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N. Harben**

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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PAUL RUNDEL: A NOVEL ***

PAUL RUNDEL

A Novel

By Will N. Harben

Harper and Brothers

1912



[See page 410]

"PAUL," SHE SAID, "YOU ARE VERY HAPPY, AREN'T YOU?"

Original

Paul Rundel

A Novel

By
Will N. Harben

Author of
"Abner Daniel" "Pole Baker"
"Jane Dawson," etc.



New York and London
Harper & Brothers Publishers

M C M X I I

Original

TO

THE MEMORY OF MY LITTLE SON ERIC

CONTENTS

I

[CHAPTER I](#)

[CHAPTER II](#)

[CHAPTER III](#)

[CHAPTER IV](#)

[CHAPTER V](#)

[CHAPTER VI](#)

[CHAPTER VII](#)

[CHAPTER VIII](#)

[CHAPTER IX](#)

[CHAPTER X](#)

[CHAPTER XI](#)

[CHAPTER XII](#)

[CHAPTER XIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIV](#)

[CHAPTER XV](#)

[CHAPTER XVI](#)

[CHAPTER XVII](#)

II

[CHAPTER I](#)

[CHAPTER II](#)

[CHAPTER III](#)

[CHAPTER IV](#)

[CHAPTER V](#)

[CHAPTER VI](#)

[CHAPTER VII](#)

[CHAPTER VIII](#)

[CHAPTER IX](#)

[CHAPTER X](#)

[CHAPTER XI](#)

[CHAPTER XII](#)

[CHAPTER XIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIV](#)

[CHAPTER XV](#)

[CHAPTER XVI](#)

[CHAPTER XVII](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII](#)

[CHAPTER XIX](#)

[CHAPTER XX](#)

[CHAPTER XXI](#)

[CHAPTER XXII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIV](#)

[CHAPTER XXV](#)

[CHAPTER XXVI](#)

[CHAPTER XXVII](#)

[CHAPTER XXVIII](#)

[CHAPTER XXIX](#)

[CHAPTER XXX](#)

I

CHAPTER I

FROM the window of her husband's shop in the mountain-village of Grayson, Cynthia Tye stood peering out on the Square. She was tall, gaunt, and thin-so thin, in fact, that her fingers, pricked by her needle and gnarled at the joints, had a hold in energy only, as she pressed them down on her contourless hips. She had left her work in the living-room and kitchen back of the shop and come in to question the shoemaker as to what he wanted for his dinner, the boiling and stewing hour having arrived.

Silas, whose sedentary occupation had supplied him with the surplus flesh his wife needed, and whose genial pate was as bald as an egg, save for a bare fringe of gray which overlapped his ears on the sides and impinged upon his shirt-collar behind, looked up and smiled broadly.

"I wish you'd quit that, Cynthy. I really do." Every outward and inward part of the man lent itself to his smile, the broad, clean-shaven Irish lip, the big, facile mouth, the almost wrinkleless pink cheeks, the clear, twinkling blue eyes, the besmirched goatee—in fact, all his rotund, satisfied self between his chin and the bench on which he sat shook like a mass of animated jelly.

"Quit what?" She turned on him suddenly. "Why, quit always and *eternally* comin' to me when I'm chock full o' breakfast, and askin' me what I want to eat for dinner. I can still taste my coffee. I reckon settin' humped over this way between meals ain't exactly accordin' to nature in its best state. I'd ruther live in a boardin'-house and take what was served, hit or miss, than to digest a meal in my mind three hours before I eat it."

"Huh! I say!" Cynthia sniffed, "and what about me, who not only has to think about it beforehand, but has to pick it in the garden, git it ready for the pots, smell the fumes of it from daylight till dark, and worry all night for fear something, will sour or be ate up by the cat, dog, or chickens?"

Silas laughed till his tools—last, hammer, and knife—rattled in his leather apron. "You got the best o' that argument," he chuckled, as he pressed the shoe he was repairing down between his fat knees, crossed his short feet, and reached for a box of nails which had fallen to the floor. Then his merriment ceased. He bent a tender glance on the woman and a gentle cadence crept into his voice: "The Lord knows you *do* have a hard time, Cynthy, an' no jokin'. I wish thar was some way around it. I lie awake many and many a night just thinkin' how happy me'n you'd be if we could take a trip off some'rs and not have nothin' to bother about for one week anyway. What are you gazin' at out thar so steady?"

"I'm watchin' that pore boy, Paul Rundel," Cynthia returned, with a sigh. "I never see 'im without my heart achin'. He's haulin' bark for Jim Hoag's tannery. He driv' up on a big load to the post-office while I was out gatherin' beans just now. You remember them two devilish Harris boys that picked the row with 'im at the hitchin'-rack last week? Well, I saw 'em at the corner and thought they looked suspicious. Then I knowed they was waitin' for 'im, for they nudged one another and picked up brickbats, and went to Paul's wagon. I couldn't hear what was said, but it looked like they was darin' Paul to git down, for they kept swingin' their bricks and shakin' their fists at 'im."

"What a pity, what a pity!" The shoemaker sighed. "That boy is tryin' his level best to live right, and thar was two ag'in' one, and both bigger and stronger."

"Well, Paul kin take care of hisself," Cynthia said, with a chuckle. "It looked like he was in for serious trouble, and I was runnin' to the fence to try to call somebody to help him, when, lo and behold! I saw him reach back on the load o' bark and pick up a double-barreled gun and stick the butt of it to his shoulder. I am a Christian woman, and I don't believe in bloodshed, but when them scamps drapped the'r bricks and broke for the blacksmith shop like dogs with their tails twixt their legs I shouted and laughed till I cried. Paul got down and was makin' for the shop, when the marshal—Budd Tibbs—stopped 'im and made 'im put up the gun and go back to his wagon. The next minute I saw the Harris boys slip out the back door of the shop and slink off out o' sight."

"It's bad, bad, bad!" Silas deplored. "Sometimes I wonder why the Lord lets things run slipshod like that. Paul has a bright mind. He is as sharp as a brier. He loves to read about what's goin' on over the world. If thar ever was a boy that needed good advice and trainin' he is one. He's right at the turnin'-point, too; he's got a high temper, a lot o' sperit, and won't stand naggin' from high or low. And what's he got at home? Nothin' that wouldn't take life and hope out of any ambitious boy—a daddy that is half dead, and won't work a lick—"

"And a mammy," Cynthia broke in, with indignation, "Si, that is the vainest, silliest woman that ever breathed, traipsin' out to meetin' in her flimsy finery bought by that boy's hard work. They say, because she's passably good-lookin' and can sing well, that she thinks herself too good to lay her hands to a thing. She don't love Ralph Rundel, nor *never* did, or she couldn't act that way when he is sick. I've heard, on good authority, that she never cared much for Paul, even when he was a baby—folks say she didn't want 'im to come when he did, and she never took care of 'im like a mother ought to."

"I've watched Paul a long time," Silas remarked. "Me'n him are purty good friends. He's rough on the outside, but now and then I see away down into his heart. He worries about his daddy's bad health constantly. They are more like two brothers than father and son, anyway, and as Ralph grows weaker he leans more and more on his boy. It certainly is sad. I saw 'em both down at Hoag's cotton-gin last fall. Paul had run across some second-hand school-books somewhar, and was tryin' to explain 'em to his pa, but he couldn't make any impression on him. Ralph looked like he was tryin' to show interest, but it wasn't in 'im. I tell you, Cynthy, the hardest job our Creator ever put on his creatures is for 'em to have unbounded faith in the perfection in the unseen when thar is so much out o' joint always before our eyes."

"Yes, but *you* never lose faith," Cynthia said, proudly. "I'd have let loose long ago if I hadn't had you to keep me agoin'."

"You see, Cynthy, I've noticed that something bright always follows on the heels of what is dark." Silas hammered the words in with the tacks, which he held in his mouth. "Peace hovers over war and drops down after it like rain on dry soil; joy seems to pursue sorrow like sunshine pushin' clouds away, and, above all, love conquers hate, and you know our Lord laid particular stress on that."

"Paul has just left the post-office," Cynthia said. "He's left his hosses standin' and is headed this way."

"He's comin' after his daddy's shoes," Silas replied. "I've had 'em ready for a week. I took 'em out to his

wagon one day, but he didn't have the money, and although I offered to credit him he wouldn't hear to it. He's as independent as a hog on ice. I tell you thar's lots in that boy."

Cynthia, as the youth was crossing the street, turned back into her kitchen. A moment later Paul entered the shop. He was thin almost to emaciation, just merging into the quickly acquired height of a boy of sixteen, and had the sallow complexion that belongs to the ill-nourished mountaineers of the South. His coarse brown hair fought against the restrictions of the torn straw hat, which, like a miniature tent, rested on the back part of his head. The legs of his trousers were frayed at the bottoms and so crudely patched at the knees that the varicolored stitches were observable across the room. He wore no coat, and his threadbare shirt of heavy, checked cotton had lost its buttons at the sleeves and neck. He had a finely shaped head, a strong chin, and a good nose. A pair of dreamy brown eyes in somber sockets were still ablaze from their recently kindled fires. His mouth was large and somehow, even in the grasp of anger, suggested the capacity for tenderness and ideality.

"Hello, young man!" Silas greeted him as he peered at the boy above his brass-rimmed spectacles and smiled genially. "Here at last. I was afraid you'd let them shoes take the dry-rot in my shop, and just because you wouldn't owe me a few cents for a day or two."

Paul made no reply. His restless glance roved sullenly over the heap of mended shoes and boots on the floor, and, selecting the pair he was looking for, he ran a quivering finger along the freshly polished edge of the soles and bent the leather testingly.

"Some o' the white oak you helped tan out thar at Hoag's," Silas jested. "If it ain't the best the brand on it is a liar, and I have been buncoed by your rich boss."

This also evoked no response. Thrusting the shoes under his arm, the boy put his hand into his pocket and drew out some small coins and counted them on the low window-sill close to the shoemaker. He was turning away when Silas stopped him. Pointing to a chair bottomed with splints of white oak and strengthened by strips of leather interlaced and tacked to the posts he said:

"Take that seat; I hain't seed you in a coon's age, Paul, and I want to talk to you."

With a slightly softened expression, the boy glanced through the open doorway out into the beating sunshine toward his horses and wagon.

"I've got to move on." He drew his tattered sleeve across his damp brow and looked at the floor. "I got another load to bring down from the mountain."

Silas peered through the window at the horses and nodded slowly. "Them pore pantin' brutes need the rest they are gettin' right now. Set down! set down! You don't have to hurry."

Reluctantly the youth complied, holding the shoes in his lap. Silas hammered diligently for a moment, and then the furrows on his kindly brow deepened as he stared steadily through his glasses, which were seldom free from splotches of lampblack and beeswax.

"I wonder, Paul, if you'd git mad if I was to tell you that I've always had a whoppin' big interest in you?"

The boy made as if about to speak, but seemed to have no command of tact or diplomacy. He flushed faintly; his lashes flickered; he fumbled the shoes in his lap, but no words were forthcoming. However, to Silas this was answer enough, and he was encouraged to go on.

"You see, Paul, I've knowed you since you was so high"—Silas held his hammer out on a level with his knee—"and I have watched you close ever since. Yore daddy—that was in his palmy days—used to take you with 'im when he'd go afishin', and I used to meet you an' him on the creek-bank. You was as plump and pink a toddler as I ever laid eyes on, just the age of the only one the Lord ever sent us. When mine was alive I was so full of the joy of it that I just naturally wanted to grab up every baby I met and hug it. I never could hear a child cry over a stubbed toe, a stone-bruise, or any little disappointment without actually achin' at the heart. But our son was taken, Paul, taken right when he was the very light an' music of our lives. And, my boy, let me tell you, if ever a Christian come nigh wagin' open war with his Maker I did on that day. God looked to me like a fiend incarnate, and His whole universe, from top to bottom, seemed a trap to catch an' torture folks in. But as time passed somehow my pain growed less, until now I am plumb resigned to the Lord's will. He knowed best. Yes, as I say, I always felt a big interest in you, and have prayed for you time after time, for I know your life is a tough uphill one. Paul, I hope you will excuse me, but a thing took place out thar in front of my window just now that—"

A grunt of somnolent rage escaped the boy, and Silas saw him clench his fist. His voice quivered with passion: "Them two devils have been picking at me for more than a year, calling me names and throwing rocks at me from behind fences. Yesterday they made fun of my father, and so I got ready, and—"

"I know, I know!"—the shoemaker sighed, reproachfully—"and so you deliberately, an' in a calm moment, laid that gun on yore load of bark, and—"

"Yes, and both barrels was loaded with heavy buck-shot!" the boy exulted, his tense face afire, his eyes flashing, "and if they hadn't run like two cowardly pups I'd have blowed holes in 'em as big as a hat."

Silas made a derogatory sound with his tongue and lips. "Oh, how blind you was, my pore boy—you was too mad to see ahead; folk always are when they are wrought up. Paul, stop for one minute and think. If you had killed one or both of 'em, that wouldn't have settled the trouble. You don't think so now, but you'd have gone through bottomless pits of remorse. The Lord has made it that way. Young as you are, you'd have died on the scaffold, or toiled through life as a convict, for it would have been murder, and deliberate at that."

The youth shrugged his thin shoulders. "I wouldn't have cared," he answered. "I tell you it ain't ended, Uncle Si. Them fellows has got to take back what they said about my father. They've got to take it back, I tell you! If they don't, I'll kill 'em if it takes a lifetime to do it. I'll kill 'em!"

Silas groaned. A pained look of concern gathered in his mild eyes. He reached for the polishing-iron which was being heated in the flame of a smoking lamp on his bench and wiped it on his dingy apron. "It won't do!" he cried, and his bald head seemed drawn down by fear and anxiety. "Something has got to be done; they are a pair of low, cowardly whelps that are try in' to bully you, but you've got to quit thinkin' about murder. It won't do, I say; the devil is behind it. You stand away above fellows like them. You've got the makin' of a big

man in you. You love to read and inquire, and they don't know their a b c's and can't add two figures. You mustn't lower yourself to such riffraff, and you wouldn't if you didn't let the worst part o' yourself get the upper hand."

When the boy had left the shop Silas stood watching him from the doorway. It was a pathetic figure which climbed upon the load of bark, and swung the long whip in the air.

"What a pity! What a pity!" the old man exclaimed, and he wrung his hands beneath his apron; then seating himself on his bench he reluctantly resumed his work. "As promising as he is, he may go clean to the dogs. Poor boy!"

CHAPTER II

IT was now near noon, as was indicated by the clock on the low, dome-capped tower of the Court House in the center of the village square. Paul recognized several idlers who stood on a street-corner as he drove past. They looked at him and smiled approvingly, and one cried out:

"Bully for you, Paul! You are all wool and a yard wide."

"And guaranteed not to tear or shrink!" another added, with a laugh over his borrowed wit; but the boy neither answered nor smiled. A sudden breeze from the gray, beetling cliffs of the near-by mountain fanned his damp brow, and he gazed straight ahead down the long road. Hot broodings over his wrongs surged within him, and the fact that he had so completely routed his enemies failed to comfort him at all. They could still laugh and sneer and repeat behind his back what they had dared to say to his face about a helpless man who had offended no one. Cowards that they were, they would keep their lies afloat, and even add to them.

His road took him past the lumber-yard, sawmills, brick and lime kilns, and through the sordid negro quarter, which was a cluster of ramshackle shanties made of unpainted upright boards grown brown and fuzzy, with now and then a more primitive log cabin, a relic of pioneer and Cherokee days. Vast fields of fertile lands belonging to his employer, James Hoag, lay on both sides of the road just outside the village. There were stretches of corn, cotton, and wheat in the best state of cultivation, beyond which, on a gentle rise, stood the planter's large two-story house, a white frame structure with a double veranda and outside blinds painted green. Beyond the house, at the foot of the slope, could be seen the dun roofs of the long sheds and warehouses of Hoag's tannery, to which Paul was taking the bark. A big gate had to be opened, and the boy was drawing rein with the intention of getting down when Hoag himself, astride a mettlesome bay mare, passed.

"Wait, I'll open it," he said, and spurring his mount close to the gate he kicked the wooden latch upward and swung the gate aside. "Drive ahead" he ordered. "I can pull it to."

Paul obeyed, indifferent even to the important man's presence. He would have forgotten Hoag's existence had the mare not borne him alongside the wagon again. The horseman was a middle-aged man of sturdy physique, fully six feet in height, and above two hundred pounds in weight. His skin was florid, his limbs were strong, firm, and muscular, his hands red and hair-grown. There was a cold, cruel expression in the keen blue eyes under the scraggy brows, which was not softened by a sweeping tobacco-stained mustache. He wore well-fitting top-boots which reached above the knee, and into which the legs of his trousers had been neatly folded. A wheeled spur of polished brass was strapped to the heel of his right boot. He sat his horse with the ease and grace of a cavalry officer. He held his mare in with a tense hand, and scanned the load of bark with a critical eye.

"How much more of that lot is left up there?" he asked.

"About two cords, or thereabouts," the boy said, carelessly.

"Well," Hoag said, "when you get that all stacked under the shed I want you to haul down the lot on Barrett's ridge. There is a good pile of it, and it's been exposed to the weather too long. I don't know exactly where it lies; but Barrett will point it out if he ain't too lazy to walk up to it."

"I know where it is," Paul informed him. "I helped strip it."

"Oh, well, that's all right. You might put on higher standards and rope 'em together at the top. That dry stuff ain't very heavy, and it is down grade."

He showed no inclination to ride on, continuing to check his mare. Presently his eyes fell on the stock of the gun which was half hidden by the bark, and his lips curled in a cold smile of amusement.

"Say," he said, with a low laugh, "do you go loaded for bear like this all the time?"

A slow flush of resentment rose into the boy's face. He stared straight at Hoag, muttered something inarticulately and then, with a distinct scowl, looked away.

The man's careless smile deepened; the boy's manner and tone were too characteristic and genuine, and furnished too substantial a proof of a quality Hoag admired to have offended him. Indeed, there was a touch of tentative respect in his voice, a gleam of callous sympathy in his eyes as he went on:

"I was at the post-office just now. I saw it all. I noticed them fellows layin' for you the other day, and wondered what would come of it. I don't say it to flatter you, Paul"—here Hoag chuckled aloud—"but I don't believe you are afraid of anything that walks the earth. I reckon it is natural for a man like me to sorter love a fair fight. It may be because you work for me and drive my team; but when I looked out the post-office window as I was stampin' a letter, and saw them whelps lyin' in wait for you, I got mad as hell. I wasn't goin' to let 'em hurt you, either. I'd have kicked the breath out of 'em at the last minute, but somehow I was curious

to see what you'd do, and, by gum! when that first brickbat whizzed by you, and you lit down with your gun leveled, and they scooted to shelter like flyin' squirrels, I laid back and laughed till I was sore. That was the best bottle of medicine they ever saw, and they would have had a dose in a minute. They slid into the blacksmith's shop like it was a fort an' shut the door. I reckon you'd have shot through the planks if Budd Tibbs hadn't stopped you."

No appreciation of these profuse compliments showed itself in the boy's face. It was rigid, colorless and sullen, as if he regarded the man's observations as entirely too personal to be allowed. An angry retort trembled on his lips, and even this Hoag seemed to note and relish. His smile was unctuous; he checked his horse more firmly.

"They won't bother you no more," he said, more seductively. "Such skunks never run ag'in' your sort after they once see the stuff you are made of. That gun and the way you handled it was an eye-opener. Paul, you are a born fightin' man, and yore sort are rare these days. You'll make yore way in the world. Bein' afraid of man or beast will stunt anybody's growth. Pay back in the coin you receive, and don't put up with insult or abuse from anybody. Maybe you don't know why I first took a sorter likin' to you. I'd be ashamed to tell you if I didn't know that you was jest a boy at the time, and I couldn't afford to resent what you said. You was a foot shorter than you are now, and not half as heavy. You remember the day yore pa's shoats broke through the fence into my potato field? You was out in the wet weeds tryin' to drive 'em home. I'd had a drink or two more than I could tote, and several things had gone crooked with me, and I was out o' sorts. I saw you down there, and I made up my mind that I'd give you a thrashin'"—Hoag was smiling indulgently—"and on my way through the thicket I cut me a stout hickory withe as big at the butt as my thumb, and taperin' off like a whip at the end. You remember how I cussed and ripped and went on?"

"You bet I remember," Paul growled, and his eyes flashed, "and if you'd hit me once it would have been the worst day's work you ever did."

The planter blinked in mild surprise, and there was just a hint of chagrin in his tone. "Well, I didn't touch you. Of course I wasn't afraid of you or the rock you picked up. I've never seen the *man* I was afraid of, much less a boy as little as you was; but as you stood there, threatenin' to throw, I admit I admired your grit. The truth is, I didn't have the heart, even drunk as I was, to lick you. Most boys of your size would have broke and run. My boy, Henry, would, I know."

"He'll fight all right," Paul said. "He's no coward. I like him. He's been a friend to me several times. He is not as bad as some folks think. He drinks a little, and spends money free, and has a good time; but he's not stuck up. He doesn't like to work, and I don't blame him. I wouldn't, in his place. Huh! you bet I wouldn't."

"Well, I'm goin' to put 'im between the plow-handles before long," the planter said, with a frown. "He's gettin' too big for his britches. Say, you'll think I'm a friend worth havin' some time. Just after that thing happened at the post-office, and you'd gone into Tye's shop, Budd Tibbs turned to me and said he believed it was his duty as marshal to make a council case against you for startin' to use that gun as you did. I saw the way the land lay in a minute. Them skunks are akin to his wife, and he was mad. I told him, I did, that he might summon me as a witness, and that I'd swear you acted in self-defense, and prefer counter-charges against the dirty whelps. Huh, you ought to have seen him wilt! He knows how many votes I control, and he took back-water in fine shape."

"I reckon I can look after my own business," the boy made answer, in a surly tone. "I ain't afraid o' no court. I'll have my rights if I die gettin' 'em." Hoag laughed till his sides shook. "I swear you are the funniest cuss I ever knew. You ain't one bit like a natural boy. You act and talk like a man that's been through the rubs." Hoag suddenly glanced across a meadow where some men were at work cutting hay, and his expression changed instantly. "I never told 'em to mow thar," he swore, under his breath. "Take your bark on. You know where to put it," and turning his horse he galloped across the field, his massive legs swinging to and from the flanks of his mare.

CHAPTER III

THAT afternoon at dusk Paul drove down the mountain with his last load of bark for the day. The little-used road was full of sharp turns around towering cliffs and abrupt declivities, worn into gullies by washouts, and obstructed by avalanchine boulders. In places decayed trees had fallen across the way, and these the young wagoner sometimes had to cut apart and roll aside. The high heap of bark on the groaning vehicle swayed like a top-heavy load of hay, and more than once Paul had to dismount from the lead horse he rode, scotch the wheels with stones, and readjust the bark, tightening the ropes which held the mass together. At times he strode along by the horses, holding the reins between his teeth, that his hands might be free to combat the vines and bushes through which he plunged as blindly as an animal chased by a hunter. His arms, face, and ankles were torn by thorns and briars, his ill-clad feet cut to the bone by sharp stones. Accidents had often happened to him on that road. Once he had fallen under the wheels, and narrowly escaped being crushed to death, a perilous thing which would have haunted many a man's life afterward, but which Paul forgot in a moment.

Near the foot of the mountain the road grew wide, smooth, and firm; his team slowed down, and he took a book from the wagon, reading a few pages as he walked along. He was fond of the history of wars in all countries; the bloodshed and narrow escapes of early pioneer days in America enthralled his fancy. He thought no more of a hunter's killing a redskin than he himself would have thought of shooting a wild duck with a rifle.

As he started down the last incline between him and Grayson he replaced his book on the wagon. The dusk had thickened till he could scarcely see the print on the soiled pages. Below, the houses of the village were scattered, as by the hand of chance, from north to south between gentle hills, beyond which rose the rugged mountains now wrapped in darkness. He made out the sides of the Square by the lights in the various buildings. There was the hotel, with its posted lamps on either end of the veranda. Directly opposite stood the post-office. He could make no mistake in locating the blacksmith's shop, for its forge gave out intermittent, bellows-blown flashes of deep red. Other dots of light were the open doors of stores and warehouses. Like vanishing stars some were disappearing, for it was closing-time, and the merchants were going home to supper. This thought gave the boy pleasant visions. He was hungry.

It was quite dark when he had unloaded the wagon at the tannery and driven on past Hoag's pretentious home to the antiquated cottage in which he lived. It had six rooms, a sagging roof of boards so rotten and black with age that they lost thickness in murky streams during every heavy rain. There was a zigzag fence in front, which was ill cared for, as the leaning comers and decayed rails testified. Against the fence, at the edge of the road, stood a crude log barn, a corn-crib made of unbarked pine poles, above which was a hay-loft. Close about was a malodorous pig-pen, a cow-lot, a wagon-shed, and a pen-like stall for horses.

The chickens had gone to roost; the grunting and squealing of the pigs had been stilled by the pails of swill Paul's father, Ralph Rundel, had emptied into their dug-out wooden troughs. In the light of the kitchen fire, which shone through the open door and the glassless windows, Paul saw his father in his favorite place, seated in a chair under an apple-tree at the side of the house. Ralph rose at the sound of the clanking trace-chains and came to the gate. He rubbed his eyes drowsily, as if he had just waked from a nap, and swung on the gate with both hands.

"No use puttin' the wagon under shelter," he said, in a querulous tone, as his slow eyes scanned the studded vault overhead. "No danger o' rain this night—no such luck for crops that are burnin' to the roots. The stalks o' my upland cotton-patch has wilted like sorghum cut for the press. Say, Paul, did you fetch me that tobacco? I'm dyin' for a smoke." He uttered a low laugh. "I stole some o' yore aunt's snuff and filled my pipe; but, by hunkey, I'd miscalculated—I sucked the whole charge down my throat, and she heard me a-coughin' and caught me with the box in my hand."

Paul thrust his hand into his hip-pocket and drew forth a small white bag with a brilliant label gummed on it. "Bowman was clean out o' that fine cut," he said, as he gave it into the extended hand. "He said this was every bit as good."

"I'll not take his word for it till I've tried it," Ralph Rundel answered, as he untied the bag and tested the mixture between thumb and forefinger. "Storekeepers sell what they have in stock, and kin make such fellers as us take dried cabbage-leaves if they take a notion."

Ralph was only fifty years of age, and yet he had the manner, decrepitude, and spent utterance of a man of seventy. His scant, iron-gray hair was disheveled; his beard, of the same grizzled texture, looked as if it never had been trimmed, combed, or brushed, and was shortened only by periodical breaking at the ends. Despite his crude stoicism, his blue eyes, in their deep sockets, had a wistful, yearning look, and his cheeks were so hollow that his visage reminded one of a vitalized skull. His chest, only half covered by a tattered, buttonless shirt, was flat; he was bent by rheumatism, which had left him stiff, and his hands were mere human talons.

Paul was busy unhooking the traces from the swingletrees and untying the straps of the leather collars, when Ralph's voice came to him above the creaking of the harness and impatient stamping of the hungry horses.

"I noticed you took yore gun along this mornin'. Did you kill me a bird, or a bushy-tail? Seems like my taste for salt pork is clean gone."

"I didn't run across a thing," Paul answered, as he lifted the harness from the lead horse and allowed the animal to go unguided to his stall through the gate Ralph held open. "Besides, old Hoag counts my loads, and keeps tab on my time. I can't dawdle much and draw wages from him."

"Did he pay you anything to-day?" Ralph was filling his pipe, feebly packing the tobacco into the bowl with a shaky forefinger.

"He had no small change," Paul answered. "Said he would have some to-morrow. You can wait till then, surely."

"Oh yes, I'll have to make out, I reckon."

At this juncture a woman appeared in the kitchen doorway. She was a blue-eyed, blond-haired creature of solid build in a soiled gray print-dress. She was Paul's aunt, Amanda Wilks, his mother's sister, a spinster of middle age with a cheerful exterior and a kindly voice.

"You'd better come on in and git yore supper, Paul," she called out. "You like yore mush hot, and it can't be kept that away after it's done without bakin' it like a pone o' bread. You've got to take it with sour blue-john, too. Yore ma forgot to put yesterday's milk in the spring-house, and the cow kicked over to-night's supply just as I squirted the last spoonful in the bucket. Thar is some cold pork and beans. You'll have to make out."

"I didn't expect to get anythin' t'eat!" Paul fumed, hot with a healthy boy's disappointment, and he tossed the remainder of the harness on to the wagon and followed the horse to the stall. He was in the stable for several minutes. His father heard him muttering inarticulately as he pulled down bundles of fodder from the loft, broke their bands, and threw ears of corn into the troughs. Ralph sucked his pipe audibly, slouched to the stable-door under a burden of sudden concern, and looked in at his son between the two heads of the munching animals.

"Come on in," he said, persuasively. "I know you are mad, and you have every right to be after yore hard work from break o' day till now; but nobody kin depend on women. Mandy's been makin' yore ma a hat all day. Flowery gewgaws an' grub don't go together."

Paul came out. "Never mind," he said. "It don't make no difference. Anything will do." Father and son walked side by side into the fire-lighted kitchen. A clothless table holding a few dishes and pans stood in the center of the room. Just outside the door, on a little roofless porch, there was a shelf which held a tin basin, a

cedar pail containing water, and a gourd dipper with a long, curved handle. And going to this shelf, Paul filled the basin and bathed his face and hands, after which he turned to a soiled towel on a roller against the weatherboarding and wiped himself dry, raking back his rebellious hair with a bit of a comb, while his father stood close by watching him with the gaze of an affectionate dog.

"That'll do, that'll do," Ralph attempted to jest. "Thar ain't no company here for you to put on airs before. Set down! set down!"

Paul obeyed, and his father remained smoking in the doorway, still eying him with attentive consideration. Amanda brought from the fire a frying-pan containing the hot, bubbling mush, and pushed an empty brown bowl and spoon toward him.

"Help yoreself; thar's the milk in the pan," she said. "If it is too sour you might stir a spoonful o' 'lasses in it. I've heard folks say it helps a sight."

Paul was still angry, but he said nothing, and helped himself abundantly to the mush. However, he sniffed audibly as he lifted the pan and poured some of the thin, bluish fluid into his bowl.

"It wasn't my fault about the cow," Amanda contended. "Scorchin' weather like this is the dickens on dumb brutes. Sook was a-pawin' an' switchin' 'er tail all the time I had hold of 'er tits. It must 'a' been a stingin' fly that got in a tender spot. Bang, bang! was all the warnin' I had, an' I found myself soaked from head to foot with milk. I've heard o' fine society folks, queens an' the like, washin' all over in it to soften their skins and limber their joints; but I don't need nothin' o' that sort. Yore ma's not back yet. She went over to see about the singin'-class they want her in. She had on 'er best duds an' new hat, and looked like a gal o' twenty. She was as frisky as a young colt. I ironed 'er pink sash, an' put in a little starch to mash out the wrinkles and make it stand stiff-like. They all say she's got the best alto in Grayson. I rolled 'er hair up in papers last night, an' tuck it down to-day. You never saw sech pretty kinks in your life. Jeff Warren come to practise their duet, an' him and Addie stood out in the yard an' run the scales an' sung several pieces together. It sounded fine, an' if I had ever had any use for 'im I'd have enjoyed it more; but I never could abide 'im. He gits in too many fights, and got gay too quick after he buried his wife. He was dressed as fine as a fiddle, an' had a joke for every minute. Folks say he never loved Susie, an' I reckon they wasn't any too well matched. She never had a well day in 'er life, and I reckon it was a blessed thing she was took. A tenor voice an' a dandy appearance are pore consolations to a dyin' woman. But he treats women polite—I'll say that for 'im."

Paul had finished his mush and milk, and helped himself to the cold string-beans and fat boiled pork. His father had reached for a chair, tilted it against the door-jamb, and seated himself in it. He eyed his son as if the boy's strength and rugged health were consoling reminders of his own adolescence. Suddenly, out of the still twilight which brooded over the fields and meadows and swathed the mountain-tops, came the blending voices of two singers. It was a familiar hymn, and its rendition was not unmelodious, for it held a sweet, mystic quality that vaguely appealed.

"That's Jeff an' Addie now!" Amanda eagerly exclaimed. She went to the door and stood leaning against the lintel. She sighed, and her voice became full and round. "Ain't that just too sweet for anything? I reckon they are both puffed up over the way folks take on over their music. Ever since they sang that duet at Sleepy Hollow camp-meetin' folks hain't talked of anything else."

Paul sat with suspended knife and fork and listened. His father clutched the back of his chair stiffly, bore it into the yard, and eased himself into it. Paul watched him through the doorway, as he sat in the shadows, now bent over, his thin body as rigid and still as if carved from stone. The singing grew nearer and nearer. It seemed to float on the twilight like a vibrant vapor. The boy finished his supper and went out into the yard. His aunt had seated herself on the door-step, still entranced by the music. Paul moved softly across the grass to his father; but Ralph was unconscious of his presence. Paul saw him take in a deep, trembling breath, and heard him utter a long, suppressed sigh.

"What's the matter, Pa?" the boy asked, a touch of somnolent tenderness in his tone.

"Matter? Me? Why, nothin', nothin'!"

Ralph started, lifted his wide-open eyes, in which a far-away expression lay.

"What did you ax me *that* for?"

"I thought you looked bothered," Paul made answer, and he sank on the grass at his father's feet.

"Me? No, I'm all right." Ralph distinctly avoided his son's eyes, and that was a departure. He fumbled in his pocket for his pipe and tobacco, and finally got them out, only to hold them in inactive hands.

The singing was over. There was a sound of merry laughter beyond the stable and corn-crib, and Jeff Warren's voice rose quite audibly:

"I thought I'd split my sides laughin'," he was heard to say, with a satisfied chuckle, "when Bart Perry riz an' called for order and began to state what the plan was to be. He was electin' hisself chief leader, an' never dreamt the slightest opposition; but I'd told a round dozen or more that if he led me'n you'd pull out, an' so I was lookin' for just what happened. Old Thad Thomas winked at me sorter on the side and jumped up an' said, 'All in favor of electin' Jeff Warren leader make it known by standin', an' every woman an' man-jack thar stood up, an' as Bart already had the floor, an' was ashamed to set down, he hisself made it unanimous. But Lord! he was as red as a turkey-gobbler an' mad as Tucker."

The low reply of the woman did not reach the trio in the yard, and a moment later the couple parted at the front gate. Mrs. Rundel came round the house through the garden, walking hurriedly and yet with a daintiness of step that gave a certain grace to her movement. She wore a neat, cool-looking white muslin dress, was slender, and had good, regular features, light-brown eyes, abundant chestnut hair, which was becomingly arranged under a pretty hat.

"Supper's over, I know," she said, lightly, as she paused at the door-step and faced her sister. "Well, they all just wouldn't break up earlier. They sang and sang till the last one was ready to drop. Singers is that a way when they haven't been together in a long time. Don't bother about me. I ain't a bit hungry. Mrs. Treadwell passed around some sliced ham an' bread, an' we had all the buttermilk we could drink."

"Tell me about it," Amanda demanded, eagerly. "What was it Jeff was sayin' about Bart Perry?"

"Oh, Bart was squelched in good fashion." Mrs. Rundel glanced at the shadowy shapes of her husband and son, and then back to the eager face of the questioner. "You know what a stuck-up fool he is. He come there to run things, and he set in at it from the start. He hushed us up when we was all havin' a good time talkin', and begun a long-winded tirade about the big singin' he'd done over at Darley when he was workin' in the cotton-mill. He pointed to our song-books, which have shaped notes, you know, and sniffed, and said they belonged to the backest of the backwoods—said the notes looked like children's toy play-blocks, chickencoops, dog-houses, an' what not. He laughed, but nobody else did. He was in for burnin' the whole pile and layin' out more money for the new-fangled sort."

"I always knowed he was a fool for want o' sense," Amanda joined in, sympathetically. "A peddler tried to sell me a song once that he said was all the go in Atlanta; but when I saw them mustard-seed spots, like tadpoles on a wire fence, I told him he couldn't take *me* in. Anybody with a grain o' sense knows it's easier to sing notes that you can tell apart than them that look pine blank alike."

"Some folks say it don't take long to learn the new way," Mrs. Rundel remarked, from the standpoint of a professional; "but as Jeff said, we hain't got any time to throw away when we all want to sing as bad as we do."

"Well, you'd better go in and take that dress off," Amanda advised, as she reached out and caught the hem of the starched skirt and pulled it down a little. "It shrinks every time it's washed, and you'll want to wear it again right off, I'll bound you."

"I don't want to wrinkle it any more than I have to," Mrs. Rundel answered. "I want it to look nice next Sunday. We hold two sessions, mornin' and evenin'; and next week—the day hasn't been set yet—we are goin' to have a nip-and-tuck match with the Shady Grove class."

"That will be a heap o' fun," Amanda said, as her sister passed her and disappeared within. For a few minutes the trio in the yard were silent. Ralph Rundel's pipe glowed in the darkness like a thing of fitful moods. Paul had not heard a word of the foregoing conversation. Young as he was, he had many things to think of. The affair with the Harris boys flitted across his mind; in that, at least, he was satisfied; the vision of the fleeing ruffians vaguely soothed him. Something he had read in his book that day about Napoleon came back to him.

It was the flashing of her sister's candle across the grass, as Mrs. Rundel passed before a window, that drew Amanda's thoughts back to a subject of which she was fond.

"Folks has always said I spoiled Addie," she said to her brother-in-law, in a plaintive tone, "an' it may be so. Bein' ten year older when ma died, I was a mother to 'er in my best days. I had no chance myself, and somehow I determined she should have what I missed. I certainly made it easy for 'er. When she started to goin' to parties and out with young men I was actually miserable if she ever missed a chance. You know that, Rafe—you know what a plumb fool I was, considerin' how pore pa was."

Ralph turned his head toward the speaker, but no sound came from him. His head rocked, but whether it was meant as a form of response, or was sinking wearily, no one but himself could have told. After that silence fell, broken only by the grinding tread on the floor within.

CHAPTER IV

PAUL stood up, threw his arms backward languidly, and stretched himself.

"Goin' to bed?" his father inquired, absent-mindedly.

"No, down to the creek; there was a plenty of cats and eels running last night. Where's my cup of bait?"

"I hain't touched it—I hain't dropped a hook in water for over two years. My hands shake, an' I can't hold a pole steady. The bait's with your tackle, I reckon."

Paul went to the wagon-shed adjoining the stable, and from the slanting roof took down a pair of long canes, from the tapering ends of which dangled crude, home-twisted lines, to which were attached rusty hooks and bits of hammered lead, and, with the poles on his shoulder and the bait-cup in his hand, he went down the path to the creek near by. He had a subtle fondness for Nature, in any mood or dress, and the mystic landscape to-night appealed to a certain famished longing within him—a sense of an unattainable something which haunted him in his reflective moods. The stars were coming out in the unclouded skies, revealing the black outlines of the mountain, the intervening foot-hills, the level meadows, where the cattle and sheep lay asleep, and over which fireflies were darting and flashing their tiny search-lights. The sultry air held the aroma of new-cut hay, of crushed and dying clover-blossom. The snarl of the tree-frog and the chirp of the cricket were heard close at hand, and in the far distance the doleful howling of a dog came in response to the voice of another, so much farther away that it sounded softer than an echo.

Presently Paul reached a spot on the creek-bank where the creeping forest-fires had burned the bushes away, and where an abrupt curve of the stream formed a swirling eddy, on the surface of which floated a mass of driftwood, leaves, twigs, and pieces of bark. Baiting his hooks, he lowered them into the water, fastening one pole in the earth and holding the other in his hands. He had not long to wait, for soon there was a vigorous jerking and tugging at the pole in his hands.

"That's an eel now!" the sportsman chuckled; "an' I'll land 'im, if he don't wind his tail round a snag and break my line."

Eels are hard to catch, and this one was seen to be nearly a yard in length when Paul managed to drag it ashore. Even out of water an eel is hard to conquer, for Nature has supplied it with a slimy skin that aids it to evade the strongest human grip. The boy sprang upon his prey and grasped it, but it wriggled from his hands, arms, and knees, and like an animated rubber tube bounded toward the stream.

"Nail 'im, nail 'im!" cried out Ralph Rundel, excitedly, quickening his stride down the path. "Put sand on yore hands! Lemme show you—thar now, you got 'im—hold 'im till I—" But the snakelike thing, held for a moment in Paul's eager arms, was away again. The boy and the man bumped against each other as they sprang after it, and Ralph was fortunate enough to put the heel of his shoe on it's head and grind it into the earth. The dying thing coiled its lithe body round the man's ankle like a boa, and then gradually relaxed.

Now, fully alive to the sport, Paul gave all his attention to rebaiting his hook. "This one raised such a racket he has scared all the rest off," he muttered, his eyes on his line.

"They'll come back purty soon," Ralph said, consolingly. He sat down on the sand and began to fill his pipe. His excitement over the eel's capture had lived only a moment. There was a fixed stare in his eyes, a dreamy, contemplative note of weariness in his voice, which was that of a man who had outgrown all earthly interests.

"How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord!"

It was the mellow, sonorous voice of Jeff Warren singing at his home across the fields.

"Humph! He gits a heap o' fun out of that, fust an' last," Ralph remarked, sardonically, and he shrugged his frail shoulders. "It ain't so much the singin' he loves—if I'm any judge—as what it fetches to his net, as the sayin' is. He is a born lady's man. Jeff knows exactly when an' how to say the things that tickle a woman's fancy. I think—I think yore ma loves to hear 'im talk mighty nigh as well as she loves to hear 'im sing. I don't know"—a slight pause—"I say I don't know, but I *think* so."

Paul thought he had a bite, and he raised his hook to see if the bait was intact. Ralph sighed audibly. He embraced his thin knees with his arms, and held the unlighted pipe in his hands. The hook was back in the water; the boy's face was half averted.

"Thar's a good many points about Jeff that women like," Ralph resumed, in a forced, tentative tone. "He's a strappin', fine-lookin' feller, for one thing; young, strong, an' always gittin' in fights over some'n or other. The impression is out amongst women an' gals that he won't let nobody pass the slightest slur ag'in' one o' the sex in his hearin'. That will take a man a long way in the opinion of females; but all the same, he's a sly devil. He'll do to watch—in my opinion, that is. I've thought some that maybe—well, I don't know that I'd go that fur neither; but a feller like me, for instance, will have odd notions once in a while, especially if he ain't actively engaged an' busy, like I am most o' the time since I've been so porely. I was goin' to say that I didn't know but what I ort to sorter, you know"—Ralph hesitated, and then plunged—"warn yore mother to—to go it sorter slow with Jeff."

Paul turned his back on the speaker and began to examine the bait on his hook; he shrugged his shoulders sensitively, and even in the vague starlight evinced a certain show of awkwardness. But Ralph was unobservant; his mental pictures were evidently more clear to him than material ones.

"Yore aunt Mandy is right," Ralph resumed. "She shorely did spoil yore ma for any real responsibility in life. La me! it was the talk of the neighborhood—I mean Mandy's love-affair was. She was just a gal when she took a big fancy to a Yankee soldier that come along in one o' Sherman's regiments. He was to come back after the war was over, but he never did. It mighty nigh killed 'er; but yore ma was then growin' up, and Mandy just seemed to find comfort in pamperin' and indulgin' her. Addie certainly got all that was a-goin'! No gal in the neighborhood had nicer fixin's; she was just like a doll kept in a bandbox. Stacks and stacks o' fellows was after her, me in the bunch, of course. At first it looked like I didn't stand much of a show; but my grandfather died about then an' left me the farm I used to own. I reckon that turned the scale, for the rest o' the fellows didn't own a foot o' land, a stick o' timber, or a head o' stock. I say it turned the scale, but I don't mean that Addie cared much one way or the other. Mandy had it in hand. I begun to see that she sorter held the rest off and throwed me an' Addie together like at every possible chance—laughin' an' jokin' an' takin' a big interest an' tellin' me she was on my side. You see, it was a case o' the real thing with me. From the fust day I ever laid eyes on yore ma, an' heard 'er talk in her babyish way, I couldn't think o' nothin' else. I felt a little squeamish over bein' so much older 'an her; but Mandy laughed good an' hearty, an' said we'd grow together as time passed. Addie kept me in hot water for a long while even after that—looked like she didn't want Mandy to manage for her, an' kicked over the traces some. I remember I had to beg an' beg, an' Mandy argued an' scolded an' nagged till Addie finally consented. But, la me! how a feller's hopes kin fall! Hard times came. I borrowed on my land to keep Addie supplied with nice things, an' my crops went crooked. I lost money in a sawmill, an' finally got to be a land-renter like I am now, low in health an' spirits, an' dependent on you for even my tobacco—*tobacco*." Ralph repeated the word, for his voice had become indistinct.

"That's all right," Paul said, testily. "Go on to bed. Settin' up like this ain't goin' to do you no good."

"It does me more good'n you think," Ralph asserted. "I hold in all day long with not a soul to talk to, an' dyin' to say things to somebody. I ain't hardly got started. Thar's a heap more—a heap that I'm afraid you are too young to understand; but you will some day. Yore time will come, too. Yore lady-love will cross yore track, an' you'll see visions in her eyes that never was on land or sea. I look at you sometimes an' think that maybe you will become a great man, an' I'll tell you why. It is because you are sech a hard worker an' stick to a job so steady, and because you've got sech a hot, spicy temper when folks rile you by treatin' you wrong. Folks say thar is some'n in blood, an' I don't want you to think because I'm sech a flat failure that you have to be. Experts in sech matters say that a body is just as apt to copy after far-off kin as that which is close by, and I want to tell you something. It is about the Rundel stock. Three year ago, when I was a witness in a moonshine case at government court, in Atlanta, my expenses was paid, an' I went down, an' while I was in the city a feller called on me at my boardin'-house. He said the paper had printed my name in connection with the case, an' he looked me up because he was interested in everybody by the name o' Rundel. He was writin' a family history for some rich folks that wanted it all down in black an' white to keep for future generations to look at. He was dressed fine, and talked like a presidin' elder or a bishop. He told me, what I never had heard before, that the name ought to be spelled with an A in front—Arundel. He had a short way o' twistin' it that I can't

remember. He said thar was several ways o' callin' the name, an' he laughed an' said he met one old backwoods chap in Kentucky that said his was 'Runnels' because his neighbors called 'im that, an' he liked the sound of it. He set for a good hour or more tellin' me about the ups an' downs of folks by the name. He said what made the whole thing so encouragin' was that the majority of 'em was continually on the rise. He'd knowed 'em, he said, to be plumb down an' out for several generations, an' then to pop up an' produce a man of great fame an' power. He had a list o' big guns as long as yore arm. I knowed I was too far gone to benefit by it myself, but I thought about you, an' I felt comforted. I've always remembered with hope an' pride, too, what Silas Tye told me about the tramp phrenologist that examined heads at his shop one day. He said men was payin' the'r quarters an' listenin' to predictions an' hearin' nothin' of any weight; but that the feller kept lookin' at you while you set waitin', an' finally Tye said the feller told the crowd that you had sech a fine head an' eye an' shaped hands an' feet an' ankles, like a blooded hoss, that he would pass on you for nothin'. Tye said you got mad an' went off in a big huff; but the feller stuck to what he'd said. He declared you'd make yore way up in the world as sure as fate, if you wasn't halted by some accident or other."

Paul saw his line moving forward, his tense hands eagerly clutching his rod, but the swishing cord suddenly became slack on the surface of the water. An impatient oath slipped from his lips.

"Snapped my line right at the sinker!" he cried. "He was a jim-dandy, too, bigger than that one." He threw the pole with the broken line on the bank and grasped the other. If he had heard the rambling talk of his father it was completely forgotten.

"Folks laugh at me'n you both," Ralph ran on, a softer cadence in his voice. "They say I've been a mammy to you, a nuss' an' what not. Well, I reckon thar's truth in it. After I found—found that me'n yore ma wasn't the sweethearts I thought we would be, an' you'd come an' looked so little an' red an' helpless in the pore little cradle I made out of a candle-box with wobbly rockers—I say, I reckon then that I did sorter take yore ma's place. She wasn't givin' milk, an' the midwife advised a bottle, and it looked like neither one o' the women would keep it filled an' give it at the right time. I'd go to the field an' try to work, but fearin' you was neglected I'd go to the house an' take you up an' tote you about. It was turnin' things the wrong way, I reckon, but I was a plumb fool about you. Yore mother seemed willin' to shift the job, an' yore aunt was always busy fixin' this or that trick for her to wear. But I ain't complainin'—understand that—I liked it. Yore little warm, soft body used to give me a feelin' no man kin describe. An' I suffered, too. Many a night I got up when you was croupy, an' uncovered the fire an' put on wood an' set an' rocked you, fearin' every wheezy breath you drawed would stop in yore throat. But I got my reward, if reward was deserved, for you gave me the only love that I ever knowed about. Even as a baby you'd cry for me—cry when I left you, an' coo an' chuckle, an' hold out yore little chubby hands whenever I come. As you got older you'd toddle down the field-road to meet me, yore yaller, flaxen head hardly as high as the broom-sedge. I loved to tote you even after you got so big folks said I looked ridiculous. You was about seven when my wagon run over me an' laid me up for a spell. I'll never forget how you acted. You was the only one in the family that seemed a bit bothered. You'd come to my bed the minute you got home from school, an' set thar an' rub my head. While that spell lasted I was the baby, an' you the mammy, an' to this day I ain't able to recall a happier time."

Ralph rose and stood by his son for a moment, his gaze on the steady rod. "I'll take the eel to the house," he said, "an' skin it an' slice it up an' salt it down for breakfast. You may find me in yore bed. This is one o' the times I feel like sleepin' with you—that is, if you don't care?"

"It is all right, go ahead," Paul said; "there is plenty of room."

With the eel swinging in his hand, his body bent, Ralph trudged toward the house, which, a dun blur on the landscape, showed in the hazy starlight. A dewy robe had settled on every visible object. An owl was dismally hooting in the wood, which sloped down from the craggy mountain. In the stagnant pools of the lowlands frogs were croaking, hooting, and snarling; the mountain-ridge, with its serried trees against the sky, looked like a vast sleeping monster under cloud-coverings.

Now and then Jeff Warren was heard singing.

CHAPTER V

AT certain times during the year Paul was en abled to earn a little extra money by hauling fire-wood to the village and selling it to the householders. One morning he was standing by his wagon, waiting for a customer for a load of oak, when Hoag came from the bar-room at the hotel and steered toward him. The planter's face was slightly flushed from drink, and he was in a jovial mood.

"Been playing billiards," he said, thickly, and he jerked his thumb toward the green, swinging doors of the bar. "Had six tilts with a St. Louis drummer, an' beat the socks off of 'im. I won his treats an' I'm just a little bit full, but it will wear off. It's got to. I'm goin' in to eat dinner with my sister—you've seen 'er—Mrs. Mayfield. She's up from Atlanta with her little girl to git the mountain air an' country cookin'."

At this moment Peter Kerr, the proprietor of the hotel, came out ringing the dinner-bell. He was a medium-sized man of forty, with black eyes and hair, the skin of a Spaniard, and an ever-present, complacent smile. He strode from end to end of the long veranda, swinging the bell in front of him. When Kerr was near, Hoag motioned to him to approach, and Kerr did so, silencing the bell by catching hold of the clapper and swinging the handle downward. Hoag laid his hand on Paul's shoulder and bore down with unconscious weight.

"Say, Pete," he said, "you know this boy?"

"Oh, yes, everybody does, I reckon," Kerr answered patronizingly.

"Well, he's the best hand I've got," Hoag said, sincerely enough; "the hardest worker in seven States. Now, here's what I want. Paul eats out at my home as a rule an' he's got to git dinner here at my expense to-day. Charge it to me."

Paul flushed hotly—an unusual thing for him—and shook his head.

"I'm goin' *home* to dinner," he stammered, his glance averted.

"You'll do nothing of the sort," Hoag objected, warmly. "You've got that wood to sell, an' nobody will buy it at dinner-time. Every livin' soul is at home. Besides, I want to talk over some matters with you afterward. Fix 'im a place, Pete, an' make them niggers wait on 'im."

There was no way out of it, and Paul reluctantly gave in. With burly roughness, which was not free from open patronage, the planter caught him by the arm and drew him up the steps of the hotel and on into the house, which Paul knew but slightly, having been there only once or twice to sell game, vegetables, or other farm produce.

The office was noisily full of farmers, traveling salesmen, lawyers, merchants, and clerks who boarded there or dropped in to meals at the special rate given to all citizens of the place and vicinity. On the right hand was a long, narrow "wash-room." It had shelves holding basins and pails of water, sloping troughs into which slops were poured, towels on wooden rollers, and looking-glasses from the oaken frames of which dangled, at the ends of strings, uncleanly combs and brushes.

When he had bathed his face and hands and brushed his hair, Paul returned to the office, where the proprietor—with some more patronage—took him by the arm and led him to the door of the big dining-room. It was a memorable event in the boy's life. He was overwhelmed with awe; he had the feeling that his real ego was encumbered with those alien things—legs, arms, body, and blood which madly throbbled in his veins and packed into his face. He would not have hesitated for an instant to engage in a hand-to-hand fight with a man wearing the raiment of an emperor's guard, if occasion had demanded it; but this new thing under the heavens gave him pause as nothing else ever had done. The low-ceiled room, with its many windows curtained in white, gauzy stuff, long tables covered with snowy linen, glittering glass, sparkling plated-ware, and gleaming china, seemed to have sprung into being by some enchantment full of designs against his timidity. There was a clatter of dishes, knives, forks, and spoons; a busy hum of voices; the patter of swift-moving feet; the jar and bang of the door opening into the adjoining kitchen, as the white-aproned negroes darted here and there, holding aloft trays of food.

Seeing Paul hesitating where the proprietor had left him, the negro head waiter came and led him to a seat at a small table in a corner somewhat removed from the other diners. It was the boy's rough aspect and poor clothing which had caused this discrimination against him, but he was unaware of the difference. Indeed, he was overjoyed to find that his entrance and presence were unnoticed. He felt very much out of place with all those queer dishes before him. The napkin, folded in a goblet at his plate, was a thing he had heard of but never used, and it remained unopened, even after the waiter had shaken it out of the goblet to give him ice-water. There were hand-written bills of fare on the other tables, but the waiter simply brought Paul a goodly supply of food and left him. He was a natural human being and unusually hungry, and for a few moments he all but forgot his surroundings in pure animal enjoyment. His appetite satisfied, he sat drinking his coffee and looking about the room. On his right was a long table, at which sat eight or ten traveling salesmen; and in their unstudied men-of-the-world ease, as they sat ordering cigars from the office, striking matches under their chairs, and smoking in lounging attitudes, telling yams and jesting with one another, they seemed to the boy to be a class quite worthy of envy. They dressed well; they spent money; they knew all the latest jokes; they traveled on trains and lived in hotels; they had seen the great outer world. Paul decided that he would like to be a drummer; but something told him that he would never be anything but what he was, a laborer in the open air—a servant who had to be obedient to another's will or starve.

At this moment his attention was drawn to the entrance. Hoag was coming in accompanied by a lady and little girl, and, treading ponderously, he led them down the side of the room to a table on Paul's left. Hoag seemed quite a different man, with his unwonted and clumsy air of gallantry as he stood holding the back of his sister's chair, which he had drawn out, and spoke to the head waiter about "something special" he had told the cook to prepare. And when he sat down he seemed quite out of place, Paul thought, in the company of persons of so much obvious refinement. He certainly bore no resemblance to his sister or his niece. Mrs. Mayfield had a fair, smooth brow, over which the brown tresses fell in gentle waves; a slender body, thin neck, and white, tapering hands. But it was Ethel, the little girl, who captured and held from that moment forth the attention of the mountain-boy. Paul had never beheld such dainty, appealing loveliness. She was as white and fair as a lily. Her long-lashed eyes were blue and dreamy; her nose, lips, and chin perfect in contour. She wore a pretty dress of dainty blue, with white stockings and pointed slippers. How irreverent, even contaminating, seemed Hoag's coarse hand when it rested once on her head as he smiled carelessly into the girl's face! Paul felt his blood boil and throb.

"Half drunk!" he muttered. "He's a hog, and ought to be kicked."

Then he saw that Hoag had observed him, and to his great consternation the planter sat smiling and pointing the prongs of his fork at him. Paul heard his name called, and both the lady and her daughter glanced at him and smiled in quite a friendly way, as if the fork had introduced them. Paul felt the blood rush to his face; a blinding mist fell before his eyes, and the whole noisy room became a chaos of floating objects. When his sight cleared he saw that the three were looking in another direction; but his embarrassment was not over, for the head waiter came to him just then and told him that Mr. Hoag wanted him to come to his table as soon as his dinner was finished.

Paul gulped his coffee down now in actual terror of something intangible, and yet more to be dreaded than anything he had ever before encountered. He was quite certain that he would not obey. Hoag might take offense, swear at him, discharge him; but that was of no consequence beside the horrible ordeal the man's drunken brain had devised. Hoag was again looking at him; he was smiling broadly, confidently, and swung his head to one side in a gesture which commanded Paul to come over. Mrs. Mayfield's face also wore a slight smile of agreement with her brother's mood; but Ethel, the little girl, kept her long-lashed and somewhat

conscious eyes on the table. Again the hot waves of confusion beat in Paul's face, brow, and eyes. He doggedly shook his head at Hoag, and then his heart sank, for he knew that he was also responding to the lady's smile in a way that was unbecoming in a boy even of the lowest order, yet he was powerless to act otherwise. Like a blind man driven desperate by encroaching danger that could not be located, he rose, turned toward the door, and fairly plunged forward. The toe of his right foot struck the heel of his left, and he stumbled and almost fell. To get out he had to pass close to Hoag's table, and though he did not look at the trio, he felt their surprised stare on him, and knew that they were reading his humiliation in his flaming face. He heard the planter laugh in high merriment, and caught the words: "Come here, you young fool, we are not goin' to bite you!"

It seemed to the boy, as he incontinently fled the spot, that the whole room had witnessed his disgrace. In fancy he heard the waiters laughing and the amused comments of the drummers.

The landlord tried to detain him as he hurried through the office.

"Did you git enough t'eat?" he asked; but, as if pursued by a horde of furies, Paul dashed on into the street.

He found a man inspecting his load of wood and sold it to him, receiving instructions as to which house to take it to and where it was to be left. With the hot sense of humiliation still on him, he drove down the street to the rear fence of a cottage and threw the wood over, swearing at himself, at Hoag, at life in general, but through it all he saw Ethel Mayfield's long, golden hair, her eyes of dreamy blue, and pretty, curving lips. She remained in his thoughts as he drove his rattling wagon home through the slanting rays of the afternoon sun. She was in his mind so much, indeed, from that day on, that he avoided contact with the members of his family. He loved to steal away into the woods alone, or to the hilltops, and fancy that she was with him listening to his wise explanation of this or that rural thing which a girl from a city could not know, and which a girl from a city, to be well informed, ought to know.

CHAPTER VI

BY chance he met her a week or so later. She and her mother were spending the day at Hoag's, and near noon Ethel had strolled across the pasture, gathering wild-flowers. Paul had been working at the tannery assisting a negro crushing bark for the vats, and was starting home to get his dinner when he saw her. She wore a big sailor hat and a very becoming dress of a different color from the one he had first seen her in. He wanted to take a good look at her, but was afraid she would see him. She had her hands full of flowers and fern leaves, and was daintily picking her way through the thick broom-sedge. He had passed on, and his back was to her when he heard her scream out in fright, and, turning, he saw her running toward him. He hurried back, climbed over the rail fence, and met her. "A snake, a snake!" she cried, white with terror. "Where?" he asked, boyishly conscious that his moment had arrived for showing contempt for all such trivialities.

"There," she pointed, "back under those rocks. It was coiled up right under my feet and ran when it saw me."

There was a fallen branch of a tree near by, and coolly picking it up he broke it across his knee to the length of a cudgel, then twisted the twigs and bark off. He swung it easily like a ball-player handling a bat.

"Now, come show me," he said, riding on a veritable cloud of self-confidence. "Where did it go?"

"Oh, I'm afraid!" she cried. "Don't go, it will bite you!"

He laughed contemptuously. "How could it?" he sneered. "It wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance against this club." He advanced to the pile of rocks she now indicated, and she stood aloof, holding her breath, her little hands pressed to her white cheeks, as he began prying the stones and boldly thrusting into crevices. Presently from the heap a brownish snake ran. Ethel saw it and screamed again; but even as he struck she heard him laugh derisively. "Don't be silly!" he said, and the next moment he had the dying thing by the tail, calmly holding it up for her inspection, its battered and flattened head touching the ground.

"It's a highland moccasin," he nonchalantly instructed her. "They are as poisonous as rattlers. It's a good thing you didn't step on it, I tell you. They lie in the sun, and fellers mowing hay sometimes get bit to the bone."

"Drop it! Put it down!" Ethel cried, her pretty face still pale. "Look, it's moving!"

"Oh, it will wiggle that way till the sun goes down," he smiled down from his biological height; "but it is plumb done for. Lowsy me! I've killed more of them than I've got fingers and toes."

Reassured, she drew nearer and looked at him admiringly. He was certainly a strong, well-formed lad, and his courage was unquestionable. Out of respect for her fears he dropped the reptile, and she bent down and examined it. Again the strange, new power she had from the first exercised over him seemed to exude from her whole being, and he felt a return of the cold, insecure sensation of the hotel dining-room. His heart seemed to be pumping its blood straight to his face and brain. Her little white hands were so frail and flower-like; her golden tresses, falling over her proud shoulders like a gauzy mantle, gave out a delicate fragrance. What a vision of loveliness! Seen close at hand, she was even prettier than he had thought. He had once admired Sally Tibbits, whom he had kissed at a corn-husking, as a reward for finding the red ear which lay almost in Sally's lap, and which, according to the game, she could have hidden; but Sally had never worn shoes, that he could remember, and as he recalled her now, by way of comparison, her legs were ridiculously brown and brier-scratched; her homespun dress was a poor bag of a thing, and her dingy chestnut hair seemed as lifeless as her neglected complexion. And Ethel's voice! He had never heard anything so mellow,

soft, and bewitching. She seemed like a princess in one of his storybooks, the sort tailors' sons used to meet and marry by rubbing up old lamps.

"What are you going to do with it?" She looked straight at him, and he felt the force of her royal eyes.

"Well, I don't intend to take it to the graveyard," he boldly jested. "I'll leave it here for the buzzards." He pointed to the cloud-flecked sky, where several vultures were slowly circling. "They'll settle here as soon as our backs are turned. Folks say they go by the smell of rotten flesh, but I believe their sense is keener than that. I wouldn't be much surprised if they watched and seed me kill that snake."

"How funny you talk!" Ethel said, in no tone of disrespect, but rather that of the mild inquisitiveness of a stranger studying a foreign tongue. "You said *seed* for *saw*. Why, my teacher would give me awful marks if I made a mistake like that. Of course, it may be correct here in the mountains." Paul flushed a deeper red; there was a touch of resentment in his voice.

"Folks talk that way round here," he blurted out; "grown-up folks. We don't try to put on style like stuck-up town folks."

"Please forgive me." Ethel's voice fell; she put out her hand and lightly touched his. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, and I never will say such a thing again—never, on my honor."

He bitterly repented it afterward, but he rudely drew his hand away, and stood frowning, his glance averted.

"I am very sorry," Ethel said, "and I can't blame you—I really can't. What I said was a great deal worse than your little mistake. My mother says rudeness is never excusable."

