouldn't pass another day like yis-tiddy fer all the slaves in Georgia."

THE WHIPPING OF UNCLE HENRY

I do believe," said Mrs. Pelham, stooping to look through the oblong window of the milk-and-butter cellar toward the great barn across the farmyard, "I do believe Cobb an' Uncle Henry are fussin' ag'in."

"Shorely not," answered her old-maid sister, Miss Molly Meyers. She left her butter bowl and paddles, and bent her angular figure beside Mrs. Pelham, to see the white man and the black man who were gesticulating in each other's faces under the low wagon-shed that leaned against the barn.

The old women strained their ears to overhear what was said, but the stiff breeze from across the white-and-brown fields of cotton stretching toward the west bore the angry words away. Mrs. Pelham turned and drew the white cloths over her milkpans.

"Cobb will never manage them niggers in the world," she sighed. "Henry has had Old Nick in 'im as big as a house ever since Mr. Pelham went off an' left Cobb in charge. Uncle Henry hain't minded one word Cobb has said, nur he won't. The whole crop is goin' to rack an' ruin. Thar's jest one thing to be done. Mr. Pelham has jest got to come home an' whip Henry. Nobody else could do it, an' he never will behave till it's done. Cobb tried to whip 'im t'other day when you was over the mountain, but Henry laid hold of a ax helve an' jest dared Cobb to tech 'im. That ended it. Cobb was afeard of 'im. Moreover, he's afeard Uncle Henry will put p'ison in his victuals, or do 'im or his family some bodily damage on the sly."

"It would be a powerful pity," returned Miss Molly, "fer Mr. Pelham to have to lay down his business in North Carolina, whar he's got so awful much to do, an' ride all that three hundred miles jest fer to whip one nigger. It looks like some other way mought be thought of. Couldn't you use your influence—"

"I've talked till I'm tired out," Mrs. Pelham interrupted. "Uncle Henry promises an' forms good resolutions, it seems like, but the very minute Cobb wants 'im to do some 'n a little different from Mr. Pelham's way, Henry won't stir a peg. He jest hates the ground Cobb walks on. Well, I reckon Cobb ain't much of a man. He never would work a lick, an' if he couldn't git a job overseein' somebody's niggers he'd let his family starve to death. Nobody kin hate a lazy, good-for-nothin' white man like a nigger kin. Thar Cobb comes now, to complain to me, I reckon," added Mrs. Pelham, going back to the window. "An' bless your soul, Henry has took his seat out in the sun on the wagon-tongue, as big as life. I reckon the whole crop will go to rack an' ruin."

The next moment a tall, thin-visaged man with gray hair and beard stood in the cellar door.

"I'm jest about to the end o' my tether, Sister Pelham." (He always called her "Sister," because they were members of the same church.) "I can't get that black rascal to stir a step. I ordered Alf an' Jake to hold 'im, so I could give 'im a sound lashin', but they was afeard to tech 'im."

Mrs. Pelham looked at him over her glasses as she wiped her damp hands on her apron.

"You don't know how to manage niggers, Brother Cobb; I didn't much 'low you did the day Mr. Pelham left you in charge. The fust mornin', you went to the field with that hosswhip in your hand, an' you've toted it about ever since. You mought know that would give offense. Mr. Pelham never toted one, an' yore doin' of it looks like you 'lowed you'd have a use fer it."

"I acknowledge I don't know what to do," said Cobb, frowning down her reference to his whip. "I've been paid fer three months' work in advance, in the white mare an' colt Mr. Pelham give me, an' I've done sold 'em an' used the money. I'm free to confess that Brother Pelham's intrusts are bein' badly protected as things are goin'; but I've done my best."

"I reckon you have," answered Mrs. Pelham, with some scorn in her tone. "I reckon you have, accordin' to your ability an' judgment, an' we can't afford to lose your services after you've been paid. Thar is jest one thing left to do, an' that is fer Mr. Pelham to come home an' whip Henry. He's sowin' discord an' rebellion, an' needs a good, sound lashin'. The sooner it's done the better. Nobody can do it but Mr. Pelham, an' I'm goin' in now an' write the letter an' send it off. In the mean time, you'd better go on to work with the others, an' leave Henry alone till his master comes."

"Brother Pelham is the only man alive that could whip 'im," replied Cobb; "but it looks like a great pity an' expense for Brother Pel—" But the planter's wife had passed him and gone up the steps into the sitting-room. Cobb walked across the barnyard without looking at the stalwart negro sitting on the wagon-tongue. He

threw his whip down at the barn, and he and half a dozen negroes went to the hayfields over the knoll toward the creek.

In half an hour Mrs. Pelham, wearing her gingham bonnet, came out to where Uncle Henry still sat sulking in the sun. As she approached him, she pushed back her bonnet till her gray hair and glasses showed beneath it.

"Henry," she said, sternly, "I've jest done a thing that I hated mightily to do."

"What's that, Mis' Liza?" He looked up as he asked the question, and then hung his head shamefacedly. He was about forty-five years of age. For one of his race he had a strong, intelligent face. Indeed, he possessed far more intelligence than the average negro. He was considered the most influential slave on any of the half-dozen plantations lying along that side of the river. He had learned to read, and by listening to the conversation of white people had (if he had acquired the colloquial speech of the middle-class whites) dropped almost every trace of the dialect current among his people. And on this he prided himself no little. He often led in prayer at the colored meeting-house on an adjoining plantation, and some of his prayers were more widely quoted and discussed than many of the sermons preached in the same church.

"I have wrote to yore master, Henry," answered Mrs. Pelham, "an' I've tol' 'im all yore doin's, an' tol' him to come home an' whip you fer disobeyin' Brother Cobb. I hated to do it, as I've jest said; but I couldn't see no other way out of the difficulty. Don't you think you deserve a whippin', Uncle Henry?"

"I don't know, Mis' Liza." He did not look up from the grass over which he swung his rag-covered leg and gaping brogan. "I don't know myself, Mis' Liza. I want to help Marse Jasper out all I can while he is off, but it seems like I jest can't work fer that man. Huh, overseer! I say overseer! Why, Mis' Liza, he ain't as good as a nigger! Thar ain't no pore white trash in all this valley country as low down as all his lay-out. He ain't fittin' fer a overseer of nothin'. He don't do anything like master did, nohow. He's too lazy to git in out of a rain. He —"

"That will do, Henry. Mr. Pelham put him over you, an' you've disobeyed. He 'll be home in a few days, an' you an' him can settle it between you. He will surely give you a good whippin' when he gits here. Are you goin' to sit thar without layin' yore hand to a thing till he comes?"

"Now, you know me better 'n that, Mis' Liza. I've done said I won't mind that man, an' I reckon I won't; but the meadow-piece has obliged to be broke an' sowed in wheat. I'm goin' to do that jest as soon as the blacksmith fetches my bull-tongue plow."

Mrs. Pelham turned away silently. She had heard some talk of the government buying the negroes from their owners and setting them free. She ardently hoped this would be done, for she was sure they could then be hired cheaper than they could be owned and provided for. She disliked to see a negro whipped; but occasionally she could see no other way to make them do their duty.

From the dairy window, a few minutes later, she saw Uncle Henry put the gear on a mule, and, with a heavy plow-stock on his shoulder, start for the wheat-field beyond the meadow.

"He 'll do two men's work over thar, jest to show what he kin do when he's let alone," she said to Miss Molly. "I hate to see 'im whipped. He's too old an' sensible in most things, an' it would jest break Lucinda's heart. Mr. Pelham had ruther cut off his right arm, too; but he 'll do it, an' do it good, after havin' to come so far."

Mr. Pelham was a week in reaching the plantation. He wrote that it would take several days to arrange his affairs so that he could leave. He admitted that there was nothing left to do except to whip Uncle Henry soundly, and that they were right in thinking that Henry would not let any one do it but himself. After the whipping he was sure that the negro would obey Cobb, and that matters would then move along smoothly.

When Mr. Pelham arrived, he left the stage at the cross-roads, half a mile from his house, and carpet-bag in hand, walked home through his own fields. He was a short, thick-set man of about sixty, round-faced, blue-eyed, and gray-haired. He wore a sack-coat, top-boots, and baggy trousers. He had a good-natured, kindly face, and walked with the quick step and general air of a busy man.

He had traveled three hundred miles, slept on the hard seat of a jolting train, eaten railroad pies and peanuts, and was covered with the grime of a dusty journey, all to whip one disobedient negro. Still, he was not out of humor, and after the whipping and lecture to his old servant he would travel back over the tiresome route and resume his business where he had left it.

His wife and sister-in-law were in the kitchen when they heard his step in the long hall. They went into the sitting-room, where he had put down his carpet-bag, and in the center of the floor stood swinging his hat and mopping his brow with his red handkerchief. He shook hands with the two women, and then sat down in his old seat in the chimney-corner.

"You want a bite to eat, an' a cup of coffee, I reckon," said Mrs. Pelham, solicitously.

"No, I kin wait till dinner. Whar's Cobb?"

"I seed 'im at the wagon-shed a minute ago," spoke up Miss Molly; "he was expectin' you, an' didn't go to the field with the balance."

"Tell 'im I want to see 'im."

Both of the women went out, and the overseer came in.

"Bad state of affairs, Brother Cobb," said the planter, as he shook hands. They both sat down with their knees to the embers.

"That it is, Brother Pelham, an' I take it you didn't count on it any more 'n I did."

"Never dreamt of it. Has he been doin' any better since he heerd I was comin' to—whip 'im?"

"Not fer me, Brother Pelham. He hain't done a lick fer me; but all of his own accord, in the last week, he has broke and sowed all that meadow-piece in wheat, an' is now harrowin' it down to hide it from the birds. To do 'im jestice, I hain't seed so much work done in six days by any human bein' alive. He 'll work for hisse'f, but he won't budge fer me."

Mr. Pelham broke into a soft, impulsive laugh, as if at the memory of something.

"They all had a big joke on me out in North Carolina," he said. "I tol' 'em I was comin' home to whip a nigger, an' they wouldn't believe a word of it. I reckon it is the fust time a body ever went so fur on sech business. They 'lowed I was jest homesick an' wanted a' excuse to come back."

"They don't know what a difficult subject we got to handle," Cobb replied. "You are, without doubt, the only man in seven states that could whip 'im, Brother Pelham. I believe on my soul he'd kill anybody else that'd tech 'im. He's got the strangest notions about the rights of niggers I ever heerd from one of his kind. He's jest simply dangerous."

"You 're afeard of 'im, Brother Cobb, an' he's sharp enough to see it; that's all."

The overseer winced. "I don't reckon I'm any more so than any other white man would be under the same circumstances. Henry mought not strike back lick fer lick on the spot—I say he mought not; an' then ag'in he mought—but he'd git even by some hook or crook, or I'm no judge o' niggers."

Mr. Pelham rose. "Whar is he?"

"Over in the wheat-field."

"Well, you go over thar n' tell 'im I'm here, an' to come right away down in the woods by the gum spring. I 'll go down an' cut some hickory withes an' wait fer 'im. The quicker it's done an' over, the deeper the impression will be made on 'im. You see, I want 'im to realize that all this trip is jest solely on his account. I 'll start back early in the mornin'. That will have its weight on his future conduct. An', Brother Cobb, I can't—I jest *can't* afford to be bothered ag'in. My business out thar at the lumber-camp won't admit of it. This whippin' has got to do fer the rest of the year. I think he 'll mind you when I git through with 'im. I like 'im better 'n any slave I ever owned, an' I'd a thousand times ruther take the whippin' myself; but it's got to be done."

Cobb took himself to Henry in the wheat-field, and the planter went down into the edge of the woods near the spring. With his pocket-knife he cut two slender hickory switches about five feet in length. He trimmed off the out-shooting twigs and knots, and rounded the butts smoothly.

From where he sat on a fallen log, he could see, across the boggy swamp of bulrushes, the slight rise on which Henry was at work. He could hear Henry's mellow, resonant "Haw" and "Gee," as he drove his mule and harrow from end to end of the field, and saw Cobb slowly making his way toward him.

Mr. Pelham laid the switches down beside him, put his knife in his pocket, and stroked his chin thoughtfully. Suddenly he felt a tight sensation in his throat. The solitary figure of the negro as he trudged along by the harrow seemed vaguely pathetic. Henry had always been such a noble fellow, so reliable and trustworthy. They had really been, in one way, more like brothers than master and slave. He had told Henry secrets that he had confided to no other human being, and they had laughed and cried together over certain adventures and sorrows. About ten years before, Mr. Pelham's horse had run away and thrown him against a tree and broken his leg. Henry had heard his cries and run to him. They were two miles from the farmhouse, and it was a bitterly cold day, but the stalwart negro had taken him in his arms and carried him home and laid him down on his bed. There had been a great deal of excitement about the house, and it was not until after the doctor had come and dressed the broken limb that it was learned that Henry had fallen in a swoon in his cabin and lain there unconscious for an hour, his wife and children being away. Indeed, he had been almost as long recovering as had been his master.

Henry had stopped his mule. Cobb had called to him, and was approaching. Then Mr. Pelham knew that the overseer was delivering his message, for the negro had turned his head and was looking toward the woods which hid his master from view. Mr. Pelham felt himself flush all over. Could he be going to whip Henry—really to lash his bare back with those switches? How strange it seemed all at once! And that this should be their first meeting after a two months' separation!

In his home-comings before, Uncle Henry had always been the first to meet him with outstretched hand. But the negro had to be whipped. Mr. Pelham had said it in North Carolina; he had said it to Cobb, and he had written it to his wife. Yes, it must be done; and if done at all, of course it must be done right.

He saw Henry hitch his mule to a chestnut-tree in the field and Cobb turn to make his way back to the farmhouse. Then he watched Henry approaching till the bushes which skirted the field hid him from view. There was no sound for several minutes except the rustling of the fallen leaves in the woods behind him, and then Uncle Henry's head and shoulders appeared above the broom-sedge near by.

"Howdy do, Marse Jasper?" he cried; and the next instant he broke through the yellow sedge and stood before his master.

"Purty well, Henry." Mr. Pelham could not refuse the black hand which was extended, and which caught his with a hearty grasp. "I hope you are as well as common, Henry?"

"Never better in my life, Marse Jasper."

The planter had risen, but he now sat down beside his switches. For a moment nothing was said. Uncle Henry awkwardly bent his body and his neck to see if his mule were standing where he had left him, and his master looked steadfastly at the ground.

"Sit down, Henry," he said, presently; and the negro took a seat on the extreme end of the log and folded his black, seamed hands over his knee. "I want to talk to you first of all. Something of a very unpleasant, unavoidable nature has got to take place betwixt us, an' I want to give you a sound talkin' to beforehan'."

"All right, Marse Jasper; I'm a-listenin'." Henry looked again toward his mule. "I did want to harrow that wheat down 'fore them birds eat it up; but I got time, I reckon."

The planter coughed and cleared his throat. He tried to cross his short, fat legs by sliding the right one up to the knee of the left, but owing to the lowness of the log, he was unable to do this, so he left his legs to themselves, and with a hand on either side of him, leaned back.

"Do you remember, Uncle Henry, twenty years ago, when you belonged to old Heaton Pelzer an' got to hankerin' after that yellow girl of mine jest after I bought her in South Carolina?"

"Mighty plain, Master Jasper, mighty plain." Henry's face showed a tendency to smile at the absurdity of

the question.

"Lucinda was jest as much set after you, it seemed," went on the planter. "Old Pelzer was workin' you purty nigh to death on his pore, wore-out land, an' pointedly refused to buy Lucinda so you could marry her, nur he wouldn't consent to you marryin' a slave of mine. Ain't that so?"

"Yes, Marse Jasper, that's so, sir."

"I had jest as many niggers as I could afford to keep, an' a sight more. I was already up to my neck in debt, an' to buy you I knowed I'd have to borrow money an' mortgage the last thing I had. But you come to me night after night, when you could sneak off, an' begged an' begged to be bought, so that I jest didn't have the heart to refuse. So, jest to accommodate you, I got up the money an' bought you, payin' fully a third more fer you than men of yore age was goin' at. You are married now, an' got three as likely children as ever come into the world, an' a big buxom wife that loves you, an' if I haven't treated you an' them right I never heerd of it."

"Never was a better master on earth, Marse Jasper. If thar is, I hain't never seed 'im." Henry's face was full of emotion. He picked up his slouch hat from the grass and folded it awkwardly on the log beside him.

"From that day till this," the planter went on, "I've been over my head in debt, an' I can really trace it to that transaction. It was the straw that broke the camel's back, as the feller said. Well, now, Henry, six months ago, when I saw that openin' to deal in lumber in North Carolina, it seemed to me to be my chance to work out of debt, if I could jest find somebody to look after my farm. I found a man, Henry—a good, clever, honest man, as everybody Said, an' a member of Big Bethel Church. For a certain consideration he agreed to take charge. That consideration I've paid in advance, an' it's gone; I couldn't git it back.

"Now, how has it turned out? I had hardly got started out thar before one of my niggers—the very one I relied on the most—has played smash with all my plans. You begun by turnin' up yore nose at Brother Cobb, an' then by openly disobeyin' 'im. Then he tried to punish you—the right that the law gives a overseer—an' you up an' dared him to tech you, an'—"

"Marse Jasper—"

"Hold yore tongue till I'm through."

"All right, Marse Jasper, but—"

"You openly defied 'im, that's enough; you broke up the order of the whole thing, an' yore mistress was so upset that she had to send fer me. Now, Henry, I hain't never laid the lash on you in my life, an' I'd ruther take it myself than to have to do it, but I hain't come three hundred miles jest to talk to you. I'm goin' to whip you, Henry, an' I'm goin' to do it right, if thar's enough strength in my arm. You needn't shake yore head an' sulk. No matter what you refused to let Cobb an' the rest of 'em do, you are a-goin' to take what I'm goin' to give you without a word, because you know it's just an' right."

Henry's face was downcast, and his master could not see his eyes, but a strange, rebellious fire had suddenly kindled in them, and he was stubbornly silent. Mr. Pelham could not have dreamed of what was passing in his mind.

"Henry, you an' me are both religious men," said the planter, after he had waited for a moment. "Let's kneel right down here by this log an' commune with the Lord on this matter."

Without a word the negro rose and knelt, his face in his hands, his elbows on the log. There never had been a moment when Uncle Henry was not ready to pray or listen to a prayer. He prided himself on his own powers in that line, and had unbounded respect even for the less skillful efforts of others. Mr. Pelham knelt very deliberately and began to pray:

"Our heavenly Father, it is with extreme sadness an' sorrow that we come to Thee this bright, sunny day. Our sins have been many, an' we hardly know when our deeds are acceptable in Thy sight; but bless all our efforts, we pray Thee, for the sake of Him that died for us, an' let us not walk into error in our zeal to do Thy holy will.

"Lord, Thou knowest the hearts of Thy humble supplicant an' this man beside him. Thou, through the existin' laws of this land, hast put him into my care an' keepin' an' made me responsible to a human law for his good or bad behavior. Lord, on this occasion it seems my duty to punish him for disobedience, an' we pray Thee to sanction what is about to take place with Thy grace. Let no anger or malice rest in our hearts during the performance of this disagreeable task, an' let the whole redound to Thy glory, for ever an' ever, through the mercy of Thy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

Mr. Pelham rose to his feet stiffly, for he had touches of rheumatism, and the ground was cold. He brushed his trousers, and laid hold of his switches. But to his surprise, Henry had not risen. If it had not been for the stiffness of his elbows, and the upright position of his long feet, which stood on their toes erect as gate-posts, Mr. Pelham might have thought that he had dropped asleep.

For a moment the planter stood silent, glancing first at the mass of ill-clothed humanity at his feet, and then sweeping his eyes over the quiet, rolling land which lay between him and the farmhouse. How awfully still everything was! He saw Henry's cabin near the farmhouse. Lucinda was out in the yard picking up chips, and one of Uncle Henry's children was clinging to her skirts. The planter was very fond of Lucinda, and he wondered what she would do if she knew he was about to whip her husband. But why did the fellow not get up? Surely that was an unusual way to act. In some doubt as to what he ought to do, Mr. Pelham sat down again. It should not be said of him that he had ever interrupted any man's prayers to whip him. As he sat down, the log rolled slightly, the elbows of the negro slid off the bark, and Henry's head almost came in contact with the log. But he took little notice of the accident, and glancing at his master from the corner of his eye, he deliberately replaced his elbows, pressed his hands together, and began to pray aloud:

"Our heavenly Father." These words were spoken in a deep, sonorous tone, and as Uncle Henry paused for an instant the echoes groaned and murmured and died against the hill behind him. Mr. Pelham bowed his head to his hand. He had heard Henry pray before, and now he dreaded hearing him, he hardly knew why. He felt a strange creeping sensation in his spine.

"Our heavenly Father," the slave repeated, in his mellow sing-song tone, "Thou knowest that I am Thy humble servant. Thou knowest that I have brought to Thee all my troubles since my change of heart—that I

have left nothing hidden from Thee, who art my Maker, my Redeemer, an' my Lord. Thou knowest that I have for a long time harbored the belief that the black man has some rights that he don't git under existin' laws, but which, Thy will be done, will come in due time, like the harvest follows the plantin'. Thou know-est, an' I know, that Henry Pelham is nigher to Thee than a dumb brute, an' that it ain't no way to lift a nigger up to beat 'im like a horse or a ox. I have said this to Thee in secret prayer, time an' ag'in, an' Thou knowest how I stand on it, if my master don't. Thou knowest that before Thee I have vowed that I would die before any man, white or black, kin beat the blood out 'n my back. I may have brought trouble an' vexation to Marse Jasper, I don't dispute that, but he had no business puttin' me under that low-down, white-trash overseer an' goin' off so far. Heavenly Father, thou knowest I love Marse Jasper, an' I would work fer 'im till I die; but he is ready to put the lash to me an' disgrace me before my wife an' children. Give my arms strength, Lord, to defend myself even against him—against him who has, up to now, won my respect an' love by forbearance an' kindness. He has said it, Lord—he has said that he will whip me; but I've said, also, that no man shall do it. Give me strength to battle fer the right, an' if he is hurt—bad hurt—may the Lord have mercy on him! This I ask through the mercy an' the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

Henry rose awkwardly to his feet and looked down at his master, who sat silent on the log. Mr. Pelham's face was pale. There was a look of indecision under the pallor. He held one of the switches by the butt in his hand, and with its tapering end tapped the brown leaves between his legs. He looked at the imperturbable countenance of the negro for fully a minute before he spoke.

"Do you mean to say, Henry," he asked, "that you are a-goin' to resist me by force?"

"I reckon I am, Marse Jasper, if nothin' else won't do you. That's what I have promised the Lord time an' ag'in since Cobb come to boss me. I wasn't thinkin' about you then, Marse Jasper, because I didn't 'low you ever would try such a thing; but I said *any* white man, an' I can't take it back."

The planter looked up at the stalwart man towering over him. Henry could toss him about like a ball. In his imagination he had pictured the faithful fellow bowed before him, patiently submitting to his blows, but the present contingency had never entered his mind. He tried to be angry, but the goodnatured face of the slave he loved made it impossible.

"Sit down thar, Henry," he said; and when the negro had obeyed, he continued, almost appealingly: "I have told the folks in North Carolina that I was comin' home to whip you, you see. I have told yore mistress, an' I have told Cobb. I 'll look like a purty fool if I don't do it."

A regretful softness came into the face of the negro, and he hung his head, and for a moment picked at the bark of the log with his long thumbnail.

"I'm mighty sorry, Marse Jasper," he answered, after remaining silent for a while. "But you see I've done promised the Lord; you wouldn't have me—what do all them folks amount to beside the Lord? No; a body ought to be careful about what he's promised the Almighty."

Mr. Pelham had no reply forthcoming. He realized that he was simply not going to whip Uncle Henry, and he did not want to appear ridiculous in the eyes of his friends. The negro saw by his master's silence that he was going to escape punishment, and that made him more humble and sympathetic than ever. He was genuinely sorry for his master.

"You have done told 'em all you was goin' to whip me, I know, Marse Jasper; but why don't you jest let 'em think you done it? I don't keer, jest so I kin keep my word. Lucinda ain't a-goin' to believe I'd take it, nohow."

At this loophole of escape the face of the planter brightened. For a moment he felt like grasping Henry's hand: then a cloud came over his face.

"But," he demurred, "what about yore future conduct? Will you mind what Cobb tells you?"

"I jest can't do that, Marse Jasper. Me 'n him jest can't git along together. He ain't no man at all."

"Well, what on earth am I to do? I've got to have an overseer, an' I've got to go back to North Carolina."

"You don't have to have no overseer fer me, Marse Jasper. Have I ever failed to keep a promise to you, Marse Jasper?"

"No; but I can't be here."

"I 'll tell you what I 'll do, Marse Jasper. Would you be satisfied with my part of the work if I tend all the twenty-acre piece beyond my cabin, an' make a good crop on it, an' look after all the cattle an' stock, an' clear the woodland on the hill an' cord up the firewood?"

"You couldn't do it, Henry."

"I 'll come mighty nigh it, Marse Jasper, if you 'll let me be my own boss an' be responsible to you when you git back. Mr. Cobb kin boss the rest of 'em. They don't keer how much he swings his whip an' struts around."

"Henry, I 'll do it. I can trust you a sight better than I can Cobb. I know you will keep yore word. But you will not say anything about—"

"Not a word, Marse Jasper. They all may 'low I'm half dead, if they want to." Then the two men laughed together heartily and parted.

The overseer and the two white women were waiting for Mr. Pelham in the backyard as he emerged from the woods and came toward the house. Mrs. Pelham opened the gate for him, scanning his face anxiously.

"I was afeard you an' Henry had had some difficulty," she said, in a tone of relief; "he has been that hard to manage lately."

Mr. Pelham grunted and laughed in disdain.

"I 'll bet he was the hardest you ever tackled," ventured Cobb.

"Anybody can manage him," the planter replied—"anybody that has got enough determination. You see Henry knows me."

"But do you think he 'll obey my orders after you go back?" Cobb had followed Mr. Pelham into the sitting-room, and he anxiously waited for the reply to his question.

The planter stooped to spit into a corner of the chimney, and then slowly and thoughtfully stroked his chin

with his hand. "That's the only trouble, Brother Cobb," he said, thrusting his fat hands into the pockets of his trousers and turning his back to the fire-place; "that's the only drawback. To be plain with you, Brother Cobb, I'm afeard you don't inspire respect; men that don't own niggers seldom do. I believe on my soul that nigger would die fightin' before he'd obey yore orders. To tell the truth, I had to arrange a plan, an' that is one reason—one reason—why I was down thar so long. After what happened today" (Mr. Pelham spoke significantly and stroked his chin again) "he 'll mind me jest as well at a distance as if I was here on the spot. He'd have a mortal dread of havin' me come so fur ag'in."

"I hope you wasn't cruel, Mr. Pelham," said Mrs. Pelham, who had just come in. "Henry's so good-hearted —"

"Oh, he 'll git over it," replied the planter, ambiguously. "But, as I was goin' on to say, I had to fix another plan. I have set him a sort o' task to do while I'm away, an' I believe he 'll do it, Brother Cobb. So all you 'll have to do will be to look after the other niggers." The plan suited Cobb exactly; but when Mr. Pelham came home the following summer it was hard to hear him say that Uncle Henry had accomplished more than any three of the other negroes.

A FILIAL IMPULSE

Y o' 're purty well fixed, Jim; I wish I had yore business."

Big Jim Bradley glanced slowly around his store. The heaps of flour-sacks, coffee-bags, sugar-barrels, piles of bacon, crates of hams, kits of mackerel, and the long rows of well-filled shelves brought a flush of satisfaction into his rugged face.

"Hain't no reason to complain, Bob," he said; "you've been in Georgia, an' you know how blamed hard it is fer a feller to make his salt back thar."

"Now yo' 're a-talkin'—yo' 're a-sayin' some 'n' now!" Bob Lash was sitting on the head of a potato-barrel, eating cheese and crackers, and his spirited words were interspersed with little snowy puffs from the corners of his mouth. "Jim," he continued, in a muffled tone, as he eased his feet down to the floor, "I'm a-goin' to wash this dry truck down with a glass o' yore cider; I'm about to choke. Thar's yore nickel. You needn't rise; I can wait on myse'f."

"I'd keep my eye open while he was behind the counter, Jim," put in Henry Webb, jestingly. "Bob's got a swallow like a mill-race. He may take a notion to drink out of yore half-gallon measure."