"Oh, it's all right," he gave in, as gracefully as he could.

"And are you sure you aren't mad with me?" she pursued, anxiously.

"Nothin' to be mad about," he returned, kicking the snake with his foot.

"Well, I hope you won't hate me," she said. "I feel that I know you pretty well. Uncle told us a lot about you that day at the hotel. He said you were the bravest boy he ever saw and the hardest worker. I saw you looked embarrassed that day, and he had no right to tease you as he did; but he was—of course, you know what was the matter with him?"

Paul nodded. "I wasn't going to pay any attention to him," he declared. "I wasn't—wasn't fixed up fit to—to be seen by anybody, any more than I am now, for that matter; but I can't do the work I have to do and go dressed like a town dude."

"Of course not—of course not," Ethel agreed, sympathetically, "and Uncle says you spend all you make on others, anyway. He was telling us about how you loved your father and took care of him. You know, I think that is wonderful, and so does mama. Boys are not like that in Atlanta; they are lazy and spoiled, and bad, generally. People in a city are so different, you know. Mama says the greatest men were once poor country boys. I'd think that was encouraging, if I was—if I *were* you—see, I make slips myself! After *if* you must always say were to be strictly correct. Just think of it, when I am grown up you may be a great man, and be ashamed even to know me."

He shrugged his shoulders and frowned. The flush had partly left his face, leaving splotches of white here and there. "No hopes of me ever mak-in' any sort of rise," he declared. "There is too much to do at home; I don't get time to go to school or study."

"What a pity!" Ethel sighed. She swept him from head to foot critically. Touches of pink lay on her cheeks just below her earnest eyes. "You are good-looking—you—you really are handsome, and so strong and brave! Somehow I feel certain that you are going to be successful. I—I am going to pray for it. They say God answers prayers when they are the right kind, and I know mine would be right."

"I don't believe any of that rubbish," he said, loftily. "I've heard your uncle Jim laugh at the preachers and folks that get converted one day and are plumb over it the next. He says they are the biggest fools in the world."

"I know he talks that way, and it worries mama awfully," the girl said. "I'm afraid he's terribly bad. You see, he drinks, plays cards, curses, and is hard on the negroes who work for him. Now, the truth is that the people who go to church really are better than he is, and that, in itself, ought to show he's wrong—don't you think so?"

"He just uses his natural brain," Paul returned, philosophically. "He says there is just one life, an' he's goin' to get all he can out of it. I don't blame him. He's rich—he can buy and sell the folks round here that say he don't know what he's talkin' about. He says there ain't no God, and he can prove it. He made it purty plain one day while he was talking to a crowd at the tan-yard. He told 'em, if they believed there was any such thing, for 'em to pray for some'n and see if they'd get it. He told about a gang of Methodists that was praying for money to make a church bigger, and the lightning struck it and burned it down."

"Did you never pray yourself?" Ethel questioned, quite irrelevantly.

He hesitated; his color flamed again in his face, and he avoided her gentle, upward gaze. "Not—not since I was very little," he said, awkwardly. "I don't believe in it; the whole shoutin', singin-and-prayin' bunch of meetin'-folks make me sick."

"Uncle is responsible for all that," Ethel declared. "You naturally would look up to him; but I believe he is wrong—I really do. I like good people, and, while he is my uncle, I—well, I don't feel the same toward him as I would if he were a different sort of man."

"He's all right," Paul defended. "He's rough, and curses some when he's mad, but you can count on him to keep his word in a deal. He's no hypocrite. Lots of folks believe as he does, but are afraid to own it; he stands his ground and tells them all exactly what he thinks, and says they can lump it."

They had been walking side by side across the grass, and had reached the point where their ways parted. He was turning homeward, when she advanced impulsively and touched him almost timidly on the arm. Her pretty red lip was quivering and her hand shook visibly.

"I don't care what uncle says—or what *any one* says. I believe there is a God, and I believe He is good, and I

am going to pray to Him to make you have faith."

There were incipient tears in her eyes, and, as if to avoid his wondering stare, she lowered her head suddenly and walked away.

At the front gate his father stood waiting for him, a mild look of excitement in his weary eyes. "Heard the news?" he inquired.

"No; what's happened?" Paul answered.

"Enough, I reckon, to them that's hit by it," Ralph returned. "Old Alf Rose, over t'other side o' the mountain, was found dead in a thicket close to his house. He was beat bad, his skull was all mashed in."

"Who did it?" Paul asked.

"They don't know for sure; but he was robbed of all he had in his pockets, an' his hat was gone. A nigger, Pete Watson, is missin', and they say the sheriff and a passle o' deputies, an' half the county, are out scourin' the woods for 'im. Ef they ketch 'im thar 'll be a lynchin' as sure as preachin'."

A voice now came from the farm-house. It was Amanda leaning out of the kitchen window.

"Come on in an' git yore dinner," she cried. "Don't listen to that stuff or you won't eat a bite. Yore pa's chatter has already turned my stomach inside out."

"That's the woman of it," Ralph sniffed, wearily. "They both begged an' begged for particulars, an' wormed every bit they could out o' me, an' now they talk about its gaggin' em."

CHAPTER VII

THAT evening, after Hoag had put his sister and niece into his phaeton, and told Cato, the negro driver, to take them to Grayson, he went back to the veranda where his wife and her mother, Mrs. Sarah Tilton, stood waving their handkerchiefs at the departing guests. Mrs. Hoag was a thin, wanfaced woman of questionable age and health. In honor of the visitors she wore her best black-silk gown, and its stiff, rigid folds and white-lace collar gave her a prim and annual-excursion look. There was a tired expression in her gray eyes, a nervous twitching of her needle-pricked fingers. Her mother was of a lustier type, having a goodly allotment of flesh, plenty of blood and activity of limb and brain, and a tongue which occupied itself on every possible occasion with equal loquacity in small or large affairs.

"I couldn't help from thinkin' what an awful time we'd have had," she was saying to her daughter, "if they had stayed here this summer instead of at the hotel. I can stand it for a day or two, but three months on a stretch would lay me stark and stiff in my grave. Did you ever in all yore bom days see such finicky ways? They nibbled at the lettuce like tame rabbits eatin' cabbage-leaves, and wiped their lips or fingers every minute, whether they got grease on 'em or not, and then their prissy talk! I *presume*, if Harriet said *presee-um* once she did fully a dozen times, an' I didn't know any more what it meant than if she'd been talkin' Choctaw."

"They are simply not used to our country ways," Mrs. Hoag sighed. "I don't feel like they are, to say, stuck up. I think they was just tryin' to be easy an' natural-like."

"Maybe she'd find it easier to go back to the way she used to live before her pa sent 'er off to that fine boardin'-school in Macon," Mrs. Tilton retorted, with a smile that froze into a sort of grimace of satisfaction. "She used to go barefooted here in the mountains; she was a regular tomboy that wanted to climb every tree in sight, slide down every bank, and wade in every mud-puddle and branch anywheres about. She was eternally stuffin' her stomach with green apples, raw turnips, an' sweet potatoes, an' smearin' her face with 'lasses or preserves. She laid herself up for a week once for eatin' a lot o' pure licorice an' cinnamon-bark that she found in the drug-store her uncle used to keep at the cross-roads."

Hoag sat down in a chair, tilted it back against the wall, and cast a summarizing glance toward his com, wheat, and cotton fields beyond the brown roofs of the long sheds and warehouses of the tannery at the foot of the hill. He seldom gave the slightest heed to the current observations of his wife or her mother. If they had not found much to say about the visitors, it would have indicated that they were unwell and needed a doctor, and of course that would have meant money out of his pocket, which was a matter of more moment than the most pernicious gossip. Hoag's younger son, Jack, a golden-haired child three years of age, toddled round the house and putting his chubby hands on the lowest of the veranda steps, glanced up at his father, and smiled and cooed. Hoag leaned forward, crude tenderness in his look and movement.

"That's right!" he cried, gently, and he held his hands out encouragingly. "Crawl up to daddy, Jack. I was lookin' for you, little boy. I was wonderin' where you was at. Got scared o' the fine town folks, an' hid out, didn't you?"

Slowly, retarded as Jack was by his short skirt, he mounted step after step, constantly applauded by his father, till, red in the face and panting, he reached the top and was eagerly received into the extended arms.

"Bully boy!" Hoag cried. "I knew you'd stick to it and never say die. You are as full o' pluck as an egg is of meat." And the planter pressed the bonny head against his breast and stroked the soft, curling hair with his big, red hand.

Few of Hoag's friends knew of his almost motherly tenderness and fondness for his child. In returning home at night, even if it was very late, he never would go to bed without looking into his wife's room to see if Jack was all right. And every morning, before rising, he would call the child to him, and the two would wake The rest of the family With their romping and laughter. Sometimes Hoag would dress the boy, experiencing a

delight in the clumsy action which he could not have analyzed. His devotion to Jack seemed all the more remarkable for his indifferent manner toward his older son, Henry, a lad of fifteen, who had a mischievous disposition which made him rather unpopular in the neighborhood. Many persons thought Henry was like his father in appearance, though quite the reverse in the habit of thrift or business foresight. Mrs. Tilton, the grandmother, declared that the boy was being driven to the dogs as rapidly as could be possible, for he had never known the meaning of paternal sympathy or advice, and never been made to do any sort of work. Be that as it might, Henry was duly sworn at or punished by Hoag at least once a week.

The phaeton returned from the village. Cato drove the horses into the stable-yard and put them into their stalls, whistling as he fed them and rubbed them down. The twilight was thickening over the fields and meadows. The dew was falling. The nearest hills were no longer observable. Jack, still in his father's arms on the veranda, was asleep; the touch of the child's breath on the man's cheek was a subtle, fragrant thing that conveyed vague delight to his consciousness. Henry rode up to the stable, turned his horse over to Cato, and came toward the house. He was, indeed, like his father in shape, build, and movement. He paused at the foot of the steps, glanced indifferently at Hoag and said:

"I passed Sid Trawley back on the mountain-road. He said, tell you he wanted to see you to-night without fail; he said, tell you not to leave till he got here."

"Oh, all right," Hoag said, with a steady, interested stare at his son, who now stood beside him. "I'll be here."

His voice waked the sleeping child. Jack sat up, rubbed his eyes, and then put a little hand on his father's face. "Dack hungry; Dack want his supper," he lisped.

Hoag-sung him gently to and fro like a woman rocking an infant to sleep. "Hold on!" He was speaking to Henry, and his tone was harsh and abrupt. "Did you water that horse?"

Henry leaned in the doorway, idly lashing his legs with his riding-whip. "No; the branch was a quarter of a mile out of the way. Cato will lead him to the well."

"You know better than that," Hoag growled. "You didn't even tell Cato the horse hadn't been watered. He would let him stay in the lot all night without a drop, hot as he is. Go water 'im now. *Go*, I tell you! You are getting so triflin' you ain't fit to live."

Henry stared, and his stare kindled into a resentful glare. His whip hung steadily by his side. It was as if he were about to retort, but kept silence.

"Go 'tend to that horse," Hoag repeated, "an' don't you ever do a thing like that again. You are none too good to do work o' that sort; I did plenty of it at your age. I had to work like a nigger an' I'm none the worse for it."

Henry stood still. He had his father's temper, and it was being roughly handled. Jack, now thoroughly awake, put both his hands on his father's face and stroked his cheeks soothingly, as if conscious of the storm that was about to break. Then, slowly and with inarticulate mutterings, Henry turned and retraced his steps down the path to the stable. Hoag leaned over till Jack had to clutch the lapels of his coat to keep from falling.

"An' don't you raise a row with that nigger, neither," Hoag called out. "I won't have it. You are not boss about this place."

Henry paused in the path, turned a defiant face toward his father, and stood still for several seconds, then slowly went on to the stable.

"Dack want his supper, daddy," Jack murmured.

"All right, baby," Hoag said, in a tone of blended anger and gentleness, and with the child in his arms he went through the dark hall into the diningroom adjoining the kitchen in the rear of the house. Here, at the table next to his own place, he put Jack into the child's high-chair, and sat down beside him, his massive arm and hand still encircling the tiny shoulders.

"Now, make Dilly bring Jack's mush an' milk!" Hoag said, with a laugh. "Call 'er—call 'er loud!"

"Dilly!" Jack obeyed. "Oh, Dilly!"

"Louder; she didn't hear you." Hoag shook with laughter, and patted the child on the head encouragingly.

"Dilly! Oh, Dilly!" Jack cried.

"Oh, I hear you, young marster," the portly negress laughed, as she shuffled into the room. "I was gittin' yo' mush en milk, honey. I 'clar', 'fo' de Lawd you make me jump out'n my skin, I was so scared."

"Where's the rest o' the folks?" Hoag inquired, with an impatient glance toward the door.

"Bofe of 'em say dey don't want er bite after eatin' all dat watermelon dis evenin'," the cook answered. "Miz Hoag say she gwine ter lie down right off, kase she got off dat hot dress en feel weak after so much doin's terday. She ain't er well 'oman, Marse Hoag—she ain't, suh. I know, kase I seed er lots of um in my day en time. She hain't got no spirit, suh; en when 'omen git dat way it's er bad sign o' what may come."

Hoag showed no interest in the comment. He reached for the big platter of cold string-beans and boiled pork, and helped himself abundantly. He poured out his own coffee, and drank it hot from the saucer without sugar or cream. He used both hands in breaking the big, oval-shaped pone of corn-bread. He enjoyed his food as a hungry beast might, and yet he paused every now and then to feed the child with a spoon or to wipe the mush from the little chin. It was Jack's drooping head and blinking eyes that caused Hoag to hasten through the meal. He took the child to the little bed in its mother's room and put it down gently.

"Go to sleep," he said. "Now go to sleep."

CHAPTER VIII

HE went back to the veranda through the unlighted hall, and stood looking across the lawn toward the gate. There was no moon; but the stars were out, and cast a soft radiance over the undulating landscape. Along the steep side of the nearest mountain forest fires in irregular lines pierced the thicker darkness of the distance, and their blue smoke drifted in lowering wisps over the level fields.

"Some'n's surely up, if Trawley wants to see me to-night," Hoag mused. "I wonder if my men—" He saw a horse and rider emerge from the gloom down the road leading on to Grayson. There was no sound of hoofs, for the animal was moving slowly, as if guided with caution. Nearer and nearer the horse approached, till it was reined in at the barnyard gate.

"That's him," Hoag muttered, and with a furtive look into the hall behind him he tiptoed softly down the steps, and then, his feet muffled by the grass, he strode briskly down to the gate. As he drew near the horseman, who was a slender young man in a broad-brimmed slouch hat, easy shirt, and wide leather belt, and with a heavy blond mustache, dismounted and leaned on the top-rail of the fence.

"Hello, Cap," was his greeting. "'Fraid you might not be at home. Henry didn't know whether you would be or not, but I come on—wasn't nothin' else to do. The klan is all worked up in big excitement. They didn't want to move without your sanction; but if you'd been away we'd 'a' had to. Business is business. This job has to go through."

"What's up now?" Hoag asked, eagerly.

"They've caught that nigger Pete Watson."

"Who has—my boys?"

"No; the sheriff—Tom Lawler an' three o' his deputies."

"You don't say; where?"

"In the swamp, in the river-bottom just beyond Higgins's farm. Ten of the klan happened to be waiting at Larkin's store when Lawler whizzed by with 'em in a two-hoss hack."

Hoag swore; his voice shook with excitement. "An' you fellers didn't try to head 'em off, or—"

"Head 'em off, hell! an' them with three cocked Winchesters 'cross their laps an' it broad daylight. Besides, the boys said you'd be mad—like you have been every time they've moved a peg without orders. You remember how you cursed an' raved when—"

"Well, never mind that!" Hoag fumed. "Where did they take the black devil?"

"To jail in Grayson; he's under lock an' key all right. We followed, and saw 'im put in. He's the blue-gum imp that killed old Rose. Lawler told some o' our boys that he hain't owned up to it yet, but he's guilty. Sam and Alec Rose are crazy—would 'a' gone right in the jail an' shot everything in sight if we all hadn't promised 'em you'd call out the klan an' take action at once."

"I see, I see." Hoag's head rose and fell like a buoy on a wave of self-satisfaction. "The boys are right. They know nothin' can be done in any sort o' decent order without a leader. You know yourself, Sid, that every time they've gone on their own hook they've had trouble, an' fetched down public criticism."

"We all know that well enough, Cap," Trawley said, "an' the last one of the gang is dependent on you. It is wonderful how they stick to you, an' rely on yore judgment. But, say, we hain't got a minute to lose. The thing is primed an' cocked. We kin pass the word along an' have every man out by twelve o'clock. I just need your sanction; that's all I'm here for."

In the starlight the lines, protuberances, and angles of Hoag's face stood out as clearly as if they had been carved from stone. He stroked his mustache, lips, and chin; he drew himself erect and threw his shoulders back with a sort of military precision. He felt himself to be a pivot upon which much turned, and he enjoyed the moment.

"Wait," he said, "let me study a minute. I—"

"Study hell! Look here, Jim Hoag—"

"Stop!" Hoag broke in sternly, and he leaned on the fence and glared at Trawley. "You know you are breakin' rules—you know the last one of you has sworn never to speak my name at a time like this. I was to be called 'Captain,' an' nothin' else; but here you go blurtin' out my name. There is no tellin' when somebody may be listenin'."

"Excuse me, Cap, you are dead right. I was wrong; it was a slip o' the lip. I won't let it happen again."

Hoag's anger was observable even in the dim light. It trembled in his tone and flashed in his eyes.

"Beggin' pardon don't rectify a mistake like that when the damage is done," he muttered. "You fellers ain't takin' any risk. I'd be the one to hold the bag if the authorities got onto us. They would nab the leader first."

"You are too shaky and suspicious," the other retorted, in sanguine contempt of caution. "We hain't got a man but would die ruther than turn traitor, an' thar ain't no court or jury that could faze us. As you said in yore speech at the last regular meetin', we are a law unto ourselves. This is a white man's country, Cap, an' we ain't goin' to let a few lazy niggers run it."

"The boys sort o' liked that speech, didn't they?" Hoag's voice ran smooth again.

"It was a corker, an' tickled 'em all," Trawley smiled. "They will put you in the legislature by a big vote whenever you say the word."

"I don't want it—I ain't that sort," Hoag said, grandiloquently. "I'm satisfied if I can help a little here at home—sorter hold you boys together an' make you cautious. A thing like this to-night has to be managed in a cool-headed way that will convince the public that there is a power that can be relied on outside o' the tardy one that costs taxpayers so much to keep up. It would tickle a black whelp like Pete Watson to be tried at our expense. He'd love the best in the world to set up in court an' be looked at as some'n out o' the general run,

an' incite others o' his stripe to go an' kill helpless white men an' insult white women. The rope, the torch, an' our spooky garb an' masks are the only things niggers are afraid of."

"You think that is it, do you?" Trawley said, with a low, pleased laugh.

"More'n anything else," affirmed Hoag, "along with our swift action. Say, I've been thinkin' over some'n Sid. You said when you fust rid up that the klan won't act without a leader, an' my business sometimes calls me off to Atlanta or Augusta—now it is important, in case I'm away at any time, to have some sort o' head, an' I've been thinkin' that, as you are sech an active member, you ought to be made my lieutenant—"

"You don't mean that, do you, Cap—you don't surely—" Trawley's voice seemed submerged in a flood of agreeable surprise.

"I do, an' I'm goin' to propose it at the next full meetin'. I want a young man like you that I can confer with now and then an' chat over matters. A feller can't always git at a big body like ours by hisself, an' you seem to be better fitted to the office than any other member."

"I'm much obliged, Cap." Trawley beamed, and his voice was round and full. "I'd like to stand in with you an' I'll do my best. I promise you that. The whole thing is fun to me."

"You've been more help to me already than anybody else," Hoag said, "and I'm goin' to propose yore name an' see that it goes through. Now, we haven't got any time to lose in this job to-night. Send the word along the line, Tell all hands to meet at Maxwell's cove by eleven o'clock—that will give us plenty o' time to git things in shape."

The dawn of the following day was on the point of breaking when Henry Hoag crossed the garden behind the farm-house, stealthily unlocked the front door, and crept up the stairs to his room. He had been out "skylarking" with some of his friends, and did not want his parents to know the hour of his return home. He did not light the candle on his bureau, but proceeded to undress in the dark. Suddenly he paused, as he sat on the edge of his bed removing his shoes, and listened. It was a soft footfall on the steps of the veranda, the gentle turning of a key in the lock of the door, the creaking of the hinges, followed by the clicking of the latch as the door was closed. A moment later a clumsy tread slurred along the lower corridor to Hoag's room.

Henry chuckled. "Got in by the skin of my teeth," he said. "If he knew I watched that thing from start to finish he'd beat me 'in an inch o' my life. He tried to change his voice, but he was too excited to hide it. Gee! didn't that poor nigger beg? Ugh, I'm afraid I'll see 'im in my sleep, and hear that last gurgle."

Henry cautiously lowered a shoe to the floor and sat still for a moment. "Poor old Pete!" he mused. "He swore he didn't do it, and somehow it seemed to me that he wasn't lyin'. I'd have turned him loose and risked it. Poor fellow! Poor fellow!"

CHAPTER IX

HOAG was in a reflective mood as he rode along his field-road in the crisp morning air. The sockets of his eyes were puffed out, and he looked like a man who had lost much sleep, and was braced up for the duties of the day by drink. Within certain material limits he was satisfied with himself. The dew seemed to have added succulence to his fat corn-stalks and sugar-cane; his wheat and cotton were in prime condition, especially the latter, of which his judgment had prompted an unusually large planting, and according to the market reports the staple would bring a fine price.

The affair of the preceding night had gone off with quiet, order, and dignity. His followers had listened to his usual speech with respect and close attention, and he was sure he had never spoken better. His threat that if his wishes were disobeyed in the slightest he would renounce the leadership had had the desired effect of proving that he was not a man to be trifled with. He told them he was giving his valuable time to the office, and had held himself in duty bound to answer every call, and would continue to do so as long as they realized the importance of his advice and services.

As he rode into Grayson he saw the sheriff and Budd Tibbs, the village marshal, on a one-horse dray, followed by a motley group of men, women, and children afoot, and Hoag knew that they were bound for the spot where the body of the lynched man was still hanging. The sheriff would cut the rope, an inquest would be held, and the corpse would be taken away for burial. On the street-corners at the Square stood groups of storekeepers without their hats and coats, blandly gazing after the dray and officers. The thought came to Hoag that some of the men on the street might wonder why he did not stop and chat about the matter, as would be natural for an ordinary citizen to do, who, living out of the village, might only just have heard of the happening; but Hoag was not in the mood for the adroit part he would have to play. His brain felt heavy and his thoughts were sluggish. The sight of the grave faces stirred a vague, unaccountable discontent within him, and he urged his horse to move faster. Suddenly the crude sign of a boot and shoe painted on a swinging board over the door of Silas Tye's shop caught his attention, and reminded him of something he wanted to say to the cobbler, so he dismounted at the door, hitched his horse to a post in front, and went into the shop.

Silas was at work putting a half-sole on a shoe which he held tightly clamped between his knees, and looked up over his murky spectacles and nodded.

"Good momin', Brother Hoag," he said. "Some'n I kin do for you?"

"Not at present, Uncle Si." Hoag sat down in a chair, thrust his hand into his hip-pocket, and taking out a piece of plug-tobacco, bit off the corner and rolled it about in his mouth. "No, I hain't got no work for you today. In fact, I come to sponge on you—to see if you can't give me a piece o' business advice. They say every

man to his line, an' I reckon you know as much about ready-made shoes as anybody else at Grayson."

"Oh, I don't know; I don't know much about manufactured stuff." Silas shook his bald head gently. "I kin tell good leather by the feel, look, an' smell of it; but mendin' has got to be my chief work now, an' mendin' shoddy goods at that. I kin make as good a boot as you or any other man would wear, but not at the machine-made price. A pair o' my boots will outwear any three from a box sold over a counter, but nobody round here will believe it."

"I don't doubt it—I don't doubt it for a minute," Hoag agreed, "and this is what I want to consult you about. I want your opinion. You know I've got that tannery, and I sometimes tan bigger quantities of hides, Uncle Si, than I am willin' to let go at the average price offered in Atlanta by the jobbers. So you see, in turnin' it over in my mind, it struck me all at once that I might put up a little factory on my place for makin' plain shoes by machinery, an' in that way work off surplus stock, increase my output of leather, and make the middleman's profit. If you will look out on the Square any day you'll see it perfectly black with idle niggers, an' I could put some of 'em to work, an'—"

The shoemaker glanced up and smiled faintly. "I reckon you won't see many in sight this momin'," he sighed, as he resumed his work. "The pore devils are scared out o' their senses by that thing last night. It's awful, awful!"

There was a pause. Hoag's eyelashes fluttered. "Yes, yes, I reckon so," he said. "I was goin' on to say—"

But some sound in the street had caught Tye's attention and, forgetful of his customer, he rose and stood at the door and looked out. The wrinkles on his brow and about his kindly eyes were drawn and deepened as he peered over the brass rims of his glasses. Hoag heard him sigh again, and saw him rubbing the sole of the shoe absent-mindedly.

"What's goin' on?" the tanner asked, without moving from his chair.

"It's that poor nigger Pete Watson's wife an' daughters," was the answer. "They've come to claim the body—Dick Morgan is showin' 'em which way to go. Lord, Lord, they do look pitiful! They ain't even cryin'—niggers seldom do at sech a time. Looks like they won't shed tears before the whites for fear it will make 'em mad. They learnt who the'r masters was before the war, an' they ain't over it. I knowed Pete Watson—I've mended shoes for 'im. He was always a civil nigger, an' clever enough. I've had talks with 'im, an' I've been astonished to hear what sensible ideas he had. He appeared to me to be a Christian—a Christian that understood what the Lord really meant when he was here on earth, an' that's rare even among the whites."

Silas came back to his bench and slowly sat down. "Lord, Lord, what a pity, what a pity!" he continued to mutter.

"They say he was undoubtedly guilty." Hoag felt his anger rising, and yet he realized that he must restrain himself. "That is the current report, anyway," he said.

"It always *is* the report," Silas said. "Even if a mistake was made the public would never know it. The gang that did the work would see to that."

"We are gittin' away from what we was talkin' about," Hoag said. "I was asking you what you thought about me startin' a little shoe-plant?"

"I'm afraid it wouldn't pay," Silas said, deliberately. "They make shoes a sight cheaper in the big works up North than you possibly could down here in the backwoods with untrained help. It's been tried, without success, several times here an' thar. The Yankees understand the knack o' splittin' leather an' usin' both halves, an' even the middle, for different purposes. You can't make shoes right an' put in good stock at the prices Northern made-up goods fetch." Silas selected a woman's shoe from a pile on the floor, and with his blackened thumb pried the worn bottom open. "Look at that—stuffed with leather shavin's an' glue! That's what you'd have to contend with. When folks go to buy they go by looks, not quality. Then yore help would fall down on you. You can't turn easy-goin', jolly singin' an' dancin' black boys an' gals into drudgin' machines all at once. They come from a drowsy, savage race an' a hot climate, an' you can't make 'em over in a day. La, la—" The shoemaker bent sideways to look out of the doorway toward the spot where the lynching had occurred. "That's why that thing seems so pitiful."

Hoag felt his ire rising, but he curbed himself. "They say—folks say, I'm told—that the nigger was *guilty*," he muttered. "When the neighbors first went to his house they found the old hat Rose had on when he was murdered. That fact may not be generally known."

"Yes, it is," Silas replied; "but if that's all the mob acted on they acted on powerful flimsy evidence. I've heard men say so this mornin'—good lawyers right here in town. Besides, I myself heard—why, a man set right whar you are a-settin' at this minute, Brother Hoag, an' told me not ten minutes ago that he seed Pete with his own eyes pick up the hat on the side o' the road long after the killin'. Now, you see, the fact that Pete had Rose's hat wouldn't actually condemn 'im in a court of law, while it would be proof enough for a drunken gang o' hotheaded nigger-haters. For all we know, somebody else done the killin' an' thro wed the hat down. I myself don't believe that even a *fool* nigger would kill a man an' tote his hat along a public road for everybody to see, an' take it home an' give it to one o' his boys to wear. It don't stand to reason."

A grim look of blended anger and chagrin had settled on Hoag's face. He crossed his legs and tapped the heel of his boot with the butt of his riding-whip.

"I'm not takin' up for the—the men that did the job," he said. "I have no idea who they are or whar they come from—all abouts in the mountains, I reckon; but any man with an eye in his head can see that the niggers in this country are gettin' out of all bounds. Thar is not a day that some white woman ain't mistreated or scared out o' her senses. I wouldn't trust a nigger an inch. I've seed the best of 'em—psalm-singers an' exhorters in meetin'—turn right round an' commit acts that only hell itself could devise."

"I know, I know," Silas sighed; "an' in my opinion that's exactly why we need law—an' good law at that. Niggers are natural imitators of the whites; they see lawlessness, an' they git lawless. Mob law stirs up the worst that's in 'em. They see injustice done—the wrong man lynched, for instance—an' they brood over it in secret an' want to hit back, an' they do it the first chance. I don't see you at meetin' often, Brother Hoag, an' you may not depend much on Scripture—many busy men don't, these days; but it is my chief guide, an' our

Lord an' Master laid down rules of conduct that if they was half obeyed thar wouldn't be a speck o' strife betwixt white an' black. Lovin' the humblest—"the least of these," as our Saviour put it—an' turnin' t'other cheek as a daily practice wouldn't leave an openin' for such as that last night."

Silas put some wooden pegs into his mouth, and began to make holes in the shoe-bottom with an awl and a flat-headed hammer. Hoag glared steadily at the bald pate for a moment, and then, shrugging his shoulders, he stood up. There was a red spot on each of his cheeks, a sullen, thwarted sort of flare in his eyes.

"Well, I'll have to be goin'," he said, winding his pliant whip around his hand. "I see you won't help me build that shoe-factory. I may do it, an' I may not. Thar is another deal I may put the money in, but that's plumb out o' your line. So long."

The cobbler raised his eyes and muttered an inarticulate something from his peg-filled mouth, and watched Hoag as he went out and unhitched his horse.

"He's one o' the big men o' the county," Silas mused, "an' yet he don't seem to have the slightest inkling o' what rail justice means. I reckon the almighty dollar has plumb blinded him. He wasn't any more concerned with what I told 'im about that pore darky than if I'd been talkin' about a dead hog. Well, they say he's give up believin' in a God or a future life, an' if he has he's livin' up to his lights, or *down* to 'em—I don't know which."

CHAPTER X

IN morbid ill-humor, and vaguely discontented under an intangible something that seemed to press upon him from external sources, Hoag went to his horse. At another time the conviction that a mere cobbler had convinced him of his lack of judgment in regard to a business venture would have irritated him beyond expression; but, strange to say, Silas had said other things that were even more objectionable, and Hoag had been obliged to sit and listen, and by his silence leave the impression on the stupid lout that he was right. The fellow was no doubt talking that way to others, and others were talking to him in the same vein.

Diagonally across the street was the front entrance to a big livery-stable. It had a high board front, on which was painted a horse in a racing-gig and a driver in a jockey's cap leaning forward whip in hand, feet firmly braced. Beneath the picture were the words:

"TRAWLEY'S FEED AND SALE STABLES"

And thither Hoag led his horse. On the edge of the sidewalk a negro was washing the dust from a new buggy with a sponge and a pail of water. Another negro close by was trimming the mane and tail of a horse with a big pair of clicking shears. They had been conversing in low, earnest tones, but they ceased and applied themselves vigorously to work as the tanner approached.

"Hold my hoss," he said to the man with the pail. "Is Sid about?"

"Back inside, boss." The negro touched his hat, swept a broad, flat foot backward, and took the bridle. "Leastwise, he was, suh, des er minute ergo. He was talkin' ter er gipsy dat had er muel ter swap. Dey didn't come ter no trade, dough. I know, kase de gipsy rid his muel off up de street."

Hoag turned into the stable, which was a spacious structure with wide doors at each end, bare, brown rafters overhead, and a storm-shattered shingle roof, which in places let in rifts of sunshine and exposed bits of sky. On either side of a wide passage, from end to end of the building, were stalls, some occupied by horses, and all smelling of manure and musty hay. There was a sound of the champing of feeding animals, the swishing of tails, for the flies were plentiful, and the satisfied accompaniment of pawing hoofs on the soggy ground.

In the rear doorway stood a man who had just stepped into view from the yard in the rear. It was Trawley. He had a stick of soft pine in his hand, and was nervously whittling with a big pocket-knife, his broad, slouch hat pushed back on his head and turned up in front. Sid was quite as well known for the good stable he ran as for his fighting tendencies, the quick use of a "gun," and general habits of brave recklessness.

Toward him, with a forced smile of companionship, Hoag walked, cautiously looking into the stalls as he passed.

"They are all in front," Trawley said, reassuringly when they met; "but we don't want to be seen confabbin' together, to-day of all days." He jerked his knife toward the yard. "Come out here whar it's quiet."

With a steady stare of awakening wonder over Sid's unwonted caution Hoag followed, first into the open glare of the sun and then under the roof of a wagon-shed.

"If you hadn't come in, I was goin' to ride out to see you," Trawley said, with a frown which lay heavily on his sharp-cut features. "I reckon you've heard—bad news travels fast."

"News? I hain't heard nothin'." Hoag held the butt of his whip against his lower lip and stared questioningly. "Say, what's up?"

"Enough, God knows—hell's to pay. We've got to git together right away an' take action o' some sort. Say—wait a minute."

The negro who had been cleaning the buggy was drawing it through the stable toward them, and his master strode angrily to the rear door.

"Leave that buggy thar," he ordered, "an' go back to the front an' stay till I come."

With a blank look of astonishment the negro dropped the tongue of the buggy, and turned back to the front. Hoag heard Trawley softly grumbling as he came back.

"I'll break a board over that nigger's head one o' these days," he growled. "He was try in' to get back here to see what me'n you are up to."

"Oh, I reckon not—I reckon not," Hoag said, his gaze anxiously fixed on Trawley's face. "Just now you said somethin' about news."

"You'll think it's news when you hear it," the stable-man said, taking off his hat and mopping his hot brow with a soiled handkerchief. "Cap, the last thing me or you could possibly expect has done happened. The sheriff of Canton County has just telegraphed that he's got the man that killed old Rose."

"Got the man that—bosh! Why *we*—" The words fell from Hoag's lips like bits of metal, and he broke off with a low oath. For a moment neither he nor Trawley spoke. Hoag laughed defiantly, mechanically, and without mirth. Then his face glowed faintly. "Oh, I see, the sheriff over thar don't know what—what took place here last night. He's nabbed some triflin' nigger that had a suspicious look, an' is holdin' 'im for—"

"'Twasn't no nigger," Trawley said. "It is a tramp—a white man that the sheriff says passed Rose's farm yesterday afoot."

"Well, what o' that?" Hoag showed irritability. "We'll have to wire the sheriff to turn the man loose—that's all—that's all!"

"If that *was* all, it *would* be easy; but it ain't, by a long shot," Trawley sniffed. "The tramp had Rose's old silver watch with his name cut on it!"

"You mean—" But Hoag knew well what he meant, and was in no mood for idle remarks. When thwarted in anything, justly or unjustly, he became angry; he felt his rage rising now over his sheer inability to cope with a situation which certainly demanded all his poise, all his mental forces.

"We are simply in a hole," Trawley muttered, still wiping the sweat from his brow. "In a hole, an' a deep one at that."

"What makes you think so?" Hoag was glaring into the eyes of his companion, as a man in dense darkness trying to see.

"Because we are," Trawley answered. "The sheriff over thar in Canton won't want to admit he's made a mistake with the proof he holds. He'll bring his man to trial an' the fellow will be convicted. The fact that we—that us boys in this county strung up a nigger for the crime won't make any difference over thar, but it will make a lot here."

"I don't see how."

"Well, I do, if you don't, Cap. We are in, an' we are in deep. You have a curious way about you—you git so mad when things go ag'in' you that you won't admit facts when they are before you. As for me, I've been here thinkin' over it all momin'. It is nasty—the whole damn thing is nasty. The niggers are gittin' bold enough anyway, along with what the Atlanta papers have been sayin' in their favor, an' the Governor talkin' about orderin' troops out, an' the like, an' now this will simply stir up the State. We kin keep the main body of niggers down by what we done—what was done last night; but thar are some sly ones with white blood an' hell in 'em. We are all in danger. Look at this stable." Trawley waved his damp handkerchief toward the big building and surrounding wagon-sheds. "One of the devils could sneak up here any night and set fire to all I got an' burn it to the ground. It is so dry it would go up like powder. I've got several thousand dollars' worth of vehicles, to say nothin' of live-stock that can't be driv' out at such a time, an' I don't carry insurance, because the rate is too high, owin' to the risk bein' so heavy; Land as for you—your tannery, house, cotton-gin, warehouse, an'—"

"Thar's no good talkin' about all *that*!" Hoag broke in, with a lowering frown. "We've got to do something, an' do it quick."

"Wait a minute," Trawley said. "I hear one o' them niggers whistlin' for me; it may be one o' our—one of—may be somebody lookin' for us now. Thar'll be excitement, big excitement, when it spreads about through the mountains."

There was an oak in the yard which shaded the well, and Hoag went to the well and sat down on the end of a long dug-out watering-trough. He was beginning to perspire freely, and he took off his hat and fanned himself in a nervous, jerky fashion. His hands were damp, and on their red backs, and along his heavy wrists, the hairs stood like dank reeds in a miniature swamp. He was in high dudgeon; everything seemed to have turned against him. Tye's unconscious lecture and crude object-lessons, combined with the old man's spiritual placidity and saintly aloofness from the horrors he shrank from, were galling in the extreme. Then Trawley's fears that certain property might be destroyed by way of retaliation were worth considering; and, lastly, there was the humiliation of such a grave mistake becoming public, even though the perpetrators themselves might not be known. From where Hoag sat he could look into the stable, and he saw Trawley going from stall to stall showing the horses to a well-dressed stranger, who looked like a traveling salesman of the better class. Presently the man left the stable, and Trawley, still holding his stick and knife in hand, came back to Hoag.

"Damn fool from up North," he explained, angrily. "Wanted to hire a rig an' hosses to go over the mountain, whar he's got some lumber interests. He talked to me like—I wish you'd a-heard 'im. I couldn't hardly pin 'im down to business, he was so full o' the hangin'. He happened to see 'em cut down the body an' haul it away. Of course, he had no idea that I—he seemed to lay it to a gang o' cutthroats from over whar he was to go, an' wondered if it would be safe for a Northern man to drive out unarmed an' without a bodyguard."

"Why didn't you slap his jaw?" Hoag growled, inconsistently.

"Yes, an' had 'im ax what it was to me," Trawley snarled. "I did, in a roundabout way, try to show up our side, an' what we have to contend with; but he just kept groanin', 'My Lord, my Lord,' an' sayin' that old woman an' her children was the pitifulest sight he ever saw! He said"—Trawley shrugged his shoulders and made a grimace as he tugged at his mustache—"he said all of us *civilized* citizens—they was his words—ought to band together an' 'force law an' order—that it was killin' our interests. He had been countin' on locatin' here, he said, but was afeard, when the thing got in the papers, his company would back out an' not

develop their property. He seemed awfully put out. I tried to tell 'im that if he knowed niggers as we do he'd see it our way; but the truth is, I was so bothered over that dang tramp's arrest that—"

"I've been studyin' over that." Hoag dismissed the stranger from his mind with a fierce frown. "There is only one thing to do. Set down here—set down!"

Sid complied. "If you can think of any way out o' the mess you can beat me," he said, dejectedly.

"Thar is just one thing for us to do." Hoag was to some extent regaining his self-possession, his old autocratic mien had returned. "You fellows are all goin' to git rattled an' somebody's got to keep a clear head an' plan how to act. The klan will naturally look to me; it is really on my shoulders; we'll sink or fall by my judgment. Some of us have got to git together to-night an' march over thar to the Canton jail an' take that tramp out."

"An' lynch 'im? Good Lord, Cap—"

"No, fool, not lynch 'im—that wouldn't do—that never would do in the world; we must send 'im about his business—hustle 'im out o' the country an'—an' circulate the report that he was arrested by mistake, which—which I've no doubt he was. Pete Watson sold 'im the watch. That's plain enough."

"Oh, ah, I see—by gum, I see; but what about the sheriff over thar? Fellers o' that sort are sometimes proud o' makin' an arrest in a case like that."

"That's the only hill to climb an' we may fail; but we've got to try it. I know 'im purty well. He expects to be re-elected, an' half of our boys live in his county an' vote thar. We must show 'im the damage the thing would work among the niggers, an' sort o' make a—a political issue of it; show 'im that he'll git beat, an' beat bad, if he goes ag'in' so many."

"By gum, you *are* a corker, Cap—you sure are." Hoag's eyes gleamed, a look of pride settled on his face; he crossed his legs and tapped the spur on his heel with the butt of his whip till the little pronged wheel spun like a circular saw, "When I'm driv' clean to the wall like this I generally see a loophole," he said. "Now, let's set to work; you send out the word in the usual way, an' have 'em meet at the Cove."

"Good, good! It's worth tryin', anyway." Trawley breathed more freely. "I'll notify most o' the boys—especially them that live in Canton County."

"Order out as many as you can," Hoag said. "At night it will be hard for the sheriff to know who they all are, an' the bigger the crowd the better; but, say—I've just thought of something important. You'll have to leave Sam an' Alec Rose out. You see it stands to reason that they'd never consent to let the tramp off, an'—an'—well, we can't kill 'im. He's got to go free."

"Yes, Sam an' Alec will have to be left out—they are crazy enough as it is. I'll caution the other boys not to let 'em know a thing about it."

"That's the idea." Hoag was starting away, when Trawley, still seated on the trough, called him back.

"Wait; thar was something else I had on my mind to tell you, but it has clean slipped away. I intended to tell you last night, but we had so much to do, an' thar was so much excitement. Lemme see—oh yes, now I remember!" Trawley stood up and caught the lapel of Hoag's thin coat. "Say, Cap, I want to warn you, as a friend, you are goin' to have more trouble with Jeff Warren. He hain't never been satisfied since you an' him had that fight last spring. He says he licked you, an' that you've been denying it. He was here at the stable yesterday talkin' about what he was goin' to do with you when he meets you. He's heard some'n he claims you said about him an' Ralph Rundel's wife. I reckon he is actin' the fool about 'er, an' maybe he is takin' advantage of a sick man; but nobody knows, for sure. Some think Jeff is honorable. Anyway, you'll have to look out an' not let 'im git the drop on you. He's a bloodthirsty devil when he's mad, an' he hain't got sense enough to know that he'd compromise the woman worse by fightin' for her than lettin' the matter blow over."

Hoag stood silent, facing his companion. His countenance became rigid and his heavy brows fell together; there was a peculiar twitching about his nostrils. "I don't know what I said about him an' her, an' I care less." He spoke in halting, uncertain tones. "I've got no use for 'im, an' never had."

"Well, I thought there'd be no harm in puttin' you on yore guard." Trawley looked at his chief as if perplexed over his mood. "He's a hot-headed devil, that will shoot at the drop of a hat."

Hoag stood rigid. There was a fixed stare in his eyes. His lips quivered, as if on the verge of utterance, and then he looked down at the ground. Trawley eyed him in slow surprise for a moment, then he said:

"I hope, Cap, you don't think I am meddlin' in yore private business. It is not often that I tote any sort o' tale betwixt two men; but Jeff is such a rampant daredevil, an' so crazy right now, that—"

"I'm not afraid of 'im. Good God, don't think that!" Hoag was quite pale. "It was only—say, Sid, it's like this: do you think that a man like me, with all I've got at stake, one way or another, can afford to—to take even chances with a shiftless fool like Jeff Warren?"

"It ain't what you, or me, or anybody can *afford* to do," the stable-owner returned, "or *want* to do, for that matter; when a chap like Jeff is loaded for bear an' on our trail we've either got to git ready for 'im or—or swear out a peace-warrant, an' me or you'd rather be hung than do the like o' that. As for me, in all rows I treat everybody alike. If a black buck nigger wants satisfaction out o' me he can git it—you bet he can."

"Yes, yes, I know," Hoag said, his eyes shifting restlessly in their deep sockets, his fingers fumbling his whip. "I was just wondering; did he—did you notice whether Warren was totin' a gun or not?"

"I think he was; that's why I mentioned the matter to you. In fact, he was inquireing if anybody had seen you—said he knowed enough law to know that if he went to yore house on such serious business that he'd be held accountable, wharas, if you an' him met on a public highway it would be all right, beca'se it was your unjustified remark ag'in' a woman that started the thing."

Hoag stared into the face of his companion for another minute. It was as if he wanted some sort of advice and did not know how to ask for it. He shrugged his shoulders, lashed the hot air with his whip, cleared his throat, and said:

"I hope you don't think I'm afraid o' the dirty puppy, Sid?"

"Afraid, oh no!" Trawley replied, indifferently. "Of course not. You kin shoot as straight as he can. Besides,

if it come to the worst—if he did happen to git the best of it—you are in as good a shape to die as any man I know. You'd leave your wife an' family well provided for. Take my advice and don't give 'im a chance to draw a gun. Pull down, and pull down quick!"

Trawley led the way back into the stable, and at the front the two men parted. Hoag was on the sidewalk when Trawley called to him, and came to his side.

"If you hain't got a gun on you, you kin take mine," he said, in a low tone.

"I've got one," Hoag answered, a far-off look in his eyes, and he slid a hand over his bulging hip-pocket. "I never go without it."

"Well, if nothin' happens, then I'll meet you tonight," Trawley reminded him. "We must put that thing through."

Hoag nodded. "All right," he returned, abstractedly. "All right—all right."

"If nothin' happens!" The words fairly stung his consciousness as he walked away. "If nothin' happens!" His feet and legs felt heavy. There was a cold, tremulous sensation in the region of his pounding heart.

CHAPTER XI

HOAG had some important business to transact in the little bank on one of the comers of the Square, and he was detained there half an hour or more. The thought flashed on him, as he sat alone at the banker's desk in the rear, that a prudent man at such a time would make a will; but the idea chilled him, horrified him. This feeling was followed by a desperate sort of anger over the realization that a low, shiftless clodhopper could so materially upset a man of his importance. He had recalled the idle remark which had reached Warren's ears, and knew it was the kind of thing the man would fight to the death about. And there was no way out of it—no way under the sun. He could not—as Trawley had said—appeal to the law for protection; such a course would make him the laughing-stock of all his followers, who thought him to be a man of unquestioned courage. Hoag drew a sheet of paper to him and began to write, but was unable to fix his mind on the matter in hand. It seemed utterly trivial beside the encroaching horror. Jeff Warren might walk in at any moment and level his revolver; Jeff Warren would kill the traducer of a woman in a church or in a group of mourners over a new grave and feel that he had done his duty. Hoag crumpled up the sheet of paper and dropped it into a waste-paper basket under the desk. He thrust his hand behind him and drew out his revolver and looked at it. He noticed, as he twirled the polished cylinder, that his fingers shook. He ground his teeth, uttered a low oath, and put the revolver back into his pocket. How could he defend himself with nerves such as the combination of tobacco and whisky had given him? He rose and went through the bank to the street, returning the banker's smiling salutation from the little grated window as he passed out.

He drew a breath of relief when he reached the sidewalk, for Warren was not in sight. To Hoag an irrelevant sort of mocking placidity rested on the scene. Storekeepers, clerks, and cotton-buyers were moving about without their coats, pencils behind their ears. Countrymen from the mountains in white-hooded wagons were unloading grain, potatoes, apples, chickens in coops, and bales of hay, with their hearts in their work, while he, the financial superior of them all, was every minute expecting to grapple with a bloody and ignominious death. He had a deed to record at the Court House, and he went into the big, cool building and turned the document over to the clerk with instructions to keep the paper till he called for it. Two lank, coatless farmers, seated near the desk, were playing checkers on a worn, greasy board.

"Ah, ha!" one of them said, "cap that un, an' watch me swipe the balance."

Hoag was going out when he saw, carelessly leaning in the doorway at the front of the hall, the man he was dreading to meet. For an instant he had an impulse to fall back into the clerk's office, and then the sheer futility of such a course presented itself. Besides, the tall, slender man, with dark hair and eyes and waxed mustache, who had no weapon in sight, was calmly addressing him.

"I want to see you, Jim Hoag," he said. "Suppose we step back in the yard at the end o' the house?"

"Oh, hello, Warren, how are you?" Hoag said, forcing a desperate smile to his stiff mouth and chilled cheeks.

"I'll try to show you how I am in a few minutes," Warren answered, coldly, and he led the way down the hall, his high-heeled boots ringing on the bare floor, toward the door at the end. "Or maybe it will be t'other way—you may show me. Well, if you can, you are welcome."

"I see you are lookin' for trouble, Jeff," Hoag began. "I heard you wanted to see me, an' I heard you was mad at some fool lie or other that—"

"You step out here on the grass," Warren said. "I never seed the day I wouldn't give even a bloated skunk like you a fair chance. Draw your gun. You've got more money 'an I have, Hoag; but, by God! my honor an' the honor of a respectable lady of my acquaintance is worth as much to me as—"

"Look here, Jeff, I ain't armed." Hoag lied flatly as he saw Warren thrust his hand behind him. "You say you want to act fair, then be fair—be reasonable. The truth is—"

"Oh, I see—well, if you ain't ready, that alters it! No man can't accuse me of pullin' down on a feller that ain't fixed. I know you ain't a-goin' to back down after what I've said to your teeth, an' I'll set here on this step an' you go across to the hardware store an' fix yourself. Mine's a thirty-eight. I don't care what size you git. I want you to be plumb satisfied. Don't tell anybody, either. We don't want no crowd. This is our affair." Hoag moved a step nearer to the offended man. He smiled rigidly. His voice fell into appealing, pleading

gentleness.

"Looky here, Jeff, you an' me 've had differences, I know, an' thar's been plenty o' bad blood betwixt us; but as God is my judge I never had any deep ill-will ag'in' you. I've always known you was a brave man, an' I admired it in you. You are mad now, an' you are not seein' things straight. You've heard some'n or other; but it ain't true. Now, I don't want any trouble with you, an—"

"Trouble!" Warren's dark eyes flashed; his voice rang like steel striking steel. It was an odd blending of threat and laughter. "If we don't have trouble the sun won't set to-night. I'm talkin' about what you said at the post-office t'other day to a gang about me an' a certain neighbor's wife."

"I think I can guess what you are talkin' about, an' you've got it plumb crooked, Jeff." Hoag bent toward the man and laid a bloodless hand full of soothing intent on his shoulder. "You say you are a fair man, Jeff, an' I know you are, an' when a man like me says he's sorry and wants to fix things straight—without bloodshed—be reasonable. I didn't mean to reflect on the lady. I just said, if I remember right, that it looked like she admired you some. An' if you say so, I'll apologize to her myself. No man could ask more than that."

The fierce dark eyes blinked; their glare subsided. There was a momentous pause.

"I wouldn't want 'er to hear a thing like that," Warren faltered. "Too much has been said anyway, one way an' another, by meddlin' gossips, an' it would hurt her feelin's. I didn't want to fight about it, but couldn't hold in. An' if you say you didn't mean nothin' disrespectful, why, that will have to do. We'll drop it. I don't want bloodshed myself, if I kin get around it."

"I don't want any either, Jeff," Hoag said, still pacifically, and yet his fury, contempt for himself, and hatred for the man before him were already returning, "so we'll call it settled?"

"All right, all right," Warren agreed; "it will have to do. When a man talks like you do nothin' more is to be said. I never yet have whipped a man that didn't want to fight. I'd as soon hit a suckin' baby." They parted, Warren going into the Court House and Hoag to the stable for his horse. Trawley was at the front waiting for him.

"Hello," he cried, "I see he didn't plug you full o' holes. I watched 'im follow you into the Court House, an' expected to hear a whole volley o' shots."

"He *did* want to see me," Hoag sneered, loftily. "In fact, he come while I was havin' a paper recorded an' wanted to see me. He tried to git me to admit I was slanderin' that woman, an' I gave 'im a piece o' my mind about it. Her son works for me, an' I think a lot of the boy. I wouldn't have Paul hear a thing like that for anything. He's all right an' is tryin' hard to make his way. I told Jeff if he wanted bloodshed to git up some other pretext an' I'd give 'im all he wanted. A triflin' scamp like he is can't stamp me in public as a traducer of women."

"I see, I see," said Trawley, in vague approval. "Well, that's out of the way, an' we can attend to the other matter. It's a serious thing, Jim Hoag. The sheriff over in Canton may tell us to mind our own rat-killin', and then we *would* be in a box."

"We've got to bring all our force to bear an' pull 'im round," Hoag said. "I'm goin' to see a few of our main men here in town, an' sorter map out a plan. If we go at it right, we'll pull it through. I'll meet you all at the Cove to-night."

CHAPTER XII

IT was late in the afternoon when Hoag rode up to his house and delivered his horse to Cato, with instructions to feed and water the animal and rub him down carefully, as he had to "use him again after supper."

In the hall he met his wife. She had a tired, anxious look on her face, which seemed flushed by the heat of the cooking-stove, over which she had been working.

"Have the cows come up?" he asked her.

"Yes." She glanced at him timidly. "Mother is down attendin' to the milkin' with Dilly. I'm watchin' the meat in the stove."

"You'd better take it up as soon as it's good done," he said. "I don't want supper to be late ag'in—not to-night, anyway. I've got to ride out to see a man that's got a lot o' land to sell."

"It's about done," she answered, wearily, "an' I'll take it up an' set the table."

He passed on to the kitchen, filled a dipper with water from the pail, and drank; then he returned to the front veranda and sat down in a latticed corner, over which honeysuckles climbed. He removed his coat, for the air was close and hot. He opened the bosom of his moist shirt, and fanned his face, big neck, and hairy chest with his hat. He was upset, dissatisfied, angry. So many things had gone contrary to his wishes. Why had he allowed Silas Tye to talk to him in such a vein? Why had he not defended the worthy principle he and his followers stood for? What could an ignorant shoemaker know of such grave and important issues? Then there was the memory of Jeff Warren's grimly determined mouth, set jaws, and flaming eyes, as he stood placidly demanding satisfaction of him—*of him*. Hoag's rage ran through him like streams of liquid fire, the glow of which hung before his eyes like a mist of flame. Why had he not—he clenched his brawny fist and the muscles of his arm drew taut—why had he not beaten the insolent fellow's face to a pulp for daring to talk of satisfaction to him? The man, even now, was perhaps recounting what had happened in his stoical, inconsequential way, and there were some persons—*some*, at least—who would think that the apology was

the last resort of a coward. Men who didn't really know him might fancy such to be the case. Yes, he must have it out with Warren. Some day—before long, too—he would call him down publicly on some pretext or other in which a woman's fame was not involved, and prove himself to others and, yes—to himself.

There was a soft step in the hallway behind him. It was his wife. He felt rather than saw her presence in the doorway.

"What is it—what is it?" he demanded, impatiently.

He heard her catch her breath, and knew the delay in replying was due to habitual timidity. He repeated his question fiercely, for there was satisfaction in being stern to some one after the humiliating manner in which he had received Warren.

"You say you are goin' out after supper?" she faltered. "I hope you ain't goin' far, because—"

"I'm goin' as far as I *want* to go," he hurled at her. "I won't let you nor your mammy dabble in my affairs. I don't have to make excuses neither. My business is my business. I'll have to be late; but that's neither here nor thar, whether I am or not. I see you both with your heads together now and then, and I know what you say—I know what you think—but I'll be my own boss in this establishment, an' you may as well count on it."

"Don't, don't! Please don't talk so loud!" she implored him, for his voice had risen almost to a shriek. "Didn't Paul Rundel tell you? I sent 'im in town to find you. Surely you know—"

"To find me? What for?"

"Why, the baby's awful sick; he's just dropped to sleep. Paul got Dr. Lynn as quick as he could, an' then went on after you."

"Sick—sick—is Jack sick?"

Hoag lowered the front part of his chair to the floor and stood up. He stared into the shrinking face for a moment, and then he spoke in a low, startled voice.

"What did the doctor say ailed him?"

"He said he couldn't tell yet. Jack's got a powerful high fever. Dr. Lynn said it might be very serious, and it might not. He left some medicine, an' told me to watch the child close. He said he'd be back as soon as he could possibly get here. He'd have stayed on, but he was obliged to attend to Mrs. Petty, who ain't expected to last through the night."

Silence fell as the woman ceased speaking. Hoag's breathing through his big, hair-lined nostrils was audible. He put his hand on the door-facing and swayed toward it. Every trace of his anger had vanished.

"I didn't see Paul." He had lowered his voice to an undertone. "I had no idea Jack was sick. When—when did you first notice it?"

"About four o'clock. He was playin' in the yard, as usual, an' I didn't dream anything was wrong till Aunt Dilly come to me an' said Jack acted odd. She said she'd been watchin' 'im through the window, an' he'd quit playin' an' would lie down on the grass awhile an' then git up an' play a little an' then lie down ag'in. I went out and found him with the hottest skin I ever felt an' a queer, glassy look in his eyes. I toted 'im in an' put 'im on the bed, an' then I saw he was plumb out o' his head, thinkin' he saw ugly things which he said was comin' to git 'im. He was that way, off an' on, till the doctor come."

One of Hoag's greatest inconsistencies was the tendency to anger whenever anything went contrary to his desires. He was angry now, angry while he was filled with vague fear and while certain self-accusing thoughts flitted about him like winged imps of darkness. He wanted to charge some one with having neglected the child, and he would have done so at any moment less grave. Just then a low moan came from Mrs. Hoag's room on the right of the hall, and she hastened to Jack's bedside. Hoag followed on tiptoe and bent over the child, who lay on his little bed before a window through which the fading light was falling.

The child recognized his father and held up his flushed arms.

"Daddy, Dack's hick. It's hot—hot!"

"I know—I know," Hoag said, soothingly, his hand on the child's brow; "the medicine will cool you off after a while."

"Black' things come to catch Dack—oh, Daddy, don't let 'em—don't let 'em!"

"You was out o' your head," Hoag heard himself saying, almost cooingly. "It was a bad dream—that's all—a mean, bad dream."

Then a vague stare of coming unconsciousness crept into the child's eyes and the long lashes drooped to the flushed cheeks. Hoag drew himself erect, held his breath lest his exhaling might waken the child, and crept quietly from the room back to the veranda.

The twilight was thickening over the fields and meadows. The mountains loomed up like sinister monsters against the sky. Clouds of blue smoke from forest fires, far and near, hovered over the valley. The sultry air was laden with the odor of burning twigs, leaves, and underbrush. There was a step on the back porch, and, turning, he saw Mrs. Tilton coming in, bowed between two pails of milk. He went to her as she stood at the kitchen-table straining the warm, fragrant fluid into a brown jar. "What do you think ails the baby?" he inquired. "Looks to me like scarlet fever," she answered, with the stoicism of her age and sex. "I hain't seen many cases in my time, but from the indications—" He swore under his breath, angry at her for even suggesting such a horrible possibility. "I reckon you don't know much about such things. Wait till the doctor says it's as bad as that before you jump at it so quick."

"I didn't *say* I knowed for sure," Mrs. Tilton flared, resentfully. "But thar's one thing certain, the doctor is worried—I saw that plain enough; he is worried, an' I never would 'a' thought o' scarlet fever if he hadn't said a lot of it was goin' round about."

"Who's got it?" Hoag demanded, as fiercely as a lawyer browbeating a refractory witness.

"Why, the McKinneys' youngest gal. They sent 'er over here to borrow salt t'other day just before she was took down, an' her an' Jack—"

"I reckon you'll say you let Jack play with 'er next," Hoag blustered, in the tone of a rough man to a rough

man.

"How could we tell?" was the admission, calmly enough made. "She hadn't broke out—she *did* look sort o' red; but it was a hot day, an' I thought she'd been runnin', as children will do. Jack was playin' in the straw that was cut last week, an' she come by an'—"

"Pack of fools—pack of idiots!" Hoag thundered, and he went back to the veranda, where for several minutes he stood staring dejectedly into the night. He was there holding his unlighted pipe in his hand, his ears bent to catch any sound from the sick-room, when Aunt Dilly, the fat cook, came shuffling in her slipshod way up behind him.

"Supper's on de table, Marse Jim," she announced, in a low tone of concern. "Miss Sarah an' 'er ma say dey don't feel like eatin' a bite—dey is so clean upset an' outdone."

Hoag was not conscious of any desire for food, but as a matter of form or habit he followed the negress to the dining-room across the hall from where the child lay and took his usual seat at the long table. A lamp with a pink paper shade stood in the center of the board, and threw a rosy glow over the dishes and cold vegetables and meat. Hoag helped himself to the cabbage and beans, and broke the corn pone, and poured out his coffee. He ate slowly and yet without due mastication, for he was constantly listening, with knife and fork poised in the air, for any sound from the sick-room. The sight of the high, empty chair in which the baby usually sat next to him sent a shudder through him and tightened his throat. Hurrying through his supper, he rose and went back to his seat on the veranda. The fear that was on him was like a palpable weight which crushed him physically as well as mentally. Recent disagreeable occurrences flitted before his mind's eye like specters. It seemed to him, all at once, that a malignant destiny might be taking him in hand. An evil sun had risen on him that day, and this was its setting. Jack, the flower of his life—the only creature he had ever really loved—was going to die—to die, actually to die! Hoag stifled an upsurging groan. His head sank till his chin touched his bare breast, and then he drew himself up in resentful surprise over his weakness. The night crept on like a vast thing full of omnipotent and crafty design. It was twelve o'clock, and yet he had not thought of sleep, although he had not closed his eyes the night before. He heard voices in the sick-room, and was about to go thither, when the door opened and Mrs. Tilton came along the hall and stopped at his chair.

"I thought you was in bed," she said, in a strange, reserved tone. "I'm awfully worried. I'm afraid it's goin' ag'in' Sarah. She ain't strong enough to stand up under it. If Jack goes she'll go too. Mark my prediction."

"How's the baby?" Hoag impatiently demanded.

"I don't know; he's tossin' awful. Looks like Dr. Lynn would have been here by this time; but he said the only thing to do was to wait an' see how the medicine acted. Are you goin' to stay up?"

Hoag's head rocked. "Yes, I want to hear what he says. I'll be out here if—if you—need me."

"All right." And the old woman slipped away in the unlighted hall, and he heard her softly opening the door of the sick-room. The silence of the night grew profound. The moon was rising like a flaming world above the mountain, throwing its mystical veil over the landscape. There was a sound of a closing gate at the foot of the lawn, and some one entered and came up the walk. It was Henry. He had a cane in his hand, and was idly slashing the flowers which bordered the walk. He was whistling in a low, contented way. Down the steps crept his father, and they met a little distance from the house.

"Stop that infernal noise!" Hoag commanded. "Hain't you got an ounce o' sense? The baby's sick an' you'll wake 'im. Whar 've you been?"

"Over at John Wells's house," the boy replied. "Tobe is going off to Texas, and everybody was saying good-by."

"I'll believe that when I have to," Hoag growled. "I can smell liquor on you now. You fairly stink with it."

"'Twasn't nothing but an eggnog Mrs. Wells made," the boy said, slowly, studying the face before him.

"Well, you go on to bed," Hoag ordered. "An' don't you make a bit o' noise goin' in, either. Don't wake that child."

"I ain't agoin' to wake 'im," Henry answered, as he turned away. "I'm sorry he's sick. Can I see him?"

"No, you can't! Go to bed an' let 'im alone."