"Had to drink out 'n a thimble, or some 'n' 'bout the size of it, at yore place when you kept a bar," gurgled Bob in the cider-glass. "But I hain't nothin' ag'in you; the small doses of the stuff you sold was all that saved my life."

The flashily dressed young man sitting at Webb's side laughed and slapped him familiarly on the knee. His name was Thornton. He used to "mix drinks" for Webb, and had been out of employment ever since his employer's establishment had been closed by the sheriff, a few months before. "One on you, Harry," he said, laughing again at the comical expression on his friend's face; "you have to get up before day to get the best o' these Georgia mossbacks."

Webb said nothing; and Bob, blushing triumphantly under Thornton's compliment, and chewing a chip of dried beef that he had found on the counter, came back to his seat on the barrel.

"Well, I reckon I *have* done middlin' well," said Jim, bringing the conversation back to his own affairs with as much adroitness as he was capable of exercising. "I didn't have a dollar to my name when I struck this town, ten year back. I started as a waiter in a restaurant nigh the railroad shops, then run a lemonade-stand at the park, an' by makin' every lick count, I gradually worked up to this shebang."

Henry Webb seemed to grow serious. He glanced stealthily at Thornton when Jim was not looking, crossed his legs nervously, and said: "Jim, me an' you have been dickerin' long enough; all this roundabout talk don't bring us an inch nearer a trade. Now I'm goin' to make you my last proposition about this stock o' goods. My wife got her money out of her minin' interest to-day, an' wants to put it in some regular business o' this sort. I'm goin' to make you a round bid on the whole thing, lock, stock, an' barrel, an', on my honor, it's my last offer. I 'll give you ten thousand dollars in cash fer the key to the door."

Everybody in the group was fully conscious of the vital importance of the words which had just been spoken. Webb, who was a famous poker-player, had never controlled his face and tone better. No one spoke for a moment, but all eyes were fixed expectantly on Bradley. "Huh," he answered, half under his breath, "I reckon you would!" He tossed his shaggy, iron-gray head and smiled artificially. His face was pale, and his eyes shone with suppressed excitement. It was a better offer than he had expected; in fact, he had not realized before that his stock was convertible into quite so much ready money, and it was hard for him, simple and honest as he was, to keep from showing surprise. "Harry Webb," he went on, evasively, "do you have any idee what I cleared last year, not countin' bad debts an' expenses? I'm over three thousand ahead, an' prospects fer trade never was better. My books will show you that I am a-givin' it to you straight."

Webb made no reply. If he had been as sure of his own moral worth as he was of Jim's he would have been a better man. As it was, he only looked significantly at Thornton, who had evidently come prepared to play a part.

"It ain't no business o' mine, fellers, one way or the other," began Thornton, slightly confused. He cleared his throat and spat on the floor. "But I 'll admit I'm kinder anxious to see Harry get into some settled

business. You know he's mighty changeable, one day runnin' some fortune-wheel or card-table, an' the next got charge of a side-show, bar, or skating-rink, and never makes much stake at anything. I told his wife to-day that I'd do my best to get you fellers to come to a understanding. That's all the interest I've got in the matter; but I'd bet my last chip you'd have to look a long ways before you could find another buyer with that much ready cash such times as these."

"Huh, you don't say!" sneered Jim, a cold gleam of indecision and excitement in the glance that he accidentally threw to Bob Lash, who erroneously fancied that his friend wanted him to say something to offset the remarks made by Webb's ally. But diplomacy was not one of the few gifts with which frugal nature had blessed Bob, and when the idea struck him that he ought to speak, he grew very agitated, and almost stabbed a hole in one of his cheeks with the long splinter with which he was picking his teeth.

"The man that gits it has a purty dead-shore thing fer a comfortable income," he blurted out, incautiously. "I wish I had the money to secure it; I'd plank it down so quick it 'u'd make yore head swim."

Jim flushed. "Nobody hain't said nothin' 'bout the shebang bein' on the market," he said, quickly.

Bob saw his mistake too late to rectify it, so he said nothing.

Webb smiled, and rose with an easy assumption of indifference and lighted a fresh cigar over the lamp-chimney. "Tibbs wants to rent me the new store-room joining you, Jim," he said, rolling his cigar into the corner of his mouth and half closing the eye which was in direct line with the rising smoke. "I kinder thought I'd like them big plate-glass show-windows. Ten thousand dollars in bran-new groceries wouldn't be bad, would they?"

Jim was taken slightly aback, but he recovered himself in an instant. "Not ef they was bought jest right, Harry," he said, significantly. "A man *mought* have a purty fair start that way, ef he was experienced; but law me! I'd hate awful to start to lay in a stock frum these cussed drummers; they are wholesale bunco-sharks. An' then, you see, I've been here sence this town fust started, an' I know who will do to credit an' who won't. My blacklist is wuth five thousand to any man in this line. Thar's men in this town that 'll pay a gamblin' debt 'thout a bobble, an' cuss like rips at the sight of a grocery bill. But thar ain't no use talkin'; I reckon my business ain't fer sale."

Webb turned to Thornton and coolly asked for a match; then the entire group was silent till Bob Lash spoke.

"How in the world did you ever happen to come 'way out here, anyway, Jim?" he asked, obtusely believing that Bradley meant exactly what he had said in regard to Webb's proposition, and that for all concerned it would be more agreeable and profitable to talk about something else.

"Got tired an' wanted a change," grunted Bradley. "I never was treated exactly right by my folks, an' was itchin' awful to make money."

"What county did you say you was from?"

"Gilmer."

Webb yawned aloud, puffed at his cigar, and swept the store from end to end with a rather critical, would-be dissatisfied glance.

"I passed through thar goin' from Dalton to Canton," went on Bob, warming up. "It's a purty country through them mountains. What was you a-follerin' back thar?"

"Farmin' it. Thar was jest three uv us—me an' brother Joe an' mother; but we couldn't git along together."

"What a pity!" said Bob.

"I al'ays wanted to make money," went on Jim, "an' atter the old man died I was anxious fer me an' Joe to save up enough to git a farm uv our own; but he tuk to drinkin' an' spreein' round generally, an' was al'ays off jest when the crop needed the most attention. I al'ays was easy irritated, an' never could be satisfied onless I was goin' ahead. Me an' Joe was eternally a-fussin', an' mother al'ays tuk his part. One night she got rippin' mad, an' 'lowed that she could git along better with 'im ef I wasn't thar to make trouble, an' so I made up my mind to come West. I tol' 'em they was welcome to my intrust in the crap, an that I had had all I could stand up under, an' was goin' off. Mother never even said farewell, an' Joe sorter turned up his nose, an' 'lowed I'd be writin' back an' beggin' fer money to git home on 'fore a month was out. I told mother ef she ever needed help to write, but she never looked up from her spinnin'-wheel, an' from that day to this I hain't had a scratch of a pen."

"Shorely you didn't leave a old woman in sech hands as that," ventured Bob.

The expression on Jim Bradley's face changed. "What was I to do? Ef I'd 'a' stayed thar I'd 'a' been a beggar to-day," he said, argumentatively. "I 'lowed ef I was sech a bother I'd leave 'em; but I 'll admit thar are times when I think I may 'a' been a leetle hasty. An' I do hanker atter home folks mighty bad at times, especially when I'm locked up in this lonely store at night, with nothin' but my cat fer company. I've been intendin' to write to mother every day, but some 'n' al'ays interferences. I heerd four year ago, accidentally, that they was gittin' 'long tolerable well."

"It's mighty tough on fellers of our age, Jim, to grow old alone in the world," sighed Bob, reaching out to the crate for another splinter. "I'd ruther have less money an' more rale home comforts. Kin is a great thing. Brother Sam sent me a pictur' uv his little gal. I wish I had it to show you; she's mighty purty an' smart-lookin'. It made me mighty homesick."

"I reckon it did," said Bradley. "I've seed dogs that lived better than I do. D' you fellers ever see whar I bunk?"

"No," joined in Thornton and Webb, seeing that they were addressed.

"Come into my parlor, then;" and Jim grinned, broadly. He lifted the lamp, and holding it over his head, he led them through some curtains made of cotton bagging into the back room. Empty boxes, hogsheads, crates, bales of hay, heaps of old iron, and every sort of rubbish imaginable covered the floor. A narrow bed stood by a window between a row of dripping syrup-barrels and the greasy wall. "Thar's whar I sleep," said Jim, pointing to the bed. "It hain't been made up in a coon's age. Sometimes old Injun Mary changes the sheets an' turns the mattress when she happens along, but it hain't often. At home I used to sleep in a big sweet-

smellin' bed that was like lyin' down in a pile o' roses."

"I'd think you'd git tired o' this; I would, by hooky!" declared Bob. "Whar do you git yore grub?"

"Fust one place an' then another; I don't bother much about my eatin'. I have to light out o' bed to wait on the fust one that rattles the doorknob in the mornin', an' am so busy from then on that I cayn't find a minute to git a bite o' breakfast. See my kettle thar? I can make as good a cup o' coffee as the next one. Half a cup o' ground Javy in my coffeepot, with bilin' water poured on, an' then put on the stove to bile ag'in, does the business. Thar's my skillet; a cowboy give it to me. Sometimes I fry a slice o' streak-o'-lean-streak-o'-fat, ur a few cracked eggs, but it hain't half livin'."

They walked back and sat down in the store again. Bob had a strange, perplexed look on his face. Webb was about to make some reference to his offer, when Bob forestalled him in a rather excited tone.

"Jim, did yore mother live nigh Ellijay?"

"'Bout three miles from town. What in the thunder is the matter? What are you starin' at me that way fer?"

Bob looked down and moved uneasily on the barrel. "I was jest a-wonderin'—my Lord, Jim! thar was a feller shot the day I passed through Ellijay. I cayn't be shore, but it seems to me his name was Joe Bradley. He was a troublesome, rowdyish sort of a feller, an' a man had to shoot 'im in self-defense."

Jim stared at the speaker helplessly, and then glanced around at Webb and Thornton. His great brown eyes began to dilate, and a sickly pallor came into his face. His breathing fell distinct and harsh on the profound stillness of the room. His mouth dropped open, but he was unable to utter a word.

"He may not 'a' been yore brother," added Bob, quickly, and with sympathy. "I'm not plumb shore o' the name, nuther. I was helpin a man drive a drove of Kentucky hosses through to Gainesville, an' we got thar jest atter the shootin'. I heerd the shots myse'f. The coroner held a inquest, an' the dead man's mother was thar. She looked pitiful; she was mighty gray an' old an' bent over. I was standin' in the edge o' the crowd when some neighbor fotch' 'er up in his wagon, an' we all made room for 'er. She had the pity of every blessed man thar. She jest stood 'mongst the rest, lookin' down at the corpse fer some time 'thout sayin' a word to anybody, nur sheddin' a tear. Then she seemed to come to 'erse'f, an' said, jest as ef nothin' oncommon had occurred: 'Well, gentlemen, why don't you move 'im under a shelter?' an' with that she squatted down at his head, an' breshed the hair off 'n his forehead mighty gentle-like. 'We are a-holdin' uv a inquest, accordin' to law,' a big feller said who was the coroner of the town. 'Law ur no law,' she said, lookin' up at 'im, her eyes flashin' like a tiger-cat's, 'he sha 'n't lie here in the br'ilin' sun with no roof over 'im. Thar wasn't no law to keep 'im from bein' murdered right in yore midst.' An' she had her way, you kin bet on that. The men jest lifted 'im up an' toted 'im into the nighest store an' put 'im on a cot. The coroner objected, but them men jest cussed 'im to his face an' pushed him away as ef he was so much trash."

"Did you take notice o' the body?" gasped Bradley, finding voice finally. "What kind of a lookin' man was he?"

"Ef I remember right, he had sorter reddish hair an' blue eyes, an' was 'bout yore build. He was a good-lookin' man."

"It was brother Joe," said Bradley. He was trembling from head to foot and was deathly pale. "Well, go on," he said, making a mighty effort to appear calm; "what about mother?"

"I don't know anything more," said Bob. "I left that same day. I heerd some talk about her bein' left destitute, an' ef I ain't mistaken, some said her other son had gone off West an' died out thar, as nobody had heerd from him. That's what made me—" But Bradley interrupted him. He rose, with a dazed look on his face, and went to his desk, a few feet away. He sat on the high stool and leaned his shaggy head on a pile of account-books. An inkstand rolled down to the floor, and a penholder rattled after it, but he did not pick them up. Then everything was still. Thornton reached over and took Webb's cigar to light his own, instead of striking the match he had taken from his pocket. The two men exchanged significant glances, and then looked curiously, almost breathlessly, at the mute figure bowed over the desk. Bradley raised his head. His eyes were bloodshot, and a tangled wisp of his long hair lay across his haggard face.

"How long ago was it, Bob?" he asked, in a deep, husky voice.

"Two year last May."

"My Lord! she may be dead an' gone by this time, an' I kin never make up fer my neglect!" He left the desk and came back slowly. "Kin you git that money to-night?" he asked, looking down at Webb.

"Yes; by walkin' up home." Webb tried to subdue the eager light in his eyes, which threatened to betray his intense satisfaction at the sudden change of affairs.

"Well, go git it. I 'll pack my satchel while yo' 're gone. I'm goin' to leave you fellers fer good, I reckon. I want to git back home. I wish you luck with the business, Webb. It's a good investment; we mought never have traded ef this hadn't 'a' come up."

Jim Bradley was worn out with the fatigue of his long journey when he alighted from the train in the little town that he had once known so well. The place had changed so much that he hardly knew which way to turn. He went into a store. The merchant was at his desk behind a railing in the rear, and a boy sat in the middle of the floor filling a patent egg-case with fresh eggs. "Come in," he said, without looking up, and went on with his work. Jim put his oilcloth valise on the floor and sat down in a chair.

"Some 'n' I kin do fer you to-day?" asked the boy, rising, and putting the lid on the egg-case.

"No, I b'lieve not to-day, bub," replied Bradley. "I've jest got off 'n the train an' stopped in to ax a few questions. The' used to be a woman livin' on the Starks place ten year ago—a widdier woman, Mis' Jason Bradley; kin you tell me whar I'd be likely to find 'er now?"

"I don't know no sech er person," said the boy; "mebby Mr. Summers kin tell."

"You mean Joe Bradley's mother," said the storekeeper, approaching—"the feller that was shot over at Holland's bar?"

"She's the one," said Jim, breathlessly; "is she still alive?"

"I hain't heerd nothin' to the contrary, but I don't know jest whar she is now. She was powerful hard up last winter, an' somebody tuk 'er to live with 'em—seems to me it was one o' the Sanders boys."

A woman entered the door and set her basket on the counter.

"Mis' Wade 'll be able to tell you," continued the merchant, turning to her; "she lives over in that direction."

"What's that, Mr. Summers?" she asked, carefully untying the cloth that covered some yellow rolls of butter.

"This gentleman was askin' about the widow Bradley, Joe's mother; do you know whar she is?"

"She's livin' with Alf Sanders," replied the woman; "I seed 'er thar soap-bilin' as I driv by last Tuesday was a week. Are you any kin o' hern?" and she eyed Bradley curiously from head to foot.

He made no reply to her question, though a warm color had suddenly come into his face at the words she had spoken. He took up his valise and looked out at the setting sun.

"How fer is it out thar?" he asked, a tremor in his voice. "I want to see 'er to-night."

"Three mile, I reckon," the woman said. "Keep to the big road tel you cross the creek, an' then turn off to the right. You cayn't miss it."

He thanked her, and trudged on past the other stores and the little white church on the hill, and on into the road that led toward the mountain. Just before entering the woods, he turned and looked back at the village.

"O Lord, I'm glad I ain't too late entirely," he said; and he took a soiled red handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes. "I don't know what I would 'a' done ef they'd 'a' said she was gone. But I 'll never see Joe ag'in, an' that seems quar. Poor boy! me an' him used to be mighty thick when we was little bits o' fellers. I kin remember when he'd 'a' fit a wildcat to help me, an' I got mad at him fer drinkin' when he wasn't able to he'p hisse'f. I'd hold my peace ef it was to do over ag'in."

Sanders' house was a low, four-roomed log cabin which sat back under some large beech-trees about a hundred yards from the road. Sanders himself sat smoking in the front yard, surrounded by four or five half-clad children and several gaunt hunting-dogs. He was a thin, wiry man, with long brown hair and beard, and dark, suspicious eyes set close together. He did not move or show much concern as Jim Bradley, just at dusk, came wearily up the narrow path from the bars to the door.

"Down, Ski! Down, Brutus!" he called out savagely to his barking dogs, and he silenced their uproar by hurling an ax-helve among them.

"This is whar Alf Sanders lives, I reckon," said Bradley.

"I'm the feller," replied Sanders. "Take a cheer; thar's one handy," and he indicated it with a lazy wave of his pipe.

Jim sat down mutely. Through the open door in one of the rooms he could see the form of a woman moving about in the firelight. He fell to trembling, and forgot that he was under the curious inspection of Sanders and his children. A moment later, however, when the fire blazed up more brightly, he saw that it was not his mother whom he had seen, but a younger woman.

"Yo' 're a stranger about here?" interrogated Sanders, catching his eye.

"Hain't been in this country fer ten year," was the laconic reply. "My name's Bradley—Jim Bradley; I've come back to see my mother."

"My stars! We all 'lowed you was dead an' buried long 'go!" and Sanders dropped his pipe in sheer astonishment. "Well, ef that don't take the rag off 'n the bush! Mary! Oh, Mary!"

"What ails you, Alf?" asked a slatternly woman, emerging from the firelight.

"Come out here a minute. This is the old woman's son Jim, back from the West."

"Yo' 're a-jokin'," she ejaculated, as she came slowly in open-eyed wonder toward the visitor. "Why, who'd 'a' thought—"

"Whar is she?" interrupted Bradley, unceremoniously. "I've come a long ways to see 'er."

"She's out thar at the cow-lot a-milkin'. She tuk 'er bucket an' the feed fer Brindle jest now."

His eyes followed hers. Beyond a row of alder-bushes and a little patch of corn he saw the dim outlines of a log stable and lean-to shed surrounded by a snake fence. Away out toward the red-skied west lay green fields and meadows under a canopy of blue smoke, and beyond their limits rose the frowning mountains, upon the sides of which long, sinuous fires were burning.

"I reckon I ort not to run upon her too sudden," he said, awkwardly, "bein' as she ain't expectin' me, an' hain't no idee I'm alive. Is she well?"

"Toler'ble," replied Mrs. Sanders, hesitatingly. "She's been complainin' some o' headaches lately, an' her appetite ain't overly good, but she's up an' about, an' will be powerful glad to see you. She talks about you a good deal of late. Jest atter yore brother Joe's death she had 'im on her mind purty constant, but now she al'ays has some 'n' to say about Jim—that's yore name, I believe?"

He nodded silently, not taking his eyes from the cow-lot. His valise rolled from his knees down on to the grass, and one of the children restored it to him.

"Yes, that is a fact," put in Sanders. "She was talkin' last Sunday about her two boys. She al'ays calls you the steady one. You ort to be sorter cautious. Old folks like her sometimes cayn't stand good news any better 'n bad."

"I 'll be keerful." His voice sounded husky and deep. "Does she—" he went on hesitatingly—"does she work fer you around the place?"

Sanders crossed his legs and cleared his throat. "That was the understandin' when we agreed to take 'er,"

he said, rather consequentially. "She was to make 'erse'f handy whenever she was able. My wife has had a risin' on 'er arm an' couldn't cook, an' we've had five ur six field hands here to the'r meals. The old critter was willin' to do anything to git a place to stay. The' wasn't any-whar else fer 'er to go. She's too old to do much, but she's willin' to put 'er hands to anything. We cayn't complain. She gits peevish now an' then, though, an' 'er eyesight an' memory's a-failin', so that she makes mistakes in the cookin'. T'other day she salted the dough twice an' clean forgot to put in sody."

"She's gittin' into 'er second childhood," added Mrs. Sanders, "an' she ain't got our ways in church notions, nuther. She's a Baptist, you know, an' b'lieves in emersion of the entire body an' in close communion an' sechlike, while the last one of us, down to little Sally thar, is Methodists. She goes whar we do to meetin' 'ca'se her church is too fer off an' we use the hosses Sundays."

Bradley's face was hidden by the dusk and the brim of his slouch hat, and they failed to notice the hot flush that rose into his cheeks. He got up suddenly and put his valise on a chair. "I reckon I mought as well walk out to whar she is," he said. "She won't be apt to know me. I've turned out a beard an' got gray sence she seed me."

"I 'll go'long with you." But Mrs. Sanders touched her husband on the arm as he was rising. "It 'u'd look more decent ef you'd leave 'em to the'r selves, Alf," she whispered. He sat down without a word, and Bradley walked away in the dusk to meet his mother. There was a blur before the strong man's eyes, and a strange weakness came over him as he leaned against the cow-lot fence and tried to think how he would make himself known to her. Beneath the low shed, a part of the crude stable, he saw the figure of a woman crouched down under a cow. "So, so, Brin'!" she was saying softly. "Cayn't you stan' still a minute? That ain't no way to do. So, so!"

His heart sank. It was her voice, but it was shrill and quivering, and he recognized it only as one does a familiar face under a mask of age. Just then, with a sudden exclamation, she sprang up quickly and placed her pail on the ground out of the cow's reach. He comprehended the situation at a glance. The calf had got through the bars and was sucking its mother.

"Lord, what 'll I do?" cried the old woman, in dismay; and catching the calf around the neck, she exerted all her strength to separate it from the cow.

Bradley sprang over the fence and ran to her assistance.

"Le' me git a hold o' the little scamp," he said, and the next instant he had the sleek little animal up in his strong arms. "Whar do you want 'im put?" he asked, drily, turning to her.

"Outside the lot," she gasped, so astonished that she could hardly utter a word.

He carried his struggling burden to the fence and dropped it over, and fastened up the bars to keep it out.

"Well, ef that don't beat all!" she laughed, in great relief, when he turned back to her. "I am very much obleeged. I 'lowed at fust you was one o' the field hands." He looked into her wrinkled face closely, but saw no sign of recognition there. She put the corner of her little breakfast-shawl to her poor wrinkled mouth and broke out into a low, childlike laugh. "I cayn't help from being amused at the way you tuk up that calf; I don't know" (and the smile left her face) "what I'd 'a' done ef you hadn't 'a' come along. I never could 'a' turned it out, an' Alf's wife never kin be pacified when sech a thing happens. We don't git enough milk, anyway."

"Le' me finish milkin'," he said, keeping his face half averted.

She laughed again. "Yo' 're a-jokin' now; I never seed a *man* milk a cow."

"I never did nuther tel I went out West," he replied. "The Yankees out thar showed me how. I'm a old bach', an' used to keep a cow o' my own, an' thar wasn't nobody but me to tend 'er."

She stood by his side and laughed like a child amused with a new toy when he took her place at the cow, and with the pail between his knees and using both hands, began to milk rapidly.

"I never seed the like," he heard her muttering over and over to herself. Then he rose and showed her the pail nearly filled. "I reckon that calf 'u'd have a surprise-party ef he was to try on his suckin' business now," he said. "It serves 'im right fer bein' so rampacious."

"Law me! I never could git that much," she said, and she held out her hand for the pail, but he swung it down at his side. "I 'll tote it," he said; "I'm a-goin' back to the house. I reckon I 'll put up thar fer the night—that is, ef they 'll take me in."

"I've jest been lookin' at you an' wonderin'," she said, reflectively, after they had passed through the bars. "My hearin' an' eyesight is bad, an' so is my memory of faces, but it seems like I've seed somebody some'r's that favors you mightily."

He walked on silently. Only the little corn-patch was between them and the group in the yard. He could hear Sanders's drawling voice, and caught a gleam of the kitchen fire through the alder-bushes.

"You better le' me take the bucket," she said, stopping abruptly and showing some embarrassment. "Yo' 're mighty gentlemanly; but Alf's wife al'ays gits mad when I make at all free with company. The whole family pokes fun at me, an' 'lows I am childish, an' too fond o' talkin'. They expect me jest to keep my mouth shet an' never have a word to say. It cayn't be helped, I reckon, but it's a awful way fer a old body to live."

"That's a fact!" he blurted out, impulsively, still holding to the pail, on which she had put her hand. "It's the last place on earth fer you."

"I hain't had one single day o' enjoyment sence I came here," she continued, encouraged to talk by his manifest sympathy. "I reckon I ort to be thankful, an' beggars mustn't be choosers, as the feller said; fer no other family in the county would take me in. But it hain't no place fer a old woman that likes peace an' rest at my time o' life. I work hard all day, an' at night I need sound sleep; but they put the children in my bed, an' they keep up a kickin' an' a squirmin' all night. Then, the' ain't no other old women round here, an' I git mighty lonesome. Sometimes I come as nigh as pease givin' up entirely."

"Thank the Lord, you won't have to stand it any longer!" he exclaimed, hotly.

She started from him in astonishment, and began to study his features. At that juncture two of Sanders's little girls drew near inquisitively. "Here!" and he held the pail out to them. "Take this milk to yore mammy."

One of them, half frightened, took the pail, and both scampered back to the house.

"Yo' 're a curi's sort of a man," she said, with a serious kind of chuckle, as she drew her shawl up over her white head. "I wouldn't 'a' done that fer a dollar. You skeered Sally out 'n a year's growth. I used to have a boy, that went away West ten year ago, who used to fly up like you do, an' you sorter put me in mind of him, you do. He was the best one I had. I could allus count on him fer help. He was as steady-goin' as a clock. He never was heerd from, an' the general belief is that he died out thar."

There was a moment's pause. He seemed trying to think of some way to reveal his identity. "You ortn't to pay attention to everything you hear," he ventured, awkwardly. "Who knows? Mebby he's still alive—sech things ain't so almighty oncommon. Seems like I've heerd tell o' a feller named Bradley out thar."

"I reckon it wasn't Jim," she sighed. "It was my daily prayer fer a long time that he mought come back, but thar ain't no sech luck fer me. I've done give up. I am a destitute, lonely woman, an' I cayn't stan' all this commotion an' wrangle much longer. Ef I had him to work fer now, I wouldn't keer; I'd wear my fingers to the bone; but fer people that ain't no speck o' kin an' hain't no appreciation fer what a body does it's different." The corners of her mouth were drawn down, and she put her thin hand up to her eyes.

"I don't b'lieve you'd know 'im ef you was to see 'im," he said, laughing artificially and taking her hand in his.

She started. A shiver ran through her frame, and her fingers clutched his convulsively. "What do you mean?" she gasped. "Oh, my Lord, what does the man mean?"

"The' ain't much doubt in my mind that he's alive an' ort to have a thousand lashes on his bare back fer neglectin' his old mammy," he said, trying to hide the tremor in his voice.

A startled light of recognition dawned in her eyes and illumined her whole visage. She stared at him with dilating eyes for an instant, and then fell into his arms. "Oh, Jim, I declare I cayn't stan' it! It will kill me! It will kill me!" she cried, putting her arms about his neck and drawing his head down to her.

"I'm as glad as you are, mother," he replied, tenderly stroking her white hair with his rough hand; "no feller livin' ever wanted to see his mammy wuss."

Then there seemed nothing further for either of them to say, and so he led her on to the house and to the chair he had left a few moments before.

"I've let the cat out 'n the bag," he said, shamefacedly, answering their glances of inquiry. "I had to mighty nigh tell her point-blank who I was."

"I never 'lowed I'd see 'im ag'in," Mrs. Bradley faltered, in a low, tearful tone. "I am that thankful my heavenly Father let me live to this day. I'd suffer it all over an' over ag'in fer this joy."

Sanders was silent, and his wife; and the children, barelegged and dirty-faced, sat on the grass and mutely watched the bearded stranger and his mother in childish wonder. Bradley said nothing, but he moved his chair nearer to his mother's and put his strong arm around her. Sanders broke the silence.

"What have you been follerin', Bradley?" he asked.

"Sellin' goods."

"Clerkin' fer somebody?"

"No; had a 'stablishment o' my own."

"You don't say!" and Sanders looked at Bradley's seedy attire and then at his wife significantly.

"Yes; I made some money out thar. The night 'fore I left, a feller offered me ten thousand dollars in cash fer my stock o' goods, an' I tuk 'im up. I didn't wait to put on my Sunday clothes; these is the things I worked in, handlin' dirty groceries. I hain't the pertic'lar sort. I've got some bonds an' reale estate that kin remain jest as well whar they are at present. I've come back here to stay with mother. I couldn't stand it to be alone much longer, an' I wouldn't ax 'er to move to a new country at 'er age."