When his son had disappeared into the house Hoag stood for a moment staring at the light which filtered through the green blinds of his wife's room, and then, hearing the beating of hoofs on the road, he moved on to the gate with an eager, tentative step.

"That's the doctor now," he thought. "What the hell's he creepin' along like a snail for when we've been waitin'—" But the horse had stopped in the shadow of the barn, and Hoag saw the rider still in the saddle leaning sideways and peering at him.

"What's the matter, Doc?" Hoag called out. "Want me to hitch yo' hoss?"

"It hain't the doctor—it's me, Cap. Anybody in sight—road clear?"

An oath of combined surprise and disappointment escaped Hoag's tense lips. It was Trawley, and for the first time since he had parted with the man that afternoon he recalled his appointment. He said nothing, but opened the gate, passed out, and went along the fence to the horse and rider.

"I come by to report." Trawley threw a leg over the rump of his steaming horse and stood down on the ground. "Met Paul Rundel in town searchin' high an' low for you, an' heard your baby was purty bad off, so when I met the boys—eighty odd—an' we'd waited as long as we possibly could, I explained to 'em and took command, an' we went on; we just had to—time was powerful short, you know. We rode fast, goin' an' comin'."

Trawley ceased speaking and looked at his chief in slow astonishment, for Hoag was blankly staring at the ground.

"My God, Cap, the little chap hain't—dead, is he?"

"No, no, not yet—not yet," Hoag muttered; "but he may be before mornin'."

"You don't say! That's bad, powerful bad, for I know what a great pet he is, an' a bright, knowin' child, too,

if thar ever was one. Well, I reckon you want to know what we done? We got thar in the neighborhood o' nine o'clock, an' rid straight to the jail. The sheriff was thar hisself on guard, an' at first he thought we was a gang bent on lynchin', an' shet all doors an' talked about firin' on us; but I'd appointed Sim Cotes as spokesman, an' we raised a white flag an' called the sheriff out. Then Sim laid down the law in a speech as smooth as goose grease. As fast as the sheriff would raise an objection Sim would knock it into a cocked hat, till finally the feller didn't have a leg to stand on. Sim told 'im that if he didn't act sensible five hundred men would be out in the mornin' workin' for his defeat in the next election. He wiggled, an' argued, an' mighty nigh prayed—they say he's a deacon or some'n or other; but he had his price, an' he finally tumbled. He went in an' talked with the jailer an' his wife. The woman was on our side; said she didn't want to see the tramp strung up nohow. It was funny; we had 'im whar the wool was short, as the sayin' is, an' so—"

Trawley stopped, for Hoag had turned abruptly and was looking past him to the cross-roads at the corner of his property.

"That must be Doc Lynn now," he said, excitedly.

"No, it ain't," Trawley answered. "That is a drummer in a rig o' mine. He went over to Tyler Station before daylight, an' was to git back to-night. I know the hoss's trot. Say, Cap, we shore did act in hot blood last night. We kin say what we like to the public, but we certainly sent one innocent coon to judgment. That measly tramp was as guilty as ever a man was."

"You think so?" Hoag said, listlessly.

"Yes; we led 'im down the road apiece after we left the jail. He hadn't heard our dicker with the sheriff, an' made shore we was in for hangin' 'im. He must o' had a streak o' good old-fashioned religion in 'im, for all the way we heard 'im prayin' like rips. Even when we all got around 'im to explain he drapped on his knees in the road and confessed to the whole dern business. He didn't ax for mercy, either, but just begged for a few minutes to pray. The boys was all feelin' purty good over the way things was goin' an' was in for some fun, so nobody let on for a while, an' Sim Cotes, in as solemn a voice as a judge, called out that we'd 'low 'im three minutes, an' we all set down on the grass like Indians smokin' a pipe o' peace, an' tuck it in like a show. It seemed he didn't really intend to kill old Rose; he just wanted to stun 'im so he could get what he had, but the old man put up a regular wild-cat fight, an' was yellin' so loud for help, that he had to settle 'im to save his own skin."

"Then you let 'im go," Hoag prompted. "Hurry up, I don't want to stay here all night."

"Yes; some o' the boys was in for givin' the poor devil a sound lashin'; but he really looked like he wasn't strong enough to stand up under it, an' we didn't dare disable 'im, so when we explained to 'im that he was free if he'd get clean out o' the country an' hold his tongue, he was the funniest lookin' sight you ever saw. By gum, he actually tried to kiss our hands; he crawled about on his knees in the road, cryin' an' whimperin' an' beggin' the Lord to bless us. It actually unstrung some o' the boys—looked like they hardly knowed what to do or say. The tramp started off, lookin' back over his shoulder like he was afraid somebody would shoot, an' when he got to the top o' the rise he broke into a run an' he hit the grit like a scared rabbit."

Trawley laughed impulsively; but no sign of amusement escaped Hoag. His eyes were fixed on a horse and buggy down the road.

"That must be the doctor," he said. "You go on to town."

"All right, all right, Cap," was the reply. "I just thought I'd stop by an' let you know how it come out. Good night."

"Good night," Hoag gloomily echoed, and he went back to the gate, where he stood waiting for the doctor.

The physician was a man past middle age, full-bearded, iron-gray, and stockily built. He got out of his buggy with the deliberation of his profession.

"How is the child now?" he asked, as he hitched his horse to the fence.

"I don't know, Doc; you'd better hurry in an' look at 'im. You think he is dangerous, don't you?"

"I thought so when I saw 'im; but I can't tell sure yet. Couldn't get here a bit sooner—tried my best, but couldn't."

Hoag opened the gate, and they both passed through. On the still air the trotting of Trawley's horse fell faintly on their ears. As they neared the house the light in the sick-room was turned up and Mrs. Tilton came to the front door.

"Walk in, Doctor," Hoag said, and he remained at the foot of the steps, his bare head catching the silvery beams of the moon. Hoag heard his mother-in-law speaking in a low, explanatory tone, as she led the doctor along the dark hall.

What would the verdict be? Hoag asked himself. Other men had lost their children, why should not he—he, of all men, take his turn at that sort of fatality? He paced the grass in front of the house impatiently. He shrank from seeing the child. There was something in the small, suffering face which he felt would unman him. The minutes seemed to drag like hours. There was a constant grinding and rumbling of feet on the floor within, the mumbling of low voices. Hoag strained his ears for the sound of Jack's voice, but it did not come. Perhaps—perhaps the little fellow was sinking; children died that way, often without pain or struggle. Hoag for one instant leaned toward the hereditary instinct of prayer, and then shrugged his shoulders as he remembered that he had long since given all that up. Belief in God and a future life belonged to a period far back in his memory, when, as a smooth-faced youth, he had erroneously thought himself converted at a revival in which the whole countryside had given itself over to tears, rejoicings, and resolutions. No; if Jack was dying, that was the end of the little life—marvelous as it was—it was the end, the very end. Hoag sat down on the lowest step of the veranda, gripped his big hands between his knees, and stared at the pale, pitiless moon.

The sound of a closing door fell on his ears; a heavy step rang in the hall. The doctor was coming out. Hoag stood up and faced him as he crossed the veranda, his medicine-case in hand. How damnably placid seemed the bearded face; how like that of an official executioner or an undertaker bent on mere profit.

"Well, well?" Hoag gulped. "Well, how is it?"

"I had my scare for nothing." The doctor bent his body to look around a tree to see if his horse was where he had left it. "It isn't scarlet fever. The child has eaten something that went against him. He had a raging fever; but it's down now, and if you will look to his diet for a day or two he'll be all right."

Hoag said nothing; something like a blur fell before his eyes, and the fence, trees, bam, and stables rose and fell like objects floating on a turbulent cloud. "Good night," he heard the doctor saying as from a distance. "Goodnight"—it seemed an echo from within him, rather than a product of his lips. The blur lifted; he steadied himself, and stood watching the doctor as he unhitched his horse and got into the buggy.

CHAPTER XIII

ON this same night certain things were happening at Ralph Rundel's cottage. The hour was late. Paul, who was suddenly roused from the profound slumber of a tired toiler, was sure of this, though he had no means of ascertaining the exact time.

"Don't you dare hit 'er, Rafe Rundel, don't you—don't you, I say!" was the cry which at first seemed to the boy to be a part of a confused dream, and which resolved itself into distinct utterance as his eyes and ears gradually opened.

"I wasn't tryin' to hit 'er, Mandy, an' you know it." It was Ralph Rundel's despondent and yet accusing voice which broke the pale stillness of the night. "I just want 'er to tell me the plain, unvarnished truth, an' she's got to! She cayn't be a wife o' mine an' carry on like that, an' do it underhand. I want to know if they met by agreement. I was on the hill an' saw Jeff waitin' at the creek ford. He had no business thar, an' stood behind the bushes, an' kept peepin' at our house till she come out an' went down to 'im. Then they walked to the spring an' set for a good hour, Jeff bent toward 'er, an' she was a-listenin' close, an' a-lookin' toward the house every minute like she was afeard somebody would come."

It was Amanda Wilks who now spoke as the startled boy put his feet on the floor and sat on the bed, grimly alert.

"Looks like Rafe is axin' a reasonable enough question, Addie," she was heard to say. "At least it seems so to me, an' I know I am tryin' to be fair to both sides, so I am."

"It *is* fair," Ralph passionately supplemented, "an' if she is honest an' wants to do right she will talk straight an' be as open as day. As my wife the law gives me the right to—"

"Law? What's law amount to when a woman's plumb miserable?" Mrs. Rundel said, in a low, rebellious tone, and Paul heard her bare feet thump on the floor as she flounced about the room. "I hate you. I've hated you all along. I can't remember when I didn't hate you. No livin' woman with any refined feelin's could help it. I want liberty, that's all. I won't have you prowlin' about in the woods and watchin' me like a hawk every time a neighbor speaks decent to me. Lemme tell you some'n; you'd better never let Jeff Warren know you make charges ag'in' me like you are a-doin'. He'd thrash you 'in an inch o' your life, if you *are* married to me. I'll not tell you why I happened to go down to the spring. That's *my* business."

Paul heard his father utter a low, despairing groan as he left the room and stalked through the corridor and out at the front door. Going to the window, the boy looked out just as Ralph turned the corner and paused in the moonlight, his ghastly profile as clear-cut as if it had been carved in stone. Paul saw him raise his stiff arms to the sky, and heard him muttering unintelligible words. The window-sash was up, the sill low to the ground, and dressed only in his night-shirt, the boy passed through the opening and stood on the dewy grass.

There he paused a moment, for he heard his aunt speaking to her sister admonishingly: "Rafe's jest got a man's natural pride an' jealousy. You know folks in a out-o'-the-way settlement like this will talk, an'—"

"Well, let 'em talk! Let 'em talk! Let 'em talk!" the wife retorted, fiercely. "I don't care what they say. I won't be a bound slave to Rafe Rundel if I *did* marry 'im. I'm entitled to my natural likes and dislikes the same now as I ever was. No woman alive could care for a man hawkin' an' spittin' an' coughin' about the house, with water in his eyes—sneezin' an' snifflin' an' groanin', as peevish as a spoilt child, an' wantin' to know every single minute where I am and what I am doin'. I'm finished with 'im, I tell you—I'm plumb finished with 'im, an' he knows it. Yes, he knows it, an' that's why he was in sech a tantrum just now, pullin' my bedclothes off, shakin' his fist like a crazy fool, an' stormin' around in the dead o' night."

The pacific voice of Amanda Wilks here broke in; but Paul did not wait to hear what she was saying, for his father, with bowed and shaking form, was tottering away in the moonlight toward the cow-lot. Ralph reached the rail fence, and with an audible moan he bent his head upon it. Paul's feet fell noiselessly on the dewy grass as he crept toward him. Reaching him he touched him on the shoulder.

"Father," Paul said, softly, "what's the matter? Are you sick?"

Slowly Ralph Rundel raised his head and stared at his son, but he said nothing. His tattered nightshirt was carelessly stuffed under the waistband of his gaping trousers, which were supported by a single suspender over his shoulder. The other suspender hung in a loop over his hip. His grizzled head was bare, as were his attenuated feet. He continued to stare, as if he had no memory of the speaker's face, his lip hanging loose, quivering, and dripping with saliva. The damp, greenish pallor of death itself was on him, and it gleamed like phosphorus in the rays of the moon. A tremulous groan passed out from his low chest, and his head sank to the fence again.

"Father, father, don't you know me? *Paul!* Don't you know me?" The boy touched the gray head; he shook it

persuasively, and it rocked like a mechanical tiling perfectly poised. The man's knees bent, quivered, and then straightened up again.

"Father, father, it's me—*Paul!*—your son! What's the matter?"

Ralph turned his face slowly to one side.

"Oh, it's you!—my boy! my boy! I thought—" He looked about the cow-lot vacantly, and then fixed his all but glazed eyes on his son's face, and said: "You go back to bed, my boy; you can't do me no good—nobody on earth can. I'm done for. I feel it all over me like the sweat o' death."

"Father, tell me"—Paul stood erect, his head thrown back, and his young voice rang sharply on the still air—"do you believe that dirty whelp—" There was an insane glare in Rundel's watery eyes, and his head rocked back and forth again.

"He's after your ma, Paul." Ralph emitted another groan. "He's took with 'er purty face, an' has set in to make a plumb fool of 'er, and make 'er hate me. He's the kind o' devil that won't pick and choose for hisself, like an honest man, out in the open among free gals an' women, but thinks that nothin' ain't as good as another man's holdin's. He thinks he is sorry fer 'er because she's tied to a sick man; but it hain't that—it's the devil in 'im!"

The boy laid his arm on his father's shoulders; his lips moved, but no sound issued; his face was rigid and white.

"I ain't talkin' without grounds." Ralph's faint voice trailed away on its wave of agony. "Friends have come to me an' reported the doin's of the two at singin'. He fetches her a bunch of flowers every day, an' they set an' sing out o' the same book with the'r heads plumped together. He walks mighty nigh all the way home with her through the woods, an' sneaks off as soon as they git in sight o' the house. He makes all manner o' fun o' me—tellin' folks, so I've been told, that I can't last long, an' that she never knowed what rale healthy love was nohow."

Paul's hand was now on his father's head, and he was gently stroking the long, thick hair, though his eyes were blazing, his breast heaving, as from an inner tempest.

Ralph turned and looked toward the house. The light was out now, and there was no sound.

"I reckon she's gone back to sleep," Ralph wailed, bitterly. "What does she care how I feel? She could have no idea, you couldn't neither, Paul, fur you are too young. But maybe some day you will know the awful, awful sting o' havin' the world look on in scorn, while a big strappin' brute of a daredevil an' the mother o' yore child—oh, my God! I can't stand it—I jest *can't!* I'd die a million deaths rather than—it's in the Rundel blood, I reckon, planted thar deep by generations an' generations o' proud folks. I'm goin' to kill 'im, Paul. I don't know when or how, exactly, but it's got to be done, if God will only give me the strength. It won't be no sin; it couldn't be; it would be just wipin' out one o' the slimy vipers o' life."

"If you don't, I will, father. I swear it here an' now," the boy solemnly vowed, removing his hand from the cold brow and looking off in the mystical light which lay over the fields.

"Huh, we won't *both* have to do it!" Ralph spoke as if half dreaming, certainly not realizing his son's frame of mind. "It never would be any satisfaction to have it said that it took two of us to fix 'im, even if he *is* rated high on his fightin' record. No, that's *my* job; you keep clean out of it!"

"Come to my bed, father." Paul caught his arm and drew him gently from the fence. "You are shakin' from head to foot; your teeth are chatterin', an' you are cold through an' through."

Ralph allowed himself to be led along; now and then he would stumble over a tuft of grass, as if he had lost the power of lifting his feet. Once he paused, threw his arms about his son's shoulder, and said, almost in fright, as he bore down heavily:

"I feel odd, powerful odd. I feel cold clean through to my insides, like my entrails was turnin' to rock. I can hardly git my breath. I don't seem to—to send it clean down. It stops in my chest like, an' I am all of a quiver, an' weak, an' dizzy-like. I can't see a yard ahead of me."

"You'll feel better when you are in bed," Paul said, soothingly, and he led his father on to the quiet, house and into his room. He undressed him, wiped the dew from his numb, bloodless feet on a towel, and made him lie down.

"I feel drowsy," Ralph sighed. "Everything is in a sort of dreamy jumble. I hardly remember what me'n you was—was talkin' about. I'm weak. I've been so bothered that I hain't eat much in several days."

Presently Paul saw that he was asleep, and lay down beside the still form. After a while he, too, fell into slumber, and the remainder of the night crept along.

The first hint of dawn was announced by the crowing of cocks, the far and near barking of dogs, the grunting of pigs, the chirping of early birds, as they flew about in the dewy branches of the trees. Paul waked and went to his window and looked out. The gray light of a new day lay like an aura on the brow of the mountain. The recollection of what had taken place in the night flashed upon him with startling freshness. He recalled Jeff Warren's visage, his mother in her dainty dress, ribbons and flowers, and his blood began to throb and boil. In a storm of hot pity he glanced toward his father, who in the dark corner lay as still as the cracked plastering, against which his grim profile was cast. Suddenly Paul had a great fear; he held his breath to listen, and strained his eyes to pierce the shadows. Was Ralph Rundel breathing? Did ever living man lie so still, so silent? Paul went to the bed, drew down the sheet, and bent over the face. Eyes and mouth open—Ralph was dead. Paul shook him gently and called to him, but there was no response. The body was still slightly warm, but fast growing stiff.

Quickly dressing, Paul went across the corridor and knocked on the door of his aunt's room.

"What is it now? Oh, what do you want now?" Amanda called out, in drowsy impatience. "You've kept me awake nearly all night with your fussin', an' jest as I am gittin' my fust bit o' rest—"

"Aunt Manda, you'd better come—" Paul's voice faltered and broke. "You'd better come see if you think—"

"What is it? Oh, what is it now?" He heard her feet strike the floor and the loose planks creak as she groped her way to the door, which she unlocked and drew open. "It ain't nigh day." She cast inquiring eyes toward

the yard. "What's got into you wantin' breakfast earlier an' earlier every mornin' you live?"

Paul swallowed a lump in his throat, mutely jerked his head toward his room. "I think—I think father's dead," he said, simply.

"Dead? Dead?" the woman gasped, incredulously. She stared blankly at her nephew, and then, holding her unbuttoned nightgown at the neck, she strode across the corridor into Paul's room. He followed to the threshold, and dumbly watched her as she made a quick examination of the body. She drew herself up, uttered a little scream, and came to him wringing her hands.

"Oh, God will punish us!" she said. "The Almighty will throw a blight on this house! He's gone, an' his last words was a curse on your ma, an' on me for spoilin' 'er. O God—God, have mercy! An' he went with revenge in his heart an' hate in his soul. Oh, Rafe's gone—Rafe's gone!"

Amanda stood leaning against the wall moaning and ejaculating bits of prayers. The door of Mrs. Rundel's room opened, and with her hair rolled up in bits of paper she peered out.

"What is it?" she inquired, peevishly. "What's the matter? Gone? Did you say he was gone? What if he *has* gone? He's been threatening to leave all summer. He'll be back. You can count on that. He knows a good thing when he sees it, and he'll lie around here till he dies of old age or dries up an' is blown away."

"No, he won't be back!" Paul strode to her and stood coldly staring at her. "He's dead. He died of a broken heart, an' you done it—you an' Jeff Warren between you."

"Dead—dead, you say?" And, as if to make sure, Mrs. Rundel stalked stiffly across the corridor to Ralph's body and bent over it. They saw her raise one of the limp hands and pass her own over the pallid brow. Then, without a word, she drew herself erect and came back to her son and sister. Her face was white and rigid; the coming wrinkles in her cheeks and about her mouth seemed deeper than ever before. She faced Paul, a blended expression of fear and dogged defiance in her eyes.

"Don't you ever *dare* to—to talk to me like you did just now," she said, fiercely. "I won't stand it. You are too young a boy to dictate to me."

"I may be that," he snarled, "but I'll dictate to somebody else if I'm hung for it. You hear me—if I'm *hung* for it!"

She shrank under this bitter onslaught. She seemed to waver a moment, then she went into her room, lighted her candle, and began to dress.

Her sister followed and stood beside her. "Don't take on," Amanda said. "Don't go an' fancy it is yore fault. Paul is out o' his head with grief an' don't know what he's sayin'. Rafe was a sick, dyin' man, anyway; his mind was unhinged; that was plain by the way he suspicioned you. Now, I'll git breakfast an' attend to everything; don't set in to cryin' an' make yourself sick; what is done is done, an' can't be helped."

CHAPTER XIV

LIKE a human machine obeying the laws of habit, Paul went about his usual morning duties, feeding and currying the horses, taking slop to the pigs, driving up the cow from the pasture, and chopping wood for the fire. Amanda came to him at the woodpile, rolling the flakes of dough from her fingers. The first direct rays of the sun were breaking over the brow of the hill.

"I'll have the coffee an' biscuits done right off," she said, in a motherly tone, which seemed to be borrowed from some past memory or the long-worn habit of protecting her sister. "I'll call you purty soon. Paul, you'll have to make the best of it. I've been expectin' it for a long time. He's been gettin' peevish an' losin' flesh an' strength. Then, like most folks in that fix, he let his fancy run rife, an' that hurried him on. It's awful—awful havin' a dead person right here in the house; but it comes to high an' low alike. I know you are cut to the quick, an' inclined to fix the blame on somebody; but that will wear off an' you 'll git reconciled. You'll miss 'im, I know—an' that sharp, for he leaned on you as if you an' 'im had swapped places."

Paul said nothing. He filled his arms with the wood and started into the kitchen. Amanda saw his dull, bloodshot eyes above the heap as he turned.

She followed, and as he noiselessly lowered the wood to the stone hearth, she stood over him.

"There is a thing that must be attended to," she said. "I sort o' hate to be left with just me an' Addie alone with him in thar like that; but you'll have' to go to town an' order a coffin. Webb an' Wiggins keeps 'em at the furniture-store, an' in hot weather like this they will want the order early. You just pick out the sort you think we kin afford—they're got all grades—an' they will trim it. If I was you I'd make them send it. It would look more decent than for you to haul it out on the wagon. We'll keep your poor pa till to-morrow; it won't look right to be in too great a hurry; thar is sech a sight o' talk these days about bury in' folks alive, here among the ignorant whites an' blacks." When he had finished his morning's work Paul came in and sat down at the table to the coffee and eggs and hot cakes his aunt had prepared, but he ate without his usual relish. He was just finishing when Abe Langston, a neighboring farmer, a tall, thin man about forty years of age, with long, brown beard, and without a coat, collar, or necktie, appeared, hat in hand, at the door.

"We've just heard it over our way," he said to Amanda. "I told my wife I'd come over before I set in to cuttin' hay in the bottom. Powerful sudden an' unexpected, wasn't it?"

"Yes, he seemed to pass away in his sleep like." Amanda was wiping her red eyes on her apron. "It was a weak heart, no doubt, an' it is a comfort to feel that he never suffered."

"I'll go take a look at 'im," Langston said, laying his hat on the door-sill. "I sent my oldest gal over after

John Tobines an' Andy Warner, an' when they git here we three will lay 'im out. John's handy with a razor—he used to work in a barber's shop—an' he'll shave the pore fellow an' trim his hair. Some o' the young men an' women will want to set up here to-night, an' give you an' Addie a chance to snatch a little sleep."

"That will be obligin' of 'em," Amanda answered, still wiping her eyes. "You kin tell 'em I'll fix a nice snack an' some coffee to sorter freshen 'em up. How many do you reckon will come?"

"Oh, I'd fix for four couples, anyway. Thar is a certain crowd that always count on sech occasions—you know who they are as well as I do, I reckon?"

"Yes, Polly Long an' her bunch." Amanda followed the man across the corridor into the room where the corpse lay, and as Paul was leaving he heard her continuing, plaintively: "Death is just the awfulest, awfulest thing we come across in this life, Brother Langston. We know so little—so powerful little about it. One minute we see the sparkle of the soul in the eye, hear a voice full of life; you catch a smile, or a knowin' look, an' maybe the next minute just a empty shell lies before you. Rafe was a good, patient man, an' he suffered a lot, fust an' last."

"Did he make his *peace*?" Langston inquired. "That is the fust thought I have when a body dies. Do you think he was all right? He didn't go to meetin' often, an' I never happened to hear 'im say what his hopes of reward was."

"I don't know—I really don't know," Amanda returned, and Paul, lingering in the kitchen doorway, heard her voice falter. "Brother Langston, sometimes I was bothered purty sharp on that score. Him and Paul both used to repeat some o' Jim Hoag's terrible sayin's like they thought they was smart an' funny, an' neither one of 'em ever would read the Bible, or seek spiritual advice, an' sech a thing as family prayer, or a blessin' asked at the table was never heard in this house."

"I know." The masculine voice sounded louder now, as if its owner had come back into the corridor. "That's why I was axin'. Folks cayn't take up notions like Hoag has in a God-fearin' community like our'n an' flaunt 'em about without causin' comment. My own opinion is that Jim Hoag is a devil in the garb of a man. He's larnt Paul all the awful things the boy believes, an' a man that will lead the young off like that ought to be tarred an' feathered an' rid out o' the community on a sharp rail. If he didn't have so much money he'd 'a' been called down long ago."

Paul was in the stable-yard when Amanda came out to him.

"I forgot to tell you," she said. "Your pa won't have to have new clothes; his Sunday suit will do for weather like this when I've ironed out the wrinkles; but you ought to buy 'im some black slippers, an' a pair o' white store socks an' a plain black necktie—they keep all sech at the furniture-store. You just tell 'em what's lackin' an' they will put 'em in."

She glanced at her nephew's face in surprise, for it was flushed, and his eyes were flashing angrily.

"What's the matter?" she asked, leaning on the fence and eying him in growing wonder.

"I heard you an' Langston talkin' in thar, standin' right over 'im," Paul blurted out, "an' him cold an' dead an' unable to take up for hissef. Make his peace nothin'! He died before he could settle the things he had to settle. If thar *was* sech a fool thing as a heaven, how could he enjoy it with Jeff Warren here gloatin' over him? But that will be settled. You hear me—that will be settled, an' before many days, too."

"I know you are not goin' to act the fool, if you are just a hot-headed boy," Amanda said. "You are all wrought up now ag'in' your ma an' everybody; but that will wear off. I know when my *own* father died I—"

But the boy refused to hear. He turned into a stall and began to put a bridle on a horse, which he led out into the yard with only a blanket on its back. There was uncurbed fury in the very spring he made from the ground to his seat. His face was fire-red, and he thrust his heels against the horse's flanks with such force that the animal gave a loud grunt as he lurched toward the open gate.

"Wait, Paul, wait!" Amanda cried after him. "You've forgot some'n. I wouldn't stop you, but you can't do without it."

He drew rein and glared down on her.

"You haven't got the measure of—of the body. I never thought of it just now when Brother Langston was here, an' he's gone to hurry up Tobines an' Warner. I'd go an' do it myself, but it ain't exactly a woman's place. I'll hold yo' hoss."

He stared at her for a moment, the color dying down in his face. Then, with obvious reluctance, he slid off the horse and went into the room where the corpse lay covered with a sheet. He was looking about for a piece of string with which to take the required measurement, when he recalled that he and his father were exactly the same height, and, with a sense of relief, he was turning from the room when an uncontrollable impulse came over him to look upon the face beneath the covering. He hesitated for a moment, then, going to the bed, he drew the sheet down and gazed at the white, set countenance. A storm of pity and grief broke over him. He had a mother's yearning to kiss the cold, pale brow, to fondle the wasted form, to speak to the closed eyes, and compel the rigid lips to utter some word of recognition. Glancing furtively toward the door, then toward the window, and with his face close to the dead one, he said:

"Don't you bother about Jeff Warren, father. I'll attend to him. I'll do it—I'll do it. He sha'n't gloat over you, an' you like this. He sha'n't—he sha'n't!"

His voice clogged up, and he tenderly drew the sheet back over the still, white face. Across the corridor he heard his mother moving about in her room; but the door was closed, and he could not see her. Going out, he took the bridle from Amanda's hands, threw it back on the neck of his horse, clutched a collar-worn tuft of the animal's mane, and sprang astride of its back.

"I won't have to bother about a new dress for yore ma," Amanda remarked, her slow eyes studying the boy's grief-pinched face. "We ain't got time to get one ready, an' she kin put on my black alpaca an' borrow Mrs. Penham's veil that she's about through with. I know she didn't wear it two Sundays ago, an' I reckon her mournin's over. It's in purty good condition."

Paul rode toward the village. In the first cotton-field on the left-hand side of the way the two Harris

brothers were cutting out weeds with hoes that tinkled on the buried stones and flashed in the slanting rays of the sun. They both paused, looked at him steadily and half defiantly, and then, as if reminded of the gruesome thing which had come upon him in the night, they looked down and resumed their work.

Further on was the farm-house belonging to Jeff Warren, and at the well in the yard Paul descried Warren turning the windlass to water a mule which stood with its head over a big tub. Paul saw the man looking at him, but he glanced away. He swung his heels against the flanks of his horse and rode on through a mist which hung before his sight.

Paul went straight to the furniture-store and gave his order, and was leaving when Mrs. Tye came hastily across the street from her husband's shop. There was a kindly light in her eyes, and her voice shook with timid emotion.

"I saw you ride past jest now," she began. "We heard the news a few minutes ago, an' me an' Si was awfully sorry. He told me to run across an' beg you to stop at the shop a minute. He wants to see you. I don't know when I've seed 'im so upset. Thar, I see 'im motionin' to us now. Let's go over."

Paul mechanically complied, and as they turned she laid her hand gently on his arm.

"Thar is nothin' a body kin say that will do a bit o' good at sech a sad time," she gulped. "I've got so I jest hold my tongue when sech a blow falls. But I wish the Lord would show me some way to comfort you. It must be awful, for I know how you doted on yore pore pa, an' how he worshiped you. Maybe it will comfort you if I tell you what he said to me t'other day. I reckon he was pulled down in sperits by ill health or some'n, for he told me that if it hadn't been for you he'd 'a' killed hisse'f long ago. Of course that was a wicked thought, but I reckon he hardly knowed what he was sayin'. He jest couldn't git through talkin' about you, an' the way you loved 'im an' looked after 'im at all times. That will be a comfort, Paul—after a while it will all settle down an' seem right—his death, I mean; then the recollection that you was so good to him will be a sweet memory that will sustain an' strengthen you all through life."

They had reached the open door of the shop, and Silas rose from his bench, shaking the shavings of leather and broken wooden pegs from his apron. In his left hand he held the coarse shoe he was repairing and the right he gave to Paul.

"I hain't done nothin' but set here an' pray since I heard it," he began, sympathetically, his rough fingers clinging to Paul's. "In a case like this God is the only resort. I sometimes think that one of the intentions of death is to force folks to look to the Almighty an' cry out for help. That seems to me to be proof enough to convince the stoutest unbelievers of a higher power, for when a blow like this falls we jest simply beg for mercy, an' we know down inside of us that no human aid can be had, an' that help naturally ought to come from some'r's."

Paul made no response. Mrs. Tye had placed a chair for him near her husband's bench, and the boy sank into it, and sat staring dumbly at the floor.

"I've got some hot coffee on the stove," Mrs. Tye said, gently. "You'd feel better, Paul, maybe, if you'd take a cup along with some o' my fresh biscuits and butter."

He shook his head, mumbled his thanks, and forgot what she had said. He was contrasting Jeff Warren as he stood at the well in the full vigor of health with a still, wasted form under a sheet in a silent, deserted room. Mrs. Tye left the shop, and her husband continued his effort at consolation.

"I know exactly how you feel, Paul, for I've been through it. I've served my Heavenly Master as well as I know how ever since His redeemin' light broke over me away back when I was young; but when He took my only child He took all that seemed worth while in my life. Folks will tell you that time will heal the wound; but I never waste words over that, for I know, from experience, that when a body is bowed down like you are, that it ain't the future you need as a salve, but somethin' right now. Thar is one thing that will help, an' I wish I actually knowed you had it. Paul, empty-minded men like Jim Hoag may sneer and poke fun, but jest as shore as that light out thar in the street comes from the sun thar is a spiritual flood from God hisse'f that pores into hearts that are not wilfully closed ag'in' it. I don't want to brag, but I don't know how I can make it plain without tellin' my own experience. My boy, I'm a pore man; I make my livin' at the humblest work that man ever engaged in, an' yet from momin' till night I'm happy—I'm plumb happy. As God is my judge, I wouldn't swap places with any millionaire that ever walked the earth, for I know his money an' gaudy holdin's would stand betwixt me an' the glory I've got. If I had an idle hour to spare, do you know whar I'd be? I'd be on the side o' that mountain, starin' out over the blue hills, a-shoutin' an' a-singin' praises to God. Some folks say I'm crazy on religion—let 'em—let 'em! History is chock full of accounts of great men, learned in all the wisdom of earth—princes, rulers, poets, who, like St. Paul an' our Lord, declared that all things which was not of the sperit was vanity, dross, an' the very dregs an' scum of existence. So you see, as I look at it—an' as maybe you don't just yet—yore pa ain't like you think he is. You see 'im lyin' thar like that, an' you cayn't look beyond the garment of flesh he has shucked off, but I can. He's beat you 'n me both, Paul; his eyes are opened to a blaze o' glory that would dazzle and blind our earthly sight. Death is jest a ugly gate that we pass through from a cloudy, dark, stuffy place out into the vast open air of Eternity. O Paul, Paul, I want you to try to get hold of this thing, for you need it. This is a sharp crisis in yore life; you've let some things harden you, an' if you don't watch out this great stunnin' blow may drag you even deeper into the mire. I feel sech a big interest in you that I jest can't hold in. I know I'm talkin' powerful plain, an' uninvited, too, but I can't help it. Knowin' that you've been about Jim Hoag a good deal, an' rememberin' little remarks you've dropped now an' then, I'm afraid you hain't got as much faith in the goodness of God as—"

"Goodness of God! Huh—poof!" Paul snorted, his stare on the ground.

"Paul, Paul, don't, don't say that!" Tye pleaded, his kindly eyes filling. "I can't bear to hear it from a young boy like you. Youth is the time most folks believe in all that's good; doubts sometimes come on later in life. It sounds awful to hear you say sech rebellious things when you stand so much in need of, the *only help in all the universe*."

"I don't believe there *is* any God," Paul muttered, fiercely, "and if I did I'd not believe he was a good one, when I know what's took place an' what's goin' on. The wild beasts in the woods come from the same source as me, an' they fight for what they get; bugs and worms and flying things and crawling things live on one

another. That's the only way for us to do if we expect to live. The only difference in men and beasts is that men can remember wrongs longer and know how to plan revenge, an' *git* it."

"Oh, my Lord!" The shoemaker lowered his head and seemed to be praying. Presently he looked up, grasped his beard with his blackened fingers, and pulled his lips apart. "I see, you are like most folks when they are under a great, fresh grief. I've knowed some o' the best Christians to turn square ag'in' the'r Maker at sech times—especially women who had lost the'r young in some horrible way—but even they'd come around finally to admit that God knowed best. Take my own case. Would I want my boy back now? No, no, Paul; as great as the pride an' joy would be I know he's in better hands than mine. It's hard on you now; but, sad as it is, this may result in good—good that you can't begin to see in advance. If we had the all-seein' eye we might pass judgment; but we are blind—blind as moles. You can't see that yore pore pa is better off, but he is—he is. I know he is—God knows he is."

CHAPTER XV

AT the end of the main street, as he rode homeward, Paul saw Ethel Mayfield coming toward him, her head down as if in deep thought. His first impulse was to turn aside, to avoid meeting her, but he saw that such a thing would be unpardonable. In spite of the weight that was on him, he felt the warm blood of embarrassment rushing to his face as the distance shortened between them.

There was a sweet, startled look of concern in her childish eyes as she raised them to him.

"Stop a minute," she said; and as he awkwardly drew rein she continued: "I've just heard about your father. Two men were talking over there by a fence on the side of the road and I listened. Oh, it is awful, awful! I am so sorry for you, for they say you loved him so much, an' were always so good to him."

A strange sense of confused helplessness surged over Paul. As she looked up at him so frankly he feared that she would read in his face the fact that she had been in his mind almost constantly since their meeting that day in the meadow. This disturbed him, and also the realization that common politeness demanded some sort of reply in accord with the refinement of her easy expression of sympathy. But that was beyond him. He felt his blood beating into his eyes. She appeared like a spirit thing poised upon an evanescent cloud; not for him save in fancy, not for any boy outside of dreams. In sheer desperation, and under the intuition that he ought not to sit on his horse while she stood, he dismounted.

"Thank you, thank you." He seemed to hear the words as if they were spoken by other lips than his own, and again he had the exquisite sense of nearness to her, which had so enthralled him before. A wondrous, delectable force seemed to radiate from her and play upon his whole enraptured being.

"I have never seen any one die," she went on, "and they say you were there alone with him. Oh, how very sad, and you—you are not much older than I am. Sad things are coming to you very early. I wish I could say something, or do something, Paul, but I don't really know how. I'm just a girl. My mother seems to know what to say at such times, but I don't. Grief like this simply overpowers me. I feel as if—as if I must cry, I'm so sorry for you."

He saw her pretty lips quivering, her glorious eyes filling, and he dug the toe of his worn shoe into the sand of the road. He was becoming conscious of the tattered appearance of his working-clothes, his saddleless horse, his rough, perspiring hands and cuffless wrists. How odd that she, who was so daintily dressed, so wholly detached from his sordid life, could stand talking to him so kindly, so intimately!

"You are very good—very!" he stammered. "Better than anybody else. If they were all like you it wouldn't seem so—so bad."

"It may seem forward of me and bold," Ethel returned, "for really we have only been together once before, and yet (I don't know how *you* feel)—but *I* feel, somehow, Paul, as if we were very old friends. I admire you because you are brave and strong. You are not like—like the boys in Atlanta. You are different (uncle says you are not afraid of anything on earth). You know a girl could not keep from wanting *that* sort of a friend. I don't mean that I'd want to see you hurt ever—ever; but it is nice for a girl to feel that she has a friend who would take any risk for her. My mother says I get a lot of notions that are not good for me out of novels. Well, I don't know how that is, but I like you, and I am very, very sad about your father. If I had not met you here I would have written you a note. Can you tell me when—when he is to be buried?"

He told her that the funeral would be at the village church the next day, and therewith his voice broke, and for the first time his heart heaved and his eyes filled.

"I wanted to know because I am going to send some flowers," she said; and then, observing the signs of his emotion and his averted face, she suddenly and impulsively caught his hand and pressed it between both of her own. "Don't, don't cry!" she pleaded. "I couldn't stand to see it!" Her own lashes were wet and her sweet mouth was drawn tight. "Oh, I wish there was something I could do or say, but I can't think of a thing. Yes, there is one thing, and it must help, because the Bible and the wisest men say it will at such times. I have been praying for you, and I am going to keep on doing it. Paul, from what you said the other day, I suppose you—have never been converted?"

He shook his head, swallowed, but kept his face turned away, conscious that it was distorted by contending emotions.

"I have been," she said, still pressing his hand, "and, O Paul, it was glorious! It happened at a camp-meeting where mother took me and my cousin, Jennie Buford, in the country below Atlanta, last summer. It was all so wonderful—the singing, shouting, and praying. I was so happy that I felt like flying. Since then I

have felt so good and secure and contented. The Bible is full of meaning to me now. I love to read it when I am alone in my room. It is beautiful when you begin to understand it, and know that it is actually the Word of our Creator. I am sure I shall lead a Christian life, as my mother is doing. It has made Jennie happy, too. We are like two twins, you know. We have been together nearly every day since we were babies. There is only a fence between our houses in Atlanta, and she sleeps with me or I with her every night. She was sick last winter, and they thought she was going to die. She thought so, too; she told me so, but would not tell her mother because she would be so broken-hearted. I prayed for Jennie all that night—all night. I hardly stopped a minute."

"And she didn't die?" Paul looked at her with a glance of mild incredulity in his eyes.

"No; the doctor said she was better and she got well. It would have killed me if she had been taken, I love her so much. We are so much alike that I often read her thoughts and she reads mine. Many and many a time we have told each other exactly what we were thinking about."

"Thought transference," he said. "I've read about that. It may be true."

Ethel now released his hand and flushed slightly. "Excuse me," she faltered, her lashes touching her cheeks. "I hardly knew what I was doing."

It was his turn to color now, and they stood awkwardly facing each other. She, however, recovered herself quickly.

"I am going to pray for you more and more now," she went on, soothingly. "It will surely help you. I know that God answers prayers when they are made in the right spirit. He must help you bear this sorrow, and He will—He will."

"Thank you, thank you," Paul muttered, his wavering eyes on the road leading between zigzag rail fences on to his home. "I must be going now. I've got a good many things to attend to."

"Of course, I know—I know," Ethel responded, gravely.

A wagon was approaching from the direction of the village. It was drawn by two sturdy mules, which thrust their hoofs into the dust of the road so deeply that a constant cloud of the fine particles hovered over the vehicle. A negro man wearing a tattered straw hat, soiled shirt and trousers, and without shoes, was driving. Ethel caught Paul's hand impulsively, and drew him and his horse to the side of the road.

"Wait till they pass," she said. "Oh, what nasty dust!"

She saw him staring at the wagon, a rigid look on his face. "It's the coffin," he explained. "It is going out home."

The wagon rumbled on. There was an unpainted wooden box behind the negro's seat, and on it rested a plain walnut coffin, thickly coated with dust. The sun had warmed the new varnish, and there was an odor of it in the air.

"Oh, it is so sad!" Paul caught the words from the averted lips of his companion. "I wish I could do something, or say something, but I can't."

Again his despair fell upon him. As he mounted his horse it seemed to him that he was a moving thing that was dead in all its parts. He couldn't remember that he had ever tipped his hat to any one in his life, and yet he did so now gracefully enough. He felt that he ought to reply to the words she had so feelingly uttered, but the muscles of his throat had tightened. A great sob was welling up within him and threatening to burst. He started his horse, and with his back to her, his head bent toward the animal's neck, he slowly rode away.

"Poor boy!" Ethel said, as the mules, the wagon, the coffin, and Paul floated and vanished in the mist before her eyes. She turned and moved on toward the village, her head lowered, softly crying and earnestly praying.

CHAPTER XVI

ACCORDING to rural custom the young men and young women of the neighborhood came that evening to keep watch over Ralph Rundel's body. In an open coffin resting on two chairs, it occupied the center of the room in which he died.

Amanda had been busy all day cooking dainties—pies, cakes, custards, and making cider from apples gathered in the orchard. She had swept and dusted the house throughout, put the candles into their places, cleaned and filled the lamps, and altered her black dress to fit the slender form of her sister, who had been in her room all day, refusing to show herself to the constant stream of curious, inquiring visitors—men, women, and children who sat about the front and rear doors, leaned on the fences of the yard and cow-lot, and even invaded the kitchen.

As for Paul, no one seemed to notice him, and of sympathy for him little was expressed. Mute and dejected he moved about, attending to his father's former duties as well as his own.

The night fell. The stars came out. There was a low hum of good cheer and merriment from the assembled company inside. To escape it, Paul slipped behind the house and threw himself down on the grass sward beneath the apple-trees. His awful sorrow, weird and gruesome, for which there was no outlet, gave him actual physical pain.

There was singing within the house. The young persons were practising hymns for the funeral service the next day. Mistakes were made, and there was merry, spontaneous laughter, which grated on the boy's ears. He buried his face in the cool, fragrant grass, and thus subdued the rising sob of which he was ashamed. In

his mind's eye he saw the exquisite face of Ethel Mayfield, but even it held scant comfort, for how could such as she belong to such deplorable surroundings? The tones of her gentle voice, as she promised to pray for him, seemed a part of some vague dream from which sordid fact had roused him.

"Prayers?" he sneered. "What puny mortal could pray this away, or undo the damnable thing even by the weight of a hair? There isn't any God to pray to—there isn't anything but pain, torment, and death." There was a tentative step on the grass. Amanda was groping her way around the well. He saw her peering here and there in the shadows under the trees. "Oh!" she exclaimed, on seeing him, as he suddenly sat up and turned his face toward her. "You gave me a scare. At sech a time a body is apt to think they see ghosts, whether they do or not. I've been lookin' high an' low for you, an' axin' the company whar you was at. You hain't had no supper, have you?"

He answered briefly in the negative.

"Well, come on in the kitchen," she pursued. "I've kept some 'taters and pork-chops hot, an' thar's plenty o' cold buttermilk."

"I don't want anything," he said, impatiently, and even roughly. "I couldn't swallow a bite to save my life—not to save my life, I couldn't!"

Her hands on her hips, Amanda stared down at him. "This ain't a-goin' to do, Paul," she gently protested. "This ain't no time for you to pout an' be cranky. You are our only man now. Yore ma's shet up in her room with a mad cryin' spell every half-hour, an' I have to lay down my work an' run, pacify, an' pet 'er. She's got all sorts o' finicky notions in 'er head that folks are a-talkin' about her an' a certain party. She heard 'em a-laughin' in thar jest now, an' actually started in to give 'em a piece o' 'er mind. I got to 'er in time—thank the Lord! She's now in bed cryin' like 'er heart is broke."

"Huh, I see, I see!" Paul sniffed. "An' well she may be afraid o' talk, an' *you* too, for bringing her up as you have. Folks say she's jest a doll, and she is—she is, and a fool flimsy one at that!"

"I ain't a-goin' to listen to you, boy," Amanda broke in, firmly. "You are too young an' inexperienced to talk that way about the woman that fetched you into the world an' gave you what life you got. If your ma was petted an' sp'ilt, that was *my* fault, not her'n, an' bein' sp'ilt only makes sech things as this go harder with 'er. If her an' yore pa wasn't the most lovin' match that could be imagined, that wasn't her fault, nor his'n either. God made 'em both, an' for all I know He may have fetched 'em together, an' in makin' a mess o' that He didn't act no wuss than in lettin' some other folks—folks that I know about—live a lifetime without *any* sort o' try at the game. Now, jest shet up, an' he'p me tote this sad thing through. I got to go set the table for them folks, an' then I'll slide into bed. Whar do you intend to sleep? That's what I wanted to see you about. That crowd has got yore room. I can lay you a pallet down on the floor in the kitchen. It would be sort o' hard, but —"

"I'm going to stay outside," he told her. "I'm going down to the haystack. The house is too hot, anyway; I couldn't go to sleep in there with all that ding-dong and racket."

"Well, I'm goin' in," answered Amanda, who was really not listening to his observations. "It won't hurt you to sleep out once on such a warm night, anyway, an' they *are* making' a lot o' noise. They don't get many such chances through the year. It is the fust time I've fixed for young folks in a long time. Thar's one pair in thar"—Amanda tittered—"that will set up housekeepin' inside o' six months. Mark my predictions. I ketched 'em a-huggin' on the front steps as I come out."

When his aunt left him Paul threw himself back on the grass and gazed up at the sky and the far-off blinking stars. How unreal seemed the dead face and stark form of his father as he had last looked upon it! Could it be actually all that was left of the gentle, kindly and patient parent who had always been so dear? Whence had flown the soft, halting voice, the flash of the eye, the only caressing touch Paul had ever known? That—that thing in there boxed and ready for burial was all there ever was, or ever could be again, of a wonderfully appealing personality, and to-morrow even that would sink out of sight forever and forever.

There was an audible footfall at the fence near the farther side of the cottage. Paul sat up and stared through the semi-darkness. It was a tall, slender figure of a man in a broad-brimmed hat. He was cautiously moving along the fence, as if trying to look into the room where the corpse lay. Suddenly a stream of light from within fell on his face. It was Jeff Warren. Paul sprang to his feet and stood panting, his muscles drawn.

"Don't, don't!" a voice within him seemed to caution him. "Not now—not now! Be ashamed!" At this juncture some one called out in a low, subdued tone:

"Is that you, Jeff?"

"Yes, Andy. Kin I come in thar with you all?"

"I dunno; wait a minute, Jeff." Andrew Warner emerged from the shadow of the house and advanced to the fence. "I raily don't believe I would, Jeff, if I was you. We've got a-plenty, an' they all intend to spend the night."

"I see, I see. Well, I didn't know how you was fixed, an' I heard you all a-singin' clean across the bottom. Say, Andy, Mrs. Rundel ain't in thar with you, is she?"

"No, we hain't any of us seed 'er; she's been shet up tight all day."

There was a noticeable pause. Paul crept closer and stood behind a trunk of an apple-tree, the branches of which, laden with unripe fruit, almost touched the ground. He could still see the two men, and their voices were quite audible.

"I see, I see." Jeff Warren was speaking now. "Have you heard anybody say—do you happen to know, Andy, how she is—takin' it?"

"Purty hard, purty hard, it looks like, Jeff. We've heard 'er cryin' an' takin' on several times; she seems powerful upset."

"I see, I see," Warren repeated, and Paul saw him lean toward his companion. "Say, Andy, I want you to do me a favor, if you will. I want you to git Mrs. Rundel to come out here a minute—jest a minute. You needn't let on to anybody else. The little woman must be awful troubled, an' me an' her are powerful good friends. I

reckon if you told 'er I was out here, maybe she—”

Paul saw the other man turn his head and stand, staring irresolutely at the house. “I can't do that, Jeff,” he was heard to say presently. “That may be all right from the way you look at it, but I don't want no hand in such. If I was you, I'd wait—that's all, I'd wait. Out of respect for what folks would say or think, I'd put it off. Seems to me like she'd want that 'erse'f—in fact, I'm shore any sensible woman would.”

“All right, Andy, all right!” Warren answered, awkwardly, as his hand tugged at his mustache. “I was jest sorter bothered, that's all. I'll take yore advice. I know you are a friend an' mean well. I'll go home an' git to bed. As you say, I kin afford to wait. What surprises me is to hear you say she's takin' on. I reckon she's sorter upset by havin' a death in the house. Rafe was at the end o' his string, anyway; you know that as well as I do.”

“If the poor fellow had lived he would have called you to taw,” was the significant and yet not unfriendly reply. “The devil's light was in his eye, Jeff. Rafe Rundel was talkin' a lot an' growin' wuss an' wuss.”

“I knowed all that, too,” Warren was heard to say. “His wife kept me posted. Well, well, so long, Andy! I'll git to bed.”

“Not now, not now!” Paul's inner voice cautioned, as with actual lips, and invisible hands seemed to detain him. “Wait, wait; there is plenty of time!” He leaned against the tree and saw Warren's form disappear in the starlight. The man's confident whistle came back on the hot, still air as he strode along the road, becoming more and more indistinct in the misty distance.

Paul went down to the hay-field, looking here and there for a bed to lie upon. Presently he found a heap of freshly cut, succulent clover, full of the crushed perfume of the white and pink blossoms, and damp and cool with the dew. Upon this lair he sank, his tense young face upturned to the stars. How he loathed the silly woman who had borne him! How he detested the happy-go-lucky man who had caught her fancy! How he yearned for the living presence of the dead! His throat felt tight. Unshed tears seemed to trickle down within him. There was a dull aching about his heart. Again, as in a dream, the gentle face of Ethel Mayfield came before him. Her voice was as sweet and soothing as transcendent music. The lovely child had said she was going to pray for him. Perhaps even now she was doing so; and she had declared that prayers were answered. The belief was silly. It was like an inexperienced little city girl to entertain such thoughts, yet what she had said and the way she had said it were strangely comforting. A fiercely fought sob broke within him. Tears swept down his cheeks and trickled into the clover. The pain within him lessened. He became drowsy. The vision of the child with her beautiful hair and eyes became an airy, floating thing; the heavens were full of sweet musical laughter. Ethel seemed to be taken up into a sunlit cloud, and for a moment was hidden from view. Then he saw her returning. She was not alone. Holding her hand was Ralph Rundel—Ralph Rundel transfigured, spirit-like, and yet himself. He was full of the glow of youth. There were no lines, no shadows in his face. His body was erect; he was smiling at his son in a fathomless, eternal way.

“If they tell you I'm dead, don't you believe a word of it,” he said. “For I ain't—I ain't!”

Paul awoke with a start. The moon was rising; the whole landscape was flooded with the pale light of a reflected day. Subdued laughter and the drone of voices came from the window of the room where the body lay.

CHAPTER XVII

EARLY in the morning following the funeral Hoag sent Cato with a message to Paul. There was some work to be done, and the boy was to come at once and see about it. Mrs. Rundel, in her black dress, was near and heard the negro speaking, but she turned indifferently into her room and closed the door.

“Well, I'd go,” Amanda advised her nephew. “Mopin' around home like this won't do any good. At sech a time a body ought to keep the hands an' feet an' even the brain busy. I'd go stark crazy if I'd allow myself to set an' brood. It seems to me that I see yore pore pa's white face everywhar I turn, an' when I ain't seein' that I seem to hear his voice talkin' like nothin' out o' the way had happened. I even git a whiff o' his tobacco now an' then. Do you know, I think maybe death is made horrible like this to warn each of us of what is ahead. Me'n you, as little as we count on it, have got to be put away exactly like Rafe was, an' we may not have any more notice than he had, neither. Some o' the sanctified folks doubt whar he's gone, but I don't—much. Somehow I can't believe that he's gone to a bad place, because he had sech a hard time of it here for sech a long, long time. His pride was cut to the quick, an' he had a lot more o' that than most folks knowed about. Of course, you can't remember his young sparkin' days like I do. He used to dress as fine as a fiddle an' held his head powerful high; but time, an' poverty, an' trouble, an' one thing or other, kept pullin' it down an' down, till it struck the pillow he died on. Well, well, he's gone, an' we 'll miss 'im. I shall, I know, for I already do, an' they say the worst time ain't always right after the buryin'. Thar's always a stir and excitement over puttin' a person away that keeps you from lookin' the thing square in the face.”

Fires of anger and resentment were smoldering in the boy's breast, but he said nothing, and turned down the road to Hoag's. He found the planter moving about in the bark-strewn tan-yard between the vats, the black contents of which were on a level with the ground. He was giving blunt orders to three or four negroes who were piling up and sorting out a great heap of green hides. The day was dry and hot, and a disagreeable odor of decaying flesh was on the still air. He noticed Paul, and carelessly nodded, but for a moment was too busy to speak to him. He held a note-book in his hand, in which he had found some mistakes of record and calculations. They were his own errors, but he was no less angry for that. Finally he approached Paul, and as he moved was actively scratching, erasing, stabbing the paper with his pencil, and muttering oaths.

"How the hell can I do head-work," he growled, giving the boy a blazing glance, "an' have to watch these black devils like a hawk all the time? The minute my back is turned they set down an' sulk an' shirk. They need a thousand lashes on their bare backs. That's the only thing they understand. Look how that whelp, Sambo, is skulkin'. I hit 'im with a piece o' plank just now, an' he thinks he's threatening me. Huh! I know 'em from the ground up. Did Cato tell you I wanted to see you?"

"Yes, an' I come right over," Paul stolidly replied.

Hoag closed his note-book, keeping the pencil between the leaves, and thrust it into his pocket. "I saw you comin' back from the graveyard yesterday, an' I decided I'd try to find regular work for you. I kin always depend on you gittin' a job done, an' that's sayin' a lot. You hain't got a lazy bone in your body, if I do say it, an' it will be the makin' of you in the long run. Now, my mill-race has washed in till the flow is gittin' sluggish an' thin. The bottom of it, for fully a quarter of a mile, has got to be shoveled out an' lowered to an even grade. It will take you a month at least, but it will be regular work. The dam's all right, so we don't have to bother with that. I want you to come over every day after breakfast, an' then go to my house for yore dinner. It will save you the walk home, an' you kin git in more time. How would you like the job at the old wages?"

"I'm willin'," Paul answered, listlessly.

"Well, pick you out a spade in the tool-house right now, an' go to the dam an' begin to work toward the mill. The mill's shut down, an' the race bed's just wet enough to make the shovelin' soft. Some o' the banks are purty steep an' you 'll have to throw purty high, but you are equal to it."

Paul went at once to the mill-dam. The work was really arduous, but the spot was shaded by thickly foliaged trees, and the shallow water, in which he stood in his bare feet, cooled his blood. Bending under his heavy implement filled with the heavier mud he worked like a machine, the sweat streaming from him, and constantly conscious of that strange, aching vacancy in his heart which nothing could fill.

At noon he put down his spade and went to Hoag's, as he had often done before, for his lunch. No one else was in the dining-room, and Mrs. Tilton brought him his dinner, putting it before him in a gentle, motherly way.

"I told Aunt Dilly to let me wait on you," she said, a note of sympathy creeping into her voice. "I was sorry I couldn't get out to the funeral yesterday. I've got Jackie to watch now, an' he's just gettin' on his feet, after his spell. His mother ain't a bit well, either; she ain't touched hardly a bite since he was so bad off. I think she ought to go to Atlanta to consult a special doctor, but Jim won't hear to it. He says, when a body gits too sick for home treatment their natural time's come, anyway, an' the money would be thrown away. I wish I could tell you how sorry I am about your pa. I know how much you both thought of each other. La, he used to come here while you was choppin' wood on the mountain, an' set in the kitchen door an' talk an' talk with tears in his old eyes about how sorry he was not to be stronger, so you wouldn't have to work so hard. He said you was the best boy that ever lived. Now, I'm just goin' to shet up," Mrs. Tilton said, regretfully. "I see you are about to cry." She went to the window quickly and looked out into the yard. "I see Jackie makin' his mud-pies. Oh," she turned to Paul, "thar's something I wanted to say. You left your gun here t'other day. It's loaded, an' I don't like to see it around. Jackie might git hold of it. I wish you would take it home."

"I'll take it to work with me now," Paul promised, "and take it home from there."

Paul toiled diligently that afternoon till the sun was down. He had just come out of the water, put on his shoes, and with his gun under his arm was starting home, when Hoag appeared on the embankment of the race and surveyed the work which had been done.

"Good, good; prime, prime!" he said, approvingly. "You've done as much as a couple of buck niggers would have done in twice the time. Keep up that lick an' you 'll reach the sluice earlier than I counted on. I won't split hairs with you on the pay for this job. If it goes through at this rate I'll tack on something extra."

Paul said nothing. He tried to feel grateful for the praise he had received, but he was too tired in body and mind to care for anything. Throughout the long day he had constantly deliberated over the thought that it would now be impossible for him to continue the life he was leading. With the death of his father his heart and soul seemed to have died.

Hoag joined him as he walked homeward, the gun under his arm.

"I could see the graveyard from the hill yesterday," he remarked, "an' I picked you out in the bunch. You looked powerfully lonely, an' the thought struck me that you was about the only real mourner. Women don't grieve for any but their own babies, an' them two from your house would have acted about the same at any other funeral. I was sorry for your daddy, Paul. He never made much headway in the world, but he deserved a better shake o' the dice. In his last days he toted an awful load. He used to talk purty free to me—just like a child would at times. He talked purty plain to *me*, I reckon, because he knowed I hain't a speck o' use for the damn snake-in-the-grass that was takin' sech a low, underhanded advantage of him behind his back. You needn't repeat this; I'm tellin' it just to you in private. If—you see, Paul—if it ever does come to words betwixt me an' Jeff Warren, I'll have to shoot 'im as I would a dog, an' a thing like that is troublesome, especially when I look on 'im as mud under my feet. I'd hate to have to stand trial for killin' a puppy, an' the law would demand *some* form-o' settlement.. Your pa would have killed 'im if he lived. I was lookin' for it every day; he was lyin' low for his chance. Preachers, slobberin' revivalists, an' fools like old Tye will talk to you about turnin' the other cheek; but the great, all-important first law of life is to fight for what you git, hold on to it when you git it, an' mash hell out of everything that tries to run over you. That's been my rule, an' it works like a charm. If I'd been your daddy I'd have shot that dirty whelp two months ago."

They had reached the point *where* their ways parted. The gray twilight was thickening. Hoag's big white house gleamed through the trees surrounding it. There were lights in the kitchen and diningroom. All Nature seemed preparing for sleep. The tinkling of sheep and cow bells came drowsily to the ear; the church-bell, a creaking, cast-iron affair, was ringing for the singing-class to meet.

"Well, so long," Hoag finished, with a wave of his fat hand in the dusk. "Set in bright an' early in the momin' an' let's see how many yards you'll wipe out before sundown."

Paul walked on, so weary now that the gun he was carrying almost slipped from his inert arm. Presently his

own home came into view, beyond the field of corn. Ralph Rundel had planted and hoed so feebly. Paul's heart sank into the very ooze of despair. How incongruous was the thought that his father would not be at the gate to meet him, as had been his habit for so many years! The boy stopped in a corner of the rail fence at the roadside and leaned on his gun. An indescribable pain, which was at once physical and mental, had his whole young being in a crushing grasp. The kitchen door was open, and the red logs of an open fire shone out on the sward about the house. Tree-frogs were snarling, fireflies were flashing here and there over the dewy meadows like tiny, short-lived meteors. Paul heaved a sigh, stifled a groan, bit his lip, and trudged on.

As he got nearer to the house, he suddenly became aware of the fact that two figures, that of a man and a woman, were standing at the bars of the barnyard. He recognized the white-clad form on the inside as his mother's. The tall, slender man with the broad hat and square shoulders was Jeff Warren—that would have been plain even if his voice in some indistinct utterance had not been heard. The blood of fury, goaded to the point of insanity, raged within the youth. He felt its close, hot pressure above his eyes, and a red veil fell before his sight. Hoag's recent words rang in his ears. Revenge, revenge! Yes, that was the only thing worth having. Paul bent lower. His gun trailed the ground like the gun of a pioneer hunter. He crept silently forward, keeping the fence between him and the pair, till he was close enough to overhear the colloquy. It was Jeff Warren's voice and his suave, daredevil tone.

"Oh, I know the boy hates me. I've seed it in the little scamp's face many a time. Rafe must 'a' put 'im up to it when his mind was so flighty; but we'll straighten him out between us when we git things runnin' smooth. He'll think I'm a rip-snortin' stepdaddy when I git through with 'im."

The hot pressure on Paul's brain increased. Pausing in a corner of the fence, he grasped his gun in both hands and cocked it with tense, determined fingers. His father's dead face rose before him. It seemed to smile approvingly. Hoag's words came to him like the advice of an oracle. He strained his ears to hear what his mother was saying, but her low utterance failed to reach him. Jeff Warren was turning away, his broad hat gallantly swung toward the ground.

"Well, I'll see you ag'in 'fore long," he said merrily. "I know how you feel, but all that will soon wear off. We kin wait a decent time, but I'm in the race, I tell you. I'll talk all them notions out o' your purty head."

Paul saw his mother vanish in the dusk, and, merrily intoning the tune of a hymn, Warren came on toward Paul. On he strode, still swinging his hat. Paul heard him softly chuckling.

"Halt, you dirty coward!" Paul cried, as he stepped in front of him, the gun leveled at the broad chest.

"What—what? Good God!" Warren gasped. "Put down that gun, you young fool! Drop it, I say, or I'll—"

Warren was about to spring forward as the only means of self-protection, but before he could do so there was a flash, a ringing report, a puff of smoke, and with a groan Warren bent forward, his hands on his breast. He swayed back and forth, groaning. He reeled, tottered sideways, made a strenuous effort to keep erect, then fell forward, gasping audibly, and lay still.

Paul lowered his gun, and for a moment stood looking at the fallen man. His blood was wildly beating in his heart and brain. There was a barking of dogs far and near. Glancing toward the house, he noticed the forms of his mother and aunt framed by the kitchen doorway, the firelight behind them.

"It may be somebody shootin' bats"—Amanda's voice held a distinct note of alarm—"but I was shore I heard somebody speak sharp-like just before the shot was fired. Let's run down thar an' look."

They dropped out of sight. Paul heard the patter of their feet, knew they were coming, and, for no reason which he could fathom, he retreated in the direction from which he had come. As if in a flash he caught and held the idea that, having done his duty, he would turn himself over to an officer of the law, as he had read of men doing in similar circumstances.

He had gone only a few hundred yards when he heard the two women screaming loudly; and why he did so he could not have explained, but he quickened his gait into a slow, bewildered sort of trot, the gun still in his hands. Perhaps it was due to the thought that he wanted voluntarily to give himself up before any one should accuse him of trying to flee. He was nearing Hoag's barn, and thinking of making a short cut to the village across the fields, when a man suddenly burst from the thicket at the side of the road and faced him. It was Hoag himself.

"Hold thar!" he cried, staring through the dusk at Paul. "What's all that screamin' mean? I heard a gun go off, an' rememberin' that you—say, did you—Good God! What you comin' back this way for?"

"I've killed Jeff Warren," Paul answered, calmly. "I'm goin' to Grayson to give myself up."

"Good Lord, you don't say—why, why—" Hoag's voice trailed away into silence, silence broken only by the voices of the two women in the distance calling for help.

"Yes, I shot 'im—you know why; you yourself said—"

Hoag suddenly laid a trembling hand on Paul's arm. The boy had never seen his employer turn pale before, or show so much agitation. "Looky' here, you didn't go an'—an' do that because I—on account o' anything I said. Shorely you didn't—shorely you didn't! Come into the thicket, quick! Folks will be passin' here in a minute. Them fool women will rip the'r lungs out. Say, you didn't really *kill* 'im, did you—actually kill 'im?"

Paul avoided his eyes. "You go back there an' see if I didn't," he said, doggedly.

Hoag stared incredulously for a moment, then, with a firm grip on Paul's arm, he drew him deeper into the thicket.

"Something's got to be done," he panted. "If you give yourself up for trial they will worm out o' you that I said—that I was talkin' to you, an'—Looky' here, boy, do you know what this means? Are you plumb out o' your senses?"

"I don't care *what* it means," Paul retorted. "I've put *him* out o' the way for good and all."

"Good Lord, you are a cool un! Wait here; don't stir! I'll come back. I'll run down thar to make sure."

Hoag moved excitedly toward the road. He had just reached it when a man came running past at full speed in the direction of the village. "Hold, hold!" Hoag cried. "What's wrong?"

The runner slackened his speed a little; but did not stop. It was Abe Langston.

"Somebody's shot Jeff Warren down thar by the fence. He's as dead as a door-nail. I'm goin' to send out the alarm an' git the sheriff."

In a cloud of self-raised dust Langston dashed away. Hoag stood hesitating for a moment, then turned back to Paul, finding him seated on the decaying trunk of a fallen tree, the gun resting on his slender knees. Hoag stood before him.

"You've got to git out o' this," he panted, excitedly. "You've done a thing that the court will hold you responsible for. I ain't sure you was justified nohow. The fellow was just in love, that's all. A jury will call it unprovoked, cold-blood, deliberate, what-not. You ain't in no fix to fight it, an' you'd be a plumb idiot to stay here an' let 'em lay hold of you.' The only sensible thing for you to do is to show a clean pair o' heels, an' git out for good an' all. You don't seem overly satisfied here with them women on your hands nohow, an' the world is big and wide. I don't want my name used—*mind that*. If you *do* git caught an' fetched back, I hope you'll have the decency not to lug me an' this advice in even under oath. I'm tryin' to help you. Make a bee-line through the mountains to North Carolina an' board the first train. Throw that gun down. Don't be caught red-handed; it would be a plumb give-away."

"What's the use?" Paul shifted his feet, and raised his sullen eyes.

"Thar's a heap o' use," Hoag returned, impatiently. "You may not think so now, but you will after you've laid in that dang dirty jail in town, an' been tuck to court to be gazed at by the public, with no money to pay fees with, no friends on hand, an' nothin' before you but to be hung by the neck till you are dead, dead, dead. Take my advice. Git away off some'r's in the world, change your name, burn yore bridges behind you, an' start life 'new all for yoreself without any load like the one you've always had like a millstone round your neck."

Paul rose to his feet, rested the stock of his gun on the trunk of the tree; he looked off through the twilight wistfully.

"You really think that would be best?" he faltered.

"It certainly will, if you kin manage to git away," Hoag said. "Why, if you stay here, you will be in a damn sight wuss fix than the skunk you shot. He's out o' *his* trouble, but if you stay here yours will just be beginnin'."

"Well, I'll go," Paul consented. "I can get away all right. I know the woods and mountains."

"Well, throw your gun down behind that log an make off. Say, if they press you hard on your way through the country, an' you find yourself near the farms of Tad Barton, Press Talcot, Joe Thomas, or old man Jimmy Webb, say this to 'em—tell 'em I said—No, I won't give you no password. I haven't got the right to do it without due form. It's ag'in' the rules; but you tell either of 'em that I said put you out of sight, give you grub or a place to sleep, an' that I said pass you along to the railroad. Got any money? Here is five dollars. I owe you that much, anyway, and it's all I happen to have in my pocket. Now, you hit the grit."

Paul took the money and indifferently thrust it into his pocket. Hoag held out his hand. "I don't want you to go away with the idea that I had anything much ag'in' the feller you shot; that's done away with now. We've had one or two little scraps, but they didn't amount to anything. Say"—Hoag pointed to the creek—"if I was you I'd wade along that watercourse for a mile or two. The sheriff might take a notion to put bloodhounds on your track, an' the stream will wash away the scent. Good-by. Make the best of it. I'd ask you to drop me a line, but that wouldn't be safe for me or you either. Cut this section clean out—it's been tough on you, anyway. You can make a livin'. You've got a great head on you for learnin'—I've heard plenty o' sensible folk say so. Good-by." They parted. Hoag went deliberately toward the constantly growing group where Jeff Warren had fallen. He had almost reached it when he met Aunt Dilly, who had been anxiously inquiring for him. She was whimpering and wiping her eyes on her apron.

"Oh, Marse Hoag," she cried, "I'se been searchin' fer you everwhar. Dey want you up at de house right off."

"Want me? What's the matter?"

"I dunno, suh; but Miz Hoag drapped off ter sleep-like in 'er chair, en her ma cayn't wake 'er up. Cato done run fer de doctor. Suppen's wrong, suh, suppen powerful wrong. Hit don't look lak des er faintin' spell."

Hoag stifled an oath of impatience, glanced at the silent group, hesitated a moment, and then turned homeward. At the gate he saw Mrs. Tilton waving her hands wildly in a signal for him to hurry.

"She's dead!" she sobbed. "She's growing cold." Hoag passed through the gate which she held open.

"Keep the baby away," he said. "There is no use lettin' 'im look at her. He's too young to—to see a thing like that."

II

CHAPTER I

|SEVEN years passed. It was early summer.

Externally James Hoag had changed. He was a heavier man; his movements were more sluggish, his hair was turning white, his face was wrinkled and had the brown splotches indicative of a disordered liver. There was on him, at times, a decided nervousness which he more or less frankly, according to mood, attributed to his smoking too much at night and the habit of tipping. He had grown more irritable and domineering. Beneath the surface, at least, he had strongly objected to his mother-in-law's continuing to look to him for support after her daughter's death. But Mrs. Tilton had told him quite firmly that she now had only one duty in life, and that was the care of her grandchild, Jack; and Hoag, quick, harsh, and decided in his dealings with others, knew no way of refusing.

He had really thought of marrying again; but the intimate presence of the mother-in-law and his inability to quite make up his mind as to which particular woman of his acquaintance could be trusted not to have motives other than a genuine appreciation of himself had delayed the step. Indeed, he had given the subject much thought, but objections more or less real had always arisen. The girl was too young, pretty, and spoiled by the attention of younger and poorer men, or the woman was too old, too plain, too settled, or too wise in the ways of the world. So Hoag had all but relinquished the thought, and if he had any heart he gave it to Jack, for whom he still had a remarkable paternal passion, as for his son Henry he still had little love or sympathy. For the last three or four years he had regarded Henry as an idle fellow who would never succeed in anything.

The "klan" of which Hoag was still the leader continued to hold its secret meetings, framed crude laws under his dictation, and inflicted grim and terrible punishment. And these men honestly believed their method to be more efficacious than the too tardy legal courts of the land.

Hoag had been to one of these meetings in a remote retreat in the mountains one moonlit night, and about twelve o'clock was returning. He was just entering the gate of his stable-yard when his attention was attracted to the approach along the road of a man walking toward Grayson, a traveler's bag in his hand. It was an unusual thing at that hour, and, turning his horse loose in the yard, Hoag went back to the gate and leaned on it, curiously and even officiously eyeing the approaching pedestrian. As the man drew nearer, lightly swinging his bag, Hoag remarked the easy spring in his stride, and noted that he was singing softly and contentedly. He was sure the man was a stranger, for he saw nothing familiar in the figure as to dress, shape, or movement.

"Must be a peddler in some line or other," he said to himself; "but a funny time o' night to be out on a lonely road like this."

It would have been unlike Hoag to have let the pedestrian pass without some sort of greeting, and, closing the gate, he stepped toward the center of the road and stood waiting.

"Good evening," he said, when the man was quite close to him.

"Good evening." The stranger looked up suddenly, checking his song, and stared at Hoag steadily in apparent surprise. Then he stopped and lowered his bag to the ground. "I wonder," he said, "if this is—can this possibly be Mr. Jim Hoag?"

"That's who it is," was the calm reply; "but I don't know as I've ever laid eyes on you before."

"Oh yes, you have." The stranger laughed almost immoderately. "You look closely, Mr. Hoag, and you'll recognize a chap you haven't seen in many a long, long year."

Hoag took the tall, well-built young man in from head to foot. He was well and stylishly dressed, wore a short, silky beard, and had brown eyes and brown hair. Hoag dubiously shook his head.

"You've got the best o' me," he said, slowly. "I'm good at recollectin' faces, as a rule, too; but my sight ain't what it used to be, an' then bein' night-time—"

"It was after dark the last time you saw me, Mr. Hoag." The stranger was extending his hand and smiling. "Surely you haven't forgotten Ralph Rundel's son Paul?"

"Paul Rundel—good Lord!" Hoag took the extended hand clumsily, his eyes dilating. "It can't be—why, why, I thought you was dead an' done for long ago. I've thought many a time that I'd try to locate you. You see, after advisin' you—after tellin' you, as I did that night, that I thought you ought to run away, why, I sort o' felt —"

Hoag seemed unable to voice his train of thought and slowed up to an awkward pause.

"Yes, I know—I understand," Paul Rundel said, his face falling into seriousness, his voice full and earnest. "I know I'm late about it; but it is better to be late than never when you intend to do the right thing. I committed a crime, Mr. Hoag, and the kind of a crime that can't be brushed out of a man's conscience by any sort of process. I've fought the hardest battle that any man of my age ever waged. For years I tried to follow your advice, and live my life in my own way, but I failed utterly. I started out fair, but it finally got me down. I saw I had to do the right thing, and I am here for that purpose."

"You don't mean—you can't mean," Hoag stammered, "that you think—that you actually *believe*—"

"I mean exactly what I say." The young, bearded face was all seriousness. "I stood it, I tell you, as long as I could in my own way, and finally made up my mind that I'd let God Almighty take me in hand. It was like sweating blood, but I got to it. In my mind, sleeping and waking, I've stood on the scaffold a thousand times, anyway, and now, somehow, I don't dread it a bit—not a bit. It would take a long time to explain it, Mr. Hoag, but I mean what I say. There is only one thing I dread, and that is a long trial. I'm going to plead guilty and let them finish me as soon as possible. I want to meet the man I killed face to face in the Great Beyond and beg his pardon in the presence of God. Then I will have done as much of my duty as is possible at such a late day."

"Oh, I see!" Hoag fancied he understood. One of his old shrewd looks stoic into his visage. If Paul Rundel thought he was as easily taken in as that, he had mistaken his man, that was certain. Hoag put his big hand to his mouth and crushed out an expanding smile, the edge of which showed itself in his twinkling eyes. "Oh, I see," he said, with the sort of seduction he used in his financial dealings; "you hain't heard nothin' from here since you went off—nothin' at all?"

"Not a word, Mr. Hoag, since I left you down there seven years ago," was the reply. "I must have walked thirty miles that night through the worst up-and-down country in these mountains before day broke. I struck a band of horse-trading gypsies at sun-up in the edge of North Carolina, and they gave me breakfast. They were moving toward the railroad faster than I could walk. I was completely fagged out, and they took pity on me and let me lie down on some straw and quilts in one of their vans. I slept soundly nearly all day. I wasn't afraid of being caught; in fact, I didn't care much one way or the other. I was sick at heart, blue and morbid. I suppose conscience was even then getting in its work."

"I see." Hoag was studying the young man's face, voice, and manner in growing perplexity. There was something so penetratingly sincere about the fellow. Hoag had heard of men being haunted by conscience till they would, of their own volition, give themselves up for punishment, but he had never regarded such things as possible, and he refused to be misled now. "Then you took a train?" he said, like a close cross-questioner. "You took the train?"

"Yes, I left the gypsies at Randal's Station, on the B. A. & L., and slipped into an unlocked boxcar bound for the West. It was an awful trip; but after many ups and downs I reached Portland in about as sad a plight as a boy of my age could well be in. I found work as a printer's devil on a newspaper. From that I began to set type. I studied hard at night, and finally got to be an editorial writer. You see, I kept myself out of view as much as possible—stayed at my boardinghouse from dark till morning, and, having access to a fine library, I read to—kill time and keep my mind off my crime."

"Your *crime*? Oh, you mean that you thought—"

"I couldn't possibly get away from it, Mr. Hoag." Paul's voice quivered, and he drew his slender hand across his eyes. "Night or day, dark or light, Jeff Warren was always before me. I've seen him reel, stagger, and fall, and heard him groan millions and millions of times. It would take all night to tell you about those awful years of sin and remorse—that soul-racking struggle to defy God, which simply had to end, and did end, only a few days ago. When I left here I believed as you did about spiritual things, Mr. Hoag, and I thought I could live my life out as I wished, but I know better now. My experience during those seven years would convince any infidel on earth that God is in every atom of matter in the universe. The human being does not live who will not, sooner or later, bow down under this truth—if not here, he will in the Great Beyond."

"Bosh!" Hoag growled, his heavy brows meeting in a fierce frown of displeasure.

"Oh, I see you still think as you used to think,"

Paul went on, regretfully; "but you'll come to it some day—you'll come to it in God's own good time. It is a satisfaction to me to know that I am giving you a proof of *my* reformation, anyway. You know, if you will stop to think about it, Mr. Hoag, that I am giving vital proof that I, at least, am convinced or I would not be willing to give my life up like this. It isn't hard to die when you know you are dying to fulfil a wonderful divine law; in fact, to mend a law which you yourself have broken!"

"I don't know what you are trying to git at, an' I don't care," Hoag blustered. "I don't know what your present object is, what sort of an ax you got to grind; but I'll tell you what I think, Paul, an' you kin smoke it in your pipe if you want to. Somebody round here has kept you posted. You know how the land lays, an' have made up your mind to turn preacher, I reckon—if you ain't already one—an' you think it will be a fine card to make these damn fools here in the backwoods think you really *was* ready to go to the scaffold, an' the like o' that. But the truth will leak out. Sooner or later folks—even the silliest of 'em—will git onto your game. You can't look *me* square in the eye, young man, an' tell *me* that you don't know Jeff Warren didn't die, an' that when he married your mammy an' moved away the case ag'in' you was dismissed. Huh, I ain't as green as a gourd!"

Paul started, stared incredulously at the speaker, his mouth falling open till his white teeth gleamed in the moonlight. He leaned forward, his breath coming and going audibly, his broad chest swelling. He laid his hand on Hoag's shoulder and bore down on it heavily. Hoag felt it quivering as if it were charged with an electric current. Paul was trying to speak, trying to be calm. He swallowed; his lips moved automatically; he put his disengaged hand on Hoag's other shoulder and forced him to look at him. He shook him. In his face was the light of a great nascent joy.

"Don't say he's alive unless—my God, unless it's true!" he cried, shaking Hoag again. "That would be the act of a fiend in human shape. I couldn't stand it. Speak, speak, speak, man! Don't you understand? Speak! Is it true—is it possible that—" Paul's voice broke in a great welling sob of excitement and his quivering head began to sink.

Hoag was quite taken aback. This was genuine; of that he was convinced. "Thar's no use gittin' so worked up," he said. "Jeff is sound an' well. I'm sorry I talked like I did, for I see you must 'a' been in the dark, an'—"

He went no further. Paul had removed his hands. A light was on his face that seemed superhuman. He raised his eyes to the sky. He swerved toward the side of the road like a man entranced till he reached the fence, and there he rested his head on his arms and stood bowed, still, and silent.

"Huh, this is a purty pickle!" Hoag said to himself. He stood nonplussed for several minutes, and then advanced to Paul, treading the ground noiselessly till he was close to him. And then he heard the young man muttering an impassioned prayer.

"I thank thee, O God, I thank thee! O, blessed Father! O, merciful Creator, this—this is thy reward!"

Hoag touched him on the shoulder, and Paul turned his eyes upon him, which were full of exultant tears. "Say," Hoag proposed, kindly enough, "thar ain't no need o' you goin' on to Grayson to-night. The hotel ain't runnin' this summer, nohow. Pete Kerr an' his wife closed it for a month to go off on a trip. I've got a big, cool room in my house that ain't occupied. Stay with me as long as you like. We are sort o' old friends, an' you are entirely welcome. I'd love the best in the world to have you."

"It is very good of you." Paul was calmer now, though his countenance was still aglow with its supernal light. "I really am very tired. I've walked ten miles—all the way from Darby Crossroads. The hack broke down there a little after dark, and as I wanted to give myself up before morning—before meeting anybody—I came on afoot. The driver was a new man, and so he had no idea of who I was or what my intentions were. Oh, Mr.

Hoag, you can't imagine how I feel. You have given me such a great joy. I know I am acting like a crazy man, but I can't help it. It is so new, so fresh—so glorious!”

“The *whole thing* seems crazy to me,” said Hoag, with a return of his old bluntness; “but that's neither here nor thar. You seem to be in earnest. Pick up yore valise an' let's go in the house.”

“Are you sure you have room for me?” Paul asked, as he went for his bag.

“Plenty, plenty. My sister, Mrs. Mayfield, an' Ethel, from Atlanta—you remember them—they are spending the summer here, as they always do now. They went to Atlanta yesterday—some o' their kin is sick—Jennie Buford. They will be back tomorrow by dinner-time. But when they come you needn't stir. We've got plenty o' room. You are welcome to stay as long as you like. I want to talk to you about the West.”

CHAPTER II

HOAG led the way through the gate and up the walk toward the house.

“Do you think you'll be likely to settle down here again?” he inquired.

“Oh, I shall now—I shall now,” Paul returned, eagerly. “I've been so homesick for these old mountains and valleys that I shall never want to leave them. It is that way with most men; they never find any spot so attractive as the place where they were brought up.”

“The reason I asked,” Hoag said, with a touch of pride, “was this. I've increased my interests here a powerful sight since you went away. I've added on two more good-sized farms. My tannery is double what it was, an' my flour-mill's a new one with the patent-roller process. Then I run a brickyard t'other side o' town, and a shingle-mill and a little spoke an' hub factory. I tell you this so you'll understand the situation. I'm gittin' too stiff an' heavy to ride about much, an' I've got to have a general superintendent. The fellow that was with me for the last four years left me high an' dry a week ago, after a row me an' him had over a trifle, when you come to think about it. It just struck me that you might want to think it over an' see how you'd like the job.”

“I should like it, I am sure,” Paul said, gratefully.

“I am going to stay here, and I'll have to keep busy.”

“Well, we'll talk it over to-morrow,” Hoag said, in quite a tone of satisfaction. “I reckon we'll agree on the price. If you are as hard a worker as you used to be I'll be more 'an pleased.”

They were now at the veranda steps. The front door was locked; Hoag opened it with a key which was fastened to his suspenders by a steel chain, and the two went into the unlighted hall. The owner of the house fumbled about in the dark until he found a couple of candles on a table, and, scratching a match on his thigh, he lighted them.

“Now we are all hunky-dory,” he chuckled. “I'm goin' to give you a good room, an' if I don't live on the fat of the land as to grub nobody else does. If we come to terms, I'll want you to stay right here, whar I can consult you at a moment's notice.”

“That would be nice indeed,” Paul returned, as he followed his host up the uncarpeted stairs to a hall, which was the counterpart of the one below.

At the front end of the hall Hoag pushed a door open and entering a large bedroom, put one of the candles on the mantelpiece. “Here you are,” he said, pleasantly, waving his heavy hand over the furniture, which consisted of a table, a couple of chairs, a bureau, wardrobe, and a fully equipped wash-stand. “You 'll have to admit”—Hoag smiled at this—“that it is better than the place you was headed for. The last time I peeped in that jail thar wasn't any beds that I could see—niggers an' tramps was lyin' on iron bars with nothin' under 'em but scraps o' blankets.”

Just then there was the sound of a creaking bed in the room adjoining.

Hoag put his own candle down on the table. “It's Henry,” he explained. “He's been poutin' all day. Me'n him had some hot words at supper. He wants me to furnish some money for him to go in business on. Him an' another man want to start a produce store in Grayson, but I won't put hard cash in inexperienced hands. It would be the same as stickin' it in a burnin' brush-heap. He's quit drinkin' an' gamblin', but he won't work.”

“I've seen young men like him,” Paul said. “Henry wasn't brought up to work, and he may be helpless. He ought to be encouraged.”

“Well, I'll not encourage him by puttin' a lot o' cash in his clutches,” Hoag sniffed. “If he'd set in an' work like you used to do, for instance, thar's no tellin' what I would do for him in the long run. Well, I'm keepin' you up. I'll see you in the mornin'. Good night.”

“Good night,” Paul said.

With his lighted candle in his hand Hoag went down-stairs and turned into his own room, adjoining the one in which Jack and his grandmother slept. Putting his candle on a table, he began to undress. He had finished and was about to lie down when he heard a light footfall in the next room. A connecting door was pushed open and a tall, slender boy in a white nightgown stood in the moonlight which streamed through a vine-hung window and fell on the floor.

“Is that you, Daddy?”

“Yes, son.” There was an odd note of affection in Hoag's welcoming tone. “Do you want anything?”

The boy crept forward slowly. “I got scared. I woke and heard you talkin' up-stairs like you was still

quarreling with Henry."

"You must have been dreaming." The father held out his arms and drew the boy into a gentle embrace. "Do you want to sleep with your old daddy?"

"Oh yes!" Jack crawled from his father's arms to the back part of the bed and stretched out his slender white legs against the plastered wall. "May I sleep here till morning, and get up when you do?"

"Yes, if you want to. Do you raily love to sleep in my bed?"

Hoag was now lying down, and Jack put his arm under his big neck and hugged him. "Yes, I do; I don't like my little bed; it's too short."

"Thar, kiss daddy on the cheek and go to sleep," Hoag said, under the thrill of delight which the boy's caresses invariably evoked. "It's late—awful late fer a chap like you to be awake."

Jack drew his arm away, rolled back against the cool wall, and sighed.

"Daddy," he said, presently, just as Hoag was composing himself for sleep, "I don't want Grandma to tag after me so much. She watches me like a hawk, an' is always saying if I don't look out I'll grow up and be good for nothing like Henry. Daddy, what makes Henry that way?"

"I don't know; he's just naturally lazy. Now go to sleep."

"Some folks like Henry very, very much," the boy pursued, getting further and further from sleep. "Grandma says he really is trying to be good, but don't know how. Was you like him when you was young, Daddy?"

"No—I don't know; why, no, I reckon not. Why do you ask such silly questions?"

"Grandma told Aunt Dilly one day that you always did drink, but that you didn't often show it. She said Henry had quit, and that was wonderful for any one who had it in his blood like Henry has. Is it in my blood, too, Daddy?"

"No." Hoag's patience was exhausted. "Now go to sleep. I've got to rest, I'm tired, and must work to-morrow."

"Are you a soldier, Daddy?" Jack pursued his habit of ignoring all commands from that particular source.

"No, I'm not. Now go to sleep; if you don't, I'll send you back to your own bed."

"Then why does Mr. Trawley call you 'Captain'?"

"Who said—who told you he called me that?" Hoag turned his massive head on his pillow and looked at the beautiful profile of his son, as it was outlined against the wall.

"Oh, I heard him the other day, when he rode up after you to go somewhere. I was in the loft at the barn fixing my pigeon-box and heard him talking to you down at the fence. Just as he started off he said, 'Captain, your men will wait for you at the usual place. They won't stir without your commands.'"

Hoag's head moved again; his eyes swept on to the ceiling; there was a pause; his wit seemed sluggish.

"Are you really a captain, Daddy?" Jack raised himself on his elbow and leaned over his father's face, "No; lie down and go to sleep," Hoag said, sternly. "Some people call me that just out of—out of respect, just as a sort o' nickname. The war is over; thar ain't no real captains now."

"I think I know why they call you that." Jack's delicate face was warm with pride, and his young voice was full and round. "It is because you are the bravest an' richest and best one. That's why Mr. Trawley said they wouldn't stir till you told them. I asked Grandma about it, and she looked so funny and acted so queer! She wouldn't say anything to *me*, but she went straight to Aunt Dilly, and they talked a long time, and Grandma looked like she was bothered. That was the night the White Caps rode along the road after that runaway negro. I saw Grandma watching from the window. She thought I was asleep, but I got up and looked out of the other window and she didn't know it. Oh, they looked awful in their long, white things. Aunt Dilly was down in the yard, and she told Grandma that God was going to have revenge, because the Bible said so. She said Cato had left his cabin and was hiding in the woods for fear they might get *him*. She said Cato was a good nigger, and that it was a sin to scare him and all the rest like that. Daddy, what *are* the White Caps? Where do they come from?"

"Oh, from roundabout in the mountains!" Hoag returned, uneasily. "Now go to sleep. You are nervous; you are shaking all over; those men won't hurt you."

"But they *do* get white folks sometimes, and take them out and whip them," Jack said, tremulously. "Aunt Dilly said one day to Cato that they begun on the blacks, but they had sunk so low that they were after their own race now. What would we do if they was to come here after—" The little voice trailed away on the still air, and glancing at the boy's face Hoag saw that the pretty, sensitive lips were quivering.

"After who?" he asked, curious in spite of his caution.

"After Henry," Jack gulped. "They might, you know, to whip him for not working. They did whip a poor white man last summer because he let his wife and children go hungry. Daddy, if they was—really *was* to ride up here and call Henry out, would you shoot them? What would be the use, when there are so many and every one has a gun?"

"They—they are not coming after Henry." Hoag was at the end of his resources. "Git all that rubbish out o' your head an' go to sleep!"

"How do you know they won't come, Daddy? Oh, Daddy, Henry really is my only brother an' I love 'im. You don't know how good he is to me sometimes. He mends my things, and makes toys for me with his knife, and tells me stories about sailors and soldiers and Indians."

Hoag turned on his side and laid a caressing hand on the boy's brow. "Now, now," he said, soothingly, "let's both go to sleep."

"All right, Daddy." Jack leaned over his father's face and kissed him. "Good night."

"Good night." Hoag rolled over to the front side of the bed, straightened himself out and closed his eyes.

CHAPTER III

ON finding himself alone in his room, Paul began to realize the full import of the startling information Hoag had imparted to him. He stood before an open window, and with the sense of being afloat on a sea of actual ecstasy he gazed into the mystic moonlight. Northward lay the village, and to the left towered the mountains for which he had hungered all the years of his absence. How restful, God-blessed seemed the familiar meadows and fields in their drowsy verdure! He took deep draughts of the mellow air, his broad chest expanding, his arms extended wide, as if to clasp the whole in a worshipping embrace.

"Thank God," he cried, fervently, "I am not a murderer! My prayers are answered. The Lord is showing me the way—and *such* a way—such a glorious, blessed way!"

And to-morrow—his thoughts raced madly onward—to-morrow the dawn would break. The land he loved, the hills and vales he adored, would be flooded with the blaze of his first day of actual life. Ethel would be there—little Ethel, who, of course, was now a young woman—there, actually there, in that very house! Would she remember him—the ragged boy whom she had so unselfishly befriended? What must she think of him—if she thought of him at all—for acting as he had? Oh yes, that was it—if she thought of him at all! He had treasured her every word. Her face and voice, in all their virginal sympathy, had been constantly with him during the terrible years through which he had struggled.

The dawn was breaking. Paul lay sleeping; his bearded face held a frown of pain; his lips were drawn downward and twisted awry. He was dreaming. He saw himself seated at his desk in the editorial room of the paper on which he had worked in the West. He seemed to be trying to write an article, but the sheets of paper before him kept fluttering to the floor and disappearing from sight. There was a rap on the door, the latch was turned, and an officer in uniform entered and stood beside him.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but you'll have to come with me. You are wanted back in Georgia. We've been looking for you for years, but we've landed you at last."

Paul seemed to see and hear the jingle of a pair of steel handcuffs. A dead weight bore down on his brain as the metal clasped his wrists. Dense darkness enveloped him, and he felt himself being jerked along at a mad pace.

"I intended to give myself up," he heard himself explaining to his captor. "I'm guilty. I did it. Day after day I've told myself that I would go back and own it, but I put it off."

"That's the old tale." The officer seemed to laugh out of the darkness. "Your sort are always intending to do right, but never get to it. They are going to hang you back there in the mountains, young man, hang you till you are dead, dead, dead! Ethel Mayfield's there—she is the same beautiful girl—but she will be ashamed to acknowledge she ever knew you. She used to pray for you—silly young thing!—and this is the answer. You'll die like a dog, young man, with a rope around your neck."

Paul waked slowly; his face was wet with cold perspiration. At first he fancied he was in a prison cell lying on a narrow cot. Such queer sounds were beating into his consciousness—the crowing of cocks, the barking of dogs, the gladsome twittering of birds! Then he seemed to be a boy again, lying in his bed in the farmhouse. His father was calling him to get up. The pigs were in the potato-field. But how could Ralph Rundel call to him, for surely he was dead? Yes, he was dead, and Jeff Warren—Jeff Warren—Why, Hoag had said that he had—recovered. Recovered!

Paul opened his eyes and looked about him in a bewildered way. The room, in the gray light which streamed in at the windows, was unfamiliar. He sat up on the edge of his bed and tried to collect his thoughts; then he rose to his feet and sprang to the window.

"Thank God, thank God!" he cried, as he stared out at the widening landscape and the truth gradually fastened itself upon him. "Thank God, I'm free—free—free!"

He told himself that he could not possibly go to sleep again, and hurriedly and excitedly he began to put on his clothes.

When he had finished dressing he crept out into the silent hall and softly tiptoed down the stairs. The front door was ajar, and, still aglow with his vast new joy, he passed out into the yard. The dewy lawn had a beauty he had never sensed before. The great trees, solemn and stately, lifted their fronded tops into the lowering mist. The air held the fragrance of flowers. Red and white roses besprent with dew bordered the walks, bloomed in big beds, and honeysuckles and morning-glories climbed the lattice of the veranda. Down the graveled walk, under the magnolias, the leaves of which touched his bare head, Paul strode, his step elastic, his whole being ablaze with mystic delight. Reaching the road, he took the nearest path up the mountain. He waved his arms; he ran; he jumped as he had jumped when a boy; he whistled; he sang; he wept; he prayed; he exulted. Higher and higher he mounted in the rarefied air, his feet slipping on the red-brown pine-needles and dry heather till he reached an open promontory where a flat ledge sharply jutted out over the gray void below. Like a fearless, winged creature he stood upon the edge of it. The eastern sky was taking on a tinge of lavender. Slowly this warmed into an ever-expanding sea of pink, beneath the breathless waves of which lay the palpitating sun. Paul stretched out his arms toward the light and stood as dumb and still as the gray boulders and gnarled trees behind him. He was athrob with a glorious sense of the Infinite, which seemed to enter his being like a flood at its height.

"Free! Free!" he shouted, as the tears burst from his eyes and streamed down his cheeks. "Forgiven, forgiven! I was blind and now I see! I stand on the fringe of the eternal and see with the eyes of truth. All is well with God and every created thing, vast and infinitesimal! O Lord, I thank Thee; with my whole being,

which is spirit of Thy spirit and flesh of Thy flesh, I thank Thee! Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty! He is in me, and I am in Him!"

Paul covered his face with his hands and the hot tears trickled through his fingers. His body shook with sobs. Presently he became calmer, uncovered his face, and looked again toward the east. The day, like a blazing torrent, was leaping into endless space, lapping up with tongues of fire islands and continents of clouds. Raising his hands heavenward, Paul cried out, in a clear, firm voice that rebounded from the cliffs behind him:

"O God, my blessed Creator, Thou hast led me through the agony of travail, through the pits and caverns of sin and remorse to the foot of Thy throne. Dimly I see Thy veiled face. I hear the far-off hosts of eternal wisdom chanting the deathless song of Love. Take me—command me, body, mind, and soul! Burden me again, and yet again; torture me, afflict me; grind me as a filthy worm beneath the heel of Thy Law; but in the end give me this—this wondrous sense of Thee and transcendent knowledge of myself. Here, now and forever, I consecrate myself to Thy cause. O blessed God, who art love and naught but love. I thank Thee, I thank Thee!"

The sun, now a great, red disk, had burst into sight. The golden light lay shimmering on hill and vale. Every dewy blade of grass, stalk of grain, and dripping leaf seemed to breathe afresh. From the lower boughs of the trees night-woven cobwebs hung, the gauzy snares of creatures as wise as Napoleon and materially as cruel. The scattered houses of Grayson were now in view. Paul feasted his eyes on the Square, and the diverging streets which led into the red-clay mountain roads. The hamlet was almost devoid of life. He saw, or thought he saw, his old friend, Silas Tye, go out to the public pump in front of his shop, fill a pail with water, and disappear. In the wagon-yard were two canvas-covered wagons and a camp-fire, over which men, women, and children were cooking breakfast. Paul's glance swept down the rugged slope to Hoag's house. Cato was feeding the horses and cattle in the stable-yard. Aunt Dilly, in a red linsey frock, was chopping stove-wood close to the kitchen, the thwacks of her dull ax sharply audible. Paul suddenly had a desire to speak to these swarthy toilers, to take them by the hand and make them feel his boundless friendliness to them, and so, with a parting look at the view below, he turned and began to retrace his steps.

Cato was near the kitchen door helping Dilly take in the wood when Paul went up the front walk, turned the corner of the house, and approached him. The negro stared in astonishment, then laid down his burden and held out his hands.

"My Gawd, Mister Paul, is dis you? Lawd, Law'd 'a' mussy!"

"Yes, it is I," the young man answered; "I've got back at last."

"It's a wonder I knowed you wid dat beard, an' dem fine riggin's on." Cato was eyeing Paul's modern raiment with a slow, covetous glance. "But it was dem eyes o' your'n I knowed you by. Nobody ain't gwine ter forgit dem peepers. Somehow dey look as saft as 'er woman's. What yer been done ter yo'se'f—you ain't de same. My Gawd, you ain't de same po' boy dat tried yo' level best ter kill dat white man wid er gun."

Paul was saved the embarrassment of a reply by the sudden appearance of Aunt Dilly, who was literally running down the steps from the kitchen porch.

"Don't tell me dat is Marse Paul Rundel?" she cried. "I ain't gwine believe it. De gen'man's er foolin' you, you blockhead idiot!"

"That's who it is, Aunt Dilly." Paul held out his hand cordially and clasped her rasping, toil-stiffened fingers. "I've got back, never to leave again."

"Lawd, Lawd, it is—it sho is dat ve'y boy!" Dilly cried. "You right, Cato, he got de eyes en de voice. I'd know 'em anywhar. My, my, my, but you sho is changed er sight! I ain't never expect ter see dat raggety white boy turn inter er fine gen'man lak dis. Lawd, what gwine ter happen next?"

Paul conversed with the two for several minutes, and then went up to his room on a hint from Dilly that breakfast would soon be served. Paul had been in his room only a short while when he heard the door of Henry Hoag's room open and Henry appeared.

"Hello, Paul!" he said, cordially extending his hand. "I wouldn't have known you from a side of sole-leather if I hadn't heard you talking to Cato and Dilly down there. I didn't know you were back. I thought you'd cut this section off your map. I'm goin' to do it some day, if I can get up enough money to start on. What you ever came back here for is one on me. It certainly is the jumpin'-off place."

"It is the only home I ever knew," Paul returned. "You know it is natural for a man to want to see old landmarks."

"I reckon so, I reckon so." Henry's roving glance fell on Paul's valise. "I suppose you've seen a good deal of the world. I certainly envy you. I am tired of this. I am dying of the dry-rot. I need something to do, but don't know how to find it. I tried life insurance, but every man I approached treated it as a joke. I made one trip as a drummer for a fancy-goods firm in Baltimore. I didn't sell enough to pay my railroad fare. The house telegraphed me to ship my sample trunks back. My father had advanced me a hundred to start on, and when I came home he wanted to thrash me. I'll give you a pointer, Paul; if you are lookin' for a job, you can land one with him. He's crazy to hire an overseer, but he wouldn't trust it to me. The chap that left 'im wouldn't stand his jaw and the old man can't attend to the work himself. Take a tip from me. If you accept the job, have a distinct understandin' that he sha'n't cuss you black an' blue whenever he takes a notion. He's worse at that than he used to be, an' the only way to git along with him is to knock 'im down and set on him right at the start. He hasn't but one decent trait, an' that is his love for little Jack. He'd go any lengths for that kid. Well, so would I. The boy is all right—lovely little chap. He hasn't a jill of the Hoag blood in him."

"I haven't seen Jack yet," Paul said. "He was a baby when I left."

There was the harsh clanging of a bell below; Cato was vigorously ringing it on the back porch.

"That's breakfast now." Henry nodded toward the door. "Don't wait for me—I usually dodge the old man. We've got summer boarders—kin folks. Cousin Eth' and her mammy are here with all their finicky airs. Eth's a full-fledged young lady now of the Atlanta upper crust, and what she don't know about what's proper and decent in manners never was written in a book of etiquette. She begun to give me lessons last year about how

and when to use a fork—said I made it rattle between my teeth. I called her down. She knows I don't ask her no odds. There is a swell fellow in Atlanta, a banker, Ed Peterson, that comes up to spend Sunday with her now and then. I never have been able to find out whether Eth' cares for him or not. The old man likes him because he's got money, and he's trying to make a match of it. I think Aunt Harriet leans that way a little, too, but I'm not sure. Oh, he's too dinky-dinky for anything—can't drive out from town without a nigger to hold his horse, and wears kid gloves in hot weather, and twists his mustache."

Glad to get away from the loquacious gossip, Paul descended the stairs to the dining-room. Here nothing had been changed. The same old-fashioned pictures in veneered mahogany frames were hanging between the windows. The same figured china vases stood on the mantelpiece over the fireplace, which was filled with evergreens, and the hearth was whitewashed as when he had last seen it. Mrs. Tilton, looking considerably older, more wrinkled, thinner, and bent, stood waiting for him at the head of the table.

"I'm glad to see you ag'in, Paul," She extended her hand and smiled cordially. "I've wondered many and many a time if you'd ever come back. Jim was telling me about you just now. How relieved you must feel to find things as they are! Set down at the side there. Jim's out among the beehives with Jack. They have to have a romp every momin'. Jack is a big boy now, and powerful bright. There, I hear 'em coming."

"Get up! Get up! Whoa!" the child's voice rang out, and Hoag, puffing and panting, with Jack astride his shoulders, stood pawing like a restive horse at the edge of the porch.

"Jump down now," Hoag said, persuasively. "One more round!" the boy cried, with a merry laugh.

"No; off you go or I'll dump you on the porch."

"You can't!" Jack retorted. "You ain't no Mexican bronco. I'll dig my heels in your flanks and stick on till you are as tame as a kitten."

"No; get down now, I'm hungry," Hoag insisted; "besides, we've got company, an' we mustn't keep 'im waiting."

That seemed to settle the argument, and in a moment Jack entered, casting shy glances at the visitor, to whom he advanced with a slender hand extended.

"You can't remember me, Jack," Paul said. "You were a little tot when I left."

Jack said nothing. He simply withdrew his hand and took a seat beside his father, against whom he leaned, his big brown eyes, under long lashes, studiously regarding the visitor. The boy was remarkably beautiful. His golden-brown hair was as fine as cobwebs; his forehead was high and broad; his features were regular; his limbs slender and well-shaped. An experienced physiognomist would have known that he possessed a sensitive, artistic temperament.

Paul heard little of the casual talk that was going on. His elation clung to him like an abiding reality. The sunshine lay on the grass before the open door. The lambent air was full of the sounds peculiar to the boyhood which had seemed so far behind him and yet had returned. Hens were clucking as they scratched the earth and made feints at pecking food left uncovered for their chirping broods. Waddling ducks and snowy geese, with flapping wings, screamed one to another, and innumerable bird-notes far and near, accompanied by the rat-tat of the woodpecker, were heard. A donkey was braying. A peacock with plumage proudly spread stalked majestically across the grass, displaying every color of the rainbow in his dazzling robe.

Breakfast over, Hoag led Paul into the old-fashioned parlor and gave him a cigar. "I've got to ride out in the country," he said, "an' so I may not see you again till after dark. I've been thinkin' of that proposition I sorter touched on last night. That ain't no reason why me'n you can't git on. We always did, in our dealin's back thar, an' I need a manager powerful bad. I paid t'other man a hundred a month an' his board throwed in, an' I'm willin' to start out with you on the same basis, subject to change if either of us ain't satisfied. It's the best an' easiest job in this county by long odds. What do you say? Is it a go?"

"I'm very glad to get it," Paul answered. "I shall remain here in the mountains, and I want to be busy. I'll do my best to serve you."

"Well, that's settled," Hoag said, in a tone of relief. "Knock about as you like to-day, and tomorrow we'll ride around an' look the ground over."

CHAPTER IV

PAUL'S first impulse, on finding himself alone, was to walk to Grayson and look up his old friends; but so new and vivifying was his freedom from the cares which had so long haunted him that he wanted to hug the sense of it to himself still longer in solitude. So, leaving the farm-house, he went to the summit of a little wooded hill back of the tannery and sat down in the shade of the trees. In his boundless joy he actually felt imponderable. He had an ethereal sense of being free from his body, of flying in the azure above the earth, floating upon the fleecy clouds. He noticed a windblown drift of fragrant pine-needles in the cleft of a rock close by, and creeping into the cool nook like a beast into its lair, he threw himself down and chuckled and laughed in sheer delight.

Ethel, little Ethel, who had once been his friend—who had prayed for him and wept with him in sorrow—was coming. That very day he was to see her again after all those years; but she would not look the same. She was no longer a child. She had changed as he had changed. Would she know him? Would she even remember him—the gawky farm-hand she had so sweetly befriended? No; it was likely that he and all that pertained to

him had passed out of her mind. The memory of her, however, had been his constant companion; her pure, childish faith had been an ultimate factor in his redemption.

The morning hours passed. It was noon, and the climbing sun dropped its direct rays full upon him. He left the rocks and stood out in the open, unbaring his brow to the cooling breeze which swept up from the fields of grain and cotton. His eyes rested on the red road leading to the village. Wagons, pedestrians, droves of sheep and cattle driven by men on horses, were passing back and forth. Suddenly his heart sprang like a startled thing within him. Surely that was Hoag's open carriage, with Cato on the high seat in front. Yes, and of the two ladies who sat behind under sunshades the nearer one was Ethel. Paul turned cold from head to foot, and fell to trembling. How strange to see her, even at that distance, in the actual flesh, when for seven years she had been a dream! A blinding mist fell before his eyes, and when he had brushed it away the carriage had passed out of view behind the intervening trees. In great agitation he paced to and fro. How could he possibly command himself sufficiently to face her in a merely conventional way? He had met women and won their friendship in the West, and had felt at ease in good society. But this was different. Strange to say, he was now unable to see himself as other than the awkward, stammering lad clothed in the rags of the class to which he belonged.

Hardly knowing what step to take, he turned down the incline toward the farm-house, thinking that he might gain his room unseen by the two ladies. At the foot of the hill there was a great, deep spring, and feeling thirsty he paused to bend down and drink from the surface, as he had done when a boy. Drawing himself erect, he was about to go on, when his eye caught a flash of a brown skirt among the drooping willows that bordered the stream, and Ethel came out, her hands full of maiden-hair ferns. At first she did not see him, busy as she was shaking the water from the ferns and arranging them. She wore a big straw hat, a close-fitting shirt-waist, and a neat linen skirt. How much she was changed! She was taller, her glorious hair, if a shade darker, seemed more abundant. She was slender still, and yet there was a certain fullness to her form which added grace and dignity to the picture he had so long treasured. Suddenly, while he stood as if rooted in the ground, she glanced up and saw him.

"Oh!" he heard her ejaculate, and he fancied that her color heightened a trifle. Transferring the ferns to her left hand, she swept toward him as lightly as if borne on a breeze, her right hand held out cordially. "I really wouldn't have known you, Paul," she smiled, "if Uncle Jim had not told me you were here. Oh, I'm so glad to see you!"

As he held her soft hand it seemed to him that he was drawing self-possession and faith in himself from her ample store of cordiality.

"I would have known you anywhere," he heard himself saying, quite frankly. "And yet you have changed very, very much."

Thereupon he lost himself completely in the bewitching spell of her face and eyes. He had thought her beautiful as a little girl, but he had not counted on seeing her like this—on finding himself fairly torn asunder by a force belonging peculiarly to her.

He marveled over his emotions—even feared them, as he stole glances at her long-lashed, dreamy eyes, witnessed the sunrise of delicate embarrassment in her rounded cheeks, and caught the ripened cadences of the voice which had haunted him like music heard in a trance.

"You have changed a great deal," she was saying, as she led him toward the spring. "A young man changes more when—when there really is something unusual in him. I was only a little girl when I knew you, Paul, but I was sure that you would succeed in the world. At least I counted on it till—"

"Till I acted as I did," he said, sadly, prompted by her hesitation.

She looked at him directly, though her glance wavered slightly.

"If I lost hope then," she replied, "it was because I could not look far enough into the future. Surely it has turned out for the best. Uncle told me *why* you came back. Oh, I think that is wonderful, wonderful! Till now I have never believed such a thing possible of a man, and yet I know it now because—because you did it."

He avoided her appealing eyes, looking away into the blue, sunlit distance. His lip shook when he answered:

"Some day I'll tell you all about it. I'll unfold it to you like a book, page by page, chapter by chapter. It is a story that opens in the blackness of night and ends in the blaze of a new day."

"I know what you mean—oh, I know!" Ethel sighed. "The news of that night was my first realization of life's grim cruelty. Somehow I felt—I suppose other imaginative girls are the same way—I felt that it was a sort of personal matter to me because I had met you as I had. I didn't blame you. I couldn't understand it fully, but I felt that it was simply a continuation of your ill-luck. I cried all that night. I could not go to sleep. I kept fancying I saw you running away through the mountains with all those men trying to catch you."

"So you didn't—really blame me?" Paul faltered. "You didn't think me so very, very bad?"

"No, I think I made a sort of martyr of you," Ethel confessed. "I knew you did it impulsively, highly wrought up as you were over your poor father's death. You can't imagine how I worried the first few days after—after you left. You see, no one knew whether Jeff Warren would live or not. Oh, I was happy, Paul, when the doctor declared he was out of danger! I would have given a great deal then to have known how to reach you, but—but no one knew. Then, somehow, as the years passed, the impression got out that you were dead. Everybody seemed to believe it except old Mr. Tye, the shoemaker."

"My faithful old friend!" Paul said. "He was constantly giving me good advice which I refused to take."

"I sometimes go into his shop and sit and talk to him," Ethel continued. "He is a queer old man, more like a saint than an ordinary human being. He declares he is in actual communion with God—says he has visions of things not seen by ordinary sight. He told me once, not long ago, that you were safe and well, and that you would come home again, and be happier than you ever were before. I remember I tried to hope that he knew. How strange that he guessed aright!"

"I understand him now better than I did when I was here," Paul returned. "I didn't know it then, but I now believe such men as he are spiritually wiser than all the astute materialists the world has produced. What

they know they get by intuition, and that comes from the very fountain of infinite wisdom to the humble perhaps more than to the high and mighty."

"I am very happy to see you again," Ethel declared, a shadow crossing her face; "but, Paul, you find me—you happen to find me in really great trouble."

"You!" he cried. "Why?"

Ethel breathed out a tremulous sigh. "You have heard me speak of my cousin, Jennie Buford. She and I are more intimate than most sisters. We have been together almost daily all our lives. She is very ill. We were down to see her yesterday. She had an operation performed at a hospital a week ago, and her condition is quite critical. We would not have come back up here, but no one is allowed to see her, and I could be of no service. I am afraid she is going to die, and if she *should*—" Ethel's voice clogged, and her eyes filled.

"I'm so sorry," Paul said, "but you mustn't give up hope."

"Life seems so cruel—such a great waste of everything that is really worth while," Ethel said, rebelliously. "Jennie's mother and father are almost crazed with grief. Jennie is engaged to a nice young man down there, and he is prostrated over it. Why, oh why, do such things happen?"

"There is a good reason for everything," Paul replied, a flare of gentle encouragement in his serious eyes. "Often the things that seem the worst really are the best in the end."

"There can be nothing good, or kind, or wise in Jennie's suffering," Ethel declared, her pretty lips hardening, a shudder passing over her. "She is a sweet, good girl, and her parents are devout church members. The young man she is engaged to is the soul of honor, and yet all of us are suffering sheer agony."

"You must try not to look at it quite that way," Paul insisted, gently. "You must hope and pray for her recovery."

Ethel shrugged her shoulders, buried her face in the ferns, and was silent. Presently, looking toward the farm-house, she said: "I see mother waiting for me. Good-by, I'll meet you at luncheon." She was moving away, but paused and turned back. "You may think me lacking in religious feeling," she faltered, her glance averted, "but I am very, very unhappy. I am sure the doctors are not telling us everything. I am afraid I'll never see Jennie alive again."

He heard her sob as she abruptly turned away. He had an impulsive desire to follow and make a further effort to console her, but he felt instinctively that she wanted to be alone. He was sure of this a moment later, for he saw her using her handkerchief freely, and noted that she all but stumbled along the path leading up to the house. Mrs. Mayfield was waiting for her on the veranda, and Paul saw the older lady step down to the ground and hasten to meet her daughter.

"Poor, dear girl!" Paul said to himself, his face raised to the cloud-flecked sky. "Have I passed through my darkness and come out into the light, only to see her entering hers? O merciful God, spare her! spare her!"

CHAPTER V

THAT afternoon Paul went to Grayson, noting few changes in the place. The sun was fiercely beating down on the streets of the Square. Two or three lawyers, a magistrate, the county ordinary, and the clerk of the court sat in chairs on the shaded side of the Court House. Some were whittling sticks, others were playing checkers, all were talking politics. Under the board awnings in front of the stores the merchants sat without their coats, fighting the afternoon heat by fanning themselves and sprinkling water on the narrow brick sidewalks. A group of one-horse drays, on which idle negroes sat dangling their legs and teasing one another, stood in the shade of the hotel. The only things suggesting coolness were the towering mountains, the green brows of which rose into the snowy, breeze-blown clouds overhead.

Paul found Silas Tye at his bench in his shop. He was scarcely changed at all. Indeed, he seemed to be wearing exactly the same clothing, using the same tools, mending the same shoes. On his bald pate glistened beads of sweat which burst now and then and trickled down to his bushy eyebrows. Paul had approached noiselessly, and was standing looking in at him from the doorway, when the shoemaker glanced up and saw him. With an ejaculation of delight he dropped his work and advanced quickly, a grimy hand held out.

"Here you are, here you are!" he cried, drawing the young man into the shop. "Bearded and brown, bigger an' stronger, but the same Paul I used to know. How are you? How are you?"

"I'm all right, thank you," Paul answered, as he took the chair near the bench and sat down. "How is Mrs. Tye?"

"Sound as a dollar, and simply crazy to see you," Silas replied, with a chuckle. "If you hadn't come in we'd 'a' got a hoss an' buggy from Sid Trawley's stable an' 'a' rid out to see you. Jim Hoag this mornin' was tellin' about you gittin' back, an' said he'd already hired you to manage for him. Good-luck, good-luck, my boy; that's a fine job. Cynthy's just stepped over to a neighbor's, an' will be back purty soon. Oh, she was tickled when she heard the news—she was so excited she could hardly eat her dinner. She thought a sight of you. In fact, both of us sort o' laid claim to you."

"Till I disgraced myself and had to run away," Paul sighed. "I'm ashamed of that, Uncle Si. I want to say that to you first of all."

"Don't talk that way." Silas waved his awl deprecatingly. "Thank the Lord for what it's led to. Hoag was tellin' the crowd how you come back to give yourself up. Said he believed it of you, but wouldn't of anybody else. Lord, Lord, that was the best news I ever heard! Young as you are, you'll never imagine how much good

an act o' that sort will do in a community like this. It is a great moral lesson. As I understand it, you fought the thing with all your might and main—tried to forget it, tried to live it down, only in the end to find that nothin' would satisfy you—nothin' but to come back here and do your duty."

"Yes, you are right," Paul assented. "I'll tell you all about it some time. I'm simply too happy now to look back on such disagreeable things. It was awful, Uncle Si."

"I know, and I don't blame you for not talking about it," the old man said. "Sad things are better left behind. But it is all so glorious! Here you come with your young head bowed before the Lord, ready to receive your punishment, only to find yourself free, free as the winds of heaven, the flowers of the fields, the birds in the woods. Oh, Paul, you can't see it, but joy is shining out o' you like a spiritual fire. Your skin is clear; your honest eyes twinkle like stars. It's worth it—your reward is worth all you've been through, an' more. Life is built that way. We have hunger to make us enjoy eatin'; cold, that we may know how nice warmth feels; pain, that we may appreciate health; evil, that we may know good when we see it; misery, that we may have joy, and death, that we may have bliss everlasting. I've no doubt you've suffered, but it has rounded you out and made you strong as nothing else could have done. I reckon you'll look up all your old acquaintances right away."

Paul's glance went to the littered floor. "First of all, Uncle Si, I want to inquire about my mother."

"Oh, I see." The cobbler seemed to sense the situation as a delicate one, and he paused significantly. "Me an' Cynthy talked about that this momin'. In fact, we are both sort o' bothered over it. Paul, I don't think anybody round here knows whar your ma an' Jeff moved to after they got married. But your aunt went with 'em; she was bound to stick to your ma."

"They married"—Paul's words came tardily—"very soon after—after Warren recovered, I suppose?"

"No; she kept him waitin' two years. Thar was an awful mess amongst 'em. Your ma an' your aunt stood for you to some extent, but Jeff was awful bitter. The trouble with Jeff was that he'd never been wounded by anybody in his life before, an' that a strip of a boy should shove 'im an inch o' death's door an' keep 'im in bed so long was a thing that rankled. Folks about here done 'em both the credit to think you acted too hasty, an' some thought Jim Hoag was back of it. The reason your ma kept Jeff waitin' so long was to show the public that she hadn't done nothin' she was ashamed of, an' folks generally sympathized with 'er. Finally she agreed to marry Jeff if he'd withdraw the case ag'in' you. It was like pullin' eye-teeth, but Jeff finally give in an' had a lawyer fix it all up. But he was mad, and is yet, I've no doubt."

"I understand." Paul was looking wistfully out of the window into the street. "And would you advise me, Uncle Si, to—to try to find them?"

"I don't believe I would," Silas opined slowly, his heavy brows meeting above his spectacles; "at least not at present, Paul. I'd simply wait an' hope for matters to drift into a little better shape. Jeff is a bad man, a fellow that holds a grudge, and, late as it is, he'd want a settlement o' some sort. I've talked to him. I've tried to reason with him, but nothin' I'd say would have any weight. I reckon he's been teased about it, an' has put up with a good many insinuations. Let 'em all three alone for the present. You've got a high temper yourself, an' while you may think you could control it, you might not be able to do it if a big hulk of a man like Jeff was to jump on you an' begin to pound you."

"No; I see that you are right," Paul sighed; "but I am sorry, for I'd like my mother to understand how I feel. She may think I still blame her for—for fancying Warren, even when my father was alive, but I don't. Rubbing up against the world, Uncle Si, teaches one a great many things. My mother was only obeying a natural yearning. She was seeking an ideal which my poor father could not fulfil. He was ill, despondent, suspicious, and faultfinding, and she was like a spoiled child. I am sure she never really loved him. I was in the wrong. No one could know that better than I do. When I went away that awful night I actually hated her, but as the years went by, Uncle Si, a new sort of tenderness and love stole over me. When I'd see other men happy with their mothers my heart would sink as I remembered that I had a living one who was dead to me. Her face grew sweeter and more girl-like. I used to recall how she smiled, and how pretty and different from other women she looked wearing the nice things Aunt Amanda used to make for her. I'd have dreams in which I'd hear her singing and laughing and talking, and I'd wake with the weighty feeling that I had lost my chance at a mother. It seemed to me that if I had not been so hasty"—Paul sighed—"she and I would have loved each other, and I could have had the joy of providing her with many comforts."

Silas lowered his head toward his lap. The pegs, hammer and awl, and scraps of leather jostled together in his apron. He was weeping and valiantly trying to hide his tears. He took off his spectacles and laid them on the bench beside him. Only his bald pate was in view. Presently an uncontrollable sob broke from his rugged chest, and he looked at the young man with swimming eyes.

"You've been redeemed," he said. "I see it—I see it! Nobody but a Son of God could look and talk like you do. My reward has come. I don't take it to myself—that would be a sin; but I want you to know that I've prayed for you every day and night since you left—sometimes in much fear an' doubt, but with a better feelin' afterward. You may not believe it, but I am sure there are times when I actually know that things are happenin' for good or ill to folks I love—even away off at a distance."

"That is a scientific fact." Paul was greatly moved by his old friend's tone and attitude. "It is a spiritual fact according to the laws of telepathy or thought-transference. Most scientists now believe in it."

"You say they do?" Silas was wiping his flowing eyes and adjusting his spectacles. "Well, many and many a time I've had proof of it. I could tell wonders that I've experienced, but I won't now—that is, I won't tell you of but one thing, an' that concerned you. Last Christmas Eve me'n Cynthy had cooked a big turkey for the next day, an' made a lot o' other preparations. We had toys an' little tricks to give this child and that one. We had laid in things for pore neighbors to eat and wear, an' both of us was in about as jolly a mood as ever we was in all our lives. We set up rather late that night, an' sung an' read from the Bible, an' prayed as usual, an' then we went to bed. But I couldn't sleep. I got to thinkin' about you an' wonderin' whar you was at an' what sort o' Christmas you was to have. I rolled an' tumbled. Cynthy was asleep—the pore thing was awful tired—an' I got up an' went to the fireplace, where I had buried some coals in the ashes to kindle from in the momin' and bent over, still thinkin' o' you. Then all at once—I don't know how to describe it any other way than to say it

was like a big, black, soggy weight that come down on me. It bore in from all sides, like a cloud that you can feel, an' I could hardly breathe. Then something—it wasn't a voice, it wasn't words spoke out of any human mouth, it was just knowledge—knowledge plainer and deeper than words could have expressed—knowledge from God, from space—from some'r's outside myself—that told me you was in a sad, sad plight. I couldn't say what it was, but it was awful. It seemed to me that you was swayin' to an' fro between good an' evil, between light and darkness—between eternal life an' eternal death. I never felt so awful in all my life, not even when my own boy died. I got down on my knees there in the ashes, and I prayed as I reckon never a man prayed before. I pleaded with the Lord and begged 'im to help you—to drag you back from the open pit or abyss, or whatever it was, that you was about to walk into. For awhile the thing seemed to hang an' waver like, and then, all at once, it was lifted, an' I knowed that you was safe. I *knowed* it—I *knowed* it."

Silas ceased speaking, his mild, melting glance rested on the young man's face.

Paul sat in grave silence for a moment, his features drawn as by painful recollection.

"Your intuition was right," he said. "On that night, Uncle Si, I met and passed through the greatest crisis of my life. I was tempted to take a step that was wrong. I won't speak of it now, but I'll tell you all about it some day. Something stopped me. Invisible hands seemed pushed out from the darkness to hold me back. Your prayers saved me, I am sure of it now."

CHAPTER VI

BEFORE the end of his first week's work Paul had reason to believe that Hoag was highly pleased with his executive ability. Paul had a good saddle-horse at his disposal, and he made daily visits to the various properties of his employer. He hired hands at his own discretion, and had a new plan of placing them on their honor as to the work that was to be done in his absence. Hoag was surprised. He had found it difficult to secure sufficient men, while under Paul's management the places were always filled. There was a clockwork regularity in it all. From his window every morning at sunrise Hoag could see men diligently at work in his fields, and at the tannery and mill. There was a fresh, buoyant activity in it all. The young man had replaced old, worn-out tools and implements with new ones, in which the workers took pride.

Paul's room looked as much like an office as a bedchamber. On his table Hoag discovered a most orderly set of accounts; on the walls hung charts, time-cards, and maps of the woodlands, with careful estimates of the cost of felling trees and the best disposition of the bark and timber. There was little doubt that Paul was infusing the spirit of the West into the slower habits of the South, and Hoag chuckled inwardly, finding it difficult to keep from openly expressing his enthusiasm. Paul convinced him, in a moment's talk, that the steam-engine and machinery at the cotton-gin were worn out, and that the whole should be renewed. Hoag saw, too, that the young man was right when he called attention to the careless manner in which the cotton lands had been fertilized. The negroes had used no judgment in placing the guano, having often put it on soil that did not need it—soil which could better be enriched by the till now unused loam of the marshes and the decayed matter of the forests.

"Go ahead with yore rat-killin'," Hoag was fond of saying. "You've got the right idea. I'm not such a old dog that I can't learn new tricks. Them fellows out West know a good many twists and turns that we ain't onto, an' I'm willin' to back you up with the cash on anything you propose."

His niece was with him on the lawn one morning as he was opening his mail.

"Just look at that letter," he said, with a low, pleased laugh, as he offered it for inspection. "I'm in a cool thousand dollars on this one deal. My scrub of a white-trash manager told me last week that the man in Atlanta who has been handlin' my leather was buncoin' me good an' strong. I didn't think he knowed what he was talkin' about then, but it seems he'd been readin' market reports an' freight rates, an' now I know he was right. He asked me to write to Nashville for prices. I did, an' here is an offer that is away ahead of any my Atlanta agent ever got, an' I save his commission to boot. Who'd 'a' thought, Eth', that such a puny no-account skunk as Ralph Rundel could be the daddy o' sech an up-to-date chap as Paul?"

Ethel's sweet face took on a serious cast. "I don't think we ought to judge our mountain people by their present unfortunate condition," she said. "I was reading in history the other day that many of them are really the descendants of good English, Scotch, and Irish families. I have an idea, from his name alone, that Paul came from some family of worth."

"You may be right," Hoag admitted. "I know my daddy used to tell us boys that the Hoag stock away back in early times was big fighters, not afraid o' man, Indian, or beast. One of 'em was a pirate of the high seas, who had his own way purty much, and died with his boots on. Pa was proud o' that. He used to set an' tell about it. He learnt us boys to fight when we wasn't more'n knee high. The hardest lickin' Pa ever give me was for comin' home from school cryin' once because another chap had got the best of me. I never shall forget it. Pa was as mad as a wildcat at me, an' t'other fellow too. An' the next mornin', as I started to school, he tuck me out in the yard an' picked up a sharp rock, he did, an' showed me how to cup my hand over it and sorter hide it like. He told me to keep it in my pocket, an' if the fellow said another word to me to use it on 'im like a pair o' brass knucks."