Sanders and his wife stared at him in astonishment. Mrs. Bradley leaned forward and looked intently into his face. She was very pale and quivered with new excitement, but she said nothing.

"My Lord, you've had luck!" exclaimed Sanders, thinking of something to say finally. "What on earth are you gwine to invest in here, ef it hain't no harm to ax?"

"I 'lowed I'd buy a big plantation. They are a-goin' cheap these times, I reckon. I want a place whar a livin' will come easy, an' whar I kin make mother comfortable. She's too old to have to lay 'er hand to a thing, ur be bothered in the least. I want to be nigh some meetin'-house of her persuasion, an whar she kin 'sociate with other women o' her age. I don't expect to atone fer my neglect, but I intend to try my hand at it fer a change." Mrs. Bradley lowered her head to her son's knee, and began to sob softly. Then Mrs. Sanders got up quickly. "I smell my bread a-burnin'," she said. "I 'll call y'all into supper directly. We hain't pretendin' folks, Mr. Bradley, but yo' 're welcome to what we got. You needn't rise, Mrs. Bradley; I kin fix the table."

THE SALE OF UNCLE RASTUS

Aunt Milly's cabin was brightly illuminated. Crude tallow dips in the necks of cracked jugs and bottles spangled a dark clothless table, a slanting heap of blazing logs filled the wide rock-and-mud chimney, and a bonfire of pine knots at the "wash-place" near the door outside threw a red light far down the road which led past a row of cabins to the residence of Aunt Milly's owner, Mr. Herbert Putnam.

The season's crop of corn had been hauled up from the fields to the cribs. Frost had come; persimmons

were ripe, and Aunt Milly was going to give the first opossum supper of the fall. Her two boys, Len and CĂsar, had caught two fat opossums the night before, and she had dressed the game and left it in a couple of pans out on the roof—"ter let de fros' bite de wil' taste out 'n it en tender it up 'fo' bilin' en bakin'." She had given this explanation to her husband, Uncle Rastus, who had been irritated by her rising two or three times in the night "ter see ef dem cats wuzn't atter dat meat."

Uncle Rastus was sick; he had taken a severe cold, which had settled on his lungs and given him a cough. Hearing the negroes singing as they came through the fields from the neighboring plantations, he left his bed in the lean-to shed and hobbled slowly into the glare of candlelight. He sniffed the aroma of coffee and baked meat and intently surveyed the preparations his wife had made.

"I heer um—dat Nelse's tenor en Montague's bass; dey all comin'. I never heer sech er racket!" As he spoke he put a quilt down on the floor in the chimney-corner and lay down and pushed out his long bare feet to the fire.

"I reckon I got my heerin'," she replied, eying him reprovingly. "Look a-heer, Rastus, who seh you might git up? You know you gwine hat er wuss achin' dan ever in yo' ches' ef you lie dar over dem cracks des atter you got out 'n dat warm bed."

"Lemme 'lone," he said, in an offhand tone; "you reckon I ain't gwine be at yo' 'possum supper, en mebbly it de las' night on dis yer plantation—huh?"

His words evoked no reply, for the guests were now near the door, and she had advanced to meet them. Nelse and Montague, two tall, lank negroes, slouched in and dropped their hats on the floor. They were followed by Aunt Winnie and her husband and a crowd of negroes of all ages and sizes. As the guests filed in at the door and huddled round the fire and Rastus's perpendicular feet, each put a silver quarter into a bowl on the end of the table.

"I don't 'grudge you mine, Aunt Milly," said Aunt Winnie, feelingly. "My goodness, you is hat enough trouble, wid yo' marster bein' so po' en Une' Rastus so sickly en y'all gwine be put up on de auction-block ter-morrer en no idee whar you gwine nex'. How much y' reckon you gwine ter fetch, Aunt Milly?"

For reply Aunt Milly simply shrugged her fat shoulders as she went round among her guests and took their bonnets and shawls, which she piled promiscuously on a chest in the corner.

"She's wuff all she 'll bring, I boun' yer," said Nelse, who was standing almost astride of Rastus's head. "As for me, Aunt Milly, I'd er sight ruther be put up on de auction-block at de court-house dan ter be sol' in er slave-mart. Dey hat me on sale in New Orleans fur two weeks han' runnin', settin' bolt up in er long room wid er passel er niggers dey call Cre-owls, en people constant er-lookin' at me en axin' my price. Dey feed you on de fat er de lan' en keep you dressed up, but you never know is yer gwine ter be er ditch-digger ur somebody's ca'ge-driver. On de block it soon over en you know whar you gwine, en ef er nigger is sharp he kin manage er li'l en git on de good side er some white man he likes."

"Marse Geo'ge Putnam 'll buy y'all, you know he will," remarked Aunt Winnie to Ras-tus, who had sat up on his quilt and been listening eagerly to Nelse. "He 'll be on'y too glad er de chance ter spite Marse Herbert en rake in some mo' uv his paw's old slaves. He already bought up all de lan' 'cep' de li'l patch Marse Herbert's house stan' on, en now de house en dis yer fambly er niggers is all dat is lef' fer 'im ter want. My white folks seh ten yeer ergo dat Marse Geo'ge never will res' satisfied till his po' brother is flat on his back destitute. Seem lak he in his glory when he hear dat suppen o' Marse Herbert's is up fer sale, so he kin buy it in. I hain't never seed two sech brothers; dey hain't 'change one word in ten yeer; en all kase ole Marse Putnam lef' Marse Herbert de ol' home place en want 'im ter hol' on ter it."

Uncle Rastus looked up suddenly. His face was full of angles, and his dark eyes flashed in the firelight. "I hope he won't buy me," he grunted; "ef I cayn't stay wid Marse Herbert, de younges' en po'es' er ol' marster's chillun, I want ter go clean off 'mongst strangers. Dis *me* er-talkin'!"

The pathos of this remark struck most of the listeners; but Montague, who, for reasons of his own, disliked old Rastus, was unmoved by it. "You needn't trouble 'bout whar *you* gwine," he said, with contemptuous emphasis on the "you," and he pushed a little black girl to one side that he might watch the effect of his words on Rastus. "De won't be any big scramblin' atter you; who want ter buy er nigger des ter git ter bury 'im dese hard times?"

"Be ershamed, Montague," remonstrated Aunt Winnie; "be ershamed er yo'se'f!"

"He ain't got no raisin'!" blurted out Aunt Milly. "Unc' Rastus ain't gwine ter listen ter dat black fool."

"I des know what white folks seh, dat's all," insinuated Montague, sullenly. "Marse Herbert come over ter see my marster ter-day, en I heerd um talkin' in de stable-yard. Marse Herbert 'low he'd been countin' on payin' off his pressin' debt wid whut dis fambly er niggers would fetch, en'd laid his plans ter hol' on ter his house en go Wes' en mek money ter pay de *intrust* en lif' de mortgage, but des den Une' Rastus, de mos' valuables' one, tuk sick, en now Aunt Milly an' de chillun won't fetch ernough ter do much good."

This announcement produced an impression. Aunt Milly was plainly too much astonished even to protest against the brutality of the revelation. Rastus took a fresh hold on his thin knees with his arms, coughed deeply and painfully, and looked Montague straight in the eyes.

"Is you tellin' de trufe?" he asked, "Is you?"

"I hain't no reason to tell you er lie, Unc' Rastus."

From that moment Montague had the contempt of the whole room. Aunt Milly was evidently recompensed by this, for she simply looked into the sympathetic faces around her and made no sound. Rastus lay back on his quilt silently, and languidly thrust his feet back to the fire.

Aunt Milly's voice sounded cold and equivocal in her effort to smother her emotions when she said, "Well, come on, y'all, an' git yo' 'possum an' biscuit 'fo' dey git co'." The last words of her invitation were drowned in the scrambling and shuffling of feet as the crowd surged toward the table. A whole opossum embedded in a great heap of fried sweet potatoes was placed by Len and CĂsar on each end of the long table, and Aunt Milly followed them with a great bucket of coffee and pans of smoking biscuits.

They were all seated and had begun the feast, when, to their astonishment, Rastus rose and staggered to a vacant place at the end of the table.

"Whar my 'possum, Aunt Milly?" he demanded, with pretended pique. "On my soul, I b'lieve you tryin' ter lef' me out."

"Go back ter yo' bed, Rastus," she scolded, gently. "What kin got in you? you ain't eat nothin' in er mont' cep' er li'l soup en gravy, en now you want ter founder yo'se'f on 'possum meat."

He shoved his plate impatiently toward her. "Gimme some er dem taters en dat 'possum. You heer me?"

"You too sick, Rastus," protested Aunt Milly, with maternal persuasiveness. "Go lie down, en I 'll fix you some er yo' good soup."

"I know I *wuz* sick," he replied; "but I want ter tell y'all, I ain't now; I'm cuored well en soun'." As he spoke these words, accompanied by a heroic attempt to hold himself erect in his chair, Aunt Milly recalled the strange look of desperate determination that had possessed his face when Montague had finished speaking, and she kept silent. Both sides of the long table were curiously looking at the invalid. "I'm er li'l weak yit, but I ain't sick," he went on, bracing himself with a thin hand on each side of the table. "You know dat conjure doctor on de river plantation? Well, he come by here dis mawnin' 'fo' day, he did—des ez I wuz gittin' up ter git er armful er firewood, en—"

"Why, you know dat ain't so, Unc' Ras-tus," broke in Aunt Milly, "kase I got up fus' dis mawnin', en you wuz soun' ersleep."

"Twuz long 'fo' you got up, Aunt Milly," added the old man, glibly, as he warmed up to his fiction. "Well, dat conjure doctor rode by de do' on er white hoss, he did, en seh to me, 'Rastus, you sick, en you mus' git well 'fo' yo' marster puts you up for sale, so you kin bring what you is wuff ter he'p him out 'n his scrape.' En he up en ax me has I my rabbit-foot erbout me, en I tuk it out 'n my weskit pocket, en he seh, 'Well, put it in de hot ashes in de back er de chimbly tell you hear er dog bark, en den tek it out en wash it clean in spring-water, en den keep it by you night en day,' en when I done ez he tol' me I got well."

A chorus of wondering ejaculations rose from the superstitious listeners, and for a moment opossum meat and potatoes were forgotten. Aunt Milly looked at her husband tenderly. "Dat nigger would die fer Marse Herbert," she thought. "He dat sick now he cayn't hol' his haid up; de sight er dat 'possum meat is gaggin' 'im, but he 'll kill me ef I let on."

"I don't want yo' ol' 'possum meat," said Rastus, rising and moving back to the fire. "I'm gwine ter lie down an' git rested up fer ter-morrer. Ef dey 'll let me, I 'll dance er breakdown on dat auction-block en turn one er my han'-springs."

"He certny is cuored," said Aunt Winnie, gladly. "Dese conjure doctors beat de ol' sort all ter pieces."

The supper over, Aunt Milly slowly counted out her earnings and put them away; the table was moved back against the wall; Nelse got out his bones and began to play, and Len and Cāsar danced jigs till they sank to the floor in exhaustion. After this, plantation songs were sung, ghost-stories were told, and it was late when they went back to their homes.

The following day was a fine one. The air was bracing, and the sun shone brightly. The autumnal foliage had never appeared more beautiful; every color in nature seemed lavished on the hills near by, and the mountains, twenty miles away, blue as the skies in spring and summer, had faded into a beautiful pink.

The court-house and auction-block were in a village two miles from the plantations of the two Putnam brothers. Uncle Rastus and his family were sent over in the wagon of Herbert Putnam's overseer, and Lawyer Sill came by in his buggy and drove Herbert to the sale.

"I thought I would stay away and let you attend to it for me," said Herbert Putnam; "but my daughter thinks I ought to go. Brother George will be there to bid them in. He wouldn't miss the opportunity to humiliate me again for anything."

"You ought to be on hand," replied Sill, as the other got into the buggy. "Your negroes worship you, and would feel hurt if you were not present. Your brother has acted very badly, and has made himself unpopular by it."

"It was my father's wish that I hold the home place, but George never could forgive me for it. If he had advanced money to me, as he has to total strangers, I should have paid out all right. He has a better head for business than I have."

A hundred wagons, buggies, and carriages were scattered over the court-house common, the hitching-racks were hidden by mules and horses, and a considerable crowd of people, white and black, were clustered around the auction-block to the right of the court-house door, near the massive log jail. In the edge of the crowd an old darky was selling "ground-peas," and his white-headed wife was threading her way through the crowd, retailing hot gingerbread from a basket and fresh cider from a capacious jug with a corncob stopper. In some of the carriages elegantly dressed ladies sat; young men, the gallants among the gentry of the county, with broad hats, and trousers in their bootlegs, conversed with them from the backs of restive mettlesome horses.

Colonel George Putnam sat in his carriage with his wife and son, but when his brother drove up with Lawyer Sill, he alighted and approached his own lawyer, who was talking with a group of planters.

"Burton," said he, in a low tone, "remember, you are to bid for me; I don't want to be conspicuous, but I will have those negroes. I don't want any of my father's estate to go into the hands of strangers."

"All right," replied Burton; "we won't have much trouble. Old man Staley has thrown out some intimation that he intends to do some bidding, but he's afraid of his shadow, and when he sees you are in the fight he 'll draw in his horns."

"I don't think so. Staley is no friend of mine, and will try to run the price up on me out of spite. I looked over them a while ago as they came up," the colonel went on, glancing at the wagon in which Uncle Rastus and his wife and sons were seated. "They all seem in pretty fair condition except Rastus. He says he has had a little spell of fever, but that he is all right now."

"He is thin, but as sound as a dollar," said Burton, lightly. "He jumped out of the wagon just now as nimbly as a kitten and unhitched the mules in a hurry. I told him I heard he had been sick, and he laughed and said he could do more work than ten ordinary darkies."

"Well, keep your eye on Staley. My brother has wasted everything my father left him, and I owe it to our name to retain as many of our old slaves as I can. You told me you would find out the amount of the mortgage on the old place."

"McPherson lent him five thousand on it."

"And he expects to make that out West and keep the interest paid! He 'll never do it in the world."

Burton glanced across the crowd at the seedy-looking man with the pale face and iron-gray hair, and his reply was tinged with feeling:

"You 're purty hard on 'im, colonel; it's none o' my business, but he's a powerful good fellow. Seems to me, as he was the only brother you have, you might have helped him a little."

The planter's eye fell, and an angry flush came into his dark face. "You don't know anything about it, Burton," said he, quickly. "I acknowledge we had some words about the will, but he set afloat the rumors about my treatment of him when I was a candidate for the legislature, and it was through him that I was beaten."

Burton wished to change the subject. "I see the auctioneer and the negroes going to the block," he said. "Look at old Rastus; he prances around like a two-year-old colt. I reckon you can fatten him up; a little sickness does 'em good sometimes."

The crowd drew closer round the platform upon which the red-faced auctioneer had sprung and was placing chairs for Rastus and his family. All of them except Rastus himself seemed awed by the solemnity of the occasion. "Who gwine buy me?" he laughed, clapping his hands and rubbing them together. "I been er li'l sick, but I'm pickin' up now, en kin hol' my own wid any nigger in dis county. Who want me? Speak up quick."

"Dry up," laughed the auctioneer, and he playfully jerked off the old man's hat and laid it in the latter's lap. "Don't you know enough not to come 'fo' company with yore hat on? Who's goin' to sell this batch of niggers, you or me? Ef you are, I 'll git down and bid on you. I want somebody to look after my thoroughbreds."

This sally evoked a wave of laughter from the crowd, and Rastus joined in with as much enjoyment as if he had caused it. Herbert Putnam drew Sill aside.

"Rastus is shamming," he whispered; "he is as sick as he can be right now. He's doing it in order to bring a better price, to help me out. Dr. Wilson said the other day that he might live to be an old man, but that he'd never be able to work any more."

"Good gracious!" ejaculated Sill; "who ever heard the like? He's a hero."

Herbert Putnam's eyes glistened and his voice was unsteady as he spoke. "I'd give my right arm rather than part with him. If I were able, he and his should be free to-day." The auctioneer began to gesticulate and shout: "Six hundred has been bid on Rastus, by Mr. Burton over thar, to start the game. Only six hundred for one of the best buck negroes in the county. Seven hundred! That's right, Mr. Staley; he's the very man you want. Seven hundred; eight do I hear it? Thank you; Mr. Burton don't intend to take a back seat. All right; nine hundred! Nine-fifty do I hear it, Mr. Burton? Nine-fifty it is. Mr. Staley has got a thousand ready for him; a thousand has been bid; anybody else in the fight? Old Rastus is thin, but he could throw a bull a rod by the tail. One thousand only on a two-thousand-dollar negro. Do I hear more?"

George Putnam's face darkened angrily as he watched the excited features of old man Staley. He drew Burton's ear down to his lips: "Bid twelve hundred, and knock him out and be done with it," he whispered; "it will scare him to death."

"Twelve hundred," said Burton, without a change of countenance, and silence fell on the chattering, speculating crowd; even the voluble auctioneer showed surprise by not at once echoing the bid. Old Rastus took advantage of the pause; he sprang up and clapped his hands and knocked his heels together. "I ain't no thousand-dollar nigger," he cried. "I b'longs ter Marse Herbert Putnam, I does; de ain't no cheap nigger on dis yer block."

"Twelve hundred dollars!" repeated the auctioneer, impressively, and there was something vaguely respectful in the way he pushed Rastus back into his chair. "Twelve hundred! Mr. Staley, don't back out; you need 'im wuss than anybody else. Is it twelve-twenty-five?"

Staley hesitated; his eyes fell before the concentrated stare of the silent crowd, and then he nodded. A murmur passed through the assembly, and Colonel Putnam grew white with anger. "Some one has put him up to this," he said in a low tone to his agent. "Make it thirteen hundred." And the next instant the auctioneer was flaunting the bid in the face of old Staley.

Herbert Putnam, unnoticed by any one, elbowed his way through the crowd to his brother and touched him on the arm. Their eyes met. "Pardon me," said Herbert, "but I must speak to you."

And George Putnam was drawn beyond the outskirts of the crowd. "I cannot keep quiet and see you cheated," faltered Herbert, with his eyes averted. "A long time ago, when you and I were boys, you stood up for me, and I cannot forget that we are brothers. Don't bid any more on Rastus; he is shamming; he is as sick as he can be, and is only pretending to be well to bring a high price."

The two men gazed into each other's eyes. George Putnam was quivering all over, and his face was softening. Impulsively he put out his hand, as if to apologize for his lack of words. "Let's not be enemies any longer," went on Herbert, as he pressed the extended hand. "I am sick and tired of this estrangement. I am going away, and I may never come back. I can't keep up the old place as father thought I would, and you are welcome to it. Take it and care for it; mother's and father's graves are on it."

George Putnam's face was working; he strove to reply, but his voice clogged. He looked toward his son and wife in his carriage, and then back into his brother's face. "God forgive me, Herb," he said; "I've treated you like a dog. Old Rastus has been truer to you than your own brother. You shall not give up the old place; you must keep it. Wait!" And with those words he hurried to the platform.

The auctioneer had been proclaiming Staley's reckless bid of thirteen-twenty-five, and the crowd was eagerly taking in the unusual sight of the two Putnam brothers in close conversation. Colonel Putnam reached the platform and signed the auctioneer to be quiet. Standing on the lower step, he was in the view of all.

"I want Rastus, and I am going to have him," he said to the upturned faces. "I want him to give him back to my brother, who has been forced by my neglect to offer him for sale. Twenty thousand dollars is my bid—and Rastus is worth every cent of it."

No one spoke as Colonel Putnam stepped back into the crowd. Old Rastus seemed the only one to thoroughly grasp the situation. "Bress de Lawd!" he exclaimed, and he slapped Aunt Milly on the back. "Dem boys done made up, en I fotch twenty thousand dollars! Whoeee!"

"Twenty thousand dollars," said the auctioneer, awkwardly. "Twenty thousand—do I hear—and sold to Colonel Putnam. I reckon the 'ain't no use puttin' up the others."

There was great activity in the crowd. Everybody was trying to see the two brothers as they went arm in arm to Colonel Putnam's carriage, and a moment later, when the vehicle with four occupants turned into the road leading toward George Putnam's plantation, a unanimous cheer rose from the crowd.

THE CONVICT'S RETURN

The pedestrian trudged down the tortuous declivitous road of the mountain amidst the splendor of autumn-tinted leafage and occasional dashes of rhododendron flowers. Now and then he would stop and deeply breathe in the crisp air, as if it were a palpable substance which was pleasing to his palate. At such moments, when the interstices of trunks and bowlders would permit, his eyes, large with weariness, would rest on a certain farmhouse in the valley below.

"It's identical the same," he said, when he had completed the descent of the mountain and was drawing near to it. "As fer as I can make out, it hain't altered one bit sence the day they tuk me away. Ef ever'thing seems purtier now, it may be beca'se it's in the fall of the year an' the maple-trees an' the laurel look so fancy."

Approaching the barn, the only appurtenance to the four-roomed house, farther on by a hundred yards, he leaned on the rail fence and looked over into the barnyard at the screw of blue smoke which was rising from a fire under a huge iron boiler.

"Marty's killin' hogs," he said, reflectively. "I mought 'a' picked a better day fer gittin' back; she never was knowed to be in a good humor durin' hog-killin'."

He half climbed, half vaulted over the fence, and approached the woman, who was bowed over an improvised table of undressed planks on which were heaped the dismembered sides, shoulders, and hams of pork. His heart was in his mouth, owing to the carking doubt as to his welcome which had been oozing into the joy of freedom ever since he began his homeward journey. But it was not his wife who looked up as his step rustled the corn-husks near her, but her unmarried sister, Lucinda Dykes.

"Well, I never!" she ejaculated. "It's Dick Wakeman, as I am alive!" She wiped her hand on her apron and gave it to him, limp and cold. "We all heerd you was pardoned out, but none of us 'lowed you'd make so straight fer home."

His features shrank, as if battered by the blow she had unwittingly dealt him.

"I say!" he grunted. "Whar else in the name o' common sense would a feller go? A body that's been penned up in the penitentiary fer four years don't keer to be losin' time monkeyin' round amongst plumb strangers, when his own folks—when he hain't laid eyes on his—"

But, after all, good reasons for his haste in returning could not be found outside of a certain sentimentality which lay deep beneath Wakeman's rugged exterior, and to which no one had ever heard him refer.

"Shorely," said the old maid, taking a wrong grasp of the situation—"shorely you knowed, Dick, that Marty has got 'er divorce?"

"Oh, yes. Bad news takes a bee-line shoot fer its mark. I heerd the court had granted 'er a release, but that don't matter. A lawyer down thar told me that it all could be fixed up now I'm out. Ef I'd 'a' been at home, Marty never would 'a' made sech a goose of 'erse'f. How much did the divorce set 'er back?"

"About a hundred dollars," answered Lucinda.

"Money liter'ly throwed away," said the convict, with irrepressible indignation. "Marty never did quite sech a silly thing while I was at home."

The old maid stared at him, a half-amused smile playing over her thin face.

"But it was her money," she said, argumentatively. "She owned the farm an' every stick an' head o' stock on it when you an' 'er got married."

"You needn't tell me that," said Wakeman, sharply. "I know that; but that ain't no reason fer 'er to throw 'er money away gittin' a divorce."

Lucinda filled her hand with salt and began to sprinkle it on a side of meat. "Law me," she tittered, "I'll bet you hain't heerd about Marty an' Jeff Goardley."

"Yes, I have. Meddlin' busybodies has writ me about that, too," said Wakeman, sitting down on the hopper of a corn-sheller and idly swinging his foot.

"He's a-courtin' of 'er like a broom-sedge field afire," added the sister, tentatively.

"She's got too much sense to marry 'im after 'er promises to me," said the convict, firmly.

"She lets 'im come reg'lar ev'ry Tuesday night."

Wakeman was not ready with a reply, and Lucinda began to salt another piece of pork.

"Ev'ry Tuesday night, rain or shine," she said.

The words released Wakeman's tongue.

"Huh, he's the most triflin' fop in the county."

"Looks like some o' the neighbors is powerful bent on the match," continued Lucinda, her tone betraying her own lack of sympathy for the thing in question. "Marty was a-standin' over thar at the fence jest 'fore you come an' whirled all of a sudden an' went up to the house. She said she was afeered her cracklin's would burn, but I 'll bet she seed you down the road. I never have been able to make 'er out. She ain't once mentioned yore name sence you went off. Dick, I'm one that don't, nur never did, believe you meant to steal Williams's hoss, kase you was too drunk to know what you was a-doin', but Marty never says whether she does ur doesn't. The day the news come back that you was sentenced I ketched 'er in the back room a-cryin' as' ef 'er heart would break, but that night 'Lonzo Spann come in an' said that you had let it out in the court-room that you'd be glad even to go to the penitentiary to git a rest from Marty's tongue, an'—"

"Lucinda, as thar's a God on high, them words never passed my lips," the convict interrupted.

"I 'lowed not," the old maid returned. "But it has got to be a sort of standin' joke ag'in Marty, an' she heers it ev'ry now an' then. But I'm yore friend, Dick. I've had respect fer you ever sence I noticed how you suffered when Annie got sick an' died. Thar ain't many men that has sech feelin' fer their dead children."

Wakeman's face softened.

"I was jest a-wonderin', comin' on, ef—ef anybody has been a-lookin' after the grave sence I went off. The boys in the penitentiary used to mention the'r dead once in a while, an' I'd always tell 'em about my grave. Pris 'ners, Lucinda, git to relyin' on the company o' the'r dead about as much as the'r livin' folks. In the four years that I was in confinement not one friend o' mine ever come to ax how I was gittin' on."

"Marty has been a-lookin' after the grave," said Lucinda, in the suppressed tone peculiar to people who desire to disown deep emotion. She turned her face toward the house. "I wish you wouldn't talk about yore bein' neglected down thar, Dick. The Lord knows I've laid awake many an' many a cold night a-wonderin' ef they give you-uns enough cover, an' ef they tuk them cold chains off 'n you at night. An' I reckon Marty did, too, fer she used to roll an' tumble as ef 'er mind wasn't at ease."

Wakeman took off his coat and rolled up his shirt-sleeves.

"I'm itchin' to set in to farm-work ag'in," he said. "Let me salt fer you, an' you run up thar an' tell 'er I'm back. Maybe she 'll come down heer."

Lucinda gave him her place at the table, a troubled expression taking hold of her features.

"The great drawback is Jeff Goardley," she said. "It really does look like him an' Marty will come to a understandin'. I don't know raily but what she may have promised him; he has seemed mighty confident heer lately."

Wakeman shrugged his shoulders and said nothing. He filled his hands with the salt from a pail and began to rub it on the pork.

Lingeringly the woman left him and turned up the slight incline toward the house. His eyes did not follow her. He was scrutinizing the pile of pork she had salted.

"Goodness gracious!" he grunted. "Lu-cindy has wasted fifteen pound o' salt. Ef I'd 'a' done that Marty'd 'a' tuk the top o' my head off. I wonder ef Marty could 'a' got careless sence she's had all the work to look after."

He had salted the last piece of meat when, looking up, he saw Lucinda standing near him.

"She wouldn't come a step," she announced, with some awkwardness of delivery. "When I told 'er you wuz down heer she jest come to the door an' looked down at you a-workin' an' grunted an' went back to 'er cracklin's. But that's Marty."

The convict dipped his hands into a tub of hot water and wiped them on an empty salt-bag.

"I wonder," he began, "ef I'd better—" But he proceeded no further.

"I think I would," said the angular mind-reader, sympathetically.

"Well, you come on up thar, too," Wake-man proposed. "I've always noticed that when you are about handy she never has as much to say as she does commonly."

"I 'll have to go," said Lucinda. "Ef Marty gits to talkin' to you she 'll let the cracklin's burn, an' then—then she'd marry Goardley out o' pure spite."

As the pair reached the steps of the back porch the convict caught a glimpse of a gingham skirt within, and its stiff flounce as it vanished behind the half-closed door-shutter suddenly flung an aspect of seriousness into his countenance. He paused, his foot on the lowest step, and peered into the sitting-room. Seeing it empty, he smiled.

"I 'll go in thar an' take a cheer. Tell 'er I want to see 'er."