"Oh," Ethel cried, "that wasn't right! It was a shame!"

"That's what the *fellow* thought." Hoag burst out laughing. "He was standin' in a gang braggin' about our fight when I got to school an' I went up to 'im, I did, an' spit on him. He drawed back to hit me, but I let 'im have a swipe with my rock that laid his jaw open to the bone. He bled like a stuck pig, an' had to git a doctor

to sew the crack up. After that you bet he let me alone, an' folks in general knowed I wouldn't do to fool with, either. The teacher o' that school—it was jest a log shack in the country—used to use the hickory on the boys, an' I've seen 'im even tap the bare legs o' the gals; but he never dared touch me. He knowed better. He drewed me up before 'im one day for stickin' a pin in a little runt of a boy, and axed me what I done it for. I looked 'im straight in the eyes, an' told 'im I did it because it would make the boy grow. I axed 'im what he expected to do about it. He had a switch in his hand, but he turned red an' hummed an' hawed while the whole school was laughin', an' then he backed down—crawfished on the spot—said he'd see me about it after school; but I didn't stay, an' that was the end of it. The man on the farm whar he boarded told Pa that the fellow was afraid to go out at night, thinkin' I'd throw rocks at 'im. Say, Eth', not changin' the subject, how are you an' Ed Peterson gittin' on?"

"Oh, about the same," Ethel answered, with a slight shrug. "I got a letter from him yesterday. He had been to the hospital to inquire about Jennie, and he thought I'd like to hear she wasn't any worse."

"Well, it ain't no business o' mine," Hoag smiled knowingly, "but I hope you won't keep the fellow in torment any longer than you can help. He sorter confides in me, you know, an' every time I'm in Atlanta he throws out hints like he is in the dark an' can hardly see his way clear. He is a man with a long business head on 'im, an' he certainly knows what he wants in the woman line. He's powerfully well thought of in bankin' circles, an', as you know, his folks are among the best in the South."

Ethel, frowning slightly, was avoiding her uncle's curious gaze. "I shall not marry any man," she said, quite firmly, "until I know that I really love him."

"Love a dog's hind foot!" Hoag sneered. "Looky' here, Eth', take it straight from me. That is a delusion an' a snare. Many an' many a good-hearted gal has spoiled her whole life over just that highfalutin notion. They've tied the'rselves to incompetent nincompoops with low brows an' hair plastered down over their eyes—chaps who couldn't make a decent livin'—and let men pass by that was becomin' financial powers in the land. Ed Peterson is of the right stripe. He ain't no fool. He knows you've got property in your own name an' that I've set somethin' aside for you, an' he's jest got sense enough to know that it is as easy to love a woman with money as without."

"How does he know?" Ethel's lips were drawn tight; there was a steady light in her eyes as she stood looking toward the mountain. "How does he know that you intend, or even ever thought of—"

"Oh, you see, he has all my papers down thar," Hoag explained. "He keeps 'em for me in the bank vault. He knows all about my business, and naturally he'd be on to a thing like that. I hain't never intimated that I'd coerce you in any way, but he knows I look favorably on the outcome. In fact, I've told 'im a time or two that, as far as I was concerned, he had a clean right-o'-way. He's sure I am on his side, but he don't seem at all satisfied about you. He's a jealous cuss, an' as much as I like him, I have to laugh at 'im sometimes."

"Jealous!" Ethel exclaimed, with a lofty frown of vague displeasure.

"Yes; he gits that way once in a while on mighty slight provocation," Hoag rambled on. "I was tellin' 'im t'other day, when I was down thar, about Paul Rundel comin' back, an' what a solid chap he'd turned out to be with all his bookish ideas an' odd religious notions—givin' hisse'f up to the law, an' the like. Ed didn't seem much interested till I told 'im that the women round about generally admired Paul, an' loved to hear 'im talk—like your mother does, for instance—an' that most of 'em say he has fine eyes an' is good-lookin'. Right then Ed up an' wanted to know whar Paul was livin'—Hoag tittered—"whar he slept an' ate. An' when I told 'im he stayed here at the house with us, he had the oddest look about the eyes you ever saw. I teased 'im a little—I couldn't help it. I was in a good-humor, for he had just told me about a Northern feller that wanted to buy some o' my wild mountain-land at a good figure. But I let up on 'im after awhile, for he really was down in the mouth. 'Do you know,' said he, 'that I'd tackle any man on earth in a race for a woman quicker than I would a religious crank or a spindle-legged preacher of any denomination whatever.'"

"I don't think you ought to talk me over that way," Ethel returned, coldly. "You'll make me dislike him. He and I are good friends now, but no girl likes to have men speak of her as if she were a piece of property on the market."

"Oh, Ed Peterson is all right," Hoag declared, his eyes on Jack, who was climbing a tree near the fence. "That child will fall and hurt hisse'f one o'these days. Oh, Jack! Come down from there—that's a good boy; come down, daddy wants you." Looking at Ethel suddenly, he saw that she was smiling.

"What in thunder is funny about *that*?" he inquired.

Ethel laughed softly. "I was just thinking of your sneer at the idea of any one's loving another. You perhaps never loved any one else in your life, but your whole soul is wrapped up in Jack."

"I reckon you are right," Hoag confessed, half sheepishly, as he started down the steps toward his son. "Sometimes I wonder what's got into me. He has sech a strange, kittenish way o' gittin' round a fellow. I believe, if I was to come home some night an' find him sick or hurt I'd go stark crazy. He ain't like no other child I ever dealt with."

"He'll be more and more of a mystery to you the older he gets," Ethel answered. "He has a strong imagination and great talent for drawing. I'm teaching him. He loves to have me read to him, and he makes up stories out of his own head that really are wonderful."

"I always thought he'd make a smart man, a teacher, or a lawyer, or something like that," Hoag returned, proudly, and he hurried away, calling loudly to his son to get down.

CHAPTER VII

IT is held by many philosophers that in order to appreciate happiness one must first experience its direct antithesis, and it may have been Paul Rundel's early misfortunes that gave to his present existence so much untrammelled delight. For one thing, he was again—and with that new soul of his—amid the rural scenes and folk he loved so passionately.

His heart was full of actual joy as he rode down the mountain-side one Saturday afternoon, for the next day would be a day of rest, and he had worked hard all the week. There was a particular book he intended to read, certain fancies of his own which he wanted to note down in manuscript, and hoped to talk over with Ethel.

He was a nature-worshiper, and to-day Nature had fairly wrapped her robe of enchantment about him. The sky had never seemed so blue; space had never held so many hints of the Infinite. Scarcely a flower on the roadside escaped his eye. The gray and brown soil itself had color that appealed to his senses, and the valley stretching away under the bluish veil of distance seemed some vague dream-spot ever receding from his grasp. The day was a perfect one. Since early morning a gentle breeze had been steadily blowing and the air was crisp and bracing.

It was growing dusk when he reached home. He was just entering the front gate when he saw Ethel walking back and forth on the lawn. Something in her hanging head and agitated step told him that her mind was not at ease. At first he thought she might wish to avoid him, but, hearing the clicking of the gate-latch, she turned and advanced across the grass to him. Then he saw that she held a folded letter in her hand and there was a perturbed look on her face.

"Not bad news, I hope?" he ventured.

"I don't know exactly." Her voice quivered, and she looked at him with a shadow of dumb worry in her eyes. "This letter is from my aunt, Jennie's mother. She proposes that mother and I come down at once. She—she—" Ethel's voice shook with rising emotion. "She doesn't say there is really any *new* danger. In fact, at the last report the doctors said Jennie was doing as well as could be expected; but somehow—you see, the fact that my aunt wants us to come looks as if—"

"Oh, I hope you won't lose hope," Paul tried to say, consolingly. "At such a distance, and not being with your cousin, it is natural for you to exaggerate the—"

"No; listen," Ethel now fairly sobbed. "I've reflected a good deal over our recent talk about thought-transference, and I am sure there is much in it. Jennie and I used to think of the same things at the same time, and I am sure—I really *feel* that something is going wrong—that she is worse. This letter was written last night and mailed this morning. I was not greatly worried till about three o'clock to-day, but since then I have been more depressed than I ever was in my life. Somehow I can't possibly conquer it. Paul, I'm afraid Jennie is going to die—she may be—be dying now, actually dying, and if she should, if she *should*—" Ethel dropped her eyes, her breast rose tumultuously, and she looked away from him.

There was nothing Paul could do or say. He simply stood still and mute, a storm of pain and sympathy raging within him.

Ethel seemed to understand and appreciate his silence, for she turned to him and said, more calmly:

"Of course, it may be only my imagination—my overwrought fears. I'm going to try to feel more hopeful. We leave on the eight o'clock train. Mother's packing our things now. It is good of you to be so sympathetic; I knew you would be."

She turned away. With a halting step she went up the veranda steps and ascended the stairs to her mother's room. Paul was seated on the lawn in the dusk smoking a cigar, when Mrs. Tilton came out to him.

"I saw you talkin' to Ethel just now," she began. "I reckon she spoke to you about her cousin?"

He nodded and regarded the old wrinkled face steadily as Mrs. Tilton continued, in a tone of resignation:

"Harriet ain't told Ethel the worst of it. A telegram come about an hour by sun, but she didn't let Ethel see it. It said come on the fust train—the doctors has plumb give up. Harriet is afraid Ethel couldn't stand the trip on top of news like that, an' she won't let her know. It's goin' to be awful on the pore child. I'm actually afraid she won't be able to bear it. In all my born days I've never seen such love as them two girls had for each other."

Paul's heart sank in dismay. "Do you think, Mrs. Tilton," he said, "that I could be of any service? To-morrow is Sunday, and I am not busy, you know. Could I help by going down with them?"

"No, I don't believe I would," the old woman answered. "Jim is goin' along. He don't care nothin' about Jennie, but he'll take that excuse to get down there to see his friends. Harriet will bring Ethel back here right after the buryin'. She as good as told me so; she thinks a quiet place like this will be better than down thar among so many sad reminders. I want to tell you now, Paul, an' I don't intend to flatter you neither; but when Jim was talkin' so big on the porch t'other night, an' pokin' fun at the idea of a future life, an' you sat down on 'im so flat, an' said all them purty things so full o' hope to old folks like me, I jest set thar in the dark an' shed tears o' joy. I could 'a' tuck you in my arms an' 'a' hugged you. He is a-hirin' you, an' would naturally like for you to agree with him; but you fired your convictions at him the same as you would 'a' done at anybody else. I'm sick an' tired o' the way he's always talked—classin' humanity with cattle an' hogs like he does. I believe thar's a life after this un; if I didn't I'd go crazy. If I didn't know, actually *know*, that my poor daughter, who suffered all them years as that man's wife, was happy now, I'd be a fiend incarnate, an' go rantin' over the world like a she-devil let loose. I say I don't want to flatter you, but you've been like a ray o' sunshine in this house ever since you got here. If I had been an' infidel all my life the sight o' your face and the sound o' your voice would turn me flat over."

Mrs. Tilton was crying. She wiped her eyes on her apron and moved away in the twilight. Paul looked, up at the window of Ethel's room, through which a light was shining. Then he bowed his head, locked his hands in front of him. He remained so for several minutes, then he said, fervently:

CHAPTER VIII

TWO days after this Hoag came back from Atlanta, reaching home just at noon.

"I didn't go to the funeral myself," he carelessly remarked at the dinner-table. "I had some fellers to see on business, an' I ain't much of a hand at such parades of flowers an' black stuff, nohow. Harriet is standin' it all right, but Eth' is in a purty bad fix. They've had a doctor with 'er ever since Jennie died. Eth' had never seen anybody die before, an' it seems that Jennie knowed enough to recognize 'er, an' begged 'er to stick by 'er side to the very end. Eth' has been nearly crazy ever since. She was too upset to go to the buryin', although plenty o' carriages was on hand, an' she could have rid in comfort. They offered me a seat at their expense, but, as I say, I had other fish to fry."

"I knew it would go hard with Ethel," Mrs. Tilton sighed. "It is a pity they let 'er see it. Such things are hard enough even on old, experienced folks. When are they comin' up, or did they say?"

"To-morrow. That ain't no place for 'em down thar in all that whiz, hustle, an' chatter, with a nigger fetchin' in a card or a bunch o' flowers every minute. The fellers that run the flower-stores certainly are in clover."

Mrs. Mayfield and Ethel came in on the nighttrain which reached Grayson at ten o'clock, and, having retired, Paul saw neither of them till the next day. He had risen for his early morning walk, and gone down to the front lawn, where he was surprised to see Mrs. Mayfield nervously walking back and forth, her troubled glance on the ground. He had never seen her look so grave, so despondent. Her hair was drawn more tightly across her brow, and there was no trace of color in her pinched and troubled face. Seeing him, she bowed and made a pathetic little gesture of welcome. He hesitated for a moment as to whether he might intrude upon her, but some appealing quality of friendliness in her sad glance reassured him, and, hat in hand, he crossed the grass to her.

"I was very sorry to hear your bad news," he said. "I was sorry, too, that there seemed nothing I could do to help."

"Thank you; you are very kind," the lady said, her thin lips quivering sensitively. "I have thought of you, Paul, several times since the blow came. After our recent talks I am sure you could have given us more consolation than almost any one else. At a time like this there is absolutely nothing to lean on except the goodness and wisdom of God."

"Yes, of course," he responded, simply.

"I am not worrying about Jennie now," Mrs. Mayfield went on, gravely, sweeping his face with almost yearning eyes. "At my age one becomes accustomed to face death calmly, but, Paul, I am actually alarmed about the effect on Ethel."

"I know, and I am sorry," Paul said; "very, very sorry."

"She has hardly touched any sort of food since Jennie died," Mrs. Mayfield asserted, in a tremulous tone. "She is wasting away. She can't sleep even under opiates. She cries constantly, and declares she can't get her mind from it for a moment. We ought not to have allowed her to see the end, but we could not avoid it. Jennie was conscious almost to the last minute, though she did not realize she was dying. They thought it best not to tell her, and she begged Ethel and her parents and me and the young man she was to marry—begged us not to leave her. She seemed quite afraid. Then suddenly she had a terrible convulsion. She was clinging to my daughter's hand when she died. Ethel fainted, and had to be taken home in a carriage. She—she—Paul, she has lost all faith in the goodness of God, in an after-life, in everything. She is simply desperate and defiant. She can't be made to see any sort of justice in it. She is bitter, very bitter, and hard and resentful. Two kind-hearted ministers down there tried to talk to her, but she almost laughed in their faces. Some sweet old ladies—intimate friends of ours—tried to pacify her, too, but could do nothing. I wish you had been there. You have comforted me more than any one else ever did. Your faith seems such a living, active thing, and even while down there under all that sadness I found myself somehow feeling that your thoughts—your prayers were with us."

"Yes, yes," he nodded, his blood mounting to his face, "that was all I could do. Prayer is a wonderful force, but unfortunately it seems without great or immediate effect unless it arises out of faith itself, and perfect faith is very rare."

"I understand," the lady sighed. "I hear Ethel coming down. I wish you would talk to her. I am sure you can do her good, and something must be done. No medicine can help her; her trouble is of the mind. It is natural for persons to lose faith under a shock like this, and in time get over it; but—but, Paul, I've known people to die of grief, and that is really what I am afraid of."

Ethel, as she descended the veranda steps, saw them. She wavered for a moment, as if undecided which way to go, and then, as if reluctantly, she came on to them. Paul noted the drawn whiteness of her face and the dark rings about her despairing eyes. Her whole being seemed to vibrate from a tense state of nervousness. Her lips were fixed in a piteous grimace as she gave Paul her hand.

"Mother's told you about it, I am sure," were her first words.

"Yes," he nodded, sympathetically, "it is very sad."

She took a deep, tremulous breath, and her lips were drawn tight as from inner pain. "Paul," she said, bitterly, "I didn't know till now that even an *omnipotent* God could invent a thing as horrible as all that was. If

—if it would amount to anything I would curse him—actually curse him.”

“I am going to leave you with Paul,” Mrs. Mayfield said, suddenly catching her breath as if in pain. “I have something to do up-stairs. Listen to him, my child. He has comforted me, and he can comfort you. You must not allow yourself to become hard like this. Oh, you mustn't—you mustn't, darling! You'll break my heart.”

“Oh, I don't know what to do—I don't know what to do!” Ethel shook with dry sobs, and there was a fixed stare in her beautiful eyes. “I can't think of Jennie being gone—being put away like that, when she had so much to live for, and when the happiness of so many depended on her recovery.”

Without a word, and with an appealing and significant backward glance at Paul, Mrs. Mayfield moved away.

“Would you like to walk down to the spring?” Paul proposed, gently. “The air is so fresh and invigorating, and breakfast won't be ready for some time yet.”

She listlessly complied, walking along at his side like a drooping human flower in movement. He heard her sighing constantly. He did not speak again till they were seated at the spring, then he said:

“Your mother overrates my power of giving consolation; there is nothing helpful that any mortal can do at such a time. I cannot give you my faith. It came to me only after years and years of suffering, sordid misery, and dense spiritual blindness. But I want to try, if you don't mind. I'd give my life to—to save you pain, to turn you from your present despair. Will you listen to me if I'll tell you some of the things that I passed through? You can't see it as I do, Ethel, but I am absolutely positive that your cousin is now a thousand times happier than she was—happier than you or I, or any one on earth.”

“Oh, I know what you will say,” Ethel wailed, softly. “I believed such things once, as you know. But I haven't been frank with you, Paul. Seeing your beautiful faith which brought you back here in such a wonderful way, I could not bear to let you know the truth; but I have been in doubt for a long time, and now I have nothing to hold to—absolutely nothing. You might argue a thousand years and you could not—kind and gentle though you are—convince me that a just and merciful God would allow my poor cousin to suffer as she suffered, and cause me to feel as I feel only through my love for her. If there *is* a good God, He is powerless to avert such as that, and a creator who is not omnipotent is no God at all. We are a lot of helpless material creatures staggering through darkness, dragging bleeding hearts after us, and yearning for what can never be ours. That's the awful, repulsive truth, Paul. It's unpleasant, but it's the truth.”

“I will tell you what I passed through after I left here, if you will let me,” Paul began, a look of pained sensitiveness clutching his mobile features. “It is hard to have you—of all persons—know to what depths of degradation I sank; but I feel—something seems to tell me—that my story may help you. Will you hear me?”

“Perhaps you ought not to tell me anything that is unpleasant,” Ethel said, listlessly.

Paul lowered his head and looked at the ground. “I am not sure, Ethel, that it is not my duty to go from man to man, house to house, and tell it word for word, thought for thought, deed for deed. The world, as never before in its history, is groping for spiritual light, and my life—my soul-experiences—would shed it upon any thinking person. No one could pass through what I have passed through and doubt the existence of God and His inexpressible goodness. It is painful to tell you, for, above all, I want your good opinion, and yet I must. Will you listen, Ethel?”

“Yes, yes,” she answered; “but, Paul, if I am absent-minded don't blame me. I've not thought of a single thing since Jennie died but the way she looked then, and in her coffin afterward. I don't think I can ever get those things out of my mind. They are simply driving me insane.”

“Nothing but an absolutely different point of view will help you,” Paul said, gravely, his glance now resting tenderly on her grief-stricken face. “When my father died I, too, was desperate. When I ran away from here that terrible night I was as near akin to a wild beast as ever mortal man was. I was at heart a murderer gloating like a bloodthirsty savage over another's death. I won't go into detail over the earliest part of what I went through. I traveled with a band of thieving gipsies for a while. Later I joined a circus, and there gravitated to the same sort of associates. Some of the company were not immoral; but I was a murderer hiding my guilt, and among only the lowest of the low did I feel at home. All others I hated.”

“Oh, do you think you ought to—ought to—” Ethel faltered. “How can it do any good to—” Her voice failed her, and she stared at him dumbly.

“I think I ought to tell you, because it is the hardest thing in the world for me to do,” he said, his tone low and labored. “I want you to know me as I was at my worst. I can't feel that I have the right to sit by you and be treated as a friend while you are unaware of what I have been. For the first two years I was as low as the lowest. I hated life, man, everything, and yet there was always something holding me back from absolute crime. Down deep within me there was always a voice, always a picture, always a sunlit scene—”

He choked up, pretended to cough, and looked away to avoid her inquiring eyes.

“I don't quite understand,” she prompted him, with her first show of interest.

He turned and looked steadily into her great, shadowy eyes.

“The scene was the roadside down there, Ethel. The picture was that of a refined, gentle little girl, her eyes full of sympathy. The voice was hers, telling me that she was going to pray for—for me.”

“Oh, oh, why do you say that now?” Ethel cried. “Now, now, after I have told you that I no longer—”

“Because the little girl ought to know,” he answered. “She should be told of the clinging effect her promise—her prayers—had on a storm-tossed human soul. The scene, the voice, the picture, never left the wanderer. They grew like pure flowers in the mire of his deepest sin. In many cases it is the memory of prayers at a mother's knee in childhood that haunts the worldly minded in after-life; but my childhood had no prayers, and that little girl became my guardian angel.”

“Oh, Paul, Paul, don't, don't!” Ethel cried, and for a moment she seemed to have forgotten her grief.

“But I must go on,” Paul answered. “I finally reached Portland and settled down. I was tired of roaming, and under a small printer I began to learn type-setting. I made rapid progress. I had access to a good public library, and I passed most of my evenings in study. Later I began reporting on a big newspaper, and from that I gradually drifted into the writing of editorials. I don't take any credit for the success I met, for the articles I

wrote were readable only because they were without heart or soul, and appealed only to individuals like myself. I ridiculed everything, tore down everything. A thing only had to be praised by others for me to hurl my vitriol upon it. The arrant hypocrisy of the church-members, the mental weakness of the preachers, and the gullibility of the public were my choice themes. Birds of my own particular feather flocked about me and congratulated me. I became vain of my powers. I was sure that I was a great intellectual force in the world. My salary was raised, and I found myself in comfortable circumstances. I belonged to a small society of advanced thinkers, as we styled ourselves. We held meetings once a week and prepared and read essays. The great materialistic scientists and writers were our guides and gods. We pitied all the rest of the world for its inability to reach our height. That went on for several years, then an odd thing happened."

"What was that?" Ethel was now almost eagerly leaning forward, her pale lips parted.

The color in Paul's cheeks had deepened. "I must tell that, too," he said. "And I shall not shirk the humiliation of it. There was a young poet in Boston whose parents lived in Portland. His books had been widely circulated, and when he came out on a visit the papers had a great deal to say about him. I don't think I ever sank lower than I did then." Paul's voice faltered. "I was jealous. I read his books out of curiosity, and found them wholly spiritual, full of dreams, ideality, and mysticism. Then I sat up all of one night and wrote the most caustic and virulent attack on his work that I had ever written. It was published at once, and created a local sensation. My friends gave me a dinner in honor of it, and we drank a good deal of beer and filled the air with smoke. Selections from the poet's books were read and laughed at. That seemed all right; but an unexpected thing happened. The next day the young man called at the office and sent in his card, asking particularly for me. It made me furious; my associates on the paper thought he had come to demand personal satisfaction, and so did I. I kept him waiting in the reception-room for some time, and then I went in to him, fully expecting trouble. So you can imagine my surprise to have him rise and extend his hand in a timid and yet cordial manner. I had never seen him before, and I was struck by the wonderful, almost suffering delicacy of his face and a certain expression in his big, dreamy eyes that I had never seen before. He seemed greatly embarrassed, so much so that at first he seemed unable to talk. Presently he managed to tell me, in the frankest, most gentle manner, that he had come to see me because, after reading my article, he was afraid he or his work had offended me personally in some way. I was completely taken aback. I simply couldn't make him out. I was tempted to speak roughly, but couldn't. We sat down, and he started to explain more fully why he had come. He said it was his aim in life to live in harmony with God's law, and that, as he saw it, the feeling between him and me was spiritual discord which ought not to exist. He said he was sure, when I understood him fully, that I could have no personal animus against him for conscientiously writing the poems I had attacked. He said it was the highest law of life for all men to love one another, and until they did there would be human discord. I can't tell you half he said. I know, somehow, that for the first time in my experience I found myself facing a human being who was more spirit than matter, and who possessed a power against which I had no weapon. He seemed to feel my embarrassment, and rose to go. At the door he gave me his hand again and pressed mine warmly. 'I am sure,' he said, 'that nothing but good can result from this visit. Something within me always tells me when I ought to do a thing like this. It is always hard to do; but if I refuse to obey I invariably suffer for it.'"

"How very strange!" Ethel exclaimed. "And what came of it?"

"Much, much," Paul answered. "When he had gone I remained for some time in the room with the door closed. I was hot from head to foot with shame. I felt worse than if I had been thrashed in public. I did not know what to do, and I was sure something had to be done. I returned to the office, and the reporters and printers gathered about me, full of jokes and eager for information. I could say nothing. A mechanical jest rose to my lips, but I didn't utter it. I could no longer make sport of him behind his back. I put on my hat and went for a walk. I felt sure that I owed him a public apology, and I knew that I would not be able to make it, and that fairly confounded me. I admired him more than any man I had ever met. During that walk a maddening mental picture rose before me." Here the speaker's voice quivered. "I fancied, Ethel—I fancied that I saw you as I last saw you. Some one was presenting that young man to you. I saw you both walking off together across the meadows in the sunshine among the flowers. He was gathering them for you. You were receiving them, and it seemed to me that you and he were mated *as man and woman never had been mated before.*"

"Oh, Paul, don't!" Ethel protested. "You must not think of me that way; but go on—go on!"

"Day after day, week after week," Paul continued, "I fought the inclination to write that apology. I'd start it, only to throw it aside as something above and beyond my nature. I began to loath myself. I had sufficient cause. I was a murderer living under a false name, continually lying about my past, haunted by remorse, and gradually losing my reason. Then came the crisis. I call it my 'black day.' You will despise me when I confess it, but I decided to—kill myself."

"Oh, Paul, Paul!" Ethel covered her face with her hands. "How *could* you—how *could* you?"

"I was a blind man, goaded to despair. I was swimming with my last feeble stroke in a torrent of sin. It was Christmas Eve. The joy of the rest of the world only added to my loneliness. All my acquaintances had gone to relatives and friends, and I was alone in my desolate room. I had never faced myself so plainly as I did that night. I did not believe there was any future life, and I told myself that I was tired of the struggle, and wanted to go to sleep never to wake again. I thought that would solve it, you see, I wrote a note to old Silas Tye, feeling somehow that I wanted him to know what had happened to me. I got ready. Forgive me, but I want you to hear it all. The door and windows were tightly closed, and I turned on the gas and lay down on the bed. I folded my hands on my breast. I was sorry for myself. Then, just as I was beginning to notice the odor of the gas, I seemed to see old Uncle Si on his knees praying for me, and I asked myself what was he praying for, to whom or what was he praying? My next thought was of you and your sweet, girlish faith, and then I recalled the poet and his beautiful ideas of life. All at once, as if in a flash of light, came the thought that you three might be right and I wrong; that while I could kill my body I might never be able to kill my soul. 'God help me!' I cried, and why I did not know, for I had never prayed before. I sprang up and turned out the gas and opened the windows and breathed the fresh air deep into my lungs. Just then the church-bells of the city rang out in the announcement of the day on which Christ was born. I was tingling all over with a strange, new

hope. What if I should, after all, actually be immortal?

"I sat down before the fire and asked myself, for the first time in my life, 'Am I flesh, blood, and bones, or am I wholly spirit?' Was it a physical possibility for my brain-cells—tiny fragments of matter—to evoke the spiritual tempest through which I was passing? Was there a God and was He good? If not, why was the universe?

"I had brought home a new book—the *Life of Tolstoi*—to review, and I began to read it with the first touch of sympathy I had ever given such a work. It clutched me and held me like a vise. At one time Tolstoi—like myself—had been tempted to kill himself because he had no faith, and life was nothing without it. Like myself, he had been influenced by materialistic thinkers and worldly-minded associates. He had wealth, a noble's title, and great fame, and yet he had thrown them all over that he might become as a little child. Among the great men of the earth—his mental peers—he could not find the peace of soul that he found reflected in the faces of the poorest peasants on his estate. He wanted to be like them, because he felt they were more like God than he. For him the riddle was solved. It struck me that his life was a wonderful revelation of spiritual truth, if it was anything aside from senility. To satisfy myself on this point I spent the next day reading his books, becoming more and more convinced of his rational sincerity and the unity of his life from beginning to end. Tolstoi's admiration for Rousseau led me to Rousseau's life and *Confessions*. From him I went to Plato, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius, and all the great poets. I neglected my duties on the paper, and fairly buried myself in books such as I'd never read before. My desire to satisfy myself that my soul was immortal became a veritable passion. I read everything that could possibly throw a light on the subject. The first thing that I became convinced of was my stupendous ignorance. For instance, I had never dreamt that one could have any faith which was not founded on the religious creeds of which I had heard all my life; but I soon saw that it was possible to acquire a belief like that of Emerson, Whitman, Wordsworth, and Goethe, which soared above all so-called revelation and reached out into the transcendental. I read the works of many philosophers, spurning almost angrily those who leaned to the material side of life and reverently devouring those who, like Kant and Hegel, were idealistic. Among the modern ones William James seemed inspired. Then Bergson held me with his idea that the simple intuition of the trusting masses was a better guide to hidden truth than the intellectuality of all the scholars."

"I didn't know you had read so much," Ethel said, when Paul paused and sat tenderly regarding her grief-stricken face.

"I was forced to," he smiled. "I was in a corner fighting for life against awful odds. I was sick and disgusted with existence. In my new atmosphere I began to breathe for the first time. I was sensing the eternal meaning of things. I began to see why I had been made to suffer, and I was glad. The habits of my associates, their cramped and aimless lives, now seemed horribly sordid. It sounded strange to hear them speak so seriously and gravely of trivial affairs when a vast new world was fairly throbbing around me. I ventured to speak with a tentative sort of respect of some of the books I had read, and they laughed at me. I was forced into cowardly craftiness. I hid my wonderful secret and continued to go among them. But that couldn't go on. One cannot serve both the spirit and the flesh and be true to either, so I gave up my associates. I apologized to the poet, wrote a strong review of a new book of his, and we became good friends."

"Then, then"—Ethel laid an eager hand on his arm—"then you decided to—to come home?"

Paul smiled reminiscently, his glance on the gray wisps of clouds slowly lifting themselves from the mountain-side up into the full blaze of the sun.

"I simply had to do it," he said. "It was as inevitable as life itself. I knew it was right, and that settled it."

"So you came!" Ethel cried. "You came back."

"Yes, and when I reached here that night and learned the truth I saw God's hand in it all. Now, you see why I have told you this. Can you believe there is any other design than good—infinite good—behind sorrow, trouble, and agony? Your grief is great—it seems unbearable now; but behind it, above it, beyond it is a purpose so divinely wise that no mortal sense can grasp it."

Just then Cato appeared at the kitchen door ringing the breakfast-bell. Ethel rose apathetically, and they slowly walked toward the house together. They saw her mother among the flowers waiting for them. Paul heard his companion sigh and, looking at her, he saw that she had lapsed into despair again.

"I can't bear it," he heard her say. "I can't—I can't. It's awful, awful!"

CHAPTER IX

HOAG rode into the village the next morning, and as his horse bore him along through the balmy air he ruminated over the object he had in view. He had determined to see Sid Trawley and have a straight talk with him about certain private matters. He no longer doubted that the liveryman was persistently avoiding him. Sid had not answered to his name at the last roll-call of the "klan," and vague rumors were afloat. One of the younger members had jocularly remarked that Sid had simply "got cold feet, an' was tryin' to shirk the entire thing." At any rate, Hoag was sure that Trawley was not deporting himself as an aide-de-camp should, and Hoag was determined to have a distinct understanding about it. It was not Hoag's way to beat about the bush, and Trawley knew too much regarding matters more or less confidential to be allowed to act as he was acting without good and sufficient reasons. As his horse cantered along the street near the livery-stable, Hoag was quite sure that he saw Trawley in the doorway and that he had purposely withdrawn from view.

"Huh, that's cheeky!" Hoag muttered, as he reined in at the stable, dismounted, and threw his bridle-rein to a negro attendant.

"Which way did Sid go?" he asked the man, suddenly.

The negro's eyelashes flickered hesitatingly, and he avoided the white man's stare.

"I dunno, boss, I hain't seed 'im," the man said. "He was heer dis mawnin', but I don't know whar he is now."

"You are a liar, you black imp!" Hoag growled. "I saw 'im right here a minute ago."

The negro made no response; he shrugged his shoulders doggedly, and his bead-like eyes were full of cautious concern as he led the horse to a stall.

Hoag stared after him, a sullen, thwarted expression on his face. "Don't take the saddle off," he yelled. "I'm goin' back right away." And with that he suddenly turned into the little office on the right, finding Trawley at his desk, a queer look, half of fear, half of sheepishness, in his shifting eyes. Hoag was now positive that the man was trying to avoid him, and a fierce demand for explanation was on his tongue, but he managed to restrain himself. Indeed, he felt that this was a case that required diplomatic handling, for Trawley had a temper, and at present had the look of a man driven into a corner.

"Hello, Sid," Hoag said. "How goes it?"

"Oh, so so," Trawley answered, awkwardly. "How's things out your way?"

"Oh, about as common." Hoag was wondering over Trawley's sallow complexion, once so ruddy, and the nervousness of a frame which surely had lost weight and poise. The two did not shake hands. Hoag idly tapped the green cloth of the desk, beating little ridges of dust into view, and fixed his purposeful eyes on the dingy, small-paned window which was hung over with cobwebs.

"You hain't answered at roll-call lately," he suddenly plunged.

"I couldn't find the time." Trawley was opening a canvas-backed ledger with thin, quivering fingers. "I've been powerful busy, Cap. Lots an' lots o' rigs an' hosses goin' out an' comin' in—can't trust my shebang with these coons. They don't feed an' water my stock—or rub 'em down when they come in tired. They git things all balled up—send out hosses on long trips that hain't had no rest; one o' my best mules dropped dead t'other day an'—"

"I understand all that." Hoag's eyes bore down on him impatiently. "But you didn't *use* to be so all-fired anxious about this dang stable. It's a new twist altogether. Say, has anything gone crooked with you?"

"What makes you ax that?" Trawley's words crept slowly from his stiff lips, and his glance rose, only to fall precipitately.

"I don't know," Hoag replied. "Some o' the boys said they didn't know but what you'd took to doctorin' yorese'f—got a fool notion in yore head that you was about to git down sick."

"Well, I *am* sick—if you want to know," Trawley suddenly declared. "I'm not a sound man, by a long shot."

"Oh, come off!" Hoag laughed. "You've been eatin' too much or smokin' more'n you ought. Maybe yore liquor ain't o' the right brand. There's a lot o' poison in the truck shoved over bar-counters these days. You oughtn't to touch any but straight moonshine corn. Some o' our boys make the best that ever slid down a gullet."

"'Tain't nothin' o' that sort," Trawley sighed, despondently. "Dr. Lynn examined me an' wasn't a bit satisfied. He said my stomach had clean gone back on me. Nothin' I eat won't stay down. I roll an' tumble at night an' shake all over durin' the day. Doc said it was serious."

"Oh, now I understand." Hoag seemed slightly relieved. "But you hain't a-goin' to let *that* scare the socks off you. Besides, Lynn may be mistaken."

Trawley's chin dropped despondently. "He knows as much as any doctor, I reckon. Looked to me like he considered my case hopeless. He shook his head all the time he was talkin'. He—he hinted purty strong that I ought to be prepared, that I might—might have to go any day." Trawley's scant blood had left his face and his lip hung limply.

Hoag shrugged his shoulders indifferently. "So you've let that scare you plumb off from old habits. You set here an' mope instead o' bein' up an' about with the rest of us. We all got to die some time or other."

Trawley glared fiercely out from his labyrinth of fears. "You wait till it gits *you* down!" he blurted out. "*You* kin talk, standin' thar with that solid pouch on you—an' a meal in it that you can hold down. Don't talk to me; I know when I'm in trouble!"

"I know when you will be, shore enough, if you don't mark my words." Hoag was now employing his favorite browbeating method, and his eyes flashed threateningly. "You have been shootin' off your mouth to outsiders. You are like a scared old hag with fits. I heard that hobgoblin tale you told about seein' the ghost o' Pete Watson. The tale's goin' the rounds, gittin' bigger an' bigger, like a cake o' beeswax that everybody adds a chunk to, an' thar wasn't a thing in it but your fool jim-jams."

"I know what I *know*!" Trawley said, a shadow of superstition in his eyes. "I was in my right senses—I was seein' as plain as I am now. The fust time he appeared I was wide awake, settin' up in a chair in the kitchen. The next time I was in my corn-crib a little after dark. Pete put his hand to his neck; I heard 'im groan an' gurgle. He comes to my bed sometimes when I'm asleepin' an' pulls the covers off an' then darts right through the wall. The last time he told me that me nor none o' the klan would ever have peace—that black folks was the same as white whar he was at, an' that accordin' to the book o' judgment to kill the innocent was the unpardonable sin alluded to in Scripture."

"Poof, Sid, you are gone clean daffy!" Hoag sneered, though a serious expression had captured his features, for he was wondering how far this indiscreet babbler could be trusted to recount such imaginings.

"He got *you* in it all right," Trawley said, vindictively. "I ain't the only one. The last time he come to me I was drivin' the cow home from the pasture after dark. At fust I thought it was a calf or a stray hog; but he come on till he was close by my side, limpin' along like he used to do, with his old flipflap feet. He talked as

plain as ever he did in this life. He said I was to die a slow death an' a terrible one—that my folks would think I was dead an' put me in the ground, but that I'd lie thar an' wait till him an' some more come an' twisted my spirit out an' tuck it on to torment. Then he fetched you in."

"Me?" Hoag sniffed. "Well, I'm glad he hain't forgot me. I hope he remembers the time I lambasted 'im for breakin' that new plow o' mine."

"Yes; he said yore time was comin', too; he said you was the prime mover an' power in the organization—that you was a rank coward at heart, an' that you jest loved the fun o' scarin' niggers because you was afraid o' brave white men. I dunno, I'm jest tellin' you what he told me. He said your luck was goin' to turn flat ag'in' you—that your present support would sluff away, an' you'd find yourself alone with nothin' 'twixt you an' the Almighty but the niggers you'd sent on ahead, an' that you'd git on your knees to 'em an' beg 'em to speak a kind word for you, but that they'd turn a deaf ear. He may have missed it in yore case, but was right about *me*. Jim Hoag, I'm a dyin' man, an' I'm in hell already." Hoag was becoming angry. Had he dared he would have spoken more sharply. He told himself that Trawley had lost his reason, and that he was a very unsafe man in his present condition, holding the knowledge he held.

"You'll have to git out o' this," he said, sternly. "You need a change."

"I need more'n that," Trawley groaned, and he beat the top of his desk with a limp, splaying hand. "I need medicine that ain't in no bottle or doctor's saddle-bags. I know what I need, but I don't know whar to git it. I need what my good old mammy had when she died, shoutin' an' talkin' about her folks that had gone on, who she declared was right thar over the bed holdin' out their hands to her."

"Take it from me, Sid," Hoag said, carelessly, "all that stuff is pure poppycock. When a man's time comes the jig is up—that's all; he's done for; he's put in the ground an' rots. As for me, that's all I want or expect."

"I know you've always said that," Trawley answered, "an' I used to think maybe you was right, bein' sech a big man in your way; but I know different now. Say, Jim Hoag, what do you make o' Paul Rundel?"

"Make o' 'im—what do you mean?"

"I want to know what could 'a' fetched 'im back here to give up to the halter like he did unless—unless he was led by some'n in 'im bigger, wider, an' higher than jest his mortal body?"

Hoag smiled significantly, and idly tapped the leg of his trousers with his whip. "Just betwixt us two, Sid, I never have knowed just *what* Paul's game was. I saw he was a good man for the job I had open, an' I tuck 'im in. I never have bothered about the tale he told. That was his lookout. He's got a clear head for business. He understands human nature, an' he was sharp enough, I reckon, to know that nine juries out o' ten would be lenient in a case like his'n. He was homesick for these old mountains, an' was willin' to serve a year or two an' be done with it."

"That won't do at all—*not at all*," Trawley protested, with firmness. "I've never seed an eye like his'n in a human head. He heard I was ailin', an' come in here last week friendly like to talk to me. Well"—Trawley averted his face and sat linking his fingers like wooden prongs—"I just don't know how to tell you about it, Cap. He said—Paul said some o' the quarest, most comfortin' things that ever a sick man heard. I want to see 'im ag'in—I just *must*. I've been to preachers, an' to old Christian men like Tye over thar, an' they all gave me the same stale song-and-dance; but this young fellow, with his shinin' face an' happy way, had some'n fresh. Why, he said that the Lord just couldn't be hard on any repentant soul He'd ever created. I wish I could tell you how Paul fixed it, but I can't remember. He said the ugly sights I'd seed was just in *me*—just in my own mind—an' that as soon as I seed that I was part an' parcel of God Hisse'f all them gloomy shadows would pass away an' I'd see visions o' true light. He cited the thief on the cross—you remember about that feller? He was dyin' thar by the Saviour, you know, an' the Lord said to him, 'This day shalt thou be with me in Paradise.' As Paul fixed it up nothin' the thief had done in days gone by was to be helt ag'in' 'im—*nothin'*! He says it is all a matter of wrong thought or right thought. He told a purty tale that was sorter like a new-fashioned parable. He said, take two brothers, for instance. A lawyer comes away across the ocean from the old country an' tells 'em, on his word an' honor, that a kinsman has died over thar an' left 'em a million apiece, but that they will have to be patient an' wait a year before the money will be paid into the'r hands. Now, Paul said one of 'em, for example, would believe the lawyer an' spend his year full o' happy expectations, but t'other wouldn't trust the lawyer's statement, an' in his doubt an' uncertainty his year would be the most miserable he ever spent. Both come in at the end on the same actual level, you see, Cap, but the trustin' fellow got in twelve months quicker—that's all. Paul says that illustrates what is called havin' the kingdom of heaven within you—it's our'n if we'll just believe it's our'n an' move in an' take possession."

Hoag's countenance was full of shadow. For a moment he seemed undecided as to what to say. He whipped his leg steadily and cleared his throat. One of the negro attendants leaned in at the door and asked Trawley a question, and the liveryman replied sharply:

"Give 'im any pair he wants, an' don't disturb me ag'in while I'm talkin'." He uttered a low groan as the negro withdrew and looked up at his frowning companion. "I tell you, Jim Hoag, when a man gits in trouble like I am in, a puny thing like whether he rents a turnout, or a hub is split, or a tire off, amounts to so little that it makes 'im mad to think about it."

"Looky' here, Sid!" Hoag's beetling brows ran together, and his tone was fierce and direct. "I want to git at this thing right now, so as to know what to depend on. Like the rest of us, you are under oath of secrecy to the klan. Did you say anything to Paul Rundel to lead him to suspect that—"

"No, I didn't," Trawley groaned. "I kept it all back, an' thar's right whar I think my chief trouble lies. I've taken an oath that binds me to the devil an' his imps. Paul says, to git the real thing you've got to go at it with a clean breast, an' I can't be that way with you fellows tellin' me to come to your secret meetin's an' layin' claim to me. I hain't give you all away, an' I ain't goin' to, but I'm in a bad fix. I want to clean up an' git right, but I don't know how. It seems wrong to break my oath, an' wuss to keep it."

"I can say to you right here, Sid"—Hoag moved toward the door, a dark, red flush on his face—"if you do betray our body you'll regret it, an' you know well enough why."

So speaking, and without another glance at the man he was leaving, Hoag strode away. Aflame with fury,

he mounted his horse and rode homeward.

CHAPTER X

THE following night was dark and sultry. A slight, brief rain had pattered upon the hot and dusty earth, leaving a warm, thick moisture in the air. The clouds, shifting, dissolving, and massing overhead, alternately revealed and hid the stars. The moon's white disk hung behind a filmy veil above the mountain-top. Hoag had retired to his room in anything but a pleasant mood. He could count on browbeating the average man under him, the man who was afraid of the good or ill opinion of his fellows; but the man who was afraid of the Infinite, as in Trawley's case, was different.

Hoag had removed his coat and his shirt was open in front. He sat in a chair at a window overlooking his tannery. He was smoking, as usual. In fact, the habit had grown upon him to such an extent that he was afraid of what he called "a tobacco-heart." There were occasional warnings, in certain muscular flutterings and lapses into drowsiness that had not belonged to his more buoyant period. He told himself that he was taking on flesh too rapidly. He was sure he was eating more than he should; that his toddies were acting as an unnatural stimulant to an appetite which had always been too vigorous.

On a table behind him a lamp was dimly burning, and the bed in its billowy warmth looked uninviting. The old clock in the hall below had struck eleven when he rose to disrobe. Suddenly he heard Rover, the watchdog, bark loudly and scamper down the lawn toward the tannery. Then there was silence, broken by a subdued muttering under the dark sheds. Hoag was sure that the dog had been silenced by some one, and the circumstance was suspicious, to say the least, and must be looked into. So, taking his revolver from the table, and in order that he might not wake Jack or Mrs. Tilton in the next room, he opened his door softly, then crept noiselessly out at the side-entrance and went across the damp lawn down the slope, avoiding this or that obstacle in his progress—a beehive, a lawn-mower, or a dismantled cider-press left at the mercy of the weather. He was soon under the sheds groping his way, most cautiously now, for it was quite dark, between the open vats, and stumbling over heaps of used and unused tan-bark, his eyes and ears alert. He asked himself, in growing wonder, what had become of Rover, for surely the dog was somewhere near. At this juncture he heard a dull, thumping sound in the warehouse a hundred yards to the left, and cocking his revolver he strode quickly in that direction. Reaching the warehouse, and turning the corner, he saw at the door of the building a horse and open road-wagon, at the side of which Rover sat on his haunches idly beating the ground with his tail. Wholly nonplussed, Hoag stepped noiselessly on to the long platform, and peered in at the sliding door. At the farthest end of the room, in the dim light of a lantern, he saw a man half pushing, half rolling a heavy bale of leather toward the door. Crouched down, as the intruder was over his work, Hoag could not see his face, but presently it appeared quite clearly in the light. It was Henry. It was his son. He was a thief caught in the act. Volcanic fury swept over Hoag. The would-be thief was of his own blood, of his own loins. Revolver in hand, and indignantly quivering in every inch of his fat body, Hoag glided from the dark into the light.

"What the hell does this mean?" he demanded, in a loud and yet guttural tone.

The young man at the bale of leather, without hat or coat, his brow red and streaming with perspiration, started and, looking up, faced his father. For an instant his glance wavered, but as Hoag thundered out a repetition of his question, Henry drew himself up defiantly and glared straight at him.

"You see well enough," he answered, doggedly.

"So you are a thief—a low, sneaking, prowling night-robber?" Hoag gasped, taken aback by his son's unexpected attitude. "You—you!"

"Call it what you like!" Henry hurled at him. "I don't care. You are rollin' in money, makin' it hand over fist—goin' to your grave rich, and I haven't any way of living. Other fellows' daddies help them along, but you never give me a cent. I used to ask you, and you'd curse me and threaten to kick me out. I'm your son, and you are stinkin' rich. You can't bluff me. I'm reckless. I don't care a tinker's damn what I do. I need money—that's all—I need it."

Hoag stood puffing. He was conscious of a fluttering about his heart, and he had the sudden fear that an outburst might mean his undoing on the spot, but he was too angry to control himself.

"So you are a thief!" he panted. "You eat at my table, sleep under my roof, an' come here with a wagon to steal my stuff. Do you know what I'm goin' to do with you?"

"Not knowing, I can't say," Henry answered, with colloquial quotation. "I've known you to get weak-kneed, as you did the day Jeff Warren called you to taw at the Court House. Jeff saw through it and told how you ate the crow he shoved at you on the point of his gun."

This angry taunt was the worst missile the desperate young man could have thrown. It drove splotches of pallor into the crimson of his father's face.

"You mean you think I'm a coward?" Hoag cried. "You—you dare—"

"I don't mean nothing about it; I *know* it," Henry retorted, still with the furious smile on his lips, a reckless flare in his eyes.

"Well, I'll show you what I'm goin' to do to *you*, anyway," Hoag said, fiercely. "I'm goin' to give you the best lickin' you ever had in all your bom days."

"You say you are!" Henry laughed, almost with actual spontaneity.

"Yes, I am, an' right here an' now."

"Right here an' now,'" Henry repeated, grimly. "Well, that is a good joke; 'right here an' now'—poof! You'd better set in. It will be breakfast time before long."

"You wait a minute," Hoag growled, as he took up the lantern and placed it on a bale of cotton; then he turned back to the door, closed the shutter and fastened the metal latch with fingers that fumbled and evoked an audible clatter in the silent room. Then, with his revolver in his hip-pocket, he stalked back to his son, who sat on the bale of leather sullenly picking his teeth with a splinter. Their eyes met like those of two infuriated beasts driven into contact by the goads of spectators. Beyond the lantern's flare the darkness hung like a curtain. Hoag picked up a piece of hard-twisted hemp rope about a yard in length, and with furious jerks proceeded to tie a knot in one end of it.

"You not only try to rob me, but you dare to insult me!" he cried, frothy saliva trickling from the corners of his big, weak mouth. "I'm goin' to give you a lickin' that you won't forget till you die."

Henry stood up. A smile dawned on his face and died; he locked his hands behind him; his lips were as firm as if cut in granite; his eyelids drew close together, and the balls gleamed with the fire of invincible purpose.

"Wait a minute," he said. "You are an older man than I am, an' you are my daddy, but if you lay the weight of your hand on me I'll kill you as sure as you've got a live hair on your head."

"You mean to threaten me—you damned midnight prowler!" And Hoag, brandishing his rope, sprang at his son like a tiger on its prey. But Henry quickly and deftly caught the descending rope, jerked it from the fat fingers, and threw it against the wall. Then, while Hoag stood for an instant bewildered, Henry clutched him round his big, bare neck and began to push him backward over the bale of leather. From side to side the two swung, grunting, panting, swearing. A mist was before Hoag's eyes; ten prongs of steel were piercing and separating the bones and muscles of his neck. He was gasping for breath when, by an extra effort, he tore his son's hands away. For a second they stood warily shifting from side to side, and then they locked in the embrace of madmen, and the struggle for supremacy was renewed. Over the rough floor, here and there among boxes, bundles, and bales, they slid and pounded. Suddenly Henry became conscious that his father was trying to get his hand into his hip-pocket.

"Oh, that's your game, eh?" he said, between his teeth. "Two can work at it." And the younger suddenly slid his hand over the back of the older man and grasped the hilt of the revolver. Then he ducked downward suddenly and stood aside, the weapon in his hand.

"Stand back!" he ordered, calmly, and Hoag, with eyes of despair on the revolver, fell away. Visions of death flashed and flared before him—visions of the monster Trawley was fearing. He held up his hands; their shadows on the wall quivered like the moving branches of a tree in a storm.

"Don't, for God's sake, don't!" he pleaded. "I'm—I'm your father."

Henry stared for a moment, and then an expression of sheer horror crept over his face. Suddenly he threw the revolver against the wall and bowed his head to a cotton bale.

"My God, oh, my God!" he cried, his hands pressed into the sockets of his eyes, his breast heaving.

Slowly Hoag lowered his uplifted hands. Silence ensued—silence broken only by the audible panting of the two men. Presently Hoag spoke.

"You started to kill me," he gasped. "Why didn't you do it? You had the chance."

"Oh, my God—oh, my God!" Henry exclaimed, in muffled tones. "Yes, yes, I came near it. I didn't know what I was about. You got me in a corner. You started at me. You made me mad. But I am not a murderer—bad as I am, I am not that. I saw you trying to pull the gun and forgot what I was doing."

"Huh, you say you did?" Hoag seemed unable to formulate anything else. "You say you did?" Suddenly stepping aside, Henry picked up the rope his father had held a moment before. Hoag stared helplessly as he came toward him with it extended in his hands.

"Take it!" Henry gulped.

"What for?" Hoag asked, wonderingly.

"I want you to whip me," Henry replied, huskily. "I'll stand here and let you lay it on till you are tired. You'll never give me enough to satisfy me. I need it and I want it. You have every right to give it to me, and I want it done."

Unconscious of what he was doing, Hoag accepted the rope, allowing it to hang loosely from his inert fingers. There was another silence. Henry had turned his back and bent his shoulders over the cotton bale.

Hoag twisted the rope awkwardly in his hands for a moment, then threw it down.

"What did you need money for?" he suddenly inquired. "Tell me; you might as well."

"I borrowed a hundred dollars from Sam Pitman last year," came from Henry's averted lips. "He's in hard luck. They are about to sell his farm for debt. His family is suffering. He told me that my hundred would tide him over."

"I see, I see," Hoag muttered.

"I didn't know how else to get it," Henry went on. "I tried a number of ways, but failed. I want you to know that I've never stole before. Somehow I made myself believe it wouldn't be wrong in such a case to take from my own father. Of course I was wrong, but I tried to see it that way. I knew where I could raise the money on the leather, and—well, that's all. I want you to whip me. Nothing else will satisfy me. After that I'll go away for good and all."

"Thar ain't no use to talk that way," Hoag said, falteringly. "I didn't know you needed money as bad as that. Pitman *is* in a hard fix, an' I'll tell you what I'll do. It's plumb foolish for you to—to talk about goin' off an' all that. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll pay that debt off in the momin'. I reckon you think I'm purty hard on you. Well, I suppose I am. I was fetched up hard, an' I've got hard. Now, go put up the hoss an' wagon. I feel bad about this. I don't know why, but I feel bad."

"Father, I can't—"

"Now, go on an' do as I tell you. I know when I want to do a thing, an' I want to pay Pitman that money, an'—an' I want you to stay on here at home. Now, go put up the hoss an' wagon. If I'm satisfied you ought to be, an' me'n you will have to rub out an' begin over ag'in in some sort o' fashion. You was mad an' I was mad. You've got my temper an' I can't blame you. Now, go on. I'll lock the door."

"Very well," Henry said, and he picked up his coat and hat and moved away into the darkness, leaving his father with the lighted lantern in his hand.

Hoag stood still for a moment. He heard his son clucking to the horse, then came the sound of the wagon-wheels scraping against the edge of the platform, and the grinding of the horse's hoofs on the stony road, as it was driven toward the stables. Hoag extinguished the lantern by lowering it suddenly, and, going out, he closed the sliding door and locked it with fingers which quivered as with palsy.

He sat down on the platform, his heavy feet and legs hanging limply, and stared out into space.

CHAPTER XI

ONE evening at the end of that week Paul met

Mrs. Mayfield walking back and forth on the lawn. Her head was enveloped in a light shawl and her eyes were downcast. Presently she turned toward him, and he saw that she had been weeping.

"I was going to inquire of Mrs. Tilton how your daughter is," he began. "I have not seen her since the morning I walked with her to the spring."

The lady touched her thin lips with her handkerchief and made an obvious effort to control her voice. She laid her hand on his arm almost with a gesture of despair, and he felt the delicate fingers tremble.

"I've been wanting to see you," she faltered. "The poor child seldom leaves her bed. The doctor says nothing but time will do her any good. She scarcely eats anything, and has grown thin and white, and oh, so nervous! Jennie's death has simply terrified her—shocked her through and through. She cries constantly. I wake up in the night and hear weeping and moaning. The doctor can't deceive me. I know he is worried, because he comes often and asks so many questions. He admits that grief like Ethel's sometimes results disastrously, and I myself have never seen so serious a case as hers. Paul, she has lost all faith in God and religion. She came up-stairs, after you talked to her that day, in what seemed to be a really more hopeful mood. She put her head in my lap and cried for the first time in a natural way, but she hardened again soon afterward. That afternoon letters came from Jennie's father and mother and the young man Jennie was to marry, and Ethel went into hysterics. She really did not know what she was saying or doing. Oh, it was pitiful! She says she simply can't get away from the memory of the awful details. It was my fault; she should never have been there. Jennie wanted her, though, and there was no time for reflection. We were all excited."

"Something must be done to take your daughter's mind from it," Paul advised, gravely. "A mental picture like that should not be held. It is decidedly dangerous."

"That's why I wanted to see you," Mrs. Mayfield said. "You can help me if you will. My brother says you are going to drive over the mountain tomorrow on business. I really think Ethel would go along if you would care to take her."

"I should be delighted," he answered. "I'd be a poor companion at such a time, but the view from the mountain at this time of the year is wonderful, and the trip might divert her thoughts."

"Then I'll have her ready," Mrs. Mayfield promised. "And oh, Paul, I do hope you will impress some of your beautiful thoughts upon her. Religion, faith in God's goodness, and the hope of immortality are absolutely the only sustaining things at such a time. If I had not had them to cling to when my poor husband died I think I should have lost my reason. I doubted at first—I could see no justice in his sufferings and mine; but I have become reconciled. People are more material in their ideas nowadays, and Ethel has come across some injurious books which have influenced her. She is so gentle and sweet—really, it is her pity for Jennie that is causing it all. She is not thinking of herself. That is the state of mind of a mother who has lost a child; she feels, somehow, that her child has been wrongly treated and she resents it."

"I'll do my best to cheer her up to-morrow," Paul said, a note of despondency creeping into his voice, "though I am afraid I can't do much."

"I am sure you can do far more than any one else," Mrs. Mayfield said, as she glanced at the window of her daughter's room and turned to go in. "I'll have her ready."

After breakfast the following morning Cato brought the horse and buggy around to the veranda, and Paul went out to see if everything was in readiness for the trip, having received a message at breakfast from Mrs. Mayfield that Ethel was quite willing to go. Presently he heard the two ladies descending the stairs, and a moment later they joined him in the yard. Paul was shocked by Ethel's appearance. She was quite pale and there were despondent shadows under her eyes, but, withal, he had never seen her look so beautiful; it was as if some rare, suppressed radiance were issuing from her hair, skin, and pain-filled eyes, the long lashes of which seemed dipped in the essence of tears.

"I know you will think I'm very troublesome, Paul," she smiled, sadly, as she gave him her hand to get into the buggy. "I've been so despondent that I have avoided all of you. It is very kind of you to bother with me today."

"It is certainly a great pleasure to me," he answered, as he tucked the lap-robe about her feet. "You mustn't try to talk unless you care to."

"It seems to me that I can think of only one subject," she sighed, as she leaned over the wheel and kissed her mother. "I seem to be floating on a sea of unreality, under clouds of despair. I was looking from the window of my room just now and saw the people going to work at the tannery, and in the fields with their pails and tools, and I wanted to scream. It seemed so queer for them to be moving about as if nothing unusual had happened when"—Her voice failed her. With a sensitive tightening of the lips Mrs. Mayfield signaled Paul to drive on, and he started the horse.

They had gone some distance along the stony road which wound gradually up the mountain-side before either of them spoke. It was Ethel who broke the silence.

"There is no time in the world, Paul," she said, huskily, "in which one so keenly feels and appreciates the kindness of friends as a time like this. I can see that you are sorry for me, and I want you to know how grateful I am, but I simply can't express it. My very heart and soul seem to have died within me."

"You mustn't try," he answered. "You must simply realize that all things are right. Even *this* great sorrow, sad as it appears, is for the best, if only you could see it in the right light."

"I remember you said so the other day. And, Paul, I did try hard. A beautiful faith in personal immortality, like yours, really does keep away the horror of death, and I tried, with all my mind and body, to grasp it. I prayed and prayed for your faith, and it seemed to me, at certain moments, that I came so close to it that I could almost sense it as a wonderful reality. It would flash before me like a beautiful dream, and then vanish, leaving nothing but that awful scene in its place. For half an hour yesterday I was almost happy. It seemed to me that Jennie was really not dead. I fancied she was there with me, telling me—not in words, but in some subtle way—not to grieve, that she was in a new life full of joy and freedom."

"That is the thought you ought to endeavor to hold," Paul fervently declared, "because it is simple truth. In fact, you deny the ultimate aim of life in looking at it in any other way."

"You will say it was a small thing, perhaps," Ethel went on, "which threw me back into despair. It was this: Shortly after our talk at the spring, I picked up a newspaper, and the first thing I saw was a long article concerning a statement made by Edison, to the effect that the result of all his careful and lifelong investigations was the conclusion that the immortality of the soul was an utter impossibility. Paul, I dropped from hope to despair in an instant. I tried to thank you might be right and he wrong, but I failed. I asked myself this question: If God is good enough to grant us another and a better life, why will He allow one of the greatest men of our age to deny it, and let me—*me*, suffering and praying for light as I am—come across his denial in grim, black letters on white paper?"

"That raises a little scientific point." Paul looked at her wistful face and half smiled. "You allowed yourself to be influenced, almost self-hypnotized, by one single mental picture."

"How so?" Ethel inquired.

Paul smiled again. "Why, you let Mr. Edison—with all due respect to his knowledge of merely material things—you let him loom too large before your sight. One may hold a little ugly insect so close to the eye that it will shut out the light of billions of suns and stars. When it is a question of opinion alone it would be better to go to specialists in the particular field we are investigating. Mr. Edison is a specialist in *material* things, not spiritual things. We would not go to a coal-miner who had spent his life underground to render an opinion on the effects of sunlight on flowers; nor to a boilermaker for an opinion on music played to the vanishing-point of delicate expression. We have one great historical authority on spiritual matters. Christ told us that there is a life beyond this, and he died asserting it. There was another—Socrates—who realized it so strongly that he laughed in the face of death. Ethel, I cannot believe that God would create men like those, allow them to suffer for others as they did, and then prove them to be liars outright or self-deceived simpletons."

"Oh, I'm so glad I came this morning!" Ethel cried, looking up at him gratefully. "You have given me so much hope. Your faith is wonderful, and you seem to inspire me with it."

"No, we really must not go to our material scientists for hope in such things," Paul resumed, "but rather to our great imaginative poets, artists, and idealistic philosophers, all of whom knew there could be no continuity of progress without eternal life. Evolution of matter is only a visible symbol of the evolution of the unseen. I can fancy Jesus meeting one of our great self-satisfied materialists and hear Him say: 'Verily, verily, thou hast thy reward; sooner shalt thou see through a mountain of adamant than look into the kingdom of heaven.'"

Ethel laughed softly. "You are making me ashamed of myself, Paul. I am going to try harder than ever to do my duty. I know what it is, but I am simply stunned. My uncle and aunt write me that the young man Jennie was to have married has gone to drinking again. He simply could not stand his great grief. That is another thing that seems so unfair and unreasonable. For Jennie's sake he gave up the habit, and promised her and her parents never to drink again. Now he is going to ruin, when if Jennie had lived—" Ethel's voice broke, and she did not finish what she had started to say.

"But can't you see what your cousin may have escaped?" Paul reasoned. "A young man who is weak enough to allow a sorrow—even a sorrow like that—to throw him into dissipation would not be likely to make a worthy husband. After marriage some other disappointment might have upset him, and a woman married to such a man would have led a miserable life."

"Oh, that's true," Ethel admitted, "and Jennie never could have borne it; she was so frail and sensitive."

"There's surely a good reason for all that happens," Paul said. "But we can't be expected to understand what is withheld from us."

They were both silent for a while. They had reached the highest point of the road, and the lower mountains and hills fell away on all sides like the green billows of a mighty ocean. Above it all shone the sun. The blue, cloud-flecked sky arched over them like a vast dome. The breeze which fanned their faces was refreshing and laden with the fragrance of wild flowers. Paul called her attention to the mill at the foot of the mountain to which they were going, and started the horse down the incline.

"I am to have a visitor Sunday," Ethel remarked, her glance on the horse. "My friend, Mr. Peterson, is coming up to spend the day."

"Oh!" Paul unconsciously ejaculated, and then the color rose to his face. "I have not met him. I saw him at the bank one day when I went to Atlanta with your uncle, but we were not introduced. He was very busy looking over Mr. Hoag's papers."

"They are great friends," Ethel said, somewhat awkwardly, her cheeks slightly tinted. "I don't feel as if I can entertain him very well in my present state of mind, but I knew my uncle would be offended if I wrote him not to come."

"It will be good for you, no doubt," Paul said, lamely, and for no obvious reason he tightened the reins and shook them over the animal's back. "He will bring you news from the city and it may divert your thoughts."

"Perhaps so. My mother thought he ought to come; he has been most kind to us. He is one of my best friends."

"Your uncle tells me that Mr. Peterson is growing rich," Paul remarked. "He seems to have a wise head for business."

"Yes, he is ambitious that way, and socially, too. He belongs to the best clubs and has a great many friends."

"Your uncle says he is a member of one of the old aristocratic families and has many influential blood connections."

"Yes, I think so"—Ethel suddenly glanced at her companion's face and noted that it was rigid, as if under the control of some keen emotion—"but such things do not really count," she added, consolingly; "they don't make a man any the better."

Paul said nothing, and the horse drew them along for some distance in silence. Then Ethel took up the subject where it had dropped.

"I am sure you will like Mr. Peterson; he has traveled a great deal. He has an interest in one of the Atlanta papers, and I have heard him speak of having influenced some of the political editorials. For so young a man he is looking far ahead and is very, very shrewd. My uncle declares that he is a born politician, and that sooner or later he will become a candidate for some high office, such even as Senator or Governor."

Suddenly Paul drew the horse to a standstill. She saw him glance up a very rugged steep over an abrupt cliff on the right.

"I see some violets," he said. "I've been looking for some all along. If you will hold the reins I'll climb up and get them."

She gave him a puzzled stare for an instant, and her lips tightened significantly as she answered: "I really would like to have them, but it looks steep and dangerous up there; you might slip and fall over the cliff."

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled bitterly.

The lines of pain she had noticed about his eyes and mouth still remained.

"Oh, it is not dangerous," he declared. "As a boy I have climbed up worse places than that; but I was barefooted then and a sort of wild animal. You remember how I looked and acted when I first met you? In the eyes of the social world I am still not much better off, for the social world—*your* world—draws a sharp line at birth and fortune, and they are things some of us have to do without."

He had got out of the buggy and was turning away. She had a startled impulse to deny what he had just said, but suitable words could not be so quickly summoned. In no little chagrin and fear of his opinion of her, she sat watching him as he climbed the steep, clinging to this or that projecting stone crevice or deep-rooted shrub. How strong, handsome, and genuine he looked, with his fine, fearless head bared to the sun and breeze! She saw him pause for seconds at a time, looking for a new foothold in the rocky soil as the one he stood on slowly crumbled, rattled down the incline, and shot over the cliff just beneath him.

She called out to him warningly once, and she was startled at the new quality in her voice. What could it mean? she asked herself. Surely she was not beginning to—She pulled her eyes from him and stared almost angrily at her folded hands, telling herself that she could not deeply care for any man. Just then she heard a small avalanche of disrupted stone sliding down the mountain-side, and, looking up, she saw Paul hanging by a single hand to a shrub, his foothold completely gone. She screamed and stood up in the buggy, only to have him turn his face, while his feet swung free, and smile reassuringly.

"Don't be afraid," he called out. "I'm all right." And then she saw him calmly placing his foot on another projection.

From that point he moved upward till the violets were reached, and she saw him gathering them and twisting them together in a tiny bunch with a reverence of touch which was observable even at that distance. Then, the stems of the flowers held between his lips, he began to make his way back, and moments of keen suspense followed in which she looked away from him to avoid the consciousness of his danger. Presently he was by her side, his brow beaded with perspiration, his broad chest rising and falling from his exertion. Without a word he gave her the violets and got into the buggy.

"Why did you take all that risk?" she asked reproachfully. "I want the flowers, it is true; but, oh! if you had lost your hold and fallen—" She went no further.

"It does seem dangerous when you look at it from down here," he answered, critically glancing up at the cliff. "But that is because we can see the full height of the bluff. Up there, you know, I couldn't look over the edge. If I had, perhaps I might have grown dizzy."

"Paul," Ethel said, after they had remained silent for several minutes, "I am very grateful to you. When I am with you I don't suffer so much over poor Jennie's death. Somehow you inspire me with your faith. I am going to ask you a favor—one favor, and then I'm done with it. Will you please tell me positively, in so many words, that you really are convinced that she is still in existence. I know you've already said so, in a way, but I want to remember your exact words, so if I become despondent again I can repeat them over and over to myself."

Paul laughed and glanced at her tenderly and wistfully. "I believe it as positively as I believe that I am here with you at this moment," he said, quite gravely.

"Thank you," she returned, simply. "I am going to believe it because you do. I know that you know the

truth. I know it—I know it!” She held the violets to her lips, and it was as if she kissed the purple petals.

A glow as of reviving health seemed to suffuse her wan cheeks.

CHAPTER XII

THAT evening after supper, as Paul sat writing in his room, his employer came to the door and looked in. “Hello!” was his half-tentative greeting, as he slouched in and took a chair near the table. “I’ve just been talkin’ to my sister. She’s powerful tickled over the effect on Eth’ of your trip over the mountain. She says she’s actually astonished. It seems like the gal’s goin’ to quit ‘er foolishness. I was gettin’ powerful sick of it myself. It’s hard enough to know your own end’s got to come some time ahead without dyin’ every time anybody else kicks the bucket.”

“I’m glad to know that Miss Ethel feels better.” Paul dipped his pen and continued to write.

Hoag crossed his fat legs and, reaching down to his right shoe, he began to fumble the string. “I want to see you about a certain matter,” he began, clearing his throat. “I don’t know as you will consider it any o’ my business exactly, but it is something that I thought you ought to be prepared for.”

“What is it?” Paul put his pen into the rack and leaned toward the speaker.

“Why, I was talkin’ to Bob Mayburn this mornin’. You know his land joins mine on the west. He had a few acres to rent an’ was afraid he wouldn’t find a tenant; but he has hooked one at last, and who under the shinin’ sun do you reckon he got?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” Paul answered.

“Jeff Warren,” Hoag said, his eyes bluntly fixed on the young man’s face in a groping stare of pleased curiosity.

“Oh!” Paul exclaimed. “I didn’t know he was anywhere near Grayson.”

“He ain’t got here yet,” Hoag went on, a note of vindictive harshness creeping into his voice. “The triflin’ skunk has been over in Alabama with yore ma an’ her sister tryin’ to make a livin’ farmin’, but without any sort o’ headway. He wrote May-burn that he was up to his eyes in debt over thar—plumb busted—an’ that they’d all three got sick an’ tired o’ livin’ among strangers, an’ was anxious to git back here whar they are acquainted. May-burn’s got a comfortable new frame cottage on his land that’s empty, but knowin’ that Jeff couldn’t pay for it, he wrote ‘im that it was already rented. Thar is an old log cabin close to the cottage, an’ accordin’ to the agreement Jeff an’ his lay-out is to occupy that. It’s tough on a feller of Jeff’s high an’ mighty pride, but it is as good as he deserves.”

Paul made no reply, a shadow lay across his sensitive face. He took up the pen again, but he did not begin to use it.

“I knowed you wouldn’t like it a bit,” Hoag continued, unctuously. “Here you are risin’ as fast as a dog can trot, gittin’ the respect an’ favorable opinion of the best folks in the county, an’ it’s tough to have a thing like that revived right when you ain’t lookin’ for it. I’ve no doubt you wouldn’t have settled here if you had thought such a thing would happen.”

“Warren is a free man.” Paul’s brows met, and his eyes held a far-off gleam. “He has as much right here as I.”

“Of course, of course,” Hoag admitted; “but he’s got a nasty, quarrelsome disposition, an’ accordin’ to some o’ his friends he still holds a big grudge ag’in’ you. It was humiliatin’ the way you plugged ‘im an’ left ‘im to die like a pig in the woods. You see, whar I’m interested is this: I want you to keep on workin’ without interruption, an’ knowin’ what a hot temper *you’ve* got yourself—well, I see that you an’ him will jest have to hitch ag’in. I’m sorry he’s comin’ back myself. I never liked ‘im. It is not often that I belittle myself by takin’ notice of a triflin’ clodhopper like him; but he’s been in my way several times, an’ may step in ag’in, for all I know.”

Paul drew a ledger toward him and opened it. “I’m glad you told me this,” he said. “I’ve got a lot of work to do before bedtime. I know you will excuse me if I go at it.”

“Oh yes, oh yes!” Hoag rose, staring in a puzzled, thwarted sort of way. “I don’t want to hinder you. I’ll be goin’. I just thought I’d throw out a hint about the matter. It is well to be prepared for trouble if it *has* to come, an’—an’ a man like Warren is sure to pick a row.”

Hoag lingered a moment, but seeing that the young man was at work he left the room.

CHAPTER XIII

THE following Sunday was a somber day for Paul Rundel. When he opened his eyes in the gray of dawn, and lay watching the pink flood of light as it widened and lengthened along the eastern horizon, his first thought was the despondent one under which he had dropped to sleep—it was the day Edward Peterson was to visit Ethel.

Paul rose and stood at the window and looked out over the lawn and frowsy brown roofs of the tannery sheds. He was cringing under a poignant agony that permeated his whole being, clogged the blood in his veins, and sucked away the very breath of the life which had recently been so full of indefinable content. The cause was not hard to find. He was convinced that Ethel was absolutely necessary to his happiness. Had he not met her again on his return to Georgia she might have remained in his memory only as the young girl who had been so unexpectedly kind and gentle to a poor outcast; but he had recently found himself more nearly on a social level with her, and he had actually helped her. She had said so. She had shown it in her words and actions, in her turning, under his guidance, from despair to hope. Yet she was to be another man's wife, a man who was evidently not disturbed by any fine-spun ideas of the Infinite or of duty to humanity. Peterson would forge ahead in the happy way such men have, surmounting obstacle after obstacle, climbing higher and higher in the estimation of men, and reaping honor after honor. Ethel would marry him. Her uncle wished it, all her friends counted on it. To refuse Peterson would be madness. The man—especially a poor man—who would ask her to do otherwise for his sake would be mad. Yes, all thought of her as anything but a sympathetic friend must be crushed. When Jeff Warren and his wife came to live in their sordid cabin on the roadside Ethel and her mother would pass their door daily and realize fully the caste to which Paul belonged.

He dressed himself and descended to the lawn. He raised his arms and lowered them, and inhaled deep breaths in his usual morning exercise; but it was done without zest and with the conviction that it would not be of benefit while such morbid thoughts ran rife within him. He must throw them off. He must face life as it was. He had suffered before. He must suffer again. After all, might he not hold Ethel in his heart as his ideal woman, even after she had become the wife of another? It must be—that was all that was left him—and yet, and yet—A sharp pain shot through him. His senses swam; the mocking rays of the rising sun flared upon him. Ethel another man's wife! Ethel the recipient of another man's caresses! Ethel the mother of another man's—

"O God, have mercy!" he moaned, and he turned down toward the gate, almost swaying as he moved across the grass.

"Are you going for a walk?" It was Ethel's cheery voice, and it came from the veranda. Glancing back he saw her lightly tripping down the steps.

"Because if you are, I'll go too—if you will let me. I was up and dressed, and saw you from the window. Oh, isn't the sunrise beautiful?"

As in a dream he stood waiting for her, and together they passed through the gate out upon the grayish, stony road, which sloped gradually up the mountain. He had smiled and bowed, but was unable to formulate any suitable words of greeting. She was studying his face slowly, furtively, and with an anxiety she was trying to hide.

"You look a little paler than you did yesterday," she said, hesitatingly. "Did you not sleep well?"

"I worked rather late last night," was his evasive answer. "Night-work sometimes has a rather depressing effect on me."

"I suppose so," she answered, still studying his features, "and yet usually you are so full of happy spirits. Perhaps you"—she hesitated—"would rather be alone?"

"Oh, how could you say that?" he exclaimed. "It is just the contrary. I don't feel, however, that I have quite the right to intrude on you in your—your—"

"You needn't look at it that way," she broke in, not yet fully convinced that she had fathomed his mood. "In fact, I want to see you. I want to tell you how much you have helped me. You have made me realize my error. I was depressing my mother and every one else by my gloomy hopelessness; but now—well, I seem to have absorbed some of your wonderful philosophy. I slept last night, as uncle would say, 'like a log,' and I feel much better this morning."

"Peterson is coming; that is the cause," Paul groaned inwardly, and he glanced away, that she might not read the thought in his eyes. To her he said, aimlessly: "I am glad—very, very glad. Hope is the only thing. Once one has it, all things become possible."

"And you are so *full* of it," she ran on, glibly. "I was speaking to my mother about you last night. She declared she did not think any one could come in contact with you and be despondent. She said it was a comfort just to watch the play of your features and hear the cheerful ring of your voice. Perhaps you don't realize, Paul, how God has blessed you. To go through life throwing out a radiance like yours is—well, it is next to—divinity."

"Divinity, divinity!" The words seemed to slip from his lips incautiously. "There are philosophers, Ethel, who believe that God Himself suffers in His hampered effort to bring things up to His ideal, and that, as parts of Him, we, too, must suffer as long as He suffers. It may be that the more we partake of His essence the more we have to bear. Who knows? The person who can bury himself in the stirring affairs of earth has a bliss which, if due to ignorance, is nevertheless bliss."

"This is not like you a bit," Ethel said, in pained reproachfulness; and then a light broke upon her. She understood. Her heart beat more quickly, and a hot flush mantled her brow. She hoped he would not note her confusion. She must have time to think, to consider. Many grave things might hang upon what he or she might impulsively say on the crumbling edge of a precipice like that. She must not allow her sympathies to rule her. She must never encourage a man whom she did not love with her whole heart, and how was a girl to judge calmly when a man was such a glorified sufferer?

"According to your views, Paul," she continued, "faith in the goodness of God *will* bring all possible things."

"Save the things of earth." She saw his fine mouth writhe under a sardonic smile as he recklessly plunged

into what he knew was mad indiscretion. "A jealous man cannot walk in the footsteps of a jealous God."

Ethel avoided his desperate and yet frankly apologetic eyes. She shrank within herself. She was sure his words were becoming dangerously pertinent. She kept silence for a moment. Then she paused at a lichen-grown boulder, rested a white, throbbing hand on it, and listlessly surveyed the trees about the farm-house.

"I am sure you cannot possibly realize the good you are doing," she said, with abrupt irrelevance. "I want to tell you something. It is about my cousin Henry. You know I have never liked him very much, but the other day I was thrown with him at the dinner-table after the others had left. He was very downcast and sad over some recent trouble with his father, and, to my great surprise, he spoke regretfully of his useless life. He said you had talked to him, given him good advice, and that you had helped him borrow money to go into business on at Grayson. Paul, I am sure you won't lose by it. He told me, with tears in his eyes, that he would rather die than disappoint you."

"I am sure he will succeed," Paul said. "He has energy and enthusiasm, and is anxious to prove himself. I was surprised to have the bank accept my indorsement, but they did quite readily. I really have great faith in him. He is ashamed of himself, and that is a fine beginning."

Ethel was turning, to proceed higher up on the road, but he stopped her.

"We must not get beyond the sound of the breakfast-bell," he warned her.

"No, for I am hungry," she answered, eyeing him still with anxious studiousness. She turned back toward the farm-house, hesitated a moment, and then said: "Did you happen to see the—the flowers on the mantelpiece in your room? I gathered them and put them there yesterday."

"Oh, did you?" he cried, eagerly. "That was very kind of you. I thought that Mrs. Tilton did it. They fill the whole room with fragrance."

"I'm glad you like them," Ethel said. "By the way, I couldn't help glancing at your books. I now know where you get your wisdom. What a wholesome group of mental companions you have!"

"Those are my special favorites," he answered. "If you wish to read any of them please help yourself."

"I was really hinting at that," she laughed. "You have roused my curiosity. I want to read what you have read and liked. There, that is the breakfast-bell!"

She quickened her step, tripping on ahead of him with a little laugh which held a note of vague uneasiness. Presently she slowed down, and with a look of gentle concern in the glance which she directed to him she faltered:

"I hope you won't get angry with my mother for something she is going to inflict on you and me this morning. Being opposed to working on Sunday, she remained up last night and arranged the table for dinner to-day. She has it gleaming like a bank of snow, and fairly covered with evergreens, ferns, and flowers. She insists that we take our breakfast this once in the kitchen. She is afraid we will disarrange something. She thinks a good deal of Mr. Peterson—*Colonel* Peterson now, for you know the paper yesterday said he was taken on the staff of the Governor. He confided to us some time ago that he had hopes in that direction, having worked hard and pulled wires for the Governor during his recent campaign. On state occasions Mr. Peterson will wear a glittering uniform, carry a sword, and be as stiff as a polished brass poker. Oh, he will like it immensely, but I can never call him 'Colonel.'"

"It certainly would not do to put *him* in the kitchen," Paul said, significantly; "at least not with his regalia on. Aunt Dilly might spill something on his epaulets."

"I see even you—good as you are—can make sport of people now and then," Ethel said, her eyes twinkling approvingly. "However, I am not going to let you sit in the kitchen this morning. I'll bring your breakfast and mine out to the table in the summer-house. It will be great fun, won't it?"

"I certainly do not consider myself above the kitchen," he returned, in too bitter a tone to fall well into her forced levity. "I've eaten at second table in a circus dining-tent, with the negro horse-feeders in a gipsy camp, as a beggar at the kitchen door of a farm-house, and barely escaped having my ration pushed through the iron wicket of a prison. I am certainly unworthy of—of the summer-house and such—such gracious company. I mean this—I mean it from the bottom of my heart."

"You sha'n't talk that way—you sha'n't, you sha'n't!" Ethel's eyes flashed and her round, full voice quivered. "You have said yourself that all those unfortunate things were behind you for ever and ever things of the past."

"Except when I need sharp, personal discipline," he smiled significantly, "and I need that now. I need it to kill blind, hopeless, impossible desire."

"You mean—" But Ethel checked herself. He seemed such a riddle—such a profound, alluring dangerous riddle as he walked beside her with that gray look of desperate renunciation on his sensitive face, beneath the surface of which smoldered unquenchable fires of passion.

Suddenly he stopped her. He laid his trembling fingers on her arm for a bare, reverent instant.

"I am a coward at times, Ethel. You must forgive my weakness. I groan under a burden that I know is right because it is from the Infinite. No man should be as vain as I am tempted to be when I am with you. You can't understand now, but some day you may—if not here, in Eternity. There is only one way to look at it, and that is that God intends me to suffer."

Ethel found herself unable, wisely at least, to make any sort of suitable response, and in awkward silence they walked along together till the gate was reached. Then she said, nervously, and yet with firmness that was quite evident: "I want you to meet my friend to-day at dinner. I want him to know you. He belongs to a class of men who seem too busy to think of deep things—things aside from an active routine, but I am sure he will like you."

Paul's face clouded over; he averted his eyes as he unlatched the gate and swung it open. "Thank you, but I am afraid I can't to-day," he said. "Uncle Si and his wife have asked me to take dinner with them."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ethel answered. "My mother will regret it, too, for she admires you and likes you very much. But we shall have our breakfast together in the summer-house, sha'n't we?" She glanced at the little

vine-clad structure and essayed a playful smile. "Now, run in and take a seat, and let me attend to everything."

CHAPTER XIV

THAT afternoon, while the ladies were taking what Hoag called their "sy-esta" in their rooms, he entertained the guest, who was a dapper young man exquisitely dressed and carefully groomed, even to the daintiest of waxed mustaches. The two men were smoking in the big, cool parlor and chatting agreeably.

"Well, I am not going to refuse the title." Peterson laughed in a pleasurable way after Hoag had made a bald jest about the honor recently conferred upon him. "I am no born idiot, Mr. Hoag. I know some folks sort of poke fun at the new list of Georgia colonels after every gubernatorial race; but even a handle to a fellow's name like that helps now and then. Take Colonel Pangle there in Atlanta, our big criminal lawyer, you know. Why, he wasn't in the war; he never fired a shot or dodged a ball. He organized a little local military company in his home town. I don't reckon he had more than thirty men at any time, and his rank, at the best wouldn't have been above captain; but he was a dignified-looking fellow with a heavy mustache and goatee, and they called him Colonel on the spot, and when he moved to Atlanta the title followed him. The boys at the bank were disposed to joke when my commission came—saluting me like a bunch of jumping-jacks; but you bet I cut it out. Think little of yourself, and the world will do the same.' That's my motto. You noticed how nice the papers spoke about it, didn't you? Well, I stand in with the reporters. They are my political friends; we take a drink together now and then, and they know how I look at such things. I am hitting the bull's eye down there in that burg, Mr. Hoag, just as you've hit it here. We are two of a kind. It doesn't take much gray matter to succeed among these slow, ante-bellum leave-overs here in the South."

Hoag laughed heartily. "Oh, you are all right," he said. "I've had my eye on you ever since you started out. As the sayin' is, you could make money on a rock in the middle of the ocean."

Peterson's features settled into rigidity suddenly, and he exhaled a tentative breath, as he held his cigar between his fingers and leaned toward his host. "As certain as I am about men, business deals, and politics, Mr. Hoag, I'm going to admit to you that I'm a country school-teacher—a knot on a log—when it comes to handling a woman. Don't you reckon every fellow is that way that is kind o' submerged, so to speak, in the affairs of the business world? I know I am a regular stick, and I don't know how to help myself."

"I reckon you are talkin' about Eth'," Hoag said, with more bluntness than a diplomat would have employed. "At least, I've wondered why you an' her both seem so offish. I don't reckon you come all the way up here on a holiday like this to talk business to *me*, an' as for Eth'—well, I can't make 'er out, that's all; an' what's the use to try? A woman is hard to understand when she is willin' to be understood, an' a devil to fathom when she ain't. Folks tell me some high-strung gals would ruther die than let a man know they are gone on 'im."

"I know," Peterson replied. "I used to size Miss Ethel up that way down home among the other girls; but this morning, when me'n her strolled down to the spring, it looked to me as if she didn't want to talk about anything but books—an' books that I've never heard about to boot. She had a thick one under her arm and I peeped in it. I think it was by Cato—no, that is the name of your stable-boy, isn't it? Oh, yes, now I remember; it was Plato, Plato. He was one of the old-time fellows, wasn't he—before the Revolution, anyway?"

"Hanged if I know." Hoag shrugged his shoulders as if the question were a disagreeable incubus suddenly fastened upon him. "I don't know any more'n a rabbit. I set one night an' listened to Paul Rundel an' her talkin' on the veranda an' I hardly understood one word in five. That fellow is the damndest chap I ever run across."

"Is he the man you told me about coming home to give himself up?"

"Yes; an' I've had 'im managin' for me ever since. He's a wheel-hoss. He's doubled my income; he's as keen as a brier; knows how to manage laborin' men. They think the sun rises an' sets in 'im. He don't indorse no church in particular, an' yet the women say he's religious. Men that was too triflin' to draw the breath o' life under me work like puffin' steam-engines for him."

"And he sits around at odd times and talks books?" Peterson said, a faultfinding frown on his face. "That's the way he seems to get his relaxation," Hoag returned. "Well, I don't care how religious he is. Sometimes that helps. I had a little crossroads store away back in my early day an' I didn't have time to manage it. I kept hirin' fellows to run it, an' every one I got would soak me—steal money an' goods so thar wasn't a sign o' profit. But one day a misfit parson come along. He had failed to make good. He was tongue-tied an' he stuttered so bad that he made the mourners laugh an' had to quit preachin'. I gave him the job, an' it was the best deal I ever made. The fellow was so honest that he wouldn't use a postage-stamp for any private purpose, or take a chaw o' tobacco, without enterin' it on his account. He kept a big Bible on the counter, an' so many o' his sort hung around that the store looked like a Salvation headquarters; but the gang bought plenty o' goods an' paid cash. I never forgot that experience, an' when I saw the kind o' man Paul had got to be I raked 'im in."

"You say he—sometimes talks to Miss Ethel?" Peterson asked, the flicker of vague rebellion in his eyes.

"Oh yes," Hoag answered, indifferently. "She's been powerfully worried over Jennie's death, an' Paul, somehow, seems to brace her up with his odd views in regard to a happy land. Maybe"—Hoag hesitated, and then pursued more confidently—"maybe if you sorter talked a little on that line yourself it would catch her fancy. Anything is fair in love an' war when a woman is clean upset like Eth' is."

"I believe in religion," the banker declared, quite gravely. "I always have a good word for it. I don't believe this world could get along without it. All of us at the bank are in some church or other. I'm a Baptist, you know; all my folks are of that persuasion. And my church has made me it's treasurer. First and last our bank handles a pile of its funds. If the heathen have to wait for it sometimes we get the interest on it. But, say, Mr. Hoag, I'm sort o' worried over this thing—I mean about this queer duck you've got working for you."

"Well, don't let that bother you." Hoag filled the awkward pause with a soft, satisfied chuckle. "Eth' understands what I want, and so does her ma. Both of 'em know I'd never give in to her marryin' such a—why, he belongs to the lowest stock this country ever produced—as nigh dirt-eaters as any folks you ever saw. He's picked up some learnin' out West, an' has got brains an' pluck; but no niece o' mine could tie herself to a bunch o' folks like that. Humph, I say—well, I reckon not! He'd not have the cheek to think of it. You leave the affair in my hands. I won't push matters now, but I will put in my oar at the right time."

"Well, I don't want no woman *coerced*." Peterson brightened even as he protested. "I don't want that exactly, but Miss Ethel is the girl I've been looking for. I can't get her out of my mind. She would be an ornament and a help to any rising man. I ought to marry; there is no sort of doubt on that line, and though I might look the field over she—well, she simply fills the bill, that's all. I'm going to erect a fine home on Peachtree Street, and I want her to preside over it."

"An' I want a place to stop when I run down thar," Hoag laughed. "You leave it to me."

CHAPTER XV

JEFF WARREN and the two women of his family were on their way back to their former home. A wagon, a rickety affair on wabby wheels, covered by a clay-stained canvas stretched over hoops, and drawn by a skeleton of a horse, contained all their earthly possessions. Peering under the hood of the wagon, an observer might see two musty straw mattresses, an old hair-covered trunk, a table, three chairs, a box of dishes, and a sooty collection of pots, pans, kettles, pails, and smoothing-irons. Carefully wrapped in bedquilts, and tied with ropes, was the household joy, a cottage-organ. Tethered to the wagon in the rear was a cow which tossed her head impatiently under the rope around her horns, and dismally mooded to her following calf.

Jeff now belonged to the shiftless class of small farmers that drifts from one landowner to another, renting a few acres on shares and failing on at least every other crop. The three members of the family were equal partners in misfortune; for both Mrs. Rundel and her sister quite frequently toiled in the fields, using the hoe, the scythe, the spade, and in emergencies, when Warren's rheumatism was at its worst, even the plow. Still of irascible temper, and grown more sensitive under adversity, Jeff had quarreled or fought with almost every man from whom he had rented land, until he now found few who would deal with him.

As he walked at the side of the wagon in which his companions were riding, along the narrow mountain road, trampling down the underbrush which bordered the way, he had still about him a remnant of the old debonair mien which had made him a social favorite in his younger days.

Amanda, as is the case with many women who have foresworn matrimonial and maternal cares, had withstood the blight of time remarkably well. Her round, rosy face had few new angles or lines, and her voice rang with youthful joy when she spoke of once more beholding familiar scenes and faces. It was her sister who had changed to a noticeable degree. There was a lack-luster expression about Addie's light-brown eyes, which had been so childlike and beautiful. Her hair was thinner; her skin had yellowed and withered; her teeth, for the most part, were gone, and those which remained appeared too prominent, isolated as they were in bare gums, when she forced a smile over some remark of her cheerful sister.

Crude as she was, Addie had followed, her poor mental hands always outstretched to grasp it, an ever-receding masculine ideal. In Jeff Warren, with his love of music and courage before men and gallantry to all women, she had once believed she had found it. But ideals do not thrive so well under hardship as violets rooted in filth, and Addie's heart constantly ached for the lost and the unattainable.

Suddenly Jeff turned to his companions and smiled. "I reckon I've got a big surprise for you both," he chuckled, his hand resting on the wagon-bed. "'Tain't the first o' April, but I've been foolin' you. I tol' you this was White Rock Mountain, but it ain't no such a thing. It is the south spur of our old Bald, and as soon as we pass through that gap up thar we'll see Grayson right at the foot."

"You don't say!" Amanda clapped her hands in delight. "Lord, Lord, I shorely shall be tickled to get back! I want to shake hands with everybody within reach. You'll never pull me away again, Jeff—never!"

Addie, in her turn, said nothing. She scarcely smiled. She was inexpressibly pained by the thought of having to live among old friends and associates in the dismantled log cabin Jeff had reluctantly described. A reminiscent sob rose and died within her as she recalled the comfortable farm-house to which Ralph Rundel, who now seemed almost faultless, had taken her as a bride. To this another pang of memory was added. By her conduct, innocent though it was, she had driven her only child from her, and how many times had her tired heart gone back to the sturdy youth who had toiled so uncomplainingly, and, young as he was, borne so many burdens! Was Paul alive or dead? she often asked herself. If alive, how he must hate her! If dead, then the baby, which she now sometimes recalled with the awakening yearning of a mother's dry breast, was gone forever.

Slowly the horse tugged up the slope. "Whoa!" Amanda cried out suddenly. "I'm goin' to jump out an' walk on to the top. I'm simply crazy to git a look at the valley. Somehow it seems like the Promised Land flowin'

with milk an' honey."

Only too willingly the horse stopped, and she sprang down to the ground.

"Don't you want to walk a little, Addie?" she asked. "You'd better limber up your legs. I'm as stiff as a pair o' tongs."

Mrs. Warren sadly shook her head and Jeff tossed the reins into her lap.

"Well, you drive," he said. "We'll walk on to the top an' take a peep. I agree with you, Mandy. I don't feel like I'll ever want to leave this country ag'in. I want to die an' be buried among my kin."

The two moved faster than the tired horse, and Addie saw them on the brow of the mountain, outlined against the blue expanse beyond. She noticed Jeff pointing here and there and waving his hand; even at that distance the glow of his animation was observable. Reaching the top, Mrs. Rundel caught their words, and in the depths of her despondency she wondered over their gratification.

"Not a new buildin' of any sort that I kin make out," she heard her husband saying. "Thar, you kin see Jim Hoag's house above the bunch o' trees. It's had a fresh coat o' paint lately; look how bright the window-blinds are!"

"An' how green an' fresh everything seems!" commented the more poetic spinster. "Looks like thar's been plenty o' rain this summer. Oh, I love it—I love it! It's home—the only home I ever knowed."

The horse paused close by them. The cow mooed loudly, and the calf trotted briskly up to her and began to butt her flabby bag with his sleek head.

"That looks like a different-shaped steeple on the Methodist meetin'-house," Amanda commented, as she shaded her eyes from the sun and stared steadily off into the distance.

"I believe you are right, by hunky," Jeff agreed. "This un is fully ten foot taller, unless them trees around it has been topped since we left." He turned to his wife, and a shadow of chagrin crept across his face as he said: "I see the house whar you an' Rafe used to live—thar, just beyond Hoag's flour-mill. Well, thar's no use cryin' over spilt milk, old girl; you ain't goin' back to comfort like that, as scanty as it seemed when you had it, an' I was goin' to do such wonders in the money line. We'll have to swallow a big chunk o' pride to put up with a hut like our'n among old friends, but we've got to live life out, an' the cabin is the best we kin get at present, anyway."

Addie, holding the reins in her thin fingers, rose to her full height, her weary eyes on her old home, which stood out with considerable clearness on the red, rain-washed slope beyond a stretch of green pasture. She saw the side porch, and remembered how Paul's cradle had stood there on warm afternoons, where she and Amanda had sat and sewed. Again that sense of lost motherhood stirred within her, and she was conscious of a sharp contraction of the muscles of her throat. Surely, she mused, after all there was no love like that of a mother's for her child, and in her own case there was so much to regret. The child had been beautiful—every one had noticed that. Its little hands were so chubby and pink; its lips like a cupid's bow. As a baby it had smiled more than any baby she had ever seen, and yet in boyhood the smile had gradually given way to a scowl of ever-increasing discontent and weariness of life and its clashing conditions.

Amanda and Jeff were now descending the mountain, and the horse plodded along behind them. They must hurry on, Jeff said, for the sun would soon be down and they must get to the cabin before dark, so as to unload and shape things up for the night. Fortunately, as he took care to remind them, they would not have to pass through the village, as the hut stood in the outskirts of the place, close to Hoag's property line.

Reaching the foot of the mountain, they took a short cut through some old unfenced fields to the cabin. Here their forebodings were more than realized. The two-roomed hut was worse than they had expected. It was built of logs, and had a leaning chimney made of sticks and clay. The rain had washed the clay out of the cracks between the logs of the walls, and the openings were stuffed with rags, paper, and dried moss. The door shutter, with broken hinges, was lying on the ground. The doorstep was a single log of pine, which the former inmate of the hut had chopped half away for kindling-wood. The wooden shutters to the tiny, glassless windows had gone the same way, along with several boards of the flooring.

"Mayburn lied to me like a dirty dog!" Jeff growled, his face dark with anger. "He said it was in decent shape—good enough for any farmer. When I see 'im I'll—"

"Yes, you will want to fight 'im, an' then we'll have no roof over us at all," Amanda said, with a smile designed to soften her own disappointment as well as his. "I tell you, Jeff, we've got to make the best of it an' be thankful. We'll have decent neighbors, I'll bet. Look at that nice house right in our yard."

"That's it," Jeff thundered. "Mayburn wrote me this shack was all the house he had, an' that one is his, an' is empty. He insulted me by sizin' me up that way before I even got here."

"Well, he'd have insulted hisse'f by puttin' us in it without the money to pay for it." Amanda had no intention of adding fuel to her brother-in-law's wrath. "A fine house like that would be worth fifteen dollars a month at the lowest. You better not tackle 'im about it; he might offer it to us cash in advance—then I'd like to know what we'd do. You said this momin' that we'd have to buy our first groceries on a credit. Jeff, yore pride has been yore drawback long enough; you've got to smother it or it will smother you. Now pick up that door an' hang it some way or other. I won't sleep in a house that can't be shut up at night."

Warren, quite beside himself in disappointment and ill-humor, replaced the shutter and then went to work unloading the furniture. He soon had it all within. Then he announced that he must leave them, to go up to the Square to buy the supplies of food they needed.

The two sisters had finished all that was to be done in the cabin, and were out in the desolate yard waiting for Warren to return.

"I see 'im," Amanda cried. "He's comin' through the broom-sedge. He's took that way to keep from passin' Abe Langston's an' havin' to say howdy, He'll have to git over that or we'll never git along. He's got to take his medicine. The Lord's hard on 'im, but Jeff never was much of a Lord's man. It's the meek an' humble that the Lord favors, an' Jeff kicks ag'in' the pricks too much. Nothin' but a strong coffin an' plenty o' earth on top of it will ever humble that man."

"He walks like he's bothered about something." Mrs. Warren sighed, her slow gaze following her approaching husband's bowed form as he trudged through the thickening twilight. "Do you suppose they have refused to credit him?"

"I reckon not, for I see a bag o' something under his arm; but he's upset—you kin depend on it. He knows we are hungry, an' he'd strike a livelier gait than that if he wasn't mad as Tucker."

As Jeff drew near they moved forward to meet him.

"Did you git anything to eat? That's what I want to know," Amanda said, with her usual disregard of even the darkest of his moods.

It was as if he were going to make no response; but her eager hands were on the tow bag under his arm, and he sullenly answered in the affirmative.

"Smoked bacon." She winked cheerfully at her sister. "I smell it. Sugar-cured in the bargain. Coffee, too, already parched an' ground. I'd know that a mile off if the wind wras in the right direction. I'm glad I put on the kettle."

Jeff strode on heavily and deposited the bag at the door.

"We've all got to bunk in one room for to-night," Amanda told him, as she untied the bag and began to take out the parcels. "There is no way fixed to keep the cow an' calf apart, an' she's got to graze or we can't have milk in the mornin', so I shut the calf up in the other room. It won't do no harm; it's clean and as gentle as a pet dog."

"That's no way to do!" Jeff loweringly protested. "A thing like that would make us the laughin'-stock of the whole county. Besides, do you know that—" He seemed to hesitate, and then, as if he was thinking of something too unpleasant for discussion, he turned abruptly away. The two women saw him walk out to the well in the yard and stand still, his gaze on the village lights in the distance.

"What do you reckon is the matter with 'im?" Addie inquired, listlessly.

"Go to higher powers 'an me if you want to know," Amanda retorted, as she proceeded to prepare supper. "Something shore has rubbed 'im the wrong way. He was out o' sorts when he left us, an' he's ready to kill somebody now."

A few minutes later supper was on the table and Jeff was summoned. He entered the dimly lighted room, dropped his hat on a bed, and sat down at one end of the table. He was hungry, as the others well knew, and yet he ate with less apparent relish than usual. Amanda kept up an incessant flow of half-philosophical chatter with more or less comforting intent, but no part of it evoked comment from the head of the family.

Supper over, Jeff rose, reached for his hat, and was stalking out with bowed head at the low doorway, when Amanda suddenly uttered a little scream of astonishment.

"What's that in your—ain't that a pistol in your hip-pocket, Jeff Warren?" she demanded, while her weaker sister stared in slow, childlike wonder.

Impulsively and somewhat guiltily Warren slapped his hand on his bulging pocket and turned, blinking doggedly at the questioner.

"That's what it is!" he answered. His tone was sullen and defiant.

"Whar did you get it?" Amanda was now on her feet, leaning toward him in the meager light.

"I swapped my watch for it," Jeff muttered; and he drew the brim of his hat lower over his burning eyes.

"Your watch!" Amanda cried. "Why, what are we goin' to do for a timepiece now? Besides, we didn't have to go armed all along that lonely mountain road; what is the need of a pistol here in the edge of town, among old friends an' law-abidin' neighbors?"

"That's *my* business," Warren snarled, and he turned out into the dark. "Folks will *know* it's my business, too. You jest lie low an' see if they don't. I'll take care of number one."

"I know *how* you'll take care of number one," Amanda sneered. "It will be by ignorin' number *three*, like you always have done when you get the devil in you as big as the side of a house. Right now you are just itchin' for a row with somebody, an' you are goin' to have it if I don't take you in hand."

Warren's innate gallantry checked the hot outburst, the forerunner of which was quivering on his white lips, and without a word he went back to the well and stood with his hand on the windlass, a pitiful symbol of human discontent outlined against the star-strewn sky.

"I ain't a-goin' to put my hands in dish-water till my mind's at ease," Amanda said to her sister. "Poor thing! I reckon you feel so bad about the way we are fixed that you ain't bothered about Jeff's fits: But it's different with your sister Mandy. When you was a young gal I worried about whether you'd git married or not. Later I was bothered about your first choice an' his jealous suspicions. Next I turned into a wet-nurse; I walked the floor with your baby at night, stickin' splinters in my feet at every step, an' *now* I've got to keep your last investment from danglin' from the gallows like a scarecrow on a pole."

Together the two women went to the brooding man at the well.

"What ails you, Jeff?" the wife began, with a timid sigh. "Anybody can see you are out o' sorts."

"Well, I'll *tell* you what's the matter," Warren fumed. "If I'd knowed it sooner I'd 'a' left you two beyant the mountain an' come on an' got it over with. I don't want to disturb women with a thing o' this sort."

"Wayburn's goin' to turn us out, that's my guess," Amanda dropped. "The shack ain't no better'n a stable for hosses, but we can't have even that without more cash than we've got."

"No, he's had one of his old quarrels with somebody," Mrs. Warren suggested, despondently.

"I hain't had one, but I'm *goin'* to," Jeff threatened. "This State simply ain't wide enough, or *long* enough, to hold me and the dirty young pup that left me lyin' in the road for dead an' went off an' gloated over me. He was a boy then, but he's a man now, an' fully responsible."

"Why, what are you talkin' about?" Amanda's inquiring stare shifted excitedly back and forth between her sister's startled face and the sinister one of her brother-in-law. "Is Paul alive—have you heard from him?"

"Heard from 'im?" Jeff's white lip curled and trembled like that of a snarling opossum. "I hain't heard from him personally yet, nor seed 'im, but he's back here struttin' around in fine clothes with plenty o' money in his pocket, an' sayin' that—"

"Oh, Jeff, oh, Jeff, are you sure?" Mrs. Warren had turned pale, and it was as if she were about to faint. Amanda threw a strong arm about her and firmly shook her. "Don't keel over," she said, almost fiercely. "I want to know about this thing right now. All this dinky-dinky talk about shootin' may pass on *some* occasions, but when the big strappin' hulk I work for gits on a high jackass an' talks about killin' my own blood-nephew because he's got more clothes an' money than we got—well, I'll be in the game myself, that's the long an' short of it, I'll be in it tooth an' toe-nail."

Never had Warren's gallantry been swathed in a blanket of such soaking dampness. He stared at his verbal antagonist with a fresh and uncurtained vision, and seemed unable to formulate a suitable reply.

"Never mind me." Amanda's tone became distinctly conciliatory, and she smiled faintly: "I won't kill you till I git at the facts, anyway. I'm dyin' to know about the boy. Go on an' tell us."

Jeff hesitated for a moment and then slowly complied. "He's back from the West. He got a fine education, an' worked his way up somehow. He's got a job on big pay managin' for Jim Hoag—he's got a hundred or more hands under him, an' the whole' county's braggin' about 'im. He rides around from one place to another with his head high in the air, givin' orders. When he landed here he told some cock-an'-bull tale about thinkin' I was underground, an' wanted the law to act, an' the like, but he's a liar."

"Oh, I'm so glad; I'm so glad!" Amanda hugged her stupefied sister to her breast impulsively and kissed the sallow brow. "I always thought thar was come-out in that boy, an' now I know it. I'm dyin' to see 'im."

"Well, he ain't dyin' to see *you*, or his mammy, either, in the plight you are in!" Jeff hurled at her. "They say he lives at Hoag's, an' goes gallivantin' about the country with that Atlanta gal, Ethel Mayfield. He's mad because we are back here to disgrace him with our dirt an' rags. He's the only livin' man that ever gloated over me, an' he's hand an' glove with my lifelong enemy. If you think I'm goin' to set back, an'—an'—"

"I don't care whether you *set* back, *stand* back, or *roll* back," Amanda's eyes rekindled. "If you fetch a hair o' that boy's head I'll pull every one you got out an' leave 'em for bird's-nests. It's Paul's prosperity that's stickin' in your craw. Hand me that pistol!"

Jeff swayed defiantly backward, but she caught his arm and turned him round by sheer strength. "Give it to me, I say, or you'll never darken that cabin-door. When I give in to you an' Addie marryin' after all that slanderous talk you agreed, as a man o' honor, to withdraw all charges ag'in that poor boy. You did that, an' now stick a cannon in the scat o' your pants an' lie in wait for 'im like a cutthroat in the dark. Gi' me that thing!"

Reluctantly Warren complied, and stood silent as Amanda scrutinized the weapon in her hand. "We kin swap it for meal an' bacon," she said. "Now let's all go to bed. I'm plumb fagged out."

CHAPTER XVI

IT was the evening of the following day. Ethel had heard of the return of Jeff Warren and was quite disturbed. Since early morning Paul had been away, and Ethel fancied that he was unaware of the arrival of the little family. In many ways she pitied Paul, and she gravely feared for his safety, for there was no mincing the fact that Jeff Warren was a most dangerous man, with a quick, uncontrollable temper. Mrs. Tilton, Mrs. Mayfield, Cato, and Aunt Dilly were all discussing the situation. That the two men would meet was not to be doubted; that Paul would have to defend himself or be injured was regarded as a certainty.

Ethel was at the window of her room just as the night began to fall, when Paul came in at the gate, and, with a weary step, advanced up the walk toward the house. Hoag was seated on the veranda, and Ethel heard the posts of his chair jar the floor as he rose and descended the steps. The two men met almost beneath her open window. Ethel was aware that their words might not be intended for other ears, and yet she was chained as by some weird and ominous spell to the spot. She dropped on her knees, leaned against the window-sill, and peered cautiously through the overhanging vines.

"Oh, yes, I heard he was here," she caught Paul's reply to an obvious question, and she was sure there was an odd, changed tone in his voice which seemed to have lost its old hopeful vitality. She saw him take his handkerchief from his pocket and slowly wipe his brow as he stood with his dusk-draped profile toward her.

"Well, I just thought I'd put you on your guard," Hoag was heard to say, with an unction of tone which men of his own type could have fathomed better than a delicate, frightened woman. "I'm sure I'd appreciate it to have a friend of *mine* come to me at such a ticklish time. I know you've got grit. I've seed it put to a test. That's why folks are a-talkin' at such a rate. The opinion of one an' all is that what you did once you can an' will do ag'in."

Ethel held her breath to catch Paul's tardy words. His head was lowered when he spoke. "So they think I'll shoot him again, do they—they think that?"

"You bet they know you won't let the skunk run roughshod over you, an' he's ready an' waitin'—bought 'im a gun right off—looked all about for you to-day, I'm told, an' some say he hinted that you'd skipped clean out to keep from facin' the music. I haven't met him. I hain't no use for the puppy, an' never did have. You've got a gun, haven't you?"

"No, I haven't owned one since I got back from the West."

"You don't say—well, you'd better git one. I've got three. You can take your pick if you want to, but for the Lord's sake don't mix me up in it. I just offer it to you as I would to any other man in my employ."

"Thank you." They were moving toward the house, and the roof of the veranda hid them from the eyes of the awed and frightened observer. Ethel heard Paul uttering some unintelligible words in the hall below, and then he came up the stairs and entered his own room. She stood in the center of the floor, trembling from head to foot. He had been such a wonderful friend to her; under his advice she had soared to heights she had never reached before, and yet now he himself, strong as he had been in her behalf, was in peril—peril he was too brave to see. She heard her uncle's ponderous step as he strode through the long hall to the kitchen, and then it occurred to her to pray for guidance. She sank down on the edge of her bed and folded her delicate hands between her tense knees. Her lips moved, but she was not conscious of the words mutely escaping her lips. Suddenly she sprang up and started to the door, for Paul had left his room and was going down the stairs with a firm and hurried stride. Her hand on the door-knob, she leaned out into the darkened hall and peered after him. She had an impulse to call to him, yet the thought that she had no excuse for stopping him which would not reveal the fact that she had been eavesdropping checked both her voice and movement. She heard him crossing the veranda swiftly, and, returning to the window, she saw him on the walk striding toward the gate. Again she tried to cry out to him, and again she failed. As he reached the gate and passed out into the road she prayed that he would go toward the village rather than toward the cabin in which his stepfather lived. Her breast seemed to turn to stone the next instant, for he was taking the shortest cut toward the cabin. How calmly, fearlessly, he moved! How erectly he walked, and it was perhaps to his death! Ethel staggered back to her bed, sank on it face downward, and began to sob, began to pray as only he had taught her to pray, with all her young soul bent to its holy purpose.

Paul strode on through the gloaming. Overhead arched the infinite symbol of endlessness, with here and there a twinkling gem of light. On either side of him the meadows and fields lay sleeping, damp with rising dew. Fireflies were flashing signals to their fellows; insects were snarling in the trees and grass; a donkey was braying in the far distance; dogs were barking.

As Paul approached Warren's cabin the firelight from within shone through the open door out upon the bare ground in front. He paused for a moment, undecided as to how he should make his presence known—whether he should call out from where he stood, after the manner of mountain folk, or approach the threshold and rap. Just then a bulky, top-heavy looking object turned the corner of the cabin and advanced to the wood-pile near by. It was a man carrying a bunch of fagots on his shoulder. He threw it down, and, seeing Paul for the first time, he drew himself erect, staring through the darkness.

"Who goes thar?" he grunted.

Paul was about to reply when Warren suddenly grasped the handle of an ax, and swiftly swinging it to one side as if ready to strike a blow, he panted: "Oh, it's *you*—is it? Well, I've been expectin' you all day. I knowed you'd hear I'd come, an' not lose time..Well, I hain't got no gun—my fool women folks took—"

"I haven't either, Jeff," Paul laughed, appeasingly. "You've got the best of it this time; I'm at your mercy, and I'm glad of it. Turn about is fair play, and if you want to you can brain me with that ax. I really think I deserve it, Jeff. I've had seven years to regret what I did, and I don't want to lose a minute to tell you that I am sorry—sorry as ever a man was in this world."

Silence fell. Warren leaned on his ax-handle and stared with wide eyes and parted lips. When he finally spoke his breath hissed through his teeth.

"Say, young feller, if you've come here to poke fun at me I tell you now you've—"

"I'm in no mood for that, Jeff," Paul broke in, with increased gentleness. "I've done you a great injury. I was a silly boy at the time and I've sorely repented. I've come to beg your pardon—to beg it as humbly as I know how."

"Good God! You—you say—you mean—"

"I'm sorry, that's all, Jeff. I want to see my mother. You've got more right to her than I have now, after my conduct, but I want to see her and ask her to forgive me, too. A man has but one mother, Jeff, and the time comes to all men when they know what it means to lose one. Is she in the house?" There was an awkward pause. Warren stood swaying like a human tree touched in every branch, twig, and leaf by clashing winds which had never so met before.

"Why, I thought—we thought—folks *all* thought"—Warren dropped his ax, made a movement as if to regain it, then drew his lank body erect, and stood staring through the gloom.

"I know," Paul laughed softly and appealingly, "they think blood, and nothing but blood, can wash out a difference like ours; but there is a better way, Jeff, and that is through good-will. We've been enemies long enough. I want to be your friend. You've taken care of my mother and aunt all these years, and I am genuinely grateful for it."

Warren turned his shattered countenance aside. "I didn't look for you to be this way at all—*at all*," he faltered, huskily. "I reckon when I heard you was back here I got mad because you was makin' your way up so fast, and I've been steadily goin' down. The devil was in me, an' I thought he was in you, too. Lord, I never dreamt that you'd walk up like this to a—a—feller that—" Warren waved a dejected hand toward the cabin—"that had fetched your mammy to a pig-pen of a shack right in the neighborhood whar you are thought so much of."

"A man doesn't deserve to be well thought of, Jeff, who considers himself better in any way than a less fortunate fellow-being. If you could really understand me you'd see that I actually think *more* of you than if you were well-to-do."

"Oh, come off!" Warren sharply deprecated. "That's beyond reason. I used to be proud. In fact, I reckon that's what drew me so much to your mother. I pitied her because your daddy made so little headway, but look at me now. Lord, Lord, jest look! Why, he was a *king* beside me. I've plumb lost my grip."

"I see—I know what you mean," Paul said, sympathetically, "but you are going to get it back, Jeff, and I'm going to do all I can to help. Is my mother in the house?"

"No; the calf got to the cow, an' the two wandered off somewhar. Your ma is down in the meadow close to the swamp tryin' to find 'em."

"And my aunt?"

"Oh, Mandy—why, you see"—Jeff appeared to be embarrassed anew—"you see, Mrs. Tobe Williams, who lives over in town, driv' by this evenin' about an hour by sun, and—and said she'd had so much trouble gettin' a woman to—to cook for her big family o' children that, if Mandy wouldn't mind helpin' her out in a pinch, she would pay well for it. I put my foot down ag'in it, but Mandy wouldn't listen to reason, an' got in the buggy and went. It seemed to me that was my last straw. If killin' myself would aid anybody the least bit I'd gladly —"

Warren's voice broke, and he stood quivering from head to foot in the effort to control his emotion. Paul advanced and extended his hand. "We must be friends, Jeff," he said, with feeling. "Between us, we can make both of them happy."

"Between us! You say—"

Warren clasped the outstretched hand and clung to it as if for some sort of support in the strange new storm which was tossing him as he had never been tossed before.

"I can't make you out, Paul," he fairly sobbed; "by God, I can't! Seems like you are foolin', an' then ag'in I know you ain't—yes, I *know* you ain't!"

"No, I'm in earnest," Paul returned. "Do you think my mother will be back soon?"

"Yes; but you stay here an' let me step down whar she's at," Warren proposed, considerately. "She ain't so well—in fact, she might get upset if—if she saw' you all of a sudden. I'll run down an'—an' tell her you are friendly. That'll be the main thing. She's been afraid you an' me would act the fool ag'in. She will be relieved and astonished. You wait here. I'll go tell 'er."

When Warren had stalked away in the gloom Paul went to the cabin-door and glanced within. The pine-knots burning under the open fire of logs, the ends of which rested on stones, lighted the poor room, from which musty odors emerged, and he shuddered and turned away. Passing around the cabin, he approached the neat cottage near by. He went up on the little vine-clad porch and peered through the window's and side-lights of the door. Putting his hand into his pocket, he took out a key, and, thrusting it into the lock, he opened the door and entered. Striking a match, he held it above his head and went into all the rooms.

CHAPTER XVII

WARREN strode down the narrow winding path through the meadow. He crossed a swift-flowing creek on a narrow, sagging foot-log and went on toward the swamp. When he was some distance from the cabin he descried, beyond a patch of blackberry vines and a morass full of pond-lilies and bulrushes, the blurred outlines of a solitary figure. Then an unexpected sound fell upon his ears. It was a piping, uncertain voice endeavoring to run the scale after the manner of the exercises in a rural singing-class. It was Mrs. Warren. She was strolling toward him, beating time with a stiff index-finger held out before her.

"That's her!" Jeff mused. "She'll sing a different tune when I tell her what I know. By gum, the boy certainly floored me! Who would 'a thought it? Not me, the Lord knows."

Skirting the boggy ground by passing along a little rise where velvety mullein-stalks grew in profusion, Jeff came face to face with his wife. With a crude instinct for dramatic surprise, he stood still without speaking and allowed her to approach closer to him. Listlessly intoning her scale and cutting the half darkness with her finger, she stopped with a start. Then, recognizing him, she laughed, and advanced confidently.

"You caught me," she said, abashed. "I was jest wonderin' if me'n you'd ever sing another note. I declare my voice is all out o' whack. Some say, losin' the teeth spoils a voice. Well, we ain't goin' out to meetin', noway, I reckon, an' so we won't be asked to sing by the old crowd. I hain't got a thing fit to put on, an' they just sha'n't poke fun at my looks."

"I thought you hit that top-note purty clear just now," he said, evasively. He was wondering how he could smoothly explain the thing which had so startingly upset all his calculations, and in which she was so soon to participate.

"I couldn't git the cow an' calf," she listlessly informed him. "The fool beasts went clean over the hill. Bob Triggs saw 'em. He said they couldn't cross the river, an' we can drive 'em up to-morrow. But you don't get no milk to-night. Say, Jeff, just for the fun of it, let's try our old brag duet. If we kept at it in the evenin' for a few days we might sorter get back into harness."

"I don't want to sing no more, never no more," he answered, and something in the ring of his voice riveted her attention. She suddenly laid her hand on his arm and forced him to look at her.

"Jeff, what's the matter?" she demanded, the comers of her sad mouth drooping in dire expectation. "Some'n has happened. I know it. You come to meet me to let me know. Oh, Lord, Lord! you an' Paul hain't met—"

"Yes, but no harm was done," he said, unsteadily. "I've seed 'im. He come to the cabin just now of his own accord. He—he wasn't lookin' for trouble; in fact, he talked nice. I never was so astonished since I was born. He—well, we shook hands an' made friends. I can't tell you—I don't know exactly how to explain it, but he's changed a powerful sight.' Nothin' like he used to be—don't talk the same—more like a lawyer, or a judge, or a high-up professor. Got a straight way about 'im, an' lots o' friendly feelin', an' even pity. He's waitin' up thar

at the shack for you."

"For *me*? For *me*?"

"Yes, he wants you, an' I told 'im if he'd stay I'd come down an' hurry you up."

The woman's scant color diminished. Her eyes caught and reflected the meager light of the stars. Her thin breast shook under suppressed agitation. Her lips moved mutely. She twisted her bony fingers together and remained silent.

"You'd better come on," Warren urged, gently. "It won't do to hold hard feelin's after a feller has put himself out to come forward like a man an'—"

"I ain't goin' a step!" Mrs. Warren blurted out in a sob of bewildered protest. "I—I don't want to see 'im ever ag'in! I ain't goin' up there. Tell 'im to go away. We ain't his sort. He's belittlin' himself to come from that fine house up there an' them fine folks to our dirty shack just because I am—am—his mother."

"Come on, come on, don't begin that!" Warren was at the end of his resources. He deliberated for a moment, then caught his wife by the arm and attempted to draw her forward, but with a low cry she sank to the ground and buried her face in her lap. He stood over her, his gaze sweeping back to the cabin in the distance.

"Come on—what will he think?" Warren pleaded, in a bewildered tone. "I don't think I'd—I'd hurt his feelin's after—after—"

"I don't care what he thinks or *does*," surged up from the submerged lips. "I'll not go a step till he's gone."

"Well, I've done all I can," Warren sighed. "But I'll have to make some excuse."

Trudging back to the cabin, he met Paul advancing eagerly toward him.

"Couldn't you find her?" the young man inquired, anxiously.

"Yes, I found her." Warren pointed to the swamp with a jerky sweep of his rheumatic arm. "I told 'er, too; but she wouldn't budge a step. She's ashamed. If you knowed everything, you'd understand how she feels. I'm dead sure she don't harbor a speck o' ill-will. She's a changed woman, Paul Rundel. She ain't the creature you left. I never give 'er no child, an' it looks like she's gone back in her mind to your baby days, an' she feels like she didn't do her full duty. I've ketched her many a time huggin' little youngsters, an' I knowed what that meant. She thought you was dead till yesterday, and of course you can see how—"

"I think I'll walk down there," Paul said, his face turned toward the swamp. "I must see her tonight."

"Well, maybe you'd better," Warren acquiesced. "As soon as she sees how—how well-disposed an' friendly you are I reckon she'll act different. I don't know, but I say I reckon she will."

As Paul neared the edge of the swamp he came upon his mother standing near a clump of sassafras bushes. Her face was turned from him, and, as the thick grass muffled his step, she was unaware of his approach.

"O Lord, show me what to do!" she was praying in 'tones which came distinctly to him on the still air. "Oh, show me—show me!"

"Mother!" he cried out, and even in the vague light he saw her start, and gaze at him in actual fear. Then she averted her face, and he saw her swaying as if about to fall. Springing to her side, he took her in his arms, and drew her frail body against his strong breast. In the desperate effort to avoid his eyes she hid her face on his shoulder. He could not remember ever having kissed her, or having been caressed by her, and yet he kissed now as naturally and tenderly as if he had fondled her all his life.

"Don't, don't!" she sobbed, yet there was a blended note of surprise and boundless delight in her opposition. Presently she struggled from his embrace and stood a foot or two away, now gazing at him in slow wonder while he took in her miserable physical aspect, the consequence of years of toil, poverty, and lack of proper nourishment.

"Aren't you glad to see me again, mother?" he asked.

"I don't know—I don't know," she stammered, piteously. "I thought you'd try to kill me an' Jeff on sight. We heard that's what you come back for."

"I came back to do my duty to God, to the law of the land, to you and every one. Mother, I am older and wiser now. Hard experience has opened my eyes and given me a clearer knowledge of right and wrong. We can't get away from duty. You are my mother, and a man owes his very life and soul to his mother."

"But not to me, not to *me*," she protested, fiercely. "I know what I done, an' how inhuman I acted toward you when I was so silly an' giddy, when you needed a mother's love an' care. You ought not to notice me in the road. You've riz, an' amount to some'n, an' me an'—an' Jeff would be mill-rocks about your neck. We are jest scabs—human scabs!"

"Listen, mother," he broke in, passionately. "No words can describe my happiness. It seems to me that the very kingdom of Heaven is here among these old hills and mountains, and you gave it all to me, for you are responsible for my very being. But for you I'd never have existed. I'll show you what I mean, and then you will understand that poverty of the body can only increase the wealth of the soul."

"But—but we *are* in such a disgraceful plight," she faltered. "You saw that cabin; you see my rags an' noticed Jeff's looks. You know what folks that used to know us will say an' think. We thought we was so smart. We was goin' to roll in money an' fine things an' prove that we knowed what we was about, but misfortune after misfortune piled on us, till—"

"That's all to end," Paul said, with firmness. "Do you know what I did to-day? As soon as I heard that Mayburn had put you in that dirty hut I rode over to his home and rented the cottage next door for you, and made a better all-round contract for Jeff—a contract under which he can easily earn money."

"You—you say?" she gasped. She laid both her thin hands on his arms and flashed a hungry stare into his face. "You say you rented that cottage?"

"Yes, here is the key," he answered, putting it into her hand. "You can move in to-night if you wish, but I wouldn't till to-morrow if I were you, for I have bought a complete outfit of new furniture in town and it will be out early in the morning."

"Oh, Paul, Paul—my boy, my baby!" she was weeping now. Violent sobs shook her frail form from head to foot. Again he drew her into his arms, and stroked back her thin hair from her wrinkled brow. "And that is not all, mother dear," he continued. "You've waited long enough for the comforts and things you love. I shall supply you with everything—food, clothing, and anything else you want. I am going to make you three happy. I am able to do it, and it will be the joy of my life." She slowly dried her tears on the skirt of her dress. She looked at him, and a glad, childlike smile broke over her face as he led her homeward..

"It all seems like a pretty dream," she muttered. "I'm afraid I'll wake in a minute."

"Life ought to be that way always," he said. "If it isn't beautiful it is our fault. If anything goes wrong with us it is because we are out of harmony with the laws of the universe, which are perfect. It is never the universe that is wrong, but only our blind notion of it."

"But, oh, Paul—" She was not capable of rising to his philosophy, and she paused and drew herself sorrowfully from his arm. "You are doing all this, but I know how most folks look at things. They say—some do—that—that you are goin' with Ethel Mayfield, an' her folks are proud an' well off. They are not the same sort of stock as me an' Jeff, and if you tie yourself to us, why, may be she—"

An expression of inner pain rose to the surface of his face. "People are apt to make mistakes," he said, awkwardly, and he forced a little misleading laugh. "It is true that I have driven out with her several times, but it was only because she needed an escort and her mother wished it. She and I understand each other, in a friendly way, but that is all."

"So thar is nothin' in *that*?"

"Nothing at all. Mother, I"—his voice caught suddenly, and he cleared his throat—"I am not really a marrying man. Marriage seems to be the happy fate of some fellows, but I am an exception. I have a great work before me—a sort of duty, as I see it—and these mountains are the best field on earth."

"Oh, I'm so happy I hardly know what to do." Her face was fairly glowing. "This thing will tickle Jeff an' Mandy to death. I am glad you made up with Jeff. He's all right, Paul. He means well. He's just been unlucky, that is all."

"Yes, he is all right," Paul agreed, "and things will run more smoothly with him from now on."

They were nearing the cabin. They saw Warren in front of the door, a bowed, sentinel-like figure in the red light of the fire within. His face was toward them as they approached, but he made no movement. His wife quickened her step, and going ahead of her son she took her husband's hands.