His air of returning self-confidence provoked a faint laugh from his well-wisher.

"Yo' 're a case," she said, nodding her consent to his request. "You are different frum 'most anybody else. Somehow I can't think about you ever havin' been jailed fer hoss-stealin'."

"It all depends on a body's feelin's," the convict returned. "Down thar in the penitentiary we had a little gang of us that knowed we wuz innocent of wrong intentions, an' we kinder flocked together. All the rest sorter looked up to us an' believed we wuz all right. It was a comfort. I 'll step in an' git it over."

He walked as erectly as an Indian up the steps and into the sitting-room. To his surprise Mrs. Wakeman started to enter the room from the adjoining kitchen, and seeing him, turned and began to beat a hasty retreat.

"Hold on thar, Marty," he called out, in the old tone which had formerly made strangers suppose that the farm and all pertaining to it had been his when he married her.

She paused in the doorway, white and sullen.

"Ain't you a-goin' to tell a feller howdy an' shake hands?" he asked, with considerable self-possession.

"What 'ud I do that fur?"

"Beca'se I'm home ag'in," he said.

"Huh, nobody hain't missed you." The words followed a forced shrug.

"I know a sight better 'n that, Marty," he said. "I know a woman that 'ud take a duck fit jest when I was gone to drive the cows home an' got delayed a little, would fret consider'ble durin' four years of sech a—a trip as I've had. Set down here an' let's have a talk."

"I've got my work to do," she returned, after half a minute of speechlessness, her helpless anger standing between her and satisfactory expression.

"Oh, all right!" he exclaimed. "I ain't no hand to waste time durin' work hours with dillydallyin'. Any other time 'll do me jest as well. I 'lowed maybe it would suit you better to have it over with. I must git out the hoss an' wagon an' haul that hog-meat up to the smokehouse. Whar's Cato? I 'll bet that triflin' nigger has give you the slip ag'in this hog-killin', like he always did."

Mrs. Wakeman stared at the speaker in a sort of thwarted, defiant way without deigning to reply; her sneer was the only thing about her bearing which seemed at all expressive of the vast contempt for him that she really did not feel. She felt that her silence was cowardly, her failure to assert her rights as a divorced woman an admission that she was glad of his return.

At this critical juncture Lucinda Dykes sauntered into the room and leaned against the dingy, once sky-blue wall. Her air of interested amusement over the matrimonial predicament had left her. It had dawned upon her, now that her sister had taken refuge in obstinate silence, that a vast responsibility rested on her as intermediary.

"Cato went with some more niggers to a shindig over at Squire Camp's yesterday an' hain't showed up sence," she explained. "Ef I was you-uns—ef I was Marty, I mean—I'd turn 'im off fer good an' all. Dick, sence you went off me nur Marty hain't been able to do a thing with 'im."

The convict grunted. It was as if he had succeeded in rolling the last four years from his memory as completely as if they had never passed.

"Jest wait till I see the black scamp," he growled. "I reckon I 'll have to do every lick of the work myself." With that Wakeman turned into the entry and thence went to the stable-yard near by.

"He hain't altered a smidgin'," Lucinda commented. "It may be kase he has on the identical same clothes; he's been a-wearin' striped ones down thar, you know, an' they laid away his old ones. To save me I can't realize that he's been off even a week." The old maid snickered softly. "He's the only one that could ever manage you, Marty. Now Jeff Goardley would let you have yore own way, but Dick's a caution! It's always been a question with me as to whether a woman would ruther lead a man ur be led."

There was a white stare in Mrs. Wakeman's eyes which indicated that she was pondering the man's chief aggression rather than heeding her sister's nagging remarks. The sudden appearance of the convict's head and shoulders above a near-at-hand window-sill rendered a reply unnecessary. His face was flushed.

"Can you-uns tell me whar under the sun the halter is?" he broke forth, in a turbulent tone. "I tuk the trouble to put a iron hook up in the shed-room jest fer that halter, an' now somebody has tore down the hook an' I can't find hair nur hide o' the halter."

Mrs. Wakeman tried to sneer again as she turned aside, and the gaunt intermediary, spurred on to her duty, approached the window.

"The blacksmith tuk that hook to mend the harrow with," she said, with a warning glance at Marty. "You 'll find the halter on the joist above the hoss-trough. Ef I was you, on this fust day, I'd try to—" But Wakeman had dropped out of sight, and muttering unintelligible sounds indicative of discomfiture, was striding toward the stable.

All the rest of that afternoon the convict toiled in the smoke-house, hanging the meat on hooks along the joists over a slow, partly smothered fire of chips and pieces of bark. When the work was finished his eyes were red from smoke and brine. He stabled the horse and fed him, and then, realizing that he had nothing more to do, he felt hungry. He wanted to go into the sitting-room and sit down in his old place in the chimney-corner, but a growing appreciation of the extreme delicacy of the situation had taken hold of him. He wandered about the stable-yard in a desultory way, going to the pig-pen, now empty and blood-stained, and to the well-filled corn-crib, but these objects had little claim on his interest. The evening shadows had begun to stalk like dank amphibious monsters over the carpet of turf along the creek-banks, and pencils of light were streaming out of the windows of the family-room. Suddenly his eyes took in the woodpile; he went to it, and picking up the ax, began to cut wood. He was tired, but he felt that he would rather be seen occupied than remaining outside without a visible excuse for so doing. In a few minutes he was joined by Lucinda.

"Dick," she intoned, "you've worked enough, the Lord Almighty knows. Come in the house an' rest 'fore supper; it's mighty nigh ready."

He avoided her glance, and shamefacedly touched a big log he had just cut into the proper length for the fireplace.

"Cato, the triflin' scamp, hain't cut you-uns a single backlog," he said, in a tone that she had never heard from him.

"We hain't had a decent one sence you went off, Brother Richard," she returned. "An' a fire's no fire without a backlog."

Their eyes met. She saw that he was deeply stirred by her tenderness, and that opened the floodgates of her sympathy. She began to rub her eyes.

"Oh, Dick, I'm so miser'ble; ef you an' Marty don't quit actin' like you are I don't know what I will do."

She saw him make a motion as if he had swallowed something; then he stooped and shouldered the heavy backlog and some smaller sticks.

"I 'll give you-uns one more backlog to set by, anyhow," he said, huskily.

She preceded him into the sitting-room and stood over him while he raked out the hot coals and deposited the log against the back part of the fireplace. Then she turned into the kitchen and approached her sister, who was frying meat in an iron pan on the coals.

"Marty," she said, unsteadily, "ef you begin on Dick I 'll go off fer good. I can't stand that."

Mrs. Wakeman folded her stern lips, as if to keep them under check, and shrugged her shoulders. That was all the response she made.

Lucinda turned back into the sitting-room, where the dining-table stood. To-night she put three plates on the white cloth; one of them had been Dick's for years. She put it at the end of the table where he had sat when he was the head of the house. As she did so she caught his shifting glance and smiled.

"I want to make you feel as ef nothin' in the world had happened, Dick," she said. "I've been a-fixin' you a bed in the company-room, but you jest must be sensible about that."

"Law! anything will suit me," he began. But the entrance of Marty interrupted his remark.

She put the bread, the coffee, the meat, and the gravy on the table, and sat down in her place without a word. Lucinda glanced at Wakeman.

"Come on, Dick," she called out. "I 'll bet yo' 're hungry as a bear."

He drew out the chair that had been placed for him and sat down. Now an awkward situation presented itself. In the absence of a man Marty always asked the blessing. Lucinda wondered what would take place; one thing she knew well, and that was that Marty was too punctilious in religious matters to touch a bite of food before grace had been said by some one. But just then she noticed something about Wakeman that sent a little thrill of horror through her. Evidently his long life in prison had caused him to retrograde into utter forgetfulness of the existence of table etiquette, for he had drawn the great dish of fried meat toward him and was critically eying the various parts as he slowly turned it round.

"What a fool I am," he said, the delightful savor of the meat rendering him momentarily oblivious of his former wife's forbidding aspect. "I laid aside the lights o' that littlest shote an' firmly intended to ax you to fry 'em fer me, but—"

Lucinda's stare convinced him that something had gone wrong.

"Marty's waitin' fer somebody to ax the blessin'," she explained.

"Blessin'? Good gracious!" he grunted, his effusiveness dried up. "That went clean out 'n my mind. But a body that's tuk his meals on a tin plate in a row o' fellers waitin' fer the'r turn four years hand-runnin', ain't expected to—"

He went no further, seeming to realize that the picture he was drawing was tending to widen the distance between him and the uncompromising figure opposite him. He folded his hands so that his arms formed a frame for his plate, and said in a mellow bass voice: "Good Lord, make us duly thankful fer the bounteous repast that Thy angels has seed fit to spread before us to-night. Cause each of us to inculcate sech a frame of mind as will not let us harbor ill will ag'in our neighbors, an' finally, when this shadowy abode is dispersed by the light of Thy glory, receive us all into Thy grace. This we beg in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen."

He ended in some confusion. A red spot hovered over each of his cheek-bones. "I clean forgot that part about good crops an' fair weather," he said to Lucinda. "But you see it's been four yeer sence I said it over, an' a man o' my age oughtn't to be expected to know a thing like a younger person."

"Help yorese'f to the meat an' pass the dish to Marty," replied Miss Dykes. "Ef I was you, I'd not be continually a-bringin' up things about the last four yeer."

He made a hurried but bounteous choice of the parts of meat on the dish, and then gave it over into the outstretched hands of Lucinda. Marty was pouring out the coffee. She passed the old-fashioned mustache-cup to her sister, and that lady transferred it to Wakeman. He sipped from it lingeringly.

"My Lord!" he cried, impulsively. "I tell you the God's truth; sech good coffee as this hain't been in a mile o' my lips sence I went—sence I was heer," he corrected, as Lucinda's warning stare bore down on him.

After that the meal proceeded in silence. When he had finished, Dick went back to his chair in the chimney-corner near the battered woodbox. After putting away the dishes and removing the cloth from the table, Lucinda came and sat down near him. Mrs. Wake-man, casting occasional furtive glances toward the front door, appropriated her share of the general silence in a seat where the firelight faded. Richard wore an unsettled air, as if getting into old harness came as awkward as putting on the new had come when he married, years before. After a few minutes he became a little drowsy, and began to act naturally, as if by force of returning habit. He unlaced his shoes, took them off, rubbed the bottoms of his feet, thrust those members toward the fire, and worked his toes. He also took a chew of tobacco. Profound silence was in the room; the thoughts of three minds percolated through it. Marty picked up the *Christian Advocate* and pretended to read, but she dropped it in her lap and cast another look toward the door.

The rustling of the paper attracted Richard's gaze.

"Is she expectin'—is anybody a-comin'?" He directed the question to Lucinda.

"I wouldn't be much surprised," was the answer. "It's Jeff Goardley's night."

"You don't say!" Each of the words had a separate little jerk, and the questioning stare of the convict's eyes pierced the space intervening between him and his divorced wife. He spat into the fire, wiped his mouth with an unsteady hand, and caught his breath.

Silence again. Lucinda broke it.

"You hain't never told us how you happened to git yore pardon," she ventured.

"By a streak o' luck," Wakeman said, the languid largeness of his eyes showing that he was still struggling

against the inclination to sleep. "T'other day the governor sent word to our superintendent that he was comin' to see fer hisse'f how we wus treated. The minute I heerd it, I said to myself, I did, 'Wakeman, you must have a talk with that man.' So the mornin' he got thar we wus all give a sort of vacation an' stood up in rowslike fer inspection. When I seerd 'im a-comin' towards me I jest gazed at 'im with all my might an' he got to lookin' at me. When he got nigh me he stopped short an' said:

"'Looky' heer, my man,' said he; 'yore face seems mighty familiar to me. Have I ever seerd you before?'

"'Not unless you remember me a-throwin' up my hat in front o' the stan' an' yellin' when you wus stump-speakin' in Murray jest 'fore yore 'lection,' said I.

"Then he laughed kinder good-natured like, an' said: 'I'm sorry to see a voter o' mine in a fix like yo'r 'n. What can I do fer you?'

"'I want to have a talk with you, yore Honor, an' that bad,' said I.

"'I am at yore disposal,' said he. 'That's what I'm heer fer. I 'll ax the superintendent to call you in a moment. What is yore name?'

"'Richard Wakeman, yore Honor,' said I. "'An' one o' the best men we ever had,' said the superintendent.

"Well, they passed on, an' in a few minutes I was ordered to come to the superintendent's office, an' thar I found the governor tilted back smokin' a fine cigar.

"'You wanted to have some 'n' to say to me, Wakeman?' said he.

"'I eased my ball an' chain down on the skin of a big-eyed varmint o' some sort, an' stood up straight.

"'I did, yore Honor, an' that bad,' said I.

"'What is it?' said he.

"'I want to put my case before you, yore Honor,' said I. 'An' I'm not a-goin' to begin, as every convict does, by sayin' he ain't guilty, fer I know you've heerd that tale tell yo' 're heartily sick of it.'

"'But are you guilty?' said the governor. 'I *have* seerd men sent up fer crimes they never committed.'

"'Yore Honor,' said I, 'I didn't no more intend to steal that hoss o' Pike Williams's than you did—not a bit. Gittin' on a spree about once a year is my main fault, an' it was Christmas, an' all of us was full o' devilment. It was at the Springplace bar, an' Alf Moreland struck me a whack across the face with his whip, an' bein' astraddle of a fine nag he made off. Pike's nag was hitched at the rack nigh me, an', without hardly knowin' what I was doin', I jumped on it an' spurred off after Alf. I run 'im nip an' tuck fer about seven mile, an' then me an' him rid on fer more whisky down the valley. The next day I was arrested, so drunk they had to haul me to jail in a wagon. They tried me before a jury o' men that never did like me, an' I got five year.'

"When I stopped thar to draw a fresh breath the governor axed, 'Is that what you wanted to say, Wakeman?'

"'Not a word of it, yore Honor,' said I. 'I jest wanted to put a straight question to you about the law. Ef you knowed that a man was a-sufferin' a sight more on account of imprisonment than his sentence called fer, would that be right?'

"The governor studied a minute, then he kinder smiled at the superintendent, an' said:

"'That's a question fer the conscience. Ef a man is imprisoned fer a crime, an' jail life breaks his health down, an' is killin' 'im, then he ort to be pardoned out.'

"Then I had 'im right whar I wanted 'im, an' I up an' told 'im that I had a wife that was all the world to me, an' that durin' my term mischievous folks had lied ag'in me an' persuaded 'er to git a divorce, an' that a oily-tongued scamp was a-tryin' to marry 'er fer what little land she had. I reminded 'im that I was put in fer stealin', an' that I had worked four year o' my sentence, an' that it looked like a good deal o' punishment fer jest one spree, but that I wouldn't complain, bein' as I was cured of the liquor habit an' never intended to put the neck of a bottle to my mouth ag'in, but that I did kinder want to hurry back home 'fore too much damage was done.

"Well, I'm not lyin' when I say the governor's eyes was wet. All of a sudden he helt out his han' to me an' said:

"'I feel shore you never intended to steal that hoss, Wakeman.'

"'My wife never has believed it fer one instant,' said the superintendent. 'An' it takes a woman to ferret out guilt.'

"The governor tuk a sheet o' paper an' a pen an' said:

"'Wakeman, I'm a-goin' to pardon you, an' what's more, I inten' to send a statement to all the newspapers that I'm convinced you are a wronged man. I've done wuss than you was accused of in my young days, an' had the cheek to run fer the office of governor.'" Then the superintendent's wife come in an' stood up thar an' cried, an' axed to be allowed to unlock my manacles. She got out my old suit—this un heer—an' breshed it 'erself, an' kept on a-cryin' an' a-laughin' at the same time. The last words that she said to me was:

"'Wakeman, go home an' make up with yore wife; she won't turn ag'in you when you git back to the old place whar you an' her has lived together so long, an' whar yore child's grave is.'"

The speaker paused. For a man so coarse in appearance, his tone had grown remarkably tender. Lucinda was staring wide-eyed, with a fixed aspect of features, as if she were half frightened at the unwonted commotion within herself and the danger of its appearing on the surface. Finally she took refuge in the act of raising her apron to her eyes.

Mrs. Wakeman had excellent command over herself, drawing upon a vast fund of offended pride, the interest of which had compounded within the last four years. Just at this crisis the steady beat of a horse's hoofs broke into the hushed stillness of the room. Lucinda lowered her apron with wrists that seemed jointless bone, and stared at her sister.

"Are you a-goin' to let that feller stick his head inside that door to-night?"

The question was ill-timed, for it produced only a haughty, contemptuous shrug in the woman from whom it

rebounded. Wakeman did not take his eyes from the fire. They heard the gate-latch click, and then a heavy-booted and spurred foot fell on the entry step. The next instant the door was unceremoniously opened and a tall, lank mountaineer entered. He was at the fag-end of bachelorhood, had sharp, thin features, a small mustache dyed black, and reddish locks which were long and curling. He wore a heavy gray shawl over his shoulders. At first he did not see Wakeman, for his eyes had found employment in trying to discover why Marty had not risen as he came in. He glanced inquiringly at Lucinda, and then he recognized Richard.

"My Lord!" he muttered. "I had no idee you—I 'lowed you—"

"I didn't nuther," Richard sneered, the red firelight revealing strange flashes in his eyes.

For some instants the visitor stood on the hearth awkwardly disrobing his sinewy hands. Finally, unheeding Lucinda's admonitory glances toward the door, and the prayerful current from her eyes to his, he sat down near Marty. Ten minutes by the clock on the mantelpiece passed, in which time nothing was heard except the lowing of the cattle in the cow-lot and the sizzling of the coals when Richard spat. At last a portion of Wakeman's wandering self-confidence resettled upon him, and it became him well. He crossed his legs easily, dropped his quid of tobacco into the fire, and with a determined gaze began to prod his squirming rival.

"Lookye heer," he said, suddenly. "What did you come heer fur, anyhow?"

Goardley leaned forward and spat between his linked hands. He accomplished it with no slight effort, for the inactivity of his mouth, which was not chewing anything, had produced a hot dryness.

"I don't know," he managed to say. "I jest thought I'd come around."

"Ride?"

"Yes, hoss-back."

"Do you know whar you hitched?" Goardley hesitated and glanced helplessly at Marty, who, stern-faced, inflexible, was looking at the paper in her lap.

"I hitched under the cherry-tree out thar," he answered, with scarcely a touch of self-confidence in his tone.

"Well, go unhitch an' git astraddle of yore animal."

Goardley blinked, but did not rise.

"I didn't have the least idee you had got free, Dick, an'—"

"Well, you know it now, so git out to that hoss, ur by all that's holy—"

Mrs. Wakeman drew herself erect and crumpled the paper in her bony hand.

"This is my house," she said, "an' I ain't no married woman."

The white fixity of Goardley's countenance relaxed in a slow grin. An automatic affair it was, but as he took in the situation it was a recognition of the aid which had arrived at the last minute.

Wakeman stood up in his stockinged feet. He was still unruffled. "That's a fact; the place is her 'n," he admitted. "But I 'll tell you one article that ain't. It's that thar shootin'-iron on them deer-horns up thar, an' ef you don't git out 'n heer forthwith it 'll make the fust hole in meat that it's made in four yeer. Maybe me 'n Marty *ain't* man an' wife, but when we wuz married the preacher said, 'What the Lord has j'ined together let no man put asunder,' an' I ain't a-goin' to set still an' see a dirty, oily-tongued scamp like you try to undo the Lord's work. You know the way out, an' I was too late fer hog-killin'. I went into the penitentiary fer jest one spree, but I 'll go in fer manslaughter next time an' serve my term more cheerful—I mought say with Christian fortitude."

Cowardice produced the dominant expression in Goardley's face. He rose and backed from the room. The convict thumped across the resounding floor to the door and looked out after the departing man.

"Run like a skeered dog," he laughed, impulsively, as he turned back into the room. And then he waxed serious as he entered the atmosphere circling about Marty, who, with a stormy brow, sat immovable, her eyes downcast.

"I couldn't help it, to save me," he began, apologetically, to her profile. "But I reckon you an' me can manage to git along like we used to, an' I never would 'a' had any respect fer myself ef I had a-let that scamp set heer an' think he was a-courtin' of you right before my eyes."

Marty made no reply. A flush of suppressed emotion had risen in her cheeks and was taking on a deeper tinge. Richard grunted, stepped half-way back to his chimney-corner, and looked at her again. Seeing her eyes still averted, he grunted aloud, and went to his chair and sat down. Several minutes passed. Then Lucinda's prayerful eyes saw his hand, now quivering, reach behind him and draw his shoes in front of him. He put them on, but did not tie the strings.

"Somehow," he said, rising, "somehow, now that I come to think of it, I don't feel exactly right—exactly as I used to—an' I reckon, maybe, I ort to go some'rs else. I reckon, as you said jest now, that in the eyes o' some folks you ain't no married woman, an' I have been makin' purty free fer a jail-bird. Old Uncle Billy Hodkins won't set his dogs on me, an' I 'll go over thar tonight. After that the Lord only knows whar I will head fer. Uncle Billy never did believe I was guilty; he's writ me that a dozen times."

As he moved toward the door, in a clattering, slipshod fashion, Lucinda fixed Marty with a fierce stare.

"Are you a-goin' to set thar an' let Dick leave us fer good?" she hurled at her fiercely.

Marty made no reply save that which was embodied in a would-be defiant shrug, but the flow of blood had receded from her face.

"Ef you do, you ain't no Christian woman, that's all," was Lucinda's half-sobbing, half-shrieked accusation. "Yo' 're a purty thing to set up an' drink the sacrament with a heart in you that the Old Nick's fire couldn't melt."

The convict smiled back at his defender from the threshold; then they heard him cross the entry and step down on the gravel walk. He had passed the bars and was turning up the side of a little hill, on the brow of which a few gravestones shimmered in the moonlight, when he heard his name called from the entry. It was Lucinda's voice; she came to him, her hair flying in the wind.

"I 'lowed," he said, sheepishly, as she paused to catch her breath, "I jest 'lowed I'd go up thar an' see ef the water had been washin' out round Annie's grave. The last time I looked at it the foot-rock was a little sagged to one side."

"Come back in the house, Dick," cried the old maid. "Marty has completely broke down. She's cryin' like a baby. She has been actin' stubborn beca'se she was proud an' afeerd folks would think she was a fool about you. As soon as I told 'er you didn't say that about bein' willin' to go to jail to git out 'n reach o' 'er tongue, she axed me to run after you. She's consented to make it up ef we will send over fer the justice an' have the marryin' done to-night."

"Are you a-tellin' me the truth, Lucinda?"

"As the Lord is my witness."

He stared at the farmhouse a moment; then he said:

"Well, you an' her git everything ready, an' I 'll git Squire Dow an' the license. I 'll be back as soon as I kin."

A RURAL VISITOR

I

Lucinda Gibbs stood in the corner of the rail fence behind her cottage. Her face was damp with perspiration, and her heavy iron-gray hair had become disarranged and hung down her back below the skirt of her gingham sun-bonnet. She was raking the decayed leaves and dead weeds from her tender strawberry sprouts and mentally calculating on an abundant crop of the luscious fruit later in the spring.

"The trouble is I won't git to eat none of 'em," she sighed, as she looked up and addressed the woman on the other side of the fence.

"You don't mean that you are actually a-goin' shore 'nough, Mis' Gibbs?" exclaimed Betsey Lowry, as she leaned heavily on the top rail.

The widow reversed her rake and began to pull out the leaves which were packed between the metal teeth, her face reddening gradually, as if she were slightly irritated.

"I'd like to know ef thar's anything strange about my goin'," she said, coldly. "You said you'd feed my cat an' chickens an' attend to the cow fer what she'd give."

"Oh, it ain't because I have the least objection to keepin' my word about them things," said the old maid, quickly. "Goodness knows, me an' Joel needs the milk an' butter bad enough, an' it ain't one speck o' trouble jest to throw scraps to the cat, an' meal-dough to the chickens, but somehow it skeers me to think of a lone woman like you a-goin' all the way to New York by yorese'f." Mrs. Gibbs leaned the rake against the fence. The flush died out of her face, giving place to a sweet, wistful expression.

"Betsey," she said, tremulously, "tell me the truth. Do you think I ought to stay at home?"

The old maid turned to look through the orchard of leafless trees to her own house not far away. She had reddened slightly.

"Ef you push me fer a answer, Mis' Gibbs, I 'll have to tell you I don't think you ought to go away up thar all alone."

"You feel that-a-way, Betsey, because you hain't never had no child an' been separated from it like I have. When Amos married up thar an' went to housekeepin' it mighty nigh killed me. An' then I begun to live on the bare hope that he'd come South on a visit, but he hain't done it, an' thar ain't no prospect of the like. He says he cayn't git away from his business without dead loss, an' they want me to come. I've said many a time that I'd never leave my home, but, Betsey, it seems to me that I cayn't live another week without seein' how Amos looks. The Lord only knows how lonely I am mighty nigh all the time. Ef Susie had lived, she'd never 'a' left me, married or not, but it's different with a man. Sometimes I wonder why the Lord tuk 'em both frum me."

Betsey's kindly face softened. The intervening fence kept her from putting a consoling arm around her neighbor.

"I hain't been blind—nur Brother Joel hain't nuther—to yore lonely way o' livin'," she said, sympathetically. "Thar's hardly a night that me an' him don't look out 'fore we go to bed to see ef you are still a-sittin' up readin' by yore lamp. I kin always tell when you are a-thinkin' about Susie more 'n common; it's always when you git back from 'er grave that you set up latest. I believe in layin' on o' flowers an' plantin' shrubs that 'll keep sech a precious spot green, but when it seems to make a body brood-like, then I think it ought not to be indulged in to any great extent."

"It's raily a sort of comfort to go to the graveyard," faltered Mrs. Gibbs; and she raised her apron to her mouth.

"How long do you intend to stay with Amos an' his wife?" asked Betsey, to divert the widow's thoughts. She looked over her shoulder, and saw her brother Joel, a tall, strong-looking man about fifty-five years of age, approaching from the direction of his store, down at the cross-roads.

"Three months, I reckon," replied the widow. "I know in reason that I won't want to leave Amos a bit sooner. You see, it may be a long time before I lay eyes on 'im again. They say the baby is doin' fine, an' I want to see it an' nuss it."

"So you are raily goin'?" cried Joel Lowry, as he leaned on the fence beside his sister.

"Yes, I'm a-goin' to make the trip, Joel."

"It's a long ways," returned the storekeeper, "an' I don't see how you are a-goin' by yorese'f. Ef it was jest a few weeks later, now, I might pull up an' go along. I've always believed ef I went to New York to lay in stock that I could save enough on my goods to defray my expenses thar an' back."

The eyes of the widow flashed eagerly. She took a long, trembling breath.

"I wisht to goodness you would," she said. "I don't know one thing about trains, an' I am powerful afraid I 'll make a bobble of the whole thing from start to finish. Ef I was to git on the wrong car—but what is the use to cross a bridge 'fore you git to it? Mebby I 'll git thar all right."

"I hate mightily to have you try it," replied Joel, reflectively, as he stroked his short gray beard. "I jest wish you would think better of it. I'm a leetle grain older 'n you, Mis' Gibbs, an' I've been about some."

Mrs. Gibbs drew her rake after her as she turned toward her cottage. "I don't want to change my mind," she said, emphatically. "I'm bent on seein' Amos, an' I'm a-goin' to do it. I'd better go in now. I've got a lot o' packin' to do."

Joel went back toward his store across a field of decaying corn-stubble without looking round, and Betsey climbed over the fence and went into the cottage with her neighbor.

"I never hated to see a body go so in all my born days," she sighed.

Mrs. Gibbs opened the front door and preceded Betsey into the room on the right of the little hall.

"You mustn't mind how things looks in heer," she apologized. "I left my trunk open right spank in the middle of the room, so whenever I see a thing that ought to go in I kin jest fling it at the trunk an' put it away when I have time."

Betsey stood over the little hair trunk and looked down dolefully.

"What on earth is that I smell?" she asked. "Sassafras, as I'm alive!"

"Yes, I dug it yesterday. Amos likes sassafras-root tea; he used to drink a power of it to thin his blood in the spring; he writ that he hain't had a taste of it sence he left heer. Shorely, it's come to a purty pass if a body cayn't get sech as that in a big city like New York."

"Seems to me," remarked the old maid, "that you've got a sight more truck here than you 'll have any need fer. What's this greasy mess wrapped up?"

"That's mutton suet," was the enthusiastic reply. "It's the whitest cake I ever laid eyes on. They 'll need it fer chapped hands an' lips. Amos says it's a sight colder up thar. That's ginger-cake in that paper box, an' I've made him an' Sally some wool socks an' stockin's."

"Are you shore you are a-goin' to be away three months?" asked Betsey, with a sigh.

"Mebby longer than that," answered the old woman. "I feel like I never will want to leave Amos again, but I couldn't be away from my home always, you know. La, it 'll seem powerful strange to wake up an' not look out o' that thar window towards the mountain."

"An' not to heer the hens a-cacklin', an' the cow an' calf a-bellowin'," added Betsey. Then she put her handkerchief to her eyes and plunged hastily from the room. Mrs. Gibbs moved quickly to the window and looked out. She saw Betsey climb over the fence and go on through the orchard, her head hanging down.

II

The evening before the day appointed for Mrs. Gibbs's departure, Betsey came in out of breath.

"What do you reckon?" she asked, as she stood over the hair trunk, which, roped and labeled, stood on end near the widow's bed. "What you reckon? Joel has made up his mind to go."

The widow was putting a brightly polished tin coffee-pot into an old-fashioned carpetbag which stood on the white counterpane of her bed. She stood erect, her hands on her hips.

"Looky' heer, Betsey," she exclaimed, excitedly, "don't you joke with me! I've jest worried over this undertakin' till I've lost every speck of appetite fer my victuals. I tell you I ain't in no frame o' mind fer any light talk on the subject."

"He's a-goin', I tell you!" declared the old maid. "I never dreamt he was in earnest the other day when he fust mentioned it, but all last night he liter'ly rolled an' tumbled an' couldn't git a wink o' sleep fer worrryin' over you an' yore wild-cat project. This mornin' the fust thing he said was that he'd made up his mind to go ef he could git a round-trip ticket thar an' back. He told me not to say anything to you tell he had sent to town. Jest a minute ago Jeff Woods got back with the ticket. Joel seems mightily tickled over goin'."

Mrs. Gibbs sat down. A serious expression had come over her face.

"Ef I'd 'a' knowed he raily meant to go I'd 'a' stopped 'im," she said. "I don't want to be a bother an' a burden to my neighbors. Betsey, I'm a-gittin' to be a lots o' trouble to other folks."

"Pshaw!" cried Betsey. "Ef Joel hadn't 'a' wanted to go he'd not 'a' bought the ticket. La me, now I 'll have to go git *him* ready."

The next morning, arrayed in his best suit of clothes, new high top-boots, and a venerable silk hat, Joel drove to the widow's cottage in his spring wagon. While she was locking up the doors he and a negro farmhand placed the widow's trunk into the back part of the wagon. The neighbors from the farmhouses down the red clay road and across the gray fields and meadows gathered at the gate. When Mrs. Gibbs emerged, their mental comment was that she looked ten years younger than before deciding on the journey.

"All that flushed face an' shiny eyes is 'ca'se she's goin' to Amos," remarked a woman who held a little bare-footed boy by the hand. The woman addressed was an unmarried woman old enough to be a grandmother. She looked at the widow's beaming visage, gave her head a significant toss, and said, contemptuously: "I say! That woman ain't a-thinkin' no more 'bout Amos 'an I am at this minute. It looks to me like some people can't see a inch before their faces. My Lor', you make me laugh, Mis' Ruggles."

Arriving at the station, Joel turned the widow's trunk over to the baggage-master, and with her carpet-bag

and his own clutched in one hand, he stood on the platform pulling his beard nervously.

"We 'll have to spend one night on the train," he said. "I never thought to mention it, but they tell me that a body kin, by payin' a fraction more, git a place to lie down and stretch out, an' snooze a bit."

The widow seemed to have made up her mind that she would not show crude astonishment at anything new to her experience, but her curiosity finally caused her to admit that she had never heard of such an arrangement. So, to the best of his ability, the storekeeper entered into a description of a sleeping-car, lowering the carpet-bags to the platform, and making signs and drawing imaginary lines with his hands.

"Men an' women in the same car with jest curtains stretched betwixt?" she cried. "No, thank you! I won't make a fool o' myse'f if other women does. I kin set up fer one night easy enough, I reckon. I've done the like many a time with the sick an' the dead without feeling the wuss fer it."

"I hardly 'lowed it would suit," stammered Joel, "but I thought thar would be no harm in givin' you yore choice."

"Not the least in the world, Joel;" and then she paled, caught her breath, and grabbed her carpet-bag, for the people on the platform were hurrying about; the train was coming.

III

In the train they found a seat together, and when the locomotive shrieked and they dashed off through deep cuts and over high trestles, Mrs. Gibbs was unable to control her excitement. He saw that she was holding tightly to the arm of the seat.

"I have never been on sech a fast one before," she said, tremulously.

"She don't whiz nigh like some I've rid on out West," replied Joel, with an air of conscious importance, even guardianship.

A few minutes later she grew calmer. Happening to catch her eye, he saw that her mind was far away.

"I was jest a-thinkin' how awful it is to be leavin' Susie's grave so fur behind," she said. "I'm goin' to Amos, but my other child is back thar."

"I was thinkin' about Rachel's grave jest a minute ago," he returned. "You called 'er to my mind jest now. Somehow you have the same sort of a look about the eyes."

"Shucks! that ain't so, I know!"

"It's true as I live!"

"Well, she was a good woman."

"The best I ever run across, an' knowed rail well."

The sun, seen first on one side of the car and then on the other, went down. The train porter laid a plank across the ends of the seats and climbed up on it and lighted the lamps overhead. This made the space outside look like a black curtain softly flapping against the car. The widow opened her carpet-bag and took out something wrapped in a napkin.

"Betsey said you loved fried chicken an' biscuits," she said.

"It's my favorite dish," he replied, stiltedly, readily cloaking himself in his best table manners.

"I'm dyin' fer a cup o' coffee," she said. "This dry food will clog in my throat without some 'n' to wash it down. I put in a package o' ground coffee an' my littlest coffee-pot, thinkin' thar might be some way to boil water, but I don't see no chance. You say we don't stop long enough to git supper?"

"That's what the conductor said."

But at the next station, where they stopped for only a minute, he took the coffee-pot and hurried out. The train started on, and she was greatly alarmed, thinking that he was left, but he had entered the rear door and now approached with the coffee-pot steaming at the spout.

"Now, ef you've jest got a cup about you we 'll be all hunkydory," he laughed.

Her face lighted up with combined pleasure and relief. "Well, I certainly 'lowed you was left back thar," she laughed. "An' how on earth did you git the coffee?"

"They sell it by the quart on the platform," he replied. "I drapped onto that trick once when I was on my way to Californy."

She got out a tin cup and filled it with the coffee. "I never was so downright grateful fer a thing in my life," she remarked. "Now, help yorese'f, an' I 'll sip some along with my chicken an' bread."

"I won't tech it tell you've had all you feel like takin'," said he, gallantly.

The coffee and the lunch seemed to stimulate them both, for they sat and chatted and laughed together till past eleven o'clock. Then he noticed that she was growing sleepy, so he took the vacant seat behind her.

"It 'll give you more room," he said.

By and by he saw her head fall forward. She was asleep. He rolled up his overcoat in the shape of a pillow and placed it on the end of the seat, and touching her gently, he told her to lie down and rest her head on the coat. She obeyed, with a drowsy smile of gratitude. He watched her all through the night. She slept soundly, like a tired child.

"I never seed a body look so much like Rachel in all my life," he said several times to himself. "Pore woman! I'm that glad I come with 'er! She's had 'er grief, an' I've had mine."

The stopping of the train a little after the break of day roused her. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. He did not wait to speak to her, but taking the coffee-pot, he ran out at the door behind her, so that her first glimpse of him was when he appeared before her with more hot coffee.

"You must take a cup to start you out fer the day," he smiled.

"You do beat the world, Joel!" she laughed. "I couldn't 'a' done without you."

She made room for him beside her, and they ate breakfast together. The rest of the journey they sat watching the changing landscape, remarking upon the different methods of tilling the soil, and talking of home and their neighbors.

"It's strange how people can live as nigh to one another as me an' you have an' not git better acquainted," he said. "I declare, you ain't a bit like I thought you was."

"I never raily knowed you, nuther, Joel," she laughed. "You was always sech a busy, say-nothin' sort of a man."

"An' right now you are off to stay a long time, and I 'll have to go back to the backwoods. I wonder ef—"

He went no farther, and she did not help him out. She had suddenly grown reticent, and seemed occupied with the landscape, which was rushing southward like a swollen stream of level farming lands, in which floated houses, fences, twisting trees, and waltzing men and horses.

"I reckon you 'll stay up thar all the spring an' summer," he said at last.

"I wouldn't like to leave Amos right away," she made answer. "You see, I hain't seed the boy fer a long time, an' I hain't thought o' nothin' but him fer many a day."

IV

They arrived in New York at six o'clock that evening. Amos met them at the train. They hardly recognized him in his silk hat, long overcoat, stylish necktie, and kid gloves. Joel did not approve of what he considered a rather dudish dress, but he overlooked that when he saw how happy the young man was at the sight of his mother.

"I wish I could invite you to my house, Mr. Lowry," said Amos, cordially, "but the truth is, we have only a small flat, and there is hardly room for you."

"Oh, never mind me," said Joel. "I'm a-goin' to a tavern nigh whar I do my tradin'. I 'll tell you good day now, but I 'll run in an' see ef Mis' Gibbs has any word to send back when I start home."

He did not see her again for a week. He had concluded his purchases, and was ready to return South, when he decided to look her up. Finding her was more difficult than he had imagined. After several hours' search on the east side of the city, she being on the west, he finally reached the big building which contained Amos's flat. Here he became involved in another mystery, for he found the front door, a glistening plate-glass affair, firmly locked, and no bell in sight. He stood in the tiled vestibule for several minutes deliberating on what was best to do. Fortunately, he saw a policeman passing, and hailed him.

"I've got a friend a-livin' somewhar in this shebang," he said; "but you may hang me ef I know how to git at 'im."

"Is his name on one of the letter-boxes?" asked the policeman.

"What letter-boxes?" questioned Joel. "I hain't seed no names."

With an amused aspect of countenance the policeman mounted the steps and went into the vestibule. Here he opened some wooden doors in the wall, disclosing to view a long row of letter-boxes with the cards of their owners beneath them.

"Who's your friend?" he asked, kindly.

"Amos Gibbs. I've knowed 'im ever sence he was a little—"

"There," interrupted the policeman. "I pushed the button. That rang a bell inside, and they will open the door by electricity if anybody is at home. When you hear the latch clicking, push the door open and go in."

He disappeared down the street, and then Joel was roused from apathetic helplessness by a rapid clicking in the lock. He opened the door and went in. It was fortunate that Amos lived on the first floor, or even then Joel would not have known how to proceed farther. As it was, another door at the end of the heavily carpeted hall opened and a servant girl in white cap and apron put out her head.

"Yes," she said, in answer to his inquiry. Mrs. Gibbs was at home. He followed her into a little parlor facing the street, with a single window. It was furnished more neatly than any room Joel had ever been in. The polished hardwood floor was covered with rugs of various kinds and sizes, and the room contained a bookcase, an upright piano, pictures, and pieces of bric-a-brac such as the store-keeper had never seen.

Mrs. Gibbs entered from the dining-room in the rear. Her hair was done up in a new style, which made her head appear larger than usual, and she wore a shining black silk gown that added height, dignity, and youth to her general aspect. She gave him her hand, and her whole attire rustled as she sat down.

"Well, you got heer at last," she said. "I 'lowed you never would come. I've been lookin' fer you every day. I hain't hardly done anything else sence I got heer."

Joel stared, flushed, and tensely folded his hands anew. It seemed to him that he would not have suffered such a dire lack of words if she had not been looking so fine. It was as if his stalwart masculinity were a glaring misfit among the dainty gewgaws about him. He was mortally afraid the slender gilded chair he was sitting on would break under his two hundred weight. He had never imagined that dress could make such a change in the appearance of any one. The only features about her which seemed natural were her voice and a triangular bit of her wrinkled face which showed through her low-parted hair.

"I come as soon as I got through," he heard himself say; and then he cleared his throat from a great depth as an apology for the frailty of his tone.

"I kin see you think I'm a sight to behold," she laughed, merrily. "Sally fixed me up this-a-way: She fluted my hair with a hot curlin' fork, an' combed it like the New York women's. She hain't done one thing sence I come but haul out dresses an' fixin's that used to belong to 'er dead mother, an' try 'em on me, an' they've kept me on the move tell I'd give a sight fer jest one little nap whar thar wasn't so much clatter. Last night they give me a old woman's party. Joel, jest think of a person o' my age a-settin' up tell 'leven o'clock talkin' to a gang o' gray-haired women like a passel o' hens jest off the'r nests! An' jest when I 'lowed they was all goin' home, Sally passed around things to eat an' drink."

"They wanted to make you have a good time," ventured the storekeeper.

The widow lowered her voice, and threw a furtive glance toward the dining-room.

"But it ain't the way to make a woman o' my raisin' enjoy a visit," she said, cautiously. "I don't dare to say a word, fer Amos seems tickled to death over all that Sally gits up; but, Joel, I'm mighty nigh dead. Like a born idiot, I told 'em in my last letter that I'd stay three months, an' now, as the Lord is my help an' stay, I don't believe I can make out another week."

Her voice faltered. Moisture glistened in her eyes.

"I hope it ain't as bad as that," remarked Joel, in a tone of vast sympathy.

"It's jest awful," whimpered the widow. "I make so many fool blunders. 'Tother day they wanted me to go to Brooklyn with 'em, an' I jest lied out o' goin'; an' as they wanted to take the hired gal along to watch the baby, I agreed to stay at home an' 'tend to the house. My Lord, Joel, ef you've never been alone in one o' these contraptions, don't you ever try it. The hired gal showed me all the different arrangements, an' what I was to do. When the bell in the back rings you must press the button in the kitchen, an' when the bell in the front rings, it's somebody at the side door in the hall. An' when you hear a shrill whistle out 'n the talkin'-tube in the kitchen, you have to open the end an' blow an' then holler through an' ax what's wanted. Then ef it's groceries, ur milk, ur peddlers' stuff, ur what not, you have to go to the dumb-waiter that fetches things up through a hole in the wall like a well-bucket an' take the things off. I had a lots o' trouble. I was busy all the while the family was off at that dumb-waiter. Like a born fool, I didn't know it tuk stuff to other folks, too, an' I thought it would save time to set at the dumb-waiter with the door open, an' take off the things without waitin' fer 'em to whistle. You never seed the like in all yore life! Before I'd been thar a hour, the kitchen was liter'ly filled with all manner o' stuff, beer, bad-smellin' cheese, and oodlin's an' oodlin's o' milk in bottles. After a while I heerd a fearful racket inside the dumb-waiter. People all the way to the top was a-yellin' out that somebody had stole the'r things, and the landlord was a-bouncin' about like a rubber ball, an' talkin' of callin' in the police. Finally he come in an' axed me about it. He fixed it all right fer me, and delivered the goods to their rightful owners, an' promised not to tell Amos nur Sally what I'd done."

"You did sorter have a time of it," said Joel. "I'm no hand myse'f to understand new fixin's. It's been chilly the last day or so, an' when I went to my room in the tavern t'other night I noticed that it was powerful warm after I went to bed. I got up an' struck a light, but thar wasn't a sign of a fireplace in the room, an' it was so hot I 'lowed thar might be a conflagration a-smolderin' som 'ers. So I put on my things an' went down to the office. They explained to me that the heat comes from a furnace below, an' runs into the rooms through holes in the floor. They come up an' shet mine off so as I could sleep."

"It's a heap nicer our way," said the widow, without a smile at his misadventure. "I tell you, Joel, I jest can't stand it. I want to go back. When are you a-goin'?"

"In the mornin'."

She fumbled in the pocket of her skirt and took out her handkerchief, placing it to her eyes.

"Oh, I'm heartily sick of it all!" she whimpered. "You are the fust rail natural thing I've laid eyes on sence I come. Sally is mighty cleanly, an' I'd ax you to clean the mud off 'n yore feet, but it's the fust muddy feet I've seen in so long I want to look at 'em."

Joel glanced down at his boots and flushed. "I never noticed 'em," he stammered. "I had sech a time a-gittin' in this shebang."

"Lord, it don't matter, Joel! I'm jest a-thinkin' about you a-goin' home. I simply cayn't stand it; an' yet Amos an' Sally would feel bad ef I went so soon. Amos was sayin' last night that they would make me have sech a good time that I'd never want to leave 'em; but la me! this is the fust rail work I've done in many a day.

"Well, I must go, I reckon," Joel said, rising awkwardly and taking his hat from the floor by his chair. "I'm sorry, too, to go back an' leave you feelin' so miserable. I wish I could do some 'n' to comfort you, but I can't, I reckon. Good-bye—take keer of yorese'f."

V

When he arrived home two days later, Betsey found him, as she thought, peculiarly reticent about his trip, and all her efforts to get him to speak of how Mrs. Gibbs was pleased were fruitless. One afternoon two weeks after his return she ran into his store, where he was busy weighing smoked bacon which he was purchasing from a customer.

"What you reckon, Joel?" she asked. "What you reckon has happened?"

"I don't know," he said, looking up from the paper on which he was figuring.

"Mis' Gibbs's got back."

"You cayn't mean it, sister!"

Betsey leaned against the counter, and the hardware in the showcase rattled. Joel's face had paled. He called his clerk to him, and told him to settle with the customer, and walked to the door with Betsey.

"Yes," she said. "She got home in Jeff Woods's hack about a hour ago. All the neighbors is over there now. She acts so quar! She hain't seemed to keer a speck about the cow, nur the cat, nur the chickens. As soon as she got 'er things off, she jest sot down an' drooped. She don't look well. The general opinion is that Amos an' his wife have sent 'er home, fer she won't talk about them. She acts mighty funny. Jest as I started out I happened to remark that you'd be astonished to heer she was back, an' I never seed sech a quar look in a body's face. But," she concluded after a pause, "they couldn't 'a' treated 'er so awful bad, fer she's got dead loads o' finery."

That night Joel closed up his store earlier than usual, and when he came into the sitting-room he brought an armful of big logs and put them in the chimney. Then before a roaring fire he sat reflectively, without reading the paper he had brought with him, as was his wont. Betsey sat in the chimney-corner knitting, and looking first at him and then peering through the window toward Mrs. Gibbs's cottage.

"Brother Joel," she said, suddenly. "You are a-actin' quar, too. You must know some 'n' about what happened to Mis' Gibbs, ur why don't you go over thar an' see 'er like the rest o' the neighbors? They've all been but you. She 'll think strange of it."

"I don't see what good I could do," he answered; and he began to punch the fire, causing a stream of sparks to mount upward with a fusillade of tiny explosions.

Betsey knitted silently for a few minutes longer, then she rose and stood at the window.

"She's got 'er lamp on the table an' a paper in 'er lap, but she hain't a-readin' of it," said Betsey. "It looks jest like she's a-goin' to commence 'er lonely broodin' life over ag'in. Some 'n' seems wrong with 'er, as good an' sweet as she is. She kinder fancied she'd be happy with Amos, an' mebby when she got 'im with 'er she begun to pine fer her ole home. Now she's back, an' I reckon she hardly knows what she does want. I say, perhaps that may be her fix."

"Mebby it is," admitted the storekeeper, briefly.

Betsey turned on him quickly. There was a peculiar aggressive sparkle in her eyes, a set look of determination on her face.

"Brother Joel," she said, "you've jest got to have a grain of common sense. You've got to go over thar this minute an' see 'er. Ef you don't she ain't a-goin' to sleep a wink. I know women, an' I've knowed Mis' Gibbs a long time."

Joel drew his feet from the fire and wedged his heels under the rung of his chair. The muscles of his face were twitching. There was no mistaking Betsey's tone. She sat down near him and laid her thin, tremulous hand on his knee.

"Do as I tell you, brother. Don't be back'ard. You can't hide nothin'."

Joel rose. He tried to smile indifferently as he went to a little mirror on the wall and brushed his hair and beard.

"You must wish me good luck, then, sister," he said, huskily. "I ain't no ways shore what she will do about me."

After he had gone out Betsey took up an album and opened it at a collection of tintype pictures. On one of these her eyes rested long and mistily. Then she kissed it, wiped her eyes, and went to bed. Two hours later she heard the front door close and her brother creeping to his room.

"Oh, Joel!" she called out. "Come to my door a minute."

His boots made a loud clatter in the dead stillness of the house, as he approached.

"Was it all right, brother?"

"You bet it was, Betsey!" He stood in the doorway. The darkness hid his face, but there was a note of boundless joy in his tone.

"I thought it would be, but I don't yet understand why she come back so quick."

"She don't like city folks' ways," answered the storekeeper; "an' then—"

"An' then what?" broke in Betsey, impatiently.

"Well, you see, the—the notion seemed to strike both of us when we was travelin' together, an'—an' she admitted that she was a leetle grain afeered that ef we didn't see one another ag'in fer three months that the notion might wear off. Raily, she's tickled to death, fur now she says she kin give Amos an' Sally a sensible reason fer wantin' to git back home."

Betsey was silent so long that Joel began to wonder if she had fallen asleep. Finally she said:

"Go to bed now, Joel. She's the very woman fer you. I hain't never had no rail happiness in my life sence Jim died, but I want them I love to git all they kin."

JIM TRUNDLE'S CRISIS

They were expecting Jim Trundle at the Cross-Roads that spring morning. His coming had been looked for even more anxiously than that of Sid Wombley, the wag of the "Cove." Sid himself, when he dragged his long legs into the store, forgot to think of anything amusing to say as he looked the crowd over to see if Jim had preceded him.

It was on the end of his tongue to ask if Trundle had come and gone, but for once he said nothing. He seated himself on the head of a soda-keg and began to whittle the edge of the counter. Sid Wombley, quiet, suited the humor of the group better on this occasion than the same voluble individual in his natural element, so no one spoke to him, and all continued to watch the road leading to Trundle's cabin.

The silence and the delay were too much for the patience of Wade Sims, a bold, dashing young man in tight-fitting trousers, sharp-heeled boots, and a sombrero like an unroped tent. He was, as he often expressed it, "afraid o' nothin' under a hide," and if "the boys" had seen fit to give Jim Trundle notification, in the shape of a letter he would shortly receive, that he was a disgrace to the community, he saw no reason for so much secrecy. He wasn't afraid of the verdict of any jury that could be impaneled in the three counties over which he openly traded horses and secretly disposed of illicit whisky.

"I reckon thar's no doubt about the letter bein' ready fer 'im," he remarked to Alf Carden, who stood in the little pigeon-holed pen of upright palings which was known as "the postoffice."

"I reckon not," was the reply, "when it's about the only letter I got on hand."

"I could make a mighty good guess who drapped it," said Sims, with a grin at a one-armed man who had once held the position of book-keeper at a cotton-gin, and who wrote letters and legal documents for half the illiterate community, "but I wouldn't give 'im away if I was under oath."

"I have an idee who's goin' to drap it," spoke up Sid Wombley from his soda-keg, and his sudden return to his natural condition evoked the first laugh of the morning. At that moment a little boy, the son of the storekeeper, who had been playing on the porch, came in quickly. His words and manner showed that he knew who was in request, if his intellect could not grasp the reason for it.

"Mr. Trundle is comin' acrost the cotton-patch behind the store," he announced, out of breath. Then silence fell on the group, a silence so complete that Jim Trundle's strides over the plowed ground outside were distinctly heard. The next moment Trundle had crawled over the low rail fence at the side of the store, and with clattering, untied brogans was coming up the steps.

The doorway, as his tall, lank figure passed through it, framed a perfect picture of human poverty. His shirt, deeply dyed with the red of the soil, was full of slits and patches worn threadbare. The hems of his trousers had worn away, revealing triangular glimpses of his ankles, and a frayed piece of a suspender hung from a stout peg in the waistband behind.

He greeted no one as he entered. A silent tongue was one of Jim Trundle's peculiarities. Few people had ever gotten a dozen consecutive words out of him. He strode to the end of the store, thrust his hand into an open cracker-box, bit into a large square cracker, and sent his eyes foraging along both counters for something to eat with it—cheese, butter, a bit of honey, or a pinch of dried beef. He was violating no rule of country store etiquette, for Alf Carden's customers all understood that those things left on the counters were to be partaken of in moderation. I think the habitués of the place had gradually introduced this custom themselves years before, when Carden was so anxious to draw people from the store across the river that he would willingly have given a customer bed and board for an indefinite time if by so doing he could have deprived his rival of the profit on a bag of salt.

Jim Trundle wasn't going to ask if there was any mail for him, that was plain to the curious onlookers; and their glances began to play back and forth between Carden and the cracker consumer, making demands on the former and condemning the latter for not more readily walking into the trap set for him.

Wade Sims winked when he caught the storekeeper's eye, and nodded toward the gaunt robber, who had squatted at the faucet of a syrup-barrel and was cautiously trailing a golden stream over an immaculate cracker.

"So you didn't git no letter fer me, Alf," said Sims, significantly. "Seems like no mail don't come this way here lately hardly at all. I hope all the rest 'll have their ride fer nothin' too."

Alf Carden understood, having given Sims a letter half an hour before, and he smiled. "No," he said, "thar hain't nothin' fer any of you except Jim Trundle; has he come along yet?"

Jim stood up quickly, and laid his besmeared cracker on the barrel. "Me?" he ejaculated, and a white puff shot from his crunching jaws; "I—I reckon yo 're mistaken."

"I reckon I kin read," replied Carden, still acting his part nonchalantly, and glancing askance at Sims to see how that individual was taking it. "It is jest Jim Trundle in plain ABC letters. It is either from somebody that cayn't write shore 'nough writin' ur is tryin' to disguise his handwrite."

Carden threw the letter on the counter. It lay there fully a minute, while Jim Trundle wiped his hands on his trousers, gulped down a mouthful of cracker, and stared helplessly round at the upturned faces. Then he reached for the letter, and with trembling fingers tore it open and read as follows:

"Jim Trundle. This is to give you due notice. We the reglar organized band of Regulators of this settlement hav set on yore case an decided what we are goin to do about it. Time and agin good citizens have advised you to change yore way of livin', but you jest went along as before, in the same old rut.

"You are no earthly account, an no amount of talkin seems to do you any good. Yore childern are in tatters an without food, an you jest wont do nothin fer them. This might hav gone on longer without our action, but last Wednesday you let yore sick wife go to the field in the hot brilin sun, an she was seed by a responsible citizen in a faintin condition, while you was on the creek banks a fishin in the shade.

"To night exactly at eight oclock we are comin after you in full force to give you a sound lickin. Yore wife an childern would be better off without you, and we advise you to leave the country before that time. If we find you at home at eight oclock you may count on a sore back.

"Yours truly, the secretary."

The spectators observed that Jim Trundle had read every word of the communication. His eyes, in their sunken sockets, darted strange, hunted glances from face to face, as if seeking sympathy; then, as if realizing the futility of the hope, he looked down at the floor. He leaned back against the counter so heavily that Carden's thread-case rattled its contents and the beam of the scales wildly swung back and forth.

The group furtively feasted themselves on his visible agony, but they got nothing more, for Jim Trundle did not intend to talk. Talking was not in his line. He knew that at eight o'clock that night he was going to be punished in a way that would be remembered against the third and fourth generation of his descendants—that is, if he did not desert his family and leave the country.

"Kin I do anything fer you in the provision line, Jim?" asked Carden, for the entertainment of his customers. "I've got some fresh bulk pork. Seems to me you hain't had none lately."

Trundle refused to answer. He only stared out into the golden sunshine that lay on the road to his home. He saw through Carden's remarks, and his heart felt heavier under the thought that before him were some of the faces which would be masked later on. He wondered if those men knew that a lazy, worthless vagabond could feel disgrace as keenly as they could.

There was nothing left for him to do except to go home. He wanted to turn his mind-pictures of his wife and children into helpful realities. Somehow they had always comforted him in trouble. Oh, God! if only he could

have foreseen the approach of this calamity! As he moved out of the store he felt vaguely as if his arms, legs, and body had nothing to do with his real, horrible self except to hinder it, to detain it near its spot of torture.