"Jeff, Jeff!" she was heard to say, and Paul caught the words, "cottage," "furniture," and "oh, ain't it glorious?"

Warren said nothing, but Paul heard him sigh. He pressed his wife's hands spasmodically and then dropped them. Firmly he advanced to meet his stepson, and paused in front of him.

"The Lord ought to have let your shot go deeper that night, Paul," he gulped, and for the first time in his life his eyes and voice were full of tears.

"The Lord caught that shot in His hand, Jeff," Paul answered. "He saved us both, and we are wiser now!"

CHAPTER XVIII

AS Paul walked homeward a wave of transcendental ecstasy fairly lifted him from the ground. The stars and all space seemed his. He laughed; he sang; he whistled; a prayer of mystic delight rippled from his lips.

He was drawing near the gate to Hoag's grounds when he noticed a man on a mule in the middle of the road. The rider's short legs swung back and forth from the plodding animal's flanks like pendulums, but his face was toward the village and Paul did not recognize him. Presently, however, when the gate was reached the rider was heard to cry "Whoa!" and Paul knew the voice. It was that of Tye, the shoemaker.

"How are you, Uncle Si?" Paul quickened his step and approached just as the old man was about to dismount.

"Oh!"—the cobbler settled back in his saddle—"I'm glad to see you. I've been over the mountain deliverin' a big raft o' work. I shod a whole family—two grown-ups an' ten children. I want to see you, an' I was goin' to hitch an' go to the house."

"I see, I see," Paul smiled easily. "Like all the rest, you want to warn me to look out for Jeff Warren."

"Not a bit of it—you are away off!" Tye stroked his short beard with the fingers which held his riding-switch and grinned confidently. "That will take care of itself. I don't have to be told what a feller with *your* light will do. I'll bet a dollar to a ginger-cake that you've been to see 'em already, an' you didn't act the fool, neither."

With a laugh Paul admitted it. "I had a narrow escape," he added. "Jeff wanted to brain me on the spot with an ax."

"But you bet he didn't," Silas chuckled, "an' I'll lay he's lookin' at things in a brighter light than ever fell across his path before. But I've come to see you about business—strict earthly business, an' it's your business, not mine. Paul, you've heard of Theodore Doran an' the big cotton-factory he's just built at Chester?"

"Oh, yes," Paul returned. "Some of my men have gone over there to work."

"Well, what do you think? Doran is stoppin' at Kerr's Hotel, buyin' up cotton to run on next fall, an' this mornin' he come in my shop an' took a seat. You see, I used to know him an' his folks powerful well. He was

in a Sunday-school class of mine, along with three other lads, away back in the seventies, when he was a tow-headed scrub of a boy that nobody ever thought would get rich, an' so I reckon he's purty free with me in confidential matters. Well, he set in to chattin' in a roundabout way, an' it wasn't long before I took notice that the talk always somehow got back to you an' your expert management of Hoag's affairs. Whar I fust began to smell a rat was when he said he'd been to every plant an' farm of Hoag's an' taken a look at 'em. Then what do you reckon he said? He said he had looked high an' low for a man to help 'im run the big factory, but hadn't found the right chap. Then he went on to say that from all he had seed an' heard you was the one he was lookin' for. He knowed me an' you was close friends, an' so he bantered me to find out if I thought you'd consider a change. I told 'im I didn't know; but, la me! if I didn't grease the wheels o' your cart no man in Georgia could. I said a lot, but he had heard more than I could tell 'im in a month o' Sundays. He said what he wanted was a feller who he knowed was honest to the core, an' he was sure he could sleep sound with a man at the helm that had come back here, like you did, as a bare matter of principle."

"I am afraid you both are thinking entirely too well of me," Paul faltered, "but I am glad you wanted to help me along."

"Well," Tye continued, "the upshot of the talk was that Doran didn't want no mix-up with Jim Hoag over tryin' to hire a man o' his, an' he asked me, as your friend, to sort o' sound you. He says he's willin' to pay a big price for your services, an' he thinks you will take an interest in the work. It is to be a model mill. They have built comfortable cottages for the workers, with a nice garden tacked onto each one, an' they don't intend to employ little children. Paul, it is a fine job—there is no better anywhar. I told 'im I didn't think you was bound to any written contract to Hoag, an' Doran said he was sure you wasn't, because Hoag wouldn't obligate hisse'f to nobody—even a good man."

"No, I am not bound to him," Paul said, "and I am just a little bit afraid he will not approve of something I am going to do. I have decided to help Jeff Warren and my mother."

"I see." Tye thrust his stubby fingers through the bristling mane of his mule, and bent down reflectively, "No, that will make 'im as mad as a wet hen. He hates Jeff with all the puny soul that's in him. Paul, take my advice. Doran will be at the hotel to-morrow an' wants to see you. Go have a talk with him."

"It is plainly my duty," Paul answered, with conviction. "There are certain expenses I have to meet, and I must sell my services for all they are worth."

"Well, that's what I wanted to see you about." Tye thrust his heels into the mule's flanks, shook the reins, clucked through his gashed teeth, and started homeward. "Good night; you know I wish you well."

Paul entered the gate and started up the walk toward the house. As he drew near the steps he saw a shadowy form emerge from the darkened doorway, move across the veranda, softly descend to the ground, and noiselessly glide toward him. It was Ethel. Her head was enveloped in a light lace shawl held close at her chin, and her sweet face showed pale and rigid through the opening.

"Oh, Paul—" she began, but her timid voice trailed away into silence, and she stood staring at him, a fathomless anxiety in her eyes.

"Why, I thought you were in bed long ago," he said, in surprise. "Has anything happened—gone wrong?"

"No, no," she ejaculated; "but you—you, Paul—"

Again her power of utterance forsook her, and she stood before him with downcast eyes. The hand holding the shawl was quivering visibly; there was a flare of burning suspense beneath her eyelids.

"I see," he said, regretfully. "Your grief has got the upper hand again. You can't fully master it yet. It may be that way for some time, but you must keep trying to view it right, for it *is* right, Ethel. I am more positive of it to-night than ever before."

"It is not *that*—oh, it isn't *that*!" Ethel cried. "It is you, Paul—you and—"

"I really don't understand," he said, bewildered. "You say that I—"

She released her hold on the shawl and laid her hand on his arm. "I must own the truth," she began, tremulously, her voice steadying bravely as she hurried on. "I listened to what you and my uncle said when you got home to-night. You were beneath my window and I could not resist it."

"Oh, I see!" A light broke on him. "And you thought—"

"You went to your room and then hurried away—you went straight toward Jeff Warren's cabin, and—"

"And you counted on hearing gunshots," he laughed, reassuringly. "Well, there were none. I owed him an apology and I made it. We are friends now, and I have my mother back."

"Oh, Paul, was that all?" He could almost see her face glow in the darkness. "I was afraid—oh, I was afraid that all your troubles were going to begin over again!"

She was silent after that. His gentle words of reassurance seemed to fall on closed ears. She stood staring up at the window of her room for several minutes, and then she said, in a tone that was quite incomprehensible to him: "You think I am silly—I know you do, but worrying over Jennie's death has—has really unstrung me. I am not myself. I don't know what I am doing or saying. I give myself up to terrible fancies. Good night, Paul."

He remained on the lawn after she had disappeared. He heard her slow step on the stair. His ecstatic spirit-dream was over. He sank on a rustic seat and bowed his head to his open hands. She was so dear to him and yet so absolutely unattainable!

CHAPTER XIX

THE next afternoon, following a conference with the owner of the cotton-mill, which took place at Tye's shop, Paul returned home. As he was about to ascend the stairs to his room he met Mrs. Tilton in the hall.

"Have you seen Jim?" she inquired; and when he had answered in the negative she added: "He was asking whar you was at. I thought I'd sort o' warn you to look out for him; he ain't in the best of tempers. Some'n's gone crooked somewhar or other. He actually cussed me just now an' slapped little Jack for the first time in over a year. The child was just comin' to git in his lap, an' he's been cryin' as if his heart was broke ever since."

"Where is Mr. Hoag?" Paul asked.

"He's down at the tannery shippin' some leather." There were still several minutes to spare before supper-time, and Paul decided to seek his employer at once, so he turned down to the tannery. As he approached the warehouse the rumble of the iron truck-wheels on the heavy floor reached him, and above the din he heard Hoag's gruff voice giving commands to two negro laborers. Stepping upon the platform, Paul saw his employer near the wide sliding door just within the dust-filled room, and he approached him.

"Anything I can do?" he asked, politely.

"Do! Does it look like thar's anything to do?"

Hoag hurled the words at him, his eyes flashing beneath beetling brows, his lip curled and drawn tight across tobacco-stained teeth.

Paul stared at him unflinchingly. "Shipments have always been made in the morning," he said, calmly. He drew a note-book from his pocket and opened it. "I had this down for the first thing to-morrow."

"It ain't what *you* have down, but what I want done, when an' how I like it. I couldn't find *you*, so I had to do it *myself*."

"We won't talk about that at all," Paul retorted, drawn into anger he was trying hard to control. "I know I earn my salary, and I'll be treated like an intelligent human being while I am at work or I'll quit. Do you understand that? I'll quit!"

"Damn your soul"—Hoag looked about on the floor as if for something with which to strike the speaker to earth—"do you mean to stand thar an' give me any of your jaw?"

"Not any more than you need to make you act like a man." Paul bent a steady and fearless gaze on him that made him flinch and drop his eyes. But Hoag was not subdued. He blinked sullenly for a moment, swore at a negro who was staggering past under an overloaded truck, followed him to the wagon at the door, where he stood, a mere husk of a man buffeted by fierce inner storms. Presently he came back to Paul; he had unconsciously crushed the order for the leather in his hand and broken the tip of his pencil.

"Thar's no use beatin' about the bush," he began, in a tone which showed that he was now more sure of his ground. "I'm goin' to give you the truth straight from the shoulder. An' if you don't like it you kin lump it." Another loaded truck was passing and Hoag stopped it. He made a flurried effort to count the rolls, and failing to do so, he waved his hand impatiently, swore at the man, and the truck was trundled on to the door.

"You needn't waste time getting to it," Paul began firmly. "I know what's the matter with you. You've made up your mind that slavery is not yet over. You've heard about what I am doing for my mother, and—"

"That's it," Hoag's dead face flared. "I may as well tell you the truth an' be done with it. Not a dollar—not one dollar of my money shall go to a low-lived, dirt-eatin' skunk like Jeff Warren."

"*Your* money? No; not a penny of *your* money," Paul laughed, sarcastically.

"Well, haven't you gone an' moved his whole lay-out into Mayburn's new house an' laid in furniture an' supplies an'—an'—"

"Oh, yes, but not at *your* expense," Paul continued to smile. "I knew you would want me to quit working for you when I did it; still, I did it, and I'm going to keep it up."

"You say you are!" Hoag had never had his will more flatly opposed. "Well, listen to me, young man. You are gittin' entirely too big for your pants. I took you up when you come back here under the ban of the law an' couldn't 'a' got a job like this to save your neck. I've been payin' you a hundred a month, but seein' that you are countin' on livin' like a royal prince, an' spendin' your wages on the rag-tag an' bobtail scum of the earth, from now on your pay is cut to seventy-five dollars a month."

The eyes of the two men met. Hoag's were burning with satanic triumph; Paul's held a certain gleam of pity, and yet they bore down with a steadiness that stirred the slow surprise of his companion.

"If you mean that as final," Paul said, "I have something vital and positive to say myself."

"I'll not pay a cent more," Hoag panted. "I'll see you dead an' buried first. Any young man with the chances you had, to go an' throw 'em all away for a low-lived tramp clodhopper—"

"We'll leave Warren out of the matter," Paul interrupted, almost fiercely. "My proposition to you is this, Mr. Hoag. I do not want to leave you, because certain things I have got under way in your interests cannot well be carried out by any one else, and it would be wrong for me to cause you to lose. Still, I know my value. If I didn't I'd not have brains enough to manage your affairs as I am managing them. Only this afternoon I have had the offer of the superintendency of the Doran Cotton Mills. The pay is double my present salary—with various chances of promotion."

"What—what? You say that you—you say that Doran—" But Hoag's utterance had failed him completely. He stood quivering from head to foot, his lip hanging low, his teeth parted, his breath hissing as it passed through them.

"I don't want to quarrel with you," Paul softened. "It is wrong for two men to quarrel—especially wrong for one who has learned the full evil of it as I have, and we need not do it now. But I have certain human rights which, for reasons of your own, you ignore, and are trying to trample underfoot. It is my right to help my

mother, and any one else I see fit to help. I cannot do these things if I work for you for less than my services are worth on the market. I want to remain here, and if you will pay me the price offered by Doran I will do so, otherwise I shall leave you."

"Pay you—pay you two hundred a month"—Hoag gasped—"pay you double what you now get so that you can spend it on a lazy, good-for-nothin' scamp? Not on your life! I'll see the last one of you dead first, an' laid out stark an' cold."

"Then it is settled," Paul answered, calmly. "I told Doran I'd let him have my decision in the morning. I'll leave you on the first of next month."

"You can go an' be damned," Hoag swore under his breath, and raised his clenched fist and shook it in Paul's face. "Git out o' my sight."

And with that ultimatum Hoag stalked out to the platform. Paul looked at him regretfully a moment and then turned away.

He failed to see his employer at the supper-table. He was at work in his room near bedtime when he heard a heavy, dragging step on the stairs. The next moment Hoag leaned in the open doorway. His face was flushed with drink; there was a thwarted glare in his bloodshot eyes.

"I reckon you meant what you said about Doran?" he began, sullenly.

"Yes, I simply stated the facts," Paul answered.

"You said you'd keep on with me for the price Doran's willin' to pay?"

"Yes," Paul returned, with dignity. "I meant to put it that way."

"Well, I reckon"—in blended chagrin and anger—"you are worth as much to me as you are to him. The offer comes through enemies of mine who want to injure me—fellers that stand in with Doran—a gang o' narrow church elders over there, who have got it in for me. You stay on, an' I'll try not to kick any more over your private matters. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"All right, then. That's all I wanted to say." Hoag turned to the door. He stood there for a moment, then slowly faced Paul again.

"There is one other thing," he said, half-sheepishly. "I got onto the fact that you went on Henry's note at the bank to git the money for 'im to go into that business on, an' I thought I'd tell you that I don't intend to let you lose it. Good business men think Henry is goin' to make money thar. In fact, I think myself that he may stick to it. I was in his store to-day an' his partner is well pleased with the work Henry is doin'. I expect to pay that note off, but I'll let 'im owe the bank a while. That will be best, I think." And with that Hoag turned and went down the stairs.

CHAPTER XX

A FEW days later Hoag was walking home from his cotton-gin. It was near noon. It had been cool and cloudy all the morning, and the humid air was laden with a hovering mist which at every moment seemed about to resolve itself into rain. Suddenly, in a thicket at the side of the road, he saw a man with his back toward him. The gaunt form resembled Sid Trawley's, yet the queer antics of the hatless figure belied such an association, for it was bending down and rising up with inexplicable regularity. Hoag paused and watched in growing wonder. It was plain that the man's contortions were not due to the lifting of any tool, for every few seconds a pair of bare, splaying hands would rise above the head, clutch at the air, and slowly descend.

"What the hell ails 'im?" Hoag asked himself, and turning into the thicket he approached the animated automaton. It was Trawley. On seeing Hoag he flushed deeply, dropped his gaze awkwardly to the ground, and stood silent, though smiling in a sheepish way.

"Look here, are you gone plumb distracted?" Hoag demanded, as he stood eying his old associate from head to foot.

"I reckon you might call it that," Trawley answered, raising his arms above his head and inhaling a deep breath. "A heap o' things look plumb foolish if you ain't onto the scientific explanation."

"Well," Hoag tittered, "I can't see no sense in a big strappin' feller like you actin' like a jumpin'-jack pullin' it's own string away out here in the woods all by yourself."

Trawley threw back his broad shoulders, took a shorter breath, and answered: "I raily didn't intend to be seen, Jim, much less by you, who never would believe nothin' outside o' your own hide. I've been doin' this thing for a month or more."

"You say you have!" Hoag exhibited one of his rare tendencies toward a smile. "I see whar you've pawed up the grass considerable. It looks like the ground round the hitchin'-post of a prize stallion."

"I reckon I *have* come here as much as anywhar else." The liveryman comically surveyed the spot in question. "I git the walk out, an' I like to operate in the same spot. I can time myself, you see. I give a' hour to it twice a day—momin' an evenin'."

"You say you do!" Hoag's smile broke broadly. "Workin' for yourself or hired out?"

"I knowed you'd joke," Trawley said, half abashed, "but no joke o' your'n, Jim Hoag, will turn me from a thing as good as this is. I've been led by your sort long enough. Thar are things in heaven an' earth, Jimmy,

that you never even saw the tail-end of, much less the head an' shoulders. I know, for I'm just beginnin' to catch onto a powerful big thing."

"The last time I saw you," Hoag said, with a smile, "you swore you was goin' to lie flat down an' die."

"Yes, that's it; I did say it, an' I was as sure of it as I am that you are a-standin' thar pokin' fun right now. Jim, I was on the actual edge o' hell. I could see the smoke, smell the fumes, an' hear the smashin' o' teeth, mentioned in Scripture. You used to see me at work in the stable, but you never seed me after the sun went down an' the night piled thick and heavy around me. I was crazy. I expected to die right off, an' the trouble was that I wasn't ready. Then what do you reckon happened?"

"I was just wonderin'." Hoag really was interested, and he stood staring seriously, all traces of humor submerged in curiosity.

"Well, I was at my lowest ebb one day. The doctor had examined me ag'in an' said I had no stomach that would hold a bite I ate, an' no relish for a thing, even soft *baby* truck. I was losin' weight as fast as a dump-cart o' manure with a plank gone from the bottom, an' I went to the stable an' set down to try to reconcile myself to the fate that all men has to meet sooner or later, but I couldn't. The more I thought about it the worse I got. Jim, in that little hour thar in my office, humped over my desk, I attended over ag'in every funeral I ever went to, an', more'n that, I seed every pore cuss our gang ever lynched a-hangin' from the rafters above the backs o' my hosses an' mules. I'd 'a' killed myself, but I knowed I'd just be hurried to judgment all the quicker, an' thar I was actually wallowin' in my despair. Then a miracle happened."

"Oh, it *did*? I thought that might be a-comin'," Hoag sneered, "for you wasn't wallowin' in anything like that when I caught you a minute ago."

"You'll say I'm a big fool," Trawley went on, with the glow of a mild fanatic in his eyes; "but I don't give a damn. The proof of the puddin' is chawin' the rag, I've always heard. Right at my worst minute, who should walk in an' set down for a chat except Paul Rundel? I always liked that boy, an' when he come home to give 'imself up like he did I was one that believed he meant what he said. I'm convinced of it now, because he's livin' up to his doctrine. Well, one thing fetched on another as me'n him talked, till somehow I got to tellin' him how low I was an' what the doctor said. I thought he'd be sorry for me, but he shuck his head an' actually laughed. He tuck my wrist, he did, an' felt my pulse, an' then he peeled my eyes back an' looked at the balls, an' made me show him my tongue; then he slapped me on the knee—careless like—an' laughed free an' hearty."

"'Thar ain't nothin' much the matter with you, Sid,' he said. I know, because I've run across lots an' lots o' cases like your'n.' Then he plunged into the sensiblest talk—well, Cap—Jim, I mean—'scuse me, I never heard anything to equal it in all my born days. It was like a rousin' sermon preached by a jolly base-ball player, or a feller that just got the meat out of religion an' threwed the gristle to the dogs. Why, he told me that what ailed me couldn't be reached by any dose o' medicine that ever slid down a throat. He said he'd bet his hat that I had some'n on my mind that ought to be unloaded. I sort o' shied off thar, but he went into all his own trouble over that shootin'-scrape in such a free an' open way that I—"

"You didn't—you didn't violate your oath to—" Hoag started, and his shaggy brows met suspiciously.

"No, an' I didn't have to. He said—Paul said—totin' sin that was behind you an' ought to be forgot was as rank a poison to some systems as any virus that ever crawled through the blood, an' I admitted that I was bothered by some things I'd done that I didn't want to talk about. But, oh my! how good that boy made me feel! He said if I would just quit thinkin' about my stomach an' what went into it, an' keep my mind full o' pure thoughts, determine to act right in the future, an' take exercise in the open air, that I'd git as sound as a dollar right off."

"Oh, I see." Hoag smiled more easily. "An' you took his advice. Well, he ain't so far wrong. Believin' you are done for is powerful weakenin'. I seed a bedrid old hag once jump out o' bed when somebody yelled that a mad dog was headed toward her cabin. She broke out with nothin' on but a shift an' one stockin' an' run half a mile, waded through a creek, an' climbed a ten-rail fence to git to a neighbor's house, an' after that she was hale an' hearty."

"It's a sight deeper science than that when you work it accordin' to up-to-date rules an' regulations," Trawley blandly explained. "The furdur you advance in it the more you seem to lay hold of. You seed me bendin' up an' down just now. Exercise like that, 'long with deep breathin', an' the idea that you are, so to speak, pullin' good thoughts an' intentions into you along with the wind, will do more than ten wholesale drug-stores. I know, for I am actually a new man, from toe to scalp. I don't eat nothin' now but ham. Look at my muscles." Trawley exhibited an arm tightly contracted and smiled proudly. "Why, I was ready for my windin'-sheet an' the coolin'-board. If I had to give up my stable, an' every hoss an' rig I have, or let go of this idea, I'd do it an' work like a nigger in a ditch for bare bread an' water. Paul calls it 'the Science of Life,' an' he's right. In our talk that day he said that it would be well to try, as far as I could, to undo any wrong I'd ever done, an' soon after that I saw Pete Watson's widow passin' the stable. I'll swear she did look pitiful in her old raggety shoes with the toes out, totterin' along with her kinky head down. Well, I called 'er in an' had a talk—"

"An' give us all dead away!" Hoag flashed in renewed fear.

"No, I didn't. She was in a powerful bad fix, an' I let 'er have a few dollars an' told 'er to look me up any time she was rail bad off. Lordy! the sight o' that old thing's face did me good for a week. I'm goin' to hire one o' her sons to work in the stable. I reckon I'd be a freer man if I wasn't sorter obligated to you boys; but I tell you now, Jim, I'm goin' to drag my skirts away from you all as much as possible. All that secret-order business an' followin' your lead got me down. Paul says, in all the places he's been at, he never has seed as bad a condition of affairs as we got right here. He says—an' I don't know whether he suspicioned that I was implicated or not—but he says that all that night-prowlin', an' scarin' half-witted niggers an' stringin' 'em up to limbs, won't settle our trouble. He says that we've got to be gentle with the blacks an' train 'em. He says the old slaveholders was kind to 'em, an' that's why no outrages was ever heard of before slavery was abolished, an' he says treatin' the niggers decent now will—"

"He's a fool!" Hoag growled, angrily. "He's gone off an' lived among a lot o' Yankees who think niggers are

a grade better'n us white folks down here. They don't know nigger-nature, an' *he* don't, neither, but I'll tell you one thing: he'd better keep his mouth shet, an' you—you can quit us if you want to, but you'd better not make too many brags about it."

"I'm not braggin' *now*," Trawley retorted. "A feller can't well brag about what he is ashamed of, an' Jim, I'm heartily ashamed of all that business. Lord, Lord! you called me 'Lieutenant', an' I remember how proud I was of the title the night you give it to me an' the boys all cheered. 'Lieutenant!' I say, '*Lieutenant!*' I hope to git to Heaven some day or other, an' wouldn't I love to hear 'em call me that up thar among the Blest, an' ax how I had got my promotion?"

"I see through you, Sid." Hoag was nettled, and yet trying to speak in a tone of unconcern, which in part was natural. "Thar's more'n one way o' showin' the white feather. You was all right as long as you felt well an' strong, but the minute you begun to think about dyin' you went all to pieces. That's how every little jack-leg preacher makes his salary, by scarin' your sort out o' their socks."

"You are away off your base." Trawley stretched himself, raised his arms, after the manner of his health exercise, lowered them to his sides, and smiled confidently. "Paul Rundel ain't no jack-leg preacher, presidin' elder, or bishop. He's movin' along mixin' business with joy as smooth as deep water headed for the ocean. He don't charge a cent; in fact, when he talks it looks like he does it because he can't hold in. He says religion don't mean givin' up the good things of the flesh or the spirit; he says it just means knowin' how to live, an'—*livin'*". Why, look at your son Henry."

"What's he done now?" Hoag's eyes flickered ominously, as they bent upon Trawley's impassioned countenance.

"Why, nothin', except he's workin' like a wheel-hoss an' Paul started 'im by a few straight talks on the right line an' havin' faith in 'im. Jim Hoag, I've set in to live right, an' I'm goin' to keep it up."

"Lemme tell you some'n, Sid," Hoag returned, dryly. "I've noticed that whenever a man is plumb played out—cayn't hold his own among men, loses his little pile, is hopelessly disgraced, or somebody dies that he thinks he has to keep—why, he goes daft about the wings he's goin' to wear an' the harp he's to play in a land flowin' with milk an' honey. Since the world begun to roll, not a word has come back from the spider-web place they all talk about, an' the feller that believes in it is simply dyin' of the dry-rot. All that a human bein' will ever git he'll git here on this globe. I've made what I've got by hard licks, common sense, an' paddlin' my own boat. A feller that sees a lot o' jimjam visions ahead never will buck down to real life here, an' he'll never lay up a dollar or own a foot of land. Wise men knowed all this long before Jesus Christ come teachin' that the only way to accumulate was to give away all you git, make a two-sided foot-mat o' your face, an' associate with fishermen that want to learn how to walk on the water."

"Say, say, Jim, that's purty tough!" Trawley protested. But with a smile of conscious victory Hoag was starting away.

"Take some more deep breaths," he chuckled over his shoulder, "an' while you are drawin' in truth suck down what I've just said. I kin *prove* what I'm talkin' about, but you can't prove that any sane man ever *dreamt* the stuff you are tryin' to believe."

Trawley stood still on the spot he had rendered grassless by his modern devotions, and stared after the receding form. "I'll bet it will take me a week to git away from that durn fellow's influence," he muttered. "He believes what he says, an' lives up—or *down*, rather—to his doctrine, but he's kept me crooked long enough. He was my god once, with all his power an' money, but he ain't no longer. I said a week—shucks! I'm free already. That sky up thar's mine, or will be if I keep on, an' it's got no fence around it nuther." Trawley inhaled a deep breath, bent downward, slowly raised himself, and with a light step started home.

"I've got a sight better thing than he has," he continued to think of Hoag, "but it wouldn't be right to gloat over 'im. The idea is to wish well to *all*—his sort along with the rest."

CHAPTER XXI

ONE clear, warm evening Hoag rode along the side of the mountain. The sun had been down for an hour, and the valley lay beneath the soft folds of a twilight which, ever creeping from west to east, seemed gradually to thicken under the increasing rays of the constantly appearing stars. He saw the village lights, and from their locations knew where the main buildings stood—the hotel, the post-office, and the wagon-yard, marked by the red glow of the camp-fires. He could see, also, his own home at the end of the road up which he had ascended.

The incline was growing steeper and his horse was stepping cautiously, and shying here and there at real or fancied objects in the underbrush on each side of the densely shaded road. Presently a point was reached where the horse could not well advance further, and the rider dismounted, hitched his rein to a bush, and, on foot, took a narrow path which led down a steep incline into a canon of considerable depth and breadth. Finally gaining a sort of level at the bottom, he trudged on into a labyrinthian maze of brambles, lichen-coated boulders, and thorn-bushes, headed for a specter-like cliff which, now and then, loomed in the starlight.

Presently a firm cry of "Halt there!" greeted him, and a tall, lank form, topped by a mask of white cloth with jagged eye and mouth openings, stood in front of him.

"Halt yoreself, Joe Purvynes!" Hoag answered, facetiously.

"Halt, I say! That won't do," and the figure raised a long-barreled gun and threateningly presented it. "What's the password?"

"Hold on, hold on!" Hoag laughed uneasily. "It's me, Joe!"

"Me! I don't know no me's in this business. You give me the proper password or I'll plug you full o'—"

"A white man's country," Hoag hurriedly complied. "Thar, I reckon that will suit you."

"Good Lord, Cap! I swear I didn't know you," the sentinel exclaimed apologetically. "By gum, I come 'in an inch o' givin' the signal to the boys up thar to lie low. It ain't for me to dictate to you, but you ought to obey regulations yourself if you expect the rest to keep order. Cap, this ain't no jokin' business; we've got to be careful."

"I thought you'd know my voice." Hoag fended the matter off with an impatient gesture and an audible sniff. "The klan arrived yet?"

"Yes, up thar in the open; some of 'em got here at sundown. Never seed 'em so eager before. They've got some game up their sleeves. I may as well tell you. You are goin' to have trouble with 'em, Cap."

"Trouble? What do you mean?"

"I don't know as I've got any ground to say it"—the sentinel leaned on his gun and lifted the lower part of his mask, that he might speak more freely—"but it's the young members, Cap. They ain't satisfied with bein' inactive so long. They say us older, men are takin' the dry-rot, an' won't git out at night because we want to lie in bed an' snooze." Hoag swore under his breath. He reflected a moment in silence; then he asked, "Who's the ringleader?"

"Hard to say, Cap; they are all a-talkin'. Thar's a dozen or more, but Nape Welborne is the worst. I may as well tell you the truth. They are ag'in' you; they are bent on creatin' dissatisfaction—bustin' up the old order an' startin' out ag'in, as they say, with new blood. They've got some fresh devilment to propose to-night, an' if you don't fall in line double-quick they are a-goin' to move to elect a new captain."

"I see, I see." Hoag felt his blood rush in an angry torrent to his head. "They are mad because I didn't favor breakin' in the jail last meetin' to take out Mart Dill. He's Nape's uncle, you know. I was plumb right about that, Purvynes. Mart paid his fine an' is free now, anyway."

"I understand, Cap, but it made a lot of 'em mad. Of course I don't know, but they say you had some grudge ag'in' Mart, an' that's why you refused to act. They've got liquor in 'em to-night up to the neck, an' you'll have to handle 'em easy or we'll bust into flinders."

"I'll break their necks, damn them!" Hoag turned to go on. "They can't run over me roughshod. I've been at the head o' this band too long for that."

"Well, I've give you my opinion, Cap," Purvynes said, more coldly. "I hope you'll try to keep down a split. Some'n seems goin' crooked, anyway. Sid Trawley's talkin' a lot—gone daffy an' turned into a regular preacher. I know a half-dozen old uns he's kept home to-night, an' Nape Welborne is goin' to make trouble. He hates the ground you walk on. Thar's no ifs and ands about that."

Farther along, at the base of the almost perpendicular cliff, Hoag found fifty or sixty men waiting for him. Some lay smoking on the grass, others hung about in various restless attitudes, and a group of ten or twelve of the younger men sat eating tinned oysters and sardines with crackers, and drinking whisky from huge flasks which stood on the ground in their midst.

A man on the edge of the assembly recognized the leader, and saluting respectfully, called out, "Boys, rise; the Captain is here!"

Thereupon a formality took place which to Hoag had always been a subtle delight. Those standing removed their hats, and all who were seated struggled to their feet and stood silent and uncovered.

"How are you, boys?" That constituted Hoag's usual greeting, and then every one sat down, and for a moment silence ensued. There was a fallen log on the border of the assemblage, and upon this the leader sat as if upon a judicial bench. He put his hat on the grass at his feet and folded his hands between his knees. There was a low tinkle of a knife-blade gouging out potted ham from a jagged tin, and Hoag drew himself erect and frowned.

"Let up on that eatin' thar!" he said, testily. "One thing at a time. I've had a hard ride to git up here, an' I'll be treated with proper respect or—"

"You be damned!" a low voice muttered, and a soft titter of startled approval rose in the group of younger men and slowly died in the consternation which Hoag's fierce attitude seemed to set afloat upon the air.

"Who said that?" he sharply demanded, and he half rose to his feet and leaned forward in a threatening attitude.

There was no response. Hoag, standing fully erect now, repeated his question, but the surly demand elicited only a repetition of the tittering and a low, defiant groan.

Hoag slowly and reluctantly resumed his seat. "I'm goin' to have order an' obedience," he growled. "That's what I'm here for, an' anybody that wants trouble can git it. This is *me* a-talkin'."

The silence was unbroken now and, somewhat mollified, Hoag proceeded to the business of the night. "Mr. Secretary," he said, "call the roll, an' make careful note of absentees an' impose fines."

A man holding a bit of lighted candle and a sheet of paper stood up and went through this formality.

"How many missin'?" Hoag inquired, when the roll-call was over and the candle extinguished.

"Seven, not countin' Sid Trawley," was the response.

"Cold feet—seven more beyond the age-limit!" a wag in the younger group was heard to say in a maudlin and yet defiant tone.

"Order thar!" Hoag commanded in a stentorian voice.

"Gone to nigger prayer-meetin'," another boldly muttered, and Hoag stamped his foot and called for order again. "What have we got before the body?" he inquired, in agreement with his best idea of parliamentary

form. "Do I hear any proposals?"

There was a short pause, then a young man in the noisy group rose. It was Nape Welborne. His mouth was full of the dry crackers he was munching, and little powdery puffs shot from his lips when he began to speak.

"Worshipful Knight, an' gentlemen of the Klan," he began, with an obvious sneer. "I've been asked to say a few words to-night. Considerable dissatisfaction has got up in our body. Things has been proposed that in common decency ought to have gone through, an' they've been put under the table an' nothin' done. The general opinion is that this has come to be a one-man gang."

"Everything's been put to a vote," Hoag retorted, with startled and yet blunt dignity.

Grunts and sniffs of contempt ran through the group of younger men, and when the Captain had secured, order Welborne resumed. It was plain that he was making no effort to disguise his rancor.

"Yes, they was snowed under after our *worshipful leader* showed that he wasn't in for action, an' the men wouldn't move without an authorized head."

"That's no way to put it," Hoag retorted. "As your leader I had to say what I thought was wisest an' best. I always have done it, an' heard nothin' ag'in' it till now."

"Because you used to have a *little* more red blood in your veins than you got now, an' that's sayin' powerful little." The speaker's eyes bore down upon the upturned faces, and was greeted by a loud clapping of hands and boisterous exclamations of agreement.

Hoag was white with helpless fury. "You mean to say—damn you—" he began, only to lapse into cautious silence, for there was something in the staring tenseness of the speaker and his crouching supporters which was ominous of a storm that was ready to break.

"Be careful, Cap!" It was the voice of Purvynes close behind him, and the sentinel leaned downward on his gun to finish: "They are drunk an' have got it in for you. They are bent on devilin' you tonight an' forcin' an issue. Look sharp!"

Welborne had drawn himself up and was silent. Hoag nodded despairingly at the man behind him and said: "Go on with your proposition, Brother Welborne. What is it you want?"

Welborne laughed out impulsively. "I see we are gettin' to be kin folks. Well, to come down to hard-pan an' brass tacks, Worshipful Knight, King o' the Mossbacks, I am empowered to say that—"

"That he's got cold feet!" a merry voice broke in with an irrepressible giggle.

At this Hoag sprang up, but hearing Purvynes' startled warning behind him, and realizing what open resentment on his part would mean, he stood unsteadily for an instant and then sank down.

"Go on!" he said, desperately. "We'll hear you out."

"I wasn't goin' to use them nasty words *myself*," the speaker smiled down into the beardless face from which they had issued, "for it wouldn't be becomin' on an occasion like this. Cold feet don't seem to fill the bill exactly, nohow. A man may have a cold pair when his judgment is ag'in' some move or other. The thing some of us new members find ourselves up against in our leader is rank *cowardice*, an' plenty of it."

"Cowardice!" Hoag allowed his rigid lips to echo.

"That's the word," the speaker stared fixedly, as low murmurs of approval swept through the immediate group around him and permeated the borders of the crowd in general.

"Explain yourself." Hoag was conscious of fighting for some expedient of rescue under the shadow of toppling defeat.

"Oh, well, our boys have made up their minds that you are plumb without any sort o' real grit," Welborne said, firmly. "You seem to be one solid bluff from beginnin' to end. We could cite half a dozen cases, not to mention the two times that Jeff Warren made you eat dirt an' lick the soles of his boots."

"It's a lie!" Hoag floundered, recklessly. "A low, dirty lie!"

Welborne stepped out from the group and advanced half-way to the captain. "That's what I've been hopin' you'd git to," he said, calmly. "I suppose you mean *me*. Now, rise from that log, Hoag, an' prove whether you got any backbone or not. You are not only a liar, but a low-lived coward in the bargain!"

Dead silence fell. Hoag was well aware that his power was gone—his throne had crumbled under his feet, for he saw the utter futility of fighting the young giant before him, and he knew that many of his supporters would regard it as inevitable.

"I didn't say *you* was a liar. I said—"

"But I say you are worse than that," Welborne snarled, "and you've got to set thar before us all an' chaw my statement an' gulp it down."

"You fellows have laid a trap for me," Hoag muttered, desperately. He glanced around at the older men. How strange it was that no word of rebuke came from even the wisest of them! Surely they didn't believe the charge of this wild young drunkard after all those years in which he had led them, and had their homage and respect.

"I see you don't mean to defend yourself," Welborne went on, glancing around at the gathering, "an' that's proof enough of what I say. You've held your post not because you was a brave man, Jim Hoag, but because you had money that some men are low enough to bow before; but us young men in these mountains will have a leader with sand in his craw, or none at all." The speaker paused, and his fellows stood up around him. There was a warm shaking of hands, a rising clamor of approval, and this spread even to the older men, who were excitedly talking in low tones.

"Come on, boys, let's go home!" Welborne proposed. "We'll have that meetin' to-morrow night, an' we'll *do* things. Next time a good man gits in jail no low-lived skunk will keep him thar!"

"Good, good!" several voices exclaimed. The entire assemblage was on its feet. Hoag rose as if to demand order, but the purpose was drowned in the flood of dismay within him. He saw Welborne and his friends moving away. They were followed by others more or less slowly, who threw awkward backward glances at him. Presently only Purvynes and he remained.

The sentinel leaned on the barrel of his gun and chewed his tobacco slowly.

"I seed this thing a-comin' a long time back." He spat deliberately, aiming at a stone at his feet. "They've talked too much behind your back to be true to your face. I can say it now, I reckon, for I reckon you want to understand the thing. Do you, or do you not?"

"Well, I don't know what to make of it," Hoag said, with the lips of a corpse, the eyes of a dying man. "I simply don't!"

"Well, it's this a way," Purvynes explained, with as much tact as he could command. "Welborne didn't tell it all. What really has rankled for a long time was that—*they* say, you understand—that you just kept this thing a-goin' for a sort o' hobby to ride on when you ain't off in Atlanta havin' a good time. They claim that you just love to set back an' give orders, an' preside like a judge an' be bowed an' scraped to. They say that, here of late, you hain't seemed to be alive to home interests or present issues. They claim the niggers are gittin' unbearable all around, an' that you are afraid they will rise an' burn some o' your property. They say you don't care how much the niggers insult white folks, an' that you'd rather see a decent farmer's wife scared by a black imp than lose one o' your warehouses or mills. They are goin' to reorganize to-morrow night. An' listen to me, Jim—" Hoag heard the man address him for the first time by his Christian name—"they are goin' to raise hell. An' that's whar you an' me come in."

"Whar *we* come in? You don't think they would dare to—to—" Hoag began tremulously, and ended in rising dismay.

"Oh, I don't mean they would actually mob you or me or any o' the old klan, but whatever they do will be laid at our door because we've been in the thing so long. The truth is, Jim, you trained them fellers to be what they are; they are jest sparks off of your flint. I reckon if Nape Welborne knowed how I looked at it he'd say *I* had cold feet, for I've been doin' a sight o' thinkin' lately. I've heard Paul Rundel talk on this line."

"You say you have! He's a fool."

"I don't know 'bout that; if he ain't got it down about right, nobody has. I heard him talkin' to a crowd one day at the flour-mill. He ain't afraid o' man nor beast. Everybody knows that. Nape Welborne chipped in once, but Paul settled 'im, an' Nape was ashamed to argue any longer. Paul says we are in an awful fix. He prophesied then that we'd turn ag'in' our own race an' we are a-doin' it. You yourself have made enemies among the very men that used to follow you, an' the Lord only knows whar it will end."

Hoag stifled a groan and struggled to his feet. His legs felt stiff and heavy from inactivity. He stood staring out into the void above the tree-tops. The rocky fastness immediately around was as still as if the spot were aloof from time and space—so still, indeed, that a pebble of the disintegrating cliff being released by the eternal law of change rattled from summit to base quite audibly. From down the mountain-side came boisterous singing. It was Welborne and his supporters.

"D'you hear that?" Purvynes asked, as, gun under arm, he got ready to walk on with his companion.

"Hear what?" Hoag roused himself as from a confused dream.

"Them young devils!" Purvynes chuckled, as if amused. "They need a good lickin'—them boys do. Can't you hear what they are a-singin'?"

"No, I can't. I wasn't payin' no attention."

"Why, it's—"

"Jim Hoag's body lies molderin' in the grave."

Hoag made no answer. He trudged along the rocky path in advance of the other. He stumped his toes occasionally, and was puffing from the exertion. The perspiration stood in visible drops on his furrowed brow. They had reached Hoag's horse, and he was preparing to mount, when a fusillade of pistol-shots, the clatter of horses' hoofs, and loud yells were heard in the distance.

"What's that?" Hoag paused with his hand in the mane of his mount, his foot in the stirrup.

"Oh, it's just them fellows celebratin' their victory. I'll bet they've already made Nape captain. But you can see how they are a-goin' to run things. We'll see the day, Jim, when us older men will be sorry we didn't let up on this business sooner. You know, I believe the klan would 'a' died out long ago if you hadn't took so much pride in it."

"Me?"

"Yes, you, Jim. Over half the members kept in just to curry favor one way or another with you, an' to drink the liquor you furnished on meetin'-nights, an' have som'er's to go."

"I reckon you are mistaken."

"No, I ain't. This thing's been your pet, Jim, but you're lost your grip on it—you have sure. An' you oughtn't to be sorry—I swear you oughtn't to be."

The valley, which he could now see from the back of his horse, was Nature's symbol of infinite peace. From its dark depths rose the dismal hooting of a night-owl, the shrill piping of a tree-frog.

CHAPTER XXII

ABOUT this time Paul paid his first visit to the attractive cottage now occupied by Warren and his wife and sister-in-law. As he entered at the front door he saw his mother in the meadow some distance from the house. Amanda was dusting the new furniture in the little parlor, and, seeing him, she came forward with a flushed, pleased look on her round face.

"Oh, we have got things to goin' scrumptious!" she laughed, as she grasped his hand and drew him into the parlor. "Paul, it's a regular palace. The day the furniture come we all worked till away after dark gettin' things straight. That's the best cook-stove I ever saw, an' you sent enough groceries to last a month. I made your ma go to town an' buy the clothes she needed, too. The storekeeper said the more we ordered the better it would please him, for thar wasn't no limit to your credit. Oh, Paul, I wish I could think it was right."

"But it *is* right," he smiled, reassuringly. "It is right because it makes me happy to be able to do it."

"That's what Ethel Mayfield said—"

"Ethel!" he broke in, his smile subsiding. "Have you seen her? Has she—"

"Oh, yes, she was over yesterday. Paul, she's awfully nice. I don't know when I have ever seen a nicer young lady. She ain't one bit stuck up. She was passin' along by the gate an' stopped an' introduced herself to me an' Addie. She offered to come in an' help fix up the house, said she'd love to the best in the world, but we wouldn't let 'er."

"And you say that she said—" Paul began, tensely, "that she said I—"

"Yes; you see, your ma begun sayin' that she couldn't feel right about lettin' you do so much for us after all that's passed, and you know how Addie is—she set in to cry. That's when I discovered Ethel Mayfield's woman-heart. She choked up 'erself, an' put 'er arm round your ma in the tenderest way, and said—Paul, she said you was the best young man the sun ever shone on. You never heard the like since you was born. It looked like nothin' would stop 'er. The more she went on the more your ma cried, an' that started me, an' we was the silliest bunch o' blubberers you ever saw—wet every rag in sight. I had to change my apron. Ethel said you'd made a different sort o' creature of her from what she used to be. She declared she seed all things with a clearer sight—that thar wasn't any human difficulty you couldn't surmount. She told your ma that she knowed it was a regular joy to you to help 'er, an' that she must let you do it. I declare that girl looked like—I don't know what she *did* look like. She was as nigh an angel as any human I ever met. Her face was as tender as a rose an' her eyes was fairly streamin' with inside light. She kept takin' your ma by the hands an' pettin' 'er, an' tellin' 'er she was pretty. She told us how nigh distracted she'd been over her cousin's death, an' how you'd turned her sorrow into comfort by the beautiful way you looked at it."

"She is very kind," Paul said. "Is my mother coming in?"

"Yes, she'll be in right away. Say, Paul"—Amanda caught his lapel and held on to it—"is thar anything between you an'—I mean—it ain't none o' my business, but it seems to me like Ethel is just the sort o' girl that you would naturally take to, an'—" Paul detached himself from her clinging hold, and essayed a faint smile, while his blood beat furiously in his face.

"You mustn't think of such things," he faltered, in a feeble effort to appear unconcerned. "She and I are good friends, that is all. You see, she is to inherit something from her uncle, and he has set his heart on her marrying a rich young man in Atlanta—a fellow that is all right, too, in every way. She knew him before she knew me, and—well, I am not a marrying man, anyway. I really don't think I ever shall marry. Some men have to stay single, you know."

Amanda recaptured his lapels, and faced him with a warm stare of tenderness. "Paul, if I thought that us three old sticks-in-the-mud was standin' between you an' that purty, sweet girl—young as you are, with life spreadin' out before you like it is—after all your troubles, I—well, I couldn't let you—I just *couldn't!*"

"How silly of you to think of such a thing!" he laughed, freely. "This opportunity to help you all, slight as it is, will be the very making of me."

"It's certainly makin' a man of Jeff," Amanda smiled, through glad tears. "He's plumb different from what he used to be. He talks about you like you was a royal prince. He says he is acceptin' this help only as a loan, an' that he'll pay it back 'fore he dies or break a trace. He rises at daybreak, an' works like a steam-engine till after dark. He's quit singin'—says he's goin' to sell the organ. He's gittin' his health an' strength back, an' holds his head higher. A funny thing happened yesterday. You'd 'a' laughed if you'd been here. He's been talkin' powerful about some'n he heard you say in regard to controllin' the temper an' not hatin' folks, an' he hammers on it constantly. He says his temper has always held 'im down, an' that you naturally would have more respect for 'im if he'd control it. Me an' him happened to be stand-in' at the gate talkin' on that very subject, when we seed Jim Hoag ridin' along toward us. Now, Jeff hadn't met Hoag face to face since we got back, an' knowin' how quick on trigger Jeff was, an' how high an' mighty Hoag holds hisse'f with common folks, I was afraid the two might hitch right then an' thar. I knowed Jeff wouldn't avoid 'im and I was sure Hoag would make 'im mad if he had half a chance, an' so to avoid trouble I said to Jeff: 'Jeff,' said I, 'now is the time for you to practise some o' your preachin'. Meet Jim Hoag like you don't want no more trouble, an' all will be well betwixt you both in future.' I reminded 'im that it was raily his duty, seein' that you git your livin' out o' Hoag an' we was so much benefited."

"And so they made friends," Paul said, eagerly. "I was afraid the old score would revive again."

"Made friends? I'll tell you how they acted an' you kin think what you like," Amanda laughed. "I've seed Jeff in a tight place before, but not one o' that sort. He stood hangin' his head, his lips curlin' an' his eyes flashin', an' all the time Hoag's hoss was a-fetchin' 'im closer an' closer. I seed Jeff makin' a struggle like a man tryin' to come through at the mourner's bench in a revival an' bein' helt back by the devil an' all his imps, but the best side won, an' as Hoag got opposite the gate Jeff tuck a deep breath an' called out, 'Hold on a minute, Jim Hoag, I want a word with you.'"

"Good!" Paul laughed. "It was like pulling eyeteeth, but he got there, didn't he?"

"You wait till I'm through an' you'll see," Amanda smiled broadly, as she stroked her face with her big hand. "Hoag drawed in his hoss an' looked down at Jeff with a face as yaller as a pumpkin an' eyes that fairly

popped out o' their sockets.

"What you want to see me about?" he axed, an' I declare he growled like a bear.

"Why, you see, Jim,' Jeff said, leanin' on the gate, 'me an' you have always sorter been at outs, an' bein' as we are nigh neighbors ag'in I thought I'd come forward like a man an' tell you that, as far as I'm concerned, I'm sorry we hain't been able to git on better before this, an' that I hain't no ill-will any longer, an' am willin' to stack arms and declare peace."

"Good for Jeff!" Paul chuckled; "he unloaded, didn't he?"

"You wait till I git through," Amanda tittered under her red, crinkled hand. "When Jeff got that out Hoag sorter lifted his reins, shoved his heels ag'in' his hoss an' snorted. Then I heerd 'im say: 'You look out for yourself, an' I'll do the same.'

"He was movin' on, when Jeff fairly wrenched the gate off its hinges an' plunged out. In a second he had the hoss by the bridle, an' was jerkin' it back on its haunches.

"Say,' he yelled at Hoag, when the hoss got still, 'that thar's the fust an' only apology I ever made to a livin' man, an' if you don't accept it, and accept it quick, I'll have you off that hoss an' under my feet, whar I'll stomp some politeness into you.'

"Lord, I was scared!" Amanda continued, as she joined in her nephew's laugh; "for Jim Hoag was mad enough to eat a keg o' nails without chawin' 'em. I was on the p'int o' runnin' 'twixt the two when Hoag sobered down."

"I don't want no trouble with you, Jeff,' he said. 'Let loose my bridle. I want to go on home.' "Well, do you *accept*? I heard Jeff yellin' at 'im, while he still hung to the reins.

"Yes, I accept; I don't want no fuss,' Hoag said, an' Jeff let the hoss loose an' stood out o' the way.

"It's a good thing you changed your mind,' he called after Hoag, who was joggin' on. 'I've sorter turned over a new leaf, but I hain't fastened it down any too tight. I could put up with *some* things from you, but you can't spit on my apology.'

Paul laughed almost immoderately. "Socrates and Jesus Christ would have laid down different rules for human conduct if they had known those two men," he said, as he went to the rear door and looked down toward his mother.

Amanda followed him. "Jim Hoag ain't the only person round here that's got a mean spirit," she commented. "I'm thinkin' now about Tobe Williams's wife, Carrie; an' Jeff ain't the only one with a hot temper—I'm thinkin' now about *myself*."

"You!" Paul smiled. "You were always as pleasing as a basket of chips."

"You don't know me, boy." Amanda subdued an inclination to smile. "I don't reckon I git mad oftener than once a year, but when I do I take a day off an' raise enough sand to build a court-house. I've already had my annual picnic since I got back."

"I'm sure you are joking now," Paul said, experimentally, an expression of amused curiosity clutching his face. "You couldn't have got angry at Mrs. Williams."

"Didn't I, though—the triflin' hussy! She driv' by the day we was housed in that pore shack of a cabin, an' put up a tale about needin' somebody to help 'er out with her house-work an' bein' in sech a plight with her big brood o' children that I swallowed my pride an' agreed to help 'er. I mention pride because me'n Carrie went to school together an' had the same beaus. She roped one in, an' is entirely welcome to 'im, the Lord knows if she doesn't. Yes, I swallowed my pride an' went. I never hired out before, but I went. I reckon we was both lookin' at the thing different. I had the feelin' that I was jest, you know, helpin' a old friend out of a tight; an' well, I reckon, from the outcome, that Carrie thought she had hired a nigger wench."

"Oh, no, don't put it that way," Paul protested, half seriously, though his aunt's unwonted gravity amused him highly.

"Well, she acted plumb like it," Amanda averred, her cheeks flushed, her eyes flashing. "All the way out to her house she was talkin' about Jeff's flat come-down, an' Addie's sad looks, an'—an', above all, our cabin. Said thar was a better one behind the barn, on her land, but she believed Tobe was goin' to pack fodder in it, an' so she reckoned we'd as well not apply for it. She kept talkin' about this here new cottage. She'd been through it, she said, an' it was fine, an' no doubt Bob Mayburn would rent it to some rich town family to pass the summers in. In that case she thought we'd naturally feel uncomfortable—she knowed *she* would if she was in our fix, an' have to live right up ag'in' folks that was so different. Take my word for it, Paul, she got me so all-fired hot that I wanted to jump over the buggy-wheels an' walk back home. I'd 'a' done it, too, but for one thing."

"What was that?" Paul inquired, still amused. "Pride," was the half-laughing answer. "Do you know the awkwardest predicament on earth is to git whar you are as mad as old Harry, an' at the same time would rather die on the rack than let it be knowed? Well, that woman had me in that fix. She was playin' with me like a kitten with a dusty June-bug. She knowed what she was sayin' all right, an' she knowed, too, that I wouldn't slap 'er in the mouth—because I was too much of a lady. But if she didn't cut gaps in me an' rub brine in no woman ever clawed an' scratched another."

"Too bad!" Paul said, biting his lips. "I am wondering how it ended."

"You may well wonder," Amanda went on. "I wanted to throw up the job, but was ashamed to let 'er see how mad I was. It was even wiles after we got to her house. She tuck me straight to the kitchen, an' with the air of a queen she p'inted to the nastiest lot o' pots an' pans you ever laid eyes on, an' said she reckoned I'd have to give 'em a good scrubbin' fust, as they was caked with grease. Then she told me what she wanted for supper. Tobe liked string-beans, an' none 'had been fetched from the patch, an' I'd have plenty o' time to pick 'em, an' so on, an' so on. I saw I was in a hole an' tried to make the best of it. But when I come to put the supper on the table that she had told her liddle girl to set the plates on I seed thar was just places fixed for the family. You see, she thought I'd wait till that triflin' gang was through an' set down to scraps. Thar was one other thing Carrie Williams expected to happen, but it didn't take place."

"She expected you to put poison in the food?" Paul jested.

"She expected me to *wait* on 'em—to fetch the grub from the stove to the table an' stick it under their noses, but I didn't. I took my seat on the kitchen door-step. I heard 'er callin', but I was deaf as a post. One of the gals come an' told me her ma said they wanted a hot pone o' bread, an' I told 'er it was in the stove, an' if she didn't hurry it would burn—that I smelt it already. When supper was over Carrie come an' told me they was finished. She said she was sorry all the preserves was ate up, but that the children was greedy an' hard to control when sweet things was in sight. I told her I didn't feel like eatin'—that I never did when I worked over my own cookin', an' I didn't touch a bite. I set in to washin' the dishes an' she hung about, still talkin'. Her main theme was the old times an' how many of our crowd of girls had been unable to keep pace an' float with her, an' the few that was left on top. Then she mentioned you."

"Me! I thought I'd get my share," Paul smiled.

"Oh, she didn't have nothin' but praise for you," Amanda returned. "In fact, she thought that would rankle. She had the idea that you was plumb through with us, an' said it must make us ashamed to be so close to you an' the fine folks at Hoag's. I was tempted to hit 'er betwixt the eyes one good lick to make 'er see straight, but I helt in. I got even, though—oh, I got even!"

"You say you did! Tell me about it," Paul cried, highly amused.

"We was all settin' in the yard," Amanda continued, "an' was jest fixin' to go to bed, when Jeff come, all out o' breath, an' told us the news about what you'd done, an' that I was wanted back home to help move. I ain't sure the Lord will ever forgive me, Paul, but I never felt so good in all my life as I did at the sight o' that woman. She was as limp as a wet rag, an' fairly keeled over. She actually tried to stop Jeff from talkin', but I pinned 'im down an' made 'im tell it over an' over. If I axed 'im one question about the new cottage an' new furniture I did a hundred. I went furdern that. I looked at the house they live in—it's jest a four-room shack, you know, made of up-an'-down boards unpainted an' unsealed—an' axed 'er if it wasn't awful cold in winter, an' if the roof didn't sag too much for safety, an' whar she put the beds when it leaked. The purty part of it was that Tobe (I wish I could 'a' spared him, for he's nice an' plain as an old shoe) kept agreein' with me, an' braggin' on our new house, an' sayin' that he was too hard up to better 'imself. Carrie got so mad she plumb lost her grip, an' told 'im to dry up, an' then she flounced into the house an' wouldn't come out to say good-by. Paul, you may preach your human-love idea till you are black in the face, but if it works on a woman like Carrie Williams it will be when she's tied hand an' foot an' soaked with chloroform. I try not to let this nice place an' my pride in you spoil me. I don't think anybody could consider me stuck-up, but if Carrie Williams calls—which she is sure to do—I'll show 'er every single item about the place, an' remind 'er how much she praised it before we got it."

CHAPTER XXIII

H OAG had become so nervous and low-spirited that he found himself every day waking earlier than usual. The dusky shadows of night were still hovering over the earth one morning in August when, being unable to return to sleep, he rose and went to a window and looked out. He was preparing to shave himself when he happened to see a man leaning against the front fence watching the house attentively.

"It looks like Purvynes," Hoag mused. "I wonder what on earth the fellow wants. This certainly ain't in his regular beat."

Hoag put down his mug and brush, listened to see if Jack and his grandmother in the adjoining room were awake, then, hearing no sound in that part of the house, he cautiously tiptoed out into the corridor, opened the front door, and crossed the veranda to the lawn. He now saw that the man was indeed Purvynes.

"Some new trouble may be brewin'," Hoag surmised, "or he wouldn't be out as early as this." Purvynes saw him approaching and moved along the fence to the gate, where he stood waiting, a stare of subdued excitement blended with other emotions in his dim gray eyes. His hair was tousled, his grizzled head untrimmed, and there were shadows, lines, and angles in his sallow visage.

"Early for you to be so far from home, ain't it?" was Hoag's introductory question.

"I reckon it is, Cap," the man answered, sheepishly, his lips quivering. "I didn't know whether you was here or off in Atlanta, but—but I thought I'd walk over an' see. I've been awake for an hour or more—in fact, I hardly closed my eyes last night. My women folks are nigh distracted, Cap. I was here yesterday, but Cato said you was over at your new mill. I'd 'a' come after supper, if my women folks hadn't been afraid to be left alone in the dark."

"Huh! I see."

There was an ominous pause. It was as if Hoag dreaded further revelations. He felt sure that something decidedly unpleasant lay beneath the man's perturbed exterior. For once in his life Hoag failed to show irritation, and his next question was put almost in the tone of entreaty.

"What's got into you an' them all of a sudden?" he faltered.

"You may well ask it," Purvynes said with a voluminous sigh. "A fellow may try to put on a brave front, an' act unconcerned when trouble's in the wind, but if he's got a gang o' crazy women an' children hangin' on to his shirt-tail he *is* in a fix."

"Well, what is it—what is it?" Hoag demanded, with staccato asperity born of his growing anxiety.

For answer Purvynes fumbled in the pocket of his patched and tattered coat and produced a folded sheet of

foolscap paper which he awkwardly attempted to spread out against the palings of the fence.

"Summoned to court?" Hoag smiled, riding a wave of sudden relief. "Ah, I see—moonshinin'. Well, you needn't let that bother you. We'll all stick together an' swear black is white. I see. You are afeard them young devils may turn ag'in' us out o' spite, but I can fix all that. You just lie low, an'—"

"God knows 'tain't that!" Purvynes held the quivering sheet open. "If that was all I'd not bother; I wouldn't mind goin' to Atlanta again, but we are up ag'in' som'n a sight worse. What do you think o' this paper?"

Hoag took the sheet, and looked at it with a dull, widening stare. It was headed by the crude design of two cross-bones and a skull which his "klan" had used in frightening the negroes with gruesome threats and warnings. Beneath the drawing was the following:

TO AWL IT CONSERNS

This is to inform the grate White mens klan that the Blak Foxes has met in secret session and took axion to protect ther rights. Paisyence has seased to bee a vurture. The white klan has lernt the foxes the trick of how to work in the dark. Wait and see the mighty fall. We know who the Captin is at last. We also know some of his main followers who is workin for his smile and his gold. We don't want his cash. We are after his meat and bones. Hel will take his sole. His body wil hang for crows to peck out the eyes. No power above or below this earth can save him. He wil never know the day or the hour. But his doom is seeled. They need Marse Jimmy down where the worm dyeth not. He has sowed his seed, and his harvest is rype. Woe unto hym and awl his gang.

Signed in the blood of Blak Buck the Captin of the Foxes.

his (Blak X Buck) mark.

The sheet of paper shook, though the morning air was as still as a vacuum. Hoag was as white as death could have made him. He silently folded the paper and handed it back. But Purvynes waved it aside with a dumb gesture of despair.

"Whar did you git it?" finally fell from Hoag's lips.

"It was tacked up on my corn-crib. I seed it from the kitchen window yesterday mornin' 'fore breakfast. I went out an' pulled it down."

Hoag had never attempted a more fragile sneer. "An' you let a puny thing like that scare you out o' your socks," he said, flamboyantly.

Purvynes's hat-brim went down and his eyes were not visible to the desperately alert gaze of his companion. "I can take my own medicine, Cap," he answered, doggedly, "but I can't manage women. They read the thing 'fore I could hide it, an' you know what excited women would do at the sight of a sheet like that. My wife's been ag'in' our doin's all along, anyway."

Hoag perused the sheet again, his putty-like lips moving, as was his habit when reading.

"How do you reckon," he glanced at the drawn face beside him, "how do you reckon they got on to *me* as—as the main leader?"

Purvynes was quite sure he could answer the question. "Nape Welborne's gang give it away. They've been braggin' right an' left about how Nape forced you to back down that night. They've been drunk an' talked 'fore black an' white like a pack o' fools."

"But from *this*," Hoag tapped the fence with the folded sheet, "it looks like the nigger that wrote, this thinks I am *still* the head."

"An' so much the worse," Purvynes moaned, and he clutched the fence nervously as if to steady himself. "You an' me an' all us old members has to suffer for the drunken pranks of them young roustabouts. When they shot up nigger-town last week, an' abused the women an' children, the darkies laid it at our door. In fact, that is the cause of this very move. It was the last straw, as the sayin' is. They've got plumb desperate, an' when niggers work underhand they will resort to anything. It's quar, as my wife says, that we never thought they might turn the tables an' begin our own game."

Hoag shrugged his shoulders, but made no comment. His shaggy brows had met and overlapped. His eyes had the glare of a beast at bay.

"My wife thought"—Purvynes evidently felt that the point was a delicate one, but he made it with more ease than he could have done on any former occasion—"she thought maybe your boy Henry might have got onto you an' talked reckless, but if he did, Cap, it was some time ago, for the boy ain't like he used to be. He's more serious-like. I got it straight from one o' the gang he used to run with that he's really quit his old ways an' gone to work."

"It's Nape Welborne's lay-out," Hoag declared. "They've done it out o' pure spite an' enmity ag'in' me."

Purvynes had averted his eyes; he seemed to feel that the conversation was drifting into useless waters, so far as he was personally concerned. "Well, I just come over. Cap, to ask you what you think I ought to do." he finally got out, as if aided by his clutch on the fence, to which he clung quite automatically.

"*You?*" Hoag emphasized the word.