Outside he drew a long, deep, trembling breath. His breast rose and expanded under his ragged shirt and then sank like a collapsed balloon, and lay still while he thought of himself. He was a dead man alive, a moving, breathing horror in the sight of mankind.

He was sure that it was his strange nature that had brought him to it. Nature had, indeed, made him happy in rags, oblivious to material things. Had he been endowed with education he might have become a poet. He saw strange, transcendent possibilities in the blue skies; in the green growing things; in the dun heights of the mountains; in the depths of his children's eyes; in the patient face of his wife.

What an awakening! A shudder ran over him. He felt the lash; he heard Wade Sim's voice of command; then his lower lip began to quiver, and something rising within him forced tears into his eyes. He had begun to pity himself. If only those men really understood him they would pardon his shortcomings. No human being could knowingly lash a man feeling as he felt.

The road homeward led him into the depths of a wood where mighty trees arched overhead and obscured the sky. He envied a squirrel bounding unhindered to its sylvan home. Nature seemed to hold out her vast green arms to him; he wanted to sink into them and sob away the awful load that lay upon him. In the deepest part of the wood, where tall, rugged cliffs bordered the road, there was a spring. He paused, looked round him, and shuddered anew, for something told him it was at this secluded spot that he would receive his castigation.

He passed on. The trees grew less dense along the way, and then on a rise ahead of him he saw his cabin, a low, weather-beaten structure that melted into the brown plowed fields about it. He was anxious to see his wife. Could it be true that she had almost fainted while at work? If so, why had she not mentioned it to him? He had noted nothing unusual in her conduct of late; but how could he? She was as uncommunicative as he, and they seldom talked to each other.

As he passed the pig-sty in the fence-corner even the sight of the grunting inmate seemed to remind him that he was going to be whipped by his neighbors. He shuddered and felt his blood grow cold. He shuddered with the same thought again, as if he were encountering it for the first time, when he dragged open the sagging gate and looked about the bare yard. In one corner of it he had once started to grow some flowers, but his neighbors had laughed at his attempt so much that he allowed the bulbs to die and be uprooted by his chickens. His mind now reverted to that period, and he decided it was this and kindred impulses that had always kept him from being a good husband, father, and citizen like his sturdy, more practical neighbors.

Well, to-morrow he was going to turn over a new leaf—that is, if—but he could not look beyond the torture set for eight o'clock. He had imagination, but it could picture nothing but every possible detail of his approaching degradation—the secluded spot, the masked circle of men, a muffled talk by Wade Sims, the baring of his back,—the lash!

His wife was in the cabin. She held a wooden bowl in her lap and was shelling peas. As he towered up in front of her in the low-roofed room, for the first time in his life he noticed that she looked pale and thin, and as he continued to study the evidences against him in growing bewilderment he felt that even God had deserted him.

She looked up.

"What's the matter?" she asked, in slow surprise.

"Nothin'." But he continued to stare. How thin her hair seemed since she had recovered from the fever! Perhaps if he had insisted on having a doctor something might have been done for her then that was neglected. Poor Martha! how he had made her suffer! The whipping would not be so hard to bear now, except that—if she were to know—if she were to witness it. Ah, he had not thought of that! Yes, God had left him wholly at the mercy of Wade Sims and the rest of his neighbors.

Her eyes held a look of deep concern.

"What are you lookin' at me that-a-way fer?" she asked.

He made no answer, but turned to a stool in the chimney-corner and sat down. She must not suspect what was going to happen. He would not escape it by deserting her, for he was going to be a better man, beginning with the next day. He would stay with her and protect her, but she must never hear of the whipping. He understood her proud spirit well enough to know that she could never get over such a disgrace.

Then out of the black flood of his despair a plan rose and floated into possibility before his mind's eye. Sims' men would gather at the store, and just before the appointed hour would march along the road he had just traversed. He would make some excuse to his wife for being obliged to absent himself for a little while and go to meet them. If he told them he had voluntarily come to be whipped, they might agree to keep the fact from his wife. Yes, God would not let them refuse that, for even Wade Sims would not want to pain an unoffending woman when he was told how Martha would take it. Then a sob broke from him, and he realized that his head had fallen between his knees, that tears were dripping from his eyes to his hands, and, moreover, that Martha was looking at him as she had never looked before. She wanted to ask him what was the matter, but she could not have done it to save her life.

"Are you ready fer dinner?" she asked, still with that look in her eyes.

"Yes, I reckon, ef—ef you are. Whar's the children?"

"Behind the house, hoein' the young corn. Do you want 'em?"

"No; jest thought I'd ask."

She emptied the peas from her apron into the bowl, and put it on a shelf. Then she walked across the swaying puncheon floor to a little cupboard, and began to busy her hands with some dishes, keeping furtive eyes the while on him. He evidently thought himself unobserved, for he allowed his head to fall dejectedly again, and stared fixedly at the hearth. Surely, thought Mrs. Trundle, Jim had never acted so peculiarly before. Wiping a plate with a dishcloth, she moved across the floor till she stood in front of him. He looked up.

The gleaming orbs in their deep hollows frightened the woman into speech she might not have indulged in.

"Look y' heer, Jim, has anythin' gone wrong?"

"No." He drew himself up, and rubbed his eyes. "Did you say dinner was ready?"

"You know the table hain't set. Look y' heer, are you sick, Jim Trundle?"

"No." His eyes rested on her. There was much that he wanted to ask her, if only he could have found the words. She turned away unsatisfied. The next moment she fanned him with the cloth she was spreading for the meal, then she put a plate of fried bacon and a pan of corn bread on the table, went to the back door, and called the children from their work.

He studied them one by one with fresh horror as they filed in, wondering what this one or that one would think if they should learn that their father had been whipped for neglecting them and their mother. At the table, however, he studied his wife chiefly. The children were young and healthy, and devoured their food like famished animals, but she was only making feeble pretenses with the piece of bread she was daintily breaking and dipping into bacon-grease. The "Regulators," as they called themselves, were right; he had allowed a sick wife to go into the hot sun to do work he ought to have done. He thought now of the lash again, but not with a shudder. It could never pain him more than the agony at his heart.

He spent that long afternoon under an apple-tree behind the cabin, mending a harrow that was broken, stealing glances at his wife, longing to open his heart to her, watching the progress of the sun in its slow descent to the mountain-top, and feeling the threatening chill of the lengthening shadows. All nature seemed mutely to announce the coming horror. At sundown he went to the shelf in the entry, filled a tin pan with fresh spring-water, and washed his face and hands. Then he went in to supper, but he did not eat heartily.

"Don't you feel no better, Jim?" asked his wife, her manner softened by a vague uneasiness his actions had roused. A suggestion of his mute suppressed agony seemed to have reached her and drawn her nearer to him.

"No, I hain't sick; I 'll be all right in the mornin'."

Through the open door he watched the darkness thicken and heard the insects of the night begin to chirp and shrill. He had the curse of introspective analysis, and resolved that they were happy. He used to whistle and sing himself when his youth rendered it excusable. How very long ago that seemed!

All at once he rose, pretended to yawn, and said something to his wife about going over to Rawlston's a little while; he would be back by bedtime. She wondered in silence, and after he had passed through the gate she tiptoed to the door and looked after him uneasily.

The landscape darkened as he went along the road toward Carden's store. It was quite dark in the wooded vale. When he reached the spring he stopped to await the coming of Wade Sims and his followers. He wondered if the spot was far enough from the cabin to prevent Martha from hearing the blows that were to fall. He hoped it was, and, more than anything else, that "the regulators" would not be drinking. They would be more apt to listen to his request if they were perfectly sober. The rising moon in the direction of the store now made the arched roadway look like a long tunnel.

It would soon be eight o'clock. He sat down on the root of a tree and tried to pray, but no prayer he had ever heard would come into the chaos of his mind, and he could not invent one to suit the occasion. By and by he heard voices down the road, then the tramp, tramp of footsteps. A dark blur appeared on the moonlit roadway at the mouth of the tunnel, and grew gradually into a body of men.

Jim Trundle stood up. They should find him ready.

"Hello! what have we heer?" It was the undisguised voice of Wade Sims. The gang of twenty men or more paused abruptly. There was a hurried fitting on of white cloth masks.

"Who's thar?" called out the same voice, peremptorily, and the hammer of a revolver clicked.

"Me—Jim Trundle."

"Huh!" Wade's grunt of surprise was echoed in various exclamations round the group. "On yore way out 'n the county, eh? Seems to me yore time's up. We 'll have to put it to a vote. It's a little past eight o'clock, an' you've had the whole day to git a move on you. Whar you bound fer?"

"I ain't on my way nowhar. I come down heer a half-hour ago to meet you-uns, an' I've jest been a-waitin'."

"To meet we-uns? Huh! Jeewhilikins!" It sounded like Alf Carden's voice.

"I—I 'lowed you-uns would likely want to do it heer, bein' as it was whar you-uns tuck Joe Rand last fall."

Silence fell—a silence so profound, so susceptible, that it seemed to retain Trundle's words and hold them up to sight rather than to hearing for fully half a minute after they had ceased to stir the air. Even Wade Sim's blustering equipose was shaken. His mask appealed helplessly to other masks, but their jagged eye-holes offered no helpful suggestions.

"Well, we are much obleeged to you," said Wade, awkwardly; and he laughed a laugh that went little farther than his mask. "Boys, he looks like he's actu'ly itchin' fer it; you needn't feel at all squeamish."

"I've been studyin' over it," said Trundle, furnishing more surprise, "and I've concluded that I ort to be whipped, an' that sound. In fact, neighbors, the sooner you do it an' have it over the better I 'll feel about it."

The silence that swallowed up this clear-cut assertion was deeper than the one which had followed Trundle's other remark. Seeing that no one was ready to reply, he went on, "I did come down heer, though, to see ef I couldn't git you-uns to do me a sorter favor, ef you-uns jest would."

"Ah!" Wade Sims was feeling better. "I must say I was puzzled about yore conduct in sa 'nterin' out to meet us. Well, what do you want?"

"I'm ready fer my whippin'," said Trundle, "becase I think I deserve it. I've been so lazy an' careless that I never once noticed till I got yore letter that my wife was a sick woman. I *did* let her go to the field in the hot sun when I was a-fishin' on the creek-bank in the shade. I thought her an' all of us would like some fresh fish, an' I forgot that our corn-patch was sufferin' fer the hoe. But she didn't. She 'tended to it. An'—now I come to the favor I want to ask. She hain't done a speck o' harm to you-uns, an', as foolish as it may seem, it would go hard with her in her weakly condition to heer about me a-goin' through what I 'll have to submit to. She has

got a mighty sight of pride, an' it's my honest conviction that she would jest pine away an' die ef she knowed about it. I ain't a-beggin' off from nothin', understand; it's only a word fer her an' the childern. You kin all take a turn an' whip me jest as long as you want to, but when it's over an' done with I 'lowed you mought consent to say nothin' to nobody about it. Besides, I've made up my mind to lead a different sort of a life, friends, God bein' my helper, an' it would be easier to do it if I knowed Martha had respect fer me; an', neighbors, I am actu'ly afeered she won't have it if she diskivers what takes place to-night. I—I think you-uns mought agree to that much."

Masks turned upon masks. Some of them fell from strangely set visages into hands that quivered and failed to replace them. It was plain to the crowd that they had not elected a leader who could possibly do justice to the infinite delicacy of the situation. In fact, something was struggling in Wade Sims that was humiliating him in his own eyes, making him feel decidedly unmanly.

"I think yore proposition is—is purty reasonable," he managed to blurt out, after an awkward hesitation. "We hain't none of us got nothin' ag'in yore wife; an' ef she is sick, an' hearin' about this—"

But his inability to continue was evident to his most sincere admirers. Trundle sighed in relief. He knew that not one in the gang could possibly be harder of heart than their blustering leader. "I wish, then, gentlemen," he said, calmly, "that you'd git it over with. I don't know how long it's a-goin' to take—that's with you-uns; but Martha thinks I've gone over to Rawlston's to set till bedtime, an' it 'll soon be time I was back."

"That's a fact," admitted Wade Sims, slowly, as if his mind were on something besides the business in hand, and he looked round him. The band stood like rugged, white-capped posts.

Then it was proved that Sid Wombley, the wag of the valley, had more courage of his convictions than had ever been accredited to him. It sounded strange to hear him speak without joking. His seriousness struck a sort of terror to the hearts of some of the most backward. There was a suspicion of a whimper in the tone he manfully tried to straighten as he spoke.

"Looky' heer, Jim," he said, and he stepped forward and tore off his mask, I've got a sorter feelin' that I want you to see my face an' know who I am. Sence I heard yore proposal, blame me ef I hain't got more downright respect fer you than fer any man in this cove, an' I want to kick myself. You've got the sort o' meat in you that ain't in me, I'm afeered, an' I take off my hat to it. I'm a member o' this gang, an' have agreed to abide by the vote of the majority, but they 'll have to git a mighty move on theirselves an' reverse the'r decision in yore case, ur I 'll be a deserter. I'd every bit as soon whip my mammy as a body feelin' like you do."

"That's the talk." It was the voice of Alf Carden. All at once he remembered that Jim Trundle, after all that had been said against him, did not owe him a cent, while nearly every other man present had to be dunned systematically once a week. "Boys, let 'im go," he said; "I'm a-thinkin' we hain't fully understood Jim Trundle."

"I hain't the one that got up this movement," said Wade Sims, in a tone of defense. Where sentiment was concerned he was out of his element. "Ef you was to let 'im off with a word of advice, it wouldn't be the fust time we conceded a p'int."

That settled it. With vague mutterings of various sheepish kinds the crowd began to filter away. Some went down the road, and others took paths that led from it.

Sid Wombley lingered with Jim a moment. Not being able to turn the matter into a jest, and yet being a thorough man, he felt very awkward.

"Go on home, Jim," he said, gently, his hand on Trundle's arm. "Your wife 'll never know a thing about it; they 'll all keep it quiet, an' the boys 'll never bother you ag'in. I—I 'll see to that."

They shook hands. Trundle started to speak, but simply choked and coughed. Sid turned away. An idea for a joke flitted through his mind, but he discarded it as unworthy of the occasion.

Jim went slowly up the hill to his cabin. The moon was now higher up, and as he neared the gate he saw his wife walking about in the entry. She was not alone. A woman sat on the step. It was old Mrs. Samuel, the aunt of Wade Sims, a neighbor, who sometimes dropped in to spend the evening. Was it an exclamation of glad surprise that he heard as he opened the gate, and did his wife stand still and stare at him excitedly, or was the sound the voice of one of the children turning in its sleep? Was her cast of countenance a trick of the moonlight and shadows?

The eyes of both women fell as he approached them.

"Good evenin', Jim," was Mrs. Samuel's greeting.

He nodded and sat down on the steps, his back to his wife. They were all silent. Mrs. Trundle stepped to the water-shelf at one side, and peered at his profile through the shadows, her face full of vague misgivings. Then she sat down in a chair behind him, and studied his back, his neck, the way his shirt lay, her hands clinched on her knees, the fury of a tiger in her eyes.

Ten minutes passed. Then Trundle roused himself with a start. He must not be so absent-minded; they must suspect nothing.

"Whar's the children?" he asked, not looking toward his wife.

"In bed a hour ago."

Her tone struck him dumb with apprehension. He stared over his shoulder at her. Her face was hidden in her hands. He glanced at the visitor, and saw her avert her eyes. Could she have heard of the plan to whip him, and revealed it to his wife? He felt sure of it; Wade Sims could not keep a secret. His wife thought he had been punished. No matter; it was the same thing. His heart was ice.

Mrs. Trundle bent nearer him. She was trying surreptitiously to see if there were any marks on his neck above his shirt-collar.

Presently her pent-up emotions seemed to overwhelm her. She began to sob and rock back and forth. Then she glared at Mrs. Samuel.

"I'd think you'd have the decency to go home," she said, fiercely, "an' not set thar an'—an' gloat over me

an' him like a crow. It's our bedtime."

"Why, Martha, what's the—" Trundle stood up in bewilderment.

"I was jest gettin' ready to go," stammered the visitor, humbly, and she hastened away. Trundle sank back on his seat. What was to be done now? He had never seen his wife that way, but he loved her more than ever in his life before. She watched Mrs. Samuel's form vanish in the hazy moonlight; then she sat down on the step beside her husband.

"Jim," she faltered, "I want you to lay yore head in my lap." She had put her thin, quivering arm round his neck, and her voice had never before held such tender, motherly cadences.

"What do you want me to do that fer?"

"Jest becace I do. I hain't never in all my life loved you like I do at this minute. I'd fight fer you with my last breath; I'd die fer you. Jim, poor, dear Jim! you needn't try to hide it from me. Mis' Samuel had jest told me what the Regulators was goin' to do when you turned the corner. I know you went down to the spring to meet 'em so me an' the childern wouldn't know it. Many a man would 'a' gone away an' left his family ruther than suffer such disgrace. Oh, Jim, I'd a million times ruther they'd whipped me! I 'll never git over it. I 'll feel that lash on my back every minute as long as I live. They hain't none of 'em got sense enough to see what a good, lovin' man you are at the bottom. I'd ruther have you jest like you are than like any one o' that layout. We must move away somewhars an' begin all over. I don't want the childern to grow up under sech disgrace."

Her hand passed gently round to the front of his shirt. She unfastened it, and began to sob as she turned the garment down at the neck. "Oh, Jim, did they hurt you? Does it—"

"They didn't tetch me, Martha," he said, finally recovering his voice. "Sid Wombley kinder tuk pity on me an' stood up fer me, an' they all concluded to give me another trial. I hain't lived right, Martha, I kin see it now, an' to-morrow I'm a-goin' to begin different. These fellows have got good hearts in 'em, an' after the way they talked an' acted to-night I hain't a-goin' to harbor no ill-will ag'in' 'em."

Mrs. Trundle leaned toward him. She began to cry softly, and he drew her head over on his shoulder and stroked her thin hair with his coarse hands. Then they kissed each other, went into the cabin, and went to bed in the dark, so as not to wake the children.

THE COURAGE OF ERICSON

In straggling, despondent lines the men in soiled gray leaned on their muskets and peered through the misty darkness at the enemy crawling across the field in front of them like a monster reptile. The colonel of the regiment nearest the coppice of pines strode restlessly back and forth in front of his men, on tenter-hooks of anxiety, the spasmodic glow of his cigar showing features grim and tortured.

"I feel like we 're in fer it to-night," whispered Private Ericson to a battle-stained comrade.

"Right you are," was the guarded reply; "an' we-uns ain't a handful beside the army out thar. I tell you the blasted fellers have had reinforcements sence the sun went down. I know it, an' our colonel is beginnin' to suspision it. Ef he had his way he'd order a retreat while thar's a chance."

Silence, punctuated by the clanking of the colonel's sword and the snoring of a private asleep standing, intervened. Then Private Huckaby resumed:

"So this is raily yore old stompin'-ground, Ericson. I reckon you uster haul pine-knots out 'n them woods, and split rails on that mountain-side."

"I know every inch of it like a book," sighed Ericson.

"An' I reckon that sweetheart o' yor 'n don't live fur off, ef she didn't refugeee."

"Her folks wuz Union," returned Ericson, sententiously. "Her 'n tuk one side, an' me an' mine t'other. The cabin she used to live in is jest beyond them woods at the foot o' the fust mountain, 'Old Crow.' She's thar yit. A feller that seed 'er a week ago told me. She 'lowed ef I jined the Confederacy I needn't ever look her way any more. Her father an' only brother went to the Union side, an' she blamed me fer wantin' to go with my folks. She is as proud as Lucifer. I wisht we'd parted friendlier. I hain't been in a single fight without wantin' that one thing off my mind."

Ericson leaned on the muzzle of his gun, and Huckaby saw his broad shoulders rise and quiver convulsively. He stared at the begrimed face under the slouched hat, beginning to think that what he had seen of his young mate had been only the surface—the froth—of a deeper nature. An excited grunt came from the mist which almost enveloped the colonel, and he was seen to dart to the end of the regiment and throw down his cigar.

"To arms!" he cried.

The words were drowned in the clatter of muskets as they were snatched from the ground to horny palms. The sound died like the rustle of dead leaves in a forest after a gust of wind. A composite eye saw that the line which had been moving across the field in front had paused, steadied itself. The next instant it was a billow of flame half a mile in length, rolling up and dashing itself against the wall of damp darkness. The colonel, his blue steel blade raised against the sheet of piercing lead, sprang forward, a black silhouette against the enemy's glare. He meant it as an objective command—a prayer—to his men to stand to their ground, but he tottered, leaned on his sword, and as its point sank into the earth he fell face downward. Drums, great and small, boomed and rattled on the Confederate side like a prolonged echo of the Federal's salvo.

The ranks of the Confederates wavered—broke; the retreat began. Running backward, his gun poised, Ericson felt a numb, tingling sensation in his right side. He turned and started after his comrades, but each step he put down seemed to meet the ground as it fell from him. Then he felt dizzy. There was a roaring in his ears, and his legs weakened. As he fell his gun tripped the feet of Huckaby, and that individual went to earth, and then on hands and knees, to avoid being shot, crept to his friend's side.

"What's wrong, Eric? Done fer?" he asked, his tone weighty with the tragedy of the moment.

"I believe so," said Ericson. "Go on; don't wait!"

"Good-by, my boy," Huckaby said. "I'd tote ye, but some 'n' is the matter with the calf o' my right leg. I'd give out, I know, an'—an' I must remember my wife and the ba—" He was gone.

Half an hour passed, during which time Ericson had experienced the delicious sensation of a man freezing to death, then a realization of his condition permeated his consciousness. He drew himself up on an elbow and glanced over the field. Black ambulances, like vultures stalking about with drooping wings, were picking their way among the dead and dying. Vaguely Ericson's numb fancy pictured himself being jostled like a human log of wood to hospital, or perhaps to prison, and grasping his musket, and transforming it into a crutch, he rose and hobbled away from the groans and puddles of blood into the edge of the wood.

He had no sooner reached it than he felt the earth acting as if it were a mad sea again, and he sank headlong into the heather and underbrush. When he came to it was morning. The oblique rays of the sun were making diamonds and pearls of the poised dew-drops. The field had been cleared. Only a shattered gun, a tattered cap, a battered canteen bore evidence of the recent carnage. Half a mile across the level valley Ericson saw a village of tents, blue-coated guards pacing to and fro, and the stars and stripes rippling from a tall staff.

The private rose cautiously to his trembling feet, and aided by his too weighty crutch he went slowly through the wood toward the cabin where dwelt Sally Tripp.

"It's the nighest house," he said to himself. "Shorely she won't refuse to let me in."

However, when he had passed through the wood and saw the cabin not fifty yards from him in the open, a screw of blue smoke curling from the mud-and-stick chimney, misgivings which had depressed him ever since he had parted with her attacked him anew. He forgot that he had lost nearly every ounce of his life-blood, and stood almost erect, resting hardly the weight of his hand on the gun as his eyes drank in the familiar old scene.

Then he heard the massive bar of one of the doors squeak as it was lifted from its wooden sockets, and in the doorway stood a golden-haired vision.

"Thank God, it's her!" Ericson muttered; and the sight of her standing there, looking afar off toward the camp of the Federals, gave him courage. He dropped his gun, determined not to exhibit weakness, and walked erectly, if slowly, toward her.

He saw the girl turn pale, stare at him steadily, and stifle a scream with her hand at her lips.

"Don't you know me, Sally?" he asked.

She stared mutely, inwardly occupied with her outward appearance, fearing perhaps that a tinge of her gladness of heart at seeing him might be detected by his supersensitive, pleading eye.

"Thar ain't nothin' to keep me from knowin' of you," she said. "As fur as them clothes on yore back is concerned, they become yore sort powerful well. A rebel is a rebel anywhar."

Again the qualms of physical weakness stirred within him. He hung his head, praying for strength to keep from falling at her feet. She smiled relentlessly and continued:

"I reckon when the Union men attackted you-uns last night you broke an' ran like all the rest. I seed that fight, John Ericson. Me an' grandpa scrouged down behind the chimney so as not to git struck an' watched the trap the bluecoats was a-layin' fer you-uns. We seed the reinforcements slide in round 'Old Crow', an' knowed most o' you-uns would play mumbly-peg 'fore mornin'. I mought 'a' 'lowed you'd git off unteched, knowing them woods as well as you do."

His silence, his downcast attitude may have shamed the girl, for a change came over her. She cast a hurried glance at the far-off encampment, and a touch of anxiety came into her tone as she added:

"You'd better git back into hidin', John Ericson. The Union soldiers have been sendin' out searchin' squads all day fer men that got aloose in the woods. They say they pulled Jake McLain right out 'n his bed. His wife had burnt his rebel uniform an' said he was a Yank a-lyin' up sick, but the powder-stains on his face give him away, an' they tuk him off."

It was plain to him that she did not suspect he was wounded unto death, and he forgave her sternness for the sake of his great love. Besides, she was showing qualities of patriotism to which he granted her the right, though he could not comprehend what influence had entered her life to harden it to such an extent. Just then the bent form of Grandfather Tripp emerged from the other room of the cabin, crossed the entry, and stared at the soldier.

"Well, I 'll be liter'ly bumfuzzled!" he exclaimed. "Ef it ain't John Ericson! I knowed yore company was in the fight last night, an' I thought o' you when I heerd the grape-shot a-plinkin' out thar. But hang me, ef you don't look sick ur half starved! Sally, give 'im some 'n' t' eat. They don't feed the rebs much. Johnny, she's been a-pinin' fer you ever sence you enlisted, an' last night durin' the fight she mighty nigh went distracted. She—"

"Grandpa, that's a lie!" cried the girl, fiercely; but there were pink spots in her cheeks as she retreated into the cabin and began to slam the pots and pans on the stone hearth.

The old man caught the arm of the soldier. "Go right in, my boy. She's that glad to see you unhurt she don't know what to do. She 'll give you a mouthful gladder 'n she ever fed a Yank."

Mounting the log steps to the cabin door seemed to deprive the soldier of the last vestige of his strength. As if from a distance he heard the girl's complaining voice, and a blur hung before his sight. Blindly he felt for a chair and sank into it. His head was sinking to his breast, when the sharp voice of the girl—sharper because

of her grandfather's meddling—revived him like the lash of a whip on the back of a succumbing beast of burden.

"Pa's dead, John Ericson," she cried. "Shot down, fer all I know, by you. He's gone. Now I reckon you see why I don't like the looks o' yore clothes. Then jest see heer." She flounced into a corner of the room, jerked a trunk open and brought to him the soiled uniform of a Federal soldier. "This was what Brother Jasper had on when he died. That hole in the breast is where the ball went in. He come home a week ago on a furlough to git over his wound, an' died a-settin' thar in that door. Do you wonder that I never want to lay eyes on a dirty gray coat again?"

Ericson's slouched hat hid the piteous glare in his eyes. He rested his two hands on the arms of the chair and tried to draw himself up, but that effort was the signal for his collapse. The girl laid the uniform on the table and stared at him, the lines of her face softening and betraying vague disquietude.

"Look a heer," she blurted out, suddenly, "are—are you wounded?"

He tried to speak, but his lips seemed paralyzed.

"My God! Grandpa, look!" the girl cried. "He's wounded! He's dying, an' I've jest been a-standin' heer—"

The old man bent over the soldier, and turned his face upward.

"Say, whar are you hit, Johnny?"

Ericson tried to affect a careless smile, and managed to place his hand on his wounded side. The old man unbuttoned his coat.

"Well, I should think so!" he muttered. "He's lost enough of the life fluid to paint a barn. Quick, Sally, put down a quilt fer 'im to lie on in front o' the fire!"

The girl obeyed as by clock-work, the whiteness of terror and regret in her face. She brought an armful of straw and some quilts and hastily patted out a crude bed for the soldier.

"Now," said the old man, "you must lie down, Johnny."

Ericson sat up erect.

"I don't want to—to be helpless heer," he stammered. "All through the war I've never thought o' one single thing except Sally, an' now—"

The girl cowered down on the hearth in front of him, and hid her face with her hands.

"I didn't dream you was wounded," she said. "Ef I'd 'a' knowed that, I'd never 'a' said what I did. Grandpa told the truth jest now, he did. Lie down, please do!"

He raised his eyes to her with a grateful glance. At this juncture the small, remote blast of a bugle fell on their ears, and it struck the tenderness from her great moist eyes. She rose and went to the door.

"It's a searchin' squad," she cried, her voice vibrating with fear. "They are at Joe French's house now. They are shore to come heer next. Ef they take John away he 'll die!"

The old man stared at her rigidly.

"We must hide 'im," he said. "Sally, he's an old friend an' a neighbor. We must hide 'im!"

The wounded soldier stood up, grasped the edge of the mantel-piece and swayed back and forth. There was a sweet comfort in her startled concern that rendered him impervious to fear.

"Thar ain't no place to hide 'im," said the girl, with an agonized glance through the doorway toward French's house.

Ericson's knees began to bend, and he sank into his chair again.

"No use," he muttered. "I 'lowed I mought git to the woods, but I'd hobble so slow they'd be shore to see me. When they git heer I 'll tell 'em you wasn't harborin' of me."

The girl turned from the door.

"They are a-comin'," she said. Then her eyes fell on her brother's uniform. She started, clutched it, and held it toward her grandfather, fired with a sudden hope.

"Dress 'im in it," she said. "I 'll go out an' meet 'em an' tell 'em nobody ain't heer except you an' my wounded brother home on a furlough. The permit is in t'other room. I 'll show 'em that. They 'll never dream he ain't brother when they read the furlough an' see 'im in the blue uniform."

A sickly smile worked its way through the grimy surface of the soldier's face as he raised his hand to signify opposition to her suggestion.

"I couldn't do that, Sally," he said. "Not to save my life, I couldn't. Somehow I think the chances o' my seein' another sunrise is dead ag'in' me, an' I don't want to die in any other uniform except the one me an' my comrades has fought in. I'd as soon wear the clothes of a brother o' yor 'n as anybody else alive, but I can't put on blue even to escape arrest. I jest can't! It would be exactly the same as bein' a spy, an' the Lord only knows how a fightin' man hates that sort of a character."

"But you must," urged the girl, frantically. "Oh, you must!"

"I simply can't. That's all. I'd a sight ruther be tuk as a wounded soldier unable to stir a single peg than to sneak into another man's clothes an' deny the side I fit on. Huh, you are a woman! War makes men mighty indifferent to anything except duty." A picture of baffled despair, the girl peered through the doorway at the approaching men.

"You once said you'd do anything I asked ef I'd consent to marry you. John, now will you let grandpa put it on you?"

A warm scarlet wave had passed over her. She had never looked so beautiful. He hesitated for some time, and then shook his head. "I can't put on blue clothes, Sally."

The air was still as death. Above the beat of her strumming pulse she could hear the "hep! hep!" of the soldiers as they marched toward the cabin. Ericson staggered to his feet and stood swaying beside her.

"I mought as well go out an' meet 'em," he said, his face awry with pain and utter exhaustion. "Ef I don't

they 'll think you are harborin' a reb, an' it mought go ag'in' you-uns."

Then he threw out his hands and clutched her shoulders, and sank to the floor.

"He has fainted, grandpa," said the girl.

"Quick! Put the uniform on 'im. I 'll try to detain 'em out thar till you are ready."

"I mought just as well take off his suit an' kiver 'im with quilts," suggested the old man. "It 'll save time."

"No, the uniform!" cried the girl. "Ef he has that on they won't ask no questions—along with the furlough. You know Jake McLain tried that trick on 'em an' failed. Put it on 'im, for the Lord's sake. Don't stand thar idle!"

The steady tramp of feet was now audible, and the occasional command of the officer in charge. Darting from the back door the girl crossed the entry, went into the next room, and emerged with the permit of absence in her belt. Picking up a pail near the door, she went to the pig-pen in a corner of the zigzag rail fence, and with no eyes for the approaching men, slowly poured the food into the animal's trough.

Stopping the squad a few yards from her, the captain doffed his cap and bowed.

"I have come to search your house for possible fugitives from the Confederate ranks last night," he said, politely. "A good many have been found hiding in farmhouses in the vicinity."

The girl set her pail down at her feet.

"We are Union," she said, simply.

"I was told so," the captain answered. "Nevertheless, I have orders to search your premises. Is there any one within?"

"Nobody but grandpa an' my wounded brother, a Union soldier home on a furlough." She took the paper from her belt and unfolded it very deliberately. "Thar's his permit. I fetched it out to show it so's you wouldn't have to wake 'im up ef you could help it. He couldn't sleep last nigh fer the shootin', an' the truth is, he is as nigh dead as kin be. I wisht you would let 'im rest." The officer perused the furlough through his eyeglasses.

"That's all right," he said, handing it back. "But you see I have to obey orders."

There was a pause. The maiden felt the captain's eyes resting on her admiringly. She could hear the hobnailed soles of her grandparent's shoes grinding on the puncheon floor, and knew that the old man was still engaged in dressing or undressing the fugitive.

"That's so," she said, in a tone which plainly intimated that the question was not positively settled. "But it looks like a shame, for brother is powerful low, an' any noise mought do 'im lots o' harm."

"I 'll leave my men here, and go in myself," compromised the officer. "I 'll walk very lightly."

The heart of the girl sank. She could still hear the crunching of her grandfather's shoes in the cabin.

"I 'll be much obleeged ef you will be careful," she said. And as he started to the cabin she joined him. "Please go in here first," pointing to the room across the entry from the one containing the two men, "an' I 'll run in an' see ef brother is fit to be seen."

He complied, with a bow, and went into the room indicated. Reappearing in a moment, he found her crouching down on the grass, a look of pain on her face.

"What's the matter?" he asked, with concern.

"Nothin'," she winced. "I set my foot on that rock an' it kinder twisted my ankle."

He gave her his hand and aided her to rise.

"Please wait jest one minute," she said, putting her foot down tentatively. "I was in sech a hurry jest now that I almost broke my ankle-bone."

He bowed assent. His eyes lit with admiration for her physical charms, and she limped around to the rear of the cabin and went in. Just as she did so the noise of her grandfather's shoes on the floor ceased. The old man, thinking she was accompanied by the soldiers, was enacting his part. He had flung himself into a chair, and sat nodding as if asleep. On the bed of straw lay Ericson, still unconscious, completely clothed in blue uniform. The discarded gray suit lay in a bundle in a corner.

"Quick, that will never do!" she cried, causing the old man to look up with a start. Taking a case from a pillow on the bed, she filled it with the gray uniform and crushed it into the bottom of the old man's chair.

"Set on it," she said. "An' don't git up, whatever you do." Then she wrung her hands despairfully as she surveyed the room. A twitching of Ericson's yellow face warned her that he was returning to consciousness, and a new terror pierced her heart.

"Ef he comes to," she thought, "he 'll deny being a Union soldier, an' then they 'll take 'im—my God, have pity on the pore boy!"

She turned from the door and limped smilingly toward the waiting officer.

"Ef brother wakes," she said, "I hope you won't git mad at nothin' he says. Fer the last two days he has been clean out 'n his head. Once he declared to us that he was actu'ly President Jeff Davis. Thar's no tellin' what idea may strike 'im next."

"I 'll try not to wake him," said the captain. "I 'll merely step inside very carefully. I wouldn't do that if—if my men were not watching. You see they'd wonder—"

"Come on, then." The rigidity of a crisis held her features. She entered first, and pushed the great cumbersome door open before her. The old man regarded them with sleepy looks and began to nod again.

The officer stood over the form in blue a moment, then peered under the bed, and even up the funnel-shaped chimney.

"It's all right," he whispered to Sally.

Ericson opened his eyes and smiled faintly.

The girl comprehended his frame of mind; he had not noticed that his clothes had been changed.

"You've run me in a hole," he said to the captain. "I'm ready to go, but I don't want you to think that these

folks are a-harborin' of me. I come heer uninvited. The truth is, that young lady ordered me off, an' I'd 'a' gone, but I keeled over in the door."

He put a hand on either side of him, and with a strenuous effort managed to sit up. Then he noticed his change of uniform, and as he plucked distastefully at his coat-sleeve, he stared first at the girl and then at the captain.

"Why, who's done this heer?" he asked. "I ain't no Yankee soldier. I'm a rebel dyed in the wool."

The girl laid her hand on the officer's arm.

"Come on, please, sir; he's gittin' excited. Ef we dispute with 'im he 'll git to rantin' awful."

Without a word the officer followed her from the cabin and down toward where his men stood. She walked rapidly, her steps quickened by the rising tones of Ericson's voice behind her. She put her handkerchief to her dry eyes, and said, plaintively:

"I hardly know what to do. We've had no end of trouble. First the news come that pa had fell, an' then brother come home like he is now."

"He looks like a very sick man," said the officer, with a bluntness peculiar to times of war. "Perhaps I ought to ask our surgeon to run over and take a look at him."

She started, her face fell.

"Old Doctor Stone, nigh us, is a-lookin' after 'im," was the hasty product of her bewildered invention. "He 'll do all that can be done—an'—an' I want to keep brother from thinkin' about army folks as much as I can. Will you-uns camp nigh us long?"

"We leave inside of an hour." He raised his cap, saluted his men, gave an order, and they whirled and tramped away.

She went back into the cabin and sat down by the side of Ericson's pallet. There was something in his dumb glance and subdued air that quenched the warmth of her recent success. As he looked at her steadily his eyes became moist and his powder-stained lips began to quiver.

"I didn't 'low you'd play sech a dog-mean trick on me, Sally," he muttered. "I'd ruther a thousand times 'a' been shot like a soldier than to hide in Yankee clothes." Under her warm rush of love and pity for him she completely lost the touch of hauteur that had clung to her since his return. She took his hand in hers and bent her body down till his fingers lay against her cheek. He could feel that she was deeply moved.

"I couldn't stand to see 'em take you off," she sobbed. "Because you are all I got on earth to keef fer. It would 'a' killed you, an' me, too." Her voice took on the gentle cadences of a mother consoling a sick child. "Grandpa will take off the mean old blue suit an' put you up in the big bed, and I 'll make you some good chicken soup with boiled rice in it."

He pressed her hand.

"Do you raily want me heer, Sally?"

Her reply was a moment's hesitation, a convulsive motion of the vocal cords, a failure of speech, and a final pressure of her lips on his fingers.

"Beca'se ef I 'lowed you did, Sally, I wouldn't keef much which side beat. I wouldn't be able to think about any livin' thing but you."

"Well, you can, then," she said; and she rose quickly. "Grandpa, I'm goin' in t'other room to fix 'im some chicken soup. Undress 'im an' put 'im to bed, an' then go fetch Doctor Stone."

An hour later the old physician arrived and examined the patient.

"A flesh wound only," he said. "But he has lost mighty nigh every bit o' blood in 'im. Nuss 'im good, Sally, an' he 'll be able to make plenty o' corn and taters fer you the rest o' yore life—that is, if the war ever ends." Ericson was convalescing when the news of Lee's surrender came floating over the devastated land.

"I'm awfully glad it's all over," he said. "I'm satisfied. I was shot by a Yankee ball an' nussed back to life by a Union gal, so I reckon my account is even."

THE HERESY OF ABNER CALIHAN

Neil Filmore's store was at the crossing of the Big Cabin and Rock Valley roads. Before the advent of Sherman into the South it had been a grist-mill, to which the hardy mountaineers had regularly brought their grain to be ground, in wagons, on horseback, or on their shoulders, according to their conditions. But the Northern soldiers had appropriated the miller's little stock of toll, had torn down the long wooden sluice which had conveyed the water from the race to the mill, had burnt the great wheel and crude wooden machinery, and rolled the massive grinding-stones into the deepest part of the creek.

After the war nobody saw any need for a mill at that point, and Neil Filmore had bought the property from its impoverished owner and turned the building into a store. It proved to be a fair location, for there was considerable travel along the two main roads, and as Filmore was postmaster his store became the general meeting-point for everybody living within ten miles of the spot. He kept for sale, as he expressed it, "a little of everything, from shoe-eyes to a sack of guano." Indeed, a sight of his rough shelves and unplanned counters, filled with cakes of tallow, beeswax and butter, bolts of calico, sheeting and gingham, and the floor and porch heaped with piles of skins, cases of eggs, coops of chickens, and cans of lard, was enough to make an orderly housewife shudder with horror.

But Mrs. Filmore had grown accustomed to this state of affairs in the front part of the house, for she confined her domestic business, and whatever neatness and order were possible, to the room in the rear, where, as she often phrased it, she did the "eatin' an' cookin', an' never interfere with pap's part except to lend 'im my cheers when thar is more 'n common waitin' fer the mail-carrier."

And her chairs were often in demand, for Filmore was a deacon in Big Cabin Church, which stood at the foot of the green-clad mountain a mile down the road, and it was at the store that his brother deacons frequently met to transact church business.

One summer afternoon they held an important meeting. Abner Calihan, a member of the church and a good, industrious citizen, was to be tried for heresy.

"It has worried me more 'n anything that has happened sence them two Dutchmen over at Cove Spring swapped wives an' couldn't be convinced of the'r error," said long, lean Bill Odell, after he had come in and borrowed a candle-box to feed his mule in, and had given the animal eight ears of corn from the pockets of his long-tailed coat, and left the mule haltered at a hitching-post in front of the store.

"Ur sence the widder Dill swore she was gwine to sue Hank Dobb's wife fer witchcraft," replied Filmore, in a hospitable tone. "Take a cheer; it must be as hot as a bake-oven out thar in the sun."

Bill Odell took off his coat and folded it carefully and laid it across the beam of the scales, and unbuttoned his vest and sat down, and proceeded to mop his perspiring face with a red bandanna. Toot Bailey came in next, a quiet little man of about fifty, with a dark face, straggling gray hair, and small, penetrating eyes. His blue jean trousers were carelessly stuck into the tops of his clay-stained boots, and he wore a sack-coat, a "hickory" shirt, and a leather belt. Mrs. Filmore put her red head and broad, freckled face out of the door of her apartment to see who had arrived, and the next moment came out dusting a "split-bottomed" chair with her apron.

"How are ye, Toot?" was her greeting as she placed the chair for him between a jar of fresh honey and a barrel of sorghum molasses. "How is the sore eyes over yore way?"

"Toler'ble," he answered, as he leaned back against the counter and fanned himself with his slouch hat. "Mine is about through it, but the Tye childern is a sight. Pizen-oak hain't a circumstance."

"What did ye use?"

"Copperas an' sweet milk. It is the best thing I've struck. I don't want any o' that peppery eye-wash 'bout my place. It'd take the hide off 'n a mule's hind leg."

"Now yore a-talkin'," and Bill Odell went to the water-bucket on the end of the counter. He threw his tobacco-quid away, noisily washed out his mouth, and took a long drink from the gourd dipper. Then Bart Callaway and Amos Sanders, who had arrived half an hour before and had walked down to take a look at Filmore's fish-pond, came in together. Both were whittling sticks and looking cool and comfortable.

"We are all heer," said Odell, and he added his hat to his coat and the pile of weights on the scale-beam, and put his right foot on the rung of his chair. "I reckon we mought as well proceed." At these words the men who had arrived last carefully stowed their hats away under their chairs and leaned forward expectantly. Mrs. Filmore glided noiselessly to a corner behind the counter, and with folded arms stood ready to hear all that was to be said.

"Did anybody inform Ab of the object of this meeting?" asked Odell.

They all looked at Filmore, and he transferred their glances to his wife. She flushed under their scrutiny and awkwardly twisted her fat arms together.

"Sister Calihan wuz in here this mornin'," she deposed in an uneven tone. "I 'lowed somebody amongst 'em ort to know what you-uns wuz up to, so I up an' told 'er."

"What did she have to say?" asked Odell, bending over the scales to spit at a crack in the floor, but not removing his eyes from the witness.

"Law, I hardly know what she didn't say! I never seed a woman take on so. Ef the last bit o' kin she had on earth wuz suddenly wiped from the face o' creation, she couldn't 'a' tuk it more to heart. Sally wuz with 'er, an' went on wuss 'an her mammy."

"What ailed Sally?"

Mrs. Filmore smiled irrepressibly. "I reckon you ort to know, Brother Odell," she said, under the hand she had raised to hide her smile. "Do you reckon she hain't heerd o' yore declaration that Eph cayn't marry in no heretic family while yo 're above ground? It wuz goin' the round at singin'-school two weeks ago, and thar hain't been a thing talked sence."

"I hain't got a ioty to retract," replied Odell, looking down into the upturned faces for approval. "I'd as soon see a son o' mine in his box. Misfortune an' plague is boun' to foller them that winks at infidelity in any disguise ur gyarb."

"Oh, shucks! don't fetch the young folks into it, Brother Odell," gently protested Bart Callaway. "Them two has been a-settin' up to each other ever sence they wuz knee-high to a duck. They hain't responsible fer the doin's o' the old folks."

"I hain't got nothin' to take back, an' Eph knows it," thundered the tall deacon, and his face flushed angrily. "Ef the membership sees fit to excommunicate Ab Calihan, none o' his stock 'll ever come into my family. But this is dilly-dallyin' over nothin'. You fellers 'll set thar cocked up, an' chaw an' spit, an' look knowin', an' let the day pass 'thout doin' a single thing. Ab Calihan is either fitten or unfitten, one ur t'other. Brother Filmore, you've seed 'im the most, now what's he let fall that's undoctrinal?"

Filmore got up and laid his clay pipe on the counter and kicked back his chair with his foot.

"The fust indications I noticed," he began, in a raised voice, as if he were speaking to some one outside, "wuz the day Liz Wambush died. Bud Thorn come in while I wuz weighing up a side o' bacon fur Ab, an' 'lowed that Liz couldn't live through the night. I axed 'im ef she had made her peace, and he 'lowed she had, entirely, that she wuz jest a-lyin' thar shoutin' Glory ever' breath she drawed, an' that they all wuz glad to see her reconciled, fer you know she wuz a hard case speritually. Well, it wuz right back thar at the fireplace

while Ab wuz warmin' hisse'f to start home that he 'lowed that he hadn't a word to say agin Liz's marvelous faith, nur her sudden speritual spurt, but that in his opinion the doctrine o' salvation through faith without actual deeds of the flesh to give it backbone wuz all shucks, an' a dangerous doctrine to teach to a risin' gination. Them wuz his words as well as I can remember, an' he cited a good many cases to demonstrate that the members o' Big Cabin wuzn't any more ready to help a needy neighbor than a equal number outside the church. He wuz mad kase last summer when his wheat wuz spilin' everybody that come to he'p wuz uv some other denomination, an' the whole lot o' Big Cabin folks made some excuse ur other. He 'lowed that you —"

Filmore hesitated, and the tall man opposite him changed countenance.

"Neil, hain't you got a bit o' sense?" put in Mrs. Filmore, sharply.

"What did he say ag'in' me—the scamp?" asked Odell, firing up.

Filmore turned his back to his scowling wife, and took an egg from a basket on the counter and looked at it closely, as he rolled it over and over in his fingers.

"Lots that he ortn't to, I reckon," he said, evasively.

"Well, what wuz *some* of it? I hain't a-keerin' what he says about me."

"He 'lowed, fer one thing, that yore strict adheerance to doctrine had hardened you some, wharas religious conviction, ef thar wuz any divine intention in it, ort, in reason, to have a contrary effect. He 'lowed you wuz money-lovin' an' uncharitable an' unfergivin' an', a heap o' times, un-Christian in yore persecution o' the weak an' helpless—them that has no food an' raiment—when yore crib an' smokehouse is always full. Ab is a powerful talker, an'—"

"It's the devil in 'im a-talkin'," interrupted Odell, angrily, "an' it's plain enough that he ort to be churched. Brother Sanders, you intimated that you'd have a word to say; let us have it."

Sanders, a heavy-set man, bald-headed and red-bearded, rose. He took a prodigious quid of tobacco from his mouth and dropped it on the floor at the side of his chair. His remarks were crisp and to the point.

"My opinion is that Ab Calihan hain't a bit more right in our church than Bob Inglesel. He's got plumb crooked."

"What have you heerd 'im say? That's what we want to git at," said Odell, his leathery face brightening.

"More 'n I keered to listen at. He has been readin' stuff he ortn't to. He give up takin' the *Advocate*, an' wouldn't go in Mary Bank's club when they've been takin' it in his family fer the last five year, an' has been subscribin' fer the *True Light* sence Christmas. The last time I met 'im at Big Cabin, I think it wuz the second Sunday, he couldn't talk o' nothin' else but what this great man an' t'other had writ somewhar up in Yankeedom, an' that ef we all keep along in our little rut we 'll soon be the laughin'-stock of all the rest of the enlightened world. Ab is a slippery sort of a feller, an' it's mighty hard to ketch 'im, but I nailed 'im on one vital p'int." Sanders paused for a moment, stroked his beard, and then continued: "He got excited sorter, an' 'lowed that he had come to the conclusion that hell warn't no literal, burnin' one nohow, that he had too high a regyard fer the Almighty to believe that He would amuse Hisse'f roastin' an' feedin' melted lead to His creatures jest to see 'em squirm."

"He disputes the Bible, then," said Odell, conclusively, looking first into one face and then another. "He sets his puny self up ag'in' the Almighty. The Book that has softened the pillers o' thousands; the Word that has been the consolation o' millions an' quintillions o' mortals of sense an' judgment in all ages an' countries is a pack o' lies from kiver to kiver. I don't see a bit o' use goin' funder with this investigation."

Just then Mrs. Filmore stepped out from her corner.

"I hain't been axed to put in," she said, warmly; "but ef I wuz you-uns I'd go slow with Abner Calihan. He's nobody's fool. He's too good a citizen to be hauled an' drug about like a dog with a rope round his neck. He fit on the right side in the war, an' to my certain knowledge has done more to 'ds keepin' peace an' harmony in this community than any other three men in it. He has set up with the sick an' toted medicine to 'em, an' fed the pore an' housed the homeless. Here only last week he got hisse'f stung all over the face an' neck helpin' that lazy Joe Sebastian hive his bees, an' Joe an' his triflin' gang didn't git a scratch. You may see the day you 'll regret it ef you run dry shod over that man."

"We simply intend to do our duty, Sister Filmore," said Odell, slightly taken aback; "but you kin see that church rules must be obeyed. I move we go up thar in a body an' lay the case squar before 'im. Ef he is willin' to take back his wild assertions an' go'long quietly without tryin' to play smash with the religious order of the whole community, he may stay in on probation. What do you-uns say?"

"It's all we kin do now," said Sanders; and they all rose and reached for their hats.

"You'd better stay an' look atter the store," Filmore called back to his wife from the outside; "somebody mought happen along." With a reluctant nod of her head she acquiesced, and came out on the little porch and looked after them as they trudged along the hot road toward Abner Calihan's farm. When they were out of sight she turned back into the store. "Well," she muttered, "Abner Calihan *may* put up with that triflin' layout a-interfeerin' with 'im when he is busy a-savin' his hay, but ef he don't set his dogs on 'em he is a better Christian 'an I think he is' an' he's a good un. They are a purty-lookin' set to be a-dictatin' to a man like him."

A little wagon-way, which was not used enough to kill the stubbly grass that grew on it, ran from the main road out to Calihan's house. The woods through which the little road had been cut were so thick and the foliage so dense that the overlapping branches often hid the sky.

Calihan's house was a four-roomed log building which had been weather-boarded on the outside with upright unpainted planks. On the right side of the house was an orchard, and beneath some apple-trees near the door stood an old-fashioned cider-press, a pile of acid-stained rocks which had been used as weights in the press, and numerous tubs, barrels, jugs, and jars, and piles of sour-smelling refuse, over which buzzed a dense swarm of honey-bees, wasps, and yellow-jackets. On the other side of the house, in a chip-strewn yard, stood cords upon cords of wood, and several piles of rich pine-knots and charred pine-logs, which the industrious farmer had on rainy days hauled down from the mountains for kindling-wood. Behind the house

was a great log barn and a stable-yard, and beyond them lay the cornfields and the lush green meadow, where a sinuous line of willows and slender cane-brakes marked the course of a little creek.

The approach of the five visitors was announced to Mrs. Calihan and her daughter by a yelping rush toward the gate of half a dozen dogs which had been napping and snapping at flies on the porch. Mrs. Calihan ran out into the yard and vociferously called the dogs off, and with awed hospitality invited the men into the little sitting-room.

Those of them who cared to inspect their surroundings saw a rag carpet, walls of bare, hewn logs, the cracks of which had been filled with yellow mud, a little table in the center of the room, and a cottage organ against the wall near the small window. On the mantel stood a new clock and a glass lamp, the globe of which held a piece of red flannel and some oil. The flannel was to give the lamp color. Indeed, lamps with flannel in them were very much in vogue in that part of the country.

"Me an' Sally wuz sorter expectin' ye," said Mrs. Calihan, as she gave them seats and went around and took their hats from their knees and laid them on a bed in the next room. "I don't know what to make of Mr. Calihan," she continued, plaintively. "He never wuz this away before. When we wuz married he could offer up the best prayer of any young man in the settlement. The Mount Zion meetin'-house couldn't hold protracted meetin' without 'im. He fed more preachers an' the'r hosses than anybody else, an' some 'lowed that he wuz jest too natcherly good to pass away like common folks, an' that when his time come he'd jest disappear body an' all." She was now wiping her eyes on her apron, and her voice had the suggestion of withheld emotions. "I never calculated on him bringin' sech disgrace as this on his family."

"Whar is he now?" asked Odell, preliminarily.

"Down thar stackin' hay. Sally begun on 'im ag'in at dinner about yore orders to Eph, an' he went away 'thout finishin' his dinner. She's been a-cryin' an' a-poutin' an' takin' on fer a week, an' won't tech a bite to eat. I never seed a gal so bound up in anybody as she is in Eph. It has mighty nigh driv her pa distracted, kase he likes Eph, an' Sally's his pet." Mrs. Calihan turned her head toward the adjoining room: "Sally, oh, Sally! are ye listenin'? Come heer a minute!"

There was silence for a moment, then a sound of heavy shoes on the floor of the next room, and a tall rather good-looking girl entered. Her eyes and cheeks were red, and she hung her head awkwardly, and did not look at any one but her mother.

"Did you call me, ma?"

"Yes, honey; run an' tell yore pa they are all heer,—the last one of 'em, an' fer him to hurry right on to the house an' not keep 'em a-waitin'."

"Yes-sum!" And without any covering for her head the visitors saw her dart across the back yard toward the meadow.

With his pitchfork on his shoulder, a few minutes later Abner Calihan came up to the back door of his house. He wore no coat, and but one frayed suspender supported his patched and baggy trousers. His broad, hairy breast showed through the opening in his shirt. His tanned cheeks and neck were corrugated, his hair and beard long and reddish brown. His brow was high and broad, and a pair of blue eyes shone serenely beneath his shaggy brows.

"Good evenin'," he said, leaning his pitchfork against the door-jamb outside and entering. Without removing his hat he went around and gave a damp hand to each visitor. "It is hard work savin' hay sech weather as this."

No one replied to this remark, though they all nodded and looked as if they wanted to give utterance to something struggling within them. Calihan swung a chair over near the door, and sat down and leaned back against the wall, and looked out at the chickens in the yard and the gorgeous peacock strutting about in the sun. No one seemed quite ready to speak, so, to cover his embarrassment, he looked farther over in the yard to his potato-bank and pig-pens, and then up into the clear sky for indications of rain.

"I reckon you know our business, Brother Calihan," began Odell, in a voice that broke the silence harshly.

"I reckon I could make a purty good guess," and Calihan spit over his left shoulder into the yard. "I hain't heerd nothin' else fer a week. From all the talk, a body'd 'low I'd stole somebody's hawgs."

"We jest *had* to take action," affirmed the self-constituted speaker for the others. "The opinions you have expressed," and Odell at once began to warm up to his task, "are so undoctrinal an' so p'int blank ag'in' the articles of faith that, believin' as you seem to believe, you are plumb out o' j'int with Big Cabin Church, an' a resky man in any God-feerin' community. God Almighty"—and those who saw Odell's twitching upper lip and indignantly flashing eye knew that the noted "exhorter" was about to become mercilessly personal and vindictive—"God Almighty is the present ruler of the universe, but sence you have set up to run ag'in' Him it looks like you'd need a wider scope of territory to transact business in than jest heer in this settlement."

The blood had left Calihan's face. His eyes swept from one stern, unrelenting countenance to another till they rested on his wife and daughter, who sat side by side, their faces in their aprons, their shoulders quivering with soundless sobs. They had forsaken him. He was an alien in his own house, a criminal convicted beneath his own roof. His rugged breast rose and fell tumultuously as he strove to command his voice.