"Why, yes, me. You see, Cap, my women say they simply won't stay here a single day longer. They are scared as nigh death as any folks you ever saw. That's why I come to you for—for advice an' to ax a favor. I'm in an awful plight. I owe a good deal on my land. My brother is well fixed, out in Texas, you know, an' I can move thar, but I'll have to raise some ready cash. My farm would be good for another loan, an' you are the only money-lender I know. You see, you know why I have to have the money, an' I couldn't explain so well to a bank. So my wife said—"

"I don't care what she said." Hoag's mind seemed to be making rapid flights to and from his own numerous holdings. "If you think *you* got anything at stake, look at me," he plunged, dejectedly. "Why, the blackimps could—could—"

"I ain't carin' about my farm," Purvynes broke in irrelevantly. "It's peace of mind I want, an' freedom from

the awful chatter of my folks. Even the little ones are scared half to death. They've picked up a word here an' thar an' follow me about whimperin' an' beggin' to be tuck to a place of safety. Women may know how to scrub an' cook an' sew, but they can't keep a secret like our'n when they are under pressure like this. The wives of all the old klan—mark my words—will be together before twelve o'clock to-day. They will brand the'r selves an' us by it, but they won't care a red cent. They'd go to the gallows in a bunch if they could talk about it beforehand. Cap, a hundred dollars is all I need, an'—”

“Don't call me Cap no more,” Hoag snapped, angrily, “an' don't ask me for money, either. I hain't got none to lend. Besides, you can't leave your property no more than I can mine. We've got to stay an'—”

“Your wife's dead, Cap—Jim, I mean—an' you kin talk, but my folks will git away from these mountains if they have to foot it on ragged uppers. They simply won't stay. Jim, my trouble is a sight deeper than I've admitted. I—I feel like a dead man that nobody cares enough about to bury. Say, I'm goin' to tell you, an' then I know you will pity me if it is in you to pity *any* man. Jim, I always thought my wife loved me as much as the average woman loves the father of her children; but last night—last night, away late, when she couldn't sleep, she come over to my bed an' set down on the rail an' talked straighter than she ever has in her life. Jim, she said—she said she thought I ought to be willin' to go away for good an' all, an' leave 'er an' the children, since I was responsible for this calamity. She said she was sure her an' the children would be let alone if I'd go clean off an' never show up ag'in, an' that she'd rather work 'er fingers to the bone than be bothered like she is. Lord, Lord, Jim, I felt so awful that I actually cried an' begged for mercy like a whipped child. I'd always thought she was a soft-hearted, lovin' woman, but she was as hard as flint. She said she'd rather never lay eyes on me ag'in than have this thing hangin' over her an' the children. She finally agreed, if I'd git the money from you an' leave at once, that maybe her an' the rest would follow. So that's why I come to see you. Jim, a rich man like you can rake up a small amount like that to accommodate an old—”

“And leave *me* with the bag to hold.” Hoag's misery was eager for any sort of company. “I won't lend you a cent—not a cent!” he snorted. “We've got to—to fight this thing out. No bunch o' lazy niggers can scare the life out o' me.”

“But we are tied hand an' foot, Jim,” Purvynes faltered. “The black brain that writ that warnin' is equal to a white man's when it comes to that sort o' warfare. I know the threat word for word by heart. I can shut my eyes an' see the skull an' bones. Even if we went to law for protection we'd have to show that sheet, an' you wouldn't want to do that as it stands, an' I don't believe all the Governor's guards in the State could help us out, for in these mountains the niggers kin stay under cover an' pick us off one by one as we walk about, like sharpshooters lynin' in the weeds an' behind trees an' rocks. Then thar is a danger that maybe you hain't thought of.”

“What's that?” Hoag asked, with a dumb stare into the other's waxlike countenance.

“Why, if they take a notion they kin poison all the drinkin'-water anywhars about. Niggers don't look far ahead. They wouldn't even think o' the widespread results to them as well as us.”

A desperate look of conviction crept across Hoag's eyes. At this juncture he heard the front door of his house open, and, turning, he saw Jack come out on the veranda and eagerly start down the steps toward him.

“Stay thar!” Hoag waved his hand dejectedly. “I'm comin' up right away.”

Jack paused on the steps, a beautiful figure with supple, slender limbs, high, white brow under waving curls. Even at that distance, and through the lowering mists which lay on the grass like downy feathers dropped from the wings of dawn, the two men marked the boy's expression of startled surprise over being so peremptorily stopped. He sat down on the steps, his beautiful eyes fixed inquiringly on his father.

“I'd send that boy off, anyway,” Purvynes said, as if thinking for himself.

“You say you would!” slowly and from a mouth that twitched. “What do you mean by—that?”

“I mean all the niggers know how you dote on 'im, Jim. I've heard folks say that they didn't believe you ever loved any other human alive or dead. The niggers that got up that warnin' wouldn't hesitate to strike at you even through a purty innocent chap like that.”

Hoag dropped his stare to the ground. He clutched a paling with a pulseless hand and leaned forward. “I reckon maybe you are right,” he muttered. “I've heard of 'em doin' the like, even kidnappin' an' makin' threats of bodily torture.”

Hoag glanced at his son again, and, catching his eyes, he waved his hand and forced a smile. “I'm comin'!” he called out. “See if our breakfast is ready. We'll have it together.”

He was turning away as if forgetful of the caller's presence, when Purvynes stopped him.

“What about that money, Jim?” he inquired, slowly, desperately.

“I can't let you have it,” was Hoag's ultimatum, in a rising tone of blended despair and surliness. “We've got to fix some way to head this thing off an' must stand together. Your folks will have to be reasonable. I'll come over an' talk to—”

“No, no, no, no!” in rapid-fire. “Don't come about, Jim. That would scare 'em worse than ever. They was afraid some nigger might see me here this mornin', an' if you was to come—”

“Huh, I'll be looked on like a leper in a pest-house 'fore long, I reckon!” Hoag snarled, but perhaps not so much from anger as from a sense of the fitness of the remark.

“Well, don't come, Jim,” Purvynes repeated, bluntly. “If you hain't got no money for me, all well an' good, but don't come about. My women are crazy, an' the sight of you wouldn't help at all.”

CHAPTER XXIV

IN the few days immediately following this incident Hoag became convinced that he had reached the gravest crisis of his career. For the first time in his experience his helplessness was as real a thing as had been his prowess in the past. A drab veil reeking with despair seemed to hang between him and every visible object. He looked in stunned amazement at the people who were going on with their daily duties as if nothing serious had happened or was impending. He saw them smile, heard them laugh, and noted their interest in the smallest details.

Death! He had been absolutely blind to its claims, but now it had taken a grim clutch upon his mind. It was made plain by men whom he had seen die—yes, by men whom he had caused to die. Their pleadings rang in his ears, and they themselves seemed to dog his steps like vague shapes from a persistent nightmare.

In some unaccountable way he was conscious of a sense of being less and less attached to his body. There were moments in which he felt that his limbs were dead, while he himself was as vital as ever. He was in a sort of conscious trance, in which his soul was trying to break the bonds of the flesh, and flee to some point of safety which was constantly appearing and vanishing.

Above all, the sight of his child playing about the place was the most incongruous. He avoided joining Jack on the lawn at any time, fearing that the act might result in disaster of some easily comprehensible sort. But within the house he tried to atone for the neglect by a surplus of affection. He would hold the boy in his arms for hours at a time and fondle him as he had never fondled him before. He became desperate in his confinement to the house, and one day he decided that he would visit some of the most faithful of his friends, and on his horse he started out. He rode from farm to farm, but soon noticed that a rare thing was happening. Invariably the women, like awed, impounded cattle, would come to the doors, and with downcast eyes and halting voices inform him that their fathers or husbands were away. At one farm he saw Bert Wilson, the owner, and one of the older members of the klan, on the bank of the little creek which ran through his place, and hitching his horse to the rail fence, Hoag, unnoticed by the farmer, climbed over and approached him. Wilson was fishing, and with his eyes on his rod failed to see Hoag till he was suddenly addressed.

"Hello, what sort o' luck?" Hoag asked, assuming a lightness of tone and mien that was foreign to his habit.

The man was heavy-set, florid, unbearded, and past middle age. He turned suddenly; his blue eyes flashed and glowed; he looked toward the roof of his house above the thicket in the distance and furtively bent his neck to view the road as if fearful of being seen.

"Oh, just so so!" he answered, doggedly.

"What sort o' bait are you usin'?"

"Crickets an' grasshoppers. The traps up at your mill catch all the big fish. Minnows an' suckers are good enough for us common folks, Jim Hoag."

"I'm goin' to do away with them traps, Bert," Hoag said, diplomatically, and he sank down on the grass, and thrusting his hands into his pockets he took out two cigars and some matches. "Have a smoke," he said, holding a cigar toward the fisherman.

"No, thanky." Wilson drew his line from the water and looked at the hook. Hoag noted, with a touch of dismay, that the hook held no vestige of bait, and yet the fisherman gravely lowered it into the water and stood regarding it with a sullen stare.

"Hain't quit smokin', have you?"

Wilson stole another look at the road, and allowed his glance to sweep on to his house. Then he raised his rod, caught the swinging line in a firm grip, and glared at the face in the cloud of blue smoke.

"I ain't a-goin' to use none o' *yore* tobacco, Jim Hoag." The words sank deep into the consciousness of the listener.

"You say you ain't!" Hoag shrank visibly. Desperate compromises filtered into his brain, only to be discarded. "Say, Bert, what's got into you, anyway?"

The fat man hesitated. His cheeks and brow flushed red.

"This much has got into me, Hoag," he began, "an' I'm man enough to speak out open. Us fellows have been followin' your lead like a damned lot o' idiotic sheep. You always talked up protection, protection to our women an' homes, when it now looks like you was just doin' it to feel your importance as a leader in some'n or other. You kept the thing a-goin', rid it like a hobby-hoss. Time after time my judgment told me to stay out o' the raids you instigated, but thar was always a fool notion among us that what one done all had to do or be disgraced, an' so we went on until natural hatred o' you an' your bull-headed game has brought down this calamity. Now, what I ask, an' what a lot more of us ask, is fur you to take your medicine like a man, an' not pull us into the scrape. If you will do this, all well an' good. You are the only one singled out so far, an' if you will stay away from the rest of us, an' not draw fire on us, all may go well; but, Jim Hoag—I reckon it's my Scotch blood a-talkin' now—if you don't do it, as God is my holy witness I wouldn't be astonished to see the old klan rise an'—an' make an example of you, to satisfy the niggers an' show whar we stand. I needn't say no more. You know what I mean. The klan has turned ag'in' you. You fooled 'em a long time; but since you knuckled down to Nape Welborne like you did they believe YOU are a rank coward, an', Jim Hoag, no coward kin force hisse'f on a lot o' men with families when by doin' it he puts 'em all in danger. Most of us believe that if you was shot, or poisoned, an' put plumb out o' the way, this thing would blow over. You kin act fair about this, or you needn't; but if you don't do it you will be *made* to. You fed an' pampered this thing up an' it has turned its claws an' fangs ag'in' you—that is all. I'm desperate myself. You are a rich man, but, by God! I feel like spittin' in your face, as you set thar smokin' so calm when my wife an' children are unable to sleep at night, an' afraid to go to the spring in daytime. Now, I'll say good-momin'. I'm goin' funder down the creek, an' I don't want you to follow me."

"Looky' here, Bert." There was a piteous, newborn frailty in Hoag's utterance. "Listen a minute. I—"

"I'm done with you," Wilson waved his hand firmly. "Not another word. You are in a hell of a plight, but it

don't concern me. Under your rule I was tryin' to protect my family, an' now that I am from under it I'll do the same. My folks come fust with me."

With the sun in his face, his knees drawn close to his chin, Hoag sat and watched the man as he stolidly strode away through the wind-stirred broom-sedge. The drooping willows, erect cane-brake, and stately mullein stalks formed a curtain of green which seemed to hang from the blue dome covered with snowy clouds. When Wilson had disappeared Hoag slowly rose to his feet, and plodded across the field to his horse. Here again, in mounting, he experienced the odd weightiness of his feet and legs, as if his mental unrest had deprived them of all physical vitality, and him of the means of restoring it.

Reaching home, he went to the barn-yard to turn his horse over to Cato. The negro was always supposed to be there at that hour, but though Hoag called loudly several times there was no response. Swearing impatiently, and for the first time shrinking from his own oaths, he took off the bridle and saddle and fed the animal. While he was in the stall he heard a sudden, cracking sound in the loft overhead, and his heart sank like a plummet into deep water. Crouching down under the wooden trough, he drew his revolver and cocked it. For a moment he held his breath. Then the cackling of a hen in the hay above explained the sound, and restoring his revolver to his pocket he went to the house.

Mrs. Tilton was at her churn in the side-gallery. Her slow, downward strokes and easy poise of body seemed wholly apart from the uncanny realm which he occupied alone. She looked up and eyed him curiously over her silver-rimmed spectacles.

"Whar's that nigger Cato?" he demanded.

"I'm afraid he's left for good," she returned. "He's acted odd all day—refused outright to fetch water to the kitchen. I told 'im I'd report to you, but he stood with the most impudent look on his face, an' wouldn't budge an inch. Then I watched an' saw him go in his cabin. Purty soon he come out with a bundle under his arm, an' started toward town. After he was out o' sight I went to his shack an' found that he had taken all his things—every scrap he could call his own. I reckon he's off for good. Aunt Dilly won't talk much, but she thinks it is all due to the raid the mountain men made on the negroes in town the other night. I know you wasn't in *that*, Jim, because you was here at home."

"No, I wasn't in it."

"I certainly am glad of it." The woman seemed to churn the words into her butter. "The whole thing has been run in the ground. It is near cotton-pickin' time, an' if the niggers all leave the country help, won't be had. The crops will rot in the field for the lack o' hands to pick it from the bolls."

Hoag passed on into the house and through the hall into his own chamber. Here the air seemed oppressively warm, the plastered walls giving out heat as from the closed door of a furnace. Throwing off his coat, he sat down before a window. Such a maze and multiplicity of thoughts had never before beset his brain. The incidents of his life, small and large, marched past with the regularity of soldiers. How strange that Sid Trawley's face, ablaze with its new light, should emerge so frequently from amid the others! How odd that he should recall Paul Rundel's notion of giving himself up to the law and suffering the consequences of his supposed crime! And the effect on both men had been astounding. Sid had nothing to fear, and to Paul all good things were falling as naturally as rain from clouds. Then there was Henry, who had suddenly turned about and was making a man of himself.

At this moment a childish voice was heard singing a plantation melody. It was Jack at play on the lawn. Hoag leaned from the window and saw the boy, with hammer and nails, mending a toy wagon. Paul Rundel was entering the gate. Hoag noted the puckered lips of his manager and heard his merry whistle. He saw him pause, tenderly stroke Jack's waving curls, and smile. Who had ever seen a face more thoroughly at peace than this young man's—a smile more spontaneous?

Hoag went to the front door and stood waiting for Paul to approach. The terror within him suggested that the young man might bring fresh news concerning the things he so much dreaded.

"Be careful, Jack," Paul was advising the boy. "If you start to coast down a steep hill in that thing you might not be able to guide it, and—zip! against a tree or stump you'd go, an' we'd have to fish you out among the splinters." This was followed by some low-spoken directions from Paul, in which the listener on the veranda caught the words, "friction," "nuts and bolts," "lubricating oil," and "electric motor."

Then the young man turned, and seeing Hoag he came on. There was a triumphant beam in his eye, an eager flush in his cheeks, as he approached the steps.

"Glad you are at home," he began. "I was going to look you up the first thing."

"Did you want to—see me about—I mean—"

"Yes, I've landed that thing at last—put it through."

"You say you've—" Hoag's thoughts were widely scattered. "You say—"

"Why, the shingle contract, you remember." Paul stared wonderingly. "You know you were afraid the Louisville parties would not sign up at my price, but they have. They take ten car-loads of pine stock at that figure and give us two years to fill the order. But have you"—Paul was studying the man's face—"have you changed your mind? Yesterday you thought—"

"Oh, it's all right—it's splendid!" Hoag's voice was lifeless; he looked away with the fixed stare of a somnambulist; he wiped his brow with his broad hand and dried it on his trousers. "You say they take five cars?"

"They take *ten*," Paul repeated, his elation oozing from him like a vapor. "It will keep our force busy summer and winter and all the extra teams we can get. I've found a place for your idle saw-mill, too—over at the foot of the ridge. I'm sure, when you have time to look over my figures, that you will see plenty of profit for you and good wages for the hands. The men are all tickled. You don't look as if you were pleased exactly, Mr. Hoag, and if anything has happened to change your mind—"

"Oh, I am pleased—I am—I am!" Hoag asseverated. "You've done well—powerful well. In fact, *very* well. I'll glance at your figures some time soon, but not now—not now. I'll leave it all to you," and Hoag retreated into

the house and shut himself in his room.

CHAPTER XXV

HERE was a galvanized sheet-iron mail-box near the gate of the tannery, and in it once a day a carrier passing on horseback placed the letters and papers which came for the family. Little Jack loved to take the key and open the box after the carrier had passed and bring the contents to the house and distribute it to the various recipients. Hoag sat on the veranda one afternoon waiting for Jack, who had just gone to the box, having heard the carrier's whistle. Presently the boy came in at the gate holding several letters in his hands, and he brought them to his father.

"Here's one without a stamp," Jack smiled. "That's funny; I thought all U. S. letters had to have stamps on them."

Hoag saw only that particular envelope in the lot which was laid on his knee.

"It must have been an accident," he muttered. "The stamp may have dropped off."

"More likely that somebody passed along, and put the letter into the box," Jack's inventive mind suggested.

Hoag made no reply. He had already surmised that this might be the case. There was a title prefixed to his name which he had never seen written before, and it held his eyes like the charm of a deadly reptile.

"Captain Jimmy Hoag," was the superscription in its entirety, and the recipient remembered having seen the scrawling script before. Automatically he singled out the letters for Paul and for Ethel and her mother, and sent Jack to deliver them.

When his son had disappeared Hoag rose and crept stealthily back to his room. Why he did so he could not have explained, but he even locked himself in, turning the key as noiselessly as a burglar might have done in the stillness of night. He laid the envelope on the bed and for a moment stood over it, staring down on it with desperate eyes. Then, with quivering, inert fingers he opened it and spread out the inclosed sheet. It bore the same skull and crossbones as the former warning, and beneath was written:

The day and the hour is close at hand. Keep your eye on the clock. We will do the rest.

his (Blak X Buck) mark.

That was all. Hoag took it to the fireplace, struck a match, and was about to ignite the paper, but refrained. Extinguishing the match, he rested a quivering elbow on the mantelpiece, and reflected. What ought he to do with the paper? If it were found on his dead body it would explain things not now generally known. Dead body! How could he think of his dead body? *His* body, white, cold, and lifeless, perhaps with a stare of terror in the eyes! Why, he had never even thought of himself as being like that, and yet what could prevent it now? What?

Some one—Ethel or her mother—was playing the piano in the parlor. Aunt Dilly was heard singing while at work behind the house. Jack ran through the hall, making a healthy boy's usual clatter, and his father heard him merrily calling across the lawn to Paul Rundel that he had left a letter for him on his table.

All this was maddening. It represented life in its full swing and ardor, while here was something as grim and pitilessly exultant as hell itself could devise. Hoag folded the paper in his bloodless hands and sank upon the edge of his bed. He had used his brain shrewdly and skilfully hitherto, and in what way could he make it serve him now? Something must be done, but what? He could not appeal to the law, for he had made his own laws, and they were inadequate. He could not evoke the aid of friends, for they—such as they were—had left him like stampeded cattle, hoping that by his death the wrath of the hidden avenger might be appeased. He could flee and leave all his possessions to others, but something told him that he would be pursued.

When the dusk was falling he went out on the lawn. Ethel and Paul were seated on a rustic bench near the summer-house, and he avoided them. Seeing Mrs. Mayfield at the gate, he turned round behind the house to keep from meeting and exchanging platitudes with her. In the back yard he pottered about mechanically, inspecting his beehives, his chicken-house and dog-kennel, receptive of only one thought. He wondered if he were really losing his mental balance, else why should he be so devoid of resources? He now realized the terrible power embodied in the gruesome warnings his brain had fashioned and circulated among a simple-minded, superstitious people. What he was now facing they had long cowered under. The thought of prayer, as a last resort, flashed into his mind, but he promptly told himself that only fools prayed. Biblical quotations flocked about him as if from his far-off childhood. And such quotations as they were!

"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord," and "What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" These things seemed to be borne to him on the breeze that swept down from the beetling rocks of the mountains which leaned against the star-studded sky.

After an all but sleepless night, Hoag ate breakfast with the family the next morning, and announced his intention of running down to Atlanta for a day or so on business. Paul wanted to ask some questions pertaining to his work, but Hoag swept them aside with a turgid wave of the hand.

"Run it yourself; it will be all right," he said. "Your judgment is as good as mine. I don't feel exactly well here lately. I have headaches that I didn't use to have, an' I think I'll talk to a doctor down thar. I don't know; I say *maybe* I will."

Riding to town, he left his horse at Trawley's stable, and going to the railway station below the Square he strolled about on the platform. A locomotive's whistle several miles up the valley announced that the train was on time. Approaching the window of the ticket-office, which was within the little waiting-room, he found

the opening quite filled by a broad-brimmed farmer's hat, a pair of heavy shoulders on a long body, supported by a pair of gaunt jeans-clothed legs.

"Yes, I'm off for Texas." He recognized Purvynes's voice in cheerful conversation with the agent. "My brother says I ought to come. He's got a good thing for me out thar—land's as black as a hat, an' as rich as a stable-lot a hundred year old. He was so set on havin' me that he lent me the money to go on. So long! Good luck to you!"

The head was withdrawn from the window; a pair of brown hands were awkwardly folding a long green emigrant's ticket, and Purvynes suddenly saw the man behind him.

"Hello, you off?" Hoag hastily summoned a casual tone.

The start, the dogged lowering of the head, the vanishing of Purvynes's smile, were successive blows to the shrinking consciousness of the inquirer.

"Yes, I'm off." Purvynes's eyes were now shifting restlessly. Then he lowered his voice, and a touch of malice crept into it as he added: "You see, I didn't have to do it on your money, nuther, an' you bet I'm glad. It's tainted if ever cash was, an' I want to shake every grain o' Georgia dust off my feet, anyway."

"I'm goin' as far as Atlanta," Hoag said, tentatively. "I may see you on the train."

"My ticket's *second class*." Purvynes shrugged his shoulders. "I'll have to ride in the emigrant-car, next to the engine. I reckon we—we'd better stay apart, Jim, anyhow. I want it that way," he added, in a low, firm tone, and with smoldering fires in his eyes which seemed about to burst into flame.

"All right, all right!" Hoag hastily acquiesced. "You know best," and he turned to the window and bought his ticket. The agent made a courteous remark about the weather and the crops, and in some fashion Hoag responded, but his thoughts were far away.

He found himself almost alone, in the smoking-car. He took a cigar from his pocket, lighted it, and, raising the window, blew the smoke outside. A baggage-truck was being trundled by. He could have put out his hand and touched the heap of trunks and bags with which it was laden. A burly negro was pushing it along. Raising his eyes suddenly, he saw Hoag, and there was no mistaking the startled look beneath the lines of his swarthy face. Another blow had been received. Hoag turned from the window. The train started on, slowly at first, and, going faster and faster, soon was passing through Hoag's property. Never on any other occasion had he failed to survey these possessions with pride and interest. The feeling had died within him. A drab disenchantment seemed to have fallen upon every visible object. All he owned—the things which had once been as his life's blood—had dwindled till they amounted to no more than the broken toys of babyhood.

Beyond his fertile lands and the roofs of his buildings rose a red-soiled hill which was the property of the village. Hoag turned his head to look at it. He shuddered. Tall white shafts shone in the full yellow light. One, distinctly visible, marked the grave of his wife, on which Hoag had spared no expense. There was room for another shaft close beside it. Under it a murdered man would lie. That was inevitable unless something was done—and what could be done? "Death, death, death!" The smooth, flanged wheels seemed to grind the words into the steel rails. They were written on the blue sky along the earth-rimmed horizon. They were whispered from the lowest depths of himself. His blood crept, cold and sluggish, through his veins. A chill seemed to have attacked his feet and ankles and was gradually creeping upward. He remembered that this was said to be the sensation of dying, and he stood up and stamped his feet in vigorous, rebellious terror.

CHAPTER XXVI

BY and by Atlanta was reached. Slowly and with a clanging bell the train crept into the grimy switch-yards bordered by sooty iron furnaces, factories, warehouses, planing-mills, and under street bridges and on into the big depot. Here his ears were greeted with the usual jumble, din, and babble of voices, the escaping of steam, the calls of train-porters. Hoag left the car, joined the jostling human current on the concrete pavement, and was soon in the street outside. Formerly he had ridden to his hotel in a trolley-car, but none was in sight, and seeing a negro cabman signaling to him with a smile and a seductive wave of his whip he went forward and got in.

"Kimball House," he said to the man, and with a snap of the latch the door was closed upon him.

Rumbling over the cobblestones, through the active scene which was bisected by the thoroughfare, he strove in vain to recapture the sensation he had formerly had on such outings—the sensation that he was where enjoyment of a certain sensual sort could be bought. Formerly the fact that he was able to pay for a cab, that he was headed for a hotel where servants would obey his beck and call, where food, drinks, and cigars would be exactly to his taste, and where he would be taken for a man of importance, would have given a certain elation of spirits, but to-day all this was changed.

Had he been driving to an undertaker's to arrange the details of his own burial, he could, not have experienced a more persistent and weighty depression. Indeed, the realization of an intangible fate, of which death itself was only a part, seemed to percolate through him. His body was as dead as stone, his soul never more alive, more alert, more desperate.

At the desk in the great noisy foyer of the hotel, where the clerks knew him and where he paused to register, he shrank from a cordiality and recognition which hitherto had been welcome enough. Even the clerks seemed to be ruthless automatons in whose hands his fate might rest. As one of them carelessly penciled the number of his room after his signature, and loudly called it out to a row of colored porters, he

had a sudden impulse to silence the voice and whisper a request for another room the number of which was to be private; but he said nothing, and was led away by a bell-boy.

They took the elevator to the fifth floor. The boy, carrying his bag, showed him to a chamber at the end of a long, empty corridor. The servant unlocked the door, threw it open, and, going in, put down the bag and raised the sash of the window, letting in the din of the street below. Then he waited for orders.

"A pint of best rye whisky, and ice water!" Hoag said. "Bring 'em right away, and some cigars—a dozen good ones. Charge to my account."

"All right, boss," the porter bowed and was gone. Hoag sat down by the window and glanced out. He noticed a trolley-car bound for a pleasure-resort near the city. It had been a place to which on warm days he had enjoyed going. There was an open-air theater there, and he had been fond of getting a seat in the front row, and smiling patronizingly at the painted and powdered players while he smoked and drank. But this now was like a thing which had lived, died, and could not be revived. He had, for another amusement, lounged about certain pool-rooms and bucket-shops, spending agreeable days with men of wealth and speculative tendencies—men who loved a game of poker for reasonable stakes and who asked his advice as to the future market of cotton or wheat; but from this, too, the charm had flown.

"What is a man profited—" The words seemed an echo from some voice stilled long ago—a voice weirdly like that of his mother, who had been a Christian woman. The patriarchal countenance of Silas Tye, that humble visage so full of mystic content and placid certitude, stood before his mind's eye. Then there was Paul, a younger disciple of the ancient one. And, after all, what a strange and wonderful life had opened out before the fellow! Why, he had nothing to avoid, nothing to regret, nothing to fear.

The bell-boy brought the whisky and cigars, and when he had gone Hoag drank copiously, telling himself that the stimulant would restore his lost confidence, put to flight the absurd fancies which had beset him. He remained locked in his room the remainder of the afternoon. It was filled with the smoke of many cigars, and his brain was confused by the whisky he kept drinking. Looking from the window, he saw that night had fallen. The long streets from end to end were ablaze with light. Groping to the wall, he finally found an electric button and turned on the current. He had just gone back to the window when there was a rap on his door. He started, fell to quivering as from the sheer premonition of disaster, and yet he called out:

"Come in!"

It was the bell-boy.

"A letter for you, sir," he announced, holding it forward. "A colored gen'man lef' it at de desk jes' er minute ergo."

Hoag had the sensation of falling from a great height in a dizzy dream. "Whar is he?" he gasped, as he reached for the envelope.

"He's gone, sir. He tol' de clerk ter please have it tuck up quick, dat it was some important news, an' den he went off in er hurry."

"Did—did you know 'im?" Hoag fairly gasped.

"Never seed 'im befo', sir; looked ter me like er country nigger—didn't seem ter know which way ter turn."

When the boy had gone Hoag looked at the inscription on the letter. He had seen the writing before.

"Captin Jimmy Hoag, Kimball House, City of Atlanta," was on the outside. He sank down into his chair and fumbled the sealed envelope in his numb fingers. His brain was clear now. It had never been clearer. Presently he opened the envelope and unfolded the sheet.

It ran as follows:

One place is as good as another. You cannot git away. We got you, and your time is short. Go to the end of the earth and we will be there to meet you. By order of his (Blak X Buck) mark.

With the sheet crumpled in his clammy hand, Hoag sat still for more than an hour. Then he rose, shook himself, and took a big drink of whisky. He resolved that he would throw off the cowardly paralysis that was on him and be done with it. He would go out and spend the evening somewhere. Anything was better than this self-imprisonment in solitude that was maddening.

Going down to the office, he suddenly met Edward Peterson as he was turning from the counter. The young man smiled a welcome as he extended his hand.

"I was just going up to your room," he said. "I happened to see your name on the register while I was looking for an out-of-town customer of ours who was due here to-day. Down for long?"

"I can't say—I raily can't say," Hoag floundered. "It all depends—some few matters to—to see to."

"I was going to write you," the banker continued, his face elongated and quite grave. "I regard you as a friend, Mr. Hoag—I may say, as one of the best I have. I'm sure I've always looked after your interests at this end of the line as carefully as if they had been my own."

"Yes, yes, I know that, of course." Hoag's response was a hurried compound of impatience, indifference, and despair.

Peterson threw an eager glance at some vacant chairs near by and touched Hoag's arm. "Let's sit down," he entreated. "I want to talk to you. I just can't put it off. I'm awfully bothered, Mr. Hoag, and if anybody can help me you can." Hoag allowed himself to be half led, half dragged to the chair, and he and his companion sat down together.

"It's about Miss Ethel," Peterson went on, desperately, laying an appealing hand on Hoag's massive knee. "The last time I saw her at your house I thought she was friendly enough, but something is wrong now, sure. She won't write often, and when she does her letters are cold and stiff. I got one from her mother to-day. Mrs. Mayfield seems bothered. She doesn't seem fully to understand Miss Ethel, either."

"I don't know anything about it." Hoag felt compelled to make some reply. "The truth is, I haven't had time to—talk to Eth' lately, and—"

"But you told me that you *would*." Peterson's stare was fixed and full of suppressed suspense. "I've been

depending on you. My—my pride is—I may say that my pride is hurt, Mr. Hoag. My friends down here consider me solid with the young lady, and it looks as if she were trying to pull away and leave me in the lurch. I don't see how I can stand it. I've never been turned down before and it hurts, especially when folks have regarded the thing as practically settled. Why—why, my salary has been raised on the strength of it."

Hoag's entire thoughts were on the communication he had just received. He expected every moment to see his assassin stalk across the tiled floor from one of the many entrances and fire upon him. Peterson's voice and perturbation were as vexatious as the drone of a mosquito. Of what importance was another's puppy love to a man on the gallows looking for the last time at the sunshine? He rose to his feet; he laid his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"You must let me alone to-night," he bluntly demanded. "I've got a matter of important business on my mind and I can't talk to you. You must, I tell you; you must!"

"All right, all right!" Peterson stared and gasped as if smitten in the face. "I'll see you in the morning. You'll come around to the bank, won't you?"

"Yes, yes—in the morning. I'll be round." When he was alone Hoag strolled back to the bar-room. He familiarly nodded to the barkeeper, and smiled mechanically as he called for whisky. He drank, lighted a cigar, leaned for an instant against the polished counter, and then, seeing a man entering whom he knew and wished to avoid, he turned back into the foyer. Presently he went to the front door and glanced up and down the street. A cab was at the edge of the sidewalk, and the negro driver called out to him:

"Ca'iage, boss? Any part de city."

"All right, I'm with you," Hoag went to the cab, whispered an address, got in, and closed the door. With a knowing smile the negro mounted his seat and drove away. At the corner he turned down Decatur Street, and presently drove into a short street leading toward the railroad. Here the houses on either side of the way had red glass in the doors, through which crimson rays of light streamed out on the pavement. The cab was about to slow up at one of the houses when Hoag rapped on the window. The driver leaned down and opened the door.

"What is it, boss?"

"Take me back to the hotel," was the command.

The driver paused in astonishment, then slowly turned his horse and started back.

"It might happen thar, and Jack would find out about it," Hoag leaned back and groaned. "That would never do. It is bad enough as it is, but that would be worse. He might grow up an' be ashamed even to mention me. Henry is tryin' to do right, too, an' I'd hate for him to know."

CHAPTER XXVII

AT twelve o'clock at night, two days later, Hoag returned to Grayson. It was warm and cloudy, and when he left the train he found himself alone on the unlighted platform. No one was in sight, and yet he felt insecure. He told himself, when the train had rumbled away, that it would be easy for an assassin to stand behind the little tool-house, the closed restaurant, or the railway blacksmith's shop and fire upon him. So, clutching his bag in his cold fingers, he walked swiftly up to the Square. Here, also, no one was in sight, and everything was so still that he could almost fancy hearing the occupants of the near-by hotel breathing. He turned down to Sid Trawley's stable to get his horse. The dim light of a murky lantern swinging from a beam at the far end shone in a foggy circle. The little office on the right was used by Trawley as a bedroom. The door was closed, but through the window a faint light was visible, and there was a sound within as of a man removing his shoes.

"Hello, Sid, you thar?" Hoag called out.

"Yes, yes; who's that?"

Hoag hesitated; then stepping close to the window, he said, in a lower tone: "Me—Jim Hoag; I want my hoss, Sid."

"Oh, it's *you*; all right—all right!"

The sound in the room was louder now, and then Trawley, without coat or hat, his coarse shirt gaping at the neck, opened the door and came out.

"You got here quick, I'll swear," the liveryman ejaculated. "Surely you wasn't in Atlanta like they said you was, or you couldn't 'a' got here as soon as this."

"Soon as this! What do you mean? I am just from Atlanta."

"Then they didn't telegraph you?"

"No; what do you mean? I hain't heard a word from here since I left." Hoag caught his breath, thrust his hands into his pockets, and stood, openmouthed.

"You don't say! Then, of course, you couldn't know about Henry's trouble?"

"No, I tell you I'm just back. What's wrong?"

"It happened about nine o'clock to-night," Trawley explained. "In fact, the town has just quieted down. For a while I expected the whole place to go up in flames. It was in the hands of the craziest mob you ever saw—Nape Welborne's gang."

"What about Henry? Was he hurt, or—"

"Oh, he's all right now, or was when me'n Paul Rundel, an' one or two more friends put 'im to bed in the hotel. Doctor Wynn says he is bruised up purty bad, but no bones is broke or arteries cut."

"Another fight, I reckon!" Hoag was prepared to dismiss the matter as too slight for notice in contrast to his far heavier woes.

"Yes, but this time you won't blame him, Jim. In fact, you are the one man on earth that will stand up for 'im if thar's a spark o' good left in you. He was fightin' for you, Jim Hoag. I used to think Henry didn't amount to much, but I've changed. I take off my hat to 'im, an' it will stay off from now on."

"Fighting for *me*?" Hoag's fears gathered from many directions and ruthlessly leaped upon him.

"Yes, it seems that Nape Welborne had it in for you for some reason or other, an' you bein' away he determined to take it out on your boy. I knowed trouble was brewin', an' I got Henry to come down here away from the drinkin' crowd in front o' his store. Henry has been powerfully interested in some o' the things Paul Rundel an' me believe here lately about the right way to live, an' me'n him was talkin' about it. We was gettin' on nice an' quiet in our talk when who should come but Nape an' his bloodthirsty lay-out, fifteen or twenty strong. You know Nape, an' you no doubt understand his sneakin', underhanded way of pickin' a fuss. He took a chair thar in front, an' though he knowed Henry was listenin' he begun on you. What he didn't say, along with his oaths and sneers, never could 'a' been thought of. He begun gradual-like an' kept heapin' it on hot an' heavy, his eyes on Henry all the time, an' his stand-by's laughin' an' cheerin' 'im. I never saw such a look on a human face as I seed on your boy's. Seemed like he was tryin' to hold in, but couldn't. I pulled him aside a little, an' told him to remember his good resolutions an' to try to stay out of a row ag'in' sech awful odds; but lookin' me straight in the eye he said:

"A man can't reform to do any good, Sid, an' be a coward. He's insulting my father, an' I can't stand it. I can't, and I won't!"

Trawley paused an instant, and Hoag caught his breath.

"He said that, did he—Henry said that?"

"Yes, I tried to pacify him, knowin' that he wouldn't stand a ghost of a chance ag'in' sech odds, but nothin' I said had the slightest effect on 'im. He pulled away from me, slow an' polite like. He thanked me as nice as you please, then he went straight toward Welborne. He had stood so much already that I reckon Nape thought he was goin' to pass by, to get away, an' Nape was beginnin' to laugh an' start some fresh talk when Henry stopped in front of him suddenly an' drawed back his fist an' struck 'im a blow in the mouth that knocked Nape clean out o' his chair. Nape rolled over ag'in the wall, then sprung up spiffin' blood an' yellin', an' the two had it nip an' tuck for a minute, but the gang wouldn't see fair-play. They was all drunk an' full o' mob spirit an' they closed in on the boy like ants on a speck o' bread an' begun to yell, 'Lynch 'im, lynch 'im!'

"It was like flint-sparks to powder in the pan. It was the wildest mix-up I ever saw, and I have seed a good many in my day. Henry was in the middle duckin' down, striking out whenever he could, an' callin' 'em dirty dogs and cowardly cutthroats. They meant business. They drug the poor boy on to the thicket back of the Court House an' stopped under a tree. Some fellow had got one of my hitchin' ropes, an' they flung it 'round Henry's neck, and tied his hands and feet. I thought it was up with 'im, when an unexpected thing happened. Paul Rundel rid up on a hoss, an' jumped down and sprung in the middle of the mob. I was doin' all I could, but that wasn't nothin'. I saw Paul holdin' up his hands, an' beggin' 'em to listen for a minute. They kept drownin' 'im out by the'r crazy yells, but after a while Paul caught the'r attention, an' with his hands on Henry's shoulders he begun to talk. Jim Hoag, as God is my judge, I don't believe thar ever was made a more powerful orator than that very young feller. His words swept through that crowd like electricity from a dynamo. I can't begin to tell you what he said. It was the whole life an' law of Jesus packed into explodin' bomb-shells. You'd 'a' thought he was cryin', from his tender face, but his eyes was gleamin' like shootin'-stars, an' he was mad enough to fight a buzz-saw. Some fellow in the gang said, 'Git away from that man, Rundel, or I'll shoot you!' an' Paul laughed, an' said, 'Fire away, my friend, but see that you don't hit yourself while you are at it!'

"Then somebody knocked the pistol down an' Paul went on talkin'. One by one the crowd got ashamed and sluffed off, an' presently just me an' Paul an' Henry an' one or two more was left. We took Henry to the hotel an' got a room for 'im, an' made 'im go to bed."

Trawley ceased speaking. Hoag stood with downcast eyes. He had nothing to say.

"Mark my word," Trawley added, confidently, "the day o' mobs hereabouts is over. This was the straw that breaks the camel's back. The old klan is down an' out, an' Paul Rundel will settle the young gang. They respect 'im. They can't help it, an' he told me he was goin' to make it his chief aim to crush it out."

Hoag remained silent and Trawley went to a stall in the rear and brought his horse forward.

"You ain't goin' in to see Henry 'fore you go out, are you?" he asked, as he released the bridle-reins.

"Not to-night," was the reply. "He may be 'asleep. I'll—I'll see 'im, I reckon, to-morrow."

Hoag thrust a clumsy foot into the wooden stirrup, and bent his knees as if to mount, but failed. There was a block near by, and he led his horse to it, and from the block finally got into the saddle.

"Good night," he said, and he rode away. At the street-corner he took out his revolver and, holding it in one hand, he urged his horse into a gallop. From every fence-corner or dark clump of bushes on the roadside he expected to see armed men arise and confront him.

ONE morning, three days later, as Paul was writing in his room his employer came in holding a sheet of paper in his hand. His face was bloated, his eyes bloodshot; he had lost flesh and quivered in every limb and muscle.

"I want to ask a favor," he said, in a tone which was almost that of pleading humility.

"What is it? I'm at your service," the young man said, politely indicating the vacant chair beside the table.

Hoag caught the back of the chair as if to steady himself, but declined to sit down. He made a dismal failure of a smile of unconcern. "You needn't think I'm gittin' ready to die by this move o' mine," he began, "but I think any sensible man ought to be prepared for any possible accident to him. I've made my will, an' I want you to witness it. It won't be contested, and your name will be sufficient."

"Oh, I see." Paul was mystified, but he took the document from the nerveless hand and spread it open on the table.

"You needn't bother to read it through." Hoag's voice trailed away toward indistinctness, and he coughed and cleared his throat. "I've made an even divide of all my effects betwixt Jack an' Henry an' Eth', an'—an' I've specified that the business—in case o' my death—is to run on under your care till Jack is of age—that is, if you are willin': you to draw whatever pay you feel is reasonable or is fixed by the law."

"Of course that is agreeable," Paul answered, "though I shall count on your aid and advice for a good many years, I am sure."

Hoag blinked. He swung on the chair a moment, then he added:

"There is one more thing, an' I hope you won't object to that, neither. It's about Jack. The child is at the age when he kin either grow up under good or—or what you might call bad influence, an' somehow I want—I've studied over it a lot lately—an' I want to take the thing in time. You don't believe exactly like other folks, but you are on the safe side—the safest, I might say. Jack thinks the sun rises an' sets in you"—Hoag's voice shook slightly—"I reckon it's because you treat the little fellow so friendly an' nice, an' it struck me that in case of any—you know—any possible accident to me that I'd like for you to be his guardian."

"His *guardian*? I! Why, Mr. Hoag—"

"Never mind; I know what you are goin' to say. You think you are too young, I reckon, but I've thought about it a lot, an' I really would feel better in—in my mind if you'd agree. I ain't—I can't say I am"—Hoag attempted a laugh of indifference—"actually countin' on the grave right *now*, but a feller like me has enemies. In fact, I may as well say I *know* I have some, an' they wouldn't hesitate to settle me if they had a fair chance. I've writ it all down thar, an' I'm goin' to sign it an' I want you to witness my signature."

"Very well, Mr. Hoag. I feel highly honored, and I'll do my best to prove worthy of the trust you place in me."

"I ain't a-worryin' about that. You are a plumb mystery to me. Sometimes I think you are more'n human. I know one thing—I know you are all right." Hoag's massive hand shook as he dipped a pen, leaned down, and wrote his name. He stood erect and watched Paul sign his name opposite it.

"You take care of it." Hoag waved his hand. "Put it in the safe at the warehouse. I can't think of anything else right now. If—if I do, I'll mention it."

"I have an order for several grades of leather from Nashville," Paul began, picking up a letter on the table, "and I want to consult you about—"

"I'd rather you wouldn't." A sickly look of despair had settled on the heavy features. "I'm willin' to trust your judgment entirely. What you do will be all right. You see—you see, somehow it is a comfort at my time o' life—an' harassed like I am—to feel that I ain't obliged to bother about so many odds an' ends."

"Very well, as you think best," Paul answered. "I'll do all I can."

Hoag was seated on the watering-trough in the barn-yard a little later, his dull gaze on the sunlit mountain-side, when two soft, small hands were placed over his eyes from behind and he felt the clasp of a tender pair of arms around his neck.

"Who's got you?" a young voice asked, in a bird-like ripple of merriment.

"Jack!" Hoag answered, and he drew the boy into his lap, stroked his flowing tresses, and held him tightly against his breast.

The child laughed gleefully. He sat for a moment on the big, trembling knee; then, seeing a butterfly fluttering over a dungheap, he sprang down and ran after it. It evaded the outstretched straw hat, and Hoag saw him climb over the fence and dart across the meadow. Away the lithe creature bounded—as free as the balmy breeze upon which he seemed to ride as easily as the thing he was pursuing. Hoag groaned. His despair held him like a vise. On every side hung the black curtains of his doom. All nature seemed to mock him. Birds were singing in the near-by woods. On the sloping roof of the bam blue and white pigeons were strutting and cooing. On the lawn a stately peacock with plumage spread strode majestically across the grass.

To avoid meeting Jack again, Hoag passed out at the gate, and went into the wood, which, cool, dank, and somber, stretched away toward the mountain. Deeper and deeper he got in the shade of the great trees and leaning cliffs and boulders till he was quite out of sight or hearing of the house. The solitude and stillness of the spot strangely appealed to him. For the first time in many days he had a touch of calmness. The thought came to him that, if such a thing as prayer were reasonable at all, a spot like this would make it effective.

Suddenly, as he stood looking at a cliff in front of him, he fancied that the leaves and branches of an overhanging bush were stirring. To make sure, he stared fixedly at it, and then he saw a black face emerge, a face that was grimly set in satisfaction. Was he asleep, and was this one of the numerous fancies which had haunted him in delirium? Yes, for the face was gone, the leaves of the bush were still. And yet, was it gone? Surely there was renewed activity about the bush which was not visible in its fellows. What was it that was slowly emerging from the branches like a bar of polished steel? The sunlight struck it and it flashed and blazed steadily. The bush swayed downward and then held firm. There was a puff of blue smoke. Hoag felt a stinging sensation over the region of his heart. Everything grew black. He felt himself falling. He heard an

exultant laugh, which seemed to recede in the distance.

CHAPTER XXIX

IT was a few weeks after Hoag's burial. Ethel had been for a walk and was nearing home. At the side of the road stood a sordid log cabin, one of the worst of its class. In the low doorway leaned a woman with a baby in her arms. She was under twenty-five years of age, and yet from her tattered dress, worn-out shoes, scant hair, and wan, wearied face she might have passed as the grandmother of her four or five little children playing about the door-step.

Catching her eye, Ethel bowed and turned in toward the hut. As she did so, the woman stepped down and came forward. The children, forsaking their play, followed and clung to her soiled skirt, eying Ethel's black dress and hat with the curiosity peculiar to their ages and station. The woman's husband, David Harris, had been confined to his bed since the preceding winter, when he had been laid up by an accident due to the falling of a tree while at work for Hoag on the mountain, and Ethel and her mother had shown him and his wife some thoughtful attention.

"I stopped to ask how Mr. Harris is," Ethel said. "My mother will want to know."

"He's a good deal better, Miss Ethel," the woman replied, pulling her skirt from the chubby clutch of a little barefooted girl.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" Ethel cried. "I suppose his new medicine is doing him good?"

"No, he hasn't begun on it yet," Mrs. Harris answered. "The old lot ain't quite used up yet. I just think it is due to cheerfulness, Miss Ethel. I never knowed before that puttin' hope in a sick body would work such wonders, but it has in Dave."

"He has been inclined to despondency, hasn't he?" Ethel rejoined, sympathetically. "My mother said she noticed that the last time we were here, and tried to cheer him up."

"That was just one thing that could cheer 'im, an' that happened."

"I'm glad," Ethel said, tentatively "He seemed to worry about the baby's sickness, but the baby is well now, isn't she?" Ethel touched the child under the chin and smiled into its placid blue eyes.

"No, it wasn't the baby," the wife went on. "Dave got some'n off his mind that had been worry-in' him ever since Paul Rundel got home an' took charge o' Mr. Hoag's business. That upset 'im entirely, Miss Ethel—he actually seemed to collapse under it, an' when Mr. Hoag died he got worse."

"But why?" Ethel groped, wonderingly.

"It was like this," the woman answered. "Long time ago, when Paul an' Dave was boys together, they had a row o' some sort. Dave admits that him and his brother, Sam, who was sent off for stealin' a hoss, two year ago, acted powerful bad. They teased Paul an' nagged 'im constantly, till Paul got a gun one day an' threatened to kill 'em if they didn't let 'im alone. Then right on top o' that Paul had his big trouble an' run off, an' him an' Dave never met till—"

"I see, but surely Paul—" Ethel began, perplexed, and stopped suddenly.

"I was comin' to that, Miss Ethel. You see, Dave had a good regular job cuttin' an' haulin' for Mr. Hoag, an' until Paul was put in charge he expected, as soon as he was strong enough, to go back to work again. But the report went out, an' it was true, that Mr. Hoag had turned all the hirin' of men over to Paul an' refused to take a single man on his own hook."

"Oh, I see, and your husband was afraid—"

"He was afraid Paul had a grudge ag'in' 'im, Miss Ethel. He talked of nothin' else, an' it looked like he dreamed of nothin' else. I used to catch 'im cryin' as he nussed the baby for me while I was fixin' 'im some'n to eat. He kept say in' that the Lord was punishin' 'im for the way he done Paul. He said no man with any spirit would hire a fellow under them circumstances, an' he couldn't expect it. He said Paul was plumb on top now since Mr. Hoag's gone, an' had a right to crow. I begged 'im to let me tell Paul how he felt about it, but he wouldn't hear to it; he was too proud. Besides, he said, no brave man would respect another for apologizin' at such a late day when he was after a favor. So he just bothered an' bothered over it till he quit eatin' an' begun to talk about bein' buried." Here the woman's voice quivered. "He kept sayin' he didn't want me to spend money on layin' 'im away. He got so troubled about that one thing that he begged Zeke Henry, who is a carpenter, you know, to agree to make 'im some sort of a cheap box to be put in so that I wouldn't go to town an' git a costly one on a credit when the time come."

"How sad—how very sad!" Ethel exclaimed. "And then Paul must have—of course, you told Paul—."

"No, I wouldn't do that," the woman broke in. "Dave would 'a' been mad; but one day, about a week ago, I was out in the thicket across the road pickin' up sticks to burn when Paul come along. I used to live over the mountain before he went off, an' so I thought he didn't know me. I thought he was goin' by without speakin' to me, for it looked like he was tryin' to overtake a wagon load o' lumber right ahead; but when he seed me he stopped an' raised his hat an' stood with it in his hand while he asked me how Dave was. He said he'd just heard he was so bad off, an' was awful sorry about it.

"I told 'im how Dave's health was, but I didn't let on about how he was worryin'." Then Paul studied a minute, an' it looked to me like he was actually blushin'. 'I wonder,' he said, 'if Dave would let me go in an' see 'im. I've met nearly all of the boys I used to know, an' have been hopin' he'd be out so I could run across 'im.'"

"That was just like Paul," Ethel said, warmly. "And of course he saw your husband?"

The woman shifted the baby from her arms to her gaunt right hip. Her eyes glistened and her thin lips quivered. "You'll think I'm silly, Miss Ethel." She steadied her voice with an effort. "I break down an' cry ever time I tell this. I believe people can cry for joy the same as for grief if it hits 'em just right. I took Paul to the door, an' went in to fix Dave up a little—to give 'im a clean shirt an' the like. An' all that time Dave was crazy to ask what Paul wanted, but was afraid Paul would hear 'im, an' so I saw him starin' at me mighty pitiful. I wanted to tell him that Paul was friendly, but I didn't know how to manage it. I winked at 'im, an' tried to let 'im see by my cheerfulness that it was all right with Paul, but Dave couldn't understand me. Somehow he thought Paul might still remember the old fuss, an' he was in an awful stew till Paul come in. But he wasn't in doubt long, Miss Ethel. Paul come in totin' little Phil in his arms—he'd been playin' with the child outside—an' shuck hands with Dave, an' set down by the bed in the sweetest, plainest way you ever saw. He kept rubbin' Phil's dirty legs—jest wouldn't let me take him, an' begun to laugh an' joke with Dave over old boyhood days. Well, I simply stood there an' wondered. I've seen humanity in as many shapes as the average mountain woman o' my age an' sort, I reckon, but I never, never expected to meet a man like Paul Rundel in this life. He seemed to lift me clean to the clouds, as he talked to Dave about the foolishness of bein' blue an' givin' up to a sickness like his'n. Then like a clap o' thunder from a clear sky he told Dave in an off-hand way, as if it wasn't nothin' worth mentionin', that he wanted 'im to hurry an' git well because he had a job for 'im bossin' the hands at the shingle-mill. Miss Ethel, if the Lord had split the world open an' I saw tongues o' fire shootin' up to the skies I wouldn't 'a' been more astonished.

"Do you really mean that, Paul?" I heard Dave ask; an' then I heard Paul say, I certainly do, Dave, an' you won't have to wait till you are plumb well, either, for you kin do that sort o' work just settin' around keepin' tab on things in general.' An' so, Miss Ethel, that's why Dave's gittin' well so fast. It ain't the medicine; it's the hope an' joy that Paul Rundel put in 'im. They say Paul has got some new religion or other, an' I thank God he has found it. Love for sufferin' folks fairly leaks out of his face an' eyes. Before he left he had every child we have up in his lap, a-tellin' 'em tales about giant-killers an' hobgoblins an' animals that could talk, an' when he went off he left Dave cryin' like his heart was breakin'."

Ethel walked slowly homeward. From a small, gray cloud in the vast blue overhead random drops of rain were falling upon the hot dust of the road. As she neared the house she saw her mother waiting for her at the front gate with a letter in her hand.

"I wondered where you were," Mrs. Mayfield said, as she held the gate ajar for her daughter to pass through. "You know I can't keep from being uneasy since your poor uncle's death."

"I'm not afraid," Ethel smiled. She noticed that her mother had folded the letter tightly in her hand and seemed disinclined to refer to it.

"Who is your letter from?" the girl questioned, as they walked across the lawn toward the house.

"Guess," Mrs. Mayfield smiled, still holding the letter tightly.

"I can't imagine," Ethel answered, abstractedly, for she was unable to detach herself from the recital she had just heard.

Mrs. Mayfield paused, looked up at the threatening cloud, and then answered, "It is from Mr. Peterson."

"Oh!" Ethel avoided her mother's fixed stare. "I owe him a letter."

"From this, I judge that you owe him several," Mrs. Mayfield answered in a significant tone. "Ethel, I am afraid you are not treating him quite fairly."

"Fairly! Why do you say that, mother?" Ethel showed some little vexation. Touches of red appeared in her cheeks and her eyes flashed.

"Because you haven't answered his recent letters, for one thing," was the reply. "You know, daughter, that I have never tried, in the slightest, to influence you in this matter, and—"

"This *matter!*" A rippling and yet a somewhat forced laugh fell from the girl's curling lips. "You speak as if you were referring to some business transaction."

"You know what I mean," Mrs. Mayfield smiled good-naturedly. "Before we came here this summer, while Mr. Peterson was so attentive to you in Atlanta, I told you that he had plainly given me to understand that he was in love with you, and wished to pay his addresses in the most serious and respectful way."

"Well?" Ethel shrugged her shoulders. "I have let him come to see me oftener, really, than any of my other friends, and—"

"But that isn't all he wants, and you are well aware of it," the mother urged. "He says you don't write to him as freely and openly as you once did—he has acted very considerately, I think. Owing to your uncle's death he did not like to intrude, but now he can't really understand you, and is naturally disturbed."

"So he has written to *you*?" Ethel said, crisply, almost resentfully.

"Yes, he has written to me. I am not going to show you his letter. The poor fellow is deeply worried. The truth is, as he says, that most of your set down home look on you—"

"As his property, I know," Ethel flashed forth. "Some men are apt to allow a report like that to get circulated. The last time he was here he dropped half a dozen remarks which showed that he had no other thought than that I was quite carried away with him."

Mrs. Mayfield faced the speaker with a gentle smile of perplexity. "You know, dear, that I firmly believe in love-matches, and if I didn't think you could really love Mr. Peterson I'd never let you think of marrying him; but he really is such a safe, honorable man, and has such brilliant prospects, that I'd not be a natural mother if I were not hopeful that you—"

"You mustn't bother with him and me, mother," Ethel said, wearily. "I know all his good points, and I know some of his less admirable ones; but I have some rights in the matter. I have really never encouraged him to think I would marry him, and it is because—well, because his recent letters have been just a little too confident that I have not answered. I can't bear that sort of thing from a man, and I want him to know it."

"Well, I'm going to wash my hands of it," Mrs. Mayfield said, smiling. "I want you to be happy. You have

suffered so keenly of late that it has broken my heart to see it, and I want your happiness above all. Then there is something else."

"Oh, something else?" Ethel echoed.

"Yes, and this time I am really tempted to scold," the mother said, quite seriously. "My dear, I am afraid you are going to make more than one man unhappy, and this one certainly deserves a better fate."

Ethel avoided her mother's eyes. Her color deepened. Her proud chin quivered.

"What do you mean?" she faltered.

"I mean that I am afraid Paul Rundel is in love with you, too."

"Paul—oh, how absurd!" the girl answered, her face burning.

"You may say that if you wish, but I shall not change my opinion," Mrs. Mayfield rejoined, gravely. "I am sure he wouldn't want me to suspect it—in fact, I think he tries to hide it from every one. It is only little signs he shows now and then—the way he looks when your name comes up. The truth is that he can hardly steady his voice when he mentions you. But he will never trouble you with his attentions. He has an idea that there is some understanding between you and Mr. Peterson, and I confess I didn't disabuse his mind. In fact, he said last night, when he and I were out here together, that he would never marry. He has an idea that he ought to remain single so that he may be free to carry out some plans he has for the public good—plans, I think, which mean a sacrifice on his part, in some way or other. He's simply wonderful, my child. He seems to suffer. You know a woman can tell intuitively when a man is that way. He seems both happy and unhappy. I thought I'd speak to you of this so that you may be careful when with him. You can be nice to him, you know, without leading him to think—well, to think as Mr. Peterson does."

"There is no danger," Ethel said, wistfully. "I understand him, and I am sure he understands me, but"—she hesitated and caught her mother's arm in a tense clasp, as they started on toward the house—"I am sure, very sure, mother, that he—that Paul is not *really* in love with me. You don't think so, either, mother—you know you do not! You have so many silly fancies. You imagine that every man who looks at me is in love with me. Paul will never love *any* woman, much less me. You see, I *know*. I've talked to him a good deal here of late, and—and I understand him. Really, I do, mother." Alone in her room, a moment later, Ethel stood before her mirror looking at her reflection.

"He loves me—oh, he loves me!" she whispered. "He's loved me all these years. He is the grandest and best man that ever lived. He has lifted me above the earth, and made me understand the meaning of life. Oh, Paul, Paul!" She sank down by the window and looked out. The rain was beginning to fall heavily. It pattered against the window-sill and wet her sleeve and hair, but she did not move. She breathed in the cooling air as if it were a delightful intoxicant borne down from heaven. The dripping leaves of a honeysuckle tapped her hot cheeks. She thrust her fair head farther out, felt the water trickle down her cheeks and chin, and laughed. Her mood was ecstatic, transcendent, and full of gratitude unspeakable.

CHAPTER XXX

ETHEL had been to her uncle's grave one afternoon, and was returning through the wood which lay between the farmhouse and the village when she met Paul.

"I've just been up with some flowers," she said. "Oh, it is so sad! I had a good cry."

"I have no doubt it made you feel better," he said, looking at her tenderly. "Nature has made us that way."

"I am afraid I became rather despondent," she answered. "Oh, Paul, I wish I had all your beautiful faith! You have actually reconciled me to poor dear Jennie's death. I can already see that it was best. It has made me kinder and broader in many ways. Do you know, Paul, there are times when I am fully conscious of her presence—I don't mean in the ordinary, spiritualistic sense, but something—I don't know how to put it—but something like the highest mental essence of my dear cousin seems to fold me in an embrace that is actually transporting. I find myself full of tears and joy at the same time, and almost dazed with the indescribable reality of it."

"Many sensitive persons have that experience in sorrow," Paul said, "and I am obliged to think there is some psychic fact beneath it. There is something undoubtedly uplifting in a great grief. It is a certain cure for spiritual blindness. It tears the scales of matter from our eyes as nothing else can do."

"I can't, however, keep from being despondent over my poor uncle," Ethel sighed, as she agreed with him. "Oh, Paul, he really wasn't prepared. He plunged into the dark void without the faintest faith or hope."

Paul gravely shook his head and smiled. "To believe that is to doubt that the great principle of life is love. We cannot conceive of even an earthly father's punishing one of his children for being blind, much less the Creator of us all. Your uncle through his whole life was blind to the truth. Had he seen it, his awakening would have been here instead of there, that is all."

"Oh, how comforting, how sweetly comforting!" Ethel sobbed. There was a fallen tree near the path, and she turned aside and sat down. She folded her hands in her lap, while the tears stood in her eyes. "Paul," she said, suddenly, "you are very happy, aren't you? You must be—you have so much to make you so."

He looked away toward the mountain where the slanting rays of the sun lay in a mellow flood, and a grave, almost despondent, expression crept into his eyes. He made no answer. She repeated her question in a rising tone, full of tender eagerness. Then without looking at her he answered, slowly and distinctly:

"All humanity must suffer, Ethel. It is part of the divine order. Suffering is to the growing soul what

decayed matter is to the roots of a flower. Light is the opposite of darkness; joy is the opposite of suffering. The whole of life is made up of such contrasts; earth is temporary captivity, Paradise is eternal freedom."

"But you have already *had* your suffering," Ethel pursued, her drying eyes fixed hungrily on his face. "Surely you—you are not unhappy now. I don't see how you could be so when everybody loves you so much, and is so appreciative of your goodness. Henry worships you. He says you have made a man of him. Old Mr. Tye declares you have actually put an end to lawlessness in these mountains. I can't see how you, of all men, could be unhappy for a minute."

"There are things"—he was still avoiding her eyes, and he spoke with a sort of tortured candor as he sat down near her and raised his knee between his tense hands—"there are things, Ethel, which the very soul of a man cries out for, but which he can never have—which he dare not even hope for, lest he slip into utter despondency and never recover his courage."

She rose and stood before him. He had never seen her look more beautiful, more resolute. "You intimated—Paul, you hinted, when you first came home from the West, that as a boy, away back before your great trouble, you—you cared for me—you said you thought of me often during those years. Oh, Paul, have you changed in that respect? Do you no longer—" Her voice trailed away from her fluttering throat, and, covering her face with her blue-veined hands, she stood motionless, her breast visibly palpitating, her sharp intakes of breath audible.

Rising, he drew her hands down and gazed passionately into her eyes. "I have come to love you so much, Ethel, that I dare not even think of it. It takes my breath away. Every drop of blood in my body cries out for you—cries, cries constantly. I have never dared to hope, not for a moment. I know what Mr. Peterson has to offer you. He can give you everything that the world values. I cannot see where my future duty may call me, but I am sure that I can't strive for the accumulation of a great fortune. So even if I *could* win your love I could not feel that I had a right to it. Many persons think I am a fanatic, and if I am—well, I ought not to influence you to link your life to mine. As you say, I have suffered, and I have borne it so far, but whether I can possibly bear to see you the—the wife of another man remains to be proved. I am afraid that would drag me down. I think I would really lose faith in God—in everything, for I can't help loving you. You are more to me than life—more than Heaven."

"You mustn't desert me, Paul." Ethel raised his hand to her lips and kissed it. The action drew her warm face close to his. "I want to go on with you in body and in spirit through eternity. I love you with all my soul. You have sweetened my life and lifted me to the very stars. I don't want wealth or position. I want only you—just as you are." He seemed unable to speak. Tenderly and reverently he drew her back to the log. In silence they sat, hand in hand, watching the shadows of the dying day creep across the wood and climb the mountainside.

THE END

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