"I hain't meant no harm—not a speck," he faltered, as he wiped the perspiration from his quivering chin. "I hain't no hand to stir up strife in a community. I've tried to be law-abidin' an' honest, but it don't seem like a man kin he'p thinkin'. He—"

"But he kin keep his thinkin' to hisse'f," interrupted Odell, sharply; and a pause came after his words.

In a jerky fashion Calihan spit over his shoulder again. He looked at his wife and daughter for an instant, and nodded several times as if acknowledging the force of Odell's words. Bart Callaway took out his tobacco-quid and nervously shuffled it about in his palm as if he had half made up his mind that Odell ought not to do all the talking, but he remained mute, for Mrs. Calihan had suddenly looked up.

"That's what I told him," she whimpered, bestowing a tearful glance on her husband. "He mought 'a' kep' his idees to hisse'f ef he had to have 'em, and not 'a' fetched calumny an' disgrace down on me an' Sally."

When he used to set thar atter supper an' pore over the *True Light* when ever'body else wuz in bed, I knowed it'd bring trouble, kase some o' the doctrine wuz scand'lous. The next thing I knowed he had lost intrust in prayer-meetin', an' 'lowed that Brother Washburn's sermons wuz the same thing over an' over, an' that they mighty nigh put him to sleep. An' then he give up axin' the blessin' at the table—somethin' that has been done in my fam'ly as fur back as the oldest one kin remember. An' he talked his views, too, fer it got out, an' me nur Sally narry one never cheeped it, fer we wuz ashamed. An' then ever' respectable woman in Big Cabin meetin'-house begun to sluff away from us as ef they wuz afeerd o' takin' some dreadful disease. It wuz hard enough on Sally at the start, but when Eph up an' tol' her that you had give him a good tongue-lashin', an' had refused to deed him the land you promised him ef he went any further with her, it mighty nigh prostrated her. She hain't done one thing lately but look out at the road an' pine an' worry. The blame is all on her father. My folks has all been good church members as fur back as kin be traced, an' narry one wuz ever turned out."

Mrs. Calihan broke down and wept. Calihan was deeply touched; he could not bear to see a woman cry. He cleared his throat and tried to look unconcerned.

"What step do you-uns feel called on to take next to—to what you are a-doin' of now?" he stammered.

"We 'lowed," replied Odell, "ef we couldn't come to some sort o' understandin' with you now, we'd fetch up the case before preachin' to-morrow an' let the membership vote on it. The verdict would go ag'in' you, Ab, fer thar hain't a soul in sympathy with you."

The sobbing of the two women broke out in renewed volume at the mention of this dreadful ultimatum, which, despite their familiarity with the rigor of Big Cabin Church discipline, they had up to this moment regarded as a vague contingent rather than a tangible certainty.

Calihan's face grew paler. Whatever struggle might have been going on in his mind was over. He was conquered.

"I am ag'in' bringin' reproach on my wife an' child," he conceded, a lump in his throat and a tear in his eye. "You all know best. I reckon I have been too forward an' too eager to heer myself talk." He got up and looked out toward the towering cliffy mountains and into the blue indefiniteness above them, and without looking at the others he finished awkwardly: "Ef it's jest the same to you-uns you may let the charge drap, an'—an' in future I 'll give no cause fer complaint."

"That's the talk," said Odell, warmly, and he got up and gave his hand to Calihan. The others followed his example.

"I 'll make a little speech before preachin' in the mornin'," confided Odell to Calihan after congratulations were over. "You needn't be thar unless you want to. I 'll fix you up all right."

Calihan smiled faintly and looked shamefacedly toward the meadow, and reached outside and took hold of the handle of his pitchfork.

"I want to try to git through that haystack 'fore dark," he said, awkwardly. "Ef you-uns will be so kind as to excuse me now I 'll run down and finish up. I'd sorter set myself a task to do, an' I don't like to fall short o' my mark."

Down in the meadow Calihan worked like a tireless machine, not pausing for a moment to rest his tense muscles. He was trying to make up for the time he had lost with his guests. Higher and smaller grew the great haystack as it slowly tapered toward its apex. The red sun sank behind the mountain and began to draw in its long streamers of light. The gray of dusk, as if fleeing from its darker self, the monster night, crept up from the east, and with a thousand arms extended moved on after the receding light.

Calihan worked on till the crickets began to shrill and the frogs in the marshes to croak, and the hay beneath his feet felt damp with dew. The stack was finished. He leaned on his fork and inspected his work mechanically. It was a perfect cone. Every outside straw and blade of grass lay smoothly downward, like the hair on a well-groomed horse. Then with his fork on his shoulder he trudged slowly up the narrow field-road toward the house. He was vaguely grateful for the darkness; a strange, new, childish embarrassment was on him. For the first time in life he was averse to meeting his wife and child.

"I've been spanked an' told to behave ur it 'ud go wuss with me," he muttered. "I never wuz talked to that away before by nobody, but I jest had to take it. Sally an' her mother never would 'a' heerd the last of it ef I had let out jest once. No man, I reckon, has a moral right to act so as to make his family miserable. I crawfished, I know, an' on short notice; but law me! I wouldn't have Bill Odell's heart in me fer ever' acre o' bottom-land' in this valley. I wouldn't 'a' talked to a houn' dog as he did to me right before Sally an' her mother."

He was very weary when he leaned his fork against the house and turned to wash his face and hands in the tin basin on the bench at the side of the steps. Mrs. Calihan came to the door, her face beaming.

"I wuz afeerd you never would come," she said, in a sweet, winning tone. "I got yore beans warmed over an' some o' yore brag yam taters cooked. Come on in 'fore the coffee an' biscuits git cold."

"I 'll be thar in a minute," he said; and he rolled up his sleeves and plunged his hot hands and face into the cold spring-water.

"Here's a clean towel, pa; somebody has broke the roller." It was Sally. She had put on her best white muslin gown and braided her rich, heavy hair into two long plaits which hung down her back. There was no trace of the former redness about her eyes, and her face was bright and full of happiness. He wiped his hands and face on the towel she held, and took a piece of a comb from his vest pocket and hurriedly raked his coarse hair backward. He looked at her tenderly and smiled in an abashed sort of way.

"Anybody comin' to-night?"

"Yes, sir."

"Eph Odell, I 'll bet my hat!"

The girl nodded, and blushed and hung her head.

"How do you know?"

"Mr. Odell 'lowed I mought look fer him."

Abner Calihan laughed slowly and put his arm around his daughter, and together they went toward the steps of the kitchen door.

"You seed yore old daddy whipped clean out to-day," he said, tentatively. "I reckon yo 're ashamed to see him sech a coward an' have him sneak away like a dog with his tail tucked 'tween his legs. Bill Odell is a power in this community."

She laughed with him, but she did not understand his banter, and preceded him into the kitchen. It was lighted by a large tallow-dip in the center of the table. There was much on the white cloth to tempt a hungry laborer's appetite—a great dish of greasy string-beans, with pieces of bacon, a plate of smoking biscuits, and a platter of fried ham in brown gravy. But he was not hungry. Slowly and clumsily he drew up his chair and sat down opposite his wife and daughter. He slid a quivering thumb under the edge of his inverted plate and turned it half over, but noticing that they had their hands in their laps and had reverently bowed their heads, he cautiously replaced it. In a flash he comprehended what was expected of him. The color surged into his homely face. He played with his knife for a moment, and then stared at them stubbornly, almost defiantly. They did not look up, but remained motionless and patiently expectant. The dread of the protracted silence, for which he was becoming more and more responsible, conquered him. He lowered his head and spoke in a low, halting tone:

"Good Lord, Father of us all, have mercy on our sins, and make us thankful fer these, Thy many blessings. Amen."

THE TENDER LINK

I

Several customers were gathered in Mark Wyndham's store at the cross-roads. They were rough farmers, wearing jean clothing, slouch hats, and coarse, dusty brogans.

A stranger, a man of quite a different type, came in and sat down near the side door. At first the crowd gazed at him curiously, but after a while he seemed to pass out of their minds. When he had waited on all his customers, Mark approached the stranger.

"By hookey!" he exclaimed, pausing in astonishment, and then extending his hand, "as the Lord is my Maker, it's Luke King! Who'd ever expect to see you turn up?"

"Yes; Luke King it will have to be, since you, like all the rest, won't call me by my right name."

Mark laughed apologetically. "Oh, I forgot you never could bear to be called by yore step-daddy's name; but you wuz raised up with the King layout, an' Laramore is not a easy word to handle. Well, I reckon you are follerin' what you started—writin' books?"

"Yes."

"I 'lowed you'd stick to it. I never seed a feller study harder an' want to do a thing as bad."

Lucian Laramore smiled. "Did any one here ever find out that I had adopted that profession?"

"Not a soul, Luke. I never let on to anybody that I knowed it, an' the folks round heer don't read much. They mought 'a' suspected some 'n' ef Luke King had been signed to yore books and stories, but nobody ever called you by yore right name. What on earth ever made you come home?"

"It was my mother that brought me here, Mark—not the others," said Laramore. "If a man is a man, no sort of fame or prosperity can make him forget his mother. I planned to come back several times, but something always prevented it. However, when you wrote me that the last time you saw her she was not looking well, I decided to come at once."

Mark was critically surveying his old friend from head to foot while he was speaking. Laramore smiled, and added, "You are wondering why I am so plainly dressed, Mark; you needn't deny it."

Mark flushed when he replied: "Well, I did 'low you fellers 'ud put on more style 'n we-uns down here."

"It's an old suit I have worn out hunting in Canada. I put it on because I intended to do a good deal of walking; and then, to tell the truth, I thought it would look better for me to go back very simply dressed."

"That's a fact, now I think of it; well, I wish you luck over thar. Goin' ter foot it over?"

"Yes; it is only three miles, and I have plenty of time."

But the walk was longer than Laramore thought it would be, and he was hot, damp with perspiration, and covered with dust when he reached the four-roomed cabin among the stunted pines and wild cedars.

Old Sam King sat out in front of the door. He wore no shoes nor coat, and his hickory shirt and jean trousers had been patched many times. His hair was long, sun-burned, and tangled, and the corrugated skin of his cheek and neck was covered with straggling hairs.

As the stranger came in view from behind the pine-pole pig-pen, the old man uttered a grunt of surprise that brought to the door two young women in homespun dresses, and a tall, lank young man in his shirt-sleeves.

"I suppose you don't remember me," said Laramore, and he put his satchel on a wash-bench by a tub and a piggin of lye soap.

"Well, I reckon nobody in this shack is gwine to 'spute with you," rumbled the old man, as with his chin in his hand, he lazily looked at the face before him.

"I might not have known you either if I had not been told that you lived here. I am the fellow you used to call Luke King."

"By Jacks!" After that ejaculation the old man and the others stared speechlessly.

"Yes, that's who I am," continued Laramore. "How do you do, Jake?" (to the lank young man in the door). "We might as well shake hands. You girls have grown into women since I left. I've stayed away a long time, and been nearly all over the world, but I've always wanted to get back. Where is mother?"

Neither of the girls could summon up the courage to answer, and they seemed under stress of great embarrassment.

"She is porely," said the old man, inhospitably keeping his seat. "She's had a hurtin' in 'er side from usin' that thar battlin'-stick too much on dirty clothes, an' her cold has settled on 'er chest. Mary, go tell yore maw Luke's got back. Huh, we all 'lowed you wuz dead 'cept her. She al'ays contended you wuz alive som 'ers. How's times been a-servin' uv you?"

"Pretty well." Laramore put his satchel on the ground and sat down wearily on the bench by the tub.

"Things is awful slow heer. Whar have you been hangin' out?"

"Nowhere in particular—that is, I have lived in a good many places."

"Huh! 'bout as I expected; an' I reckon you hain't got nothin' at all ter show fer it 'cept what you've got on yore back."

"That's about all."

"What you been a-follerin'?"

Laramore colored sensitively.

"Writing for papers and magazines."

"I 'lowed you mought go at some 'n' o' that sort; you used to try mighty hard to write a good hand; you never would work. Married?"

"No."

"Hain't able to support a woman I reckon. Well, you showed a great lot of good sense thar; a feller can sorter manage to shift fer hisse'f ef he hain't hampered by a pack o' children an' er sick woman."

At that juncture Mary returned. She flushed as she caught Laramore's expectant glance. She spoke to her father.

"Maw said tell 'im ter come in thar." Laramore went into the front room and turned into a small apartment adjoining. It was windowless and dark, the only light filtering through the front room. On a low, narrow bed beneath a ladder leading to a trap-door above, lay a woman.

"Here I am, Luke," she cried out, excitedly. "Don't stumble over that pan o' water! I've been taking a mustard footbath to try an' git my blood warm. La, me! How you did take me by surprise! I've prayed for little else in many er yeer, an' I was jest about ter give it up."

His foot touched a three-legged stool, and he drew it to the head of her bed and sat down. He took one of her hard, thin hands and bent over her. Should he kiss her? She had not taught him to do so when he was a child, and he had never kissed her in his life, but he had seen the world and grown wiser. He turned her face toward him and pressed his lips to hers. She was much surprised, and drew herself from him and wiped her mouth with a corner of the sheet, but he knew she was pleased.

"Why, Luke, what on earth do you mean? Have you gone plumb crazy?" she said, quickly.

"I wanted to kiss you, that's all," he said, awkwardly. They were both silent for a moment, then she spoke, tremblingly: "You al'ays was womanish an' tender-like; it don't do a body any harm; none o' the rest ain't that way. But, my stars! I cayn't tell a bit how you look in this pitch dark. Mary! oh, Mary!"

Laramore released his mother's hand, and sat up erect as the girl came to the door.

"What you want, maw?"

"I cayn't see my hand'fore me; I wish you'd fetch a light heer. You 'll find a piece o' candle in the clock; I hid it there to keep Jake from usin' it in his lantern."

The girl lit the bit of tallow-dip, and fastened it in the neck of a bottle. She brought it in, stood it on a box filled with cotton-seed and ears of corn, and shambled out. Laramore's heart sank as he looked around him. The room was nothing but a lean-to shed walled with upright slabs and floored with puncheons. The bedstead was a crude wooden frame supported by perpendicular saplings fastened to floor and rafters. The cracks in the wall were filled with mud, rags, and newspapers. Bunches of dried herbs hung above his head, and piles of old clothing and agricultural implements lay about indiscriminately. Disturbed by the light, a hen flew from her nest behind a dismantled loom, and with a loud cackling went out at the door.

The old woman gazed at him eagerly. "You hain't altered so overly much," she observed, "'cept yore skin looks mighty white, and yore hands feel soft."

Then she lowered her voice into a whisper, and glanced furtively toward the door. "You favor yore father—I don't mean Sam, but Mr. Laramore. Yore as like as two peas. He helt his head that away, an' had yore way o' bein' gentle with womenfolks. You've got his high temper, too. La, me! that last night you was at home, an' Sam cussed you, an' kicked yore books into the fire, I didn't sleep a wink. I thought you'd gone off to borrow a gun. It was almost a relief to know you'd left, kase I seed you an' Sam couldn't git along. Yore father was a different sort of a man, Luke; he loved books an' study, like you. He had good blood in 'im; his father was a teacher an' a circuit-rider. I don't know why I married Sam, 'less it was 'kase I was young an' helpless, an' you was a baby."

There was a low whimper in her voice, and the lines about her mouth tightened. Laramore's breast heaved, and he suddenly put out his hand and began to stroke her thin, gray hair. A strange, restful feeling stole over

him. The spell was on her, too; she closed her eyes, and a blissful smile lighted her wan face. Then her lips began to quiver, and she turned her face from him.

"I'm er simpleton," she sobbed, "but I cayn't he'p it. Nobody hain't petted me nur tuk on over me a bit sence yore paw died. I never treated you right, nuther, Luke; I ort never to 'a' let Sam run over you like he did."

"Never mind that," Laramore replied, tenderly; "but you must not lie here in this dingy hole; you need medicine and good food."

"I'm gwine ter git up," she answered. "I'm not sick; I jest laid down ter rest. I must git the house straight. Mary and Jane hain't no hands at housework 'thout I stand over 'em, and Jake an' his paw is continually a-fussin'. I feel stronger already; ef you 'll go in t'other room I 'll rise. They 'll never fix you nothin' ter eat, nur nowhar to sleep. I reckon you 'll have to lie with Jake, like you useter, tel I can fix better. Things is in a awful mess sence I got porely."

He went into the front room. The old man had brought his satchel in. He had opened it in a chair, and was coolly examining the contents in the firelight. Jake and the two girls stood looking on. Laramore stared at the old man, but the latter did not seem at all abashed. Finally he closed the satchel and put it on the floor.

In a few minutes Mrs. King came in. She blew out the candle, and as she crossed to the mantelpiece she carefully extinguished the smoking wick. The change in her was more noticeable to her son than it had been a few minutes before. She looked very frail and white in her faded black cotton gown. Her shoes were worn and her bare feet showed through the holes.

"Mary," she asked, "have you put on the supper?"

"Yes'm; but it hain't tuk up yit." The girl went into the next room, which was used for kitchen and dining-room in one, and her mother followed her. In a few minutes the old woman came to the door.

"Walk out, all of you," she said, wearily. "Luke, you 'll have to put up with what is set before you; hog-meat is mighty sca'ce this year. Just at fattenin' time our hogs tuk the cholera an' six was found dead in one day. Meat is fetchin' fifteen cents a pound in town."

II

After supper Laramore left his mother and sisters removing the dishes from the table and went out. He did not want to be left alone with his stepfather.

He crossed the little brook that ran behind the cabin, and leaned against the rail fence which surrounded the pine-pole corn-crib. He could easily leave them in their poverty and ignorance, and return to the great intellectual world from which he had come—the world which understood and honored him; but, after all, could he do it now that he had seen his mother?

The cabin door shone out a square of red light against the blackness of the hill and the silent pines beyond. He heard Jake whistling a tune he had whistled long ago when they had worked in the fields together, and the creaking of the puncheon floor as the family moved about within.

A figure appeared in the door. It was his mother, and she was coming out to search for him.

"Here I am, mother," he said, as she advanced through the darkness; "look out and don't get your feet wet!"

She chuckled childishly as she stepped across the brook on the stones. When she reached him she put her hand on his arm and laughed: "La, me, boy, a little wet won't hurt me—I'm used to it; I've milked the cows in that thar lot when the mire was shoe-mouth deep. I 'lowed I'd find you heer some'rs. You used to be a mighty hand to sneak off from the rest, an' you hain't got over it. But you have changed. You don't talk our way exactly, an' I reckon that's what aggravates Sam. He was goin' on jest now about yore bein' stuck up in yore talk an' eatin'."

He looked past her at the full moon which was rising above the trees.

"Mother," said he, abruptly, and he put his arm around her neck, and his eyes filled—"mother, I don't see how I can stay here long. Your health is bad and you are not comfortable; the others are strong and can stand it, but you can't. Come away with me, for a while anyway. I 'll put you under a doctor and make you comfortable."

She looked up into his eyes steadily for a moment, then she slapped him playfully on the breast and drew away from him. "How foolish you talk!" she laughed; "why, you know I couldn't leave Sam an' the children. He'd go stark crazy 'thout me round, an' they'd be 'thout advice an' counsel. La, me! What makes you think I ain't comfortable? This house is a sight better 'n the last one we had, an' dryer, an' a heap warmer inside. Hard times is likely to come anywhar an' any time. It strikes rich an' pore alike. Thar's 'Squire Loften offerin' his big river-bottom plantation an' the best new house in the county at a awful sacrifice, kase he is obliged to raise money to pay out 'n debt. He offers it fer ten thousand dollars, an' it's wuth every dollar of twenty. Now, ef we-all jest had sech a place as that we'd ax nobody any odds. Sam an' Jake are hard workers, but they've had 'nough bad luck to dishearten anybody."

"Ten thousand dollars!" Laramore's heart bounded suddenly. It was exactly the amount he had in a Boston bank—all that he had ever been able to save. He had calculated on investing it with some literary friends in a magazine of which he was to be the editor.

"Do you think they could manage the place successfully, mother?" he asked, after a moment.

"Why, you know they could," she returned. "A body could make a livin' on that land and never half try. 'Squire Loften spent his money like water, an' let a gang o' triflin' darkies eat 'im up alive."

"I remember the farm and the old house very well," he said, reflectively.

"They turned that into a barn," she ran on, enthusiastically. "The new house is jest splendid—green blinds to the winders, an' cyarpets on the floors, a spring-house, an' a windmill to keep the house an' barn in water."

"We'd better go in," he said, abruptly; "you 'll catch cold out here in the dew."

She laughed childishly as she walked back to the cabin by his side. A thick smoke and an unpleasant odor met them at the door.

"It's Sam a-burnin' rags to oust the mosquitoes, so he kin sleep," she explained; "they are wuss this yeer'an I ever seed 'em. Jake an' the gals grease the'r faces with lamp-oil when they have any, but I jest kiver up my head with a rag an' never know they are about. I reckon we'd better go to bed. Jake has fixed him a bed up in the loft, so you kin sleep by yorese'f. He's been jowerin' at his paw ever sence supper fer treatin' you so bad."

The next morning, after breakfast, Jake threw a bag of shelled corn on the bare back of his old bay mare and started to mill down the valley, and his father shouldered an ax and went up on the hill to cut wood.

"Whar are you gwine?" asked Mrs. King, following Laramore to the door.

"I thought I would walk over to the Loftan place and see the improvements. I used to hunt over that land."

"Well, be shore to git back by dinner, whatever you do. Me an' Jane caught a hen on the roost last night, an' I'm gwine to make you a chicken pie, kase you used to love 'em so much."

Half a mile up the road, which ran along the side of the hill, he came into view of the rich, level lands of the Loftan plantation. He stood in the shade of a tall poplar and looked thoughtfully at the lush green meadows, the well-tilled fields of corn, cotton, and sorghum, and the large two-storied house with its dormer windows, tall, fluted columns, and broad verandas—at the numerous outhouses, barns, and stables, and the white-graveled drives and walks from the house to the road. Then he turned and looked back at the cabin—the home of his mother.

It was hardly discernible in the gray morning mist that hung over the little vale in which it stood. He saw Jake, far away, riding along, in and out among the sassafras and sumac bushes that bordered a worn-out wheat-field, his long legs dangling at the sides of the mare. There was a bent figure in the wood-yard picking up chips; it was his mother or one of the girls.

"Poor souls!" he exclaimed; "they have been in a dreary treadmill all their lives, and have never known the joy of one gratified ambition. If only I could conquer my own selfish desires I could give them comforts they never dreamed of possessing—a taste of happiness. It would take my last dollar, and Chamberlain and Gilraith would never understand. They would look elsewhere for capital and for an editor, and it would be like them to say they could get along without my contributions."

It was dusk when he returned to the cabin. Jake sat on his bag of meal in the door. Old Sam had taken off his shoes, and sat out under a persimmon tree "coolin' off," and yelling angrily at his wife to "hurry up supper."

When she heard that Laramore had returned she came to the door. "We didn't know what had become of you," she said, as she emerged from the cabin.

"I got interested in the Loftan farm, and before I realized it the sun was down; I am sorry."

"Oh, it don't matter; I saved yore piece o' pie, an' I'm just warmin' it over. I bet you didn't get a single bite o' dinner."

"Yes, I did; but I am ready for supper."

As they were rising from the table Laramore said: "I have got something to say to you all."

They dragged their chairs back to the front room and sat down with awkward ceremony. They stared at him in open-mouthed wonder as he placed his chair in front of them. Old Sam seemed embarrassed by the formality of the proceedings, and endeavored to relieve himself by assuming indifference. He coughed conspicuously and hitched his chair back till it leaned against the door-jamb.

There was a tremor in Laramore's voice, and all the time he was speaking he did not look up from the floor.

"Since I went away from you," he began, "I have studied hard and applied myself to a profession, and though I have wandered about a good deal I have managed to save a little money. I am not rich, but I am worth more than you think I am. You have never had any luck, and you have worked hard, and deserve more than has fallen to your lot. You never could make anything on this poor land. The Loftan property is worth twice what he asked for it. I happened to have the money to spare and bought it. I have the deed for it."

There was a profound silence in the room. The occupants of the row of chairs stared at him with widened eyes, mute and motionless. A sudden breeze came in at the door and turned the flame of the candle on the mantel toward the wall, and caused black ropes of smoke from the pine-knots in the chimney to curl out into the room like pyrotechnic snakes. Mrs. King bent forward and looked into Laramore's face and smiled and winked, then she glanced at the serious faces of the others and broke out into a childish laugh of genuine merriment.

"La, me! Ef you-uns ain't settin' thar and swallowin' down every word that boy says jest ez ef it was so much law and gospel!"

But none of them entered into her mood; indeed, they gave her not so much as a glance. Without replying, Laramore arose and took the candle from the mantelpiece. He stood it on the table and laid a folded paper beside it. "There's the deed," he said. "It is made out to my mother to hold as long as she lives, and to fall eventually to her daughters and her son Jake."

He left the paper on the table and went back to his chair. An awkward silence ensued. It was broken by old Sam. He coughed and threw his tobacco-quad out at the door, and smiling to hide his agitation he went to the table. His back was to them, and his face went out of view when he bent to hold the paper in the light.

"That's what it is, by Jacks!" he blurted out. "Thar's no shenanigan about it. The Loftan place is Mariar Habersham King's ef I kin read writin'."

With a great clatter of shoes and chairs they rose and gathered around him, leaving their benefactor submerged in their shadow. Each took the paper and examined it silently, and then they slowly dispersed, leaving the document on the table. Sam King started aimlessly toward the kitchen, but finally turned to the front door, where he stood irresolute, staring out at the road. Mrs. King looked at Laramore helplessly and went out into the kitchen, and exchanging glances, the two girls followed her. Jake noticed that the wind was

blowing the paper from the table, and he rescued it and silently offered it to his half-brother.

Laramore motioned it from him. "Give it to mother," he said. "She 'll take care of it. By the way, Lofton will get out at once. The price paid includes the crops, and they are in very good condition."

He had Jake's bed to himself again that night. For hours he lay awake listening to the drone of excited conversation from the family which had gathered under the trees in front of the cabin. About eleven o'clock some one came softly into his room. The moon had risen and its beams fell in at the open door. It was his mother, and she was moving toward his bed with cat-like caution. "Is that you, mother?" he asked.

For an instant she was so much startled at finding him awake that she could not reply.

"Oh, I tried not to wake you," she stammered. "I just wanted to make shore yore bed was comfortable."

"It is all right. I wasn't asleep, anyway." He could feel her trembling as she sat down on the edge of his bed.

"Seems like you couldn't sleep, nuther," she said. "Thar hain't a shut eye in this cabin. They've all laid down, an' laid down an' got up ergin, over an' over." She laughed softly and twisted her hands nervously in her lap. "We are all that excited we don't know which way to turn. Why, Luke, it 'll be the talk o' the county! Sech luck hain't fell to any family as pore as we are sence I can remember. La, me! It 'ud make you split yore sides a-laughin' jest to set out thar an' listen to all the plans they are makin'. But Sam has the least of all to say; an', Luke, I'm sorter sorry fer 'im. He feels bad about the way he has al'ays treated you. He's too back'ard an' shamefaced to ax yore pardon, an' he begged me jest now to do it fer 'im the fust time I got a chance. He's a good man, Luke, but he's gittin' old, an' has been hounded to death by debt an' ill-luck."

"I know it; he is all right," replied Lara-more, tremulously. "Tell him I have not the slightest ill-will against him, and that I hope he will get along better now."

"You talk like you don't intend to stay."

"No; I shall have to return North pretty soon—that is, after I see you moved into your new home. I can do better up there; you know I was not cut out for a farmer."

"I reckon you know best 'bout your own arrangements, but I hate to have you go ag'in. I'd like to have all my children with me ef I could."

"I 'll come back every now and then; I won't stay away so long next time."

She went out to tell her husband what he had said and to let her son sleep, but Laramore slept little. All night, at intervals, the buzz of low voices and sudden outbursts of merriment reached him.

His mother stole softly into his room. This time it was to bring a shawl, which she cautiously spread over him, for the air had grown cold. She thought him asleep, but as she was turning away he caught her hand, and drew her down and kissed her.

"Why, Luke!" she exclaimed; "don't be foolish. Why, what's got in—?" But her voice had grown husky and her words died away in an irrepressible sob of happiness. She did not stir for an instant; then impulsively she put her arms around his neck and kissed him. And he felt that her face was damp.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NORTHERN GEORGIA SKETCHES ***

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